

They Tried to Kill Us; We Won; Let's Eat

or

Christmas in Hanukkah, Hanukkah in Christmas

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My first and only identity crisis occurred on December 25, 1941 at about 7:30 a.m. I was five, spending a few days with my grandmother and great aunt while my parents vacationed in Mexico. Christmas morning had arrived but with no anticipatory excitement, since I was pretty sure I was Jewish. My grandmother instructed me to stay in a distant room until summoned. It was odd to suddenly hear "Happy Birthday to You" emanating from a wind-up Victrola in the living room as I was invited in. My grandmother and great aunt proudly welcomed me to what they called a Christmas tree, hung with colored lights and sporting a shiny tinfoil star at the top, and, yes, presents at the foot of the tree. Terrific, I thought, they aren't sure when my birthday falls, so maybe I can have two a year! The kind, loving sisters apologized for the "Happy Birthday" record, but they didn't know how or where to find a Christmas carol, so "Happy Birthday" seemed to them sufficiently celebratory. But darn it, they knew it wasn't my birthday!

But Jewish kindergarten buddies had been talking about a neat holiday featuring a present a night for eight nights, the eight nights of Hanukkah, which I'd never heard of. I must guiltily add that I never asked my grandmother about Hanukkah, for fear of spoiling a good thing, this unexpected windfall of presents, including my first electric train. I was pretty sure I was still Jewish but briefly wondered if opening these presents would change that! It took me a long time to figure out why my family's enjoyment of a Christmas tree was not so unusual for a Jewish family of German origin. And where was Hanukkah in all this?

The history of Hanukkah extends back to the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great in 333 B.C.E. and his untimely death ten years later. His two generals, Seleucus and Ptolemy, battled over his inheritance, with Ptolemy eventually taking over Egypt and Phoenicia, Seleucus Mesopotamia and Syria. Ancient Israel was caught in the middle. The Seleucids retook Israel from the Ptolemies in 200 B.C.E. The Jewish population strongly opposed the dictatorial policies of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid ruler in 170 B.C.E. His cruel taxation, extortion, and finally a militarily enforced Hellenization, defiling the Temple, and requiring the Jewish population to abandon their religious practices led, in 168 B.C.E. to a revolt led by a Temple elder, Mattityahu, and his five sons, the most famous of whom is Judah the Maccabee ("the Hammer"). The Jewish community succeeded beyond all expectations. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of this small rebel group, and Hanukkah is the *first holiday in history in celebration of religious freedom*.

After cleansing the Second Temple, it was rededicated to God. The word Hanukkah comes from the Hebrew for "dedication." We are told of the Hanukkah miracle, that at the rededication of the Temple there was only a small amount of sacred oil to light the Temple lamps, but, miraculously, this tiny amount of oil lasted for eight days. Thus we have Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, wherein Jews light

one, and then one more and one more, candle each of the eight nights of Hanukkah in praise of God's miracle.

How odd then that there is no mention of the holiday or its origin in the TaNaKh (pronounced Tanax) an acronym for the components of the Hebrew Bible, or in any Protestant Bible. The First and Second Books of Maccabees, written before 60 B.C.E., do appear in the Catholic Bible as part of the Apocrypha, which recount the battles and final victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucid forces of Antiochus IV, but no more than that. There is no mention anywhere of the miracle of the oil burning for eight days and nights in *anybody's* Bible! None. Why is this not in the TaNaKh? This raises the question of who decides what is Holy Scripture and what doesn't make the cut? We have some framework for the timing of this decision, since there is evidence that the last book to be "canonized" was the Book of Daniel about 163 B.C.E. However the final list of Jewish Books accepted as divinely inspired, revealed or written continued to be debated among the rabbis for a few hundred years, and the contents of the TaNaKh were finally set between 150 and 250 C.E.

In about 500 C.E. the miracle of the oil was finally recounted in the newer part of the Talmud, the Gemara, a part of a central Jewish document containing the writings of thousands of rabbis. However, we do know from a rabbinic disputation recounted before 10 C.E. that up to eight candles a night were kindled over those eight days of Hanukkah.

A pragmatic answer to the question of why 1 and 2 Maccabee are not in the TaNaKh might be that during the time when there was discussion of what writings should be included in the Jewish canon, the rabbis involved were leaders of a people who had unsuccessfully revolted against Rome. To include detailed texts describing a *successful* outcome of a Jewish revolt might call down the terrible destructive wrath of Rome yet again.

Now we can examine, and try to understand, the interplay between Jewish ideas of Hanukkah and Christmas. Many German Jews emigrated from Germany to America between 1840-1870. The seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment had raised the level of acceptance of educated Jews during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Germany, but, as we have learned most tragically, never to the level they believed had been attained. The isolation of Jewish communities in Germany had gradually diminished over this period, and there arose a desire among German Jewry to be accepted as citizens, blending in with their neighbors.

This assimilation included the adoption of a medieval, probably pagan, Northern European custom that appeared widely in Germany in the early nineteenth century, decorating a tannenbaum, a fir tree. This evergreen had acquired the symbolism of constancy and faithfulness since about the sixteenth century, evolving into wide acceptance as the beloved Christmas tree by the early nineteenth century. The desire to assimilate, to be part of that mythic "melting pot" and not to be seen as different was one part of this new German- Jewish-American tradition. Besides, the decorated tree was beautiful!

Budapest- born Theodore Herzl (d. 1904), the founder of Zionism, had a Christmas tree, seen by many Jews as a lovely secular artifact of the season. Associate Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis (d. 1941) decorated a Christmas tree. One was photographed on the bimah, or elevated platform, of Reform

Temple Sinai in New York. Lighting the Christmas tree became a not uncommon multigenerational tradition in the homes of Cincinnati Jews of German extraction through much of the twentieth century, and in the homes of some this continues today, recalling that old tradition with which many grew up.

However, Eastern European Jews, arriving in America largely between 1890 and 1924, had experienced tremendous discrimination and violence (recall Sholem Aleichem's "Fiddler on the Roof") and looked most disapprovingly at this custom, which reminded them that deadly riots had occurred on what became known in some areas as "the fearful night."

Jewish immigrants to the United States from any part of Europe, East or West, discovered in Christmas an occasion for considering their relationship to the larger American society in which they lived. Jews faced the only American religious national holiday, and Christmas had an enormous and growing public presence, difficult to ignore or avoid. American Jews who could not accept the religious or cultural elements of Christmas endured this season as an American reality, yet many quietly enjoyed the visual beauty, music, and aura of joy surrounding the holiday. While younger generations of Jewish Christmas tree decorators were lighting the Hanukkah candles, Christmas, and the Christmas tree, had also come to symbolize family togetherness, community, generosity, abundance and goodwill. One author, writing in New York's *Jewish Messenger in 1905* noted, "Christmas truly fulfills its mission of bring peace and good will to me. All this and more Chanuka (*sic*) should be to us." There arose a growing recognition of the converging spirit of the two holidays.

Nevertheless many were embarrassed at employing a symbol of a faith that was not theirs, leading to a new approach, abandoning the Christmas tree tradition to find a Jewish parallel to Christmas. Starting with a congregation in Charleston, S.C. in the 1840's, and nurtured nationally by two great Cincinnati rabbis, Max Lienthal and Isaac Mayer Wise, this modest home holiday was magnified, with more extensive home and Temple-based, as well as public celebrations, and an emphasis on children's programs that might vie with the excitement surrounding Christmas. The expanded public side of Hanukkah, beginning in the later part of the nineteenth century, included pageants, major social gatherings covered by the New York Times, and the first Presidential lighting of the Hanukkah menorah, beginning with Jimmy Carter in 1979.

Four conditions favored a wider celebration of this minor holiday among Jewish-Americans. First, the Hanukkah rite is very simple, brief and easy to personalize. Hanukkah always occurs in late November or December, and thus has simultaneity with the Christmas season when American culture encourages people to celebrate a tradition bringing families together and indulging their children. Third, the Hanukkah story can be retold in the framework of the American search for religious liberty and freedom from tyranny. Finally, Hanukkah provides a time to ponder God's presence in Jewish history.

Hanukkah was now more widely celebrated among Jews as a victory of the weak over the strong, a victory against tyranny, and a celebration of the resurgence of the Jewish state over its enemies. Hanukkah songs spoke of universal brotherhood, movingly expressed in the song "Light One Candle" by Peter Yarrow, Paul Stookey and Mary Travers. The chorus reads:

Don't let the light go out.

It's lasted for so many years.

Don't let the light go out.

Let it shine through our love and our tears."

Through humor Jews tried to convince each other that Hanukkah was as important as Christmas, but the delightful parodies of "The Night before Christmas" and Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" suggest that these writers enjoyed a taste of Christmas spirit too. Humor is always revealing, and in Jewish humor surrounding these holidays Christmas is virtually always present.

For example there is this gem:

It was Hanukkah in a poor Russian shtetl and the villagers were concerned that they might not have any latkes, potato pancakes fried in oil, to commemorate the miracle of the Temple oil, because they had run out of flour. Rudi, the village Rabbi, was called upon to solve the problem. The Rebbe said, "Don't worry, you can substitute matzo meal for the flour, and the latkes will be just as delicious". His wife, a fine cook, looked dubiously at her husband and asked, "Do you really think it'll work?" "Of course" he replied,

"Rudolph the Reb knows grain, dear."

Ironically Jews have had a role in the celebration of Christmas over the last 70 years, as Jewish composers looked to broaden their audiences and wrote commercial hits, most notably Irving Berlin's "White Christmas", Johnny Mark's and Robert May's "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer", "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree", "Holly Jolly Christmas," "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year", "Silver Bells," and more.

I must reemphasize that Hanukkah is a minor holiday in the Jewish calendar, celebrated at home. A candle is lit each night as prayers are offered, such as:

- thanks for delivering the Jewish people from extinction;
- for family;
- for the privilege of Torah study;
- for freedom, hope, charity, and peace for peoples of all races and religions.

A traditional meal includes foods fried in oil, those glorious latkes, and, more often in Israel, jelly donuts, to recall the oil that lasted eight days. For the children Hanukkah gelt, often tinsel wrapped chocolate coins, or small gifts are handed out, and a game with a four sided top with symbols on each

side called a dreidel (draydel) is played. Hanukkah gelt and the dreidel were invented relatively late in the Jewish experience in response to the gift giving children observed during Christmas.

On Christmas day, celebrating that great convergent holiday spirit we all sense, many Jews volunteer at hospitals, soup kitchens, and wherever we can relieve Christmas celebrants so they can be with their families. Then we dine out..... but what's open? Chinese restaurants are packed with Jews struggling mightily, and with limited success, with chop sticks on Christmas night.

And yet.....on Christmas day I respect my own family's 170 year old tradition and that of my kids, raised Catholic. I unwrap and hold the century old ornaments my mother held as a child; those I have retained from my own childhood even down to that tin foil wrapped, memory laden, star; and the newer ornaments special to my kids.

Then I say the Shehecheyanu (Shuh-heck-ee-ah-nu, with accent on the "heck") the 2000 year old prayer of thanks to God for giving us life, sustaining us, and for giving me this very special moment.

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