

# The ABC's of Chanukkah

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Chanukah (Hanukkah), the Festival of Lights, begins on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev, and lasts for eight days. On the secular calendar, Chanukah generally falls out in December.

The Hebrew word Chanukah means "dedication." In the 2nd century BCE, during the time of the Second Holy Temple, the Syrian-Greek regime of Antiochus sought to pull Israel away from Judaism, with the hopes of assimilating them into Greek culture. Antiochus outlawed Jewish observance — including circumcision, Shabbat, and Torah study — under penalty of death. As well, many Israelites — called Hellenists — began to assimilate into Greek culture, taking on Greek names and marrying non-Israelites. This began to decay the foundation of Jewish life and practice.

When the Greeks challenged Israel to sacrifice a pig to a Greek god, a few courageous Israelites took to the hills of Judea in open revolt against this threat to Jewish life. Led by Matitياهو, and later his son Judah the Maccabee ("The Hammer"), this small band of pious Israelites led guerrilla warfare against the Syrian-Greek army.

Antiochus sent thousands of well-armed troops to crush the rebellion, but after three years the Maccabees beat incredible odds and miraculously succeeded in driving the foreigners from their land. The victory was on the scale of Israel defeating the combined super-powers of today.

Israelite fighters entered Jerusalem and found the Holy Temple in shambles and desecrated with idols. The Maccabees cleansed the Temple and re-dedicated it on the 25th of Kislev. When it came time to re-light the Menorah, they searched the entire Temple, but found only one jar of pure oil bearing the seal of the High Priest. The group lit the Menorah anyway and were rewarded with a miracle: That small jar of oil burned for eight days, until a new supply of oil could be prepared and sanctified.

From then on, Israel has observed a holiday for eight days, in honor of this historic victory and the miracle of the oil.

## **The *Chanukiah***

The *chanukiah* has 9 lights, not to be confused with the 7-branched Menorah.

To publicize which night of Chanukah it is, all eight candles on the *chanukiah* should be at the same height — and preferably in a straight line. Otherwise, the candles may not be easily distinguishable and may appear like a big torch.

In addition to the eight main lights, the *chanukiah* has an extra helper candle called the "*Shamash*." As we are forbidden to use the Chanukah lights for any purpose other than "viewing," any benefit is as if it's coming from the *Shamash*.

Since the *Shamash* does not count as one of the eight regular lights, your *chanukiah* should have the *Shamash* set apart in some way — either placed higher than the other candles, or off to the side.

## **Which Candles to Light**

The most important thing is that that your candles must burn for at least 30 minutes after nightfall. (Those famous colored candles barely qualify!) Many Jewish bookstores sell longer colored candles.

Actually, it is even better to use olive oil, since the miracle of the Maccabees occurred with olive oil. Glass cups containing oil can be placed in the candle holders of any standard menorah. Many Jewish bookstores even sell kits of pre-measured oil in disposable cups.

## Where to Light

To best publicize the miracle, the *chanukiah* is ideally lit outside the doorway of your house, on the left side when entering. (The mezuzah is on the right side; in this way you are "surrounded by mitzvot.") In Israel, many people light outside in special glass boxes built for a *chanukiah*.

If this is not practical, the *chanukiah* should be lit in a window facing the public thoroughfare.

Someone who lives on an upper floor should light in a window. If for some reason the *chanukiah* cannot be lit by a window, it may be lit inside the house on a table; this at least fulfills the mitzvah of "publicizing the miracle" for the members of the household.

## When to Light

The preferable time to light the *chanukiah* is at nightfall. It is best to light in the presence of many people, which maximizes the mitzvah of "publicizing the miracle" and adds to the family atmosphere. The *chanukiah* can still be lit (with the blessings) late into the night, as long as people are still awake.

The *chanukiah* should remain lit for at least 30 minutes after nightfall, during which time no use should be made of its light.

On Friday afternoon, the *chanukiah* should be lit 18 minutes before sundown. And since the *chanukiah* needs to burn for 30 minutes into the night, the candles used on Friday need to be bigger than the regular "colored candles" (which typically don't burn longer than a half-hour).

## How to Light

On the first night, place one candle at the far right, as you face the *chanukiah*. This applies whether the *chanukiah* is placed next to a doorway or by a window.

Another candle is placed for the *Shamash* (taller helper candle) which is used to light the others. It is not counted as one of the candles.

First light the *Shamash*, then recite the blessings, and then use the *Shamash* to light the *Chanukah* candle.

On the second night, place two candles in the two far-right positions — and use the *Shamash* to light the left one first.

On the third night, place three candles in the three far-right positions — and use the *Shamash* to light them in order, from left to right.

Follow this same procedure each night of Chanukah... until all the lights are kindled and glowing brightly!

## The Blessings

The first two blessings are said with the *Shamash* already lit, but immediately prior to lighting the Chanukah candles.

### Blessing #1:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו  
וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

*Baruch ata Ado-noi Elo-heinu melech ha-olam, Asher kid-shanu bi-mitzvo-tav, Vi-tzee-vanu li-had-leek ner shel Chanukah.*

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light.

### **Blessing #2**

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
שְׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ  
בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה.

*Baruch ata Ado-noi Elo-heinu melech ha-olam, Shi-asa nee-seem la-avo-teinu, Baya-meem ha-haim baz-man ha-zeh.*

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, Who made miracles for our forefathers, in those days at this season.

### **Blessing #3**

This blessing is said on the first night only.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ  
וְהִגִּיעְנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה.

*Baruch ata Ado-noi Elo-heinu melech ha-olam, Sheh-he-che-yanu vi-kee-yimanu Vi-hee-gee-yanu laz-man ha-zeh.*

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

### **The following paragraph is said each night, after the first light has been kindled:**

*Ha-nerot ha-lalu anach-nu mad-likin Al ha-nissim vi-al hanif-laot Al ha-tshu-ot vi-al ha-milchamot She-asita la'avo-teinu Ba-yamim ha-heim, ba-zman ha-zeh Al ye-dey kohan-echa haki-doshim.*

*Vi-chol shmonat ye-mey Chanukah Ha-nerot ha-lalu kodesh heim, Ve-ein lanu reshut li-heesh-tamesh ba-hem Ela leer-otam bilvad Kedai le-hodot u-li-hallel li-shimcha Al ni-secha vi-al niflo-techa vi-al yeshua-techa.*

We kindle these lights for the miracles and the wonders, for the redemption and the battles which You performed for our forefathers in those days at this season through Your holy priests. During all eight days of Chanukah these lights are sacred, and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them, but only to look at them – in order to express thanks and praise Your Great Name, for Your miracles, Your wonders, and Your Salvation.