



Traditions, Story

 [Share](#)

[Flip](#)

 [Mail](#)

 [Print](#)

What Is Hanukkah?

[The Hanukkah Story](#)

[Hanukkah Traditions](#)

[Hanukkah Greetings](#)

[Hanukkah Songs](#)

[Hanukkah Blessings and Prayers](#)

[Hanukkah Foods](#)

[Lighting the Menorah](#)

[How to Play Dreidel](#)

[What Is Gelt?](#)





Updated on December 12, 2019

Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday, often referred to as the "Festival of Lights." Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days and nights, starting on the 25th of the Jewish month of Kislev, which may fall anywhere between late November and early December on the secular calendar. For eight nights, families say prayers and then light candles in an eight-branched candelabra called a menorah. Most families also serve special holiday foods, sing songs, play games, and give gifts including Hanukkah gelt (chocolate coins).

In 2019, Hanukkah will be celebrated Sunday, December 22 through Monday, December 30.

The Hanukkah Story

The Hanukkah story is based on historical events that took place in 165 BCE in Jerusalem. After the Second Temple in Jerusalem was desecrated by the Seleucid Emperor Antiochus IV and his Greco-Syrian troops, Jewish priest Mattathias and his sons rebelled. Retaking Jerusalem and the Temple, they lit the holy lamp (the menorah) but had only enough oil for one night. Miraculously, the lamp stayed lit for eight days until enough holy oil could be procured.

Hanukkah is a minor Jewish holiday as compared to the high holidays of Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur or to Purim and Passover. It became a more significant holiday in the western world because of its proximity to Christmas and the desire among more secular Jews to participate in the cultural build-up to the winter solstice; as a result, gift-giving (in addition to the traditional gift of Hanukkah gelt) is more popular in the west than in other parts of the world. While the traditions of Hanukkah are similar around the world, each country has its own unique twist. In parts of France, for example, families light a double-decker (16-candle) menorah, while in Morocco fried treats are made with fruit juice and orange zest.

When Is Hanukkah?



the dates of holidays vary from year to year based not on the Gregorian calendar but on the phases of the moon (which last 29.5 days). Some years are longer or shorter than others, but instead of adding a leap day every four years, the Hebrew calendar adds a full lunar month to seven out of every 19 years.

Hanukkah Dates (2019–2025)	
2019	December 22–30
2020	December 10–18
2021	November 28–December 6
2022	December 18–26
2023	December 7–15
2024	December 25–January 2
2025	December 14–22

The Hebrew calendar doesn't start on January 1 but instead starts in the fall. Hanukkah falls on the 25th day of the third month, called Kislev. In longer years, Hanukkah occurs near the end of December, while in shorter years it falls nearer the end of November.

How Is Hanukkah Celebrated?

According to Jewish law, Hanukkah is one of the less important Jewish holidays. However, Hanukkah has become much more popular in modern practice because of its proximity to Christmas. Unlike many other holidays, Hanukkah is truly a family event; it is all about enjoying time together. Every community has its unique Hanukkah traditions, but there are some traditions that are almost universally practiced.

Eight Nights



each night. On the Friday of Hanukkah, more observant families may also light Shabbat (sabbath) candles and say blessings after the Hanukkah candles are lit. There are also complex Talmudic rules governing the placement of the menorah, the quality of the candles, and the treatment of the candles and their wicks after use; these are followed by a minority of families who may follow more orthodox forms of Judaism.

Lighting the Menorah

Every year it is customary to commemorate the miracle of the Hanukkah oil by lighting candles on a menorah. Each family has its own menorah, an eight-branched candelabra with a spot for a ninth candle in the center. The central candle (the shamash) is lit, and that candle is used to light one additional candle each night until, on the eighth night, all of the candles are lit.

Special blessings are said or sung in Hebrew before the Hanukkah candles are lit; three are sung on the first day and two on each of the remaining days. The candles are allowed to burn down each night and are replaced the following day.

Special Foods

Because Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of the oil, it is traditional to eat fried foods such as latkes and sufganiyot during the holiday.

Latkes are pancakes made out of potatoes and onions, which are fried in oil and then served with applesauce.

Sufganiyot (singular: sufganiyah) are jelly-filled donuts that are fried and sometimes dusted with confectioners' sugar before eating.

Blintzes are thin pancakes wrapped around a sweet cheese filling and fried.

Kugel is a sweet or savory casserole made with either potatoes or noodles.

Other traditional foods include brisket (a particular cut of beef), tsimmiss (a sweet vegetable stew), challah (braided egg bread), and gefilte fish



A dreidel is a four-sided top with one Hebrew letter written on each side.

נ (Nun)

ג (Gimmel)

ה (Hay)

ש (Shin)

Together, the letters stand for the Hebrew phrase "Nes Gadol Haya Sham." This phrase means "A great miracle happened there [in Israel]."

To play the game, players place bets with foil-covered coins called Hanukkah gelt and spin the dreidel. Depending on how the dreidel lands, players receive or give back all or some of their gelt.

Gifts

While gift-giving is not part of the ancient Hanukkah tradition, it has become a part of western celebrations—largely because it occurs during the Christmas season. Some families give gifts on every night; some give only small tokens while others give larger presents. Often, Hanukkah gelt is given to children on the first night so that it can be used to play the dreidel game on succeeding nights.

Hanukkah, Hannukah, or Chanukah?

Hanukkah is written חֲנֻכָּה or חנוכה (Ḥănukkâh) in Hebrew, but there is no direct translation into English (or any other language). It comes from the term "hanukat hamizbe'ah," meaning "dedication of the altar."

There are at least 16 different ways to spell Hanukkah. There are many different translations of the word, and while some start the word with the "ch" sound (as it would be pronounced in Hebrew) others prefer the anglicized "h" sound. Americans often choose to spell it as Hanukkah because that is the official spelling from the Library of Congress.