



Rabbi Weiner's Dec. 2007 Bulletin Article

We will soon observe the wonderful holiday of Chanukah. There is something about this holiday that attracts the attention of Jews like perhaps no other holiday. Maybe it is the simple yet compelling Mitzvah of lighting the *Chanukiyah* for eight nights to recall the rededication of the Holy Temple after its defilement at the hands of the Syrian Greeks. Or perhaps it is the great military victory achieved by the Macabees, the struggle of the righteous few against the larger and more powerful enemy who sought to uproot the practice of Judaism in the land of Israel. There is something special about this holiday. Only Passover is observed as widely and passionately in the Jewish community.

These traditional explanations of Chanukah tell a powerful story. But the historical sources from the time period from which Chanukah emerged also tell another story as well. A strong case can be made that the Jewish community of the land of Israel was under enormous pressure from the Syrian Greeks. But another strong case can be made for the argument that the struggle was actually a civil war within the Jewish community between those Jews who had completely assimilated into the larger Hellenist (Greek) culture which had first been introduced into the land of Israel by Alexander the Great in the third century BCE, and those who had not. The Hellenist culture proved enormously appealing to many of the conquered peoples throughout the Middle East, and a goodly portion of our ancestors were as well. The influence of Greek culture, philosophy, and even values had an enormous impact on the development of the Jewish religion as we practice it today. Whether it is the philosophy of Maimonides, the Passover Seder, even in the way we deduce interpretations from our traditional sources, the prevailing value system of that time continues to exert influence over our practice and understanding of Judaism today. Against those who wanted to completely to assimilate were large numbers of Jews who wanted to maintain their Jewish identity, and our unique way of life.

Every Jewish community that has ever existed has absorbed the practices, values, and norms of the larger surrounding culture. The distinctive clothing that marks dress code of a Hasidic Jew is not found in classical Jewish sources, but rather represents the dress of the Polish nobility in 18th century Poland. The *afikoman* so beloved by our children during the Passover Seder reminds us of the dessert served at Greek high society dinners. (Indeed *afikoman* is a Greek word) The sermon, which is such a prominent part of our Shabbat services in the United States of America, was influenced by its prominent role in a Protestant

religious worship. In addition to observances and practices that are rooted solely in the Jewish sources, every community that has cared about maintaining Jewish life has also assimilated certain values and practices from the outside while casting away others.

So how is the determination made? What separated the Jews who wanted to fully assimilate, and those who wished to carry on the tradition. The answer is found in the very name for this holiday. Chanukah literally means dedication, in this case the re-dedication of the Holy Temple. But the Hebrew root of the word Chanukah is *chinch*, which means education. The differences between the two camps in the Jewish community were those who wish to carry on the tradition by dedicating themselves, that is teaching and learning the Jewish heritage so that they decided was essentially Jewish and worthy of practice, and those who were willing to cast off all of their Jewish identity and practice and simply adopt the faith and culture of others. Chanukah tells the story of this struggle long ago. But it remains an important aspect of our Jewish life today.

We live in the most open and free Jewish community that has ever existed. But nonetheless we must struggle to assert our identity in a culture that often impels us in another direction. Do we allow the school calendar to determine when we can go to synagogue? Or will we at times tell our children that though school is important, there are certain times that we must absent ourselves from school so that we might participate more fully in Jewish life. Will we tell our employers that we must take off on certain Jewish holidays, or will we allow others to decide which holidays are significant to us. When we think about those we appoint as our leaders, will the American values of autonomy independence, and individualism help us to decide which candidates are worthy of our votes, or will Judaism's concern for the elderly, the poor, and the sick prove more influential. These are but a few of the questions before us. Only by educating ourselves about our beautiful heritage and the sharing of its values with our families can insure that we are strengthening ourselves as Jews, and assimilating the best of the surrounding culture, not its worst.

The original Chanukah was first observed long ago. But the story it tells and more importantly the light that it offers continue to challenge us today. Will we be as courageous as the generations that preceded us?



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