



UNIVERSITY OF  
TORONTO

# HANUKKAH IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

EQUITY · DIVERSITY · INCLUSION

# WHAT IS HANUKKAH?

Hanukkah (also spelled Chanukah) is the eight-day Jewish celebration also called the Festival of Lights. Hanukkah begins on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, which changes according to the lunar calendar, and always begins in November or December.

This year, Hanukkah begins in the evening on December 25, 2024 and ends in the evening on January 2, 2025.

# WHAT DOES HANUKKAH COMMEMORATE?

The Hebrew word “**Hanukkah**” means “rededication”. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of a small band of Jewish fighters, led by Judah the Maccabee, who battled Syrian-Greek forces in 167 BCE for the right to observe Jewish customs. Following the defeat of the Syrian-Greek army, Jewish fighters liberated and rededicated the temple in Jerusalem to the service of God.

According to Jewish custom, the temple in Jerusalem housed a “**menorah**” (candelabrum), meant to burn day and night to symbolize the light of God’s presence. When the Maccabees went to relight the candelabrum, they found it only had enough clean oil for one night. Miraculously, the one-day supply of oil lasted for eight days, until new oil could be prepared. The festival of Hanukkah was established to honour and commemorate this miracle.

# HOW IS HANUKKAH OBSERVED?

To symbolize the miracle of the oil, Hanukkah is celebrated by lighting a candle on the nine-branch menorah, the number of candles corresponding to the number of the night (one candle the first night, two candles the second night, etc). An extra light called a “**shamash**” is used to light the other candles and is given a distinct location, usually higher, lower, or to the side of the others. It is customary for observers to recite a blessing as the menorah is lit and sing traditional Hanukkah songs following the lighting ceremony. Throughout the festival, a Hanukkah menorah known as a “**hanukkiah**” is placed in a window or doorway and “**hanukkiot**” (plural) are also lit in synagogues and other public places.

To commemorate the miracle of the oil, it is a Hanukkah tradition to eat and share fried foods. “**Latkes**” (potato pancakes) are a favourite, as are “**sufganiyot**” (fried jam-filled doughnuts), and “**cassola**” (cheese pancakes).

Hanukkah has also evolved into a gift-giving holiday for some. Families have different traditions, but children tend to receive a small gift on each of the festival’s eight days. There is also a tradition of giving “**gelt**” (money, in Yiddish) – to children to give to charity, as well as chocolate coins as a treat. Many families also play a customary game of “dreidel” after lighting the menorah candle each night. A dreidel is a small, four-sided spinning top with Hebrew letters on each side that form an acronym for “great miracle happened there”, referring to the miracle of the oil.

# HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

**1** **Get educated.** Ensure staff who supervise colleagues that celebrate Hanukkah are aware of the festivities and how they can be supportive.

**2** **Intentional planning and accommodations.** Update your scheduling tools to reflect religious observance dates and to support the planning activities.

The University of Toronto recognizes its obligation to prevent discriminatory impacts on members of its community that arise from the failure to accommodate based on religion or creed. It is the responsibility of both the Manager and the individual seeking accommodation to work cooperatively and respectfully to explore and implement appropriate accommodation options. Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. Look for solutions that suit all parties.

**3** **Don't make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Jewish colleagues will take time off but may still observe the festival in various way.