Introduction

One December evening when I was five years old, my mother helped me dress for a special occasion. She chose my turquoise satin blouse and black felt skirt decorated with big turquoise cabbage roses. It was the fifties. Mom smiled as I traded my play clothes for the outfit she had laid out, but, curiously, she remained in the same blouse and slacks she had worn all day. I alone prepared to be the center of attention. Suitably dressed and coiffed, I went off to—our living room!

There, my father had set up a tripod—huge, it seemed to me—with four blinding flood lights focused on the area in front of our fireplace. He waited for me to enter the scene before beginning to film. With mom nearby but out of range of the camera’s lens, I sang the three Hanukkah candle blessings in Hebrew. As tradition mandates, they praise God first for commanding us to kindle the Hanukkah lights, second, for performing a miracle for our forefathers long ago at this season, and third, for sustaining us in life to reach this occasion. With the helper candle my mother had already lighted for me to use, I lighted
the holiday candle that had already been placed in the special Hanukkah candelabra—called a Hanukkah menorah. Thus we marked the holiday’s first evening. After the brief ceremony concluded, I opened a lovely wrapped gift (a sweater—it was Buffalo), smiled, and waved at my dad behind the camera. If my parents coached me from off screen, we will never know. While the Kodachrome eight-millimeter film dad used made the evening’s movements and colorful images almost indelible, the camera could not preserve sounds. But it did preserve a significant turn in religious observances common in American Jewish homes in that era.

The change became apparent two nights later when my father’s cousin Albert joined me in the ceremony and on camera. I recited the blessings with him, but then Albert, without a second thought, struck the box of matches and lighted both the helper candle and the first of that evening’s three candles in the menorah himself. I burst into tears. Although Jewish law requires that children must be taught to light the Hanukkah candles, the tradition among most Jews who traced their heritage to eastern Europe—like my family—prefers that men light them. Albert believed he acted appropriately and never considered doing otherwise. Startled and surprised, he turned to my father for guidance. Behind the camera, my father must have instructed Albert, because he handed the lighting job over to me. Despite Jewish custom, for many mid-twentieth-century American Jewish families like mine, Hanukkah’s significance lay in its ability to create memorable religious experiences for their children. The holiday that had for two millennia thanked God for preserving Judaism in the past had become a means to try to ensure the American Jewish future by impressing youngsters of its importance.¹

The seeds of my interest in writing this book may have been planted during that confused Hanukkah evening. Clearly, it seemed to me, ordinary Jews like my family felt quite at ease in adapting and modifying the religious customs they practiced. In particular, those rites and customs enacted at home, without rabbinic supervision, could easily be reshaped to better express their own values. My parents’ Hanukkah became a vehicle for featuring their child in a Jewish domestic frame. What other changes had American Jews made to it, and why? I wondered. How have the experiences of other Jews in America changed
the way we celebrate the holiday? The answer, I have learned, involves almost two hundred years of Jewish history in the United States. Without government support for religious institutions or clergy, Americans—Jews and non-Jews alike—must take much of religious life into their own hands. Thus, American Jews can reshape, support, aggrandize, or neglect religious practices as they see fit. Forming new congregations, they institutionalize their choices. Clergy, for their part, find it essential to persuade and educate, to inspire and motivate their coreligionists to follow approved paths. As Jews participated in American society and learned its cultural values, their religious lives reflected their encounter with that broader world. In the past and today, each person, young or old, makes a choice. Whether drawing a sharp boundary between themselves and American society or cultivating a way to navigate being Jewish while fully participating in the larger society, American Jews create their religious lives. Hanukkah itself raises questions about religious boundaries and, not surprisingly, became a key occasion for thinking about the complex issues that boundaries raise.

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. But Jews have created continuity despite historical changes before. Historians Albert I. Baumgarten and Marina Rustow explain that at many points in Jews’ long history, they have “papered over” changes in their religious practices with strong appeals to older traditions, sometimes inventing new rituals that are legitimated by their aura of historicity. Baumgarten and Rustow argue that “appeals to continuity became the means by which Judaism either absorbed and legitimated innovations or sacralized ancient practices.” For example, two thousand years ago, the early rabbis pointed to understandings about biblical law that seemed to have descended from Moses, down the generations, in an oral tradition, to legitimize their own work on adapting biblical laws to the new circumstances of a diaspora existence. With that authority, their rabbinic teachings about ways to apply biblical law became normative for Judaism. 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. Over centuries, Jewish religious rites and traditional customs developed in a rich array, often by claiming continuity with the ancient past. Through religious recitations and rites that brought selected elements and understandings of past events into contemporary view, says professor of Jewish history and culture Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Jews created a distinctive historical memory linked to religious practice. Their American experience posed new challenges to Jews whose previous diaspora experiences set them apart from gentile populations in varying ways, including—but not limited to—legal, political, and labor restrictions as well as limiting where they could reside. Few of those limits described most Jews’ American lives. In the United States, Hanukkah’s recitations and rites were augmented, reshaped, and redefined to create memories and occasions more meaningful to American Jews.

Hanukkah’s strongest American advocates seem to have been those who felt the complexities of American Jewish life most acutely. A dynamic alliance of rabbis and women became the most effective force advocating enhancing the holiday’s importance. Liberal rabbis, whose congregants tended to follow few of Judaism’s dictates, especially urged Jews to be more like the loyalist heroes of Hanukkah’s story and to resist assimilation to American culture so influenced by Christianity. Yet liberal rabbis themselves owed their authority as much to American conditions that gave free rein to religious variety as to Judaism’s teachings. Before the latter decades of the twentieth century, American Jewish women, for their part, were denied an education in Judaism’s authoritative religious law and so carried little authority in religious matters. They, like most American Jews, lived in the broad and wide borderland where Jewish and American cultures coexist. For them, Hanukkah’s timing in the midst of the Christmas season offered a way to perform their Jewish commitment through the holiday’s rite and, for a moment, to resolve the ambiguity of being an American Jew. The holiday’s story about the triumph of ancient religious loyalists in their battle to control Judaism’s most sacred locale, the Temple in Jerusalem, encouraged them in their effort to remain Jews. Hanukkah’s domestic focus enabled them to vivify their familial bonds, and its joyousness helped them to be happy to be Jews at a time when, in the American cultural calendar, they are most conscious of their minority status.
The eight days of Hanukkah are marked with special hymns in synagogues, but its real celebration is the domestic candle-lighting rite. Parents recently surveyed about Hanukkah reported their most vivid Hanukkah memory to be, as Philadelphian Philip Steel put it, “seeing our children and grandchildren’s eyes.” Many Jewish parents give their children gifts at Hanukkah, sometimes on each night of the holiday. In addition, the Hebrew words for Hanukkah and for education share a common root, and thus custom encourages donations to charities, especially to support Jewish educational institutions.

Gifts can strengthen both family and social relationships, and Hanukkah gifts have become especially popular over the past century in America as parents created a Jewish alternative to Santa Claus. Their Hanukkah gift giving reinforced the bond between parents and children as family but also as members of the larger Jewish world. Jews rarely constituted more than three percent of the population of the United States, and many parents worried that their children might feel left out of the national festivities surrounding Christmas without a comparable celebration of their own. Even worse, that feeling might lead them to dislike being Jewish. Bostonian Carol Kur explained, “We count on those eight little candles to outshine the splendor of trees, tinsel, . . . [and to stand up to the] sparkling electricity of sight and sound, so dazzlingly packaged by Madison Avenue’s best, it’s simply too much to ask. Even the Maccabees [heroes of Hanukkah’s origin] did not face such overwhelming odds.” Hanukkah brought Jews closer to each other and made them more visible to their communities. Some Jews living in areas without a sizeable Jewish population make a special effort to create memorable Hanukkah experiences for their children. Anne Bayme, who raised her children in the small town of Vidalia, Georgia, in the 1970s, recalled, “We always got our family with grandparents together. We also got together with friends.” The Baymes also attended their synagogue’s Hanukkah Family Night, and Anne made educational presentations in her children’s school, hoping to help her children “not to feel invisible” in December. But Jews in big cities often also share Anne’s concern.

American manufacturers look to the purchasing power of Jewish families such as the Steels and the Baymes and market their December goods for Hanukkah as well as Christmas. Publishers use National
Jewish Book Month each autumn to promote books of Jewish interest for purchase as Hanukkah gifts. In 2007, Hallmark’s website offered seven different Hanukkah cards, all in a color scheme of blue and white or silver, reminiscent of Jewish prayer shawls (Hebrew: tallitot) and the Israeli flag. By then, those colors had become the standardized color scheme that helped customers find Hanukkah cards in stores near the red-and-green Christmas goods. The American marketplace offered Jews the opportunity to express and reaffirm their Jewish identity by purchasing items to use as ritual objects that might also be displayed in their homes and to exchange as gifts on Hanukkah. In the twentieth century, concerns about both children and profits, in other words, helped to lift Hanukkah to prominence.

Yet many Jews have opposed those trends. Jewish law rates Hanukkah only a minor festival, one of the two least important festivals in the Jewish religious calendar. The other is a winter festival called Purim, which, like Hanukkah, also commemorates an occasion of rescue, but that of Jews rather than Judaism, as Hanukkah does. Rules for both holidays allow Jews to work as they would on any ordinary day, unlike on the Sabbath or on an important holiday. At Hanukkah, work is banned only while the candles remain lighted. Except for the Sabbath that occurs during the week of Hanukkah, Jews are free to travel to visit each other and to attend special events. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, those who felt Jewish life ought to be guided by rabbinic standards of religious law—often called “tradition”—resisted the power of the American holiday calendar to reshape Judaism. At least one rabbi felt it “distorted” Hanukkah, and he challenged synagogues that regularly publish the Hanukkah blessings for their members’ use to also publish other blessings, such as those used on Shabbat, on Sukkot, and during morning prayers. Other rabbis insisted that families who fully observed Judaism’s yearlong ritual calendar kept their children sufficiently engaged in Jewish life to resist the lure of the American Christmas season and did not need a unique American-style Hanukkah. Gertrude Braun Migler, whose father served Pittsburgh’s Jews as a kosher butcher and maintained an Orthodox home, recalled Hanukkahs of her childhood in the 1940s that meant nothing more than lighting the candles—fat, orange-colored items.

Forty years later, sisters raised in a highly traditionally observant
home recalled that their religious day school in Dallas, Texas, which also served many students from minimally observant families, made Hanukkah decorations at school and at home, sang holiday songs, and read and discussed the special Hanukkah issue of the Jewish children's newspaper, *Olomeinu* (Our World). Their religious schools' lessons for Hanukkah turned on the “dangers of assimilation and acculturation.” Yet, when the family relocated to Baltimore, the more observant school they attended “just didn't talk much about it in any formal sense.” Religious knowledge and loyalty were “assumed.” In a similar way, the women’s organization of the Conservative movement recently argued that “any child who has built a *sukkah* [booth constructed for prayers and meals during the autumn holiday of Sukkot] will not feel deprived of trimming a [Christmas] tree.” In their view, those children would not need Hanukkah to be any more elaborate than rabbinic standards made it. During the 1990s, scholars who studied attitudes about Hanukkah among a group of Jews who regularly celebrated the festival found that it “elicited no strong emotions” and was largely performed “for children.”

Some American Jews have felt that the commercialism demeaned Hanukkah. In 1915, a Yiddish newspaper admonished its immigrant readers to resist advertisers because “we do not want death from pleasure.” From that perspective, the scarcity and want that many Jewish immigrants had known in Europe lent their religious holidays, each with its own particular material goods and ritual practices, an aura of distinction and an emotional power. It made religious life more magical than the day-to-day existence. Without that contrast between the lovefulness of religion and the harshness of daily life, the writer thought, Jewish life might wither and die. By the last decades of the twentieth century, when one catalog of Judaica offered fifty-three different Hanukkah menorahs with designs featuring artistic invention and whimsy, sports, family photos, or Mickey Mouse, others argued that the welter of goods specially marketed for Hanukkah had buried the holiday’s religious meaning under crass commercialism.

But a parade of parents, rabbis, teachers, journalists, playwrights, poets, authors, song writers, hippies, mystics, members of various men's and women's clubs, Zionists, restauranteurs, merchants, and choreographers who, since early in the nineteenth century, have exalted
Hanukkah with new hymns, songs, concerts, stories, ceremonies, lessons, customs, pageants, crafts, and foods hoped to reach the many, many other Jews among whom “the practice of religious ceremonials and rituals [was] rapidly declining.”

Applying their many different talents to the task, Hanukkah’s advocates promoted its significance in schools, clubs, and synagogues, in public squares, in their businesses, and in American Jewish homes. They turned the national seasonal celebration for domestic religion, although based in Christianity, into a festive occasion for the country’s Jews, often hoping to inspire a Jewish religious renewal. Their efforts produced a religiously informed American Jewish culture that took shape each year at Hanukkah.

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’ December 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.”

Because the Hanukkah culture that has been annually created and re-created is so fluid, it has been uniquely able to reflect Jews’ attitudes about Jewish life in America as it has changed with new historical circumstances.

Another popular Jewish holiday, the spring event called Passover, carries extensive and elaborate rules that limit creativity—although, because it, like Hanukkah, is also a domestic occasion created by families, it has also seen new American rewrites that modify its historical meaning. By contrast, the important autumn holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are synagogue events under the control of clergy and so are not amenable to the creation of a holiday culture that could significantly modify their meanings. While Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur hold far more important places in the Jewish religious calendar than does Hanukkah, no occasions in the fall or spring American calendars provoke the December conundrums for American Jews that Hanukkah has been able to address through its holiday culture.

Those myriad Hanukkah cultural creations largely consist of ways
either to supplement the brief Hanukkah rite, to reinterpret 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 celebrations. 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 for 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 within 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 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 ancient 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.

American Jews stand in a long line of people who have fashioned special Hanukkah customs. The biblical reading for Sabbath Hanukkah from the prophet Zechariah instructs Jews to “sing and rejoice,” encouraging them to create jovial festivities. Rejoicing can take many forms, and for this largely domestic occasion on cold winter evenings, mental gymnastics became common. In many eras of the Jewish past, riddles, acrostics, and arithmetical puzzles in which the answer is always
forty-four (the total number of lights burned on Hanukkah) became widespread. By the fifteenth century, card games surpassed puzzles in popularity. In warmer climates, Hanukkah pleasures moved outdoors. In the Middle Ages, Jews in Venice rowed gondolas through their district, “greeting each illuminated house with a benediction and a merry Hebrew chorus.” The dreidel, a small top carved with four letters that is used for one of the simplest and most enduring of Hanukkah games, has enjoyed widespread popularity, especially among children, across historical eras and climates alike. By the eighteenth century, some Jewish communities made donations to educational institutions, teachers, and impoverished students on Hanukkah.

Many Jews have made Hanukkah a specially pleasurable time for children and adults. In nineteenth-century Europe, children often received Hanukkah gelt (German and Yiddish: coins), often with the expectation that they would give some of it to their teachers. Rabbis approved gambling only on Hanukkah, and in Alsace, in that era, people expected to “have a good time and, above all, to play games” while enjoying pickled meats. Poor children in Persia visited neighbors’ homes on Hanukkah, offering to protect households from the Evil Eye by burning special grasses in return for gifts. Mothers in Yemen gave children coins for purchasing sugar powder and red dye—ingredients for a sweet Hanukkah beverage. In eastern Europe, folk songs in Yiddish, the everyday language of those Jews, augmented Hanukkah’s repertoire of religious tunes in Hebrew. Synagogues often hosted concerts with instrumental accompaniment, something normally banned at worship. Music, therefore, also became especially associated with Hanukkah festivities.

Judaism takes food seriously. Leviticus set down rules on animals that could not be eaten (pigs and other animals that do not chew their cud or have a cloven hoof; animals that swarm, such as bugs or, among sea creatures, shellfish; and animals that die of natural causes). It also banned cooking a calf in its mother’s milk. Rabbinic rules extended and modified those rules, for example, banning the consuming of meat and milk in the same meal and identifying special symbolic foods to be eaten at the Passover seder. But ordinary Jews also elaborated food customs for other holidays, creating customs that symbolized each distinctive occasion. At Hanukkah, foods cooked in oil or a dairy dish that recalled elements of Hanukkah’s origin stories became customary. In
addition to foods that carried symbolic meaning, Jews distinguished the holiday with particular foods. Wealthier Jews might feast on roast duck, while poorer folk ate pancakes. In the twentieth century, in Jewish settlements in the future state of Israel, some Jewish children in families from the Levant visited their neighbors demanding foods for a Hanukkah feast; others serenaded householders with Ladino songs.27 Today’s Israelis eat jelly doughnuts on Hanukkah. Whatever the locale, whatever the age, Jews have deemed Hanukkah ripe for embellishment with foods, songs, charity, and games.

Yet all those embellishments, across the world and across a millennium, did not lift Hanukkah to the prominence in the Jewish calendar that it achieved in the United States in the twentieth century. Choreographed pageants in music halls, specially crafted synagogue festivals, amateur theatricals, decorations for the home, commercial greeting cards and distinctive gift items, restaurant dinner specials, crafts, holiday programming in museums and Jewish community centers, and public menorah lightings have elaborated on the simple rite to create something far more grand. I began my investigation into the holiday’s popularity with one simple assumption: few people choose to do things that hold no meaning for them. If contemporary surveys show Hanukkah to be one of the two holidays American Jews celebrate most often (the other is Passover), then these Jews must have reasons for doing so. A vast sea of historical data, including private letters, articles in Yiddish-language newspapers and newsletters of congregations and women’s associations, hymnals, pageant programs, and original plays and holiday manuals, suggests that four foundational conditions allowed Hanukkah to become so popular in America.

First, Hanukkah lent itself to reshaping as a significant American Jewish event because its rite is so simple. Taking only a few minutes to complete, it can be embellished with ease. Enacted in the privacy of the home, without supervision by a religious authority, modifications and adornments can be determined according to the performers’ tastes. It is easy to mold.

Second, Hanukkah had the good fortune to occur in the midst of a holiday season when American culture encourages people to celebrate something that, like Christmas, brings families together and indulges children. Hanukkah enabled Jews to accept that invitation to celebrate
a sanctified family life in December. Jewish children never, it emerged, begged to be taken to church. Rather, they begged for decorated trees and Santa Claus. Jews replied with Hanukkah.

Third, Hanukkah’s story depicted an ancient conflict that could be retold in ways that highlighted American Jews’ own dilemmas. At the holiday’s origin, Jews differed, disagreed, and ultimately fought about the degree to which they should embrace Hellenic culture and customs. In America, the diverse ways Jews modified their religious practices reflected their accommodation to American culture. Through lay-run congregations, the rise of Jewish denominations, and modifications to the liturgy, they have continually transformed Judaism. In the process, endless conflicts have emerged between Jews over the proper balance between modernity and tradition. Changing trends in American cultural values also encouraged new religious adaptations, especially expanding women’s roles and opportunities. 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 while living as a small minority—something they are most aware of during December, when their minority status becomes most vivid.

Finally, Hanukkah provided an occasion to ponder God’s presence and intervention in Jewish history. While every Jewish holiday directs worship to the divine, Hanukkah’s story also focused attention on a crisis in the ancient Jewish past when Jews achieved something extraordinary—defeating a conqueror who had banned Judaism and regaining their religious and political independence. Different interpretations judged it either as accomplished through Jews’ own devotion and bravery or as the result of divine rescue. The upheavals and terrors that modern Jews experienced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries lent that Hanukkah story special significance. Hanukkah helped them assess the dimensions of their freedom and safety in the United States.

Today, public and private Hanukkah activities in homes, synagogues, museums, community centers, restaurants, and public squares, in media and on the web, provide American Jews with a holiday that is rich in activities for both children and adults and that appeals to the senses, the emotions, and the intellect. Hanukkah in its season looms large in the American Jewish psyche.
Many Jews argue that Hanukkah became important in the United States only as a Jewish foil to Christmas’s cultural dominance in December. As such, they say, Hanukkah synthesized Jewish and American cultures. Yet what did that mean? Was the common wisdom correct? The ways in which Jewry developed Hanukkah, the meanings it selected and the activities it created, show that while it embraced some elements of American culture, it redefined or resisted others. Jews themselves often disagreed about how to understand Christmas, asking, for example, if a decorated fir tree is a sacred Christian item or not. Not only did Jews differ on how—and whether—to modify Hanukkah, but the holiday itself became a vehicle by which they commented on their differences and contested over them. But most agreed that Jewishness, with or without religious content, deserved its own cultural space.

Jews even disagreed about how to spell Hanukkah. American advertising, English translations of Jewish literature, and religious documents spell it in myriad ways. Because it is a Hebrew word whose first letter has no equivalent sound in English, American Jews tend to write it in ways that mimic their own pronunciation. In the 1970s, one writer concluded that the best spelling is “Chanukah”; the “Ch” signals people in the know to use the back-of-the-throat sound of the Hebrew letter het. But that spelling led everyone else to mispronunciations sounding like the “ch” in chair. Some publishers placed a dot under the H at the beginning of Hanukkah to indicate the Hebrew pronunciation, but that, too, seemed to signal correct pronunciation only to those who already knew it but left others with a simple “H” and bewilderment. Contemporary scholars of the European Jewish language, Yiddish, often spell it “Khanike,” which comes closer to that language’s pronunciation. In 1889, the New York Times wrote “Hanukkah” in its condensed version of an article that originally appeared in the Jewish Messenger, a local Jewish newspaper. The Times has spelled it that way ever since. That spelling is now itself an American Jewish tradition.

Hanukkah, therefore, holds a complex relationship to American culture. In magnifying the simple holiday, Jews acted on their desire to be part of the larger society’s winter festival season. In creating and revising new holiday songs and stories, they inscribed American values into Hanukkah’s meaning. At the same time, though, they used their expanded Hanukkah festival to resist the lure of Christianity. By making
Hanukkah an important part of their Jewish lives, they enlivened a Jewish religious and cultural tradition. Celebrating Hanukkah each year, Jews acknowledge boundaries between themselves and Christian society. But by touting Hanukkah’s “fit” with the values of the Christmas season and of American culture, they insist on their right to be different, because, “underneath,” people are all the same. Moreover, by elaborating on their own religious festival that commemorates a miracle, Jews also refute secular trends in America that diminish religion’s importance. So while it appears at first glance that Hanukkah elaborations are all about Jews fitting into America, closer analysis suggests that Hanukkah is the vehicle through which Jews draw distinctions between themselves and the majority society while asserting their common humanity.

Christmas may have prompted many Jews to take a new look at Hanukkah’s relevance, but what they found in Hanukkah held little link to Christianity. Completely apart from Christmas’s culture, American Jews used Hanukkah’s story to understand the changes in their own religious condition. They retold its dramatic account of oppressors, traitors, loyalists, and faithful followers in myriad ways as diverse elements of American Jewish society faced off over questions about Judaism’s survival in the modern world. The ways in which they understood God’s role in Hanukkah’s story, and the likelihood of divine rescue as Jews withstood the terrors of the twentieth century, defined them to each other. As they retold the holiday’s story each year, it became a narrative that reminded them of ancestors who might be models for their own lives. It also made their contemporary challenges less novel. Contemporary American experience is not so different, Hanukkah’s story suggested. Jews have faced this disarray before. The holiday’s homey traditions and inspiring messages consoled and comforted adults who, through their celebrations, made sure it cheered both their children and themselves. Those who advocated for Hanukkah’s increased importance assured their coreligionists that they could, indeed, live joyous Jewish lives in America despite the challenges they faced as a religious minority whose own diversity fragmented their religious communities. In this season that brought their differences from American society and from each other into sharpest focus, Hanukkah arrived to tell a Jewish story of a time when unity, power, and divine favor emerged to overcome disarray, weakness, and religious confusion.