

# The Hanukkah Story—Miracle, Myth, or History?

Those who come from a traditional Jewish background are probably familiar with the so-called Hanukkah Miracle story. For two years the Jews, under the leadership of Judah and his four Maccabee brothers, waged a bloody struggle against the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire. They fought for Jewish liberation and the freedom to openly practice the Jewish religion. On the 25th day of the month of Kislev in 165 BCE, when the victorious Jewish army finally entered the Temple in Jerusalem, they found to their dismay that the Temple had been defiled by the evil Greeks and their equally evil idolatrous Jewish Hellenist allies. After a cleansing of the Temple, they wished to re-light the temple Menorah. Unfortunately, they discovered that there was only enough pure oil to keep the menorah lit for one day. But somehow, miraculously, the menorah remained lit for eight days, by which time enough olive oil could be produced to continue to keep it lit. Hence, the eight days of Hanukkah.

But there is also a secular tradition, with its own Hanukkah story. Those of us who come from a secular Jewish background simply celebrate the Maccabees' victory over the Seleucid army as a war for Jewish freedom. In 1948, during the State of Israel's war for its independence, Howard Fast, a secular, socialist, Jewish-American writer, wrote a novel that described the Maccabees' war as something resembling a socialist war for freedom. Fast wrote his novel in the first person, in the form of a memoir of Jonathan, the youngest and last of the Maccabee brothers. In Jonathan's memory, he and his glorious brothers led a fight for freedom. They sought to create a Jewish society that would be the antithesis of the Hellenistic world around them. It was to be a society that thrived on freedom for all and rejected the slavery that abounded in the Hellenistic world.

Unfortunately, that secular Hanukkah story is just as fictitious as the religious one.... So, as Jewish Humanists, having rejected both the religious and the secular mythological stories, what Hanukkah story should we celebrate?...

We tell our children that those are fictitious stories, but they represent an important fact about Jewish history—the fact of our yearning for freedom. The stories that we made up about the origin of our people are stories of our people's millennia-old hope for freedom. Those two holiday stories represent that hope, a yearning that continues throughout our history. That is indeed a cause for celebration.

*Excerpted from Natan Fuchs in "Here is Our Light," pp. 53–54.*



# The Humanistic “Miracle”

It is a part of the human condition to celebrate light during the season’s shortest and darkest days. Hanukkah occurs around the winter solstice where in the Northern Hemisphere the days are the shortest. Thus, a holiday celebrating light both scientifically and metaphorically is most welcome. And so today we celebrate Hanukkah as the festival of lights for eight days as we ache for longer days and more “light” in the world.

*Rabbi Miriam Jerris*

The miracle of the oil story gives rise to the custom of eating fried foods on Hanukkah. To assist in that custom, we offer this recipe for latkes that are both delicious and gluten-free—truly a modern-day miracle!

## GLUTEN-FREE POTATO LATKES (JEWISH POTATO PANCAKES)

(<https://www.food.com/recipe/potato-latkes-jewish-potato-pancakes-gluten-free-201068>)

### INGREDIENTS

- 4 pounds russet potatoes
- 1 large onion, peeled
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 tablespoon white pepper
- 1 cup gluten-free rice flour mix
- 3 eggs, beaten
- Olive oil for frying

### DIRECTIONS

- Preheat oven to 200 degrees or “warm” setting.
- Peel potatoes and submerge in cold water. Grate the onion into a large bowl. Grate the potatoes using the larger grate of a box grater, or use the grater attachment of a food processor.
- Quickly squeeze a handful of grated potatoes at a time over a second bowl (or the kitchen sink)
- Heat 1/4 inch of olive oil in a large, heavy skillet (cast iron works best) over medium-high heat, until just below the smoking point.
- Add remaining ingredients to the batter, and stir until fully combined. Place a small handful of batter (approximately 1/4 cup) in the hot oil at a time, gently pressing each latke with the back of the spatula so that it is no more than 1/3” thick. Do not press too hard, as the latkes will be crispier if the batter is not densely packed and each latke is thin and lacy (space in between the pieces of potato). Fry until completely golden-brown on the bottom and crispy around the outside corners. Flip and brown on the second side.
- Transfer latkes to a plate lined with paper towels or several layers of brown paper (I use grocery bags). Allow paper to absorb excess oil, then transfer latkes to a cooling rack placed over a baking sheet in the preheated oven, where they will stay warm until ready to serve. Serve hot, with sour cream and applesauce. (This is a greatly debated subject. Some also say that brown sugar is an option).

