

# A Lesson on English



## DECEMBER CELEBRATIONS in the USA

by Sara Tusek

In December, several spiritual and cultural traditions are celebrated in the United States. While some are national holidays, such as Christmas, others are celebrated by their followers without official recognition.

The United States insures religious freedom to all people of all faiths and creeds in the 1st Amendment to the US Constitution:

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . .*

However, in daily American life the Christian faith is given preference over others (such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahá'í, Wicca, paganism, Taoist, and Sikhism), due to its traditional position and political muscle.

### MAJOR DECEMBER HOLIDAYS

**Christmas (Christian)** is observed on December 25 to commemorate the birth of Jesus, the central figure of Christianity. The date is not known to be the actual birthday of Jesus, and may have initially been chosen to correspond with the date of the Roman winter solstice or one of various ancient winter festivals.

Although nominally a Christian holiday, Christmas is also celebrated by an increasing number of non-Christians worldwide, and many of its popular celebratory customs have pagan or secular themes and origins. Popular modern customs of the holiday include an exchange of gifts and Christmas cards.; caroling; a festive meal and home decorations; charitable giving; and attendance at a special church service.

Because gift-giving and many other aspects of the Christmas festival involve heightened economic activity among both Christians and non-Christians, the holiday has become a

significant event and a key sales period for retailers and businesses around the world.

**Hannukah (Jewish)** is a Jewish holiday celebrated for eight days and nights. It starts on the 25th of the Jewish month of Kislev, which coincides with late November-late December on the secular calendar.

In Hebrew, the word "hanukkah" means "dedication." This holiday commemorates the re-dedication of the holy Temple in Jerusalem following the Jewish victory in 165 B.C.E. over the Syrian-Greeks. In 167, B.C.E. the Syrian-Greek emperor Antiochus made the observance of Judaism an offense punishable by death. He also ordered all Jews to worship Greek gods.

Jewish resistance began in the village of Modiin, near Jerusalem. Other Jews wishing to fight against the Greeks joined them. Eventually they succeeded in retaking their land from the Greeks. These rebels became known as the Maccabees, or Hasmoneans.

Once the Maccabees had regained control, they returned to the Temple in Jerusalem. By this time it had been spiritually defiled by being used for the worship of foreign gods and also by practices such as sacrificing swine. Jewish troops were determined to purify the Temple by burning ritual oil in the Temple's menorah for eight days. But to their dismay, they discovered that there was only one day's worth of oil left in the Temple. They lit the menorah anyway and to their surprise the

small amount of oil lasted the full eight days.

This is the miracle of the Hanukkah oil that is celebrated every year when Jews light a special menorah known as a hanukkiyah for eight days.

One candle is lit on the first night of Hanukkah, two on the second, and so on, until eight candles are lit.



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Sara and Jarda Tusek at Blue Springs State Park, Florida

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## December Celebrations—*from p. 1*

**Kwanzaa** is an African American and Pan-African holiday which celebrates family, community and culture. Celebrated from 26 December thru 1 January, its origins are in the first harvest celebrations of Africa from which it takes its name. The name Kwanzaa is derived from the phrase "matunda ya kwanza" which means "first fruits" in Swahili, a Pan-African language which is the most widely spoken African language.

The first-fruits celebrations are recorded in African history as far back as ancient Egypt and Nubia and appear in ancient and modern times in other classical African civilizations such as Ashantiland and Yorubaland.

Kwanzaa builds on the five fundamental activities of Continental African "first fruit" celebrations: ingathering; reverence; commemoration; recommitment; and celebration.

Ashura is a Muslim observance that falls on the 10th of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. For Sunnis, Ashura commemorates the exodus of Moses from Egypt, and is usually observed by completing an optional fast as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad. For Shi'as, it marks the anniversary of the tragic death of the Prophet's grandson, Husain, at the hands of the Umayyad ruler, Yazid. For Shi'as the day is marked with mourning and often enactments of the tragic event. This date is determined by a lunar calendar and will fall this year on December 26. Islamic New Year falls on December 18 this

year. It marks the 1st day of Muharram, the 1st month of the Muslim calendar.

**Bodhi Day** (Rahatsu) commemorates the Enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. It is usually celebrated on the 8th day of the 12th lunar month (December 8 this year).

In approximately 596 BCE, a young prince left the safety of his walled castle to enter the world in search of the meaning of life. For 6 years he lived as an aesthetic, traveling from place to place on his search. One day, so it is told, he sat under the tree and vowed not to get up again until he understood the meaning of life. On the eighth day the realizations came to him that would become the foundation for Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path.

Some of the traditions that may be celebrated in a Buddhist household include having a tree that represents the Bodhi tree, decorated with colored lights. Three colorful ornaments may be used to decorate as well. The decorations represent the three gems of Buddhism, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. It is a day of remembrance, and many who celebrate spend extra time meditating and reflecting on the ancient story that grounds Buddhism.

A ritual meal of milk and rice is sometimes served to commemorate the first meal the Buddha ate upon awakening from his meditation under the Bodhi tree.

