



Staten Island Advance

Hanukkah: Commemorating the miracle of the oil

The eight-day celebration known as the Festival of Lights begins on Dec. 21

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The celebration of Hanukkah, which begins Dec. 21, continues a tradition that dates from 165 BC, after the Maccabees recaptured the Holy Temple in Jerusalem from the Greeks.

Even though there was enough oil in the temple lamp to burn for only one day, the oil lasted for eight days -- a miracle.

It was decreed that Jews were to celebrate the miracle of Hanukkah, known as the Festival of Lights, every year thereafter on the Jewish calendar's 25th day of Kislev, which usually falls in December.

The custom continues to this day, with Jews lighting a flame each night, until eight flames are burning in the menorah, or candelabra, plus the shamash, the tallest flame.

As the centuries passed, many customs have sprung up since that long ago time, including the use of candles: The Maccabees lit olive oil with a wick, not candles, even though beeswax candles were used in Egypt since 300 BC

Many Orthodox Jews today also light olive oil with wicks, the preferred method, but they come conveniently packaged with snap-off tops.

And there are those electric menorahs in residents' front windows and at the Staten Island Mall.

"Only a real flame fulfills the actual command to commemorate the miracle of Hanukkah, however," said **Rabbi Abe Unger, Wagner College campus rabbi, and assistant professor with Wagner's Department of Government and Politics.**

SYMBOLIC GESTURES

"Electric menorahs at home and in the mall are merely symbolic gestures," said Unger, who is also rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Israel, Tottenville.

Regarding the custom of giving money or Hanukkah gelt (Yiddish term for money), it is said to have originated in Europe during the Middle Ages. Scholars say the custom is based on celebrating the Maccabees' minting of new coins after their victory over the Greeks in Jerusalem.

In the United States, the custom has since evolved into giving -- and eating -- chocolate "coins," covered in gold or silver foil.

Foods fried in oil also are a longtime custom that remains popular. A favorite tradition is potato latkes or pancakes, fried in oil to symbolize the one-day's worth of oil that lasted for eight days.

The game of spinning the dreidel is thought to be a relatively modern custom that began in Europe more than a century ago. In the United States, the Hebrew letters on the dreidel (nun, gimel, hay, shin) stand for,

"A great miracle happened there," while in Israel, the letters (nun, gimel, hay, pe) stand for, "A great miracle happened here."

GIFT-GIVING

In the 20th century, the custom of giving Hanukkah gifts took hold. While the gifts can be small, one each night for eight nights, some can be pricey iPods, cameras, racing bikes and jewelry. And it's not just parents giving to their children, but husbands and wives exchanging expensive gifts, too.

Hanukkah has traditionally not been a gift-giving holiday, noted Rabbi Judah Kogen of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, West Brighton. "But it has evolved to that, many say, due to the influence of Christmas, which our neighbors are celebrating at the same time of year," he said.

In Rabbi Kogen's family, among the Hanukkah traditions is the lighting of a unique wrought iron menorah, which he designed himself. It was crafted two decades ago by a Shaker artisan in Kentucky, whose work Kogen admired while on a trip with his wife through the Midwest. After arriving at their then-home in Atlanta, "I sent a drawing of the menorah design to the Shaker artisan, who crafted it and shipped it to me," Kogen said.

He noted that, "The biggest difference between today's celebration of Hanukkah and those of generations ago, is that, historically, Judaism has emphasized the spiritual nature of Hanukkah as the miracle of God's intervention, enabling a group of weak Jewish rebels to overcome the empire, which was their oppressor."

MISSING TRADITION

Joyce Gralla, office manager at B'nai Jeshurun, is among those wishing tradition would once again rule the Hanukkah holiday.

"When we were younger, lighting the candles would be the main thing," she said. "We would give small presents, each day."

For her two grown daughters, this year, for instance, Mrs. Gralla plans to buy small gifts, such as makeup, socks, stationery, shopping for these items at local discount and drug stores.

"Hanukkah has become much too commercial, to the point that sometimes the religious aspects have gone astray," she said.