

What is Chanukah?

There are many ways of looking at the history of Chanukah. You might want to use the extracts below and put on a Chanukah Presentation for young people. Have each person (or some people together) read the extract aloud. There are 8 extracts. You might want to read each one and then light a candle. If it is not actually Chanukah when you read these pieces, and therefore it might be inappropriate to light the chanukiah, you may want to set the scene with a lit chanukiah on the stage, or even many candles around the readers to create a special ambience.



IDEA

Extract 1

Our Rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev commence the 8 days of Chanukah and on these days one is forbidden to lament the dead or fast. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils inside and when the Hasmonean dynasty triumphed and defeated the Syrian Greeks, they searched and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but only contained enough for one day's lighting only, yet a miracle occurred and they lit the temple menorah for 8 days.

Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b

Extract 2

In the days of Mattityahu, the son of Yochanan, the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons – when the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and compel them to stray from the statutes of Your Will – you in Your great mercy stood up for them in the time of their distress... You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure...

Al Hanissim prayer

Extract 3

In the year 333 BCE Alexander the Great conquers Judea and this now becomes part of the Greek Empire. The year 323 sees Alexander leave this world and of course the Empire splits with one bit ruled by Ptolemy (Egypt) and another bit ruled by Seleucus (Syria). Funnily enough Palestine is placed 'whap bang' in the middle of the 2 kingdoms!

Extract 4

198, and Judea becomes under Selucid control which remains until the Maccabean revolt. In 175 Antiochus IV Epiphanes becomes the Selucid ruler and rather than allow the cultural freedoms that had been permitted previously he decides that the Greek way is best and attempts to remove all religious and national differences in the Empire.

In 168 Antiochus shoots himself in the foot on the 25th of Kislev he orders a statue of Zeus to be placed in the Temple and an altar built so Zeus can be worshipped. He also ordered that any man who kept Shabbat would be killed, as would Jews who were found with a Torah scroll. This of course posed difficulties for the Jews. Some simply couldn't deal with the pressure and gave up their religion for the sake of the safety of their families whilst others wanted to rebel...

Extract 5

168 is the year of Mattityahu. He leads the revolt against the Greeks. He was the son of Yochanan son of Shimon a priest of the family of Yehoyariv and so was held in high esteem in his village/town of Modiin... But when those that were appointed by the King to come to Modiin, that they might compel the Jews to do what they had commanded; and to enjoin those that were there to offer sacrifices as the King had commanded, they desired Mattityahu, because his fellow citizens would follow his example. but Mattityahu said that he would not do it and that even if all the other nations would obey the commands of Antiochus, either out of fear, or to please him, he, nor his sons would leave the religious worship of their country."

Extract 6

I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors. Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king's words by turning side from our religion to the right hand or to the left.

When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer a sacrifice on the altar in Modiin, according to the king's command. When Mattityahu saw it he burned with zeal and his anger was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him on the altar. At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice and he tore down the altar. Thus he burned with zeal for the law, just as Pinchas did against Zimri, son of Salu. (Numbers 25:6-13)

Sefer HaMaccabee 1 2:20-26

Extract 7

3 years of battle against incredible odds (and the Greeks) ends on the 25th of Kislev 165 when Judah (son of Mattityahu who before he died told his sons that Judah should take over his mantle as leader of the rebellion) drove the Greeks out of Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple. To be fair, the fighting did not just stop, as with all rebellions, small groups kept on fighting for close to 20 years.

Extract 8

When they entered they found a ruined and 'defiled' Temple. The Jews wanted to light the great Menorah that was lit in the Temple night and day. However, there was only one small bit of oil left, and though Judah lit it in the knowledge that it would not last long, tradition has it that a miracle of God occurred and this caused the oil to burn for 8 days, just enough time for new, fresh, pure oil to be made by the Jews. They re-dedicated the Temple and indeed Chanukah is Hebrew for dedication.

