

# What is Chanukah?

*Source Sheet by Lily Solochek*

## What is the miracle of Chanukah?

### **Al Hanisim (from the Siddur ~875C.E.)**

"We thank You also for the miraculous deeds and for the redemption and for the mighty deeds and the saving acts wrought by You, as well as for the wars which You waged for our ancestors in ancient days at this season. In the days of the Hasmonean Mattathias, son of Johanan the high priest, and his sons, when the iniquitous Greco-Syrian kingdom rose up against Your people Israel, to make them forget Your Torah and to turn them away from the ordinances of Your will, then You in your abundant mercy rose up for them in the time of their trouble, pled their cause, executed judgment, avenged their wrong, and delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and insolent ones into the hands of those occupied with Your Torah. Both unto Yourself did you make a great and holy name in Thy world, and unto Your people did You achieve a great deliverance and redemption. Whereupon your children entered the sanctuary of Your house,

### **על הניסים (מסידור התפילה)**

על הניסים ועל הפורקן ועל הגבורות ועל התשועות ועל המלחמות שעשית לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה. בימי מתיתיהו בן יוחנן, כהן גדול, חשמונאי, כשעמדה מלכות יוון הרשעה על עמך ישראל להשכיחם תורתך ולהעבירם מחוקי רצונך. ואתה, ברחמך הרבים, עמדת להם בעת צרתם, רבת את ריבם, דנת את דינם, נקמת את נקמתם. מסרת גיבורים ביד חלשים ורבים ביד מעטים וטמעים ביד טהורים ורשעים ביד צדיקים וזדים ביד עוסקי תורתך ולך עשית שם גדול וקדוש בעולמך ולעמך ישראל עשית תשועה גדולה ופורקן כהיום הזה ואחר כן באו בניך לדביר ביתך ופניו את היכלך

cleansed Your temple, purified Your sanctuary, kindled lights in Your holy courts, and appointed these eight days of Hanukkah in order to give thanks and praises unto Your holy name."

וטיהרו את מקדשיך והדליקו  
נרות בחצרות קודשך וקבעו  
שמונת ימי חנוכה אלו להודות  
ולהלל לשמך הגדול

*According to the Siddur, what is the miracle of Chanukah? How is it celebrated?*

### Shabbat 21b:10

The Gemara asks: **What is Hanukkah**, and why are lights kindled on Hanukkah? The Gemara answers: **The Sages taught** in *Megillat Ta'anit*: **On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them.** What is the reason? **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. The next year** the Sages **instituted** those days **and made them holidays with** recitation of *hallel* and special **thanksgiving** in prayer and blessings.

### שבת כ"א ב"י

מאי חנוכה דתנו רבנן בכה  
בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא  
אינון דלא למספד בהון  
ודלא להתענות בהון  
שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל  
טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל  
וכשגברה מלכות בית  
חשמונאי ונצחום בדקו ולא  
מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן  
שהיה מונח בחותמו של  
כהן גדול ולא היה בו אלא  
להדליק יום אחד נעשה בו  
נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה  
ימים לשנה אחרת קבעום  
ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל  
והודאה

*According to the Talmud, what is the miracle of Chanukah? How is it celebrated?*

### 1 Maccabees 4:48-55 (ca 100 B.C.E.)

**48** They also rebuilt the sanctuary and the interior of the temple, and consecrated the courts. **49** They made new holy vessels, and brought the lampstand, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple. **50** Then they offered incense on the altar and lit the lamps on the lampstand, and these gave light in the temple. **51** They placed the bread on the

table and hung up the curtains. Thus they finished all the work they had undertaken. **52** Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in the one hundred forty-eighth year, **53** they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering that they had built. **54** At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals.... **56** So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and joyfully offered burnt offerings; they offered a sacrifice of well-being and a thanksgiving offering.

*According to 1 Maccabees, what is the miracle of Chanukah? How is it celebrated?*

**Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 12:319-325 (C.E. 94/95)**

**319** So on the five and twentieth day of the month Casleu, which the Macedonians call Apelleus, they lighted the lamps that were on the candlestick, and offered incense upon the altar, and laid the loaves upon the table, and offered burnt-offerings upon the new altar....**323** Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days, and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms....**324** Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. **325** And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.

*According to Josephus, what is the miracle of Chanukah? How is it celebrated?*

**Mishneh Torah, Scroll of Esther and Hanukkah 3:2**

When, on the twenty-fifth of *Kislev*, the Jews had emerged victorious over their foes and destroyed them, they re-entered the Temple where they found only one jar of pure oil, enough to be lit for only a single day; yet they used it for lighting the required set of lamps for eight days, until they managed to press olives and produce pure oil.

**משנה תורה, הלכות מגילה**

**וחנוכה ג'ב'**

וְכִשְׁגָּבְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אוֹיְבֵיהֶם  
וְאֶבְדוּם בְּכ"ה בְּחֹדֶשׁ כִּסְלֹו הָיָה  
וְנִכְנְסוּ לְהֵיכָל וְלֹא מָצְאוּ שָׁמֶן  
טָהוֹר בַּמִּקְדָּשׁ אֶלָּא פֶּךָ אֶחָד וְלֹא  
הָיָה בּוֹ לְהַדְלִיק אֶלָּא יוֹם אֶחָד  
בְּלֵבַד וְהַדְלִיקוּ מִמֶּנּוּ נְרוֹת  
הַמַּעֲרָכָה שְׁמוֹנָה יָמִים עַד שֶׁכָּתְשׁוּ

זֵיתִים וְהוֹצִיאוּ שֶׁמֶן טָהוֹר:

Because of this, the sages of that generation ruled that the eight days beginning with the twenty-fifth of *Kislev* should be observed as days of rejoicing and praising the Lord. Lamps are lit in the evening over the doors of the homes, on each of the eight nights, so as to display the miracle. These days are called *Hanukkah*, when it is forbidden to lament or to fast, just as it is on the days of *Purim*. Lighting the lamps during the eight days of *Hanukkah* is a religious duty imposed by the sages.

וּמִפְּנֵי זֶה הִתְקִינוּ הַחֲכָמִים שְׁבָאוֹתוֹ  
הַדּוֹר שֶׁיְהִיוּ שְׂמוֹנֶת הַיָּמִים הָאֵלּוּ  
שֶׁתְּחַלְתֶּן כ"ה בְּכֶסֶלּוֹ יְמֵי שְׂמֻחָה  
וְהַלֵּל וּמְדַלִּיקִין בְּהֵן הַנֵּרוֹת בְּעָרֵב  
עַל פְּתַחֵי הַבָּתִּים בְּכָל לַיְלָה וְלַיְלָה  
מִשְׂמוֹנֶת הַלַּיְלוֹת לְהַרְאוֹת וּלְגַלוֹת  
הַנֵּס. וַיָּמִים אֵלּוּ הוּ הַנִּקְרָאִין  
חֲנֻכָּה וְהוּ אֲסוּרִין בְּהֶסְפֵּד וְתַעֲנִית  
כִּימֵי הַפּוּרִים. וְהַדְּלָקַת הַנֵּרוֹת  
בְּהֵן מִצְוָה מִדְּבַרֵי סוּפְרִים  
בְּקִרְיַת הַמְּגִלָּה:

## **2 Maccabees 10:1-8 (ca 2nd century B.C.E.)**

Now Maccabeus and his followers, the Lord leading them on, recovered the temple and the city; **2** they tore down the altars that had been built in the public square by the foreigners, and also destroyed the sacred precincts. **3** They purified the sanctuary, and made another altar of sacrifice; then, striking fire out of flint, they offered sacrifices, after a lapse of two years, and they offered incense and lighted lamps and set out the bread of the Presence....**5** It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Kislev. **6** They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the Festival of Booths, remembering how not long before, during the Festival of Booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. **7** Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to God who had given success to the purifying of God's own holy place. **8** They decreed by public edict, ratified by vote, that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year.

*According to 2 Maccabees, what is the miracle of Chanukah?  
How is it celebrated? What holiday does it echo?*

## **Festivals of Light**

**Chanukah** (Judaism) - celebrates the Maccabees military victory and rededication of the Jerusalem Temple

**Diwali** (Hindu) - festival of light, symbolizing the spiritual "victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance"

**Yuan Xiao Festival** (China) - marks the first full moon of the lunar year; houses are decorated with lanterns, often with riddles written on them; reconciliation, peace, and forgiveness

**Yee Peng** (Thailand) - celebrated on the full moon of the 12th lunar month; according to local tradition, this is when the rivers are at their highest; releasing the lantern represents releasing ills and misfortune

**Lohri** (Punjabi) - celebrates longer days after the winter solstice; celebrates winter crops and the sun deity (Surya); bonfires, eating and community gathering

**Yaldā Night** (Persian) - celebrated on the winter solstice ("longest/darkest day of the year"); communal gatherings, sharing food, reading poetry, decorating with candles and lights

Avodah Zarah 8a:6

**MISHNA:** And these are the festivals of gentiles: Kalenda, Saturnalia, and Kratesis, and the day of the festival of their kings, and the birthday of the king, and the anniversary of the day of the death of the king. This is the statement of Rabbi Meir. [...]

**GEMARA:** Rav Ḥanan bar Rava says: When are these festivals celebrated? Kalenda is celebrated during the **eight days after** the winter **solstice**, and Saturnalia is celebrated during the **eight days before** the winter **solstice**. [...] With regard to the dates of these festivals, **the Sages taught:** When Adam the first man saw that the day was progressively **diminishing**, as the days become shorter from the autumnal equinox until the winter solstice,

עבודה זרה ח' א:ו'

מתני' ואלו אידיהן של  
עובדי כוכבים קלנדא  
וסטרנורא וקרטיסים ויום  
גנוסיא של מלכיהם ויום  
הלידה ויום המיתה דברי  
רבי מאיר

גמ' אמר רב חנן בר רבא  
קלנדא ח' ימים אחר  
תקופה סטרנורא ח' ימים  
לפני תקופה

ת"ר לפי שראה אדם

he did not yet know that this is a normal phenomenon, and therefore he **said: Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven**, as it is written: “And to dust shall you return” (Genesis 3:19). **He arose and spent eight days in fasting and in prayer.**

**Once he saw that the season of Tevet, i.e., the winter solstice, had arrived, and saw that the day was progressively lengthening** after the solstice, he **said:** Clearly, the days become shorter and then longer, and this **is the order of the world. He went and observed a festival for eight days. Upon the next year, he observed both these eight days on which he had fasted on the previous year, and these eight days of his celebration, as days of festivities. He, Adam, established these festivals for the sake of Heaven, but they, the gentiles of later generations, established them for the sake of idol worship.**

הראשון יום שמתמעט  
והולך אמר אוי לי שמא  
בשביל שסרחתי עולם  
חשוך בעדי וחוזר לתוהו  
ובוהו וזו היא מיתה  
שנקנסה עלי מן השמים  
עמד וישב ח' ימים בתענית  
[ובתפלה]

כיון שראה תקופת טבת  
וראה יום שמאריך והולך  
אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא  
הלך ועשה שמונה ימים  
טובים לשנה האחרת  
עשאו לאלו ולאלו ימים  
טובים הוא קבעם לשם  
שמים והם קבעום לשם  
עבודת כוכבים

During Saturnalia, work and business came to a halt. Schools and courts of law closed, and the normal social patterns were suspended. People decorated their homes with wreaths and other greenery, and shed their traditional togas in favor of colorful clothes known as *synthesis*. Even slaves did not have to work during Saturnalia, but were allowed to participate in the festivities; in some cases, they sat at the head of the table while their masters served them. Instead of working, Romans spent Saturnalia gambling, singing, playing music, feasting, socializing and giving each other gifts. Wax taper candles called *cerei* were common gifts during Saturnalia, to signify light returning after the solstice.  
(<https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-rome/saturnalia>)