

Hanukkah, Hanukkah

by Donna Rhodenizer

Hanukkah is not my cultural tradition or faith experience. However, students I teach do observe this holiday. My research and my understanding of things that are meaningful in the lives of my students can help me make a connection with them and also helps me facilitate understanding between them and their peers.

When students are able to share the things that are meaningful to them, they can feel included, heard, understood and represented.

The simple song, *Hanukkah, Hanukkah* is a starting point and a gateway to discussion and the search for additional information. To that end, when singing [Hanukkah, Hanukkah](#) information is included below to help teachers by providing a bit of background that connects to the song. Additional research is encouraged.

Songs that highlight various cultural traditions, celebrations or observances can be used to help foster community. Being part of a community is not about everyone being the same, but recognizing and respecting our differences.

Background - Hanukkah (festival of lights)

The celebration of Hanukkah is tied to the Hebrew calendar that is used to follow religious dates. This calendar follows the lunar cycle and therefore it begins on a different date each year. Usually, Hanukkah starts in late November to mid-December.

Hanukkah lasts for eight days. This Jewish holiday celebrates a miracle from more than 2,000 years ago. After winning a prolonged battle, the Jews wanted to rededicate their temple. One jar of usable oil was all that could be found. This was enough to light the temple's candles for only one day. The oil miraculously burned for eight days, enough time to find more oil for their sacred candles.

To celebrate the ancient miracle of the oil burning a candle for eight nights, Jews celebrating Hanukkah light a candleholder called a menorah. In the temple the menorah that is used has eight candles. The menorah that is used in a home has nine candles, one for each night plus a candle called the *shamash* used to light the other candles.

On the first night, one candle is added to the menorah and lit. On the second night, another candle is added and lit. The adding and lighting of candles continues for eight nights. During these moments, people



recite special blessings and prayers, sing songs, and exchange gifts to celebrate the miracle in the temple more than 2,000 years ago.

The Dreidel (pronounced DRAY-dull) is also a traditional symbol associated with Hanukkah.

A dreidel is a spinning top with four sides. Each side has a different Hebrew letter. Outside of Israel, the four letters are *nun*, *gimmel*, *hey*, *shin*, representing “*nes gadol haya sham*” (“A great miracle happened there”). In Israel, the *shin* is replaced with a *peh*, representing “*nes gadol haya po*” (“A great miracle happened here”). In addition to simply spinning the dreidel, children also use this spinning top to play the traditional Hanukkah game.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dreidel>

Children play dreidel using chocolate wrapped coins. As each player takes a turn spinning the dreidel, the player’s action is determined by the side on which the dreidel lands.

Nun – the player does nothing (a position of safety!)

Gimel – the player gets everything in the pot

Hei – the player gets half

Shin – the player adds to the pot

The game is played until someone wins all the coins, or at whatever point the players decide to stop playing.



The two symbols shown in this image of a dreidel are Gimel (facing front/left) and Nun (on the right side)

Elements associated with Hanukkah

Menorah

Dreidel

Hanukkah gelt (wrapped chocolate coins)

Latkes and sufganiyot – traditional Hanukkah foods

Activities of Hanukkah

Lighting the menorah

Eating fried foods

Playing dreidel

Giving gifts

Donating to charity

The spelling of Hanukkah can be confusing. Because the word is originally written in Hebrew, writing the word in English is a phonetic representation. There are 24 variant spellings listed in the Oxford English Dictionary!

Thanks to Nomi Teplow for providing first-person Hanukkah information and pronunciations.

Online sources:

Hanukkah, by Laura Goertzel <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/celebrations/article/hanukkah>

<https://jewishunpacked.com/how-to-celebrate-hanukkah/> (includes samples of popular Hanukkah songs)

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dreidel>