

Chanukah and Xmas

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

To the memory of Dr. Daniel Cammerman, a good, brilliant person, and a much-admired and respected pediatrician, taken tragically too soon from us. May his memory be a blessing.

This week I was asked by a non-Jewish friend, whether atonement plays a part in Chanukah as it does in Xmas. At first, I did not understand the question. But then it got me thinking of the differences between the two festivals.

Whereas Xmas is one of the two most important days in the Christian calendar, Chanukah comes much lower down in priority in Judaism. In reality, there is no equivalence. Other than the coincidence of the season. Or perhaps in some much earlier celebration of the winter solstice.

Firstly, Chanukah is a post-Biblical, rabbinic festival. Biblical festivals outrank it and take priority. Not only festivals but every Shabbat, each week, are much more important. Whereas the Talmud mentions Chanukah in passing and with only a few paragraphs, whole folios are devoted to Shabbat and Biblical festivals.

Secondly, whereas Christmas is an absolute core element in the Christian faith, Chanukah is essentially a historical nationalist celebration of survival. It is marginal theologically.

Chanukah was always controversial. The victory of Judah Maccabee over the Syrian Greeks led to the recovery of the Temple and a measure of Judean independence. But the victory was never a complete one. It was a civil war too. Many Jews favored Graeco-Roman culture and assimilation. For them, it was more important to be part of the Roman Empire and its cultures. The Maccabees stood for a commitment to traditional Judaism and national identity. Not very different from Jewish life today.

After Judah's generation, the Hasmonean dynasty slowly declined. It became a corrupt, Roman client in constant conflict with religious values and authorities (with the exception of Queen Salome Alexander). And this is probably why the two contemporary Books of the Maccabees were not included in

the Jewish Biblical Canon. They were preserved mainly by Christians who saw the books as a manifestation of Jewish failure. And justification for the rise of Christianity as a more successful religion. There is even a theory that the name Judah Maccabee came to be associated negatively with the Judah who betrayed Jesus.

Although Judah did indeed re-dedicate the Temple (which is what Chanukah actually means), there is no record of the miracle of the lights on the Temple until long after the Hasmoneans. This is why the Rabbis of the Talmud emphasized the miracle of the oil rather than the Maccabee victory. Judah was not even mentioned. Whereas the Temple Candelabrum of the Miracle of the oil which has Biblical status, was seven-branched, the candelabrum used for Chanukah has eight. This underlines its lower order of priority. Another distinction between the sanctity of the Temple and a more mundane celebration.

By the time of the Talmud, the Romans had almost obliterated Jewish life in Israel. The violent uprisings of 70 CE, the responses to the Trajan and Hadrianic persecutions and of course the Bar Cochba revolt had all been disasters for Judaism. So that celebrating military victory seemed less appropriate to Jewish values and survival than negotiation. By medieval times, Chanukah regained its triumphalism precisely because Jews were beginning to seek an escape from constant oppression and humiliation. As Christmas came to be associated with oppression and the attempts to convert the Jews, Chanukah became a statement of defiance again. The lights in the window were there to publicize the miracle of our survival and also an assertion of our identity in public as well as private.

The ways we celebrate Chanukah now are different from Christmas. There is no tradition of going specially to the synagogue more than any other day. Festivities center on the home rather than the synagogue. We play with dreidels and gamble for nuts and cards as a nod towards fate, and the hope that our circumstances would change. Gambling is something we shouldn't do, in theory, during the rest of the year. Apart from the lights, we eat cakes, donuts fried in oil to parallel the oil of the lamps. But otherwise, life carries on normally until dusk when we light up. There are none of the restrictions of not working on Shabbat and Festivals.

It is true that today many Jews imitate Christmas with presents. I guess as a way of making their children feel they are not hard done by being different in a world where everyone else gets gifts. In my youth, we did not give or receive presents specifically for Chanuka but we did get Chanukah Gelt, usually small denominations! In the diaspora, we cannot avoid being aware of Christmas. But in many of our enclaves and in Israel at this time of the year, there is no competition. What goes on outside, passes largely

unnoticed.

Then there was the question I was asked about atonement on Chanukah. For Christians, Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus and that is, of course, a happy occasion. But the tragedy of the crucifixion is present at Christmas, as much as joy. Jesus in death atoned for their sins. The Christian Mass involved the solemn act of atonement. The imagery of the church was one of suffering on the cross. So that being in Church on Christmas, in itself resonates with the idea of atonement. It is true that we too ask for forgiveness every day in our prayers for our misdeeds. But the awesome concept of atonement in the theological sense is reserved primarily for the Ten Days of Penitence.

We don't, as a rule, mix solemnity with happy occasions. The Bible uses the word joy, *Simcha*, with regard to festivals more than any other descriptive term. Chanukah still counts as a festival. It is a celebration of survival, which is overwhelmingly joyous. Atonement would be casting too serious a pall on a festivity.

Whereas Chanukah is a Jewish national celebration, Christmas, at least in its theory, is universal. Goodwill and peace to all mankind. Sadly in human affairs, however great our ideas are in terms of our love for humanity as well as loyalty to our specific traditions, the theory too often is distorted and diminished by those who profess their religiosity. Humans have this capacity of thinking the loftiest ideals and practicing the worst betrayal of them.

None of this should suggest any lack of respect for other traditions and festivities. We should all strive to increase the amount of fraternity and wellbeing in the world. We should greet our Christian friends and neighbors and be happy with their happiness. While naturally being thankful for our different traditions. And as for joy, the more the merrier.