

## Christmas and Hanukah - 2005

In case you missed it, I would like to point out that the month of December arrived last week. Most months kind of just begin, but it is hard not to be conscious of the arrival of December, with all the decorations and everything.

It usually more or less coincides with the Jewish month of Kislev. Actually, I knew when Kislev started this week because I was in shul last week.

We Jews have a wonderful custom. On the Shabbos before the first of the new month, a prayer is recited in synagogue announcing that the new month will begin on such and such a day. The prayer is one of my favorites, for it is so beautiful and spiritually poignant in its humble requests of God. The custom of publicly proclaiming the new month hearkens back to a time which obviously predates printed calendars. On Saturday, when the entire community was and is gathered together in prayer the shaliah tzibbur announces which day of the coming week would be the first of the month.

It reminds me of the guy who rented an apartment in a crowded tenement. He boasted that he didn't need a watch, because he always asked his friends what time it was. So a friend said to him, but what if its the middle of the night, and you want to know what time it is? "Easy," he replied, "I merely start banging on the pipes in my apartment. Usually, after just a few clops and loud bangs, people shout out – Stop making so much noise. It's two o'clock in the morning!"

Anyway, what we call, "*Shabbat mevorchim*: the Sabbath of blessing, or announcement" is our equivalent of announcing and letting everyone know what time it is on the Hebrew calendar.

I mention all of this today because it just so happens that this year the beginning of Kislev corresponds to the beginning of December, which means the days of the month parallel each other. As a result, for example, the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup> of December will also be the 10<sup>th</sup> of Kislev. Consequently, the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev will commence the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. By now, some of you may have figured out where I am going with all of this, because as we all know, the 25<sup>th</sup> of the month is when people all over the world celebrate the holiday, the holiday of Chanukah.

For the first time in 46 years, since 1959, Christmas falls on the first night of Chanukah. I thought about how I wanted to phrase the previous sentence. Should I say – The first night of Chanukah falls on Christmas, or should I phrase it -- that Christmas falls on the first night of Chanukah. Since as a Jew, the Jewish calendar is my point of reference, I described Christmas as falling on the first night of Chanukah.

I am not the only one who has noticed the convergence of the two holidays.

A front page article in last week's Wall Street Journal, entitled, "Late Hanukah May Extend Retail Season," begins:

“Ken Giddon is expecting an unusually strong holiday season this year, but not because of falling gasoline prices, colder weather or the extra shopping weekend before Christmas. It’s the late Hanukkah.”

The owner of a high-end menswear store, he says that when Hanukah is early, it takes the momentum out of the season, but when there is a juxtaposition of the two holidays business is better. As a result, he is hoping for a 10 % jump in sales this year. The article quotes a number of retailers who are anticipating increased numbers and a late sales surge as a result of the way things fall out this year with Hanukah coming so late in December.

Now I must tell you, I had a number of reactions to this article, which I must share with you.

First of all, I am always excited when the name of a Jewish holiday makes the headline of a major newspaper. My initial reaction is to be fascinated by the whole premise. I thought – who are we kidding?! Do these guys have any idea how few of us there really are? Maybe its good they don’t know it, but the truth is we comprise less than three percent of the entire American population, and we are constantly agonizing that our numbers are declining. So I find it incredulous that there are some who really think that we can have such a significant impact on the nation’s economy. In fact, a point not mentioned or considered in the article – is I wonder what the true economic impact of our buying power can be accurately calculated since we usually buy wholesale and not retail anyway.

What a country. What a people.

The underpinning premise of the article actually reflects a profound truism. We Jews have a disproportionate impact on society. Despite our numbers, and how small of a people we are, we have had an astounding influence on the world. Whether it is in the realm of arts, science, politics, ownership of professional sports teams, theater, academics, or business, we can take pride in the achievements of our fellow Jews and marvel at the distorted numbers and over-representation of our people amongst those who lead and excel in all these fields.

December is also the month when the Nobel Prizes are granted, and this people, who on the international scale, are an even smaller minority than in America, will once again have a significant number of recipients.

So in many respects, reading in the Wall Street Journal that this *pintele* people will account for as much as 10% of the nation’s sales, and that we will help propel the economic numbers and forecasts because of when Hanukkah falls is not so surprising. It reflects the consistent trend that throughout history we have a major impact on what happens in the world.

While we can and should be proud of all of this, there is, however, another side to what the article is saying, and I would be remiss if I did not point it out.

The second underlying premise of the article is that Jews buy a lot of gifts for Hanukkah.

I went back and reread the Shulhan Aruch, the authoritative code of Jewish law just to double check and be sure what I am about to say is correct. But nowhere could I find a commandment telling us to buy gifts on Hanukah.

There are plenty of other things we are commanded to do, but this holiday actually is one with the least amount of mitzvot associated with it. It is often referred to as a minor holiday, because it is not mentioned in the Bible or Mishnah. We are enjoined to light the menorah and recite the blessings, and we are told the proper way and time-frame to perform the mitzvah. We are told to celebrate the victory of the Macabees, and to proclaim the miracle of the holiday, but God did not stipulate that gifts need to be given at this time of year.

Far be it from me to be the Grinch who stole Hanukah, and there probably is not too much harm from a little gift giving, but let's face it – If we are single-handedly responsible for a surge in holiday sales, then surely things have gotten excessive and out of hand.

It may be hard to resist all the stimulation, the decorations, the commercials, the sales appeals, the mailings, the music of this season, but let us pause and recall the principle the Macabees were fighting for. They battled against the Assyrians because they opposed the forcible imposition of the Hellenistic way of life upon them. They fought to resist assimilation and to preserve their unique identity as Jews, as a minority in a society which was so predominantly different than their way of life.

Let us draw strength, sustenance and inspiration therefore from their struggle and message. Hanukah is one of many beautiful holidays we have. It is especially beautiful when it is celebrated as a family spending time together, when gathered around the menorah, when singing the songs of the season, when telling the story, when sharing traditional foods of the season. Its meaning is enhanced when it is one of many holidays celebrated. In the context of other sacred times marked in the home and synagogue community, it is especially cherished as a time when warm memories can be created.

Let this, our eternal quest to bring light to the world and to preserve the teachings of our faith then be what is noteworthy about our celebration of Hanukah, and what is noted about our observance of the holiday.

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