

Miniatures Marketplace - December 2000
CELEBRATING CHANUKAH - THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS
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Handcrafted Miniatures BY BARB

When a shop owner requested that I create dollhouse scale Chanukah items I had no expectations of creating Judaic miniatures for the next 21 years. Though Judaic miniatures appeal to a small segment of our customers there is a definite market for these items. Some understanding of the Jewish Festival of Chanukah might assist you in meeting your customers wants and needs.

As a wonderful table centerpiece or fascinating gift a miniature Chanukah display can be fun for both children and adults alike. Children can enjoy creating a scene, anticipating the fun of the forthcoming holiday, while adults can replicate one, fondly remembered from their childhood. A dollhouse can be transformed into an exciting holiday scene with menorah's set out, gifts waiting to be wrapped and festival food being prepared or served. A collection of miniature menorahs can be displayed for the holiday or throughout the year.

This year, on December 4th, the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev, the eight days of the Chanukah festival will begin. The Jewish calendar does not coincide with the secular calendar, therefore, Chanukah does not always fall on the same date each year.

Chanukah, also known as the Festival of Lights, is celebrated for eight days. Each evening one more candle will be lit in the Menorah. This will commemorate the miracle of the oil that was found after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 B.C. There was only enough oil to light the eternal flame for one day but, miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days until more could be found.

The Chanukah Menorah is an eight branch candelabra, plus one, the Shamash. The Shamash symbolizes the one day's worth of oil and is used to light the other eight candles symbolizing the eight days the oil burned. Menorahs are a distinctive feature of Jewish memorabilia. Every Jewish museum has a collection, as do most synagogues and many individual families.

The major ritual associated with Chanukah is the lighting of the Menorah. In our home, as in many Jewish homes, each member of the family has his own Menorah, which we all light together. When they are all displayed it truly is a festival of lights. As the candles are lit the Chanukah blessings are recited.

After candle lighting, we exchange Chanukah gifts and gelt (money). When our children were younger, we gave each of them a small gift each night of the Chanukah festival. Now we gather together on one of the evenings of the festival with my parents, my children and my grandchildren to light candles, share festival food, exchange gifts, play Dreidel, read stories and sing songs about Chanukah.

On Chanukah it is customary to eat foods cooked in oil, such as potato pancakes or doughnuts to

remind us of the miracle of the oil.

Dreidel is a game of Chanukah. The players spin a four-sided spinner. Each side is labeled with a Hebrew letter. The letters form an acronym for the phrase "A great miracle happened here". Depending on which letter the dreidel lands, the person takes from or puts into the pot. We play the game for Gelt (foil wrapped chocolate coins). It is also fun to see how many dreidels you can keep spinning at once. Another game is to try to knock down other spinning dreidels with your dreidel.

Chanukah as a holiday continues to change. During the Middle Ages the focus of Chanukah remained on the miracle of the oil. In America Chanukah has been influenced by the celebration of Christmas. While the tradition of giving Chanukah gelt is an old one, the proximity to Christmas has made gift giving an intrinsic part of the holiday. In Israel elaborate gift giving is not widely practiced. In general, the attempt to create a Jewish equivalent to Christmas has given Chanukah more significance than in the past.