

## Chanukah or Hanukkah

*By Howie Flomberg*

I've received a few questions about Chanukah. I am going to use this forum to discuss this holiday. First of all – how is it spelled? I prefer to spell it Chanukah. It is a phonetic translation of a word in a Semitic language far older than English. So take your pick, all are valid.

The roots of Chanukah are in the conquests of Alexander the Great. When Alexander conquered a nation one of the methods that he used to quell future revolution was to allow the conquered people to keep their own religions and customs. In Israel this worked quite well. Jews remained Jewish. Jews prospered in the Hellenic civilization and many freely adopted the Hellenic manner and form of dress.

However after the death of Alexander his empire fractured. Governors sought to control the areas that they inherited. However they did not have Alexander's wisdom. Israel wound up under Assyrian rule. This dispute between Assyria (Syria) and Israel still remains.

Antiochus IV, the Assyrian ruler was busy fighting wars when the local constabulary instituted worship of Zeus as the local religion and in doing so trashed the Jewish temple. The temple was dedicated to the Greek gods and profaned. Keeping of the Jewish Sabbath was deemed illegal and those who refused to adopt Greek customs were put to death.

According to tradition a Hebrew Priest named Mattathias initiated a revolt led by his eldest son Judah, the Hammer. Hammer in ancient Hebrew is Maccabee. The revolt was called the Maccabean Revolt. When they reclaimed the Holy Temple they cleansed it and relit the Temple Menorah (or light). According to the story they only had enough oil for the lamp to burn for one day and it took eight days for the oil to be produced. The miracle of Chanukah is that the oil burned for eight days allowing the lamp to burn for eight days. The Maccabean culture survived until the Romans conquered the Holy Land.

Today we celebrate this victory for eight days. We light a nine-branched Menorah or candelabra. The center candle is called the Shamus or Helper. This candle is used to light the other candles. One candle is then lit on the first night, two on the second night and three on the third and so on.

The Chanukah holiday is celebrated on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month Kislev. As the Hebrew calendar is a lunar calendar the date varies according to the "English" calendar. Every few years a "leap month" is added to bring them back into sync.

Chanukah is often referred to as the Jewish Christmas. That is an interesting statement. Chanukah is the most recent Jewish holiday. Traditionally it happens to be a minor holiday. It became prominent as the Jewish family's defense against the Christmas holiday. When my children were young we celebrated by lighting the lights, chanting the blessings and singing a song or two. My children were then allowed to go to the fireplace and select a gift from the pile. After opening the gift and comparing it to their sibling's gift, they ran to the phone to call their Gentile friends and tell them what they got. Today we still celebrate Chanukah by lighting the lamp and exchanging gifts.

In closing I wish you all a Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah and a happy and healthy New Year.

