

An American Invention: Hanukkah the Holiday of Religious Freedom By Noam Zion

From *A Different Light*



The Statue of Liberty and American Flag Hanukkah Menorah, by Mae Shafter Rockland
This unique Menorah synthesizes modern American and ancient Jewish symbols of freedom. The Statue of Liberty, donated by the Republic of France in honor of its sister Republic, is adorned with a quote from the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus which appears on this menorah as well: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free." (Jewish Museum of New York. 1974

In the 21st century Hanukkah is celebrated widely and enthusiastically by more Jews than any other holiday than Passover. Both holidays are performed at least one night a year by almost 90% of American Jews, more than observed Hanukkah in the 1930s. The sociological reason is surely related the competition with a commercialized, publicly-observed Christmas and to the holiday season. Yet Jews could also have adopted a secularized Christmas as many German Jews did in the 19thC and early 20th C. If social pressure and a desire to be like everyone else and make sure out children are not left out were the only reason, then one need not enhance a separate Jewish holiday that highlights the very difference that makes many American Jews uncomfortable. There was also counterpressure to assert one's ethnic and religious identity against the majority. Thus

whatever the social reasons for Hanukkah, Jewish educators developed an ideological rationale which became very popular. Reform and Conservative Jews led the way in this Americanization of Hanukkah not only by inventing the custom of giving eight gifts, one per night, and using colored candles, unknown beyond its shores, but also reshaped the message of the menorah's light to fit the American Jewish predicament.

The Reform reinvention is quite striking. There are elements in Hanukkah that could be difficult for classical Reform Jews to adopt. For the Maccabees Hanukkah is celebrated as the "rededication of the altar" (hence its name "Hanukkah") desecrated by the Greek Syrians who sacrificed pigs on that altar to Zeus, but Reform Jews do not pray to return to sacrifices and to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and they name every local synagogue a Temple. In the days of the Maccabees martyrs died rather than eat impure food, but most Reform Jews do not preach keeping kosher. The Maccabees fought to achieve political independence for a separate Jewish nation in the Jewish homeland by trying to expel Western culture (Hellenism) by acts of military heroism. But classical Reform Judaism was non-nationalist, anti-Zionist, pacific in orientation and committed to integration within Western civilization in their own lands to which they owed their exclusive national allegiance. Matthias killed a Jew who publically worshipped Zeus when Antiochus' men came to enlist supporters and Judah the Maccabee forcibly circumcised Jewish babies when their parents wanted to be more Hellenized or were simply afraid of reprisals by the Greek Syrians.

In contrast, freedom of conscience, faith in God, loyalty to the state and an ethics of peace and reason have been central Reform values.

Thus it should not be surprising that Isaac M. Wise, who introduced Reform Judaism in the United States and founded its major institutions, suggested in 1865 the elimination of the Hanukkah lights. However, six years later the Augsburg Synod, with delegates mostly from German Reform congregations, introduced a resolution urging the appropriate commemoration of Hanukkah, which had been neglected in many Reform Jewish congregations and schools. The rationale for this resolution was to counteract the celebration of Christmas by many Jewish families "in direct opposition to Jewish consciousness." A hundred and fifty years later American Jews continue to give great significance to Hanukkah as a counter weight to Christmas.

However they have also made Hanukkah a major symbol of America Jewish values. Let me cite a 1971 Reform curriculum for children written by Harry Gersh.*

"Freedom to Serve God: So this war was the first for the right of a people within a country to believe as they wish – so long as they followed the king's law in worldly matters. For thousands of years, Jews have lived under kings, princes, dukes, caliphs, governors, presidents. And they have always been loyal to these rulers – so long as they were permitted to practice their own religion. This idea of religious freedom is followed in all free nations today. It was first given to the world by the Jews."

The battle of the Maccabees against the religious and political coercion of Antiochus was a battle for collective religious hence national political freedom, but not for individual

* *When a Jew Celebrates* by Harry Gersh with Eugene Borowitz and Hyman Chanover, published by Behrman House 1971, (pp. 171-181), and reprinted by permission.

freedom of conscience as such. But the Reform interpretation is certainly as valid as any rabbinic reading of the past and it makes Hanukkah central to the American Jewish concern for maintain their difference within a democratic land. American values are also reread so the Pilgrims who were persecuted in their faith did go to America for religious freedom, but they gave no religious freedom to dissenting Protestants or Catholics, let alone Jews.

Reform Jews have become at least since the Holocaust strong supporters of Zionism and Hanukkah can also represent for them as it does for Israelis a war of independence and a model for the virtue of military courage in a just war. Still some liberal Reform Jews especially during the protests against the War in Vietnam have felt ambivalent about militant nationalism. In the same 1971 curriculum cited above it says:

Today some people try to use Hanukkah to show that the Jews were a warrior people. They were not. **Most Jews in all ages thought war was stupid. ... Jews never take up the sword willingly.** No one can take joy in the death of another human being. But sometimes we have no choice. We must stop and fight those who would deny us the freedom to be Jews. If we do not, we are, in effect, agreeing to become slaves.

That's why Mattathias, the priest of Modiin, is the real hero of Hanukkah. He had the courage to stand up to the Syrians. **Mattathias did not want war. When many people shouted for war, Mattathias ran away from Jerusalem hoping to avoid war.** But when he found that meant he would have to give up his Judaism he knew what he had to do. If war and death were the price the Jews had to pay for the right to be Jews, then war and death it would be.

Two thousand years before Abraham Lincoln said that a nation cannot endure half slave and half free, Mattathias, the priest of Modiin, sent his five sons into war against the Syrians because he knew that the Jews could not exist half slave and half free....

Some people try to change the meaning of Hanukkah so that it celebrates a war for independence. It wasn't. The Jews would rather have had their own government and king, but they did not go to war over politics.



An American Jew wearing a top hat lights Hanukkah candles with his family. (Harper's Magazine, New York, 1890)

Religious coercion is identified with slavery in such a way that to be true Reform Jew is to be a true American, at least liberal one like Abraham Lincoln. In between the lines of this children's story there is polemic against other contemporary Jews who use Hanukkah to promote national independence even by means of war.

Many Reform and Conservative Jews will dissent from the particular curriculum by Harry Gersh. But I think it is still true to say that liberal American Jews hold that Hanukkah candles represent a value that they are proud to propagate in the public sphere – the banner of religious freedom for every individual. This is *the* central value for American liberal Jews and for liberal Americans and that bridges the tension between Jewish and American identity, so the Jews need not feel so uncomfortable with being different. This rationale is as important as the eight presents.