

Learning About Hanukkah

The Jewish Festival of Lights

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Teaching about religion in a classroom might seem fraught with difficulty but focusing on the customs and stories surrounding important religious holidays is a great place to begin, especially with kids. This text set explores the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, an 8-day festival of lights that is usually celebrated in December.

Many religious holidays are joyous occasions that bring family, friends, and community members together to mark important events in religious lore and share stories. These stories, which have been told for centuries, are certainly engaging, but they also offer opportunities to share information about the history and culture of both long-ago times and today. This is particularly important for Judaism. The U.S. routinely calls itself a Judeo-Christian country and, while Jews make up only about 2% of the population, over 50% of the world's Jews live here.

The Hanukkah story is based on an event that happened in the 2nd century BCE. At that time, the Greeks controlled nearly all of the Middle East, including the region now known as Israel. For many centuries, Jews were able to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, a massive structure that served as the center of Jewish life. Eventually, however, the Greeks decided to ban Judaism and to defile the Temple. Five sons of a Jewish priest decided to reclaim the Temple. After a 3-year campaign, the Maccabee sons finally achieved their goal. An important step in cleaning up the Temple included relighting the menorah which represented the eternal presence of God. Unfortunately, there was only enough olive oil to keep the menorah burning for one night. According to the story, the menorah remained lit for eight days, which gave the Jews enough time to procure additional oil. In honor of this event, Jews now light an 8-candle menorah called a *hanukkiyah* {hahn-oo-kee-uh}, adding one candle each evening of the eight-day celebration.

Most religious holidays are also associated with special rituals or customs. Hanukkah is no exception. In addition to lighting menorahs, Jews also enjoy fried foods cooked in oil (preferably olive oil). Favorites include potato pancakes called *latkes* {lot-keys}, jelly-filled donuts called *sufganiyot* {soof-gah-nee-oat}, and filled croissant-like pastries called *rugelach* {roo-gu-lakh}. Jews, especially kids, also play a game called *dreidel* {dray-duhl}. It involves spinning a 4-sided top (also called a *dreidel*) with Hebrew letters on each side that provide instructions for the game.

Historically, Hanukkah was a minor holiday in the Jewish tradition, and the Maccabees story is not even found in the Jewish/Hebrew Bible. However, especially over the last century, Hanukkah has become much more significant in the Jewish calendar. This is partly because of its proximity to Christmas, which is also why gifts are now part of Hanukkah festivities in the U.S. In 1979, Jimmy Carter became the first president to light a public menorah and, in 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that both hanukkiyahs and Christmas trees were secularized symbols of the holiday season. Today, it is quite common to see public menorahs in cities and towns across America.

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Classic Hanukkah menorah. The center candle, called the “helper candle” or *shamash*, is used to light the other eight candles - one for each day of Hanukkah. [Pixabay: Ciker-Free-Vector-Images]



Potato pancake or *latke*, a favorite Hanukkah food that is fried in oil. [Pixabay: Taken]



Rugelach, a traditional croissant-like pastry that is a popular treat during Hanukkah. [Wikimedia Commons: Douglas W. Jones]



Three small wooden *dreidels* used to play the popular Hanukkah game. The symbols are Hebrew letters that provide instructions for the players. [Pixabay/PublicDomainPictures]



Model of the 2nd Temple of Jerusalem. This portion is part of a larger model of Jerusalem at that time. The entire model is housed in the Israel Museum of Jerusalem. [Photo by Berthold Werner/public domain].

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Primary Sources

ClickView MiniClips. “What Is Hanukkah?” Uploaded November 30, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDMoklVYsvU>

This video is just under 5 minutes and great for elementary kids. It provides a brief version of the Hanukkah/Maccabees story, an overview of the *hanukkiyah* with 8 candles and a *shamash*, a description of the common foods eaten, and a nod to the modern-day practice of giving gifts. The brief description of *dreidel* also includes some of the variations found within Judaism since the Hebrew letters are different depending on whether players live inside or outside of Israel.

Speakaboos on Homer. “The Story of Hanukkah.” Accessed February 2, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tws_uMAEOs

This video (2:10) features a read-aloud version of *The Story of Hanukkah* by Jeremy Frank. It’s a great, kid-friendly version of the Hanukkah/Maccabees story.

Storytime – Anytime. “Clifford Celebrates Hanukkah – Kids Books Read Aloud.” Uploaded November 29, 2018.

[youtube.com/watch?v=Tpqz6-ECBuk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tpqz6-ECBuk)

This factual, accurate, and clear video lasts just over 5 minutes. It features a read-aloud version of the book by Norman Bridwell and offers a great overview of how Hanukkah is celebrated by modern-day American families. It includes information on why Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days and features the traditional practices of lighting a menorah, eating fried foods, exchanging gifts, and visiting the large public menorah in the town square.

Central Synagogue. “Learn the Chanukah Blessings.” Uploaded December 3, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nd5RlON-ijI>

This short video (1:29) is geared to young Jewish kids. It features a Jewish woman who briefly lights a *hanukkiyah* while singing the traditional blessings in Hebrew. In the process, she offers clear and simple instructions for the somewhat-complex rules surrounding the placing and lighting the *hanukkiyah* candles.

Everyday Jewish Mom. “How to Play Dreidel/Hanukkah Dreidel Game Instructions. Uploaded December 17, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1m7PKnhWEI0>

This clear, colorful, and concise video explains the rules for playing dreidel in just under three minutes.

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Secondary Sources

Inside Edition. “What is Hanukkah?” Uploaded December 22, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVt4aMMxnQ4>

This four-minute overview of Hanukkah is geared to adults. It includes interesting information on Hanukkah’s relationship with Christmas and mentions some of the variability within Judaism.

Houston Public Media. “Jewish Students Celebrate Hanukkah in the Classroom.” Uploaded December 3, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0pIWQMGiog>

In this video (just under three minutes) a local TV station visits a Jewish school and talks to both teachers and kids in 2nd and 3rd grades about how they celebrate the holiday.

Sesame Street. “Hanukkah with Veronica Monica.” Uploaded December 17, 2008.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VfChLAADS8>

This video, which is just under 3 minutes, features Elmo and his screen. It provides a brief, fast-paced, humorous version of the Hanukkah/Maccabees story.

Shalom Sesame. “Baby Bear and Telly Play Dreidel.” Accessed February 2, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6LIC_J4384

This three-minute video shows Papa Bear, Baby Bear, and Telly playing *dreidel*. With typical Sesame Street humor and positivity, it also features the famous “*dreidel* song.”

Zion, Noam. “How to Play Dreidel.” My Jewish Learning. Accessed February 2, 2021.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-to-play-dreidel/>

This post provides both written and video instructions on how to play dreidel. If the kid-friendly videos still leave you with questions about the rules, this article will answer them.

Lights Down Reading. “Chanukah Lights Everywhere by Michael Rosen – Children’s Book Read Aloud.” Uploaded November 16, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3dY7IQFrJ4>

This read-aloud video (3:21) intertwines modern-day Hanukkah traditions and the numbers 1-8. It also includes a bit about both God and nature (new moon, stars in sky).

Hilary Myrick. “My First Chanukah Read Aloud.” Uploaded December 9, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLhFBcp9eEA>

This video (1:24) is a read-aloud version of *My First Chanukah* by Tomie dePaola, the best-selling board book for infants and toddlers.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Basic Content Questions

What religion has Hanukkah as a holiday?

Do you know when Hanukkah is usually celebrated?

What is a menorah/Hanukkiah, and why do Jews light eight candles during Hanukkah?

What is the extra/9th candle used for?

Have you ever seen (or lit) a menorah?

What special foods do Jews eat during Hanukkah?

Would you like to try any of these foods?

What game is often played during Hanukkah?

Do you know/remember what is written on the sides of the dreidel?

Critical Thinking Questions

Do you celebrate any holidays that include lighting candles?

Do you celebrate any holidays that include exchanging gifts?

What holidays are important to your family and what special foods do you eat?

What are some of the similarities/differences between Hanukkah and the holidays you celebrate?

Even More

Books

There are many, many books about Hanukkah for kids of all ages. Only a handful of them are available as read-aloud video stories. Here are some other options to look for in your library system.

The Story of Hanukkah by David A. Adler (auth.) and Jill Weber (illus.) – Holiday House, 2012

Holiday Lights Around the World: Let's Celebrate Hanukkah by Deborah Heiligman – National Geographic Kids, 2016

The Ninth Night of Hanukkah by Erica S. Perl (auth.) and Shahar Kober (illus.) – Sterling Children's Books, 2020

The Hannukah Mice by Steven Kroll (auth.) and Michelle Shapiro (illus.) – Two Lions, 2012

Menorahs

Because lighting a menorah is a religious practice that is usually performed at sundown and includes reciting Jewish blessings in Hebrew, a menorah should not be lit in the classroom “for fun.” However, you can display a menorah, available at many retail stores, during the holiday season as part of a Hanukkah lesson.

Dreidel

Playing dreidel is not a devotional practice; however, you should still check with your district's policies about religious holidays and always offer an accommodation if requested. Small dreidels are inexpensive to buy, but there are also many freely-available on-line templates for making them out of cardstock. You can play with any size group, but groups of 4-6 work best.

About the Author

Rev. Dr. Vicki Michela Garlock is the founder of Faith Seeker Kids, which offers tips and tools for families, educators, and faith communities interested in improving children's religious literacy. She received her Ph.D. in Psychology with dual specialties in Neuroscience and Cognitive Development and worked as a full-time professor at Warren Wilson College for over a decade. She then served as the Nurture Coordinator and Curriculum Specialist at Jubilee! Community Church where she was ordained as Minister of Education. She is the author of *We All Have Sacred Spaces*, which highlights the worship spaces of 7 different faith traditions, and *Embracing Peace: Stories from the World's Faith Traditions*. She has also written extensively for both The Interfaith Observer and Multicultural Kid Blogs. She lives her interfaith life in Asheville, NC, and can be reached at vicki@faithseekerkids.com.

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ABOUT US

The Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute is a nonpartisan national initiative focused on educating the public about the religious liberty principles of the First Amendment.

Reorganized in 2010 to expand on religious liberty initiatives begun by the First Amendment Center in 1994, the Religious Freedom Center has sponsored numerous public programs at the Newseum, developed partnerships with national and international organizations, and convened a broad range of religious and civil liberties groups.

VISION A world committed to religious freedom as an inalienable right for all people.

MISSION The mission of the Religious Freedom Center is twofold: to educate the public about the history, meaning, and significance of religious freedom and to promote dialogue and understanding among people of all religions and none.

INITIATIVES The Religious Freedom Center carries out its mission through five initiatives:

1. promoting civil dialogue,
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