

Interactive Celebrations for a Jewish Holiday

By Mark A. Zeid

Many of us are gearing up for the holiday season, and in particular for Christmas, but have you ever thought of doing something a bit different, culture-wise, with your students? Finding new and interesting ideas to use is sometimes difficult, but Mark Zeid, a Jewish Lay Leader of the Iwakuni Jewish Community, shares some facts and fun about Hanukkah, a Jewish celebration of victory and rededication.

Teaching culture requires interactive classes that go beyond reading about holidays and playing one or two games. Students need to gain more than a few vocabulary words.

Therefore it becomes necessary for lessons to give students an opportunity to actually celebrate the holiday in some form. The lessons here are for Hanukkah, the Jewish celebration usually occurring in December known as the "Festival of Lights".

Let's begin with a short history of Hanukkah, which celebrates the winning of religious freedom more than 2,300 years ago. In the land of Judea, which is now Israel, there was a Syrian king, Antiochus, who ordered the

Jewish people to reject their religion and worship the Greek gods. Antiochus had all the Jewish synagogues turned into temples for his gods.

One man and his five sons, the Macabees, formed an army to rebel against Antiochus. After three years of fighting, they won the war and drove the Syrians out of Judea. They then reclaimed the temple in the capital city of Jerusalem.

Since the Syrians had used it for their gods, the temple had to be cleaned and rededicated. In the center of all Jewish temples, there is a lamp that is always lit, known as the eternal light. Only a tiny jar of oil for the lamp was found, just enough for one day. It would take at least a week before they could get more. Then a miracle happened; the oil lasted eight days, until they could get more.

Now Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days. A special candleholder called a menorah is used. It has nine candles; one is the shamash and it is used to light the others. On the first night, one candle is lit; on the second night, two candles, and so on until the



Hanukkah menorah and a selection of books.

eighth night when all of the candles are lit. When the candles are lit, special prayers are recited. Common Hanukkah customs are eating donuts and latkes (potato pancakes); playing dreidel, a game with a four-sided top; and giving small gifts to children.

When I teach classes about holidays, I usually start with a brief history. Once the students understand the story behind the holiday, I have the students write a brief play and act it out. It's okay to add characters and roles to the story; in fact, it helps to make the plays more interesting. I limit the plays to five or ten minutes. The students create their own dialogue, as long as it keeps to the storyline. HINT: We all have shy students. I have students add new characters to the story, but each of these characters has the same name as a shy student. It encourages them to participate in the play. I often give them specific roles to play, such as the person who finds the oil.

If students are having trouble with writing the dialogue, then break it down into acts. For example: King Antiochus outlaws the Jewish religion; the Macabees refuse to obey the king and then start a revolt; the actual revolt and war which drives out the



Miyoko Rachel and Seiji Joshua recite the Hebrew prayer over the Hanukkah candles as they light them.

Syrians; the Macabees and the Jews find the old temple and discover it needs to be cleaned; they clean the temple and find the small jar of oil; and one week later when they get more oil and decide to have a celebration called Hanukkah.

After they write the play, students then make paper puppets for the characters and attach them to wooden chopsticks. Other students make the background, usually on several A3 or B4 sheets of paper. When everything is ready, the students rehearse the play and then give a performance, usually to other students, teachers or parents.

Don't feel restricted to doing the play with puppets. If you have the time and resources, you can put on a play with the students acting out the roles, with just hats or headdresses for the different roles. Remember, the goal is to learn language and culture, not to put on a production. Let the students read their parts or give them their lines. Have fun with it. Don't get too serious about it.

I find the play an excellent way to teach vocabulary and the culture of the holiday. The best part is that this project can be used for any age group or for any size class. If you have only a few students, they would each have several parts. If you have a large class, you can have several groups doing their own version of the play.

Other activities students enjoy are arts and crafts. Drawing or making murals is fun. Decorating a wall or bulletin board is something else they enjoy. I like to have them make menorahs using eight cardboard tubes, like the ones found in the center of rolls of toilet paper; one cardboard tube which is longer, maybe from a roll of paper towels; a flat piece of sturdy cardboard; and wrapping paper and colored paper.

The first thing to do is to cover the flat piece of cardboard and all of the tubes with wrapping paper. Some teachers use colored paper or simply have students color the tubes with paint or markers. Then arrange the tubes so that the longer tube is either in the center or at one end. This serves

as the shamash, the candle we use to light all the other candles. The other eight tubes are placed in a straight line, a V- or S-formation, or in any form the students can imagine. Glue them in place. Then take some colored paper and make flames for all of the candles.

When lighting a menorah, the candles are placed in the menorah from right to left, but they are lit from left to right. On the first night of Hanukkah, place one paper flame on the shamash and one on the candle furthest to the right. On the second night, there are two candles, starting from the right. Use paper clips to fasten the flames onto the tubes so the menorah can be used again next year. Or, you can glue or tape the flames on. Be sure to place the menorah in a public spot, such as a foyer or a window.

Another thing to do, especially if you have only one class period, is to have students draw pictures of Hanukkah. First I go over the story of Hanukkah and what it's like in my family. Then I let the students go wild with their imaginations and draw pictures of what they think Hanukkah was like 2,300 years ago or what it is like now. Afterwards, we talk about the pictures, focusing on what they put in them. Naturally, when they put in things like a Christmas tree or a baked ham, I explain they have the wrong holiday. But mostly, the idea is to have fun and see how much they understand.

Another activity I like to do is make potato latkes (pancakes), but you must have access to a kitchen and only a few students can participate. The easiest recipe is four potatoes (about one kilogram), one cup of flour, one egg, and salt and pepper to taste. You can easily add other ingredients such as garlic, onions and carrots if you like. Grate the potatoes and mix them with the flour, egg, and seasonings. Then heat a pan with about 3cm of oil. Spoon the batter into the pan and fry the latkes for about four or five minutes; turn them over and fry them for another three or four minutes until they are brown. Drain them on paper towels and serve them with apple-sauce, mustard or sour cream.

One activity many of my friends



The dreidel isn't just a game of chance—it's a game of history.

ask about is playing dreidel. A dreidel is a four-sided top with four Hebrew letters on it. The letters stand for the Hebrew phrase *Nes gadol haya sham*, which means, "A great miracle happened there". Players start with a limited number of coins, nuts or candy. Everyone puts in a piece of candy or a coin into the center. Each person in turn spins the dreidel. Depending on which letter shows when it stops, the player gets all, half, or nothing, or must add one piece to the center. When the pot gets low, everyone puts some candy in. In our family, when we played dreidel, we used M&Ms. Whenever we won we had to eat the candy so the game would end at some point instead of going on for too long.

In conclusion, here are some resources for those who wish to do something for Hanukkah. Useful books include *ESL Teacher's Holiday Activities Kit* by Elizabeth Claire and *Holidays and Special Days in the USA* by Jane Myles. A good website is www.holidays.net/chanukah. For materials such as dreidels, menorahs and candles, you can contact the Tokyo Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Community of Kansai, or order them from the Source for everything Jewish at www.jewishsource.com.

One final note: the ideas presented in this article can be used for other holidays. I've used them for Thanksgiving, Halloween, Saint Patrick's Day and the Fourth of July. You are limited only by your imagination.

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