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Why We Choose To Celebrate Hanukkah Aboard A Cruise Ship



SANDY BORNSTEIN

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Cantor George Henschel leading Hanukkah service aboard the Celebrity Apex in December of 2021
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

On the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev, corresponding this year to the evening of Sunday, December 18, Jews around the world will begin the 8-day celebration of Hanukkah, sometimes referred to as the festival of lights. Hanukkah, or Chanukah, commemorates the

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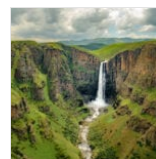
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Jewish victory in 165 B.C. over the Syrian-Greek oppression led by King Antiochus IV.

Under his reign, the Temple in Jerusalem was converted into a pagan shrine and the Jews were prohibited from performing any of their traditional religious practices. When the Jews, led by Judah Maccabee and the Hasmonean family, regained control of the Temple, it was cleansed and rededicated. Only one small jug of oil for the Temple's menorah (candelabrum) was located. After the High Priest rekindled the oil, he anticipated that it would last only 1 day. Instead, the flame remained for 8 days.

For centuries, Jews have recalled this historic military victory and the rededication of the Temple — along with the miracle of the oil lasting for 8 days — by celebrating Hanukkah, the Hebrew word for rededication. A hanukkiah, or menorah with nine holders, is used for a family's nightly tradition of lighting candles. The ninth candle, called the shamash, lights the other candles. On the first night, only one candle is lit with the shamash. On each successive night, another candle is added to the hanukkiah and lit.

Since the Hebrew calendar is configured differently than the Gregorian calendar, Hanukkah can start as early as the very end of November or as late as the last few days of December. The new day on a Hebrew calendar always begins at sundown — so Jewish holidays and festivals commence at sundown.

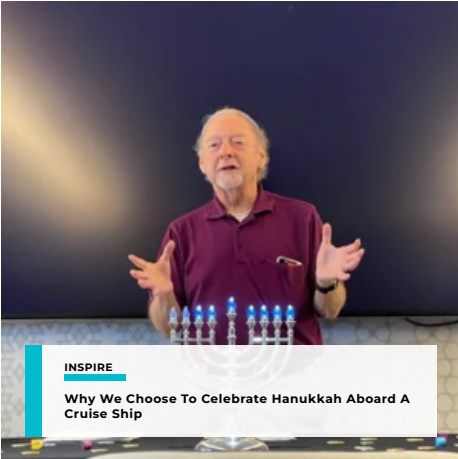


The Bornstein family's introduction to a Hanukkah aboard a cruise ship in December of 2004
PHOTO CREDIT: CREW MEMBER OF CELEBRITY CRUISES

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Decades ago, we came together as a family with our four sons to light candles and sing songs every night and celebrated Hanukkah at least one evening with extended family members. We wanted our sons to experience this home-based holiday with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Gifts were exchanged by everyone.

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They grew up eating traditional foods like *latkes* (potato pancakes), *sufganiyot* (jelly donuts), homemade Hanukkah cookies baked in the shape of dreidels, menorahs, and six-pointed stars, and chocolate in the shape of a coin covered in gold or silver foil. These semi-sweet and milk chocolates are referred to as *gelt* and recall the Eastern European Jewish tradition of parents giving money to their children during the holiday. Another annual tradition was playing a game called dreidel. Most of the time, we used a diaspora dreidel with the Hebrew letters nun, gimmel, hay, and shin, standing for Hebrew words meaning “a great miracle happened there.”



Cantor George Henschel and his wife, Ricki, reciting the blessings over wine and challah during Shabbat Hanukkah service aboard Celebrity Apex in 2021.
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

Celebrate With Folks From Around The World

Family gatherings became more challenging when our eldest sons went to college. To accommodate their conflicting schedules, we embarked on our first Hanukkah cruise and fell in love with the concept of cruising during the festival. Our family gathered in our cabin to light our electric hanukkiah and had the opportunity to join with Jews from around the world for a short Hanukkah program each night. However, due to safety regulations, we were unable to light actual candles.

The chefs created a variety of latkes and sufganiyot that we ordered throughout the cruise. The festive ambiance aboard the ship, along with the fun times in port, created memorable experiences.



Sandy and Ira Bornstein passing down the Hanukkah tradition of lighting candles to their six grandchildren in Colorado
PHOTO CREDIT: KAYLA GARTHWAITE

Why We Continue To Celebrate Hanukkah Aboard A Cruise Ship

One by one, our children became engaged and then married their significant other. A few years later, grandchildren added a new dimension to our growing family. Early on, we introduced the next generation to our family's traditional songs, holiday foods, and ritual observances.



The Celebrity Equinox in Cozumel, Mexico
PHOTO CREDIT: NAPA / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Escape The Cold

For the last couple of years, we have coordinated our travel plans so our growing family can be together for at least one day during Hanukkah. While our preference is to ski during the winter months, we usually avoid the holiday crowds on the Colorado slopes until New Year's Day.

Deciding whether to stay home or travel during winter break is a toss-up. Taking a cruise to a tropical climate is always enticing, especially when we are celebrating only one day of Hanukkah with our children and grandchildren.

Cruising and celebrating Hanukkah go hand in hand. On board the ship, we thrive in a festive environment filled with theatrical performances, live music, the opportunity to dance, an abundance of activities, and amazing food choices. At ports of call, our desire to explore and participate in outdoor adventures is fulfilled. We also have quality time relaxing on our balcony or on outdoor decks.



Sufganiyot (jelly donuts) aboard the Celebrity Apex
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

Enjoy Traditional Foods

During Hanukkah, many cruise ships offer early evening programs with traditional foods. Our experience aboard Celebrity cruise ships has been positive. A cantor or rabbi leads a short service that includes songs along with the lighting of an electric hanukiah. Afterward, the group is treated to kosher wine, latkes and sufganiyot, and challah if the day coincides with the Jewish Sabbath.

We have had the good fortune of chatting with people from around the world during these celebrations. Sometimes these encounters have blossomed into relationships that continue after we return home.

As empty nesters, living mostly in a quiet house, we find it uplifting to be aboard a cruise ship during the holiday season. While the decades of being surrounded by children every day are behind us, we can reap the benefits by having holiday family gatherings and filling the remainder of our time with energizing experiences. Perhaps when our grandchildren are a little older, they will join us on a holiday cruise so we can introduce them to another one of our traditions.

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SANDY BORNSTEIN

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Sandy Bornstein is a Colorado-based, award-winning travel and lifestyle writer who focuses on active adventure, food and beverages, history and culture, cruises, luxury boomer travel, family travel, health and wellness, worldwide Jewish culture, and the importance of...
After living in Warsaw, Poland, and teaching in Poland, she moved to the United States and became a travel writer. She has written for various travel websites and has been featured in several travel magazines. She wrote [May This Be the Best Year of Your Life: A Memoir](#) as a

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