

Without Hanukkah There Might Not Be A Christmas! **By Rabbi Michael Lotker**

This is the time of the year known in the Jewish circles as “The December Dilemma.” Jewish families often struggle and feel caught between the twin demands of being true to our Jewish traditions and not missing out on the commercial and cultural pleasures (and stresses) of the Christmas season. In the hopes of being helpful and informative, I offer three important thoughts for you all.

First, Hanukkah is not the Jewish Christmas. In fact the two holidays have nothing to do with each other except for the fact that they come at about the same time of the year. Christmas is, of course, an important Christian holiday celebrating, as it does, the birth of the central figure in that religion. Hanukkah is a relatively minor Jewish holiday celebrating the re-dedication of the Holy Temple after the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greek oppressors in the year 135BCE. As we will see below, the holiday is not even mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Interestingly, it is not traditionally even a gift giving holiday for Jews (gifts are more traditional to Purim); it only became so in more modern times for Jews living in Christian lands due to the influence of Christmas gift giving. Hanukkah is a wonderful and fun holiday to celebrate with Hanukkah lights, dreidles, foods made with oil, chocolate Hanukkah gelt and more, but please don’t send me (or anyone else) any “Christmaskuh” cards. Celebrate Hanukkah with your family and Jewish friends and celebrate Christmas with your Christian family and friends and don’t mix up the two.

Without the Christian Church, we would know far less about Hanukkah. For a variety of interesting reasons, the Rabbis of the Talmud did not admire the Maccabees and their successors. Perhaps it was because these same successors that harassed the rabbis and perhaps the rabbis were tired of Jewish revolts having suffered in the aftermath of two unsuccessful revolts against Rome. In any events, when the Rabbis of the time were deciding which books would become part of the official Hebrew Bible, they excluded the two Books of Maccabees that were written at the time. As it turns out, the early Church Fathers decided to include these books into the Christian Old Testament thereby preserving them for Christians and for us as well. We therefore owe most of the detailed knowledge of the Maccabee revolt to the preserving efforts of the Church.

Without Hanukkah there might not be a Christmas. Speaking historically, it’s interesting to speculate on what would have happened if the Maccabees’ Hanukkah revolt had not succeeded. It’s just possible that Judaism would have been eliminated as a force and a religion in the world. If this were the case, it’s hard to see how Jesus (who was born some 130 years later) would have been seen as the Jewish Messiah. Thus, it’s just possible that, without Hanukkah, there would be no Christmas.

In summary, Hanukkah and Christmas, like Christians and Jews, owe a real debt to one another and have much to teach each other. I love both holidays and what they stand for. I take delight in wishing my Christian friends and family a Merry Christmas and my Jewish friends and family a Happy Hanukkah. And to all, a happy and healthy New Year.