

Let's put back "Chanukkah" into Chanukkah

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Abstract: "I think just about all of us are troubled by the excessive materialism that has all but obliterated the real spirit of all the December holidays, whether that be Christmas or Chanukkah or Kwanzaa. How do we reclaim the true meaning of Chanukkah and the real spirit of this winter festival?"

The focus of my teaching tonight is "Let's put back Chanukkah into Chanukkah." By this I mean: how do we reclaim the true meaning of Chanukkah and the real spirit of this winter festival?

I think just about all of us are troubled by the excessive materialism that has all but obliterated the real spirit of all the December holidays, whether that be Christmas or Chanukkah or Kwanzaa.

How should we celebrate Chanukkah? Chanukkah should be celebrated with perspective and restraint. Chanukkah is a relatively minor holiday in Judaism. It was not ordained by God. There is no mention of it in the Torah. Chanukkah was a holiday created by human beings, the famous Maccabees, and recorded in their historical books.

How do we put back the Chanukkah in Chanukkah? We do it by shifting the focus of our Chanukkah celebration from the consumption of things to the consumption of moral values and religious virtues; from the giving of material gifts to the giving of gifts of the heart. This festival of Chanukkah affirms many wonderful humanitarian values: religious diversity and freedom, might does not make right, the few can overcome the many, miracles can and do occur.

Chanukkah always falls near the winter solstice, literally the darkest day of the year. In the midst of all that darkness, we kindle light. This ritual teaches us that even at our personal moments of deepest darkness, there is still reason for hope. Our Chanukkah ritual reminds us of what comes immediately after the darkest moment of the night...why, of course, it is the dawn!

Furthermore, the ritual of kindling one more light each night of Chanukkah, of augmenting the light, symbolizes our responsibility to bring more light and more Godliness into our oftentimes cold, cruel, and lonely world. On Chanukkah, we banish the darkness of winter and bring warmth and light and caring wherever we go.

Above all, let us remember that the word Chanukkah means "dedication." Just as the Maccabees rededicated the great temple in Jerusalem to Judaism, so too Chanukkah calls upon us not just to kindle candles, but to rededicate ourselves to our Jewish faith and people, to rededicate ourselves to Jewish learning and to Jewish living.

Our festival of Chanukkah is much more than a holiday for children. As delightful as they are, Chanukkah is so much more than dreidels and latkes. Chanukkah is a holy time that offers a beautiful, substantive, and serious message. “As we prepare to kindle the lights of Chanukkah, let us pray for a world of greater lights and lessened darkness, greater soulfulness and lessened materialism, greater joy and lessened sorrow...and above all, the light of peace and freedom which we pray will illuminate the world” (Rabbi S. Zimmerman).

May your celebration of Chanukkah be filled with illumination, with light, and with love.