

OBSERVER/FAITH & REASON

Haneirot Hallalu
(These Lights)

These lights
we kindle to recall
the miracles
and the wonders,
And the deliverance
and the victories,
That our ancestors
accomplished in
those days
at this season,
Through the hands
of Your Holy Priests.
And throughout
all eight days of
Hanukkah,
These lights
are sanctified
and we may not
use them,
Except to look upon
them, in order
to thank and praise
Your great name,
For Your miracles
and for Your wonders
And for Your
deliverance.

— TRADITIONALLY RECITED
AFTER HANUKKAH CANDLES
ARE LIT, THIS PRAYER PROBABLY
ORIGINATED AROUND 700 CE

Light a candle
for religious
FREEDOMJews resist
the trend
to commercialize
as they celebrate
Hanukkah

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CALGARY HERALD

“Hanukkah tends to be packaged with Christmas,” says University of Calgary religious studies professor Eliezer Segal, “when its message, in some respects, is just the opposite.”

Most non-Jews recognize a menorah — the nine-branched candlestick — as a Jewish symbol. And, Segal says, “the media presents non-religious aspects of the holiday, such as the potato pancakes” eaten at that time and the dreidel game, played with a spinning top.

But that’s about as deep as the portrayal of Hanukkah on television and movies usually goes. And, since our culture is largely media-driven, that’s all many of us know about this Jewish holiday.

Though the two holidays have little in common, many non-Jews regard Hanukkah as “the Jewish Christmas,” not understanding the significance of the menorah and its flickering candles.

Unlike Christmas, Hanukkah is “not a day of harmony and brotherhood,” Segal points out. “It commemorates a struggle for religious freedom. It’s about standing up for your rights.”

The holiday has its roots in Israel, in 165 BCE. When a band of Jewish rebels called the Maccabees (Hammers) reclaimed the temple in Jerusalem from their Greek overlords and Hellenized (assimilated) Jews, they discovered the dwelling place of the Most High had been desecrated.

Statues of Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes, who believed he was the incarnation of Zeus, were in the sanctuary. Sacred vessels had been destroyed or defiled. The altar had been polluted with pagan sacrifices. There was no question among the religiously observant warriors: the temple had to be cleansed and rededicated.

The Maccabees demolished the altar and built a new one. They discarded the defiled ritual objects and replaced them. They looked for oil to burn in the consecrated lamps, but found only one jug bearing the stamp of the high priest — enough for only one day.

To get new, pure oil made and

brought to the temple would take a week. Nonetheless, in the belief God would provide, a lamp was lit. Amazingly, it continued to burn for eight days, until new oil was delivered.

That is the miracle of Hanukkah. Light is kindled to celebrate the Lord’s presence with His people, who have struggled to retain their distinctive culture in the face of indifference and outright persecution.

As a yearly reminder of the Jews’ struggle against assimilation, it is somewhat ironic that Hanukkah usually falls close to Christmas, in a season during which North America is steeped in a “winter wonderland” of excess in the name of commerce.

However, though marketing has overtaken the original meaning of Christmas in many corners, spokesmen for Calgary’s Jewish community say Hanukkah in our city is practised much the same as ever.

When it comes to the observance of Hanukkah, “I don’t think the Jewish world has changed much,” says Segal, but adds: “I lived for a year (1984) in the United States, where things were a bit different. I was actually a bit taken aback by what a profile (the holiday) had — large-scale gift-giving to a degree that I have never experienced in Canada.”

Moshe Saks, rabbi of Beth Tzedek Conservative congregation, says in spite of the Christmas juggernaut, Hanukkah remains largely untouched by commercialism and retains its meaning in Jewish homes.

“Hanukkah is not about gifts,” agrees Rabbi Howard Voss-Altman of the Reform Jewish Temple B’nai Tikveh. “It’s about light and the celebration of religious freedom.”

Nevertheless, gift giving is part of the holiday. Mendel Zaltzman of the Jewish outreach Chabad Lubavitch says Hanukkah “gelt” (Yiddish for gold) is traditionally given to children through the eight nights of the holiday. This money is over and above any usual allowance given the children.

Adults are expected to give to each other as a sign of tzedek or charity, but “not huge amounts,” he stresses. This tradition, Zaltzman says, evolved into giving gifts at Hanukkah. Nowadays, the “gelt” children receive is often the foil-wrapped chocolate coins used in the dreidel game as well as a small gift on each of the eight nights.

Though Hanukkah is characterized as a minor holiday on the Jewish calendar, Zaltzman cautions this doesn’t mean “minor” in the usual sense of the word. It simply means Hanukkah is not a Biblical holiday.

“It’s not like Passover or Rosh Hashanah (New Year). It’s a holiday that happened over the course of Jewish history, due to a certain event... That’s what they mean by ‘minor.’ But none of our holidays are minor (in the sense of ‘less important’). They’re all kept to the ‘t’. All the law, the customs and everything. If anything, Hanukkah is the most popular (Jewish) tradition.”

Voss-Altman agrees. “Jews understand Hanukkah is not a major holiday, but it serves an important purpose: to light candles in the darkness of winter.” This is a metaphor, he says, for bringing joy and celebration to a careworn world.

Zaltzman adds: “In Jewish tradition, Hanukkah is the only holiday we are to publicize... The menorah has to be put in the window. Why? It’s lit at night. Why? So you can see it. That’s the reason we have public menorah lighting and huge Hanukkah parties, to publicize the miracle.”

Saks likewise says while Hanukkah is liturgically a minor holiday, it is the only time of year Jews are called upon to publicize their beliefs.

Still, he says, there is no escaping the pervasive Christmas culture surrounding Jews this time of year.

“We do often feel like outsiders,” says Saks. “The only place that wouldn’t be true would be Israel.”

Zaltzman, who works with children and youth, chuckles when asked what it’s like to be a Jewish child in a Gentile culture. He refers to The Hanukkah Song, written by Adam Sandler of Saturday Night Live fame.

One line goes: “When you feel like the only kid in town without a Christmas tree...”

“It sounds very cute,” Zaltzman says, “but it’s true. On the other hand, it’s not true. The way I was brought up, my religious background was based... on tolerance, acceptance and freedom. Which means... you’ve got to do what’s right, and you need to live and let live. Your neighbour may be Christian, Muslim, Jewish, whatever. You need to accept that and let your neighbour do what your neighbour feels is the right thing to do.”

Segal agrees: “People can appreciate other peoples’ holidays... I prefer an open celebration of Christmas, rather than these attempts we have to come up with some generic thing that we know is Christmas, but nobody wants to call it that... It’s much easier to respect someone’s religion if they’re doing it seriously than to pretend this is just some kind of civil observance.”

Voss-Altman counsels Jewish families who, due to intermarriage, have Christian relatives, to make Hanukkah their only “home” celebration.

“Enhancing Hanukkah makes sense in Canada,” Voss-Altman says. Though the rabbi’s three children aren’t old enough to grasp Hanukkah’s message of resisting assimilation and how this relates to them, he says, they are old enough to understand “the Maccabees were brave and strong and fought to keep their identity.”

The biggest challenge for interfaith families, says Voss-Altman, is non-Jewish grandparents not wanting their grandchildren left out of Christmas festivities.

However, he agrees, just as a child can go to another’s birthday party and celebrate, a child can attend and appreciate aspects of Grandma and Grandpa’s Christmas celebration, without making it a personal holiday.

In such cases, Voss-Altman says, grandparents should give Hanukkah, rather than Christmas gifts, respecting the beliefs of the recipients and their families. He believes such a solution is far better than family squabbles at what should be a time of joy. But, he stresses, Jewish families should “make Hanukkah the special time, that it is, independent of Christmas.”

Saks, noting Hanukkah is only one holiday among many on the Jewish calendar, says: “The more secure you are in your Jewish identity, the less problem you have with (Christmas).” This is a good argument, he says, for not living at the fringes of Judaism, but being involved throughout the year.

“All our celebrations are ways to bring joy into the home,” says Voss-Altman.

Zaltzman makes a similar point: “We are the only kid in town without a Christmas tree,” he says, “but we’re proud of it, because we have our own holidays. We have our own things to celebrate.”

He says celebrating their rich culture year-round gives Jews a sense of being part of a larger picture.

“It’s fascinating how everything in Judaism is connected,” says Zaltzman. “Everything we do is connected with everything else. There is nothing that stands on its own. So, definitely, participating in all the holidays, each one adds to the others.”

Not participating can lead to feelings of inadequacy and assimilation, he says.

“There is nothing empty in this world. We can create a vacuum, but, naturally, if you open it up, air will go into it... It’s the same thing with our minds, with our feelings. They’re never empty.”

“If Jewish kids, Jewish people, don’t let their own traditions in... something else is going to go in.”

Synagogues all over the city are helping families ensure such a vacuum will not develop in Calgary’s Jewish homes. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Lubavitcher Jews — all are preparing to make delicious latkes and sufganiyot, readying dreidels and gelt, and lovingly placing menorahs — often family heirlooms — in places of honour for the celebration that begins at sundown Dec. 19. Personal, family and prescribed traditions will all play a part in the holiday.

Like the shamash (servant) candle at the centre of the menorah, Hanukkah is one of the many lights of Judaism, time-honoured traditions bringing light into darkness, proclaiming the steadfast love of God.

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The menorah is lit
each evening of
Hanukkah.