

A Cultural History of Chanukah Gelt

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/cultural-history-chanukah-gelt>.

Introduction

Chanukah, the Jewish festival of lights, celebrates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after its capture by the Syrian Greeks in 164 BCE. Although historically it was perceived as a minor holiday, Chanukah is one of the most widely celebrated holidays among Jews in America today.

One of the many traditions associated with the holiday is giving Chanukah gelt, or money, as a celebratory gift. Although this gift-giving was at one time a gratuity offered to workers, not unlike what happens on the Christian Boxing Day, this custom later transformed into the nineteenth-century European practice of giving coins to children in celebration of the holiday. In America, under the influence of the ubiquitous commercial Christmas season, the tradition of giving coins was largely replaced by the practice of giving gifts. When the company Barton's Candy introduced their chocolate coins as a Chanukah confection in 1951, nostalgia for the older practice of distributing coins to children fueled the success of this new treat. This kit explores the history of Chanukah gelt as reflected in modern Jewish literature and culture. Through this history, the kit offers a window into the idea of money in modern Jewish identities as well as the transformation that European Jewish traditions underwent in American contexts.

A note about spelling: The Yiddish and Hebrew names of the holiday Chanukah are transliterated many different ways in contemporary American English. We have chosen to use the spelling that is consistent with the rest of the Yiddish Book Center's website. However, when referring directly to a published work that uses a different spelling, we will refer to the holiday using that alternate spelling.

Cover image: Illustration by Uri Shulevitz, 1978.

Subjects

Childhood, Jewish Holidays, Money, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- Dianne Ashton's *Hanukkah in America* is a terrific place to turn to explore more about the evolution of celebrations of Hanukkah in the United States. Those seeking online resources may also wish to consult [this interview with Ashton](#) on the Judaism Unbound podcast, as well as Emma Green's "Hanukkah, Why?" from *The Atlantic* or Julian Cardillo's [interview with American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna](#) on the topic in *BrandeisNow*.
- To read more about Isaac Rivkind, the scholar whose work on Jews and money is excerpted in this kit, see Eli Lederhendler, "A Jewish 'Third Way' to American Capitalism: Isaac Rivkind and the Conservative-Communitarian Ideal" in *Chosen Capital* (Rutgers University Press, 201, 234-252).
- Teachers who enjoy teaching the Sholem Aleichem story in this kit may wish to consider using the resource kit on [Sholem Aleichem's character Tevye the Dairyman](#) to guide their students in further reading.

Resources

1: Lexicon excerpt, Isaac Rivkind's "Yidishe Gelt," 1959, translation from Yiddish.

Isaac Rivkind, a librarian, antiquarian, scholar, and writer who served for 36 years as the head librarian of the Hebrew-Yiddish



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division of the Jewish Theological Seminary Library, compiled an ethnographic lexicon of words and phrases used in Yiddish to describe money and the exchange of money. In it, he argues that Jewish economic life in Eastern Europe was guided by a moral principle of co-responsibility, a belief that members of the community were required to support one another financially, which was a social response to economic segregation and stagnation. These excerpts come from his entry on the term "*khanike gelt*" ("Chanukah gelt").

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to think about the role of gift-giving in their own lives and society. What is the difference between a bonus, a charitable donation, and a gift? Do they think of these as separate or related acts of monetary giving? How do they think that the evolution of Chanukah gelt from a bonus given to clergy, into a gift given to children, reflects changes in Jewish culture and society?

Point out to your students that this definition of Chanukah gelt includes items other than money. In their own knowledge of Chanukah or other gift-exchanging holidays today, do other objects stand in for money? Do they think there is a difference, financially or emotionally, in exchanging money versus other objects?

Sources: Isaac Rivkind, *Yidische Gelt* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1959), 102-107. Unpublished translation by Jessica Kirzane.

2: Folksong excerpt, from Shloyme Bastomski's "Baym Kval," 1923, Yiddish and English translation.

Shloyme Bastomski (1891–1941), was a Yiddish pedagogue, folklorist, writer, and editor. A teacher for the first secular Jewish boys' school in Vilna, he pioneered pedagogy for Yiddish secular schools and published children's journals and learning materials. Among his pedagogical aims was to teach Yiddish folklore as a central component of Yiddish secular culture. To this end, Bastomski collected and analyzed proverbs and other folk materials and included previously uncollected folklore materials in his pedagogical texts. His journals for children were read in Yiddish schools throughout the world.

This excerpt of an untitled folk song can be found in Bastomski's collection of Yiddish folk songs from Lithuania, *Baym Kval (At the Wellspring)*.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to characterize the mood of these lyrics—is the speaker carefree? Is he complaining about his precarious economic position? What does this song tell you about the economic structure of his society and the extent to which the community acts as a social safety net?

What do Purim and Chanukah seem to represent for this speaker? How does this differ from your students' experiences or impressions of these holidays, or of other holidays they celebrate? If your students are already familiar with Jewish holidays and practices, have them create a Venn diagram comparing *shalekh-manes* (in Hebrew *mishloach manot*, Purim holiday gifts) and Chanukah gelt: Who gives the gift? Who receives it? Is there a written tradition to support the gift giving? What does the gift consist of? Students may wish to consult [this article](#) from MyJewishLearning.org as a reference on the Purim tradition.

Source: S. Bastomski, *Materialn tsum yidishn folklor-folkslider* (*At the Source: Materials on Yiddish Folklore and Folk Songs*) (Vilna: Farlag Naye Yidische Folkshul, 1923), 92. Unpublished translation by Jessica Kirzane.

3: Short story excerpt, Mendele Moykher-Sforim, "What's the Meaning of Hanukkah?", translation from Yiddish.

Sholem Yankev Abramovitch, more commonly known by his persona Mendele Mokher Seforim, is widely considered the founder of modern artistic prose in Hebrew and Yiddish. This story, "What's the Meaning of Hanukkah?", offers interpretations of the idea of miracles and the role of history in the holiday. In the passage below, Mendele describes Chanukah as a liberatory holiday for Jewish children who otherwise lead punishing lives (educational reform was a major issue for Mendele and other thinkers of the *Haskole* or Jewish Enlightenment. See our [resource kit on kheyder](#), or traditional Jewish elementary education.) Chanukah gelt appears in the story as a gift that children receive to increase their luck and joy for the holiday. The expression in the excerpt, "*lived like God in Odessa*" refers to the boisterous port city known for its diversity, religious freedom, and economic opportunity. In the expression, Odessa is a city in which even God could have a good time – a pleasure paradise.

Suggested Activity: Discuss the following questions with your students: What, according to this short paragraph, did Chanukah mean for *kheyder* boys? Is there any mention of piety or religious feeling in this description, or social responsibility? What function does Chanukah gelt serve? Because this short paragraph is packed with details about the celebration of the holiday, help your students to visualize the scene by asking them to draw a picture of the narrator's Chanukah celebration, or of one element thereof. They should include a caption.

Source: Mendele Moykher-Sforim, "What's the Meaning of Hanukkah?", trans. Ri Turner, Yiddish Book Center website, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/yiddish-tr...>

4: Poem excerpt from Y. Y. Shvarts's "Yunge Yorn," 1952, Yiddish with English translation, and audio excerpt of the poem being read aloud.

Y. Y. Shvarts (1885-1971) was raised in Lithuania in a traditional religious family, and he discovered literature of the *Haskole*, or Jewish Enlightenment, while he was a student in a yeshiva. He immigrated to America in 1906 and worked as a teacher while writing poetry. Shvarts published Yiddish translations of John Milton, Walt Whitman, William Shakespeare, and Hayyim Nachman Bialik, demonstrating his knowledge of and affinity for English literary traditions as well as his perception that modern Jewish literature was part of the same enterprise. In 1918, he relocated to Kentucky where he worked as a peddler for twelve years. During that time, he wrote *Kentoki* (*Kentucky*), a collection including a novel in verse, poems, and poetic fragments that came to be known as a foundational work of American Yiddish literature. He translated the work into Hebrew in 1962. After leaving Kentucky, Shvarts returned to New York and continued to write and translate poetry. Shvarts published his autobiographical book-length poem *Yunge Yorn* (*Young Years*) in 1952. In it he describes the traditional Jewish world of his childhood that he left behind.

Suggested Activity: Invite your students to perform a skit based on this scene, inserting their own dialogue that supports their interpretation of the text. Ask them to consider one or more of these questions as they prepare their skits: Do they see the father as playing with the children? Instructing the children? What lessons is the father teaching? What purpose and significance does the Chanukah gelt hold in this passage, and how is it different from, or similar to, the passages in other resources in this kit?

Sources: Y. Y. Shvarts, *Yunge Yorn* (Mexico: *Farlag Tsvi Kesel bay der Kultur Komisiye fun Yidishn Tsentral-Komitet in Meksike*, 1952), 139. Unpublished translation by Jessica Kirzane.

Y. Y. Shvarts, "Yunge Yorn," recorded at Montreal's Jewish Public Library in the 1980s or 1990s. Digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Sami Rohr Library of Recorded Yiddish Books, accessed October 16, 2018. <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/audio-books/smr-israel-jac...>

5: Greeting card, "Khanike-geld," Yiddish, date unknown.

This photographic postcard from prewar Poland shows a man distributing money to his children (or grandchildren) in celebration of Chanukah.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to describe what they see. How are the people in the photograph dressed, and what can we learn about them from their dress? (Students may wish to note the girl's frilly dress, hair ribbon, and polished boots as a sign of the family's wealth and modern tastes, for instance. They may also note the father's *kapote* (long black coat traditionally worn by male Jews in Eastern Europe) and beard as a sign of the family's religious traditionalism. These two observations together might allow them to conclude that the family is both traditional and modernizing.) If they were to describe the holiday of Chanukah from this postcard alone, what would they say were the practices and ideas associated with the holiday? To what extent does the postcard suggest that Chanukah is about or for children?

Source: *People of a Thousand Towns*, Online Photographic Catalogue, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Used with permission from YIVO.

6: Excerpts from Sholem Aleichem's "Hanukah Money," translated and adapted by Uri Shulevitz and Elizabeth Shub, with illustration by Uri Shulevitz, 1978.

This story by the classic Yiddish author **Sholem Aleichem** is told from the perspective of an impish child who eagerly enjoys the material rewards of Chanukah, greedily counting his Chanukah gelt until he dreams at night about wolfing it down like a steaming

plateful of latkes. Students with Yiddish knowledge may wish to access the story in the original version [here](#) or to listen to an audio recording [here](#).

Uri Shulevitz, a Caldecott Medal-winning children's book author and illustrator, illustrated an English-language children's book version of Sholem Aleichem's story with witty, whimsical monochromatic pictures featuring children in poorly-fitting raggedy clothing giddily reaping the rewards of the holiday. This is the final illustration in the book, showing the narrator's dream of devouring a platter of Chanukah money.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to discuss the following questions: How is the reading audience meant to feel toward the narrator for his hyper-focus on Chanukah gelt (rather than on his relatives or on the more religious rituals of Chanukah)? Affection? Disdain? Does the apparent poverty of the children in the picture enhance or change your interpretation of their interest in, and desire for, money? Invite your students to characterize the narrator's personality with a few adjectives (e.g., childish, desperate, frivolous) and to think about whether this illustration reflects their own interpretation of the narrator.

Source: Uri Shulevitz, in Sholem Aleichem, *Hanukah Money*, trans. and adap. Uri Shulevitz and Elizabeth Shub. (New York: Mulberry Books, 1978).

7: Excerpts from children's book, Sadie Rose Weilerstein's "K'tonton Takes a Ride on a Runaway Trendel" from "The Adventures of K'tonton," 1935.

Sadie Rose Weilerstein's series of children's books featuring K'tonton, a thumb-sized mischief-making Jewish boy, are considered landmark works of American Jewish children's literature, educating young people about Judaism through adventure rather than pure didacticism. The stories, initially published by the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, brought readers into K'tonton's upwardly mobile, Americanizing immigrant family, who may have seemed to them quaintly typical of a previous generation of American Jews.

In "K'tonton Takes a Ride on a Runaway Trendel," K'tonton is eager to collect Chanukah gelt to add to his collection for the iconic blue box of the Jewish National Fund, an organization that educated Jews toward Zionism and encouraged them to contribute money to purchase land in Eretz Yisrael. When his family forgets to give him Chanukah gelt, he accidentally winds up riding a runaway *trendel*—a synonym for "dreidel"—which leads him to a quarter and eventually reminds his family to contribute to his collection.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students: What knowledge does this story take for granted? What do children already need to know about Chanukah gelt in order to read the story? What attitudes does the author communicate about the relationship between East European Jewish cultural traditions (like Chanukah gelt) and Zionism? How is this portrayal of the practice of giving Chanukah gelt similar to or different from the portrayal in other excerpts in this kit?

Source: Sadie Rose Weilerstein, "K'tonton Takes a Ride on a Runaway Trendel," in *The Adventures of K'tonton* (The League Press of the National Women's League of the United Synagogue, 1935), 27, 29, 31.

8: Audio excerpt, the Klezmatiks performing Woody Guthrie's "Hanukah Gelt," 2003.

Woody Guthrie is considered one of the fathers of American folk music. In addition to his left-leaning political music and Americana, he also composed a lesser-known oeuvre of Jewish-oriented songs as a result of his involvement with the Coney Island Jewish Community and his relationship with his mother-in-law, Yiddish poet Aliza Greenblatt. Many of these songs were never recorded until they were rediscovered in 1998 by his daughter, Nora Guthrie, who commissioned new music for the lyrics from the Klezmatiks, a prominent band of the Klezmer revival. You can listen to the song in its entirety [here](#), and the lyrics are available [here](#).

Suggested Activity: This is a children's counting song revolving around Chanukah gelt. To what extent do you think it affirms the idea of Chanukah gelt as a fun reward for children? Does this seem like a song for children, or does the complex virtuosic klezmer performance suggest an adult audience? Invite students to add a new verse to this song that describes their own thoughts or feelings about Chanukah gelt (with a similar structure: Chanukah, Chanukah 1, 2, 3... rhyme) and then discuss what they chose to emphasize and why.

Source: The Klezmatiks. *Woody Guthrie's Happy Joyous Hanukkah*. Shout Factory. 2006.

9: Online catalog image, Hanukkah Gift Set, American Girl.

American Girl is a brand of dolls and accessories originally built around stories focusing on various periods of American history. In 2009 the company released Rebecca Rubin, a historical character doll who is a nine-year-old Jewish girl living on the Lower East Side of New York in 1914. This toy Hanukkah Gift Set, complete with menorah, dreidel, and coins (gelt) is part of the Rebecca Rubin collection.

Suggested Activity: Have your students scroll through the American Girl online catalog at home or on their own devices in class. Then ask how they feel about having a Jewish doll within that collection, and whether and to what extent they think that her character and accessories help to define Jewishness to broader American audiences. Given Rebecca Rubin's role within the larger American Girl series, do they think that a "Hanukkah Gift Set" is an appropriate accessory for this doll? Are there other accessories for Rebecca Rubin that they would like to suggest? What does this gift set suggest is central to the holiday of Chanukah?

Invite your students to list or draw their own set of Chanukah accessories for a doll. As they create the set, they should consider the following questions: What might they add or take away from the gift kit marketed by American Girl, or how might they redesign the items on offer? In particular, would they present Chanukah gelt differently – as chocolate coins? As money? How would their character doll interact with the money – would she receive it as a gift? Give it away as charity?

Source: "Hanukkah Gift Set," American Girl, <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/hanukkah-gift-set-f8736>, (October 19, 2018).

10: Explanation of Chanukah gelt, "The San Bernardino County Sun," December 9, 1978.

This definition of Chanukah gelt was part of a larger feature on "The Symbols of Hanukkah," explaining the holiday to the readership of a local newspaper in San Bernardino, California.

Suggested Activity: Discuss the following questions with your students: What relationship does this definition have to Isaac Rivkind's definition of the term, found in resource 1 of this kit? What does this tell you about how new expressions of Jewish tradition become standardized over time? Invite your students to write and illustrate their own definition of the term "Chanukah gelt" for broader audiences who may be unfamiliar with the tradition.

Source: "The Symbols of Hanukkah," *The San Bernardino County Sun*, December 9, 1978, 33.