

Literary Club

December 17, 2018

LIGHTS

By Stephen D. Strauss

Everyone who was raised in the United States, whether Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Atheist or Agnostic, knows about Christmas: the birth of the baby Jesus to the Virgin Mary in a manger in Bethlehem, the Three Wise Men, the Star in the East, the Carols, Santa Claus. Christmas is one of the two most important Christian holidays. The other, of course, being Easter that celebrates Christ's resurrection from death.

During the Holiday Season when Jews wish their gentile friends and neighbors "Merry Christmas", Christians often respond with a "Happy Hanukkah" greeting. Most non-Jews don't know much about Hanukkah except that it goes on for several days and that in some vague way it is the Jewish equivalent of Christmas.

However, while Hanukkah is a holiday that lasts eight days, it is a very MINOR holiday from a religious standpoint. The major Jewish holidays are Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and Passover which celebrates the liberation of the Jews from slavery in ancient Egypt.

In terms of religious importance Hanukkah is definitely NOT the equivalent of Christmas.

So, what are the origins of Hanukkah and how did the celebration of Hanukkah in the United States evolve beginning with some events that occurred in Cincinnati?

Hanukkah is the holiday that commemorates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem during the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire. It is observed by lighting the lights of a candelabra called a menorah.

Hanukkah is therefore known as the Festival of Lights. Thus the title of this paper is LIGHTS.

In 198 BCE Syrian King Antiochus III gained control of Judea and Samaria. After Antiochus IV ascended to the throne in 175 BCE the Temple in Jerusalem was looted, Jews were massacred and the Jewish religion was outlawed. The King ordered an altar to Zeus erected in the Temple. Judah Maccabee and his four brothers led a revolt and in 165 BCE recaptured the Temple. Against all odds the courageous, resourceful, and badly outnumbered Jewish freedom fighters prevailed.

The traditional view is that after the recapture of the Temple the festival of Hanukkah was established to celebrate this event. The wicks of the menorah miraculously burned for eight days even though there was only enough sacred oil to last

for one day. This is why ever since Hanukkah lasts for eight days.

Interestingly, descriptions of Hanukkah are not to be found in the Hebrew Bible but they are included in books 1 and 2 Maccabees used by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches but not in most Protestant Churches.

For the next two thousand years Hanukkah was celebrated as a minor Jewish holiday and it remains a minor holiday in much of the world.

However, the observance of Hanukkah changed in the United States.

Here's what happened:

As Jews in Central and Western Europe began to enjoy more freedom in the 1800's, some Jews wanted a religious experience more in tune with the times with less strict rules

and regulations so a Reform movement started. These Jews did not want to practice their religion in the traditional, orthodox manner. Maybe or maybe not the emergence of Reform Judaism is in some way analogous to the Reformation in Christianity.

Cincinnati was the epicenter of the Reform Jewish movement in the United States in the 1800's. The most consequential leader of Reform Judaism in America was Rabbi Isaac M. Wise. Born in Bohemia in 1819 Wise immigrated to the United States in 1846. After serving as a Rabbi in Albany, New York, Wise came to Cincinnati in 1854 to become Rabbi of the congregation now known as Wise Temple. Most importantly, Wise founded Hebrew Union College, the seminary for Reform Jewish Rabbis located in Cincinnati. We now have and have had HUC faculty as fellow members of the Literary Club. Rabbi Wise also started the American Israelite,

the oldest English language Jewish newspaper which is still published today.

German born Reform Rabbi Max Lillienthal came to Cincinnati in 1855 to serve as Rabbi of the congregation known today as Rockdale Temple and he became a friend of Wise.

Lillienthal came to believe that the very rational and intellectual Reform Judaism of his time wasn't so good for children. He noted that churches has lots of events for kids especially during the Christmas season, so with the assistance of women in his congregation he created a festival for children at Hanukkah. There were songs and candle lighting and candy, oranges and ice cream. Rabbi Wise also began Hanukkah celebrations at his Temple. Word of these successful Cincinnati Hanukkah celebrations spread around the country. By 1900 Jewish newspapers were urging parents to buy Hanukkah gifts

for their children. Over the years the other branches of Judaism, Conservative and Orthodox, also began Hanukkah celebrations.

I grew up in a quite Reform Jewish family. When I was a kid, we always had a Christmas tree, though not a manger scene. Santa brought me presents every year whether I was a good boy or a bad boy. I recall my father saying that we had a tree and gifts so that my brother and I would not feel left out while all of the other kids in the neighborhood celebrated Christmas and received presents.

We didn't do much at Hanukkah until I was in my teens. Of course by then the celebration of Hanukkah became widespread and it has grown immensely in the years that followed.

**So I conclude this paper by wishing each of you Seasons
Greetings, Merry Christmas and Happy Hanukkah!**