

Sharing Hanukkah in the Classroom: A Resource for Parents and Educators



Courtesy Valentyn Semenov/EyeEm/Getty Images

Overview

Learn simple and engaging ways to bring Hanukkah into the classroom! This guide highlights the rich traditions and customs of Hanukkah—the Festival of Lights—making it easy to share the joy of the holiday with young students. Designed for parents, caregivers, and educators, this guide is part of a vibrant resource series aimed at introducing K–5 students to Jewish holidays, culture, and traditions in a fun and inclusive way.

Here, you'll find everything you need to share Hanukkah with students, including an explanation of the holiday, a holiday craft, a recommended book for a read-a-loud, snack suggestion, and a music playlist. Also included is a short overview of what it means to be Jewish and background information on Hanukkah.

Diversity of Jewish Life

Jewish is both an ethnicity and religion. People express their Jewish identity in a multitude of ways. Some people think of their Jewish identity strictly as an expression of heritage; some may hold certain Jewish values central in their lives; some may eat Jewish foods or celebrate Jewish holidays; and some identify religiously as Jewish and follow rules and teachings found in a book called the Torah. All of these are part of the multi-faceted experience of being Jewish today.

Jewish people have diverse origins and communities spanning across the world. These communities have flourished over centuries, through an over two-thousand-year diasporic experience. This global diversity is expressed in Jewish life through distinct practices in cuisine, language, music, and more. Additionally, Jewish people are racially diverse and may also identify as Black, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latinx, and more. While the largest populations of Jewish people are found in the United States and Israel, there were and are Jewish communities throughout the world.

What is Hanukkah?

Use the information below to familiarize yourself with Jewish traditions and customs of Hanukkah. [This video by BimBam](#) shares a great summary of the holiday and traditions. Please note we are recommending this video for adults, as it has too much information to share in a classroom.



What is Hanukkah? Continued

Hanukkah, a widely-observed Jewish holiday, is an eight-day celebration that takes place in November or December, during the time of the year with the shortest daylight hours in North America. It is marked by lighting the candles of the menorah, singing festive songs, and eating foods fried in oil, since oil was used in ancient menorahs.

Hanukkah celebrates a time in Jewish history in which the Jewish people overcame a group that wanted to destroy the Jewish tradition.

The story of Hanukkah takes us back over 2,000 years to ancient Israel, where the Jewish people's sacred Temple stood in Jerusalem. Inside the Temple was a golden menorah that was lit each night using pure olive oil. During the time of the Hanukkah story, Israel was ruled by a Hellenistic king named Antiochus, who banned Jewish practices, including the celebration of holidays and the reading of Jewish holy books. Antiochus sent soldiers to desecrate the Temple, and destroyed sacred items, including the precious oil used to light the menorah.

The Jewish people resisted giving up their traditions. To continue learning of Jewish texts in secret, Jewish people would disguise their studies by playing games like spinning tops (known as dreidels) when Antiochus' soldiers passed by. To regain access to the Temple, a group of Jewish warriors, led by Judah Maccabee and his brothers, fought back. Known as the Maccabees, they eventually drove Antiochus's forces out.

Upon returning to and reclaiming the Temple, the Maccabees found it in ruins, with shattered oil jars and destroyed ritual objects on the floor. They discovered only a small jar of oil intact, enough to last for just one night. Miraculously, this small amount of oil burned for eight days.

These eight days then became a holiday known as Hanukkah. The word "Hanukkah," meaning "dedication" in Hebrew, commemorates the rededication of the Temple by the Jewish people.

All over the world, the central tradition of Hanukkah is the lighting of a menorah, also called a *hanukkiah*, often displayed in a window to honor the resilience of the Jewish people. A menorah has eight flames, plus one that is called the *shamash* (meaning "attendant") used to kindle the other eight lights. On the first night, one flame is lit, with an additional flame lit each subsequent night until all eight are kindled on the final night.

Celebrating Hanukkah also includes eating foods fried in oil to commemorate the miracle of the oil, with foods such as latkes (potato pancakes), *sufganiyot* (a Hebrew word meaning jelly-filled doughnuts), *bimuelos* (a Ladino word meaning fried dough puffs), and *keftes de prasas* (Ladino derivation meaning leek patties). Some people also play dreidel and give chocolate coins, or gelt (Yiddish), to friends and family. Many families exchange gifts during Hanukkah, too.

Pre-visit Suggestions for Parents

A great time to conduct this session is in the month leading up to Hanukkah. Contact your child's teacher, share the dates of Hanukkah (Dec 25, 2024–Jan 2, 2025) and ask if there is a time prior when you may come in to share a thirty-minute activity with the students, including an explanation of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, an art project, a story for younger grades, music, and a snack. You can explain that being Jewish is an important part of your family's identity, and you would like to provide a secular classroom activity about Hanukkah traditions.

In addition, share this [Calendar of Jewish Holidays](#) with your school administration so they may avoid scheduling events, programs, and exams at times that conflict with observant Jewish holidays.

In the Classroom

Materials

Ask the teacher beforehand if they can provide the following supplies:

- Glue sticks
- Markers

You will need to bring some of your own supplies. These include:

Snack:

- Paper plates
- Napkins
- Mini jelly donuts or donut holes

For art project (pre-purchase or hand-cut):

- [Tissue Paper](#) (three to four inch squares)
- [Pre-cut colored cardstock strips](#) (use colored cardstock or construction paper to cut your own into 2 ½ x 17 inch strips)

Print-outs of photos found at the end of this resource guide. If your child's school has a smartboard, you may also project them directly from the resource guide. If you are printing, please print three of each photo for passing around.

Optional

- Dreidel from home, if you have one. Note: You can also [purchase](#) inexpensive dreidels to hand out to each student at the end of your time together
- Menorah from home, if you have one

Classroom Prep

We recommend doing the introduction on the floor (for grades K–2) and then asking students to move to their desks for the art project, story, and snack. If you are playing [music](#), make sure it is cued up on your phone, or, if you are using the classroom speakers, that everything is set up prior to beginning. Gather all art materials and have them ready to be passed out by the teacher or another pre-assigned person. If you are providing a snack, ensure that it is ready to be served along with paper plates and napkins.

Introduce Yourself

Introduce yourself and explain your connection to the classroom. Talk about why you wanted to come in. Explain that today, you are going to share a little about Jewish holiday traditions and culture, do some art together, eat a traditional Hanukkah food, and hear a story.

Explain the Holiday

Drawing on the information provided earlier in the guide, share with the class about the diversity within Jewish culture. Explain that Jewish people come from various parts of the world, and there are many ways they choose to practice and celebrate their Jewish identity. Mention that traditional Jewish foods can differ depending on where someone's ancestors lived, and that Jewish holidays are a common thread that unites Jewish people. Then, introduce the holiday of Hanukkah: explain its origin story, describe some key traditions for celebrating, and consider sharing a special element from your own family's celebration.

As you explain the holiday, use either your own menorah/dreidels or print a few copies of the following pictures (full-size images are at the back of the resource). You can also project the full-size images on the smartboard. For example, when you talk about a menorah, show a picture or hold up a menorah. You may ask a few discussion questions based on student engagement (recommended maximum of three questions).

See thumbnails of images on next page.



Bill Graham Menorah lighting in Union Square, San Francisco, 2017.

Ask students what they notice, or share:

San Francisco was the first city in the United States to host a large-scale menorah lighting. Since 1975, every Hanukkah, a giant

menorah is lit downtown on Union Square in San Francisco. For the eight nights of Hanukkah, people come to watch the lighting, sing songs, and eat jelly donuts and potato latkes.

Discussion Question:

Do you have any holidays that you celebrate outside of your home?



Hanukkah Menorah by Manfred Anson.

Ask students what they notice, or share: Notice how each candle holder is in the shape of a miniature Statue of Liberty, with a different event in the Jewish people's history on the base of each holder. This menorah was made by Manfred Anson for the bicentennial of the Statue and Liberty in 1986 to celebrate both his Jewish and American identities. This menorah is in museum collections around the world.

*Note for parents: Manfred himself escaped from Nazi Germany as a teenager and reunited with his family after he immigrated to the United States.

Discussion Questions:

What does the Statue of Liberty mean to you?

Why do you think the artist chose this symbol to use on a menorah?



San Francisco Giants Dreidel, August 2013.

Ask students what they notice, or share: These dreidels were giveaways for Jewish Heritage Night at the San Francisco Giants game in August 2013.

Discussion Question:

Do you have any special games you play on holidays?

Transition to Art Project

During Hanukkah, it is traditional to put a menorah in the window to show pride in being Jewish. Today we're going to make candles to show pride in our identities and celebrate who we are.

Art Project

Materials

- Glue sticks
- Markers
- Strips of 2 ½ x 17 inches colored paper (two per student)
- Tissue paper cut into three to four inch squares (five per student—ideally red, orange, yellow, or gold)

Ask students

Name one or two things in your life that make you feel proud.

This could be your family, your heritage, your favorite sports, an accomplishment you made or something you built, your pets, your friends, or even your school.

On the separate slips of colored paper, write down at least one thing in your life that makes you feel proud. If you have more than one thing you are proud of, you can write on the front and the back of one strip, or on both strips of paper.

Key Steps

1. Take the two strips of paper with the words from the exercise above. Glue the strips together at a right angle (perpendicular).
2. Fold the papers over each other, alternating the strips.
3. Glue the ends together.
4. Layer at least two pieces of different colored tissue paper on top of tab, with glue between each. Crumple to create a flame.

Music Playlist: Listen to this [Hanukkah playlist](#) while making your candle!

Directions for 1st grade and up



1

Write something that you are proud of on a cardstock strip. Try to take up as much of the paper as possible.



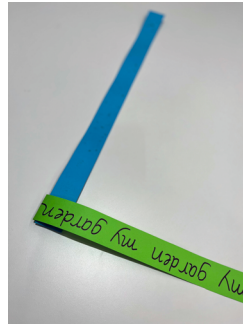
2

Place the two strips at a right angle. Glue ends of strips together.



3

Fold over bottom strip



4

Fold over top strip. Continue folding opposite strips until completely folded.



5

Glue ends of strips together.



6

Glue three or four pieces of tissue on top of the folded paper with a dab of glue stick between each layer ensuring only the middle of the tissue is glued.



7

Crumple up edges to create flame.



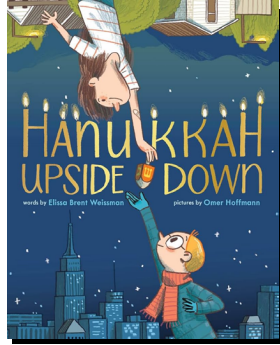
8

Glue the bottom to a piece of tissue and let candle pop up.

Snack and Read Aloud (Grades K–2)

Read a Hanukkah story out loud. Serve each student a mini jelly donut (*sufganiyah*).

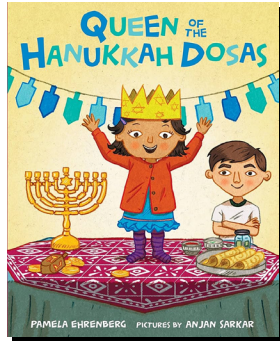
Recommended Reading



For Grades K–2:

[Hanukkah Upside Down](#), by Elissa Brent Weissman

From their homes in New York and New Zealand, cousins Noah and Nora decide to have a competition. Winter versus summer: Who can have the world's best Hanukkah? But as the eight nights of Hanukkah go on, the contest proves tougher than they imagined. Even as each cousin celebrates the holiday with their own unique traditions, they realize they have more in common than they thought.



[Queen of the Hanukkah Dosas](#), by Pamela Ehrenberg

A boy is worried that his little sister's climbing will spoil the first night of Hanukkah, when his family combines his father's Jewish traditions with his mother's East Indian cooking.

Snack and Music (3rd Grade and up)

Continue listening to the [music playlist](#) as each student is served a mini jelly donut.

Closing

Thank everyone for giving you the opportunity to share about Jewish culture and the holiday of Hanukkah. Acknowledge how special and wonderful every single person's traditions and identity are, and that we have so much to learn from each other. Thank them for taking the time to learn about your family's culture.

Additional Resources

For more resources on celebrating Hanukkah, please see [PJ Library Web Resource](#).

Feedback and Survey

We would love to learn from your experience. Please take a moment to fill out this very short survey about your experience using this guide:





Public menorah lighting, Union Square, San Francisco, California, 2017. Courtesy NBC News Bay Area.



Statue of Liberty Hanukkah Lamp by Manfred Anson.
Courtesy National Museum of American History



San Francisco Giants Dreidel, August 2013.