



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

HANUKKAH IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

What is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is the eight-day Jewish celebration also called the festival of lights. The date for this festival changes according to the lunar calendar, but it always begins in November or December. In 2020, Hanukkah begins in the evening on December 10th and ends in the evening on December 18th.

What does Hanukkah mean, and what does the day commemorate?

The Hebrew word Chanukah 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. It also commemorates the liberation and rededication of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. In the temple was a menorah (a candelabrum), meant to burn day and night to symbolize the light of God’s presence. When the Maccabees went to relight it, they found only enough clean oil for one night. Miraculously, it instead lasted for eight days, until new oil could be prepared.

How is Hanukkah observed?

To symbolize the miracle, Hanukkah is celebrated by lighting a candle on the nine-branch menorah at sunset each night of the festival. A Hanukkah menorah, usually placed in a window or doorway, is called a Hanukkiah. Most observers will say a blessing as the menorah is lit and may sing traditional Hanukkah songs afterwards. Hanukkiot (plural) are also lit in synagogues and other public places.

In commemoration of the legendary oil, it is a Hanukkah tradition to eat fried foods. Latkes (potato pancakes) are a favourite, as are sufganiyot (fried jelly doughnuts).

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. Dreidel is a traditional Hanukkah game. A dreidel is a small, four-sided spinning top with Hebrew letters on each side that form an acronym for “great miracle happened here”.

HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

1

Get educated. Ensure staff who supervise self-identified Jewish colleagues are aware of Hanukkah and how they can be supportive.

2

Intentional planning. Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events during Hanukkah.

3

Be flexible. Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to switch shifts to observe Hanukkah. Look for solutions that suit all parties. Work during Hanukkah is permitted, however as the candles are lit at sundown, those who observe may wish to leave work early.

4

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