

The Story of Chanukah

The story of Chanukah happened a long, long time ago in the land of Israel. At that time, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was the most special place for the Jewish people. The Temple had many beautiful objects, including a tall, golden menorah. Unlike menorahs of today, this one had seven branches and was lit not by candles, but by oil. Every evening, oil would be poured into the cups that sat on top of the menorah. The Temple would glow with shimmering light that burned day and night.

At the time of the Chanukah story, a cruel king named Antiochus ruled over the land of Israel. "I don't like the Jewish people," declared Antiochus. "They are so different from me. I don't celebrate Shabbat or read from the Torah, so why should they?" Antiochus ordered the Jewish people to stop being Jewish and to pray to Greek gods. "No more going to the Temple, no more celebrating Shabbat, and no more Torah!" shouted Antiochus. He sent his guards to destroy the Temple. They brought mud and garbage into the Temple. They broke furniture, tore curtains, and smashed the jars of oil that were used to light the menorah. This made the Jews very sad and angry.

One Jew named Judah Maccabee cried out, "We must stop Antiochus! We must make him leave the land of Israel." At first, Judah's followers, called the Maccabees, were afraid. "Judah," they said, "Antiochus has so many soldiers and such big weapons. How can we Jews, who don't have weapons, fight against him?" Judah replied, "If we think very hard and plan very carefully, we will be able to defeat him." It took a long time, but at last the Maccabees chased Antiochus and his men out of Israel.

As soon as Antiochus and his soldiers were gone, the Jewish people hurried to Jerusalem to clean their Temple. What a mess! The beautiful golden menorah was gone, and the floor was covered with trash, broken furniture, and sharp pieces from the shattered jars of oil. The Maccabees built a new menorah. At first they worried that they would not be able to light their new menorah, but they searched and searched, until at last they found one tiny jar of oil - enough to light the menorah for just one evening. The Maccabees knew that it would be at least eight days until they could prepare more oil, but they lit the menorah anyway.

To their surprise, this little jar of oil burned for eight days. The Jewish people could not believe their good fortune. First, their small army had chased away Antiochus' large army, and now the tiny jar of oil had lasted for eight whole days! The Jewish people prayed and thanked God for these miracles. Every year during Chanukah, Jews light menorahs for eight days to remember the miracles that happened long ago.

