

Christmas and Chanukah 2016  
Vayishlah

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
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A few years ago something very rare occurred, something that happens maybe once in a lifetime, about as frequently as Haley's Comet. Chanukah coincided with Thanksgiving. We marveled at the rarity of the event and the quirk of the Jewish calendar that caused the holiday of Chanukah, which for as long as any of us can remember has always come in December to fall in November, which of course, is when Thanksgiving is celebrated. It gave great credence to the famous observation that the Jewish holidays are never "on time". They are always either early or late.

Well, this year, the Jewish holidays are on time. Chanukah is back in December, where it belongs. In fact they are so on time that we have something which is not quite as rare, but which last occurred 11 years ago, and the time before that was 1959 -- the first night of Chanukah falls this year on Christmas eve. There are years when Chanukah has been near Christmas, and there are times when one of the days of Chanukah may include Christmas. After all, the holiday lasts eight days. But this year it actually begins on Christmas eve, or as we Jews refer to it, Erev Christmas.

The year when Chanukah fell on Thanksgiving many rabbis spoke about the convergence of the two holidays and of the similar themes the two share in common. I don't think anyone went so far as to compare the pilgrims to the Macabees, but I, and many of my colleagues drew parallels between the two. We pointed out that Chanukah reminds us to be thankful for the blessing of our faith and tradition, and that it shares certain characteristics with Thanksgiving.

One difference of course between Thanksgiving and Chanukah is that the central theme of most Jewish holidays can be summed up in four short phrases which do not apply to Thanksgiving: They tried to kill us. We fought. We won. Let's eat.

So while we focused at the time on the similarities of the two holidays and the compatibility of the themes of Chanukah and Thanksgiving, as well as the harmony of what Judaism teaches and the openness of our reception and experience in America as Jews, when talking about Christmas and Chanukah it is my obligation as a rabbi to point out the differences between the two.

Some non-Jews are under the mistaken impression that Chanukah is how Jews celebrate Christmas. I can understand the mistake, and am not really all that offended or bothered by it. It all has to do with one's point of reference. After all, Israeli Jews who come to America at this time of year are surprised to see that there are so many Sukkot lights all over the place in December.

Christmas of course is one day, whereas Chanukah lasts eight days. Everyone knows the date of Christmas, but Chanukah moves around and requires a special calendar given to you by a funeral home to figure out when it occurs. Christmas is spelled one way, while I came up with at least seven different ways to spell Chanukah. On Chanukah, we sing songs written and sung by Jews. And on Christmas people sing songs written and sung by Jews.

Just to remind everyone in case you don't know, or have forgotten: Christmas celebrates the birth of the one who the Christian religion teaches is the Messiah and their Savior. It is a sacred holiday with deep religious significance for our friends who celebrate the birth of the one who brought God's message to the world.

In many respects, the Jewish holiday with the closest theological parallel would not be Chanukah, but Shavuot, because that is the holiday that celebrates God giving His message to the world. That is when we recall that we received the Torah at Mt. Sinai and that it is our role as Jews to share that message with our descendants and with the world.

So my message to Jews who are tempted and want to celebrate Christmas is – celebrate Shavuot instead. Admittedly, Shavuot is not as flashy or attractive a holiday. After all, the main thing associated with it is the eating of cheese blintzes. Stores do not hold Shavuot or post-Shavuot sales – not even in Israel.

It may be difficult to resist the stimulation, decorations and commercials that bombard us this time of year about Christmas. It is indeed a beautiful holiday – but we should never forget, it is not our holiday. It is not ours to celebrate.

How ironic that the very thing that Chanukah celebrates, and the principle the Macabees were fighting for was to resist assimilation. They battled the Greek Assyrians precisely because they opposed the adoption of the Hellenistic way of life. As a minority in a society which was so different from their way of life they had the courage to reject it and to go against the grain. They fought to preserve their unique identity as Jews. Because they were victorious in their quest we are here today, while the Greek civilization is not.

In today's Torah portion, Esau suggests that he and Jacob join and continue on their journey together. It seems to be a nice offer. Yet Jacob declines. He offers a lame excuse that the women and children with him will walk at a much slower pace, and he does not wish to be a burden to Esau. He says, go ahead and I will catch up with you, but instead goes elsewhere. Our rabbis say that Jacob chose to not go with Esau because he realized that they are different and that it would not be beneficial to preserving his family's identity if he were to submit to Esau's suggestion to go together.

In other words, Judaism teaches us to accept our differences. We need not all be alike. The world would be boring if there were only one flavor of ice cream and everything was the same.

Chanukah is a time for families and friends to gather together, to tell the story, to light the menorah, and share traditional cholesterol heavy food. It is a time to create memories – uniquely Jewish memories. It is a time to rejoice in our freedom and to reaffirm the holiday's message, a time to remember that our ancestors throughout history struggled to maintain and perpetuate our religion and heritage. Let us light the menorah and continue to bring light to the world by illuminating our homes with the observance and practice of the faith the Macabees fought so hard to preserve.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Congregation B'nai Tzedek  
Potomac, MD  
December 17, 2016  
[potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org](mailto:potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org)*