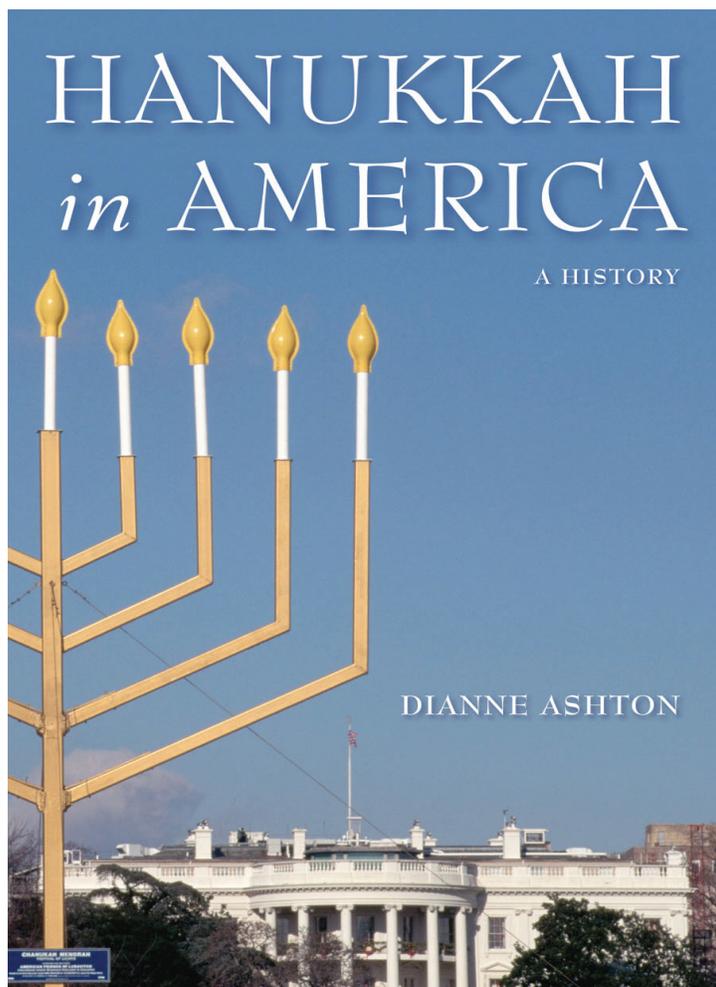


HANUKKAH IN AMERICA

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



In New Orleans, Hanukkah means decorating your door with a menorah made of hominy grits. Latkes in Texas are seasoned with cilantro and cayenne pepper. Children in Cincinnati sing Hanukkah songs and eat oranges and ice cream. While each tradition springs from its own unique set of cultural references, what ties them together is that they all celebrate a holiday that is different in America than it is any place else. For the past two hundred years, American Jews have been transforming the ancient holiday of Hanukkah from a simple occasion into something grand. Each year, as they retell its story and enact its customs, they bring their ever-changing perspectives and desires to its celebration. Providing an attractive alternative to the Christian dominated December, rabbis and lay people alike have addressed contemporary hopes by fashioning an authentically Jewish festival that blossomed in their American world.

The ways in which Hanukkah was reshaped by American Jews reveals the changing goals and values that emerged among different contingents each December as they confronted the reality of living as a religious minority in the United States. Bringing together clergy and laity, artists and businessmen, teachers, parents, and children, Hanukkah has been a dynamic force for both stability and change in American Jewish life. The holiday's distinctive transformation from a minor festival to a major occasion that looms large in the American Jewish psyche is a marker of American Jewish life. Drawing on a varied archive of songs, plays, liturgy, sermons, and a range of illustrative material, as well as developing portraits of various communities, congregations, and rabbis, Hanukkah in America reveals how an almost forgotten festival became the most visible of American Jewish holidays.

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SUMMARY

The religious lives that American Jews create sometimes reach deep into the Jewish past and emerge with elements that are crafted into new traditions that speak to Jews' American experience. Their creative use of the past should not surprise us. Jewish studies scholar and educator Yehuda Kurtzer points out that "memory becomes more magical, fantastical, and commanding in the hands of those who are less bound by what actually transpired and more inspired by what they might learn from it." Rituals and holidays are especially ripe for reinvention. Rituals are "prominent in all areas of uncertainty, anxiety, impotence, and disorder," argued anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff, and Hanukkah's rituals have long shined a bright light on the difficulties of Jews' religious decisions, dubbed the "December dilemma." Contemporary historians of religion point out that rituals are "fluid and multidimensional, capable of adapting to the changing circumstances of community life and capable of deploying meanings on several planes: for the individual, for the local community, for the (implied) universal membership. . . [Ritual] accordingly both conserves tradition and enlarges it as it orders the practical activity of worship."

Those myriad Hanukkah cultural creations largely consist of ways either to supplement the brief Hanukkah rite, to interpret its meaning, or to change its cultural significance by changing its performers. They have been created by both clergy and laity whose attitudes about both Judaism and America have varied across a wide spectrum of approaches, from wholehearted embraces to wary suspicions about both the authority of religious tradition, on one hand, and the power and allure of American cultural standards on the other. Those approaches themselves have responded to changing historical circumstances that American Jews have faced over almost two hundred years.

Holidays are often complex events, bringing together—not always harmoniously—stories and practices, communities and objects, traditions and inventions. This is certainly the case with Hanukkah. Starting in the 1840s, a wide swath of Jewish interest groups took hold of the occasion and shaped it into something that held importance for them and the particular, often widely divergent goals they hoped to achieve. Beginning with members in a Charleston, South Carolina congregation who voiced a new meaning for the holiday in order to make it resonate with their local Jewish community as well as their Protestant religious environment, and continuing with rabbinic debates about how Judaism could survive in the progressive mood of mid-nineteenth-century America, Hanukkah found advocates who insisted it held greater importance for modern Jews than tradition acknowledged. A new regard for the heroes of Hanukkah's

origin, the Maccabees who led a revolt against a foreign conqueror of Judea and then reinstated Jewish worship in the Jerusalem Temple, signaled that Hanukkah itself held a new significance for Jews in America. Over the course of nearly two centuries, various Jews have added their own creations and arguments to make sure the festival would not be overlooked or ignored. By the opening years of the twenty-first century, it has become a broadly known, public, Jewish American event.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why are domestic rituals easy to change?
2. Why is it easy for ordinary people in the U.S. to make changes to their religious practices?
3. What are the four foundational conditions that allowed Hanukkah to become popular in the U.S.?
4. What is the choice that the author says each American Jew makes?
5. Why did liberal rabbis advocate for making Hanukkah a more significant event?
6. What did Jewish American women see in Hanukkah's importance?
7. What is the December Dilemma?
8. Describe the two different attitudes toward material goods for Hanukkah.
9. Why do some American Jews feel that Hanukkah should not be considered a significant holiday?

SUMMARY

The Hebrew word Hanukkah means “dedication” and the holiday of Hanukkah commemorates that rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after the Maccabee-led Judean fighters retook it from the Assyrians. Judah, his brothers, and the men with them decreed a celebration of the Temple’s rededication annually on the twenty-fifth of the Hebrew month of Kislev, to be marked with eight days of “gladness and joy.” Today, Jews who learn about this dedication ceremony talk about the lack of pure oil with which to relight the menorah, and a tiny drop that miraculously burned for eight days until more could be made. But that story does not appear in the early documents about the event. In those first accounts, the Maccabees own celebration began with hymns of thanksgiving accompanied by harps, lutes, and cymbals in the Temple, after they had rebuilt the stone altar. They rejoiced for eight days with various offerings to God. The “garland[s]...and flowering branches . . .[and] palm fronds” in their celebration mirrored the autumn festival of Sukkot, which the fighters were not able to celebrate because war raged and the Temple remained in Antiochus’ hands.

Yet the successful revolt to preserve the Temple ultimately carried within it the seeds for even greater destruction. Ironically, by installing both king and high priest from the same family, the Hasmoneans reshaped Judea to look more like a Greek city-state. The ceremony installing the first Hasmonean king drew upon Greek customs. The Hasmoneans also soon angered the same traditionalists who had supported their revolt. Judah’s brother Jonathan became the high priest—and another brother, Simon, followed suit after Jonathan—despite the fact that their family did not descend from Zadok (which legitimated each new high priest). Ultimately, the Hasmoneans’ foreign alliances linked Judea to Rome and extended Rome’s control of the territory. Judeans eventually lost confidence in the Hasomoneans, and Herod, the ruthless ruler later appointed by Rome, ousted every Hasmonean from public office. By 63 C.E., Judea was effectively a Roman province. For reasons still debated, but probably a combination of unjust taxes and religious insults, Jews in Galilee and Judea revolted against Rome. Rome, after a protracted war, destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E. and took many Judeans to Rome as slaves. The Jewish polity in Judea failed, the priesthood lost the power to lead, and Temple-centered Judaism shattered forever.

As rabbis reshaped Judaism to accommodate Jewish life in the diaspora, they established a new Hanukkah celebration. They explained the successful Maccabean revolt as an instance of divine intervention that removed a foreign threat to Jewish religious life. As Hanukkah was a joyous occasion, the rabbis forbade fasting during it. They also designated Hanukkah to be a minor festival.

Unlike major festivals of the Jewish calendar—Passover, Sukkot, and Shavuot—they banned work on Hanukkah only for the time that the candles remain lighted, rather than for the entire first or last day of the holiday. The sages who compiled the Talmud (the 5,894 folio pages that record their discussions in Aramaic about biblical laws) in the six centuries after 70 C.E. embedded their discussion of Hanukkah within another about the much more important occasion of Shabbat. The day of rest that occurs each week in the Jewish calendar from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, Shabbat is the most common occasion when candles are lighted. As the rabbis reshaped worship for a post-Temple Jewish life, they established rites to be performed at domestic tables that recalled Temple practices. Thus, on Shabbat, there is the kindling of lights and the blessing of wine and food. Their thoughts on the holiday about rededicating the Temple, Hanukkah, fit well into their discussions about Shabbat. In this section, probably completed in the sixth century C.E., they explained the Maccabean victory as evidence of God’s continuing protection of Jews.

The rabbis designed Hanukkah recitations to focus on God’s power. In the daily prayers said each night at home during Hanukkah, as well as in daily and Sabbath prayers in the synagogue during the holiday and in grace after meals, Jews today thank God, for delivering “the strong into the hands of the weak.” A special reading from the prophet Zechariah, including the phrase, “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord,” is recited after the Torah portion. Those prayers and readings credit God with the Maccabean victory, creating a powerful image of transcendent power and of God’s willingness to come to the aid of Jews.

While rabbinic discussions set the rules for Hanukkah rites, ordinary Jews have expressed their own ideas about the holiday in far greater variety. The idea of miraculous rescues inspired new Hanukkah poetry and songs, accounts of the Maccabean revolt that liberally mix folklore with history, and new customs. Games have long been part of Hanukkah celebrations and a spinning top engraved with letters that stand for the phrase “A Great miracle Happened There” (in Israel the letters stand for “A Great miracle Happened Here”) has been part of the most popular game.

Since the early days of the 19th century, new customs for celebrating Hanukkah developed. The story of how and why American Jews transformed Hanukkah into something grand reveals a mix of hope and anxiety in their experience in America. By 1972, one American rabbi called Hanukkah “one of the most relevant of Jewish holidays.”

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS HANUKKAH?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why was the Temple in Jerusalem so important in ancient Judea?
2. How did Judeans' encounter with Hellenic culture become a religious and political problem?
3. How did the destruction by Rome lead to new religious leaders emerging among Jews?
4. How did rabbis' Hanukkah celebration reflect their perspective on Jewish history and religion?
5. How did Hanukkah menorahs reflect the holiday and add to its material presence?
6. How did popular Jewish culture keep the memory of the Maccabees alive? Why do you think it did so?
7. Why did Christian bibles and non-religious histories of the Jewish past give Jews a new appreciation of the Maccabees?

SUMMARY

Sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century, Hanukkah began to evolve from an often neglected occasion in the Jewish calendar to one deemed particularly relevant for American Jews. Surprisingly, it did not begin with a new emphasis on actually celebrating the holiday but with a new interest in the Maccabees themselves. Their image became a recurring trope in heated debates about how Jewish life could thrive in the new land. Competing factions vied for religious leadership of the country's Jews, and each sought the legitimacy of the past by claiming the mantle of the Maccabees, whose powerful family, the Hasmoneans, had achieved military, religious, and political leadership in ancient Judea. Those ancient heroes offered an authentically Jewish model that inspired and, each side hoped, legitimated its own bid to lead. Hoping to win over the Jewish masses, each faction argued its case in the English-language Jewish press. As they did so, they also impressed on American Jews the important role that the Maccabees had played in ancient Jewry's survival.

Throughout the nineteenth century, some Jews tried various ways to adapt Judaism to American life. As they began looking for images to help understand and expand what a proper response to American challenges might be, Hanukkah became ripe for reinvention. In Charleston, South Carolina, one group of Jews made Hanukkah into a time for serious reflection that responded to their evangelical, Protestant milieu. At mid-century, a heated debate about the future of Judaism itself erupted among American rabbis, some whom claimed to be Maccabees for the modern world. Later, young laymen championing new Jewish institutions to promote religious and cultural life emerged, similarly drawing on the Maccabees to claim authority for themselves and to justify their own youthful leadership. In the century's last years, the movement to resettle Jews in their ancient homeland near the Mediterranean Sea likened its effort to that of the Maccabees. Each of those very different projects aimed to help Judaism thrive under challenging new conditions, and each drew on a strong appeal to the Maccabees to justify its novel work.

Most rabbis believed the future of Jewish life in America rested on their own ability to motivate ordinary Jews to greater religious devotion. Talk of ancient Maccabees fighting a great world power in order to restore Jewish practice dotted their rhetoric. Traditionalists more often spoke of the grandeur of the Maccabean past and the duty of modern Jews to honor it. Reforming rabbis used more militaristic Maccabean imagery, drawn from both the Books of the Maccabees and American culture, and dismissed the legend about miracles established in the Talmud. Reformers sometimes claimed that they themselves were the Maccabees of today and often told the ancient story in contemporary

language. Both sides also blended America's rhetoric of liberty and revolution into the story of the Maccabean revolt. In doing so, they contributed to a larger trend that dominated American Jewish life as American Jews wove their own story into the fabric of American culture. Those nineteenth-century Hanukkah debates lent new significance to the heretofore minor festival.

Hanukkah emerged as a newly meaningful holiday for nineteenth-century American Jewish leaders because its story provided images and lessons useful to clergy and lay leaders on all sides of a heated debate about how Judaism should adapt to America. By linking the image of the Maccabees with modernity, they inserted the particularities of their own religious perspectives into the secular universalism espoused by modernist philosophers whose Enlightenment ideals informed the founding documents of the United States. At the same time, they promoted an image of Jewish bravery and faith already admired by some of the country's Christians. Most importantly, rabbis and Hanukkah advocates among ordinary Jews created an image of Jewish military bravery and success comparable to the nation's own patriotic rhetoric, taking another opportunity to assert their own "fit" with American society.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did competing leaders of American Jews use the image of the Maccabees and why did they do so? What did ordinary Jews learn from these debates?
2. How did the proliferation of synagogues give more power to the laity and lessen the power of rabbis and congregational leaders?
3. How did Penina Moise's hymn, *Feast of Lights*, combine Jewish tradition with a response to the local non-Jewish religious beliefs common to her gentile neighbors?
4. Why did tradition-minded rabbis and leaders like Sabato Morais and Isaac Leeser promote Jewish education and the education of women?
5. Who were the group called Kayam Dishmaya? How did they view Hanukkah and what did they do with it?
6. How did Kayam Dishmaya's Hanukkah pageant and I.M. Wise's serialized story, *The First of the Maccabees*, both reflect Victorian culture in America?

SUMMARY

Post-Civil War American culture increasingly looked to children for emotional rewards. Earlier in the century Americans began looking to domestic relationships for the emotional honesty that could offset the less trustworthy interaction with strangers that became a growing part of success in urbanizing America. By wartime, “Adults relied on children emotionally to offset hardship,” explains family historian Anne Carver Rose. Because children were thought to bring feelings “simpler and more innocent” than those of any adult, these feelings “could be returned without reserve.” Americans saw that attitude reflected back to them in their cultural products; women’s magazines especially promoted it.

While every religious group strived to inculcate its teachings among its children, for Jews, that goal carried particular importance. Since ancient times, the transmission of the religion from parents to their children determined the religion’s future. Despite Judaism’s popularity in many parts of the Middle East, events ultimately brought Jewish proselytizing to an end. As early as 586 B.C.E., when Babylonia destroyed the first Temple in Jerusalem and exiled many of the country’s residents eastward, “marriage with outsiders came to be seen as a threat to Jewish identity and widely condemned.” When the Hasmoneans, who led Judea more than 400 years later, undertook mass conversions in the areas they conquered, they reversed history’s trend. When Roman emperor Publius Aelius Hadrian (ruled 117-138) forbade Jews to proselytize, he restored anti-Jewish measures first enacted by Antiochus IV (the villain of Hanukkah’s story) three hundred years earlier. Christian rulers carried on that custom.

By the early years of the Common Era, therefore, Judaism had already begun its transformation into largely an ethnic tradition passed down through families. Jewish leaders and rabbinic writings urged extensive investigation into a convert’s sincerity before performance of the public conversion ceremony. Although American Jews faced no legal restrictions to proselytizing, the familial tradition that stood for millennia remained ingrained in Jews. Rabbis expected that only marriage could induce a gentile to join them. Jewish children were, quite literally, Judaism’s only future.

To interest children in the synagogue, in the late 1860s, Rabbi Max Lilienthal came up with a Hanukkah celebration held in the vestry rooms of his own synagogue on Mound St. in Cincinnati. By 1870, Rabbi Isaac M. Wise instituted a similar event at his Plum Street synagogue for children of the Talmud Yelodim Institute, a Jewish religious school that he led. At both venues, Cincinnati’s Jewish children enjoyed a Hanukkah festival where singing and instrumental solos, speeches, and refreshments framed an elaborate version

CHAPTER 3

CHILDREN LIGHT UP

of the holiday's traditional candle-lighting ceremony. More than two hundred children attended. After answering the holiday blessings in a chorus, they enjoyed ice cream and other sweets, all in a room festively decorated by the "ladies of the congregation" who had worked "with a will." Both Wise and Lilienthal understood that this festival might be the only Hanukkah experience their young charges would encounter.

Anthropologists who study ritual in its many forms note that because ritual "is good for conveying a message as if it were unquestionable, it is often used to communicate those things which are most often in doubt." Elaborating on the ritual of this minor, almost forgotten festival seemed an ideal way to impress young Jews with its importance and to show youngsters that Judaism held special appeal for them.

The holiday's most popular tune was the thirteenth-century work, "*Maoz Tsur*". In America's growing Jewish communities a number of English translations circulated but one endured. "*Rock of Ages*" was the product of a collaboration between rabbis Gustav Gottheil and Marcus Jastrow, based on a German rewrite of the song. Although they modified the lyrics and the length to better fit American culture, they kept the traditional melody, which allowed American Jews to feel that they were singing the "authentic" and "right" song for Hanukkah, even as the lyrics fit their modern sensibilities.

A dynamic relationship between congregational rabbis and lay women became the engine that developed and promoted these new Hanukkah activities. Whether as financiers or as Sunday-school teachers, in formal ladies' auxiliaries or sisterhoods, or informally as mothers of Sunday-school children, women performed much of the labor needed to mount Hanukkah celebrations. As New York educator Julia Richman pointed out, "only with the aid of . . . (could) the Rabbis hope to gain real influence over their flocks."

American Jews organized day nurseries, afternoon schools, night schools, and trade schools, along with settlement houses and visiting nurse services, for immigrants and poorer Jews. Women in New York's wealthy congregations uptown also organized elaborate Hanukkah entertainments for children of the Lower East side, where most of the new Jewish immigrants in New York City lived. These entertainments were sometimes held in large uptown synagogues or in industrial schools run by uptown's Jewish charities. Some Jewish women's charitable societies gave Hanukkah gifts of clothing to the children in their charge. The idea caught on quickly and newspapers around the country urged families to give gifts to their children at Hanukkah so that they would not envy their Christian playmates who received gifts at Christmas, which usually occurred near Hanukkah.

But “Judaism is not safe if relegated only to synagogue celebrations and elaborate public festivals,” argued the editors of one influential Jewish newspaper, because “the true...best place for religion is the home. For that reason, tradition-minded Rabbi Sabato Morais felt sure that Judaism’s future in America would be determined by Jewish mothers.

By creating new ways of celebrating Hanukkah in order to delight Jewish children during the Christmas season, Jews added conviviality to synagogue life and brought more children and their families within its walls. Amid the growing popularity of Christmas festivities, new Hanukkah festivals offered Jewish children celebrations comparable to those enjoyed by their Christian friends. Both reforming and traditionalist rabbis encouraged Jews to expand Hanukkah’s importance for Jewish children.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why did Reform leaders Wise and Lienthal think that Jewish children needed a holiday that would interest them especially?
2. How did their interest in creating a Jewish children’s festival reflect both American culture and Jewish tradition?
3. Why were Jews especially concerned that children like Judaism?
4. Why were women so important for new Hanukkah celebrations and how did they help to make Hanukkah more important in America?
5. Why was it easy for local groups to create their own Hanukkah celebrations that expressed their own talents and interests?
6. How did new Hanukkah songs express contemporary attitudes without rejecting tradition?
7. What effect did women and girls have on the telling of the Maccabean story?
8. Why did Reform rabbis come to think that domestic rituals needed to be celebrated despite their earlier focus on the rabbi’s sermon during synagogue worship?
9. Why were secular elements of Christmas easy for Jews to participate in?
10. Why did rabbis insist that secular Christmas activities were full of Christian symbolism and proclamations of faith in Christ?
11. Why did domestic Hanukkah rites also require women’s labor, just as did synagogue festivals?

CHAPTER 3

CHILDREN LIGHT UP

12. How did Hanukkah contribute to the growth of a national American Jewish culture?
13. How did new Hanukkah celebrations help American Jews to feel a part of American culture while still being faithful to their own tradition?

SUMMARY

In the forty-three short years between 1881 and 1924, the American Jewish world underwent a transformation. In 1880, American Jewry counted roughly 250,000 souls, most of whom traced their heritage to the Germanic areas of central Europe. By the time the U.S. government restricted immigration in 1924, more than two million Jews lived in America, the vast majority from Eastern Europe and imbued with an identity distinctly Jewish. They were Yidden (Jews) in their language of Yiddish, or Jewish. The diverse Hanukkah celebrations they created in America reflected their own particular memories and hopes.

Romanian-born David Moses Hermalin, for example, found inspiration for his own life especially in the figure of Judah in Hanukkah's story, "Ah, how I love this hero and admire his courage!" Other Yiddish writers found religious devotion or nationalist fervor in the Maccabees' story, or a thirst for freedom, or a commitment to universal brotherhood. For the adults among those immigrants, Hanukkah held an importance far beyond its possible worth as a Jewish child's antidote to Christmas envy. It provided a rich trove of memories, new political meanings, familiar rituals, and simple joys. Torn from old pleasures, the immigrants sought new ones. Those who remade the holiday with activities that fitted their new situation imagined themselves as modern Jews with a Hanukah suitable to their new home. At the same time, by carrying out the rite, they also acted on their desire to continue Jewish religious life. Their culturally rich Hanukkah helped these immigrants to understand their tumultuous lives within Judaism's chain of tradition.

These diverse Jewish newcomers arrived amid eighteen million non-Jewish immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, mostly Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christian, many of whom also clustered in urban neighborhoods near employment. Their number, languages, religions, and residential patterns distinguished these immigrants from the English-speaking Protestants who dominated American culture. Social analysts dubbed them "new immigrants" and worried about their effect on the country.

Poverty and violence hounded Jewish immigrants out of Europe; abundance, security, and access to new places marked their Americanization. "Presents" was one of the first English words to appear in Yiddish newspapers. Many scholars have pointed out that "the prospect of material abundance... made America different" for many immigrants.

While many immigrants seem to have accepted holidays commemorating the American past such as the 4th of July and Thanksgiving, some of them used political muscle to shield their children from Christian influence in the

public schools. Between 1903 and 1906, New York's Jewish press covered the increasing savagery and frequency of Europe's pogroms against its Jews, and some immigrants found it difficult to entrust their children to the gentile teachers and staffs of the city's schools. Moreover, while Jews embraced civic holidays as part of their new American world, they drew the line at effort to inculcate Christianity. They expected the U.S. constitution to protect their children from forced conversions, just as it protected themselves.

Hanukkah celebrations among the new immigrants seldom discussed the holiday's broad historical significance. Moreover, except for "Maoz Tsur's" recitation of past divine rescues and Psalm 30's pronouncement of dedication to the faith, their Hanukkah melodies evoked neither religious prayer nor sacred devotions but wove themselves around the activities that constituted the holiday's celebration itself. Thus, Hanukkah music reflected the immigrants' own celebrations while it enlivened them. Myriad musical programs often reflected the different roots of immigrant cultures, revealing Jewish, European, and American influences. Well-known melodies held "sad and sweet memories, thoughts of much that is dearest to the Jewish heart and home." As immigrants took advantage of a burgeoning music industry, Jewish music became a key element in expanding Hanukkah celebrations both in their dense network of clubs and institutions and in Jewish homes.

These trends—the availability of sheet music and cantorial soloists, some amount of leisure time and income, nostalgia for a Jewish life left behind, the desire for reassurance that one's venture to America need not mean an entire loss of Jewish identity, and the expanding knowledge of a Jewish song repertoire—enhanced simple holiday hymn traditions and made Hanukkah concerts into a staple of Jewish immigrant life.

The Yiddish language created an immediate bond among Jewish immigrants despite the fact that they hailed from many different towns and regions across Eastern Europe. Many Yiddish newspapers offered readers Hanukkah essays, short fiction, and poetry conveying the views of diverse rabbis, along with those of intellectuals, political thinkers, socialists, scholars, and poets. Several religious scholars published pamphlets to instruct ordinary Jews about Hanukkah's importance.

But some Jews simply did not care about the holiday that elicited eloquence and passion from intellectuals. Significant number of Jews came to America hoping to loosen the hold of Jewish authorities that they felt had bound them too tightly in Europe. Disaffected Jews seeking more personal freedom in America could easily ignore the whole Hanukkah event.

For turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrants, Hanukkah became an occasion to enact their adjustment to America while, at the same time, performing activities generated by Judaism's rites and customs. Religious traditions had no choice but to work with market forces. Now, not only rabbis but editors, restaurateurs, producers, and shopkeepers determined the range of purchasing options from which Jews could choose the holiday meanings they could learn. The Hanukkah culture that blossomed in the early twentieth century thus changed the experience of being Jewish in America, simultaneously untraditional religious authority, empowering ordinary Jews, and tying religion inextricably to the market.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Jewish immigrants who arrived between 1880 and 1924 change American Jewish culture?
2. In what way did Hanukkah practices among new immigrants in New York City reflect American culture?
3. Explain the ways in which Hanukkah songs expressed different attitudes toward the holiday and toward Jews' lives in America?
4. How did the activities of cantors win the admiration and support of Jewish immigrants in New York City?
5. What did Yiddish speaking intellectuals have to say about Hanukkah?
6. We've seen that the story of Hanukkah and of the Maccabees has been retold and reshaped by different Jews at different times. What different retellings emerged among the new immigrants?

SUMMARY

In the confusing and challenging years between the end of World War I and the end of World War II, American Jews once again found that Hanukkah provided a vehicle for thinking about their own contemporary Jewish issues. The holiday about dedication became a palimpsest for expressing their concerns. For example, original amateur dramas for adults and children, performed in myriad clubs and schools, fears of another kind of “death from pleasure” than the *Yiddishe Tageblatt* had warned about in 1907. Then, that newspaper’s editors had told immigrants that indulging too much in America’s abundance might erase the special luxury that holidays typically brought to Jewish homes and thus emotionally flatten the religious high points in the Jewish calendar. Now, in the twenties, through creative dramas and plays, Jews voiced fears that some of their peers, and many of their children, might abandon both their religion and their religious community in its time of need as they stepped into the welcoming arms of America’s larger gentile culture to enjoy the pleasure of total acceptance.

But how welcoming was America? Original Hanukkah dramas from this era reveal Jews’ anxieties about rising anti-Semitism and the country’s growing distrust of immigrants and their children, at the same time that they warned Jews against too much assimilation. When the U.S. Congress sharply limited immigration from eastern and southern Europe and the Levant (along with most parts of the world outside western Europe) in an effort to restore the ethnic makeup that prevailed in the United States in 1890, it signaled that the limit to its welcome had been reached. Anti-Semitic ideas could be read in American newspapers and, by the 1930s, heard on radios. Select universities instituted quotas that kept many Jewish students out. As Jews watched Nazism rise in Europe and sometimes violent anti-Semitism rear its head in America, original dramas performed in Jewish social organizations and clubs, as well as in religious schools, provided vehicles for expressing fears while also containing them. Some Jews, especially mothers, also strived to cultivate more religiously rich domestic experiences that provided emotional support and inculcated Jewish identity. Hanukkah’s domestic rites, easily embellished, became pivotal in the effort to strengthen Jewish identity. In communal settings and in homes, Jews in this era shaped Hanukkah into a festival uniquely suited to address the uncertainties they faced.

Beginning in the 1920s, many new plays for Hanukkah became available to American Jews. The holiday about dedication became an ideal vehicle for raising issues about American Jews’ religious loyalties, as well as evaluating threats to Jewish life and survival. Jews selected from easily available stock

of plays produced by small publishing houses like Bloch and the Hebrew Publishing Company, which printed and promoted these skits along with their line of songbooks, prayer books, literature, and other religious and educational materials. The Reform movement's publishing house also produced plays, juvenile literature, and textbooks which, in the interwar years, reflected respect for various styles of Jewish observance and the importance of Jewish peoplehood, making them useful to many groups.

These didactic, brief, Hanukkah plays lacked much artistic merit, but their authors really aimed instead for emotional impact. The playwrights depicted familiar settings and used well-known cultural references to send simple messages. They hoped to influence their audiences' behaviors, emotions, and ideas toward Judaism and did not expect literary or dramatic critics to ever encounter their work.

Many women acted upon the plays' sentiments. The National Federation of American Sisterhoods (Reform) Committee on Religious Schools urged local groups to promote Hanukkah observance and offered each chapter several programming options to implement. The committee's chair told members that Hanukkah gives them "more scope for work" than any other Jewish holiday and urged them to work with local rabbis and religious school teachers. They should "provide every child with little tin menorahs and a box of candles." A growing chorus of rabbis and women's groups argued that Hanukkah's story held even greater contemporary meaning than it had in the past—even if they had to redefine the terms in order to prove it.

World War II sharpened many Jews' appreciation for Hanukkah's story of military victory. "At no time...has its celebration been of larger and clearer significance than...this year," proclaimed the *Reconstructionist* magazine in 1940. If the anti-Semitism of the interwar years called for Hanukkah's capacity to raise Jewish morale, wartime seemed to prove moral's power to determine the fate of nations. The *Reconstructionist* told readers that the "Maccabean war [shows us] what a religion can do to save even a small and weak people from being overwhelmed by a powerful enemy."

Jews' responses to threats against them that emerged in the interwar years elicited new, more nuanced cultural creations and activities. While parents' desire to synthesize Jewish and American culture remained, they came to believe that the synthesis needed to be a healthy one. Spokespeople pointed out Judaism's significance as the foundation for both Christianity and Western civilization.

Simple one-act, original dramas entertained children while instructing them in Hanukkah lore and promoting the grandeur of the Maccabees. Dramas for adults reveal complex considerations and conflicting emotions. Women's organizations insisted that in December, the thresholds of Jewish homes should mark the boundary between Jewish and gentile culture. The conviction emerged in this era that American Jews especially needed an emotionally rich domestic Judaism.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What new concerns were expressed in original dramas written between World War I and the close of World War II?
2. How were plays for adults and plays for children different?
3. How did the Maccabees appear in this era's plays?
4. What did Jewish women's organizations do to promote Hanukkah and why did they do it? How did these groups differ?
5. In what ways did rabbis retell the Maccabean story in this era?
6. Why did some rabbis and women's groups argue that Hanukkah held greater meaning now than ever before?
7. Why did anti-Semitism grow in the 1920s and 1930s?
8. How did this era's songs reflect new perspectives?
9. How did World War II and Nazism influence the way that Jews told the Maccabean story and used the image of the Maccabees?
10. How did Zionism and the movement to establish a Jewish homeland effect the way that the Hanukkah story was told in this era, and also the image of the Maccabees?

SUMMARY

In the two decades after World War II, Jews, like other Americans, joined religious congregations in increasing numbers. As new congregations sprouted in postwar suburbs, rabbis' messages reached more people and women's organizations linked to synagogues, and saw their numbers mushroom. In the 1950s, synagogues—often in suburbs—became the communal centers of Jewish life. They benefitted from the national rush to join organizations that continued in the postwar years through the 1960s. Indeed, membership in groups of all kinds, from religious associations to bowling leagues, marked that era of American history. When television's three major national broadcast networks rose to dominate the national airwaves, they lent an aura of mass culture that augmented the drive toward conformity that supported the era's clubbiness. In those postwar years, as in previous decades, Jews in America came to see Judaism through the lenses of their American experience. Once again, they tinkered with Hanukkah to make it serve their own needs and reflect their own values, ideal, and concerns.

Even thinkers who doubted much useful guidance could be elicited from Hanukkah's story repeated the view that Jews who considered Hanukkah to be only a children's holiday misunderstood its significance to Western civilization. Joachim Prinze, who had trained for the rabbinate in Breslau and became a great defender of civil liberties in the United States, pointed out that "freedom is an untested Jewish experience." Jews had never really faced circumstances quite like their situation in the United States. Judaism could survive in America only if Jews "liberate" themselves from "kindergarten approaches" and "celebrate their Hanukkah not in the shadow of the Christmas tree" but for its own value, knowing that "without the Maccabees there would have been neither Jesus nor Paul nor Christianity." Prinze's assertion about Hanukkah's importance to world history echoed those made by earlier rabbis. In 1857, as we have seen, Isaac M. Wise told it to readers of his newspaper, the *Israelite*. It also echoed Deborah Melamed's more general argument that the Maccabees preserved for Western civilization the moral traditions propounded by the Hebrew Prophets. It seems unlikely that Prinze meant to suggest that Judaism was great because it made Christianity possible. Rather, he—like Wise and Melamed—hoped to instill a sense of pride and dignity in Jews by showcasing their venerable history. Now, as this argument emerged again in the postwar era, it became a standard understanding of Hanukkah's significance that supported other reasons to make the holiday a more important Jewish occasion.

Rabbis and Jewish leaders wanted every Jew's "core of personality"

to be self-identified as Jewish. Religious celebrations held at home, such as Hanukkah, where identity is shaped in fundamental ways, became especially valuable. After the war ended, the conservative movement promoted domestic religion even more energetically than it did in the past. Some Conservative congregations arranged congregational Passover seders and other normally domestic holiday rituals in their synagogues because they feared that some members did not celebrate them at home. They hoped those experiences would give attendees the confidence to replicate those rites domestically.

Conservative Rabbi Gordon's enriched domestic Hanukkah festival also offered instructions for creating Hanukkah parties. Recipes for foods, songs, lyrics, decorating advice about blue and white lights and crepe paper, details of guessing games, lists of Hanukkah children's books, song books, and recordings of Hanukkah music now available from Victor, Columbia, and Decca records filled many pages. As the postwar consumer market expanded, more Jewishly coded commodities became available for enacting Jewish religious and cultural life. Like the cards, records and candies marketed by National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods in the interwar years, these items provided markers for Jewish identity. Through the purchasing, displaying, and giving of these objects, they provided material ways for Jews to recognize each other and to validate their shared understanding of Jewish culture. Gordon showed Jews how to use them to create idyllic Jewish worlds in their homes.

According to Women's League for Conservative Judaism founder Sarah Kussy, time ordinarily spent listening to the radio or watching television should be used to extend the family's Hanukkah experience. By shutting access to December's mass culture, with its Christmas programming, women could block both secular and Christian ideas. Few Americans owned a television set in the late 1940s, when radio had sixteen hundred stations but television only twenty-eight. Television stations served New York City, where over two million Jews lived, long before small towns. But television spread quickly. By 1955, roughly three-fourths of American households owned a television. While Jewish families might join the mass viewing audience on other evenings, at Hanukkah, women should turn off the set in order to create a Jewish environment for their families.

Postwar Jews argued that religious instruction belonged in homes and in synagogues, and they enrolled their children in religious schools in record numbers. Schools in all Jewish denominations experienced rising enrollment. In 1959, the combined increase reached more than 131 percent over previous years. By the early 1960s, "approximately 590,000 children nationwide studied in synagogue schools."

The schools turned to music to reinforce lessons, to help students practice Hebrew pronunciation, to enliven the classroom experience, and, especially, to promote Jewish spirit. “Schools of all types taught customs and ceremonies,” and Hanukkah’s musical repertoire expanded.

The postwar movement to promote interfaith tolerance, begun in the 1930s with the formation of the National Council of Christians and Jews, turned to chaplains’ experiences in World War II. Military chaplains had ministered to soldiers who practiced many different religions, and organizations such as the Jewish Welfare Board provided materials to guide them in serving these new constituencies. After the war, the Chicago branch of the Anti-Defamation League’s Department of Interreligious Cooperation adapted the concise style of the chaplaincy materials for its postwar series called *Your Neighbor Celebrates: the Jewish Holidays*, to be used by gentile leaders in creating accurate interfaith programming, as well as by Jewish chaplains.

In 1968, New York City’s mayor, John Lindsay, lighted a large, ornate Hanukkah menorah in City Hall near a Christmas tree. His side-by-side arrangement was an explicit attempt to please his large Jewish constituency, whose support for him had waned, as he faced reelection the following autumn. Placing these two markers of separate holiday traditions in the same room suggested that they belonged together. Because the tree had been draped with Christmas lights that had become increasingly popular in the years since General Electric began producing them in the nineteen twenties, the two religious icons of December seemed to be recast as similar nature festivals meant to create light in the winter’s shortest days. This politically deft solution mirrored many public schools’ change from Christmas assemblies with carols and hymns to winter assemblies with songs about Santa, dreidels, and snow.

Many Americans who had experienced the challenges of the interwar era and World War II emerged from those struggles with a commitment to securing their own and their children’s place in America—as committed Jews. Hanukkah became an important tool for raising happy, devoted Jewish children and enriching family life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did postwar American Jews use Hanukkah as a child-rearing tool?
2. What was the attitude toward religion in postwar America? How was that reflected in the popularity of Hanukkah?

CHAPTER 6

FORGING A COMMON TRADITION

3. What social, religious, and familial goals did many Jews hope would be achieved through domestic Hanukkah celebrations?
4. What material objects for Hanukkah emerged in this era and how did Jews use them?
5. How did Jewish women's organizations in this era promote Hanukkah and why? Why were women and mothers so important to Hanukkah in this era?
6. What did people want from Hanukkah music in this era? What songs became especially popular?
7. What did the Christmas tree symbolize for some Jews? In what ways did they create domestic Hanukkah decorations?
8. How did Hanukkah activities, stories, and objects create an American Jewish culture?
9. How did new Hanukkah stories hope to appeal to children? To teens?
10. Why did Jewish political movements use Hanukkah images, like the menorah, etc., in public political events?
11. What did sociologists suggest as the way to understand why some religious activities became popular among American Jews, while others did not?

SUMMARY

The sixties' political and social upheavals set the stage for different religious values and practices to emerge toward the century's end. Critiques of American society that developed with the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements posed significant challenges to the country's sense of a social, political, and legal status quo. New immigration laws enacted during the decade meant that by the year 2000, fifty-six million Americans were either foreign-born or had one foreign-born parent, constituting twenty percent of the U.S. population. Most came from either East Asia or Latin America, bringing new cultures and religions to the country. Among Jews, too, experiences of American life generated more diverse understandings of Hanukkah's significance than in previous years. That diversity included new assessments of Judaism and the nature of its faith in the divine. By the end of the century, in a surprise to most American Jews, one small Jewish mystical group became widely recognized for public Hanukkah celebrations aiming to completely change the quality of American Jews' December experience. By the 1990s, American Jewry, like the nation as a whole, looked like a more religiously diverse people who practiced many "varieties of Jewishness" over which denominational organizations exercised little control.

Once again, Hanukkah's timing, its story, its domesticity, and its joyousness became signal factors in its embrace by American Jews. One rabbi insisted that they "could not overdo the celebration of Chanukah." It not only turns people's "feelings from winter doldrums to sunny rejoicing"; it also reflects "the acceptance of...Chanukah's theme—freedom to celebrate fully the religion of our choice." Embellishing Hanukkah is not "the mimicry of our neighbors," as some earlier rabbis had insisted. Instead, he said, by adding to Hanukkah's activities, Jews show how much its message of freedom of religion means to them.

Three experiences motivated young Jewish Hippies to create their own Hanukkah celebrations. First, they felt comfortable being Jewish in America. Second, they became aware that they viewed the world somewhat differently than their gentile peers. Third, by 1970, more than eighty percent of young Jews attended college and sometimes that experience shaped their attitudes about being Jews. Their university educations sometimes included formal or informal Jewish studies that revealed an intellectually sophisticated and spiritually broad Judaism that their previous, child-oriented religious instruction had lacked. Young people purchased *The Jewish Catalog*—130,000 copies sold soon after its release. Together, its three editions sold over a million copies.

The first counterculture *havurah* began in 1968, but adventurous denominations and synagogues organized small prayer groups as early as 1960. By 1963, ten *havurot* counted themselves in the Reconstructionist camp. California's Harold Schulwieiss believed *havurot* could rejuvenate interest among congregants who belonged to very large synagogues but spent little time in them. Through his influence, by 1975, some five hundred *havurot* existed in that state alone. As many as "twenty percent of American synagogues had at least one *havurah*;" the figure doubled for California.

Some Americans reacted against what seemed in the sixties and seventies to be a breakdown of social mores by advocating a larger role for religion in the public arena. The growing respect for religion and religious language in American public discourse emboldened Chabad to stage public Hanukkah rites. It did not aim for a simple display of a Hanukkah menorah, as did some postwar Jews, but to conduct a full ritual candle-lighting ceremony and to create a festive Hanukkah celebration open to the general public. One ethnologist who studied Chabad summed up its attitude this way: "If anybody else can display whatever they want to, why do we have to be shy?" Despite being one of the country's smallest religious groups, Chabad nonetheless undertook a mission to increase all Jews' level of observance. Toward that goal, it brought public menorah lighting to new heights that elicited new rulings from the U.S. Supreme Court. As American Jewry divided into the highly observant and minimally observant camps, the Chabad Lubavitch Chasidim stood out. They acted on their felt obligation toward less observant Jews.

As in the past, many Jews strived to imbue home celebrations with greater meaning. By the 1970s, few rabbis felt the need to promote Hanukkah gift-giving, as this practice had become so widely accepted that many rabbis felt uneasy about the degree which gifts and goods had taken a central place in many families' home practices. More often, they refocused attention on the rite itself. "Only during the actual lighting of candles is there a true feeling of holiness," counseled one, whose two hundred page *Liberal Judaism at Home* provided guidance and advice on domestic religious practices accepted as standard by the Reform movement.

Jews also participated in a "domestic revolution" under way across the country in the late twentieth century as economic challenges pulled wives and mothers into the paid labor force. From the 1950s to the 1990s, "the fraction of women who work[ed] outside the home doubled from fewer than one in three to nearly two in three." Although we do not have figures for the national rate of Jewish women's participation in the paid labor force in 1950, by 1990 they were slightly more likely than gentile women to be employed. Social trends away from extended family that marked postwar Jews' experience continued to hammer away at family life later in the century.

Many American Jews looked to domestic holidays such as Hanukkah and Passover to enhance what seemed to be their increasingly complicated home lives. It is no surprise that guides to Jewish living especially proliferated in this era. Rabbis and women's groups already accustomed to publishing these items continued to produce them. In the mid-1980s, the conservative movement's Federation of Jewish Men's clubs responded to the increasing stresses on family life and joined the growing trend toward adult education that had begun in the postwar suburbs, by producing practical guides to Jewish life—texts, workbooks, and audio tapes—on many subjects. To help Jewish families infuse religion and spirituality into their Hanukkah creations, many of these included lengthy discussions of Antiochus' oppression, songs, games, and recipes. Families whose heritage includes other religions in addition to Judaism often are left to find their own, distinctive ways to celebrate Hanukkah.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, a divided Jewry elaborated upon the various aspects of Hanukkah that held meaning for each group or individual. Feeling more confident as Americans than had Jews in past eras, they brought their celebrations into more public spaces. The expanded array of Hanukkah activities and special Hanukkah goods available at the close of the twentieth century also indicated its significance.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How had American Jewish society changed in the latter years of the twentieth century?
2. What did Hasidim do to try to change the quality of Jews' December experience?
3. How the sixties effect Jewish college students' approach to Hanukkah?
4. How did the way American Jews told the Hanukkah story in the latter years of the twentieth century reflect their experience and attitudes?
5. Why were Hanukkah's timing, story, domesticity, and joyousness key factors in American Jews' embrace of this holiday?
6. How did the Jewish counterculture's approach to Hanukkah's material objects reflect their values?
7. Why did communal Hanukkah festivities make it easier for intermarried families to have a Hanukkah activity?

SUMMARY

As the twenty-first century opened, American Jews once again found in Hanukkah's story a way to apply the consoling language of faith while facing new threats to their existence. Three months after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, on the Pentagon, and the attempted attack on the White House that killed almost three thousand Americans—including many Jews—Jewish newspapers pointed out that Hanukkah's special message of faith and commitment should be seen as especially applicable to the contemporary situation. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, which provides copy to Jewish newspapers, claimed that Jews now needed both kinds of Hanukkah miracles—the oil, “which symbolizes our commitment to Judaism,” along with military power, “to dispel the darkness that has fallen on our world.”

At the same time, however, in the first Hanukkah after the attacks, the difference between Jews and their American neighbors seemed to fade. Philadelphia's Jewish Exponent compared the heroism of “fire fighters, police officers, [and] emergency personnel who answered the call on September 11” to that of the Maccabees.

By the twenty-first century, Hanukkah had moved beyond the confines of Jewish homes and synagogues and into American culture. Special Hanukkah evenings might include listening to National Public Radio's annual program of short stories about Hanukkah or listening to any of many CDs of Hanukkah music that might be produced by both non-Jewish and Jewish companies. Jews might turn to the web and share with family and friends rabbinic commentary on the holiday or recipes for Hanukkah foods, watch the performance of a new Hanukkah song on YouTube, or arrange a holiday visit with distant friends and family through Skype.

Hanukkah's ability to reaffirm Jewishness and strengthen family bonds continued to be important to American Jews. But a growing number of intermarried families forged novel adaptations of both Hanukkah and Christmas, hoping to elide the season's serious potential for religious conflict. One such family in Kansas City whose children were “as familiar with the menorah as with the manger scene” now were sending hybrid holiday greeting cards like those that proclaim “Merry Chrismukkah,” rather than the nonsectarian winter scenes they had used in the past. These new cards, which blur the differences between Judaism and Christianity, they believe, are respectful to both holidays.

Sociologists have surmised that because “Americans have become increasingly likely to work with, live alongside, and marry people of other

religions,” interfaith relations have generally improved. “It is difficult to demonize the religion, or lack of religion, of people you know.” Yet it also seemed that many Christian Americans who lived in areas with large Jewish populations did not feel comfortable sharing what they understood to be the Christmas season with Hanukkah. Protests against Hanukkah’s growing public presence could be heard in calls for merchants to instruct their staff to wish their customers “Merry Christmas,” as they had decades earlier, instead of the increasingly customary, more encompassing phrase, “Happy Holidays.” A growing number of Hanukkah events in public venues welcomed all comers to enjoy a celebration while learning something about the holiday. Hanukkah events outside the home help Jews avoid feeling invisible during the Christmas season.

Hanukkah gave American Jews an annual occasion to ponder the demands of Jewish loyalty, the dangers of dissension among Jews, and the courage they would need to remain faithful Jews during the Christmas season, when, their minority status became most vivid. At the same time, Hanukkah also provided a vehicle for reaching the social goals of enhancing familial bonds, educating children, and promoting communal ties. With so rich a capacity to improve and enlighten Jewish lives, Hanukkah achieved a new, more significant place in the American Jewish calendar than it had known in two thousand years of Jewish history.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did new tellings of the Maccabee story reflect the September 11, 2001 attacks?
2. In what ways does Hanukkah serve as a vehicle promoting good interfaith relations today?
3. What are the elements of American Jewish culture that emerge each year at Hanukkah?
4. Why did Hanukkah achieve greater significance in America than it had in other and earlier eras of Jewish history?

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