

Hanukkah and the Other December Dilemmas

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Hopefully you saw **our December newsletter on intermarriage**, but as the Festival of Lights begins, it is appropriate to note that not every "December Dilemma" has anything whatsoever to do with intermarriage. Tonight begins Hanukkah, a holiday defined in America by its awkward juxtaposition with Christmas -- a juxtaposition which is the source of much consternation, but also, perhaps, an entirely appropriate layer of meaning. Here are a few publications on the subject.

High school student Jessica Schutz tells the story of her family's "Hanukkah bush" and her own response: "I was forced to question my identity as a Jew. What kind of Jew was I? What entitled me to bear that title, besides birth to a Jewish mother?"

Nancy Wallack looks at Hanukkah cards and **doesn't like what she sees:**

Jews' beefing up of Chanukah celebrations to console our children (and perhaps ourselves), has crept into cards mixing Christmas and Chanukah, gentile and Jewish imagery. Mealy-mouthed "seasons greetings" are joined with wishes for "Shalom." My guess is that the Shalom is a straight translation of the Christian concept of the coming of or the promise of peace, in the birth of the Prince of Peace. Carolers sing, "Peace on earth, good will to men," why not extend this to our friends the Jews?

Steven Greenberg seeks **"a plausible meaning of Hanukkah"** that can be shared with non-Jewish friends and neighbors, specifically thinking of the common situation of explaining the holiday to public schoolchildren. He settles on two:

1. Hanukkah celebrates the strength it takes to be different. The Jewish people had a different way of looking at the world than their Greek

neighbors. Although they learned much from Greek culture, Jews were proud of their very different way of living life. Everyone knows what it's like to be in the minority. We all are, in some way, different from the pack. It takes a lot of courage to be unique, to like yourself when you march to a different drummer. It takes even more courage to fight for what you believe in. Hanukkah celebrates the freedom everyone needs to be a little, or sometimes a lot different, from the majority.

2. Hanukkah means rededication. When Judah rededicated the Temple, he was also rededicating his people to their vision of the world, the Jewish dream of a world of justice and goodness. Justice and goodness are easier to talk about than to do. It takes a lot of work. Anyone can get tired working for even the greatest of goals. That's why rededication is so important. We all need a "Hanukkah" to remind us of our dreams as we work in small ways to make them happen, little by little, every day.

A final thought, in synthesis of these three perspectives: if a holiday can be seen as, in addition to a time to celebrate, a challenge to us to live up to that holiday's message, then Hanukkah's juxtaposition with Christmas could not possibly be more appropriate. As Wallack laments, it is true that Christmas often threatens to engulf Hanukkah and replace its native meanings. But, as Schutz discovers, this confrontation can crystallize the questions we must ask ourselves as Jews, and force us to ask them. The season may be a difficult time to be different, but as Rabbi Greenberg notes, it is an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to being different.

ag urim samea!