

# The Stories of Hanuka

## **A Brief Background:**

Hanuka is primarily a historical holiday, originally proclaimed by Judah Maccabee at the end of a bloody and violent war that occurred over 2,000 years ago. It was both a rebellion against the Greek empire as well as a civil war among Jews.

Who were the Maccabees? In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, during the time of the Second Temple, Antiochus III became the ruler over Israel. He wasn't so bad – he treated the Jews reasonably well. During this time Syrian and Greek culture was actively encouraged in Israel – at first it was encouraged while also allowing Jews freedom to practice their own way of life, and some Jews (the Hellenists) accepted Greek ideas they liked and brought them into their culture. Other Jews (the Hasmonians) fought against all Greek and Syrian ideas. This created tension, and even guerrilla warfare, within the Jewish community.

In 175 BCE, Antiochus III's son, Antiochus IV, began his reign. He called himself Antiochus Epiphanes (“God Manifest”); but many people referred to him instead as Antiochus Epimanes (“The Madman”). He didn't like the Jews and wanted to force them to give up their way of life. Around 168 BCE, Antiochus ordered Jews to pray to Greek Gods and act against Jewish customs (eat Pork, pray to idols, not observe Shabbat). He forbade them to carry out their own customs and observe Jewish holidays. Judah Maccabee formed a band of guerilla fighters called the Maccabees to defeat the Syrian army and fight against the Jewish Hellenists. The Maccabees entered Jerusalem and defeated Antiochus' army and won back the Temple in 165 BCE. This was a miraculous victory against great odds. However it is not a story with a completely happy ending – when they came into power, new troubles arose that would ultimately lead to the destruction of the Second Temple. By the time of the Rabbis (after the destruction of the Temple), the Rabbis believed that the Hasmonians had been partly responsible for the destruction of the Second Temple and the Jewish Exile to Babylon. Did this affect the way they told the Hanuka story?

There are several stories about Hanuka in early documents and in rabbinic texts from which we can see the history of how early generations told and retold the historical significance of the holiday and of its central ritual, the lighting of the *hanukiah* (eight-branched menorah). Originally, the eight-day holiday was intended to parallel the eight-day festival of Sukkot. The Books of the Maccabees does not mention of the legend concerning a small jar of oil that unexpectedly lasted for eight days. Only centuries after the Maccabees' defeat of the Syrians did the story of the jar of oil—which has come to be a part of Hanuka—appear in the Talmud.

It took several generations before Hanuka was accepted and celebrated by Jews around the world.

*This brief history is cobbled together from different sources, unfortunately not documented. Given it retold, and in the spirit of 'fair use' for educational use and for use in the crafting of new material that extends knowledge, I believe this is fine to reprint. If anyone identifies a source, please notify me so that I can acknowledge it. Two known sources are: <https://reformjudaism.org/hanukkah-history> and <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hanukkah-history/>*

## Why is Hanuka 8 days? Why do we light candles on Hanuka? Different accounts through history.

### Account I ( I Maccabees , 4:39)

“Then Judas and his brothers and the entire assembly of Israel decreed that every year for eight days, from the twenty-fifth day of the month Kislev, the days of the dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness on the anniversary.”

### Account II (II Maccabees ch. 10. 6-7.)

Unable to celebrate Succot because of the war and Antiochus's decree that forbade them from observing Jewish festivals, the first Hanuka celebration was "Succot in Kislev" and was celebrated like Succot.

And they celebrated the feast of the Lord for eight days, as in the festival of Sukkot and remembered how, not long before, at the time of the festival of Sukkot, they had been living [hiding] in the mountains and caverns like wild animals.

So carrying palm fronds they sang songs of praise to God, who gave them courage and strength to purify the Temple and his holy place.

And they sent out a message to all the cities of Judah to celebrate this festival every year.

And so it came to pass after the death of the evil Antiochus [known as] Epiphanes

ט: ויחוגו חג לה' שמונת ימים כימי חג הסוכות, ויזכרו את הימים מקדם בחגגם את חג הסוכות בהרים ובמערות, ויתעו בשימון כבהמות שדה.

י: ויקחו ערבי נחל וכפות תמרים ושירי שיר שבח והודיה לה', אשר נתן להם עוז ותשועה לטהר את בית מקדשו.

יא: ויעבירו קול בכל ערי יהודה לחוג את החג הזה מדי שנה בשנה.

יב: ויהי אחרי מות אנטיוכוס הרשע, וימלוך אנטיוכוס אאפטר בנו תחתיו.

Hebrew text from *Sefaria*

### **Account III** (*Megilat Ta'anit 9\**)

"Why did the rabbis make Hanuka eight days? Because . . . the Hasmoneans entered the Temple and erected the altar and whitewashed it and repaired all of the ritual utensils. They were kept busy for eight days. And why do we light candles? Because . . . when the Hasmoneans entered the Temple there were eight iron spears in their hands. They covered them with wood and lit candles on them. They did this each of the 8 days."

\* *Megillat Taanit* (Hebrew: מגילת תענית), lit. "the Scroll of Fasting," is an ancient Aramaic text, which lists 35 days on which the Jewish nation either performed glorious deeds or witnessed joyful events.

### **Account IV** (*Pesikta Rabbati. Ch.2\**)

"Why do we kindle lights on Hanuka? Because when the sons of the Hasmoneans, the High Priest, defeated the Hellenists, they entered the Temple and found there eight iron spears. They stuck candles on them and lit them."

\**Pesikta Rabbati* (Aram. פסיקתא רבתי), a medieval Midrash on the festivals of the year.  
Quoted in: DovBear facebook post, Dec.27, 2016.

### **Account V** (*Talmud: Shabbat 21b*)

When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it eight days.

\* *Sefaria translation. William Davidson Talmud, Shabbat 21b*

## Commentaries and interpretations of Hanuka



**Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**

[https://www.chabad.org/holidays/cHanuka/article\\_cdo/aid/2406935/jewish/To-Light-another-Light.htm](https://www.chabad.org/holidays/cHanuka/article_cdo/aid/2406935/jewish/To-Light-another-Light.htm)

### **TO LIGHT ANOTHER LIGHT**

There's a fascinating argument in the Talmud. Can you take one CHanuka light to light another? Usually, of course, we take an extra light, the shamash, and use it to light all the candles. But suppose we don't have one. Can we light the first candle and then use it to light

the others?

Two great sages of the third century, Rav and Shmuel, disagreed. Rav said No [because oil might be spilled and there would be less light]. Shmuel said Yes [because we use the light to create more light]... *the law follows Shmuel. Why?* When I use the flame of my faith to light a candle in someone else's life, my Jewishness is not diminished. It grows, because there is now more Jewish light in the world. When it comes to spiritual goods as opposed to material goods, the more I share, the more I have. If I share my knowledge, or faith, or love with others, I won't have less; I may even have more. That's the view of Shmuel, and that is how the law was eventually decided.

So share your Judaism with others. Take the flame of your faith and help set other souls on fire.



### **President Obama's Hannukah Message**

#### Statement by the President on Hanukkah

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/16/statement-president-hanukkah>

Over the eight nights of Hanukkah, Jews across America, Israel, and the world will remember an ancient triumph of freedom over oppression, and renew their faith in the possibility of miracles large and small.

Even in the darkest, shortest days of winter, the Festival of Lights brims with possibility and hope. The courage of the Maccabees reminds us that we too can overcome

seemingly insurmountable odds. The candles of the Menorah remind us that even the smallest light has the power to shine through the darkness. And the miracle at the heart of Hanukkah – the oil that lasted for eight nights instead of only one – reminds us that even when the future is uncertain, our best days are yet to come.

May this Hanukkah embolden us to do what is right, shine a light on the miracles we enjoy, and kindle in all of us the desire to share those miracles with others. From my family to yours, Chag Sameach.



Judith Beheading Holofernes  
Caravaggio, painted in c.1598-1599.

## Judith and the Hanukkah Story

### From the Jewish Women's Archive

Jewish Women's Archive. "December: Judith and the Hanukkah Story." (Viewed on September 3, 2018)

<https://jwa.org/discover/throughtheyear/december/judith>

In the Middle Ages Hanukkah festivities celebrated more than just the valiant deeds of the Maccabees. For several centuries there was another hero associated with Hanukkah: Judith. The Book of Judith promised that her praise would "never depart from the heart of those who remember the power of God," and that her actions would "go down through all generations of our descendants." While not historically connected to the story of the Maccabees, the Book of Judith shares the theme of Jewish faith and courage overcoming a larger force.

The Rabbis who included Judith in their Hanukkah narrative could not have imagined a time when the story of Judith's bravery in the face of enormous danger would cease to be part of the legacy of the Jewish people passed down from one generation to the next.

And, yet, like so many other Jewish women, Judith has been virtually written out of the Hanukkah narrative as we know it. Who was she? Why should we remember her?

In the second century B.C.E., as the powerful Assyrian army invaded the Near East, the town of Bethulia was besieged.... If Bethulia fell, the whole country would come under Assyrian control. Discouraged, the city's elders agreed to surrender if they were not rescued within a few days. Judith, a young widow and most unlikely savior, challenged them to take responsibility for the survival of their famine-stricken community. Accompanied only by her maid, she set out for the enemy camp. Smitten with her beauty, Holofernes invited her to a banquet. When he fell asleep in a drunken stupor, they were left alone in his tent. After praying for God's help, Judith took his sword and decapitated him. With the Assyrian army thrown into confusion, she urged the Israelites to launch a surprise attack; they emerged victorious.

Judith's faith and courage changed the course of history. Modern-day Judiths carry on her legacy as they dare to act, to speak, to teach, and to write themselves into the record of American Jewish history. Examples include artist [Judy Chicago](#), writer [Judy Blume](#), social and political activist [Judith Epstein](#), and other Jewish women whose deeds continue to inspire us.

\* **Picture: Wiki-commons.** 'Fair-use' for creation of educational resources.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Judith\\_Beheading\\_Holofernes\\_-\\_Caravaggio.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Judith_Beheading_Holofernes_-_Caravaggio.jpg)