

## How Diverse Jews find their Particular Identity symbolized in the Light of the Menorah by Noam Zion

From *A Different Light: The Big Book of Hanukkah* by Noam Zion  
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As Rabbi David Hartman has argued, Judaism is a “community of interpretation” rather than a community of common dogmas. In celebrating foundational events of their communal history, Jews redescribe the past in light of their analysis of the present and their blueprint for the future. The Jews share the events, texts and rituals of their collective past, but each sub-community of Jews carves out its own particular interpretation of that past. As in families, each member experiences and remembers common events from his or her own unique perspective. In retelling the family autobiography s/he may argue and persuade the others to accept his/her version as the authentic, official account of what happened and therefore of what lessons must be learned. Often even the family therapist cannot get everyone to agree on what happened, who was the victim and who the perpetrator, and how the ongoing sense of injury and social competition is to be resolved

As all Jews worldwide light the same Hanukkah candles, a ritual shared by all denominations whether religious or secular, whether North American, Israeli or Russian, we may be misled into a false sense of unanimity about what happened and to what values we are rededicating ourselves by lighting these candles. These candles are symbolic – they are meant to “proclaim *the* miracle” (*pirsum hanes*) to all those who pass by our Jewish windowsills. That is why the halakha recommends that optimally candles should be lit half an hour before dusk or before stars come out, when the most people are on their way home through the streets. They ought to be at door step or windowsill facing out to the public space and placed at a height of no more than 20 cubits, so one passersby see them without bending their necks. The riels for proclaiming the miracle are actually guide lines for advertising a message. *Nes* can mean miracle but also banner. What values would you put on your front yard or on a button on your chest? Vote Obama or Romney? Pro Life or Pro Choice? To light the candles aimed outward is to testify to the values you wish to live by and which you wish to propagate. The Greek word for Jews who testify to their values even when persecuted is martyr = witness. The religious martyrs in history who chose to die defiantly rather than worship a pagan god and its earthly ruler convert were Jews during the rule of Antiochus the Greek Syrian who thought of himself as an embodiment to the sungod identified with the god of heavens, Zeus. He also demanded that Jews celebrate his birthday by marching through Jerusalem with ivy wreathes, burn incense to the gods on their doorsteps where the menorah would later be placed, and refrain from circumcision on penalty of death. To defy Antiochus and his Hellenized Jewish high priests in 167 BCE was to be near witness to Jewish values and to invite martyrdom. The conflict was civil war within the Jewish community as well as an act of national resistance

Look at this amazing photograph from Nazi Germany which my sister who worked at the US Holocaust Museum found for me. It said in the archives that the provenance was 1933- 1939. Some Jew in Kiel, Germany, had the guts to advertise his Jewish identity and his right to be different, while the Nazi banner hung for the city hall outside his window.



After I reprinted the photograph in my Hartman Hanukkah Book *A Different Light* someone took the book for weekend to Beit Shemesh a suburb of Jerusalem. Her hosts recognized the menorah and exclaimed: "Oh, that menorah lives on our street down three houses." Sure enough the neighbors reported that this was their grandfather's menorah. He had been a rabbi publically vilifying the Nazis in sermons in 1930- 1935 when he was thrown out of Germany. So the photo can now be dated to Hanukkah, 1932, after the Nazis came to power in some but not all municipalities.

To agree that the menorah stands for Jewish pride and religious freedom from oppressive non-Jewish regimes is easy. But Hanukkah is also about a civil war among Jews, but the identification of Jews of light and of darkness is unresolved. Hanukkah lacks an agreed common text as to what the candles symbolize. There is no megillah and no book of the canonized Jewish Bible devoted to its story; there is no agreed interpretation of the symbols..

The history of the Maccabean period reveals a terrible cultural, class, and religious civil war among Hellenist, Hassidic and moderate nationalist Jews. Each sub-community of the Jewish community identifies itself with Mattathias and Judah the Maccabee and condemns its contemporary Jewish rivals as self-hating Hellenists or as passive self-ghettoized martyrs. Each group claims the symbols and the heroes of Hanukkah as their own and villifies the darkness of war, of obscurantism, of false enlightenment and of assimilation represented by competing Jewish ways of life.

In our contemporary era of polemical polarization as well as pluralism within the Jewish communities, Hanukkah becomes a crucial test for the self-understanding of each group of Jews. Precisely because Hanukkah lacks an agreed narrative, it becomes a kind of Rorschach test for the self-projection and self-creation of Jewish communities. Interestingly enough, Israeli Zionism, Lubavitch Hassidim and even North American Liberal Judaism have invested a great deal of creative energy to revive and reshape Hanukkah to carry their banners for Jewish renaissance. For each Hanukkah is no minor holiday about ancient history.

In the essays that will appear in this column for the next few weeks I will try to epitomize radically different interpretations of Hanukkah, each reflecting a key to the self-interpretation of an entire community. You may very well disagree with some of these seemingly forced readings of the Festival of Lights presented by competing camps in the Jewish world. Yet you may also discover surprising and enlightening perspectives and implications on a holiday too often regarded as a simplistic children's festival promoting obvious and banal values.

Our collection of interpretations begins with **(1) the Zionist** debates about the significance of the Maccabees for the building of a Jewish state which struggled against both the classical Reform, ultraOrthodox and the assimilationist Jews

**(2) The Reform** Movement while initially opposed to celebrating Hanukkah at all came round to turn it into a holiday of religious freedom for all. In the 1970s some reform curriculum writers had compunctions about celebrating Hanukkah as military victory of a nation over its oppressors, so they had to reinterpret it again. **(4) The Hassidic world view** of Habad (Lubavitch) and Gur portrays the battle between Greek and Jew, between darkness and light, as an ongoing struggle fought both within the inner Temple of our souls and without in the public squares of Moscow, Washington and Jerusalem.

In conclusion, the multiple interpretations presented here are meant to challenge us to choose our own perspective. It is not enough to light the candle and say we recall the past. Each recollection is an interpretation, and we must reflect on the implications of these interpretations for the Jewish tasks that lie before us "in our days. and at this time"

