

**THE HIDDEN
HISTORY OF
HANUKA
FOR KIDS**

(AND GROWNUPS TOO)



The Sholem Community in Los Angeles is a secular Jewish educational, cultural, and social institution with a Sunday school, celebrations of Jewish holidays, cultural activities, and seminars. Taking a non-religious approach, we explore Jewish identity by understanding our history, culture, and traditions.



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Hanuka through the story of the Magic Oil Jar.
But the Hidden History is quite different.

In Eastern Europe, by the time December arrived, the fruits and vegetables that had been stored away at the beginning of autumn were almost all eaten. (There weren't any supermarkets then, and no fast-food places.) All that was left was potatoes. So every day, people ate boiled potatoes. For a special treat, on Sabbath (Saturday), they might have had a pudding made of potatoes. And, for Hanuka, *latkes* made of — you guessed it!

People have eaten *sufganiyot* for centuries. They are sweet and tasty; and that's a good enough reason for a holiday treat!

However you celebrate — no matter how many gifts you get (or hope to get) — and whatever tastes best to you...

gut yontif!

khag sameyakh!

Happy holidays!!

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF HANUKA FOR KIDS

(AND GROWNUPS TOO)

By Hersh Hartman

Original Illustrations
By Amy Goldman Koss





(There's a Hidden Rule about the dreydl game. Two or more tops are dreydlakh, with that Bach sound at the end. Anyone who says dreydls has to give up a turn. Just kidding!)

FOOD

Finally, there's a Hidden History about the special fried Hanuka treats, *latkes* (potato pancakes), and *sufganiyot* (jelly doughnuts). *Latkes* originated with Jews in Eastern Europe. *Sufganiyot* are the traditional Hanuka treats of Jews in the Mediterranean areas and the Middle East.



Some people think that because both *latkes* and *sufganiyot* are fried in oil, they connect with



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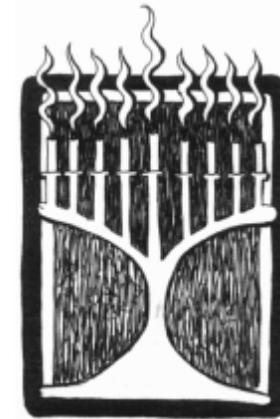
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GAMES

The special kids' game for Hanuka is called *dreydl* (rhymes with ladle). It's played with a four sided top (the *dreydl*) which has a Hebrew letter on each side. The letters tell you whether you've won or lost. Here are the letters and the rules:

Letter	Yiddish/Game Rule
ג <i>gimel</i>	<i>gant</i> (all) or <i>gut</i> (good) TAKE ALL
ש	<i>shel</i> (put) PAY THE POT
נ <i>nun</i>	<i>nisht</i> (nothing) PASS
ה	<i>halb</i> (half) TAKE HALF THE POT



Almost everybody knows about Hanuka.

Even kids who aren't Jewish have heard about Hanuka.

Mostly, they know about the eight gifts, one on each night. Cool.

But almost no one knows the Hidden History of Hanuka.



THE SPELLING

First, there's the mystery of how Hanuka is spelled. On different calendars and greeting cards, the name of the holiday is spelled in many ways.

Mainly, it's because the name of the holiday is a Hebrew word that's written in a different alphabet and is read from right to left. It looks like this: “ ח נ פ ה ”

In Yiddish it looks a little different: “ ח נ ו פ ה ”

The word means "dedication" or "inauguration." The first letter on the right (ח) sounds like the "ch" in the name of the composer, Bach.

To keep things simple, this book uses "Hanuka," but if you like some other spelling, that's okay. Later on, you'll find out why "the right to be different" is one of the ideas of Hanuka.

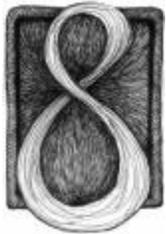
The "Festival of Lights" belongs to many cultures. Hanuka celebrates the right to be different, just as the Jews of Judah fought for the right to have different ideas from the Greco-Syrians.

Some families celebrate the *two* holidays that started with the Festival of Lights – Hanuka and Christmas. Some people include little *menorahs* among the decorations of the evergreen tree, or put the six-pointed Star of David on top. The lights of the Hanuka candles join with the Christmas lights to make everything bright and cheerful and hopeful.





that says kids should get elaborate gifts, let alone one gift a night! In Eastern Europe, where some of your ancestors may have lived, it was the custom to give children coins (the Yiddish word is gelt) on the fifth night of Hanuka. That was it! Giving Hanuka gelt probably started when Jews saw Christians exchanging gifts at Christmas-time, so Jewish kids wouldn't get jealous. The idea of eight gifts is not a very old one. Probably the stores and the toy companies had a lot to do with it.)



CANDLE LIGHTING

Some Jews who follow religious customs say special blessings over the candles and sing a hymn about the Miracle of the Lights.

Secular Jews and Humanistic Jews who feel that the history and culture of the Jewish *people* are more important to them than *religion*, say their own words when they light the candles. They may dedicate the lights to special people or to their hopes for a better world.

Now, we can get back to that "Hidden History." First, let's make sure that everyone knows why Hanuka is celebrated nowadays. There are actually a number of different reasons.

ANCIENT HISTORY

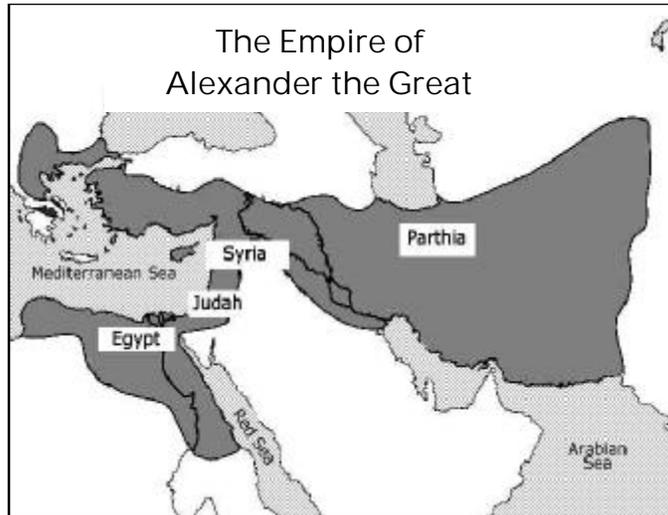
Over 2,000 years ago, a part of the land we now call Israel was known as Judah. Judah was one of the many kingdoms conquered by Alexander the



Great, a Greek emperor. Alexander was different from most kings in those days. Instead of forcing all the people in his empire to follow the ways of Greece, he encouraged them to continue their own habits and beliefs. As a result, many people adopted Greek ways freely. Alexander was a smart ruler. He knew that when you're kind to people, they will agree with you much more easily than when you're mean to them.



After Alexander died — at the age of 33 — his generals, who weren't nearly as smart, fought among themselves. Each general who ruled part of Alexander's empire tried to take over the

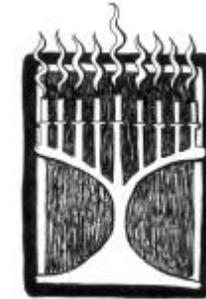


other lands. One part of the empire was in Egypt. Another part was in Syria. And between the two of them was Judah. So when the rulers went to war, they first conquered Judah.

Eventually, the Greek Syrians (actually the Greco-Syrians) ruled the little country of Judah.

CELEBRATING HANUKA

Most Jewish people – and families that are both Jewish and something else – celebrate Hanuka on the eight days that are specified on the Hebrew calendar. The dates change from year to year, but they are usually in December. Although there are many different ways to celebrate, almost everybody takes part in the same three things: lighting the *menorah*, eating special foods, and exchanging gifts. In some families, kids get eight gifts, one for each night!



GIFTS

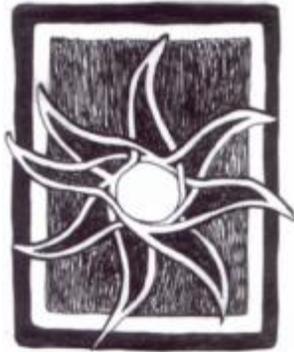
(Now here's a part of the Hidden History that you may want to keep hidden - especially from your parents There is nothing in ancient Jewish tradition



against God and their religion. How could they support George Washington, Samuel Adams, Tom Paine, and the other revolutionaries, yet still be faithful to their religious beliefs?

Some ministers of the Congregational Church in New England found the answer in the Book of Maccabees. There, they found the words of

Mattathias that we read earlier: "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."



Now they could help the revolution!

So the Hidden History of Hanuka helped create the United States of America and the freedoms that the founders wrote down in the Bill of Rights. Did you know that Bill of Rights Day comes on December 15, often during Hanuka?

That's another thing worth celebrating on Hanuka.

ANTIOCHUS RULES

About 150 years after the death of Alexander the Great, the king of Greco-Syria was Antiochus IV. (In Greek, that's pronounced *an-TIE-oh-kus*.) To make sure that all his subjects were behind him, Antiochus declared that *everyone* in his empire had to think of him as a new chief god — ahead of their own gods. He declared that his face was the face of god, and that statues of him had to be put up throughout the empire.



Many people in the cities of Judah had no problem with that. Even the High Priest of the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship, was cool with it. (Back then, Jewish



religious leaders were called priests, not rabbis.) But, out in the countryside, the Jewish farmers were horrified at the idea. Still, they thought they had to do what Antiochus's soldiers ordered them to do.



That changed one day when, in the village of Modin, not far from Jerusalem, soldiers ordered the local Jewish priest to sacrifice a pig in front of the statue of Antiochus. (Pigs are considered "unclean" animals, according to Jewish and Muslim law, though nowadays many Jews and Muslims don't follow those ancient rules.)

in December. They may not know about the different "Festivals of Lights" in olden days. But, when things are darkest, human beings find ways to express their hopes that their lives will become better and brighter.

RESISTANCE TO TYRANNY

Here's another part of the Hidden History. This one happened in America.

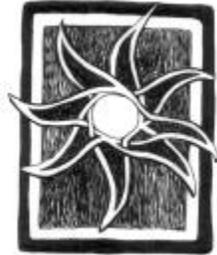
At the time of the American Revolution against the king of England in 1776, most people in the world thought that kings got their power directly from God. To go against a king, they thought, meant that you were going against God. No one wanted to do that, of course.

This was a problem for many religious Americans. On the one hand, they wanted to get rid of King George III and be free to live their lives as they wished. On the other hand, to go against the king would mean going





it worked! People believed that it was because of the fires they lit that the "dying" sun stayed alive and grew stronger, bit by bit.



Now the parts of the Hidden History come together. When Judah Maccabee wanted to proclaim a festival to celebrate his victory in Jerusalem, he hooked it up with the "Festival of Lights" that people were celebrating anyway. And when the rabbis needed to explain why there was an *eight-day* festival that wasn't mentioned in the Bible, they told the story of the magic oil. That also connected it to the "Festival of Lights."

And, nowadays, we can see why *many* people, in different parts of the world, following different religions and traditions, have their own stories that explain lights and fires and evergreen trees

MATTATHIAS REVOLTS

The local Jewish priest, Mattathias the Hasmonean, refused to follow the Greco-Syrian soldiers' orders.

But one of the men in the crowd, who probably thought he would be rewarded, came forward to sacrifice the pig Mattathias killed the man whom he considered to be a traitor. Then he called out: "If you follow the Law, follow me!" And he and his five sons fled to the hills to form what we now call a "guerrilla army."

The farmers who made up that "army" weren't experienced soldiers, but they succeeded by making unexpected attacks at night on the Greco-Syrians, then fading away back to the hills.

**Mattathias said:
"Resistance to tyranny is
obedience to God."**



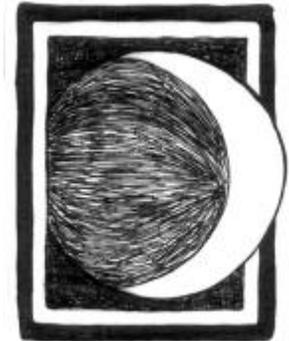
One of Mattathias's sons became the leader of the army. His name was Judah (just like the land). And, because he struck the enemy like a hammer, his followers gave him the name of "Judah the Hammer." (In Hebrew, that is *ye-HU-dah ha-mah-KAH-bee*. In English: Judah Maccabee.)

After fighting for a few years, the Maccabees — by then, all the brothers were known by that name — were able to drive Antiochus's army out of Jerusalem. They and their followers got rid of the statues of Antiochus in the Temple and cleaned out all the garbage that his troops had left there.



To celebrate the dedication of the restored Temple, Judah proclaimed an eight-day festival called Hanuka — *dedication*. That festival, usually during December, has been celebrated by Jews ever since, for over 2,000 years!

In those days, people didn't have the kinds of calendars we do now. They counted weeks and months by watching the moon. The word "month" comes from "moon." They counted years by watching as the sun shone longer in the spring and summer, and less in the fall and winter.



During the winters, the sun seemed to get gradually weaker, and the days got very short. On December 21, there is less sunshine than on any other day of the year. It's known as the "winter solstice," and it used to be a frightening time. People were afraid that the sun would die, leaving them forever in the dark and cold. They thought the sun was a living god who rode across the sky, and they wanted it to get stronger. So what would be a good way to give the sun that idea?

First, they lit one fire. On the next night, two fires. On the third night – you get the idea. And



A FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

Long before the Maccabees — more than 2,000 years earlier — people in the land of Judah held a festival each winter at the time we call



December. It was called "the Festival of Lights." They would light eight flames in special oil lamps — one flame added each night.

In Greece at about the same time of year, people would run through the hills with torches.

And in Europe, people would cut down evergreen trees, because they were the only things that kept growing as autumn turned into winter. They worshipped the trees, then burned them. They were called "yule logs." In Sweden, young girls would decorate their hair with burning candles. (Let's hope they were *very* careful!)



Why did so many people in different countries long, long ago have these fire festivals in December?

THE MACCABEE RULERS

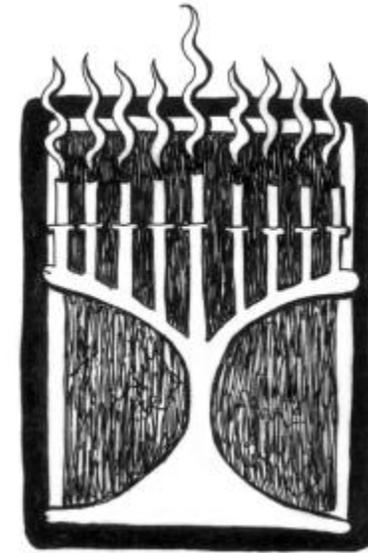
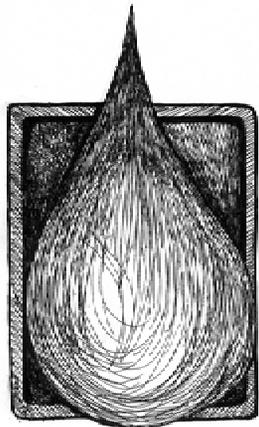
It would be nice if we could say that, after the Maccabees drove out the Greco-Syrians, the people in the land of Judah had happy lives. But after Judah was killed in battle, some of his brothers and their soldiers began to act more like Antiochus than like Alexander the Great. They were cruel. They took over other countries, and they forced people to follow strict religious rules.

That is one of the reasons why the rabbis — who came many years later — were not too pleased about celebrating Hanuka as a festival in honor of the Maccabees and their victory. The history of Judah and his brothers, called the "Book of Maccabees," was not made part of the Bible. Much later, about four hundred years after the Maccabees' victory, the rabbis told a story, in a set of books called the Talmud, that took the spotlight away from the Maccabees. Instead, the main "hero" of the rabbis' story was a magic jar of oil.



THE MAGIC OIL JAR

According to that story, when the Hasmoneans (the rabbis used Judah's family name) came into the Temple to clean it, they found only a single jar of the special, holy olive oil that was used to light the lamp that hung over the altar. The oil in the jar would last only one night, but eight nights were needed to clean up the Temple and to make more special oil. Magically, that one jar of oil lasted all eight nights!



And that is why, the rabbis said, we celebrate Hanuka, and why we use a special candle-holder with nine branches, called a *menorah*, or lamp, similar to the *menorah* used in the Temple in Jerusalem.

The history of the Maccabees was gradually forgotten and replaced by the story of the Magic Oil Jar.

So the story of the Maccabees is the first part of the Hidden History of Hanuka.

But there are other parts of the Hidden History.