

# BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

## TRAVELING WITH JEWISH TASTE

### Jewish Gelt

By Carol Goodman Kaufman / Special to the BJV

According to the great Maimonides, "...it is forbidden to lament or to fast (on Hanukkah), just as it is on the days of Purim." Given the tense times in which we currently are living, this commandment is a difficult one to obey. However, let's remember the twin messages of the holiday: to defend our right to live freely as Jews and to bring increasing light into the world.

Aside from lighting the hanukkiyah to publicize the miracle of the oil in the Temple, we celebrate the holiday with games of chance and, of course, food. The tradition of eating fried foods is based on the legend of the one flask of oil lasting not one but eight days in the rededicated Temple's menorah.

The custom of eating cheese-based dishes commemorates different a biblical event. Judith saved her people from the Assyrian onslaught by feeding salty cheese to the general Holofernes, getting him drunk, and lopping off his head. Even though Judith's story took place hundreds of years before the Maccabean revolt, the tradition commemorates the ability of the weak to overcome the strong.

And finally, we have chocolate gelt.

Some scholars trace the giving of actual gelt, the Yiddish word for money, all the way back to the time of the rededication of the Temple. Victorious over the Syrian Greeks and celebrating the very first Hanukkah, the Maccabees reportedly distributed to widows, soldiers, and orphans the booty seized from their enemies.

The tradition of giving gelt to children during Hanukkah has roots in the tradition of giving actual coins to children, and it relates to the root meaning of the word "Hanukkah," education. In the 17th century, Polish Jews demonstrated their regard for education by giving money to their children to present to their teachers. In the 18th century, Eastern Europeans bypassed the children to give directly to the teachers. By the 19th, parents began to give money to the children.

In 20th century United States, Hanukkah gelt morphed into chocolate coins. In the 1920s, the New York-based Loft's Candies began making chocolate coins and wrapping them in gold foil. I'm sure I'm not the only one to recall with great fondness getting a little mesh bag of the candies and using its contents as chips when playing dreidel with my cousins.

The modern gelt we see today usually features an embossed image of the Temple menorah. To be accurate, however, the first Jewish coins produced with that image were not minted until decades after the 164 BCE rededication. It wasn't until King John Hyrcanus I of Judea that the first coins with the menorah were minted, around 135 BCE.

The simple chocolate coins many of us grew up with have now evolved. While still wrapped in foil embossed with images of the menorah, stars of David, and

even messages, today's gelt may feature upscale, fair-trade certified chocolate. And they are no longer simply the gold-covered milk chocolate variety. Silver foil signifies a dark chocolate coin.

*A shuttered Loft's store on Nassau Street in downtown New York City. Founded in the 1860s, Loft's was finally out of business by the 1990s.*



PHOTO CREDIT: Peter Burka



### Peanut Butter Gelt Cookies

#### INGREDIENTS:

- ¾ cup peanut butter
- 1 stick unsalted butter, softened
- ½ cup granulated sugar, plus more for rolling
- ½ cup packed light brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt

- 1 large egg, room temperature
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour, fluffy not packed
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 36 chocolate gelt, unwrapped & frozen

#### DIRECTIONS:

- Preheat the oven to 375°F. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper.
- In a large mixing bowl or the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat until combined the peanut butter, butter, sugars and salt.
- Add the egg and vanilla and beat until well combined.
- Scrape down the bowl.
- Add the flour and baking soda and beat on low speed just until combined.

- Scoop the dough and form into 1-inch balls. Roll each ball in the sugar.
- Place on a prepared baking sheet 2 inches apart.
- Bake for 8 to 10 minutes or until the bottoms just start to turn brown.
- Remove from oven and immediately press a chocolate coin into the center of each cookie.
- Allow the cookies to cool completely on the pan.



*A coin embossed with a menorah minted during the reign of King John Hyrcanus I of Judea (circa 130 BCE)*

*Under the name Carolinda Goodman, Carol Goodman Kaufman has just published her third picture book for young children. Detective Bears and Friends introduces readers to the whimsical names that various animal groups are called. In addition to her work for children, Kaufman also writes under her "real" name about food history (including for the Berkshire Jewish Voice). Her first novel, The First Murder, is set in the Berkshires.*

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