

Shabbat Chanukah 5781

Chag urim sameach! Happy Chanukah!

Chanukah is one of the most popular and enduring of Jewish holidays. Even Jews who are highly assimilated, who never go to shul or do anything “religious,” will still eat some latkes, light a menorah, and at least here in North America, give gifts, especially to their children.

Lighting a menorah of course is the main point of the holiday. The Talmud tells us that lighting one candle per day is enough to fulfill the commandment; the most zealous of the zealous add a candle for each night so that on the last night of Chanukah we have 8 candles, plus the shamash. So even the most religiously lax amongst us is counted as one of the most zealous for this week.

We also understand the origin of the custom of eating latkes, jelly doughnuts, and other things that aren't healthy this week – it's all about the “miracle of the oil.”

And then there's giving gifts, which for kids anyway may seem to be the essence of the holiday. One of the hit new Chanukah songs this year “Puppy for Chanukah,” from Jewish, African-American, rapper and Hamilton star Daveed Diggs. His song celebrates how Chanukah is better than Christmas.

Some kids write lists for they Christmas gifts
And they send 'em all off to they Santas
But I don't trip off a list for my gifts
I'mma get it cause I got eight chances
That's right, eight nights, festival of lights
Go hard for a week with a plus one
So y'all keep stressin', be good, learn lessons
But Hanukkah is the best fun

So, what is it with the gifts? Is that really a Jewish custom? Or is it the adoption of a Christian custom, so the Jewish kids won't feel left out?

It turns out this question is more complicated than you might think. Many people get it wrong, because they neglect to ask an important first question: where does the custom of giving gifts at Christmas come from?

Many Christians think it's an ancient custom, perhaps tied to the gifts the three wise men brought to the birth of Jesus. But research shows it wasn't really a custom in North America until the mid-1800s.

In the early 1800s in America, Christmas per se was not a big deal. But December was a time of "social inversion," when poor people would demand food and drink from the wealthy and celebrate in the streets. This was a holdover from agrarian days, when December was a down time and the peasant farmers had a lot of free time. The elites basically wanted to turn Christmas into a home-centered holiday so as to get away from the general revelry through the month of December. Encouraging parents to give gifts to children was part of the process of turning Christmas into a home-based holiday. Santa Claus with his armfuls of gifts became a thing in the 1860s. By the turn of the century marketers figured out that advertising toys to children was a way to get them to nag their parents into buying them.

What happened with the Jews was a somewhat parallel process. Giving presents was not part of the ancient Chanukah rituals. Back in the 17th century there was a Sefardic custom to provide for students and buy clothes for both pupils and teachers at Chanukah time. Perhaps this custom came about because the Hebrew word for education, *chinuch*, has the same root as Chanukah. In the 19th century in Eastern Europe the custom of giving children a little Chanukah gelt, money, developed. It seems that the custom of Chanukah gelt was borrowed from the Christians, who followed an ancient Roman custom of giving children money on holidays.

Giving gifts at Chanukah, at least for Jews in North America, is a custom that seems to have started in the 1880s. In 19th century America, Chanukah was a very neglected holiday. Many Jews didn't even know when Chanukah was, and they didn't light candles. In the early 1900s the Yiddish press actively encouraged parents to give their children "Chanukah presents" so as to increase the youngsters' enthusiasm for the holiday. Much in the same way that earlier Christians in America encouraged parents to buy children presents for Christmas to make it more attractive to their children. By the 1920s the Yiddish press was advertising everything from cars to waffle irons as Chanukah presents.

Just as Christians have had to cope with the commercialization of Christmas, Jews have had to cope with the over-commercialization of Chanukah and have had to work to make sure children know there's more to the holiday than getting presents.

It seems that instead of adopting a Christian custom, Jews and Christians both were responding to similar outside forces – and were using gifts as a way to strengthen and reinforce a holiday that wasn't getting the attention that many felt it deserved. This also probably explains why giving presents became a Jewish custom, but the “Chanukah bush” did not – trees are seen as too much a specifically Christian thing, not something that Jews have ever done. Also, since Christians in the “old country” didn't give Christmas presents, Jewish immigrants to America were able to see giving presents this time of year as an American custom, not a Christian custom. And they were eager to adopt American customs!

Now that we have a well ingrained custom in our community of giving gifts at Chanukah, we can add Jewish meaning to the custom. There are several ways we can do this. The very first Chanukah was celebrated in the Temple, and sacrifices were offered – gifts from us to God. Chanukah is also a celebration of the rededication of the Temple, and in the Torah we're given a long list of the gifts that were brought at the dedication of the predecessor to the Temple, the Mishkan or Tabernacle.

Even though Chanukah gelt may originated with Eastern European Jews adopting local norms, we can also find a Jewish reason for that custom – the Talmud teaches us that everyone, even poor people are obligated to light Chanukah candles. So Chanukah gelt is a way to give tzedakah, and to make sure everyone can celebrate the holiday.

Some people would say all of this is inappropriate cultural appropriation. Shouldn't everyone keep to their own customs without imitating or stealing other people's customs?

Cultural appropriation is inevitable whenever different cultures come into contact with each other. No one really knows when Jesus was born. Some biblical scholars think it was in the spring; some astronomers think he was born in October, others in the summer. So why is his birthday celebrated on

December 25? It was cultural appropriation from a Roman holiday, Saturnalia. As the Christians won over pagan converts, they didn't want to give up a fun holiday, so the Christians gave Christian meaning and spin to an older holiday.

Jews have a long history of doing the same thing: we take a custom that may have non-Jewish origins, and put a Jewish "spin" on it, as in the *shalosh regalim* being adopted from older pagan harvest festivals that fell at those times of years. Any casual observer would assume that many of the Sukkot rituals, for example, waving agricultural products in the air and beating willows until the leaves fall off, must have pagan origins. The whole structure of the seder is another example of Jewish cultural appropriation: it was modeled on the Greek symposium.

Even what for many of us is the essential symbol of Chanukah – the latke – comes from cultural appropriation. Jews didn't invent potato pancakes. They are, in fact, the national dish of Belarus and Slovakia. But when potatoes were introduced to Eastern Europe – and with them potato pancakes – the Jews said, "What a great way to celebrate Chanukah! Lots of oil!"

Enjoy your latkes and Chanukah presents. As much as Jews think of themselves as a people apart, we are also very much a part of, and are influenced by, the cultures that surround us. And we in turn have an outsize impact on those cultures. Such mixing is normal, and it's a good thing – it gives us a way to be a part of the world around us, while still being uniquely Jewish by adding our interpretation. The Germans eat latkes either salty or sweet, with apple sauce; but a great Jewish innovation is to eat them with BOTH sour cream and apple sauce!

Chag sameach