

# A Dreidel for Christmas

*Divergent holidays provide opportunities for unity, understanding*

BY AMY E. TUCKER

The countdown to Christmas has begun. Hallmark started it in July with their holiday ornament premiere and retailers nationwide have been lining shelves with merchandise since September and bombarding us with holiday ads to keep their profits in the black.

Amidst the fanfare and commercialism of Christmas, Jews in America celebrate one of their minor holidays, Hanukkah, which begins at sundown on December 15. Though the impact has "slightly" changed Hanukkah over the years, the majority of practicing Jews don't feel like they're missing out.

"Hanukkah was already a commercial holiday," explained Rabbi Robert Kasman of Agudat Achim in Niskayuna. "It was never a Biblical holiday, even in its inception. The Talmud uses the Aramaic phrase 'per-sumei nisa' which describes our obligation at the holiday to 'advertise the miracle.'"

Judaism, according to Rabbi Kasman, doesn't have a deep history of gift-giving. Even the traditional holiday "gelt" (or coin) is a German word that probably started in medieval times. He sees the tendency to over-celebrate holidays as more a function of society.

"If you take Halloween, for example, some people had pumpkins growing up and others didn't. Now you see homes adorned in hundreds of dollars worth of decorations, life-size figurines and front-lawn cemeteries. People are celebrating holidays in a larger, more visual way today than they did 40 years ago and Hanukkah is included in that development."

The commercialism also extends to their Purim holiday, which always involved food and 'mishloach manot' (sending of gifts). Today, people send pre-printed boxes and pre-packaged foods. "I think it's proportional to the American tendency in the twenty-first century to celebrate bigger with everything we do," Rabbi Kasman said.

Mark Salem, a 22-year-old orthodox Jew in his second year at Albany Law School, feels that the emphasis on Christmas has made a positive impact.

"The media tends to advertise Hanukkah with Christmas and lump the two together," said Salem. "Because Christmas is commercialized, it's taking Hanukkah with it to an extent. But, it has brought our holiday out into the open more, so I think it's good."

American Jews growing up in the twentieth cen-

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ture didn't always share such positive experiences. As a child, 41-year old Jeffrey S. Handelman, a congregant at Agudat Achim didn't just feel alienated around Christmas, but all year long.

"It was everything," he conceded. "Teachers would schedule tests on the Jewish holidays and my parents always had to intervene. Now, many schools are closed for Jewish holidays."

Growing up, Handelman's family began celebrating Christmas with a family friend, which he calls a "terrific experience".

But, before those get-togethers, there was nothing for them to do on Christmas day except go to the movies or a Chinese restaurant.

"You knew everyone else was doing great things and the rest of the world was shut down," Handelman said.

Salem, who lives alone so he can maintain a kosher kitchen, also identified with feeling different.

"Growing up in a closed society in Brooklyn with a lot of other Jews around me, you tend to look at the outside world as something totally different from what you are. You don't want to have to feel like you're trying to fit in," he said, "But, if anything is stopping you from wanting to keep your traditions or be the Jew that you are, you should think twice about it."

"I think the people who are unhappy or dissatisfied are the ones who aren't celebrating the Jewish holidays thoroughly," said Rabbi Kasman. "There's a sense with Christmas of 'that's what they do, this is what we do.' But, that's an ongoing thing with Jews all year long.

"Christians decorate a tree for Christmas and we decorate a house (hut/booth) for Sukkot each fall. I think if you're celebrating Hanukkah, you can identify Christmas as being somebody else's holiday, and you're not really being left out."

Unlike when Handelman was in school, many colleges and secondary schools today are not only educating students about different cultures, religions and holidays, they're actually closing down for major observances and avoiding scheduling exams and events on significant dates.

"I think as the world is becoming more accepting of diversity, it's making conscious efforts to include other religions, cultures and holidays," said Salem. "It's interesting to see the differences between your religion and other people's religions," he continued. "Instead of viewing it as a problem, it should motivate you to learn about other aspects of the world and different cultures."

At an early age, Handelman learned that he could share in some of his friends' holidays and they could share in his, even if they didn't believe in exactly the same thing. As a fifth-generation conservative Jew, he hopes his children will embrace their traditions and "not feel the pressure of being part of a minority religion in a Christian society."

"I don't want the [Jewish] religion and traditions to end with me," he said. "I try to instill in them pride in their Jewish heritage and explain that their non-Jewish friends have their own heritage to celebrate. Sharing in others' religions is a great way to expose kids to different traditions and eliminate some of the misconceptions that are common."

Perhaps Rabbi Kasman sums it up best: "When it's someone else's birthday, you can be happy for them. You just don't necessarily get a slice of the cake."

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