



ORNATE MENORAH A menorah burns in the background. Photo from Creative Commons.

Exploring Hanukkah Traditions at Westhill

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As the calendar year comes to an end and winter starts to set in, millions of Jewish families around the United States light the Menorah, spin Dreidels, and savor fried treats in celebration of Hanukkah.

Known as the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah is a holiday rich in history and tradition, yet its observance has evolved significantly over the centuries.

Originally commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the 2nd century BCE, Hanukkah was a testament to the resilience and faith of the Jewish people during the Maccabean Revolt. The Jewish people had only enough oil to keep a flame burning for one day. However, this flame miraculously burned for 8 days, emphasizing the significance of the length in which Hanukkah is celebrated.

Unlike Passover and Yom Kippur, it was not originally considered a major Jewish holiday, focusing primarily on the miracle and the historical events surrounding the Maccabees. It involved a primarily modest celebration, focusing on the ideals of Judaism by embracing song and traditional foods.

“I enjoy spending Hanukkah with all of my family on my mother’s side and cooking together, singing together, and sharing laughs,” Nava Rubin (‘26) said.

Today, while the core story of the miraculous oil that burned for eight days remains central, modern Hanukkah celebrations reflect cultural adaptations, blending historical reverence with contemporary customs. The holiday has become a staple in Jewish households, recognized as one of the most celebrated holidays in all of the United States.

Through assimilation, it developed modern traditions such as gift-giving and parallels to winter symbols. One of the more popular modernizations is the idea of chocolate gold coins, otherwise known as gelt, which have been commercialized across all holiday stores around the United States.

The expansion of the Jewish community in the United States has also contributed to this assimilation, with many winter decorations having parallels to Hannukah, embodying Jewish values and principles. As the Jewish population in America rises, the commercialization of Jewish holidays expands. The menorah, the candle holder used to represent the 8 nights the original candle had burned along with a ninth candle for the shamash (the candle used to light the other candles), has been sold with various new designs, all about the original point with a modernized twist.

The most intriguing part of this mod-

ernization is the idea that it does not detract from the overall purpose of Hanukkah. The holiday seems to have found a bridge between tradition and innovation.

“My favorite modern tradition is inventing new kinds of potato latkes (pancakes) but substituting the potato with other delusional flavors,” Lev Rubin (‘28) said.

This idea of creating modern twists on staple foods is one way in which the holiday is able to preserve its roots while still growing leaves. It provides observers with the perfect balance of new and old traditions, bridging the gap between the traditional and modern views on religion.

This idea of a bridge displays the role of religion in the modern era. Many of the new traditions are made by younger generations who have a different view on the religion that was presented to them, allowing for values to be shown in a new light. Lev Rubin’s favorite tradition of making modern latkes complements Nava Rubin’s cherished time for cooking with her family while sharing laughs.

Newer generations express religion in new ways, highlighting the balance between modern and historic regarding popular holidays.