



BURT WOLF TASTE OF FREEDOM HANUKKAH



On the 25th day of the Jewish calendar month of Kislev, Jews throughout the world light the first candle of the Hanukkah celebration. They light it in memory of a battle that took place in 165 B.C. A Jewish clan known as the Maccabees won a battle against the King of Syria, which allowed them to return to Jerusalem and rededicate a sacred temple that had been sacked and burned. The battle was part of a rebellion by the Maccabees.



RABBI JEFFREY WOHLBERG

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It was a rebellion doomed to failure because it was a small group of guerrillas against the greatest armed might of the world. And ultimately, they could not win. But they won some battles and some significant victories. They were able to recapture the Temple. And in 165 before the common era, they cleansed the Temple, removed the statue, rededicated the Temple to their God and celebrated a festival. According to the tradition that grew up, there was only enough sacred oil found to last one day, but it miraculously lasted eight days and we celebrate that miracle and the rededication of the Temple. The word Hanukkah itself means dedication or rededication.



The Maccabees rededicated that Temple in Jerusalem to God, and religious life. Religious observance continued in the appropriate manner because of that military victory.

BURNING CANDLES

But it was not just a battle against the religious oppression of the Syrian King. It was also a battle against assimilation—the acceptance of Greek Hellenist culture by Jews.

The Maccabees didn't rebel because they wanted political independence. The Jews had lost political independence centuries before and they were not about to get it back. They were rebelling because Judaism was outlawed. They were rebelling not only because Judaism was outlawed but because they were seeing assimilation all around them. Hellenism was a dominant culture, very significant, and it was very attractive. It was new and it was upbeat and it was worldly. And so, Jews were attracted to it. And Jews who should've known better were participating in the Greek games, they were speaking Greek, they were adopting Greek culture and Greek attitudes. And in doing that, they were abandoning Judaism. So the Maccabees were fighting on two fronts, as it were: the external front against this domination and the internal front against assimilation.



THE MENORAH

Hanukkah is an eight day festival and the number eight is fundamental to the Hanukkah tradition.

Hanukkah calls for the kindling of eight lights in a window or a doorway to publicize the miracle. On the first day of Hanukkah one light is lit, on the second two, and on and on until all eight are burning.

To perform this ceremony Jews evolved a unique lamp. The earliest examples date to the 1100s in Spain and France. There are always eight containers on the same



level, each holding oil or candles. Often there is a ninth light which is used to kindle the others. The bench type has a row of oil cups or candle holders that are set on or above a horizontal surface, this form often has a back-plate and legs. The second type consists of eight branches reaching upward from a central stem. Rabbinical laws have not imposed many

restrictions on the form of the Hanukkah lamp and its decorations which has allowed craftsmen a great deal of freedom. The largest and most comprehensive collection of these lamps is in New York's Jewish Museum. The lamps on view come from all over the world and illustrate many aspects of Jewish history.

SUSAN BRAUNSTEIN,
Curator of Archaeology and Judaica,
The Jewish Museum, New York

The lamps on display here show a special relationship of the Jews to the lands they were living in. The only requirement for a Hanukkah lamp is that it needs eight



lights. So the decorations vary according to where the Jews lived. Many times you'll see the national symbols of the country where the Jews

were living incorporated in the lamps.

Originally there were only to be eight lights, one for each night of the holiday, but, during the course of time it was realized that the eight lights provided room light, so you would be reading by this and using it to do work, and the rabbis decreed that you can not use the Hanukkah

lamp for anything but religious observance. It was a religious light, it was a holy light and you couldn't use it for secular purposes. So over time a ninth light was added, which took the function of the secular lighting of the room. Today we also use the ninth light to light the other eight.



The motif on a Hanukkah lamp often reflects national symbols, such as the double headed eagle of the Hapsburg Empire. We have another lamp that has a tulip on it, that was made in Holland. And so through the lamps and the way they were decorated, Jews were expressing their dual identity. They were Jews, they were using Hanukkah lamps, but they also had allegiance to the country where they lived, and they adopted many of the styles and the customs of those countries.

SPINNING DREIDELS

Hanukkah has an official game—dreidel spinning. A dreidel is a four sided top with a letter on each side. And each letter stands for an instruction to the players. The game starts with each player placing a coin, or something that stands in for a coin, into the pot. Then one of the players spins the top. If it lands with the *nun* up, then the player takes nothing from the pot. If the *gimel* is up, you take everything in the pot. *Hay* will give you half and if it's a *shin*, you add a coin. If you come to a point where you no longer have any coins, you are out of the game.



There's a legend that explains why the game is associated with Hanukkah. It says that when the King of Syria decided that any Jew found studying Jewish religious texts would be put to death, members of the Maccabees, gathering together to discuss religion, would put a dreidel on the table and spin it. If the authorities passed by they would think that they were just a bunch of guys gambling. The characters on the dreidel also stand for the first Hebrew letters of the phrase, "A great miracle happened here."



Historians working with a bit more precision note that our earliest recorded use of the dreidel dates back to Germany during the Middle Ages. It was a simple gambling game. It probably became associated with

SPINNING THE DREIDEL

WHAT YOU DO:

- 1.) EACH PLAYER STARTS OFF WITH A EQUAL NUMBER OF COINS.
- 2.) EACH PLAYER PUTS ONE COIN INTO THE POT.
- 3.) EACH PLAYER TAKES A TURN SPINNING THE DREIDEL. WHICH SIDE LANDS UP DETERMINES WHAT THE PLAYER TAKES OR GIVES TO THE POT:



- NUN = NOTHING



- GIMEL = EVERYTHING



- HAY = HALF



- SHIN = ADD A COIN

- 4.) A PLAYER IS OUT OF THE GAME WHEN HE OR SHE HAS NO MORE COINS.



Hanukkah because it could easily be played by children and added to the joyous atmosphere of the holiday. But the gambling aspect also has a symbolic meaning.

RABBI WOHLBERG

According to the tradition, the Maccabees minted coins to indicate that they had achieved independence, which they really hadn't. That was a symbol of their independence. So the minting of the coins by the Maccabees in ancient times became the symbol for Hanukkah money, or "gelt," in modern times.

THE FOODS OF HANUKKAH

Originally, Hanukkah was a festival that commemorated the middle of winter, the darkest day of the year—it was a minor Temple festival. During the Middle Ages it evolved into a family event that centered around a miracle—miracles were very important during the Middle Ages and any self-respecting religion need a few.



The miracle of Hanukkah is symbolized in the foods that are part of the celebration—the oil that lit the lamps in the Temple resurfaces in the oil used for deep-frying. Jewish groups who trace their history through Northern Europe eat *latkes* which are deep-fried potato pancakes. In Israel Hanukkah is celebrated by making *soufganioth* which are jam-filled, deep-fried doughnuts. One folk story has God giving a sweet doughnut to Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Jews from Spain and Portugal eat dough fritters topped with honey or sprinkled with powdered sugar. Italians prepare pieces of chicken by dipping them in batter and deep-frying. The single uniform element in all the recipes is deep-frying in oil.

There is also an emphasis on dairy foods. The custom goes back to the Middle Ages and was introduced to commemorate the story of Judith, who saved a besieged city of Jews by killing *Holofernes*, the general in-charge of the Syrian troops that were attacking the city.

According to the legend, *Holofernes* was interested in adding Judith to his collection of girlfriends. One night, while



BLESSINGS OF HANUKKAH

BLESSING #1: BLESSING OVER CANDLES

BLESSED ARE YOU, LORD OUR GOD, KING OF THE UNIVERSE, WHO HAS SANCTIFIED US WITH HIS COMMANDMENTS AND COMMANDED US TO LIGHT THE HANUKKAH LIGHTS (AMEN)

BLESSING #2:

BLESSED ARE YOU LORD, OUR GOD, KING OF THE UNIVERSE WHO PERFORMED MIRACLES FOR OUR ANCESTORS IN THOSE DAYS AT THIS TIME (AMEN)

BLESSING #3:

BLESSED ARE YOU LORD, OUR GOD, KING OF THE UNIVERSE, WHO HAS KEPT US ALIVE, SUSTAINED US, AND DELIVERED US TO THIS TIME (AMEN)

they were dining at her place, Judith served him a very salty cheese, which made him thirsty—the thirst set him to drinking a considerable amount of wine. When he passed out in a drunken stupor, Judith took a sword and cut off his head, which made him rather useless as the head of the army. To commemorate this event, many Jews eat foods with cheese or sour cream as a major ingredient such as cheesecake and rugelach.



THE RITUALS OF HANUKKAH

RABBI WOHLBERG

Jews began to feel that with Hanukkah some wonderful things had happened, miraculous things. God had acted on their behalf. With the rabbis emphasizing the miracle over the military, Hanukkah took a little bit of a turn.



People began to celebrate, not just the war, but the victory. And not just the cleansing of the Temple and religious freedom but the miracle that took place on their behalf.

The rabbis wanted to make certain that Jews understood that it wasn't because they themselves, through force of might and their abilities, were able to recapture the Temple and rededicate it. But rather, that it was God stepping in on their behalf. And so, there was an emphasis on the theologic from the rabbinic point of view, not only the military.

Hanukkah falls on the 25th day of the Jewish month of

Kislev. Christmas falls on the 25th day of December. Different month, different calendar, but yet the same date, 25-25, same time of the year. I think that's not coincidental. From what I understand, in the Fourth Century Christian scholars who were gathered together decided to move the birth celebration of Jesus from the spring, which according to



the New Testament is when it took place. The old date was too close to Easter. And they selected a date that was well-known. The 25th in the Pagan calendar is a dark time of the year. They did that on purpose. They were saying, as we are saying, when there's darkness, we want to add light. And so, Hanukkah is a

celebration of light just as Christmas has light associated with it. When the days are short, when light is less, when darkness overwhelms, we want the light to be increased. And we look forward to a brighter time in the world. Hanukkah emphasizes that. Christmas does too.

THE GIFTS OF HANUKKAH

In America Christmas has had another influence on Hanukkah, and that is gift-giving. The idea of giving to ourselves when we have no need is a very strange idea, very modern. It didn't exist in the old world. Jewish children would say "Oh, there's so much Christmas around" and they would get a little jealous, "why don't we have all of that with the trees and things like that?" So, we end up rebalancing and shifting. And what we've done is we've taken this gift-giving from Christmas and



we've blended it into Hanukkah. When I was young, parents would give their children some coins on Hanukkah and that was the gift. Now it's grown into something quite extraordinary because of the materialism of the society in which we live.

America is a wonderful country. It has offered Jews tremendous opportunities, as it offers all of us opportunities. We've been able to find acceptance here that we were not able to find in any other part of the world throughout history, as it were. And so, that's very special for us. But with freedom comes assimilation because if there are no ghetto walls holding us in, which there aren't in America, and there are no laws forcing us to be different, which there aren't in America, we then begin to expand and

lose some of the essences of what held us together over the centuries. And some of the ties become weaker. The pull in America is centrifugal, whereas the pull in Europe



in the smaller communities was centripetal, it pulled to the inside and now we're pulled to the outside. That influences everything we do. It means, for example, that on Hanukkah we do things that were never part of Hanukkah. We decorate. And so, my wife puts some decorations on the table for our Shabbat dinner because it was Hanukkah as well. We have a "Happy Hanukkah" sign hanging in our home, as do many. And that's not traditionally Jewish. Certainly, nothing is wrong with it. It's perfectly fine. It doesn't diminish Judaism at all.

But it's quite unique and it happens in the free society



of America. People want to be like everybody else and do what they do in a way which is more American, not just Jewish. The ability not just to practice your faith but to announce it

with decoration is exercised by all Americans. Perhaps the Maccabees would call it assimilation, but others will call it freedom.

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