

It's Okay To Be Different! Ancient Message of Chanukah still relevant today

by Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach,
Spiritual Leader, Temple Beth Am

It is perhaps an accident of time that the eight-day festival of Chanukah and Christmas, fall so close together. They even sometimes coincide. (But only sometimes. Chanukah, based on the Hebrew calendar, not the Gregorian one, can fall as early as the end of November or as late as the beginning of January.) It is perhaps an accident. But it is, at one and the same time, both unfortunate and fortuitous that these quite different holidays come so close together.

It is unfortunate only in that many people assume that Chanukah is “the Jewish Christmas.” In fact, Chanukah (the older celebration by nearly two centuries) is one of the minor holidays of the Jewish year, and has been elevated in importance only on the basis of its close proximity to a time when so many others are celebrating, and when the American economy goes into a frenzied overdrive.

It is also unfortunate since, because the two holidays fall so close together, some people simply assume that they have the same message, that of universal peace and love.

Universal peace and love, reconciliation between human beings and the divine, these *are*, of course, among the most important themes of human life. As such, this message is an important part of Jewish life. But it is not *this* holiday, or *this* season that celebrates these themes for Jews. In fact, the celebration of Chanukah has a very different story to tell.

Once upon a time (well, it was 165 B.C.E. to be exact), in a place far away (well, Israel -- and with airplanes you can get there quicker than you could with camels) there was a people, the Jews, who were ruled over by another people, the Seleucid Empire, the Syrian part of the remnants of what was once Alexander the Great's territory. The Syrian-Greeks wanted everyone to be the same. They were used to the fact that in every land they conquered, people began to imitate them. The conquered peoples took on the clothing of their rulers, and their customs, and their cuisine, and their culture. And their gods.

Every people they conquered emulated them. In every land their ways held sway. In every land, that is, except one. In ancient Israelites, the world's first and at that time still only monotheists, could not simply take on Greek culture completely. Because to do so meant to take on the Greek gods. And that was impossible for a monotheist to do.

While Israel was at peace, and gave the Syrian Greeks no trouble, these conquered people were perhaps a curiosity, but they were of no greater concern than that. They could be tolerated. They could be indulged. But when there was trouble in the land, when there was internal tension between those Jews who wanted to imitate the Greeks to some degree (although not to the point of taking on the pantheon of polytheism) and those who did not, when the people became difficult to rule, the limited “tolerance” of the Syrian-Greeks evaporated. Not understanding monotheism at all, not understanding why there were not willingly placed statues to the ruling gods, the Seleucids, under King Antiochus Epiphanes IV, simply banned Judaism. They made the practice of the religion illegal -- punishable by death.

The details of the Maccabean revolt are somewhat well known -- how a small band of Jewish resistance fighters, knowing the land well and (tradition says) graced by God, managed to overthrow the mighty empire, to recapture and cleanse the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, to

rekindle the Eternal Light which the enemy had extinguish with the scant single sack of purified oil that remained -- only to witness the flame lasting for eight full days, until the time when new oil could be made.

The details are well known, perhaps... but it is the motive behind the details that makes the timing of Chanukah so fortuitous. For what motivated the Maccabees, the Jews who revolted against the Syrian oppression, was a fight for survival, yes. But it was not a war of conquest. It was not a war to end all large empires, or turn a minority into a majority. In the midst of an overwhelmingly gentile world, against oppressors who wanted to make everyone the same, the fight of the Maccabees was just as much about the right to be different.

The right to be different. The right to be a minority. To survive, to even thrive, *as* a minority, who share many but not all of the values of the surrounding culture. It was the message of Chanukah centuries ago. And, for Jews, it is the opportunity in the celebration of Chanukah to this very day.

In one sense, it is precisely *because* Chanukah falls so near to Christmas, that in celebrating Chanukah Jews are reminded, especially in this part of the country, of what it is like to be different. The continued celebration of the holiday as a minority thus contains the fulfillment of its own message. At this season, in days gone by, Jews fought hard for the right to be different. To celebrate this Jewish holiday still, even while wishing Christian neighbors well in their different and much more visible celebration of this season, is to remember the ancient fight, and relive its message anew.

Jews and Christians celebrate at about the same time at this season, and thus share a spirit of celebration. But we do not share the specific holidays of our tradition, and the message is not the same. But that should not be a problem. Because it is okay to be different.