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Week 91

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Latkes are yummy and presents are fun, but are there ways I can make Hanukkah more meaningful?

By Jill Cogan

With winter right around the corner, the stores are beginning to fill up with everything that we need for the holidays. One holiday sticks out in everyone's mind...Hanukkah! To kids, Hanukkah means candles, latkes, gelt, dreidles and, most of all, presents. My question is: what's the big deal? Why does everyone emphasize Hanukkah? It's not even in the Torah!

Hanukkah is the Festival of Lights. During the eight days of Hanukkah, we celebrate the victory of the Maccabees, the rededication of the Temple and commemorate the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days. Although this holiday is not one of the "most important" holidays in Judaism, we should still celebrate it.

There is so much we can do to make Hanukkah more meaningful than presents and gelt. For example, studying the full story of Hanukkah enables us to gain a better understanding of the true story. We can also follow the traditions of Hanukkah by eating foods such as *sufganiyot* (jelly donuts) and latkes (potato pancakes). These foods are fried in oil, reminding us of the oil that lasted eight days. Many families have decorations for Hanukkah, but the most important decoration is often left out. Publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah is a mitzvah, so the *chanukiyah* should be placed in a window where others can see it. The visual representation of the *chanukiyah* constantly reminds us of the story, and makes the holiday a bit more meaningful and resonant in our lives. Another way to make Hanukkah more meaningful is to bring family and friends together for a traditional Hanukkah celebration complete with the lighting of the candles, games of dreidel, Hanukkah songs and reflections on the miracles that have happened in your own lives. With a little work and a lot of fun, Hanukkah easily can become more meaningful.

During Hanukkah, we celebrate the religious freedom that we gained when the Maccabees won the war and returned us to the Temple. Regaining the Temple in Jerusalem was the ultimate gift because it gave us religious freedom and a holy place to, once again, call home. The gifts that we get on Hanukkah are insignificant compared to the gift of freedom. Throughout history, the Jewish people have constantly fought for their freedom, and Hanukkah is another example of our victory. As Jewish teenagers in North America, we should be grateful for the fact that we are able to practice Judaism freely. Just as it was a miracle that the Maccabees were victorious, and that the oil lasted for eight days, it is a miracle that we are able to live freely as Jews. This year, we should all take some time and reflect on the true meaning of Hanukkah.

Related Questions

What is the tradition for lighting the Hanukkah candles?

On Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, we light candles each night to celebrate the miracle that God performed for the Maccabees. We begin with one candle on the first night, and add one candle each night for eight nights. In addition, we light the *shamash* each night which we use to light the other candles. The candles should be added to the menorah from the right to the left, but they are *lit* from left to right. The blessings (check out the link in the resources section) are recited each night with the



lit *shamash* in hand, after which the candles are lit immediately. The first two blessings are sung every night, the third only on the first night .

Exchanging gifts is not mentioned in the story of Hanukkah, so why do we get them?

Traditionally, gifts were never given on Hanukkah. Gelt, which used to consist of small amounts of money, was given when playing dreidel, but people did not exchange gifts. In today's world, it is difficult to go anywhere during the holiday season without seeing references to Christmas and gifts. As a result of this, many Jews adapted and mixed with society, and thus the idea of giving gifts on Hanukkah developed.

Taking Action

Share the Celebration

You can do many different things to spread the message of Hanukkah and make it more meaningful. Simply explaining the story and the miracle associated with it is a great way to spread the message of this holiday. Temple Youth Groups (TYG's), Jewish clubs at your school or even your Hebrew school class can run programs and activities based around the story of Hanukkah. Even throwing a traditional Hanukkah party can be a fun way to educate others and celebrate the miracle of Hanukkah.

Help others find freedom

As we celebrate our own freedom during Hanukkah, it is also important to remember that others are not free. The Religious Action Center (RAC), on its website, has a social justice guide for the holiday, "[Sustaining the Light.](#)" Use the holiday as a call to help others work for and celebrate their own freedom.

Jill Cogan hails from Cherry Hill, NJ where she is a senior at Cherry Hill East. Jill has grown up at Temple Emanuel, where she is a proud member of TEFTY (Temple Emanuel Federation for Temple Youth). She is currently serving her second term as the Religious and Cultural Vice President of NFTY-Pennsylvania Area Region (PAR). A URJ Camp Harlam alumna, Jill participated in NFTY in Israel in the summer of 2005. Outside of NFTY, Jill is extremely active in theatre and choir. She enjoys playing guitar, a good cup of coffee, and spending time with her friends. Jill is excited to go to college next fall to pursue a degree in psychology and Jewish studies, and one day plans to attend Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as a rabbinical student.