

Hanukkah celebrates both an ancient military victory and a miracle of light – modern Jews can pick from either tradition

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The main ritual of Hanukkah is the lighting of the menorah.

skynesher/ E+ via Getty Images

Friends and family will come together to celebrate, share gifts and eat traditional foods as the eight-day Jewish festival of Hanukkah begins on Dec. 14, 2025.

Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the center of ancient Judean worship, in 164 B.C.E. It had been defiled by the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes and was recaptured by Judean forces. Judean culture had been transformed by Greek influence for centuries, but Antiochus attempted to quash Judean religious distinctiveness altogether. This led to a rebellion by the Hasmonean family, known also as the Maccabees. They established a dynasty that lasted until the conquest by Rome in 63 B.C.E.

The story is preserved in the Books of the Maccabees, written during the second and first centuries B.C.E. Some Christians consider the texts part of the Bible, though Jews today do not. The first rabbis working 2,000 years ago left it out of the Jewish Bible.

As a scholar of modern Jewish religion and politics, I have always been fascinated by the ways in which modern Jews pick and choose from the well of tradition to construct a form of Jewishness they feel is authentic.

Hanukkah serves as a prime example of this process.

What does the holiday celebrate?

The eight-day holiday has two traditional components. On the one hand, its liturgy gives thanks to God for the military victory. This reflects the original pre-rabbinic core of the holiday, which was declared by the new Hasmonean dynasty to celebrate its triumph.

The primary ritual of the holiday, however, is the lighting of the Hanukkah menorah. It celebrates the legend of a single flask of pure oil found in the Temple that was sufficient for just one day, but miraculously burned for eight.



A sketch illustrating Judas Maccabeus' orders to priests to cleanse the temple sanctuary.

Sepia Times/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

The earliest version of this story appears in the Talmud – the main collection of rabbinic laws and commentary – some 500 years after the story occurred. The founders of Rabbinic Judaism – the Judaism of the past 2,000 years – were apparently uncomfortable with its military message and reshaped the holiday to give it new meaning.

In the words of historian Malka Simkovich, “Instead of glorying military prowess, the holiday instead glorifies the unconditional and miraculous divine light that Jews can depend on, even in the gloomiest of darkness.” This reflects Rabbinic Judaism’s tendency to reread biblical and other texts about land and power as metaphors for spiritual growth and faith.

Though popular today, Hanukkah is traditionally a minor holiday on which work is permitted. Over time, it developed into a celebration emphasizing family and children, games and gifts and special foods.

Modernity brings new meanings

In the 19th century, this shared meaning of the holiday changed. In America and parts of Europe, Jews experienced emancipation and economic mobilization and sought ways to integrate into their local national communities.

As Jews became more integrated into wider society, Hanukkah served as an opportunity to celebrate at a time of year when their Christian neighbors were doing the same. They continued to celebrate the holiday in its rabbinic, spiritual meaning, however. As the pioneering European Hebrew newspaper Hamagid wrote in 1857: “More than we recall the physical valor of the Maccabees, we understand the war as a struggle for spiritual deliverance from Greek culture.”

Then came Zionism, the Jewish nationalist movement born in the 1880s in Europe, that defined Jews as a modern nation rather than just a religion. It hoped one day to establish a home in Palestine, the site of the ancient Israelite kingdoms. They used Jewish traditions, especially pre-rabbinic biblical traditions about Jews living in that land, to prove the validity of their worldview.

Zionists quickly adopted Hanukkah as their most important holiday. They did this for a variety of reasons, but most important was its easy reformulation into a secular nationalist festival.

Zionism remakes Hanukkah

Hanukkah was not merely repackaged by Zionists in Europe; it was totally transformed from a relatively minor holiday into the central annual celebration of the movement.

Moreover, while the miracle of the oil defined traditional celebrations, it was specifically the military victory that defined Zionist ones. For the fledgling nationalist movement, the ancient story gave a historical example of Jewish heroes who successfully fought to expel foreign invaders from their homeland.

They exemplified the “new Jew,” the “Jew of muscle” that their leaders promoted, in contrast to the European stereotype of Jews as weak or bookish.

The role of God and even the Temple was limited; the story was refocused on the nation and its military struggle for freedom and independence. Hanukkah offered weapons, heroes and victories, writes historian Francois Guesnet: “It was an occasion to confront the glorious past with the needs of the contemporary national re-awakening.”

At the same time, Zionist Hanukkah celebrations also connected the movement to Jewish religious observance, thereby appealing to traditional groups without alienating its secular core. After all, Hanukkah was a traditional Jewish celebration, and since work is allowed, they were not violating any ritual laws with their events.

Orthodox leaders did not buy it.

In Sanz, for example – a city today in Poland – the Zionists’ first Hanukkah celebration in 1900 raised a storm of protest by local Hasidic leaders. They accused the Zionists of desanctifying the holiday and defiling the Hanukkah miracle. They even complained that the Zionists defiled the Star of David by using it in their signage and directed that the emblem be torn off the Holy Ark in the synagogue.

Over time, the Zionists’ version of Hanukkah largely won, especially in Israel. Zionists brought these values into the new Jewish state that they succeeded in creating in 1948. But it has also been embraced by many Jews in the diaspora.

Other meanings persist

The rabbinic tradition has not disappeared. There are still ultra-Orthodox Jews who reject the Zionist return to pre-rabbinic traditions of the Book of Maccabees, for example. There are also many liberal Jews, especially young Jews, who reject the infusion of Zionism into their Jewish identity.

These numbers have grown in recent years due to Israel’s actions in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The Book of Maccabees describes the battle against Antiochus being preceded by a battle against Jews who sided with him. As a result, it has become almost an annual tradition for Jews to accuse each other of representing that traitorous group and to claim that one’s own camp represents the true Jews.



An ultra-Orthodox Jewish man and woman light candles on the second night of Hanukkah, in the Mea Shearim neighborhood of Jerusalem, on Dec. 13, 2017.

Menahem Kahana/AFP via Getty Images

Some Jews will write editorials and social media posts about how Hanukkah “proves” that Zionism is the authentic interpretation of Jewish tradition. Some even question why non-Zionist or anti-Zionist Jews bother lighting candles. Their opponents respond with articles about Hanukkah’s history as a rabbinic holiday and how it has been reinterpreted since the start of the Zionist movement.

Each argues that their own interpretation is the correct one.

In truth, Judaism is constantly being made and remade. Is Hanukkah’s “real” meaning the Zionist return to pre-rabbinic sources? Or is it the rabbinic spiritualization of the holiday and its metaphor of bringing light into darkness? There is no clear answer.

In other words, both sides have sources to support their interpretation. Zionists can draw on the military imagery featured in the First Book of Maccabees and other sources. For those who prefer the holiday as presented by the rabbis who founded Rabbinic Judaism 2,000 years ago, there is an equal wealth of material, including in the prayers recited in synagogues.

The rabbis assigned a special reading from the later biblical books for each Sabbath and holiday. Their choice for the Sabbath of Hanukkah – Zechariah 2:14-4:7 – is revealing: “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, saying: ‘Not by military might and not by physical power, but by My spirit,’ says the Lord of Hosts.”

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