

CHANUKAH TONIGHT!

(Notes by the composer)

This exuberant song gives a quick glimpse of the legend, tradition, and modern observance of Chanukah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, in a lively syncopated setting that builds from the quiet placing of one more candle in the *chanukiah* each night, to the bright celebration on the eighth night, with songs, food, and play. It is intended for both Jewish and non-Jewish choruses and audiences and is suitable for an inclusive (non-sectarian) Winter Holiday concert. (The tune and words are not traditional but newly-made, in familiar style.)

LEGEND – Chanukah is about standing up for your religious freedom. On Chanukah, in 165 BCE, the Maccabees regained control of Jerusalem and rededicated the (second) Temple, which had been desecrated by Antiochus IV. They found only one night's worth of priest-consecrated olive oil for the menorah lamp, but when they lit it, it burned for eight days (the time it took to press and prepare new oil)—a symbol of the miracle.

CANDLES – Jewish law follows the position of Hillel that it is best to add a candle for each successive night and build up the light and joy. The lighting traditionally starts after dark (except on the Jewish Sabbath). This is typically a home observance. One can also use oil lamps.

SHAMMASH – (*shah-mush*, Hebrew: "attendant" or "sexton") – The extra (ninth) candle, the only one lit with a match; it is then used to light the others. The rule is that the Chanukah lights themselves are not used for practical illumination, only for symbolic contemplation and publicizing of the miracle. The *shammash* is there to have a light for use. It gets a distinct position relative to the other candles.

LIGHT UP OUR HOME – In some traditions, the *chanukiah* (the special 9-branched *menorah* or candelabrum) is placed so the light can be seen from outside, to share the miracle—"Illumination of the house without."

BLESSING, THANKING – On eight all nights two traditional prayers are sung, one blessing the Lord for the commandment to light the lights on Chanukah, one thanking Him for miracles. On the first night the *Shehecheyanu* prayer is also sung, thanking Him for preserving us to see this season.

SONGS – After lighting and blessings, singing of the hymns *Ma'oz Tzur* and *Hanerot Halal* and other traditional songs is customary in many homes. Some Hasidic and Sephardi Jews also recite Psalms.

LATKES – Almost all Jewish holidays include an unofficial "commandment" to eat. There is a custom of eating foods fried or baked in oil (preferably olive oil) on Chanukah. *Latkes* are traditional fried potato pancakes, best prepared fresh from scratch, often served with apple sauce and sour cream (yum!); they come from the Ashkenazic tradition. There are many Jewish cultural variations that involve other foods, including special jelly donuts (Sephardic and Israeli).

DREIDEL – (Pronounced DRAY-dle; Yiddish, "little spinner") – A four-sided wooden top spun to play a game with betting (usually with tokens or chocolate coins). It bears four Hebrew characters: נ (Nun), ג (Gimel), ה (Hey), ש (Shin), for the words "A Great Miracle Happened There". Rules are complex and variable (like Calvin Ball).

GIVING – In North America and in Israel it is common to exchange small presents, or to give *zedakah* (alms—literally, "justice") instead.

CHRISTMAS – Chanukah is *not* the Jewish equivalent (there is none); it is a minor festival based on a legend that is not mentioned in the Jewish Bible (Torah and Tanakh), only in the Talmud (rabbinic commentary). The Christian Bible refers to Jesus' being at the Jerusalem Temple during "the feast of the dedication and it was Winter" in John 10:22-23.