

# Shedding light on Hanukkah

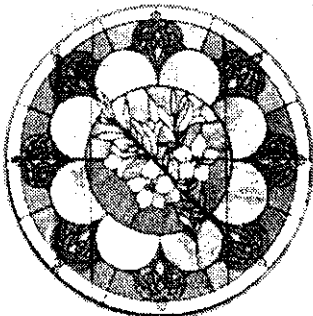
BY DENNIS C. SASSO

Last year around this time, I came across a holiday greeting card that read: "Merry Christmas or Happy Hanukkah or Whatever." Some years earlier I was given a Hanukkiah (a Hanukkah candelabrum) in the shape of a Christmas tree.

More than a sign of the relativism of our cultural values, these incidents reflect the misinformation that abounds concerning these religious celebrations, especially Hanukkah.

Hanukkah, which begins this year on Sunday evening, Dec. 13, means "dedication." Its historical background is to be found in Maccabees I and II.

These books are not part of the Hebrew Bible, but belong rather to a collection of ancient Jewish texts known as the Apocrypha ("hidden" or "outside" writings). The story relates how during the years 168-165 B.C., Judah Maccabee and his brothers, inspired by their courageous father Mattathias the Hasmonean, priest of Modin, led a revolt against Antiochus IV, the Seleucid monarch.



## FOCUS ON FAITH

Antiochus, in an effort to consolidate his reign, had forcefully introduced Greek idols into the land of Judah, prohibited certain Jewish

customs and profaned the Temple with pagan practices. The narrative tells us how Judah and his followers vanquished the oppressors, reconquered Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple.

There is also a seasonal background that sheds light on the celebration of Hanukkah. Long before the Maccabees, there was a celebration of the winter solstice at this time of the year. Several legends associate Hanukkah with the winter solstice and the lighting of fires, which is reported as part of the dedication of the Temple's altar. Hanukkah is also associated with customs similar to those of Sukkot (Tabernacles), such as carrying palms and branches.

In the earliest sources, Hanukkah is described as a belated Sukkot because the faithful had not been able to celebrate that festival while the Temple was under foreign hands. Hence, Hanukkah, like Sukkot, is an eight-day celebration.

In subsequent centuries, while the Jews lived under Roman domination, the rabbis sought to tone down the nationalist and military aspects of the original Hanukkah, and they spiritualized the message of the celebration. A late Talmudic legend explains that once the Maccabees recovered the Temple, they discovered only one cruse of undefiled oil for the Temple lamp. It contained just enough oil to provide light for one day. But a miracle happened and the small amount of oil produced light for eight days until more of it could be prepared. Therefore, in praise and thanksgiving, we kindle Hanukkah lamps for eight days.

There are many lovely customs and folk traditions associated with the festival. It is customary among Ashkenazim (Central and Eastern European Jews) to eat latkes (potato pancakes). Sephardim (Jews of Spanish ancestry) to eat Sufganyot (jelly filled donuts). These delicacies remind us of the miracle of the oil.

Unlike Christmas for Christians, Hanukkah is for the Jews a minor holiday. But because of its proximity to the Christian celebration, it has acquired added significance among American Jews. Hanukkah and Christmas both point to the distinctive history and values of their faith traditions but should not

be confused or blurred in meaning or observance. It is worth noting that had it not been for the heroism and dedication of the Maccabees in the second century B.C., Judaism might have disappeared. Thus, the emergence of Christianity two centuries later, may not have occurred.

An important aspect of the Maccabean struggle was its defense of minority rights. The Maccabees and their followers refused to succumb to the tyranny of the majority. Today, Hanukkah speaks to us of the values of tolerance and of religious and cultural freedom that enrich a pluralistic society, allowing each community to develop its own particular lifestyle with integrity and to engage in open dialogue and cooperation with others.

Sasso is a rabbi at Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis.

## The Hanukah Story

After Seleucus died, Antiochus, called Epiphanes, ascended the throne. Jason, brother of Onias the High Priest, supplanted his brother by promising the king three hundred and sixty talents of silver and eighty talents from other sources. In addition, he was promised another fifty if he was given permission to build a gymnasium and change the name of the city of Jerusalem to Antiochia. The king agreed and Jason took over. He immediately started to convert his countrymen to the Greek way of life. He broke down the traditional way of life and introduced new customs forbidden by the law. He set up the gymnasium right in the Temple Citadel and introduced the finest young men to the wearing of the Petsus hat (athlete's headgear). The passion for adopting Greek customs rose to such heights that the Priests would neglect their Temple service in favor of unlawful exercise, running from their duties as soon as a call came for discus throwing.

(II Maccabees 4:7ff, 120 BCE)

...then the king (after the revolt by the Hasidim) ordered all his kingdom to become one people and decreed that everyone should forsake his own law. All of the nations agreed to the decree of the king and sacrificed to idols and violated the Shabbat. The king also sent letters to Jerusalem and to the cities of Judea, commanding them to follow foreign customs, to stop Temple sacrifices, to violate Shabbat and holidays, to profane the Temple sanctuary, to build high places and ... idols, to sacrifice swine flesh and unkosher animals, and to leave their sons uncircumcised... Whoever would not obey the king's orders was to die.

(I Maccabees 1:41-50, written close to actual events)

Judah and his brothers said: "Our enemies have been defeated, let us go up to Jerusalem to cleanse the Temple and to rededicate it." They found the Temple in ruin, the altar profaned, the gates burnt down, the courts overgrown and the priests' rooms in shambles...They purified the Temple, removing the stones which cluttered it...they took unhewn stones, as the law commands, and built a new altar on the model of the previous one. They rebuilt the Temple and restored its interior and courts. They fixed the sacred vessels and the lampstand to shine within the Temple. Then, early on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev...it was rededicated with hymns of thanksgiving (Hallel), to the music of harps and lutes and cymbals...then Judah, his brother, and the whole congregation of Israel decreed that the rededication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness at the same season each year, for eight days.

(I Maccabees 4:39-59, written close to the actual events)

Maccabeus with his men, led by the Lord, recovered the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. He demolished the altars erected by the heathens in the public square and their sacred precincts as well. When they had purified the Sanctuary, they constructed another altar, then striking fire from flints, they offered the lights, and the Shew Bread... The Sanctuary was purified on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Kislev... This joyful celebration went on for eight days; it was like Sukkot, for they recalled how only a short time before they had kept the festival while living like animals in the mountains; and so they carried *lulavim* and *etrogim*, and they chanted hymns to God who had triumphantly led them to the purification of His Temple. A measure was passed by the public assembly that the entire Jewish people should observe these days every year.

(II Maccabees 10:1-8, 120 BCE)

Our Rabbis taught: On the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev begin the eight days of Hanukah, which are days on which mourning and fasting are prohibited.

For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all of the oil in it; and when the Hasmonean dynasty defeated them, they searched and found only one jug of oil with the official seal of the Head Kohein, enough to burn for one day. But a miracle happened and the oil lasted for eight days.

In the following years, these days were appointed as a festival on which Hallel was said.

(Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b, 300-500 CE)