

# Appreciating Diversity through the Holidays



**Christmas** is an annual holiday celebrated on December 25 that marks and honors the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Modern customs of the holiday include gift-giving, church celebrations, and the display of various decorations—including the Christmas tree, lights, mistletoe, nativity scenes and holly. Santa Claus is a popular mythological figure often associated with bringing gifts at Christmas. Christmas is celebrated throughout the Christian population, but is also celebrated by many non-Christians as a secular, cultural festival. The holiday is widely celebrated around the world, including in the United States, where it is celebrated by 96% of the population. Because gift-giving and several other aspects of the holiday involve heightened economic activity among both Christians and non-Christians, Christmas has become a major event for many retailers.



**Hanukkah** or **Chanukah**, also known as the **Festival of Lights**, is observed for eight nights, starting on the 25th day of Kislev according to the Hebrew calendar, and may occur from late November to late December on the Gregorian calendar. The holiday commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The festival is observed by the kindling of the lights, the *Menorah*, one light on each night of the holiday, progressing to eight on the final night. An extra light called a *shamash*,



(Hebrew: "guard" or "servant") is also lit each night, and is given a distinct location, usually higher or lower than the others. The purpose of the extra light is to adhere to the prohibition, specified in the Talmud, against using the Hanukkah lights for anything other than publicizing and meditating on the Hanukkah story. After lighting the menorah, it is customary in many homes to play the *dreidel* game where players spin the four-sided spinning top and gamble with coins, chocolate, nuts, raisins, candies or other markers.

**Diwali** or **Deepavali**, also known as the **Festival of Lights**, is a major Hindu holiday, and a significant festival in Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The most significant spiritual meaning is "the awareness of the inner light." The five day festival of Diwali generally occurs during October and/or November on the Gregorian calendar and marks the victory of good over evil, and uplifting of spiritual darkness. Diwali celebrates this through festive fireworks, lights, flowers, sharing of sweets, and worship. While the story behind Deepavali varies from region to region, the essence is the same - to rejoice in the Inner Light (Atman) or the underlying reality of all things (Brahman). On the day of Diwali, many wear new clothes and share sweets and snacks. They light diyas—cotton-like string wicks inserted in small clay pots filled with coconut oil—to signify victory of good over the evil within an individual. Some North Indian business communities start their financial year on Diwali and new account books are opened.





**Kwanzaa** is a week-long holiday celebrated throughout the world, honoring African heritage, marked by participants lighting a kinara (candle holder). First celebrated in 1966, it is observed from December 26 to January 1 each year. Kwanzaa consists of seven days of celebration, featuring activities such as candle-lighting and pouring of libations, and culminating in a feast and gift giving. It has its roots in the black nationalist movement of the 1960s, and was established as a means to help African Americans reconnect with their African cultural and historical heritage by uniting in meditation and study of "African traditions" and "common humanist principles."



Families celebrating Kwanzaa decorate their households with objects of art, colorful African cloth, especially the wearing of the Uwole by women, and fresh fruits that represent African idealism. It is customary to include children in Kwanzaa ceremonies and to give respect and gratitude to ancestors. A Kwanzaa ceremony may include drumming and musical selections, libations, a reading of the "African Pledge" and the Principles of Blackness, reflection on the Pan-African colors, a discussion of the African principle of the day or a chapter in African history, a candle-lighting ritual, artistic performance, and, finally, a feast (Karamu). The greeting for each day of Kwanzaa is "Habari Gani," which is Swahili for "What's the News?"



**Ramadan** is a Muslim religious observance that takes place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar; the month in which the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is the Islamic month of fasting, in which participating Muslims do not eat or drink anything from true dawn until sunset. Fasting is meant to teach the person patience, sacrifice and humility. Muslims ask forgiveness for past sins, pray for guidance and help in refraining from everyday evils, and try to purify themselves through self-restraint and good deeds. Since it is a festival of giving and sharing, Muslims prepare special foods and buy gifts for their family and friends and for giving to the poor and needy who cannot afford it; this can involve buying new clothes, shoes and other items of need. There is also a social aspect involved – the preparing of special foods and inviting people for the Iftar meal (the meal to break the fast). In many Muslim and non-Muslim countries with large Muslim populations, markets close down in the evening to enable people to perform prayers and consume the *Iftar* meal – these markets then re-open and stay open for a good part of the night. Muslims can be seen shopping, eating, and spending time with their friends and family during the evening hours.

