



Lesson Ideas to Integrate Jewish Representation in December

Congratulations, Educators! As we look toward December planning, we also look toward the halfway point of the 2024/2025 academic calendar. December can be one of the most fun and creative months of the school year and is a great time to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to your students.

According to the Association for Middle Level Education, “Research shows that representation in the classroom not only boosts feelings of belonging but also supports a positive school environment, where students feel more confident and achieve more” (Reginal, 2021). This guide offers simple and California State Standards-aligned ways to include representation of Jews and Judaism in the month of December, helping you enrich your classroom with fresh perspectives and traditions!

This year, the eight-day Jewish holiday of Chanukah begins on the evening of December 25, 2024.

Chanukah Overview

Chanukah, which means "dedication," commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 165 BCE, but metaphorically celebrates faith, freedom, and perseverance, emphasizing the importance of cultural identity and religious liberty.

In Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago, a group of Jewish fighters (called the Maccabees) stood up against a powerful king and his army. The king, Antiochus, wanted the Jewish people to stop practicing their religion and follow his Greek customs instead. He even took over their holy Temple and used it for things the Jewish people didn't believe in.

The Maccabees fought hard and, even though they were a small group, they won. After their victory, they cleansed and repaired the Temple so they could worship there again. But when they wanted to light the menorah (a special lamp that was supposed to stay lit all the time), they could only find enough pure oil to keep it burning for one day. It would take eight days to make more oil.

Then something amazing happened. That small amount of oil lasted for eight whole days. This was considered a miracle, and is one of the reasons why Chanukah is eight days long.

To remember this event, Jewish families light a special menorah called a Chanukiah during Chanukah. Each night, they light one more candle until all eight candles are glowing on the last night. They also celebrate by eating foods cooked in oil, like potato pancakes (latkes) and jelly doughnuts (sufganiyot). Other festivities include songs, games and playing with a spinning top called a dreidel.

Chanukah is a time to remember standing up for what you believe in, being brave, and celebrating miracles!

Chanukah Themes

One way to integrate new cultures into your current curricula is through a focus on common themes. Universal and unifying ideas can be used to help students find a common ground with a new culture and are an opportunity to use the new cultural content to explore familiar ideas. Below are some of the themes of Chanukah:

- Triumph of Good over Evil.
- Light vs. Darkness (both literal and metaphorical)
- The Underdog Success Story
- Resilience/Persistence
- Resisting Assimilation
- War/Warriors/Military

Symbols of Chanukah

In addition to the lessons suggested within this document, you may find it fun and helpful to bring in physical symbols of Chanukah. The use of realia in the classroom increases student engagement and can support their exploration of a new culture.

Menorah/Chanukiah

A Chanukiah is the menorah (ritual candelabra) lit during Chanukah. It has nine spaces for candles. One candle, called the shamash, stands slightly apart from the rest. The other eight candles each represent one night of Chanukah. On the first night of Chanukah, Jewish people put one candle in the menorah in addition to the shamash for a total of two candles. On the second night, two candles are put in, in addition to the shamash, for a total of three candles. The shamash is lit first and then it is used to light the other candles. Prayers are recited during the candle-lighting. Menorahs are then set in the window and the candles allowed to burn down completely.

Dreidel/Sevivon

A dreidel (in Yiddish) or sevivon (in Hebrew) is the spinning top used in a traditional Chanukah game. In the Chanukah story, Jewish religious study was outlawed and punishable by death by the Greeks. It is said that Jewish children would hide in the mountain caves to study Torah (the Jewish holy text) despite the risks. When the Greek patrol would come, the children would take out the spinning tops and use the game as a cover for their studies. The letters on a dreidel (Nun, Gimmel, Hay, Shun) each stand for an action taken during the game. See “How to Play Dreidel” below for detailed game instructions.

Latkes

To commemorate the miracle of the oil, many Jewish people enjoy foods fried in oil during the holiday. One popular dish is called latkes. They are fried potato pancakes that are often eaten with applesauce or sour cream.

Sufganiyot

Another popular fried food to eat on Chanukah are sufganiyot. These jelly-filled doughnuts are a special holiday dessert on Chanukah.

How to Teach Dreidel: For Teachers

Supplies

- One dreidel per group of students.
- Items to use as playing chips/tokens like beans, gelt (chocolate coins), math manipulatives, loose crayons or other classroom supplies. Usually 15-20 per student.
- One “How to Play Dreidel” (below) page per group or posted on the whiteboard/projector.

Setup

- Divide the class into groups of three to six people. Groups can be slightly larger if needed.
- Provide each student with an equal number of tokens to play the game with.
- Give each group one dreidel and directions.

Directions

- Preview the history and Jewish cultural significance of Dreidel (see page 2 of this document).

- Preview the game meaning for each Hebrew letter on the dreidel.
- Read the directions as a class/to the class.
- Lead the class in watching one group play a “test game” where you walk the group and class through each turn until the round is over (someone got a Gimmel and the pot is emptied)
- Instruct the groups to begin playing and circle the room to support.

How to Play Dreidel

- Letters on the Dreidel: The symbols on the sides of a dreidel are Hebrew letters. Each letter corresponds to an action in the game.
 - Shin (שׁ): Put one token into the pot.
 - Nun (נ): Take none of the tokens. Lose none of your tokens.
 - Hay (ה): Take half the tokens in the pot.
 - Gimmel (ג): Winner! Take all of the tokens in the pot.
- Get into groups of three or more. Make sure each person has tokens or game pieces. A popular choice is Chanukah gelt(chocolate coins).
- To decide who gets to play first, each person should spin the dreidel. The person with the highest spin gets to start the game. Shin is the lowest, then Nun, Hay, and finally Gimmel is the highest.
- Before the first round can begin, each player must put one of their tokens into the “pot.” People will add to and draw from the pot throughout the game.
- The player who is starting the game spins the dreidel. The dreidel will fall and land with one of four letters facing up.
 - If Gimmel (ג) is facing up, the player wins the round and takes all the tokens from the pot as their winnings and the game play begins again with everyone putting in a token.
 - Hay (ה) is facing up, the player gets half of the tokens in the pot. If there is an odd number of tokens in the pot, round down. The dreidel is then given to the next person to spin.
 - If Shin (שׁ) is facing up, the player must take one of their own tokens and add it to the pot. The dreidel is then given to the next person.
 - If Nun (נ) is facing up the player does nothing, and the dreidel is given to the next person.
- The round is over when someone gets Gimmel or there is only one token left in the pot. At this point the group begins again with putting one token into the pot to start the next round.
- Once someone is out of tokens, they can continue to spin until they get Shin and cannot put one in or they cannot put in the starting token—after that they are “out.” If they are able to win tokens before getting out they can continue to play as normal.

English Language Arts Integration:

Grade	Standard	Lesson Ideas
K-2	<p>Reading Literature 1-10</p> <p>Reading Informational Texts 1-10</p>	<p>Do a group reading of a story or nonfiction text that is about Chanukah. Focus on engaging the class with a lively reading and connecting with the narrative. While this is not a history lesson, if you select a book that presents Chanukah as a backdrop to the other events it would be helpful to also do a reading of an informational text about Chanukah as well.</p> <p align="center">Narrative Text Suggestions</p> <p><i><u>Queen of the Hanukkah Dosas</u></i>, written by Pamela Ehrenberg <i><u>When Mindy Saved Hanukkah</u></i>, written by Eric A. Kimmel <i><u>The Eight Knights of Hanukkah</u></i>, written by Leslie Kimmelman <i><u>Sammy Spider's First Hanukkah</u></i>, written by Sylvia A. Rouss</p> <p align="center">Nonfiction Text Suggestions</p> <p><i><u>Holidays Around the World: Celebrate Hanukkah: With Light, Latkes, and Dreidels</u></i>, written by Deborah Heiligman</p>
3-5	<p>Reading Literature 1-3</p> <p>Reading Literature 9 (if you read Little Red Ruthie with other Big Bad Wolf/Little Red Riding Hood stories),</p> <p>Reading Literature 10 (if student read)</p>	<p>Use books connected to the Jewish holidays as part of larger lessons. These stories can be used to study characterization, theme, or story structure. Increase challenge by having students read the story themselves (in older grades).</p> <p><i><u>A Donut in Time: A Hanukkah Story</u></i>, written by Elana Rubinstein <i><u>A Horn for Louis</u></i>, written by Eric A. Kimmel</p> <p align="center">Lesson Suggestion</p> <p><i><u>Little Red Ruthie: A Hanukkah Tale</u></i>, written by Gloria Koster With this story, study how different authors can use the same characters, themes, or story elements to explore different ideas and plots. After studying a few versions of the story, work as a class or in small groups to have students write their own version.</p>

<p>6-8</p>	<p>Writing Standards 3 and 10</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Lesson Suggestion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Briefly summarize the story of Chanukah, focusing on the Maccabees and the Miracle of the Oil. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use a short video like the one available here (PJ Library: The Story of Chanukah) or, for older students, here (History Channel on YouTube, History of Holidays: Chanukah). ● Discuss key themes: fighting conformity, courage, hope, “underdog success” and miracles. ● Read another short story with similar themes or connect to themes in class texts. ● Discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What challenges did the characters face?" and "What themes stood out?" ● Writing Activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Write a short story inspired by the themes of Chanukah. It can be set in ancient times, modern day, or a fictional world. Include a challenge, a moment of courage or hope, and a positive resolution. ○ Volunteers share their stories. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Discuss how their stories connect to the themes of Chanukah.
<p>9-12</p>	<p>Writing Standards 3 and 10</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Lesson Suggestion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Briefly summarize the story of Chanukah, focusing on the Maccabees and the Miracle of the Oil. Use a short video like the one available here (History Channel on YouTube, History of Holidays: Chanukah). ● Discuss key themes: fighting conformity, courage, hope, “underdog success” and miracles. ● Read another short story with similar themes or connect to themes in class texts. ● Discuss which themes stood out. How does the author address these themes in each text? ● Writing Activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Write a short story inspired by the themes of Chanukah that gives the student an opportunity to share their commentary or perspective on the theme(s) discussed.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Volunteers share their stories (each student should be prepared to explain what themes they explored and why they chose to explore them in the way they did).
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Social Studies Integration:

Grade	Standard	Lesson Ideas
K-2	Chronological thinking can be enhanced by constructing timelines, practicing sequencing of a story, and learning words such as first, next, then, and finally while sequencing story events. What makes someone heroic? Who are some people who have made a difference in our lives?	<p>Introduction: Briefly introduce Chanukah as a holiday celebrated by Jewish families, explaining that it lasts for eight nights and involves lighting candles on a menorah. Emphasize that people celebrate in a sequence of steps each night.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Story Sequencing: Read a simple, age-appropriate Chanukah story, such as <i>Sammy Spider's First Hanukkah</i>. As you read, pause to discuss sequencing words like "first," "next," "then," and "finally." ● Interactive Activity: Provide students with picture cards representing steps in a Chanukah celebration (e.g., lighting the menorah, saying blessings, playing Dreidel, eating latkes). Have students arrange the cards in the correct order and use sequencing words to describe the steps. ● Timeline Creation: As a class, create a visual timeline of the eight nights of Chanukah. Draw or display a menorah and add one candle each time the sequence is reviewed to show the progression of the holiday. ● Wrap-Up : Reflect on how sequencing helps us understand celebrations like Chanukah, and encourage students to use sequencing words to describe their own routines or holidays.
3-5	What is the rule? Why is it important to have this rule? Is this rule constitutional? Does this rule	<p>Introduction: Begin with a discussion on rules. Ask, “Why do we have rules?” and “What makes a rule fair or unfair?” Write down students' ideas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Chanukah Story and Discussion: Share a child-friendly version of the Chanukah story, focusing on how the Maccabees resisted unfair rules that limited their freedom to practice their religion. Discuss questions like:

	<p>uphold our classroom principles of freedom, justice, and equality?</p>	<p>“What rules did the Maccabees face?” and “Were those rules just or fair?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rule Analysis: As a class, create a chart with three columns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Column 1: Example of a Rule (from the story or the classroom). ○ Column 2: Why is this rule important? ○ Column 3: Does this rule support freedom, justice, and equality? ● Discuss examples from the Chanukah story and from the students' own classroom. ● Debate Activity: Split students into small groups. Assign each group a rule (e.g., "Everyone must take turns" or "Everyone must follow the same holiday traditions"). Have students discuss whether the rule supports the values of freedom, justice, and equality and share their reasoning with the class. ● Connection to Classroom Principles: Reflect on how the Chanukah story relates to classroom values. Ask students, “What can we learn from the Maccabees about standing up for fairness and justice in our classroom?” ● Wrap-Up: Conclude with students writing and/or creating a drawing that illustrates a rule which promotes freedom, justice, and equality in their classroom or community.
<p>6-8</p>	<p>6th Grade: Ancient Hebrews</p> <p>7th Grade: In connection with the study of the spread of Christianity, Greek and Roman conquest and the Jewish diaspora.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduction: Review students’ prior knowledge about the spread of Greek and Roman culture during their respective conquests. Ask students: “How did the spread of these empires affect different groups of people, including their beliefs and traditions?” Briefly introduce the Jewish diaspora, explaining that it refers to the scattering of Jewish communities due to conquest and persecution. ● The Chanukah Story: Share the story of Chanukah, emphasizing the Maccabean Revolt against Hellenistic influences under Antiochus IV, who sought to suppress Jewish religious practices. Discuss how the Maccabees’ resistance was both a fight for religious freedom and a reaction to the cultural pressures of Greek rule.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Historical Connections: Analyze how the events of Chanukah fit within the larger context of Greek and Roman influence in the region. Use a map to show areas affected by Greek and Roman conquest, highlighting Judea. Discuss how this resistance set the stage for later interactions between Jewish communities and Roman authorities, including events leading to the diaspora. ● Classroom Discussion: Ask students to consider: “What does the Chanukah story tell us about cultural resilience in the face of conquest?” and “How do stories like this help maintain cultural identity during times of displacement, like the diaspora?” ● Group Activity: Divide students into small groups to create a timeline showing major events: the Greek conquest, the Maccabean Revolt, Roman rule, and the diaspora. Include key connections between these events and the preservation of Jewish cultural and religious practices. ● Wrap-Up: Reflect on how the themes of resistance and cultural resilience in the Chanukah story connect to broader historical patterns of cultural survival during conquest and displacement. Pose the question: “How does understanding events like Chanukah help us better understand the spread of cultures and religions in history?”
9-12	Students relate the moral and ethical principles in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, in Judaism, and in Christianity to the development of Western political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduction: Begin by asking students to brainstorm key ethical principles in Western political thought (e.g., justice, freedom, equality, the rule of law). Write responses on the board. Briefly review the influence of Greek and Roman philosophy on Western thought, focusing on ideas like democracy, justice (Plato, Aristotle), and the rule of law (Roman legal codes). ● The Chanukah Story and Jewish Ethical Principles: Present a summary of the Chanukah story, highlighting its moral themes: the fight for religious freedom, the value of community, and resistance to oppression. Introduce Jewish ethical principles central to the story, such as Tikkun Olam (repairing the world), Tzedek

	thought.	<p>(justice), and the importance of maintaining cultural identity in the face of persecution.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Comparative Analysis: Divide students into small groups and provide them with texts or excerpts from: Greek philosophy (e.g., Aristotle’s Politics on justice and the common good), Roman political thought (e.g., Cicero on natural law and moral duty), and Jewish teachings (e.g., ideas of justice and freedom in the Chanukah story and Torah principles). Ask students to compare and contrast the ethical principles in each tradition, focusing on how they address justice, freedom, and the role of the individual in society. ● Class Discussion: Facilitate a discussion connecting these principles to Western political thought. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Guiding questions: “How do the ethical principles of Chanukah reflect ideas of justice and freedom found in Greek and Roman philosophy?” and “How did these moral frameworks influence the development of democratic principles in Western political thought?” ● Individual Reflection: Have students write a short response to the question: “What can the Chanukah story and its ethical principles teach us about the importance of justice and freedom in modern society?” ● Wrap-Up (5 minutes): Summarize the interconnectedness of Greek, Roman, and Jewish moral systems in shaping Western political thought. ● Pose a final reflective question: “Why is it important to study these moral traditions to understand our modern political systems?”
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Math Integration:

Grade	Standard	Lesson Ideas
K-2	Counting and Cardinality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach the students how to play Dreidel and give them each a collection of 5, 10, or 20 tokens, depending where the group is in their number learning at this point of the year.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lead the class in putting one token into the middle pile, or “pot” and have students predict, calculate, or count how many they each have left. Have a student volunteer to count how many tokens are in the pot. ● For older grades, have students keep track of their participation for each round with an algebraic expression.
3-5	Multiplication/ Division	<p>Option 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach Dreidel to the class. ● Use landing on “Hay” (when the player takes half the tokens from the pot) to practice division skills. <p>Option 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Add a quiz layer to Dreidle. After every spin, students need to correctly answer a random “math fact” to finish their turn and take tokens from the pot, or to save themselves from losing a token when rolling a “Shin.”
6-8	Ratios and Proportionality.	<p>Ratios and Proportionality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explore a resource that tells the story of Chanukah and shares that the oil, which was supposed to last for only one day, miraculously lasted for eight. ● Have students create a three-column chart that lists an item in Column 1, its expected lifespan in Column 2, and the Chanukah story lifespan in Column 3. ● In row one, fill out the chart for the Chanukah story <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Column 1: Oil ○ Column 2: 1 day ○ Column 3: 8 days ● Using equivalent ratios and online research, have students fill additional rows with equivalencies for the use-lifespan of supplies and tools they use in their own life. Examples could be: iPhone battery, egg expiration, how long they can sprint for, or anything else that can be timed. Example for row 2: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Column 1: iPhone battery ○ Column 2: 20 hours ○ Column 3: 160 hours ● Have students share out and check each other’s work.

		Probability: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use the game of Dreidel to explore probability ● Expand from one dreidel to multiple to increase challenge.
9-12	All Areas	Use Chanukah, its themes, and symbols as part of your math exploration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Study exponential growth with menorah candle usage. ● Create story problems related to gift exchange or Dreidel play.

Additional Resources

Resources for Adult Learning:

[History of Chanukah](#) - ReformJudaism.org

[The Chanukah Story](#) - Chabad.org

Videos/Movies:

[What is Chanukah?](#) - BimBam (4 minutes, 4th Grade +)

[Sesame Street: Happy Chanukah from Elmo and Friends](#) - Sesame Street (4 minutes, Preschool-K)

[How to Play Dreidel](#) - My Jewish Learning (1st Grade +)

[History of the Holidays](#) - Chanukah: History (3rd Grade +)

[Latke Recipe](#) - Chanukah: The Maccabeats - (All Ages)

Music:

[The Maccabeats - Candlelight - Chanukah](#) (reviews the story of Chanukah)

[The Dreidel Song \(I made it out of clay\)](#) - Shaboom!

[Oh Chanukah](#) - The Maccabeats

[Puppy for Chanukah-Daveed Diggs](#) - DisneyMusicVevo

[Five Little Latkes](#) - Shira Kline (hand song for Preschool-K)

[Chanukah Playlist](#) - Spotify (it offers many)

Additional Classroom Resources:

[Calendar of Major Jewish Religious Observances](#) - JCRC Bay Area

[Best Practices for Home Culture Sharing in Classrooms](#) - JCRC Bay Area

[Chapter Books Celebrating Jewish Life and Culture](#) - San Francisco Public Library

[Children's and Middle Grade Books That Mirror the Diversity of Jewish Communities](#) - PJ Library