

Hanukkah marks the 'gift' of peace

By Rabbi Judea B. Miller
Guest contributor

The festival of Hanukkah — which took place December 2-9 this year — is not a Jewish Christmas. The two holidays are different in both meaning and content. There is no such thing as a "Hanukkah bush." There is only a tiny lamp that contains eight candles — kindled during the eight nights of Hanukkah — that makes our world a little brighter.

The story of Hanukkah is not of a gentle nature. It is a remembrance of bloody battles fought in 165 B.C. to defeat the oppressive Hellenistic Syrian-Greeks who occupied the land of Judea.

The Syrian-Greeks offered art, poetry and literature to the lives of the Judeans (Jews), attempting to create a new mind set of customs, traditions and pagan faith. Many were attracted to it. After all, who could not be enticed by the charms of Eros (the god of love), the philosophy of Plato, the plays of Aristophanes, the sports games of the stadiums? The energy of Greek culture enlightened the literate and distracted the weary.

If all that the Hellenes did was to introduce their art, literature and sports in the life of the Jewish people, Hanukkah would not exist. But they went one step too far. They attempted to impose their own religious values, dogma and fanaticism upon the people. To the Jews, these preachments and practices were blasphemous.

Inherent in Greek tradition was senseless slaughter, the disposition of the elderly, a lack of regard for human dignity and — most heinous of all — the denial of the One God who gave to each human being the divine gifts of life and freedom of choice.

Conformity to Hellenistic Greek culture meant relinquishing the right to be one's self. The "fates" determined every move, and they were fickle and amoral.

Under the leadership of Mattathias and his son, Judah Maccabee, war was waged for individual freedom and the right to worship without the proscriptions of an authoritarian government. In their victory lies the miracle of the holiday. Had the Jews not been successful, would Christianity even have emerged generations later?

In this age of suffocating conformity, the struggle for individual freedom and responsibility must still be waged. Within our society, strident voices try to tear away from us our right to make

choices about our lives, our right of personhood, our right to be different.

Hanukkah embodies concepts of human dignity and individual free will. These are still ideals for which we must struggle. These ideals teach that, as divinely created beings, we are responsible to God and to ourselves to live and act morally, humanely and with personal self-regard.

These ideals of Western civilization find their expression in Hanukkah, which celebrates a gift the Jews have given to the world. In lighting eight little candles, Jews bring the gifts of divine light and life to the human soul. What greater gift can there be than the right to be free?

But there is an additional message in Hanukkah. It is more subtle, but it is

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particularly important for this season when we try to celebrate the goal of peace on earth for all people, in the Middle East and everywhere else. That message comes in the significant fact that nowhere in the *Talmud* is there any mention of the military victories of Judah Maccabee and the Hasmoneans. The exploits on the field of battle are recorded in the books of the *Apocrypha*, but not in those books that were preserved by the rabbis.

The major rabbinic work of that period was a collection called the *Mishnah*. It was to become the core of the *Talmud*, the collection of writings constituting Jewish religious and civil law.

The only mention of Hanukkah in the *Mishnah* is the tale of the miracle of the lamps lighted in Jerusalem's rededicated sanctuary that remained lit longer than we expected. But about the exploits on the field of battle, the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud* are strangely silent. Why is this?

I believe one reason is that traditional Jewish religious values do not exalt military conquest. Jews of integrity would judge themselves through

their own traditional standards, not through the standards of the majority's civilization. The eyes of the majority were often regarded as "foreign" and unappreciative of Jewish values.

It is only natural that Jews today would be exhilarated by the victories of Israelis on the field of battle. These victories require intelligence and courage. Jews are grateful for modern deliverances and are justifiably proud of our Israeli brethren. Would that the Jewish people had had such capacity for defense and rescue in the 1930s and 1940s when Hitler was killing millions of our people in Europe. We were helpless then to save them.

Most nations are now tremendously impressed by the might of Israel's armed forces, as well they should be. The Jew as a latter-day Israeli warrior seems to impress the world more than did two millennia of Jewish scholarship, spirituality, piety and humaneness. Of such theologians, philosophers and writers as Maimonides, Judah Ha Levi, Hillel, Chaim Bialik, Buriah, Israel Baal Shem Tov, Martin Buber and others, the nations of the world know little and could care less.

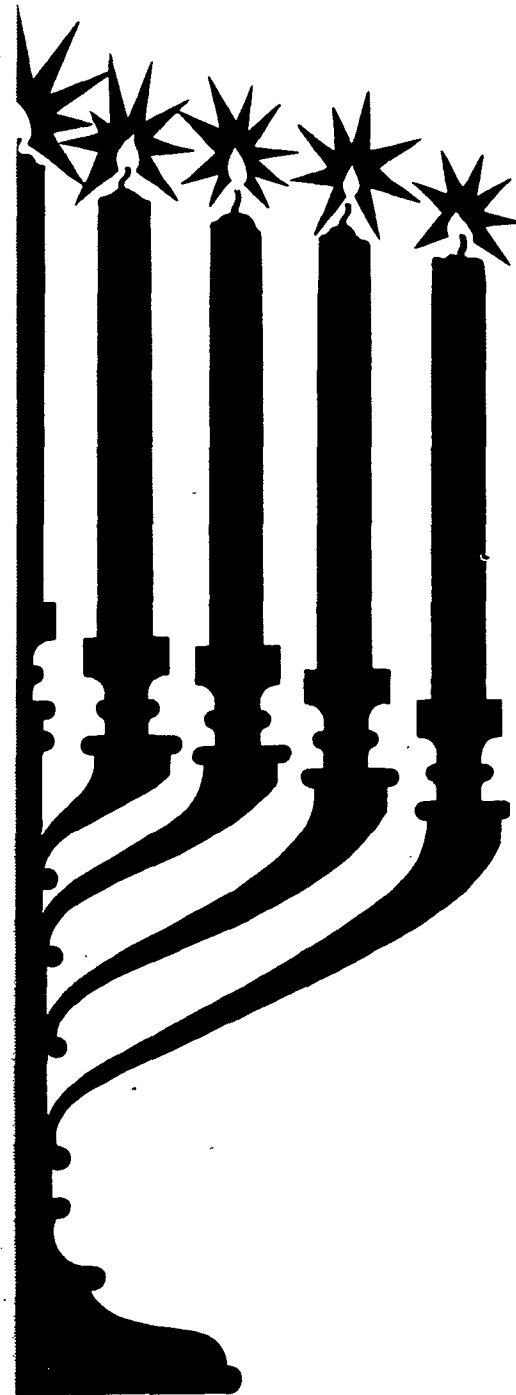
But the world understands and appreciates an Israeli soldier with an Uzi machine gun. This is the world's loss. It is a measure of the world's spiritual weakness and shows how far civilization still has to mature.

We Jews dare not let ourselves be seduced by the praises of the world. The nations of the world are helpless or indifferent to save Jews who are now in danger, just as they were helpless or indifferent to save our brethren then in the camps of extermination in Nazi Europe. So their praises now are irrelevant.

But more important, we Jews have our own spiritual values. Jews belong to an ancient people with an ancient heritage. We know that there are times when we, too, like the Maccabees of ancient times must fight for survival using the sword or the Uzi. But such weapons are not Jewish goals of survival. This we must ever remember.

So when we think of Hanukkah, let us remember that it is not the Maccabees' military victories that Jews celebrate, but rather the rededication of the lights of faith in our holy temple. This is the ultimate message those eight small candles offer to the world.

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