

Hannukah:Then and Now

‘Twas the Reason for the Season!

Hanukkah: “The Festival of Lights”

In my memory as a boy, the kitchen always looked like a battlefield at Hanukkah. I can still smell the warm latkes as *bubbe* gives me “*the look*” that told me to wait for the food to be ready. The whole family gathered around our big menorah to recite the prayers as we lit the colorful Hannukah candles by our living room bay window for the whole neighborhood to see. Soon we would be playing the dreidel game, trying our best not to eat the chocolate *gelt* used for it.

Everybody would get excited as we all exchanged presents on this first night of the “Festival of Lights,” especially the kids looking forward to the next seven nights. “Eight nights of presents—that is so much better than Christmas, and we even get chocolate gelt!” my brother would shout. I recall my mother smiling at my father as she rearranged a myriad of Hanukkah cards from family and friends. The festive cards were displayed on our fireplace mantel and taped on the stairway and banister. “So many cards, so many friends! I love Hanukkah!” she would sigh with joy.

Hanukkah Is the Jewish Christmas! Or is it?

While we must recognize that there wouldn’t be Christmas if it weren’t for Hanukkah, it would be a stretch of the imagination to label the “Festival of Lights” as the “Jewish Christmas.” Still, we cannot lose sight of the fact that Christmas celebrates the birth of Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah . He was born 2000 years ago as Messiah ben Yoseph, born to die for the whole world. He will come back one day as Messiah ben David to reign forever in Jerusalem.

As the Jewish people were preserved by God because of the faithfulness of the Maccabees, the Jewish line continued so that Yeshua could be born as the Scriptures declared. Thus the incarnation was made possible through God’s faithfulness to fulfill His promises to preserve the Jewish people.

*For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)*

Christians and Jews alike often miss the close connection between Christmas and Hanukkah. In striving to commercially outdo each other, both communities lose much of the real meaning for these celebrations.

More *Gelt*, less Guilt!

For as long as we can remember, some Hanukkah traditions have been the Jewish response to Christmas traditions. How did the holidays become so commercialized? When was the first Hanukkah card ever created? Irma was born in 1921 in the United-States from a family of Russian and German Jewish immigrants. Today at age 87, she remembers how she used to celebrate Hanukkah. She recalls:

Irma's Memories THEN: "My bubbe would slave in the kitchen and prepare potato pancakes, apples and stuffed chicken neck. The kitchen was the busiest area of her house and would often end up being the meeting place for all of us. The celebration was always done at home and not in the synagogue. I remember the prayers recited in Yiddish, but no songs were sung. My bubbe would give all of us kids money as a gift on one night, usually a quarter that she had saved up, a penny at a time. This was a lot of money at the time for us kids, but this was also a challenge for her to save it up, as she was very poor. This was our response to the Christmas of the Christians; but even so, to this day, I still regret the fact we did not decorate the house with lights, garlands and ornaments! Additionally, I don't remember any cards being exchanged or even received until the mid-to-late '40s. The [current] decorations didn't even come on the market until the 60s."

Thank You for the Card!

As Irma is reminiscing about the past, it becomes clear that the reasons for the holiday of Hanukkah have morphed the festival into more of an industry than a family celebration.

Today, the Festival of Lights has become part of a multi-million dollar industry. Greeting cards increasingly punctuate our calendar year with the regularity of the chime of a grandfather's clock.

Each year, American consumers purchase over 7 billion cards for all occasions (not to mention the millions of e-cards sent via the internet each year)¹ In 1843, London England saw the first published Christmas card.² Incidentally, it is not until the '40s, over one century later, that the first Hanukkah card was published by Hallmark in the USA.³

We probably can do very little to stop the commercialization of Hanukkah and also must recognize that not all of it is negative. Today Hanukkah is widely celebrated by Jewish people around the globe. In America, it has received tremendous exposure due to the publishing of cards, exchanging of presents and other holiday paraphernalia.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with sending a card for a holiday. Culturally, it shows that you remember someone and care for them. But if it is done as the main reason to celebrate the holiday and keep up with the Jones (or the Cohens!), then much is lost in the process.

Nu, So What's the Real Reason Already!?

Yeshua Himself validated the holiday when He was at the Temple. *At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Yeshua was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon* (John 10:22-23).

The true meaning of Hanukkah is to celebrate the rededication of the Temple by the Jewish people after the failed attempt by Antiochus Epiphanes IV and his army to destroy us. That was another attempt at destroying the Jewish nation that was thwarted by the Almighty.

G-d promised to never destroy or forsake Yisrael (Jeremiah 31:35-37); and because of His promise, our people were preserved miraculously during the revolt of the Maccabees. God's deliverance enabled the Jewish people to continue to prosper and the Jewish Messiah to be born.

It would be no stretch of the imagination to celebrate Hanukkah with the understanding of the real reason for Christmas, as we recognize G-d's provision and preservation of His people. "The Festival of Lights" celebrates the birth of the "Light of the World" (John 8:12).

¹ <http://www.greetingcard.org/pdf/2007%20fact%20sheet%20grtng%20cards.pdf>

² http://www.greetingcard.org/thegreetingcard_history.html

³ <http://newsroom.hallmark.com/Holiday/Hanukkah>

