

Local rabbis riff on Chanukah

The meaning of Chanukah in a time of Christmas

Larry Yudelson |

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Tu Bi-Sh'vat doesn't have this problem.

Nobody ever preached that the meaning of the Jewish New Year of the Trees was being overshadowed by practices imported from Arbor Day.

And no one scolds congregants for making their Shemeni Atzeret observances seem more like Columbus Day.

But Chanukah — oy, Chanukah. A holiday often under the shadow of its more popular calendrical neighbor, Christmas.

Rabbi Debra Orenstein says it's ironic "that this is the holiday when we sometimes aspire to appropriate the customs of the general culture, because the essence of the Chanukah story, and the essence of the original battles of the Maccabees, was about the right to be different."

Orenstein, of Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson, says that it is misrepresenting what Chanukah is and what it could be in the eyes of Jews "when we call it the Jewish Christmas or allow that impression to stand.

"The commercialization of the season — that's not something I want to borrow from the general culture. That's not attractive for Christians about Christmas; why would Jews want to bring that into Judaism?"

Which is not to say that she agrees with those who play down Chanukah as an unimportant minor holiday.

"It's a historical holiday. The word minor conveys the wrong impression. It's significant. It has an important message and a place in the life of the Jewish calendar."

Orenstein said the core messages of Chanukah "have to do with the right to be different, with the willingness to fight and sacrifice and step out in faith, even when the odds are against you."

She sees an important message of the balance between faith and action in the holiday.

"The story of the oil lasting for eight days conveys divine protection, and that miracles can surprise and benefit you. But in this holiday, that miracle is only portrayed as happening after people have taken actions and risks. We need both of those elements. We need confidence that if we step out in faith we'll be supported by miracles that haven't yet revealed themselves.

Rabbi Stephen Wylen of Temple Beth Tikvah in Wayne said he's "surprised at all these rabbis who preach to all their congregants and the Jewish people to stop celebrating Chanukah so much, like that's the biggest problem we have — over-celebrating our holidays.

"Times change, and Chanukah is a minor holiday only in the technical sense that it's not commanded in the Torah. It's obviously a major holiday in the mindset of American Jews, and I think for very good reasons.

"Sukkot is not as big as it was two thousand years ago because hardly any of us are farmers anymore. The messages of Chanukah are increasingly relevant to American Jews," Wylen continued.

"It's completely anachronistic to attribute to Judah Maccabee the idea of fighting for religious freedom. Matthias, Judah's father, said, 'Everyone who wishes to remain loyal to the traditions of our ancestors, follow me.'"

What the Maccabees understood as maintaining ancestral traditions, "we understand as religious freedom — freedom to maintain our identity in the face of the incredibly attractive culture in the midst of which we live. Our experience is quite parallel to that of the Maccabees. There are many lessons of Chanukah we can strongly identify with. I would go with that flow as opposed to trying to fight it," Wylen said. "It's well and good to try to revive Sukkot and Shavuot, but those people who claim that we're only celebrating Chanukah because we're imitating American Christmas don't understand the historical process involved."

"Christmas in the Christian world was technically a minor holiday. Many early American Protestants were strongly opposed to Christmas observance altogether. The Puritans outlawed it. Christmas did not get big until Charles Dickens and the poem 'A Visit from St. Nicholas'" in the early 19th century.

Not long afterwards, “Jewish nationalists revived Judah Maccabee as a role model,” Wylen said, “reinventing Chanukah with its real history which in prior centuries Jews either ignored or didn’t really know at all. Traditional Jews knew so little about the actual story of Chanukah. The traditional ‘Al Hanisim’ prayer begins ‘In the days of Matityahu, the high priest.’ If he was the high priest, there wouldn’t be Chanukah at all.

“Even today a lot of Jews know the story so poorly they think the eight days of Chanukah are because the oil for one day burned eight days. Kids ask: ‘Why does it take eight days to prepare oil’? It doesn’t. You just squeeze olives.

“The original story is they decided in advance that it would be an eight day observance, like Sukkot,” Wylen continued.

“The whole miracle story was built around suppressing the history and the relevance of Judah Maccabee. In the modern observance, Judah Maccabee and his fights for cultural independence in the Greek empire take on great relevance. It’s about who we are, and our struggle to remain Jewish against the forces of assimilation.

“We’re not going to resist assimilation. If Judaism is going to survive in America, it’s because we’re going to find a way to assimilate and remain Jewish. That’s what the Maccabees worked out; we need to work out something as successful for ourselves.

“Christmas and Chanukah both grew big along the same time in the modern era, to some extent because of the growth of secularism. Chanukah and Christmas are both relatively secular holidays. If you’re a Christian, the really religious holiday is Easter; if you’re a Jew, it’s the High Holy Days and the three festivals,” he said.

Wylen pointed out that critics of Chanukah are overlooking something the Jewish holiday and Christmas have in common: the date. Chanukah is the 25th of Kislev; Christmas is the 25th of December. Those are the first winter months of their respective calendars. “They take place on the same date. Obviously they’re not completely distinct,” he said.