

The Story of Hanukkah

The Maccabees

The story of Hanukkah is an important story in the history of the Jewish people. Around 600 B.C., the Jewish people had been driven out of their land, called Israel, and exiled to a land called Babylon (now part of Iraq). For hundreds of years, they lived there and worshipped at the temple.

Over the years, Judea had been conquered by Alexander the Great and became a part of the kingdom of Egypt. The Jewish people, however, were allowed to continue their way of life. In 167 B.C., another empire, from what is now Syria, defeated Egypt and took control of Judea. The new king's name was Antiochus and he had no tolerance for the customs and religion of the Jewish people. He ordered that their temple be turned into an altar to Zeus, one of the Greek gods that he worshipped.

Led by a man named Judas Maccabee, the Jewish people revolted against the new empire, and they reclaimed their temple and drove out the empire's army. Hanukkah celebrates the return of the temple to the Jewish people and the rededicating of it to Judaism after it had been turned into an altar to Zeus.

To be rededicated, the temple had to be cleansed, and only olive oil that had not been used during the Greek rituals could be used for the lamps. It is said that there was only enough oil to burn for one day, and eight days were needed to make new oil. Many people of the Jewish faith believe that through a miracle, the day's supply of oil lasted the full eight days, allowing the temple to be rededicated. The eight days of Hanukkah represent the eight days the oil lasted.



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Map Activity

This is a modern map of a small part of the Middle East where most of the history of Judea and the Jewish people took place. The area shown on the map is about a quarter of the size of the United States. Color in and label the countries and bodies of water as they exist today.



What do you think it was like for so many different empires and cultures to be so close to one another?

Student answers will vary, but may include themes of cross-cultural learning and sharing, shared customs and foods, political and religious influence, as well as power struggles and conflict over land and resources.

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Ma'oz Tzur

The Ma'oz Tzur is a traditional song that is sung and spoken during Hanukkah. It recites the ancient history of the Jewish people and Judaism. There are six stanzas to the song, but only two are shown here. On the left is how the song is written in its original language, Hebrew. (The Hebrew Alphabet reads right to left.) The English translation is on the right side.

Read the two stanzas, and reflect on how they apply to what you have learned about the story of Hanukkah. Then answer the questions below.

<p>דְּבִיר קֹדֶשׁוֹ הֵבִיאֲנִי, וְגַם שָׁם לֹא שָׁקֵטָתִי. וּבָא נוֹגֵשׁ וְהִגְלִנִי, כִּי זָרִים עֲבַדְתִּי. וַיֵּין רַעַל מִסִּכְתִּי, בְּמַעַט שְׁעִבְרָתִי. קֶזַע בָּבֶל, זְרֻבָּבֶל, לְקֶזַע שִׁבְעִים נוֹשָׁעָתִי.</p>	<p>He brought me to His holy abode; even there, I found no rest. The oppressor came and exiled me, because I served strange gods, and drank poisonous wine. Yet scarcely had I gone into exile, When Babylon fell and Zerubbabel took charge; Within seventy years I was saved.</p>
<p>יְנֻנִים נִקְבְּצוּ עָלַי, אֲזִי בַיָּמֵי חֲשֹׁמְנַיִם. וּפָרְצוּ חוֹמוֹת מִגְדָּלַי, וְטָמְאוּ כָּל הַשְּׁמֵנִים. וּמִנּוֹתַר קִנְקָנִים, נִעֲשָׂה גֵס לְשׁוֹשָׁנִים. בְּנֵי בֵינָה, יָמֵי שְׁמוֹנָה, קִבְּעוּ בְּשִׁיר וּרְנָנִים.</p>	<p>The Greeks gathered against me, in days of the Hasmoneans. They broke down the walls of my towers, and defiled all the oils. But from the last remaining flask, a miracle was wrought for the Jews. Therefore the sages of the day ordained these eight for songs of praise.</p>

When the song mentions being exiled, where were the Jewish people exiled to?

They were exiled to Babylon, which is now part of Iraq.

Who do you think is meant by “the Greeks” when the song says, “The Greeks gathered against me”?

The song is referring to the Syrian empire under Antiochus, which worshipped Greek gods.

What lines tell the story of the miracle of the oil?

Lines six through eight tell the story of the miracle of the oil:

They broke down the walls of my towers, and defiled all the oils.

But from the last remaining flask, a miracle was wrought for the Jews.

Therefore the sages of the day ordained these eight for songs of praise.

