

# Chanukah Rituals And Customs

By Carol Green

No festival in the Jewish calendar is as much loved as Chanukah. Rare among Jewish holidays, it carries no aura of solemnity, nor does it impose any special restrictions. Instead, Chanukah is a time for thanksgiving and lighthearted rejoicing. It is a time when family and friends gather together around the Chanukah lights to play games while enjoying special holiday snacks. But Chanukah rituals, foods and games are more than quaint folk customs; they are rich in symbolic meaning and provide insights into the meaning of the holiday and the history of the Jewish people.

## Symbol of Chanukah

The Chanukah menorah, or candelabrum, is the most prominent symbol of the holiday for it is a reminder of the menorah that once stood in the Temple in Jerusalem. Its eight lights recall the miracle of the oil: when the Maccabees reentered the holy Temple they sought to light the menorah, however they found only one flash of pure olive oil, supply enough for one day. Eager to rededicate the Temple after years of disuse they lit the menorah anyway. Miraculously, the oil continued to burn for eight days - long enough for a fresh supply of oil to be pressed. To commemorate the miracle, we add an additional light to the menorah on each night of the holiday.

Jewish law does not require that the menorah assume a specific form, only that it have room enough for eight lights plus a shamash or servicing light from which the other lights are kindled. Talmudic dictum requires that the menorah be prominently positioned outside the front entrance to the house as a public affirmation of the miracles of the holiday and the cities of ancient Israel were aglow with the lights of these menorahs.

## Types of Menorah

Archaeologists have unearthed long vertical bases onto which the lights were mounted for public display. If, however, anti-Semitism made public display impossible, the menorah went indoors. In Muslim Spain the Jews developed a small portable menorah which was hung inside the house near the door opposite the mezuzah. This portable 'benchtype,' often ornately decorated, later became popular throughout Europe.

Menorah designs reflect the influences of both Jewish tradition and the surrounding culture. In Spain the backwall or bench of the menorah was often fashioned from Arabic curl patterns while in Italy during the Renaissance menorahs were adorned with cherubs, masks and cornucopias. Jewish decorative motifs such as stars of David, lions of Judah and scenes from the Chanukah story were universally popular.

Jews have traditionally been willing to lavish large sums of money on a beautiful menorah. Thus menorahs were carved by the finest Jewish artisans. In Europe menorahs were fashioned from copper, bronze and silver, while the Jewish craftsmen of Morocco and North Africa distinguished themselves with their elegant pottery menorahs.

During the Second World War Jews exposed themselves to grave danger to be able to kindle the Chanukah lights. Concentration camp inmates fashioned crude menorahs from raw potatoes, using pieces of fat they had saved from their meager rations as fuel and thread torn from their uniforms as wicks.

In modern Israel the menorah is once again proudly displayed in public. Menorahs are lit in front of all major public buildings and monuments including the Knesset and the mountain top for-

ness of Massada. The light of Chanukah is also recalled in a torch relay originating from Modi'im, the home of the Maccabees. On the first night of the holiday the torch is lit in a special ceremony at Modi'im and then is carried by runners throughout Israel to Jerusalem.

## Chanukah Delicacies

The festival cuisine also recalls the miracle of the oil, as throughout the Jewish world it is customary on Chanukah to eat pastry or potato dishes fried in oil. Among the Sephardim a delicacy called birmennales, a tortilla like pancake made from fried meal, is quite popular. In the Ashkenazi communities the pancake batter is made from grated potatoes and the dish is called latkes and eaten together with apple sauce or sour cream. In Israel, the entire nation snacks on sufganiot, fried jelly donuts, either of the home made variety or ones bought on street corner stands.

Many Jewish communities have a tradition of eating dairy products to recall the bravery of Judith. According to Jewish apocrypha the beautiful Judith, reputedly a member of the Hasmonean (Maccabee) family, invited the enemy general Holofernes to a banquet. Judith insisted on feeding him only dairy products and when he grew thirsty she gave him wine to quench his thirst until he fell into a drunken stupor, whereupon she proceeded to stab him to death.

In some Sephardic communities the seventh day of Chanukah is observed as a special women's feast honoring Judith. In North Africa women and girls would fill the synagogue where they withdrew the Torah scrolls from the Ark and kissed them. In a special service they then recited prayers and blessings invoking God's

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