

Be the Light: A Campus Celebration of Hanukkah

On December 11, 2024, the Thunderbird Commons hosted “Be the Light”, the first campus celebration of Hanukkah, a joyous Jewish holiday. This event was made possible through the generous support of the Strategic Equity and Anti-Racist Enhancement Fund, awarded to a group of faculty, staff, and student applicants representing the Jewish Academic Alliance of BC, and was supported by Prof. Gregg Gardner, Diamond Chair in Jewish Law and Ethics and Chair, UBC Minor in Jewish Studies.

The celebration opened with a lively performance by Balkan Shmalkan, a beloved East Vancouver band. Surrounded by two tents adorned with Hanukkah-themed decorations, the music created a vibrant and welcoming atmosphere, drawing passersby to tables offering coffee, *gelt* (a Yiddish term for money and chocolate coins), and *sufganiyot* (a Hebrew name traditionally used by Jews for delicious jelly-filled doughnuts), generously donated by Breka Bakery. Another table displayed beautifully crafted menorahs and educational books (courtesy of UBC Library) explaining the traditions, history, and significance of Hanukkah. The weather cooperated perfectly, as sunlight added to the cheerful atmosphere of the gathering.

The event continued with engaging presentations by a local rabbi, Arts faculty members and students who shared the religious, historical, and cultural importance of this 2,100-year-old festival. Attendees learned how Hanukkah commemorates the victory of a Jewish revolt over Greek-Syrian colonial rule and celebrates religious freedom, spiritual resilience, and divine intervention. Handouts with song lyrics were distributed, and participants enjoyed singing traditional Hanukkah songs together, learning how perceptions of the holiday differ across various cultures. A heartfelt moment followed when a student shared personal reflections on celebrating Hanukkah with family, offering a glimpse into the intimate meaning of the festival. The celebration concluded with another lively session of music, leaving the audience uplifted.

This event provided an immersive and enriching learning experience for the campus community. Attendees learned that Hanukkah (which means “dedication”) is an eight-day Jewish festival commemorating the reclaim of the Second Temple, made possible by victory over the rule of the Greek-Syrian Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BCE. In 168 BCE, Emperor Antiochus IV issued decrees suppressing the Jewish religion, prompting a revolt led by the Jewish rebels Maccabees. In 164 BCE, the Maccabees managed to recapture Jerusalem and rededicate the ruined Temple. In response to the dedication of a sacred space, the miracle of the oil happened—when a small amount of sacred oil needed to light the candelabrum lasted for eight days. Commemorating this miracle, the Hanukkah traditions include preparing a variety of fried foods, such as *latkes* (potato pancakes) and *sufganiyot*.

The “Be the Light” celebration brought together students, faculty, and staff in a joyful, educational, and inclusive atmosphere, leaving participants with a deeper appreciation of this meaningful holiday.



