

Twelfth Night

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As a child, I liked to feel how fortunate I was to have eight days of Chanukah, whereas the non-Jews only had one day. But then I learned that was not quite correct, they had twelve. In theory at least.

One of Shakespeare's most loved comedies is "Twelfth Night." What is the Twelfth Night? There's no clue in the play itself which is one of his most popular. It has inspired many dramatic and cinematic adaptations over the centuries. Nowadays we might say its focus is on complicated issues of gender, class, and same-sex attraction. But Shakespeare most definitely was not woke.

It is a comedy of disguises. A twin brother and sister, Viola and Sebastian, are shipwrecked off the coast of Illyria (the eastern coast of the Adriatic). They both assume the other has drowned. Viola disguises herself as a man called Cesario and gets a job working for Duke Orsino. The Duke is wooing a rich lady called Olivia who is in mourning for her father and brother. Viola as Cesario is sent to persuade Olivia of Orsino's merits. But Olivia falls in love with Cesario while Viola is in love with the Duke. In a comic subplot involving Olivia's pompous and unpopular steward Malvolio, he has been fooled into thinking Olivia loves him and makes a complete fool of himself. Olivia has Malvolio locked away.

Meanwhile, Viola's twin, Sebastian, has been rescued and he adds to the confusion of mistaken identities. Assuming Sebastian is Cesario, Olivia asks him to marry her. Cesario and Sebastian come together, and everyone is amazed at their physical similarity. Viola reveals her identity and is reunited with her twin brother. Duke Orsino marries Viola, Sebastian Olivia. All's well that ends well. This is also the title of another of Shakespeare's comedies. Everyone ends up happy. Even Malvolio is placated.

Shakespeare simply called his play Twelfth Night or What You Will, because it was written as a celebration of the twelfth night of Christmas. This last night of the Christmas season is sometimes called the Eve of the Epiphany.

Christmas, (or Nittel in Yiddish) is the annual festival commemorating the birth of a nice Jewish boy called Yeshua, or Jesus to the rest of the world. It is observed by many Christians on December 25 and it is supposed

to last for twelve days, commemorating The Apostles. It culminates, on the twelfth night which is sometimes called the Eve of Epiphany.

Most Christians celebrate Christmas on December 25 in the Gregorian Calendar, which has been adopted almost universally for civil calendars. However, some of the Orthodox Eastern churches celebrate Christmas on December 25 of the older Julian Calendar, which currently corresponds to January 7 in the Gregorian Calendar. On the other hand, the Armenian Church in the Holy Land celebrates the Nativity on January 18th and 19th. There are at least four different dates used by different Christian groups to mark the birthday.

And just as we have our skeptics and academic reductionists, so do they. Christmas does not appear on the lists of festivals given by the early Christian writers. The earliest reference to it is in Rome in 336 CE. It was recorded in Constantinople in 379 CE, in Antioch in 388 CE, and in Alexandria a year later.

December 25 was also the date of the winter solstice (when the earth's North Pole is at its furthest distance from the sun) according to the Roman Calendar, which was when the Romans used to worship the sun (not the son) god Sol Invictus. This cult was established by Aurelian in 274 CE.

As with most pagan festivals it was associating with drunkenness and other misbehavior. As a result, the Puritans banned Christmas in England and in America in the 17th century. It became a legal holiday in 1660 when King Charles the 2nd was restored. He was a good Catholic as well as loving fun. In the early 19th century, the Anglican Church tried to jazz up its image. Christmas became a public holiday in 1834 with the approval of William IV. Holly and Mistletoe go back as far as the druids.

In America, commercial interests introduced Christmas in the nineteenth century as a national festival of presents, cards, stockings, and trees with lights. It was Coca-Cola that introduced us to Santa Claus in Coca Cola's colors with his sleigh and reindeer from Greenland. A long way removed from a manger in Bethlehem.

If you think that there are too many different customs and rituals in Judaism and we have far too many sects and dispensations, just pity the Christians. Except as they number in the billions and we are in the lower millions. Though from the media you'd think the numbers are reversed.

The faithful don't really care how a custom came about, why, or what for. It's a custom. And if it involves fun, food, drink and presents so much the better? It certainly beats fasting. All societies have them and celebrate them. It's what humans do.

As we say nowadays, Happy Holidays, whether it's Chanukah, Xmas or Kwanza, Twelfth Night, New Year, Sylvester or Hogmanay (awae the Scots). Just be happy!