

Chanukah Traditions

It is traditional to eat fried foods on Hanukkah because of the significance of oil to the holiday. Among Ashkenazic Jews, this usually includes latkes (potato pancakes, pronounced "lot-kuhs" or "lot-keys" depending on where your grandmother comes from. See recipes.)

It is extremely unusual to give Hanukkah gifts to anyone other than our own young children and we are more likely to extend gifts to neighbors and the needy at Purim rather than at Hanukkah. The only traditional gift of the holiday is "gelt," small amounts of money, but external pressure has given way to match the other well-known holiday of the season.

Another tradition of the holiday is playing dreidel, a gambling game played with a square top. Some say the dreidel game is played to commemorate a game devised by the Jews to camouflage the fact that they were studying Torah, which was outlawed by Greeks. The Jews would gather in caves to study, posting a lookout to alert the group to the presence of Greek soldiers. If soldiers were spotted, the Jews would hide their scrolls and spin tops, so the Greeks thought they were gambling, not learning. Today, most people play for matchsticks, pennies, M&Ms or chocolate coins.

A dreidel is marked with four Hebrew letters: Nun, Gimmel, Heh and Shin. This supposedly stands for the Hebrew phrase "nes gadol hayah sham", a great miracle happened there. Actually, it stands for the Yiddish words nit (nothing), gantz (all), halb (half) and shtell (put), which are the rules of the game! There are some variations in the way people play the game, but the way I learned it, everyone puts in one coin. A person spins the dreidel. On Nun, nothing happens; on Gimmel (or, as we called it as kids, "gimme!"), you get the whole pot; on Heh, you get half of the pot; and on Shin, you put one in. When the pot is empty, everybody puts one in. Keep playing until one person has everything. Then redivide it, because nobody likes a poor winner.