

# Chanukah

The festival of Chanukah (also spelled Hanukah) celebrates the defeat of the Syrian Greeks and the rededication of King Solomon's Temple by the Maccabees in 165 BCE.

The Syrians, ruled by King Antiochus, tried to force the Jews to worship the Greek Gods. He forbade them, under penalty of death, to keep the Sabbath or celebrate any Jewish holidays, circumcise their sons, or keep any other traditions of Judaism. He desecrated the Temple by placing statues of Greek gods in it, and he ordered the people to bring sacrifices of non-kosher pigs. King Antiochus sent inspectors to every town to make sure that the people carried out his instructions. The inspectors burned Torah scrolls and put to death anyone who violated the King's orders.

In the small town of Modi'in, a priest named Mattityahu (Mattathias) and his four sons refused to obey the King's orders. They fled to the hills and called for others to join them in fighting the Syrians. When Mattityahu died, the rebellion continued under the leadership of his son Judah, who had been given the name *Maccabee*, a Hebrew word meaning "hammer," because of his strength. Although Judah Maccabee and his followers were poorly equipped and outnumbered, they defeated the Syrian armies and recaptured all of Jerusalem.

The Temple was cleansed of idols and rededicated with feasting and great joy. A tiny container of oil was found in the Temple, enough to last one day. Miraculously, it burned for eight days and nights. That is why a special eight branched menorah (candle holder) called a *chanukiyah* is lit during Chanukah, and that is also why Chanukah is sometimes called "The Festival of Lights." The ninth candle, called the *shamash*, is used to light each of the other candles. One candle is lit on the first evening, two on the second, three on the third, and so on until all eight candles are lit on the last night.

In addition to the lighting of the chanukiyah, children receive gifts and play a top-spinning game called the *dreidel* game. See the next page to make your own dreidel.

