

The goy's guide to Hanukkah

Or matzo over mistletoe, gelt over gifts

By Vicki Wilson

*Put on your yarmulke,
It's time to celebrate Hanukkah
-Adam Sandler "The Hanukkah Song*

It's that time again. Time to haul out the menorah, fry up the latkes, and spin that dreidel. If menorah, latkes and dreidels sound like three little-known Pokemon to you, then you need to bone up on your Hanukkah facts.

Hey, it's nothing to be ashamed of – let's face it, this isn't Israel.

Christianity is the dominant culture in this country, and Christmas is the flagship holiday. And pretty much from Halloween on in the U.S., it's nothing but the guy in the red suit, Silent Night, and Rudolph on the tube. We all know the "true meaning of Christmas," but what's this Hanukkah deal all about?

First, a bit of history. According to the book "Every Goy's Guide To Common Jewish Expressions," written by Arthur Naiman, Hanukkah celebrates the struggle of the Hebrew people to free themselves from Syrian domination in the second century B.C. Against all odds, Judah and The Maccabees (maccabee means "hammer," by the way) beat the Syrians at Emmaus. The legend goes that during the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, a tiny amount of oil, reportedly only enough for one day, amazingly burned for eight days.

Miscalculation or miracle? You be the judge. No harder to buy than a virgin birth. Anyway, the whole Hanukkah story is filled with the symbolism that still marks the holiday to this very day.

Hanukkah is also called the Festival of Lights. That's because for eight days, usually sometime in December, Jews light candelabras called menorahs to mark the miracle. On the first night, the center

candle, called the shamash, which means "servant," is lit, and then it is used to light all the other candles, "Baruch Ata Adonai. . ." you probably know the drill. Basically, it's glory to God and honor to the ancestors who fought for religious freedom.

And what's a Jewish holiday without an eating occasion? Remember the oil that burned in the temple lamp? At Hanukkah, Jews use oil to fry one of the best things about Hanukkah – latkes! Latke is Yiddish for pancake, and at Hanukkah the pancakes are made from potatoes-think hash browns, only better.

Latkes are usually made from grated potatoes, onion, eggs and flour or matzo meal. The neat thing about making latkes is, all that grating and frying is a lot of work, so it's a good way to get the whole family in on a very delicious job.

Another tradition is the dreidel game. A dreidel is a small spinning top with four sides. On each side is a different Hebrew letter – nun, gimme, hay and shin. These letters stand for the first letter in the phrase "A Great Miracle Happened There." Players contribute coins or candy or something else of value to a pot or kitty, and then each player gets a turn to spin the dreidel. If nun comes up, you do nothing; if gimme comes up, you take the whole pot, and then each player puts in one more object before the next spin; if hay comes up, the player takes half; if shin comes up, the player puts in one object. The game ends when a player has the whole pot, and everyone else has nothing. There are variations, but that's the basic idea of the game.

Whether you're a Christian believer or not, you have to admit that gifts are a huge part of the party on December 25. Well, Hanukkah has no shortage of presents, either. Families handle it in different ways. Some give presents each night, others give small things for seven nights with a big shebang on the last night. Gelt, which can be real coins or simply chocolate ones, is a traditional gift at Hanukkah time.

So, hopefully, your Hanukkah-Q has been raised a few points. In the end, it's a lot like that other December holiday-a celebration of faith, a time for family, and an occasion to be treasured. Happy Holidays everyone!