

RELIGIOUS STUDIES · KS2

Hanukkah — Festival of Lights

A Jewish festival lesson

About this lesson

Hanukkah (sometimes spelled Chanukah) is an eight-day Jewish festival in winter, usually December. It celebrates an event from over 2,000 years ago. This lesson tells that story, explains the miracle of the oil, and describes how Jewish families celebrate today. Designed for a 45-60 minute lesson.

The story of Hanukkah

Over 2,000 years ago, the Greeks ruled the land of Israel. Their king, Antiochus, was cruel — he banned the Jewish religion and turned the holy Temple in Jerusalem into a Greek temple. A small group of Jewish fighters called the Maccabees, led by Judah Maccabee, fought back. After three years, they won and reclaimed the Temple. They wanted to relight the menorah — the special seven-branched lamp — which was supposed to burn at all times. But there was only enough holy oil left to last one day. They lit it anyway. To everyone's amazement, the oil lasted EIGHT days — long enough for new oil to be prepared. This is the miracle of Hanukkah: light in dark times, and faith rewarded.

Families celebrate Hanukkah

Eight days, eight candles

- Lighting the hanukkiah — a special nine-branched candle holder
- On day one, light one candle. On day two, two. By day eight, all eight are lit, plus the helper candle (shamash).
- Saying special prayers as the candles are lit
- Placing the hanukkiah in the window so others can see the light



- Eating foods cooked in oil — to remember the oil miracle
- Latkes (potato pancakes), sufganiyot (jam-filled doughnuts) — favourites in many homes
- Playing dreidel — a four-sided spinning top with Hebrew letters
- Giving small gifts, especially to children — sometimes one each night
- Singing Hanukkah songs together as a family
- Saying 'Hanukkah Sameach!' (Happy Hanukkah)

Why Hanukkah matters

Hanukkah means 'dedication' — referring to the rededication of the Temple. The festival is a celebration of religious freedom — the right to practise your faith. It also celebrates light in darkness — a meaningful theme in the depths of winter. The miracle of the oil teaches that small acts of faith and courage can have effects much bigger than expected. Hanukkah is not the most religious festival in Judaism (Yom Kippur and Passover are more important). But because it falls near Christmas and is family-focused with gifts and food, it has become particularly visible and beloved among Jewish families around the world.

Reflection

