

# The Real Message of Chanukah

By Pelia Werth

**C**hanukah: possibly the most famous Jewish festival, but also the most misunderstood. Time and again, whether on television or in books, Chanukah is portrayed as the “Jewish Christmas”, the biggest festival of the year, a time for presents and parties. Of course, there’s the popular image of lighting candles in an eight-branched candlestick, but its significance is often lost under the general glitter and jollity of the festive season.

Actually, aside from the time of year (coincidentally, Chanukah falls on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev, just as Christmas falls on the 25th of December) Chanukah has very little in common with Christmas. In fact, having been instituted after the Torah was given, it’s a relatively minor festival. That’s not to say, however, that it does not carry a profound message that may be especially relevant today.

**O**ur story starts over 2000 years ago, with the conquest of the land of Israel by Alexander the Great. As a result of this, more and more Jews became attracted to Greek culture and started to embrace a hedonistic, Epicurean lifestyle, wearing Greek clothes, adopting Greek names and participating in Greek pastimes—including gladiatorial combat! Of course, the ancient Greek emphasis on the physical and the pursuit of pleasure ran contrary to Jewish ideals of spirituality, but Jewish religion and culture were still tolerate until, in 175

B.C.E, the Greek-influenced, Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes came to the throne. A period of repression and persecution started in which Jews were forbidden to circumcise their sons, observe the Sabbath or study the Torah. The ultimate insult came when, in the holiest part of the Temple in Jerusalem, a statue of Zeus was set up and pigs sacrificed there. Across the country, Jewish leaders were ordered to carry out similar sacrifices.

Yet there were those who stood up against the orders of the empire. A woman called Hannah and her seven sons were tortured to death rather than renounce their faith and, in the town of Modi’in, a priest called Matityahu and his five sons started a rebellion. Amazingly, the group of rebels, known as the Maccabees (from the Hebrew for “hammer”), emerged victorious and rededicated the Temple—the word Chanukah means “dedication”.

However, when the time came to relight the Menorah, the eight-branched candlestick, there was only enough pure oil to last for one day, and it would take eight days to obtain more. Miraculously, this tiny amount of oil burned for eight days—which is why today, Chanukah is celebrated for eight days, and the candlestick known as a chanukiah is lit on every night of the festival! It’s also why oily foods such as doughnuts and potato cakes called latkes are eaten during the festival.



**S**o what lessons from this incredible story of faith and survival can we learn today? For Jews, Chanukah is a symbol of Judaism’s seemingly miraculous continuation throughout the ages and a reminder that the Jewish people should never abandon their religion through attempting to emulate other cultures (which is what makes comparisons to Christmas so ironic). This is especially relevant in the increasingly secular age we are living in. For everyone, Jewish or not, I would say that Chanukah teaches us that we should always stand up against injustice, even in the face of overwhelming opposition. We should be proud of our beliefs and hold onto them even if they are mocked and insulted by others.

**Happy Chanukah!**