

Chanukah, the Festival of Light

Chanukah, the Festival of Light, is among the most widely celebrated of Jewish holidays. It is a time for happy family gatherings around the menorah, for children's songs and sizzling potato latkes and games of "dreidel." For many of us, it brings back fond memories of childhood, or serves to renew our sense of Jewish identity.

What is chanuka?

Beginning with the 25th of Kislev, eight days of chanuka are observed, during which no eulogies are delivered, nor is fasting permitted. For when the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oils, and when the Hasmoneans (the Maccabees) defeated them, they searched and found only one remaining jar of oil with the seal of the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest). Although it contained only enough oil to burn for one day, a miracle occurred, and the oil burned eight days. A year later the Rabbis designated these days as Yomim Tovim (Holidays) on which praise and thanksgiving were to be said.

The Greek's Harsh Decrees:

During the Second Temple period, the Greek kings outlawed the Jewish religion, forbade them to engage in the study of Torah and the practice of mitzvot, and ravaged and defiled all that had been ritually pure. The Hasmoneans were finally able to subdue the enemy, whereby they designated a king to rule over Israel which lasted for more than 200 years. The Sages of that generation therefore decreed, that the eight days beginning with the 25th of Kislev should be days of rejoicing; that Hallel (praise) be recited and that lights be lit in the entrance to their homes each of the eight nights, in order to publicize the miracle.

What may one use to light the chanuka candles?

The preferred way to perform the mitzvah is to light the chanuka menorah with pure olive oil and cotton wicks, since their light is pure and it causes us to remember the light of the Menorah which was lit with olive oil. All other oils and wicks are permissible if their light is pure and does not flicker. One may also use candles made of wax. One must be careful and make sure the lights stay lit for about a half an hour or as long as people coming home from the marketplace would be able to see them. The menorah itself should be pretty and can be made of metal or glass. An earthenware holder is permissible but may only be used once while it is still new. After one usage it becomes unclean and may not be used for the next night. A wick which was used one night may be used on succeeding nights as well. The same is true of the remaining oil or of the remainder of waxcandles.

How does one light the lights?

On the first night of chanuka, one light is lit and on each successive night another light is

added until the eighth night when all the lights are lit. When one lights on the first night, one lights the one on the extreme right. The following night he adds the one immediately to the left and kindles it first. He then turns to the right and kindles the light of the previous night. He follows the same procedure each night always adding from right to left but always lighting from left to right. The reason for this procedure is that the additional light recalls the greatness and growth of the miracle.

There is also a custom of using an extra candle, the shamash to light the other candles. The shamash may only be used for lighting the other candles and one may derive benefit from its light. The chanuka lights themselves, however, may not be used for any other purpose while they are burning for the purpose of the mitzvah. One should preferably have other lights on in the house in order that one does not run into this problem.