

“What is Chanukah?”

Chanukah begins on the twenty-fifth day of the Jewish month of Kislev, and lasts eight days.

All of us are aware of the story of Chanukah, of the victory of the brave Maccabees against the Greeks and of the miracle of the cruse of oil that burned for eight days instead of one. But the story is not so simple.

In the fourth century B.C. Alexander the Great with his Greek armies conquered the Near East including Israel. After his death, his empire split apart. The land of Israel came under the control of the Seleucid dynasty, which ruled the region of Syria. In the year 167 B.C., the king Antiochus Epiphanes decided to force all the peoples under his rule to Hellenize. The practice of Jewish rituals such as the Sabbath and circumcision was outlawed. The worship of Greek gods and the sacrifice of pigs replaced the traditional worship in the temple.

When the Greeks came to the village of Modi'in to set up an altar, they commanded the Jews to bring a pig as a sacrifice to show obedience to Antiochus' decree. Mattathias, an old priest, was so enraged when he saw a Jew about to comply that he killed him. He and his five sons then fought the Greek detachment, retreated to the mountains, and began a guerrilla war against the Greeks and their Jewish allies. Before he died of old age, Mattathias passed on the leadership to his son Judah the Maccabee. It was Judah and his followers who liberated Jerusalem, reclaiming the temple from its defilement by the Greeks.

The Golden Menorah of the Temple, perhaps the same one made by Moses in the wilderness, which was removed and broken by Antiochus, was repaired by the Maccabees and lit again. They could find only one small cruse of oil, enough to last one day, but when they lit the Temple Menorah with it, a miracle occurred and the menorah burned for eight days.

The commitment to Judaic beliefs, which fuelled the Maccabees' war against their oppressors is what gave the festival

of Chanukah its importance, for it celebrated the first war fought for religious freedom.

The Menorah became the icon of light and truth, and so, the most important symbol of Chanukah. But when our ancestors made the first Chanukah Menorahs, they knew that it was forbidden to imitate the seven-branched candlestick of the Temple. Besides, they wished to commemorate the little jar of oil that had lasted for eight days when the Temple was rededicated. For that reason, a special Chanukah lamp was designed for the Festival of Light, with an individual shaft for the *shammash* (servant) by which all the wicks were lit.

The Blessings on Lighting the Chanukah Candles:

1) *Ba-ruch atah A-do-nai, E-lo-he-nu melech ha-o-lam, asher kidd-sha-nu b-mits-vo tav, v-tsvanu, l-had-lik ner shel cha-nu-ka.*

Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who hast sanctified us by Thy commandments and commanded us to kindle the lights of Chanukah.

2) *Ba-ruch atah A-do-nai, E-lo-he-nu melech ha-o-lam, she-a-sah nissim la-avo-te-nu, bayamim ha-haim, baz-z'man haz-zeh.*

Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who hast wrought miracles for our fathers, in the days of old at this season.

3) (Blessing recited on first night only)

Ba-ruch atah A-do-nai, E-lo-he-nu melech ha-o-lam, she-hech'y a-nu v-ki-ma-nu, v-

higgi-a-nu la-z'man haz-zeh.

Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has kept us in life and has preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season.



CHANUKAH BEGINS FRIDAY EVENING,

DECEMBER 11TH

AND CONTINUES THROUGH

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19TH, 2009.