

The Story of Hanukkah

INTRODUCTION

Overview:

The most commonly known aspects of the story of Hanukkah are probably the Maccabean heroes and the miraculous Temple oil that burned for eight nights instead of one. Yet there is a great deal more to this story.

The story of Hanukkah recounts the clash between traditional Judaism and Hellenism in the land of Judah during the second century BCE. The Maccabees (from the Hebrew for “hammer”), were a band of Jewish fighters who fought against laws restricting Jewish observance, ultimately emerging victorious. They rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem and established a Jewish ruling dynasty, the Hasmoneans.

Students will explore background on Jewish life in a Greek world, the story of Hanukkah as recorded in 1 and 2 Maccabees, and the meaning of Hanukkah beyond the familiar lighting of the hanukkiah.

Grade Level: Middle school

Subjects Covered: Geography, History, World cultures, Music

Goals: Students learn the history behind the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

1. locate the Seleucid Empire on a map;
2. explain how the Jews in the Greek world were influenced by Greek culture;
3. discuss the causes of the Maccabean revolt;
4. narrate the story of Hanukkah as presented in I Maccabees.

Suggested Time Frame: Four 45-minute sessions

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Before you begin:

Teachers should be sure to explore all bookmarked pages of the DVD-ROM used in this lesson.

Introductory Activity:

1. Ask students what they know about the story of Hanukkah. Accept all responses, and write them on the board or on a large sheet of paper. Keep these answers, as the class will add to them later. Some topics to consider are food, history, and customs. You may also have students collectively narrate the story.

2. Tell students that the Hanukkah story occurred in 165 BCE, in Jerusalem. Look at the map segment “Jerusalem, 165 BCE”. Point out the Seleucid Empire and explain that at this time, Jerusalem (and the kingdom of Judah) was a part of the Seleucid Empire. The Seleucids were Greek rulers based in Syria and had conquered much of the region by the second century BCE. Use the navigation box to show students the extent of the Seleucid Empire, from east to west. Zoom in and click on the words “Seleucid Empire” and “Jerusalem” and read the text boxes that appear.

3. Ask the class:

- Who ruled Jerusalem during this time period?
- What did Antiochus IV (Antiochus Epiphanes) try to force the Jews to do?
- Who led the revolt against him?

Learning Activity 1: Judaism and Hellenism: Clash or Compromise?

The story of Hanukkah tells of heroic, devoted Jews who fought against the anti-Jewish laws and oppressive practices of the Hellenistic Syrian king. But Greek culture had had an enormous impact on Jewish life in the centuries leading up to the Maccabean Rebellion. In 332 BCE Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire, which included most of the eastern Mediterranean. For the next two centuries, the Hellenistic empire brought Greek culture and beliefs to all the lands it ruled.

1. Give a working definition of “Hellenism,” a concept that will come up often in this lesson. “Hellenism” is the adoption of Greek culture. “Hellenistic” means “a blend of Greek and local cultures,” and can be applied to all areas that were under the control of the Greeks.

2. Watch the video segment Judeans in a Greek World. Stop when Abba Eban says, “came to be known in the Hellenistic world as Biblos in Greek—the Bible.”

3. Ask the class:

- What are some of the ways in which Greek culture influenced Jews living in Greek lands?
- Where does the word “Bible” come from?
- Why might some Jews have been eager to embrace Hellenistic culture? Why might others fear that it threatened their tradition? (Remind students that this is prior to the anti-Jewish laws of Antiochus, so the Jews were not being forced to accept Greek culture at this time.)
- What are some of the influences of Greek culture on us today?
- When and where else in history can we see Jews adapting to and incorporating the surrounding community’s culture and traditions?

4. Divide the class in half. Hold a debate with one half of the class representing Jews who were in favor of Hellenization, and the other side representing those Jews who wanted to resist all Greek influence. One or two students can create a pro/con list on the board.

Learning Activity 2: A New Judean Kingdom

The Hanukkah story was set in motion when some of Jerusalem’s Jewish leaders allied themselves with the region’s Syrian-Greek rulers in the second century BCE. Acting on the leaders’ wishes, the king forbade Jewish religious practices such as observing the Sabbath, and demanded that Jews offer pagan sacrifices. A group of Jews rebelled against these edicts and defended their traditions.

1. Watch the video segment “[A New Judean Kingdom](#)”. Stop the video at the end of the subchapter, when the narrator says, “The traditions of the people had triumphed.”
2. Ask the class:
 - What first caused the Jewish people’s revolt?
 - Who led the revolt?
 - What did Antiochus Epiphanes do in an attempt to force Jews to stop their rebellion and embrace Greek culture and religion?
 - How did the Maccabees ultimately defeat the Syrian army?

Optional Activity: Accounts of the Maccabean Uprising

(Note to teachers: The following activity is optional and depends on the reading level of your class. The text of the historical documents is rather dense; you may prefer to have students read only the introductory material for each document.)

The first two books of Maccabees offer an account of the violent oppression of Jewish practices and beliefs and the Maccabean heroes who led the revolt against the Syrians and their enforcement of Hellenistic practices on their subjects. Maccabees is part of the Apocrypha (religious writings not included in the Tanakh or codes of oral law). Looking at original sources gives us a better feel for the historical content of the Hanukkah story.

1. Divide the class into three groups. Each group will be responsible for summarizing one of the following documents.

A. An excerpt from II Maccabees describes the conflict between Jews who wanted to Hellenize and those who did not. Read the document Jerusalem becomes a Greek City.

B. I Maccabees describes some of the ways in which Jews who did not wish to Hellenize were persecuted. Read the document The Seleucid Oppression.

C. I Maccabees also describes the rebellion of the Maccabees and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty. Read The Maccabean Uprising.

2. Ask the class:

- What did the king's officers ask Mattathias and his sons to do?
- What did Mattathias do when he saw a Jew about to obey the king's officers?
- How did the Maccabees come to be the powerful army of Jews that defeated the Syrians?
- Were the Maccabees justified in their violence?

3. Ask the class how these documents enhance their understanding of Hannukah. Add key terms to the list on the board.

Learning Activity 3: The End of the Conflict: Dedication and Celebration

In 164 BCE the Maccabees defeated the Syrian Greek rulers. Antiochus Epiphanes (Antiochus IV) died in the same year. Antiochus V, at the urging of the Hellenistic Jewish leaders, retracted his father's anti-Jewish laws. The Maccabees' success and rededication of the Temple were triumphs for the Jewish people and their religious traditions, and led to an era of Jewish self-rule under the Hasmonean dynasty.

1. Two letters from Antiochus V demonstrate the willingness of both the Jewish leadership and the Seleucids to back down from conflict. Read the document The Conflict Eases.

2. Ask the class:

- How was the battle resolved?
- Why did the leaders back down from the conflict?

3. There are differing stories as to why we celebrate Hanukkah for eight days and nights. The Books of Maccabees do not mention the "miracle of light." The Rabbis, however, tell a different story. We will look at both stories.

- **A Great Military Victory**

2 Maccabees 1:9 states that Jews celebrate Hanukkah for eight days because, during the fighting, Sukkot (another eight-day holiday) was not celebrated. The rededication of the Temple was meant to make up for this, and was celebrated with sacrifices, music, and prayer. Essentially, Hanukkah is thus the celebration of a military and political victory.

▪ **The Miracle of the Oil**

The story of the “miracle of lights” is actually a *baraita*, a tradition that came out of later commentary. One *baraita* tells us that when the Maccabees entered the Temple for the first time since fighting broke out, there was very little oil left with which they could light the candelabrum. There was perhaps enough for one day. The Maccabees rededicated the Temple, and a great miracle happened: the oil lasted for eight days. Thus, Hanukkah is the celebration of a miraculous event.

4. Ask the class:

- According to 2 Maccabees, why do we celebrate Hanukkah for eight days?
- According to the *baraita*, why do we celebrate Hanukkah for eight days?
- Do you think these two differing stories can be reconciled? Could both be right?
- The word “Hanukkah” means “dedication.” Why do you think the holiday was given the name Hanukkah?

Culminating Activity: The Symbols of Hanukkah

There are a lot of fun and interesting customs associated with Hanukkah. Typical Hanukkah foods are fried in oil. In Israel, it is traditional to eat *sufganiyot*, fried doughnuts filled with jam. European Jewish tradition calls for making *latkes*, fried potato pancakes. We sing special songs, and even the way we light the hanukkiyah is influenced by customs.

1. Have the class discuss some of the traditions around Hanukkah. How do their families, or families they know, observe the holiday?

2. Students may mention that they play dreidl on Hanukkah. “Dreidl” comes from the Yiddish word “dreyen,” “to spin.” It is said that young Jews, who could be punished during Antiochus’s rule for studying Torah, would pretend to play with a top when Greek guards came around, so they would not be punished. Later, this story blended with an English and German game traditionally played around Christmas time. The letters on dreidls outside of Israel—*nun*, *gimmel*, *hey*, and *shin*—stand for “A great miracle happened there,” while Israeli dreidls (*sevivon* in Hebrew) have the letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *hey*, and *pey*, for “A great miracle happened here.”

3. Have students learn some holiday songs, and discuss their meanings. See the Materials section for a list of places to find the printed words and music and audio materials. Some suggestions:

Oh Hanukkah (English or Yiddish)
Maoz Tsur
Light One Candle
Ner Li
Ocho Kandelikas
I Have a Little Dreidl (English or Yiddish)
Mi Yimalel
Mrs. Maccabeus

4. On Hanukkah, we light one candle the first night, two candles the second night, and so on. This tradition was the preferred way of Hillel the Elder, a sage in the period just after the Hanukkah story takes place. Hillel said that the miracle of the oil burning grew greater with each passing night; adding an additional candle each night represents the miracle growing. But the school of Shammai, another sage, says that we should light eight candles first, then seven, on down to one, to show how the light in the Temple would have diminished. Have students discuss which way they think makes the most sense.

Extension Activities (Optional)

1. Have students, as a class, make either sufganiyyot or latkes. See the Materials section for Jewish cookbook suggestions.
2. Have students read a different story each night from Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Power of Light*. Students could take turns reading a story each night, and report back to the class, or you could assign groups of students to each of the stories. How do these stories enhance our understanding of what Hanukkah means today?
3. Have students read the book *The Christmas Menorah*, a true story that took place in Billings, Montana, in 1993. Hate crimes, including a brick thrown through a window with a hanukkiyah in it, had escalated in Billings. Citizens of the town, along with schools and churches, put up hannukiahs in their windows in solidarity. Since that time, no hate crimes have been reported in Billings. This story is also told in a film, *Not in Our Town*. See the Materials section for book and film information.

MATERIALS

Suggested books:

Cohn, Janice. *The Christmas Menorah*. Morton Grove, Illinois: Albert Whitman, 2000.
Dunn, J. Mark, and Joel English, eds. *The Complete Chanukah Songbook*. New York: URJ Press, 1993.
Nathan, Joan. *Joan Nathan's Jewish Holiday Cookbook*. New York: Schocken, 2004.

Pasternak, Velvel. *The World's Most Popular Hanukkah Songs*. Baltimore: Tara Publications, 1998.

Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *The Power of Light*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990.

Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

Suggested film:

Not in Our Town I: The Original Story (order from www.theworkinggroup.org)

Suggested websites:

www.zemerl.com (site for Jewish music, with lyrics and audio files)

Suggested CDs:

Cahan-Simon, Lori. *Chanukah is Freylekh: A Yiddish Chanukah Celebration*

STANDARDS

Historical Understanding

Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective

World History

Standard 7:

Level III, Benchmark 3: Knows the locations of significant Greek city-states and colonies in the Black Sea, Northern Africa, and the Western Mediterranean basin and reasons for their establishment

Level IV, Benchmark 2: Understands events that led to the spread of Judaism (e.g., the significance of the Babylonian captivity for the subsequent history and survival of Judaism, the significance of the Jewish diaspora for the transmission of Judaism in the Mediterranean region and Southwest Asia)

DVD-ROM BOOKMARKS

Jerusalem, 165 BCE (Atlas > 586 BCE-72 CE > 165)

Judeans in Greek World (Video > The Power of the Word > Greece > Judeans in a Greek World > Play)

A New Judean Kingdom (Video > The Power of the Word > The Maccabees > A New Judean Kingdom > Play)

Jerusalem Becomes a Greek City (Video > The Power of the Word > The Maccabees > A New Judean Kingdom > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > Jerusalem Becomes a Greek City)

The Seleucid Oppression (Video > The Power of the Word > The Maccabees > A New Judean Kingdom > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > The Seleucid Oppression)

The Maccabean Uprising (Video > The Power of the Word > The Maccabees > A New Judean Kingdom > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > The Maccabean Uprising)

The Conflict Eases (Video > The Power of the Word > The Maccabees > A New Judean Kingdom > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > The Conflict Eases)

Hanukkah (Index > Hanukkah > Encyclopedia > Hanukkah)