



The Chanukah Hangup

by Earl Shorris

THE ANSWER TO THE “Prayer for the Conversion of the Jews” is Santa Claus. That jolly red myth and his elves, Bing Crosby, and the Macy Thanksgiving Day Parade, are far more effective proselytizers than were the Legions of Rome or the tortures of the Inquisition. On the morning of December 25 the bearded devil seems almost inexorable. To keep himself from being trampled by the golden calf of Christmas the Jew has been forced to dip once again into that much used bag in which he keeps his tricks of survival. The trick he has come up with this time is Chanukah.

What is Chanukah? To a Jewish child it is just like Christmas, except Irving Berlin didn’t write a song about Chanukah. For the older children there are some other distinctions, but to a four-year-old boy a red wagon is a red wagon, a turkey leg is delicious and an evergreen tree draped with colored lights is beautiful. What does he care about Christmas or Chanukah? He’s not taking a course in comparative religion; he’s having a good time. Which is exactly what his parents want him to think and do. Chanukah and Christmas come and go: the problem of explaining the difference between Jews and Christians in a Christian nation is avoided; the assimilation goes on un-

impeded and extinction by conversion is staved off again.

The disproportionate celebration of Chanukah, which is both the adoption of a Christian custom and a defense against the inroads of Christianity, is symbolic of the tightrope on which the American Jew must walk. If he falls off to one side he becomes “clannish,” moves back into the ghetto; if he falls off to the other side he becomes a Unitarian. It is a problem with which the Jew has little experience. For the most part he has lived in a ghetto or a ghetto nation, where his contact with Gentiles was limited to the marketplace. And as the Gentile was not fond of the Jew, the Jew had little use for the Gentile. Even a generation ago the Jew from Chicago who told the Jew from New York that there were a hundred thousand Jews and four million Gentiles in Chicago was asked, “Four million goyim? Tell me, do you need so many?” The Jew in the process of assimilation does not enjoy that kind of “chosen people” story; if he has been out of the ghetto long enough he may not even get the joke.

By Old World standards the American Jew of the ’60s is not even Jewish: he works and rides on the Sabbath, he goes out for lunch on Yom Kippur, he likes ham and eggs for breakfast, and he doesn’t know Talmud from tuchus

about being a Jew. The only real connection between him and his forefathers is that they share the same God, and even there the God of Moses is giving way to a nicer, more forgiving God. But as nice as the God of the Jews has become, he remains a problem. It's not an easy thing to be stuck with an entirely nonanthropomorphic God. The Magi can bring gifts to the product of a Virgin Birth, but how can you wrap a concept in swaddling clothes? When a Jewish child asks his father about God, the father inevitably winds up trying to define the universe. That was hard enough for Einstein, but as a dialogue between a retailer and his five-year-old daughter it's hopeless. On the other hand, when the child asks him why Jews don't celebrate Christmas, he has a better answer: "Because we have Chanukah."

Chanukah or Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday (not a holy day) of very little importance. So far, it has not even merited an agreement on a proper English name. It is either the "Festival of Lights," the "Feast of Dedication" or the "Feast of the Maccabees." Whatever its name, it lasts eight days and celebrates the defeat of the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes and the purification and rededication of the Temple by a band of guerrillas under the leadership of Judah* Maccabee or Maccabeus (from Makbi, the hammer) in 165 B.C. It's a pretty good story. If there had been a love interest for Judah, DeMille might have made another epic.

The Maccabees are actually heroes on two counts: they not only defeated the Greek (Antiochus was a Syrian king of the Seleucid dynasty) Army, they chased Hellenism out of the Temple. From the time of Alexander's conquests until Antiochus ascended to the throne of Syria and named himself Epiphanes (the manifest God) in 175 B.C., Hellenism had been making inroads into Israel. The country was divided between the Hasidim (Pious or Puritans) and the Letzim (Hellenists). It is not hard to understand why so many Jews turned to Hellenism: it was more fun. Judaism, with its stress on moral law and its striving for holiness through obedience, was hardly a match for a philosophy that encouraged complete self-expression. Judaism was on the way out when Antiochus IV decided to finish it off. His first move was to maneuver a Hellenist into the position of high priest. The Jews submitted to this until they heard that Antiochus had been killed in Egypt. Then they revolted, killed the Hellenist priests and took over the Temple again. But the report of Antiochus' death turned out to be only a rumor. He came back with a vengeance, sending 22,000 soldiers into Israel to enforce

an edict banning the practice of all Jewish customs and forcing the Jews to perform Hellenistic rites.

The Syrian Army looted the Temple, burned whole villages, and sold women and children into slavery. The Jews mourned the martyred while the numbers of the martyred increased. In the face of persecution, however, those who had accepted Hellenism returned to the Law of Moses. The first Jew to resist was an old Hasid called Mattathias, who lived in the town of Modin, north of Jerusalem. He saw a Greek soldier forcing a Jew to sacrifice a pig to Zeus. It was more than the old man could bear. He killed both the Greek and the Jew.

REVOLT HAD BEGUN. Mattathias, his five sons and a group of Hasidim fled into the mountains, where they established a small guerrilla army. Though there was not a single trained soldier among them, they were able to conduct successful night raids on the Syrian encampments. Mattathias led them until, on his deathbed, he appointed his son, Judah, to take his place. Under Judah the army grew. The destructiveness of the raids increased. The Jews began to call him Judah the Hammer.

The band of guerrillas would probably not have been allowed to grow into an army of thousands had Antiochus not been occupied with a war in the East, because as soon as he was able to turn his attention back to Israel, he sent an army of 50,000 foot soldiers and horsemen to put down the insurrection.

Judah was a shrewd general. He waited for the Syrians, knowing they had to march through the pass of Emmaus to reach his mountain camp. He ambushed the Syrians at the pass and defeated them. A second, formal battle was fought at Mizpah. There the Syrians were so sure they would defeat the outnumbered Jews that they brought slave merchants and slave chains with them. This time the victory of the Maccabees was decisive. Judah the Hammer was able to lead his troops into Jerusalem. On the 25th day of Kislev the Temple was rededicated. But the Maccabees had another problem. There was only enough oil to keep the holy lights burning for a single day, and it would take eight days to prepare more oil. They went ahead with the rededication, and miraculously, the small cask of oil burned for eight days. Judah decreed that the Jews should celebrate the miracle and the rededication each year by burning lights, adding a new light each day for eight days. That eight-day period is called Chanukah.

In case you wonder what happened to the Maccabees after the rededication in 165 B.C., all of them were killed in later battles with the Syrians but Simon, who became High Priest of Israel following the withdrawal of the Syrians in 142 B.C.

* The name Judah is also translated as Judas. Although the Pope has now set the statute of limitations at 99 generations, I feel a certain reluctance to explain the Jewish celebration of the deeds of a man called Judas.

THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE of Chanukah is negligible; if the Jewish holidays were to be listed in order of importance, Chanukah would be very near the end of the list. The Chanukah ceremony, the lighting of the candles, is performed at home each night at sundown. It is usually done by a boy who sings the blessings in faltering Hebrew. The boy wears an embroidered blue and white yamelke. His voice is changing. His father is bald and wears a tan, snap-brim fedora. In the kitchen the mother is preparing dinner. Up and down the street the Christmas tree lights are being turned on. The boy sings only two short blessings, neglecting the long passages which close the service, "The Grecians were gathered against me in the days of the Hasmoneans; they broke down the walls of my towers, and defiled all the oils; but from one of the last remaining flasks a miracle was wrought for thy beloved, and their men of understanding appointed these eight days for song and praises.

"Uncover thy holy arm, and bring near the day of Salvation; do so we pray thee, for thy name's sake, that we may be saved, for slow is our deliverance in coming, and there is no end to the days of evil; thrust the shedder of blood into the shadow of darkness and raise over us seven shepherds." The candles are lit. The father and the children make gentlemen's bets on which will last the longest. Chanukah is celebrated. There would be nothing more to it if the rededication of the Temple had not come in the month of Kislev, which corresponds to December. There never was anything more until the Jews began to be assimilated into a Christian society.

"But how can you deprive the Children? Chanukah is for the children," is one explanation, meaning that Christian children get presents; why should the Jewish children do without? Chanukah grew in importance by generations: the grandparents said, "For Christmas you'll get a hole from a bagel; for Chanukah you'll get Chanukah gelt," which meant a nickel or a dime on each night.

The parents gave presents, but always during Chanukah and never wrapped in Christmas gift paper. The children set up a Chanukah Bush for their children and open the presents on Christmas morning. In some houses the Chanukah Bush is an evergreen tree hung with bagels, in others it is a Christmas tree complete with chalky angels and a glowing, five-pointed star. Perhaps in some houses there is a nativity scene beneath the Chanukah Bush.

In some cities — El Paso, Texas, is one — there is a Chanukah outdoor decoration contest among the members of the Jewish community, and during Chanukah the rabbis ride from house to house observing strings of shiny letters that read HAPPY CHANUKAH and giant, electrified Menorahs. I do not know whether the Orthodox Rabbi

and the Reformed Rabbi ride on the same night. They do, however, judge only their own flock. What would a Reformed Rabbi know about Orthodox Chanukah decorations? The newspapers there have not yet taken to printing pictures of the prettiest Chanukah decorations, but that time does not seem too far distant.

If you ask a Jew whose house is decorated with multi-colored Chanukah lights why he has done this, he will tell you, "It's to show that I'm proud to be a Jew." But if he's so proud to be a Jew, why does he go to so much trouble to act like a Christian? Why doesn't he turn off the Chanukah Bush and buy his children a dreidel, the four-sided metal top which was brought to America by the Jews of Eastern Europe and is the only true tradition of Chanukah other than the lighting of the candles? He can't. If he turns off the Chanukah Bush, he will find Santa Claus lurking in the darkness, ready to snatch away his children.

Judaism and Hellenism were irreconcilable; in the time of the Maccabees the choice was clear. But is there a Judeo-Christian tradition? And is the disproportionate celebration of Chanukah and all that it symbolizes only a sign of Jewish acceptance of the idea of such a tradition? While Jewish theologians debate the existence of a Judeo-Christian tradition, the Jewish traditions die out; the sons of the old men who put on their tfillin every morning and said mincha own sing-along Christmas records.

THE JEW HAS ALWAYS RETURNED to the God of Abraham when he was in trouble, as when the persecutions by Antiochus united the Jews in the time of the Maccabees. Today, the Christian and the Jew are aware of a common danger from the East. Perhaps that's why they are both more willing to unite under a banner of Judeo-Christian tradition. After all, how different are they really? In December both Christians and Jews exchange gifts and decorate their houses. In December the Jews talk of thrusting the shedder of blood into the shadows of darkness while seven shepherds are raised over them, and the Christians talk of peace on earth, goodwill toward men. For the Christians it is just that — talk. Whether the Jews take the idea any more seriously is hard to tell, since the Jews do not have enough power to demonstrate their corruption. If we can assume a common deceitfulness, only one thing keeps the Jew and the Christian from complete union under the banner of the golden calf each December: the Jew, for the life of him (at times) cannot understand why the Christians persist in calling that Hasid from Nazareth the Son of God.

Earl Shorris' new novel Ofay will be published next February by Delacorte Press.

