



CHAPTERS IN AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

Presented by the American Jewish Historical Society

Revised Version of Earlier Chapter

Chanukah, American Style

Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, celebrates the victory, in 164 B. C. E., of armed Jewish rebels led by Judah the Maccabee over the army of the Syrian despot Antiochus IV. Against all odds, the courageous, resourceful and badly outnumbered Jewish freedom fighters, David-like, slew the Syrian Goliath. Since that day, Jews around the world have marked Chanukah as a "minor" holiday, not an observance commanded by Scripture but one that is traditional nonetheless. Chanukah has allowed Jews who were oppressed or under pressure to assimilate to identify a golden age in which militant, assertive Jews maintained their religious freedom. Lighting candles, playing cards and gambling with *dreidels* recall the prowess of the Maccabees and the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days, a sign that Jews are indeed God's chosen people.

For the millions of Jewish immigrants who came to America at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Chanukah in the New World took on new, ambiguous and conflicted meanings. Chanukah's proximity on the calendar to Christmas posed particular challenges. By the 1890's, Christmas was firmly established as America's premiere season for gift giving. For many Americans of all faiths, consumerism and general feelings of "good cheer" supplemented, if not replaced, the religious basis for Christmas. The holiday was rapidly becoming a national, rather than purely Christian, tradition.

For Jewish immigrants feeling pressure to shed their European ways, exchanging gifts with neighbors at Christmas time signaled their adaptation to their new home. In 1904, the *Forward* quoted Jewish Christmas shoppers who, when challenged, asked (in Yiddish), "Who says we haven't Americanized?" The paper observed, "The purchase of Christmas gifts is one of the first things that proves one is no longer a greenhorn."

As historian Jenna W. Joselit notes, some Jewish leaders criticized the tendency of immigrant Jews to accept Christmas as an American consumer ritual. Writing in *The Menorah* in 1890, Rabbi Kaufman Kohler asked, "How can the Jew, without losing self-respect, partake in the joy and festive mirth of Christmas? Can he without self-surrender, without entailing insult and disgrace upon his faith and race, plant the Christmas tree in his household?"

Yet, Rabbi Kohler admitted, Chanukah as then celebrated by American Jewry could not hold a candle (so to speak) to Christmas. Kohler said of the comparison, "How humble and insignificant does one appear by the side of the other" and suggested that Chanukah needed more pizzazz if it was to compete with Christmas. Jewish homemaking advisor Esther Jane Ruskey lamented in 1902 that Christmas's focus on family celebrations, gift-giving, decorations and Santa Claus "gives a zest to life that all the Chanukah hymns, backed by all the Sunday-school teaching and half-hearted ministerial [rabbinic] chiding, must forever fail to give."

Joselit notes that it was not until the late 1920s, when Jewish immigration to America was effectively ended, that Chanukah "began to come into its own as a Jewish domestic occasion and an exercise in consumption." Merchandisers to Jews began advertising their wares as ideal Chanukah gifts. *Der Tog* carried an ad in Yiddish for Hudson automobiles, which were proclaimed "A Chanukah Present for the Entire Family—The Greatest Bargain (*metsiah*) in the World." Colgate promoted toiletries as Chanukah gifts and food purveyors such as Loft's and Barton's candies marketed chocolates wrapped in gold foil to simulate Chanukah *gelt*. Aunt Jemima flour proclaimed itself "the best flour for latkes" and the *Hadassah Newsletter* advised that "mah-jongg sets make appreciated Chanukah gifts."

With the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Chanukah took on a new, or rather renewed, meaning. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the valor and success of Israeli military forces helped rebuild the image of the Jew as fighter. Zionists proudly identified the Haganah and Irgun as Maccabean descendants. Adapting the image of the martial Jew to its Chanukah

product line, Loft's Chocolate Company issued a board game called "Valor Against Oppression" that featured General Moshe Dayan. Not to be outdone, Barton's produced what Joselit calls "an Israelized version of Monopoly whose board featured a map of Israel, miniature Israeli flags [and] menorahs."

Despite the shift in the meaning of Chanukah in light of Israeli military success, the holiday remains ambivalent for many American Jews. For younger Jewish children, December can still be a difficult month as they come to terms with the omnipresent lures of Santa Claus. Yet, Chanukah seems to grow in popularity today as the observance of traditional Jewish ritual becomes more widespread and intense. In 1951, a California Jewish woman offered advice that, while acknowledging the parallels between Chanukah and Christmas, bridges the worlds of Jewish particularism and American civic celebration: "Let this be our guiding principle: Keeping within the framework of our own tradition, using a color scheme of blue and silver and yellow and gold, let us adorn our homes inside and out as beautifully as we can for Chanukah, enlarging upon the old-time Feast of Lights."

The American Jewish Historical Society wishes the readers of "Chapters in American Jewish History" a happy and festive Chanukah.

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pizzazz if it was to compete
with Christmas.**

American Jewish Historical Society

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