

Seleucids, Symbols, and Solstices

My roommate burst into our room carrying two large plastic bags, talking excitedly with a friend, awkwardly hauling in a long cardboard box behind him. The pair set the equipment down and began littering the floor with lights and baubles. After successfully making the room a fire hazard, they started their construction of a tall artificial Christmas tree.

Before long, they had gotten the plastic tree set up. My roommate was beaming as he admired his handiwork. His partner, on the other hand, was jumping up and down with his hands on his head, raving “yo,” “dude,” and “this is insane” as if the tree had spontaneously generated into the room. After what felt like the twentieth “insane,” I got up and left the room to find somewhere quieter to work on homework while they began decorating the tree.

A few hours later when I returned, the lights were off and the fully decorated tree was lit up in its full majesty. Red, silver, and gold baubles hung from its green branches, and a string of small light bulbs¹ snaked around the tree, leading to a glorious golden glowing star at the top. The ogling friend had long since vanished, and my roommate sat in his chair, smiling at the tree. “Ain’t it beautiful?” he asked, the words sounding strange in a Midwestern accent.

I nodded and congratulated him on his craftsmanship. The glow really made the depressing dorm room a lot cozier, and the lifeless tree gave the room more life than the default bleak walls. But there was still something about the tree that irked me. While my roommate and I never discussed our purchases, should I be offended that he bought a Christmas tree without asking me first? Should I be offended by the Christmas tree itself? How should I feel about the Christmas tree? Oh, I should probably mention that I’m Jewish.

And since I’m Jewish, to make sure we’re all on the same page, let me define what a Christmas tree is. Christmas trees are coniferous evergreens (usually pine, fir, or spruce) which

¹ To be absolutely clear, since Christmas lights might be prohibited in the dorms, these lights are strictly fictional and or hypothetical, and the light they emitted was conducted via magic.

are decorated and used to celebrate Christmas. These trees (which can be artificial) are often decorated with lights and ornaments such as baubles or tinsel. Coniferous comes from the Latin *conus* meaning “cone” and *ferre* meaning “to bear/carry” (“Conifer (n.)”). So, the evergreens used are “cone-bearing” in terms of how they reproduce (i.e., by seeds in a cone such as a pinecone) (Elwell). The term “evergreen” comes from, and this may come as a great shock, the words “ever” and “green” smushed together. In case that wasn’t clear, an evergreen is called an evergreen because it’s always green. This has to do with the unique nature of their leaves; evergreen leaves are tightly rolled into thin needles which somehow conserve more water than the average leaf, which allows the leaves to perform photosynthesis and survive throughout the winter (“Why Do Evergreens”). This forever green nature has been vital to the symbolic role of evergreens and why they’re used as Christmas trees.

It turns out that evergreens were being used for holiday celebrations long before Christmas even existed. Ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Vikings, Germanic Tribes, Chinese, Japanese, and Druids all came up with similar excuses for shoving various thrushes and boughs and garlands and wreaths in their homes for the winter solstice. Egyptians brought in palm rushes during the solstice to symbolize the recovery of their sun god, Ra, from his winter sickness² (History.com). Greeks used a pine in belief that pines are sacred to Attis, god of vegetation, and decorated it in a clairvoyantly Christmas-y fashion. They even put gifts (offerings) under the tree for the gods (“Meaning & Significance”). The other aforementioned civilizations also brought evergreens or parts of evergreens into their homes and decorated them to honor deities, scare off demons and wicked spirits, and symbolize a good harvest to come (History.com).³ These practices all occurred in the wintertime around or during the solstice.

² Most likely the flu.

³ To clarify, all of these cultures did not use evergreens for *all* of these reasons, maybe just one or the other. I didn’t want to bore you by going through each civilization and explaining why they like plants.

Thus, the evergreen has been an existing staple long before the advent⁴ of Christians putting their stamp on it. The tree was Christianized from some pagan holiday minding its own business. It's contested as to which holiday this was. Rome is credited with solidifying Christmas occurring on December 25th,⁵ the date when Saturnalia⁶ and the solstice were celebrated. This celebration entailed many traditions now present in Christmas such as gift giving, decorating, candle lighting, and singing ("The Unexpected Origins"). The Romans even hung metal ornaments on their trees to represent a god ("These 6 Christmas Traditions"). So, it wouldn't be outlandish to believe that Christmas trees and these other traditions come from Saturnalia. Some argue that Christmas tree decorations come from both Saturnalia and the use of nuts and fruits to decorate trees to honor the god Odin by Germanic pagan tribes during the solstice ("These 6 Christmas Traditions"). Others argue that the Christmas tree and all those previously mentioned customs came from the pagan holiday of Yule — the solar celebration of the winter solstice ("Celebrating Yule").

In any event, the origin of the modern day Christmas tree comes from 16th century Germany. It's also debated when exactly the first sighting was, but I particularly like the legend of one fateful night in 1536. The religious reformer Martin Luther was taking a pleasant stroll through a conveniently placed pine forest when he looked up and was caught in the brilliance of the glittering stars through the evergreen branches. He was reminded of the "starry heavens from whence their Saviour came" and he rushed home in a bout of inspiration to put some candles on

⁴ This could be a pun, but then again, I know very little about Christianity.

⁵ No one in their right mind would even suggest that this date was selected because it may have been Jesus' birthday. As everyone knows, and definitely not just historians, Jesus was most likely born in the spring (Zhu).

⁶ A pagan holiday in which Saturn, the god of agriculture, was honored with a feast and evergreen boughs strewn about the house ("Meaning & Significance"). Don't complain these footnotes aren't helpful.

his conveniently placed tree (Barnes). Many say that this was the invention of Christmas lights,⁷ but it's nicer to just say he invented the Christmas tree altogether.⁸

German immigrants brought the Christmas tree to America, but it took a long time for the trees to catch on (History.com). Especially since from 1659 to 1681, the Puritan government banned pagan Christmas celebrations (i.e., all Christmas celebrations), since they believed Christmas to be an incredibly important holy day.⁹ Possessing something like a Christmas tree resulted in a fine (Zhu), but eventually Christmas celebrations became so popular that they gave up ("The Unexpected Origins"). But Christmas trees still had yet to take off among non-German Americans.

In 1800, Queen Charlotte, the German wife of King George III, brought Christmas trees to England as "a special treat to give the youngsters" (Barnes). She made Christmas trees very popular among the upper class, but it wasn't until Charlotte's daughter, Queen Victoria, and Prince Albert popularized the tree in 1846 when their festivities were publicized in periodicals (Barnes) and because most in England saw the young queen as a role model (Cline). These periodicals were seen in the colonies, and Christmas trees exploded in popularity in America.¹⁰

Along with these Christmas trees came the Americanized Christmas we know and love today,¹¹ which solidified itself between 1830 and 1880 (Mehta) with the "rise of department stores, mass marketing, and advertising" (Greenberg). Previously, the Christmas tree had a lot of religious significance — many saw the tree as a symbol of the birth of Jesus, with the star topper

⁷ Fun Fact: the first electric Christmas tree lights were invented by Thomas Edison's assistants (History.com).

⁸ Like most dictators, I enjoy rewriting history for convenience.

⁹ Or maybe they were just grumpy. They did ban dancing after all.

¹⁰ Eventually, President Franklin Pierce brought the Christmas tree tradition to the White House. President Theodore Roosevelt, being the staunch environmentalist he was, banned the tree in the White House for environmental reasons. In 1923, President Calvin Coolidge began the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony which is continued to this day. The lighting of the National Christmas Tree was postponed in 1963 due to public grieving for the assassinated JFK, and the tree was not fully lit in 1979 to commemorate those still being held hostage in Iran (History.com).

¹¹ Who doesn't love good ol' capitalism?

representing the Star of Bethlehem that guided the Magi to Jesus, and the angel topper representing the Angel who announced Jesus' birth. The evergreen was seen as symbolizing immortality and the crown of thorns worn by Jesus on the cross ("Meaning & Significance"). And candles and lights were seen as symbolizing Christ as the "light of the world" ("Christmas Tree"). But with the ever-growing commercialization of Christmas, and American society becoming more and more secular, the Christmas tree began to lose some of these religious connotations.¹²

In fact, legally/judicially, the Christmas tree is seen as a secular symbol, according to the United States Supreme Court. In the 1989 Supreme Court case, *County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union*, the Court considered the constitutionality of two holiday displays — a crèche on the Grand Staircase of the Allegheny County Courthouse, and an 18-foot menorah erected outside the City County Building next to a 45-foot Christmas tree. Oddly, only the crèche and the menorah were pulled into question, not whether the Christmas tree violated the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. The Court's opinion was that the Christmas tree is generally believed to be a secular symbol. According to Justice Blackmun, while "Christmas trees once carried religious connotations, today they typify the secular celebration of Christmas" since "numerous Americans place Christmas trees in their homes without subscribing to Christian religious beliefs" (*Allegheny County v. ACLU*).

First, it would be prudent to talk about the idea of the religious and secular dimensions of Christmas since Justice Blackmun mentioned the "secular celebration of Christmas." Some argue that Christmas is wholly a religious holiday, while others argue that due to commercialization and Americanization, Christmas is now wholly a secular holiday. But the truth is somewhere in

¹² Maybe this wouldn't have happened if it was a well-known fact that upon birth, Jesus looked green and prickly with a pyramidal body, a decagonal head, and a holy phosphorescence most likely caused by angelic radiation.¹³

¹³ No? Just me?

between. As Justice O'Connor put it, "the Christmas tree is widely viewed as a secular symbol of the holiday, in contrast to the crèche which depicts the holiday's religious dimensions" (*Allegheny County v. ACLU*). The nativity scene and anything associated with the birth of Jesus is part of the religion dimension of the holiday, while other aspects such as gift-giving, Santa Claus, Christmas music, etc. are all secular — they have nothing to do with the religious meanings of the holiday. Some only celebrate one dimension of the holiday, but most celebrate both.

Second, there is a bit to unpack regarding the rest of Justice Blackmun's statement. It is true that there are many Americans who have Christmas trees and even celebrate Christmas without being Christian or having any association with Jesus. As an example, my cousin (who is Jewish¹⁴) said her favorite holiday is Christmas, and she always celebrates with a Christmas tree. But this is not the case for all Jews or non-Christians, and the idea that Christmas trees only represent the secular dimension of Christmas is highly contested.

No matter how secularized they have become, Christmas trees can be alienating and ostracizing to minorities. Christmas is a Christian holiday, and Christians make up about 70% of the American population ("Religious Landscape Study"). The sheer magnitude of Christmas in America — Christmas trees everywhere, Christmas music and carols all over the radio and in stores, etc. — is a massive reminder to certain people (like Jews) that they are a minority in this country (Fenson). So, while my cousin might like the holiday cheer of the Christmas tree, not all Jews feel the same way.

Jews as a whole have had an ambivalent relationship with Christmas trees and Christmas in general. In 1900, an influx of millions of European Jews immigrated to the United States to find an already secularized Christmas. Being a minority and wanting to fit in, they immediately

¹⁴ And not part of a denomination like "Jews for Jesus."

began to assimilate by adopting Christmas traditions.¹⁵ It was quite common for Jews to have Christmas trees in their homes and to sing Christmas carols at schools (Greenberg). In fact, as a particularly odd form of assimilation, many of the most famous Christmas carols such as “Let it Snow,” “It’s The Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” and “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” were written by Jewish composers in the early 20th century (Albert).¹⁶ However, the next generation of Jews resisted celebrating Christmas, a holiday which they believed was still fundamentally Christian. Due to the rapidly growing Jewish population, they no longer felt the need to assimilate. But Jews began to feel left out during the holiday season, especially in the present department. So, parents began to adopt the previously-pagan-but-now-Christian gift giving tradition, giving their children presents each night of Chanukah.¹⁷ Lighting the menorah was supposed to be a sufficient alternative to lighting the Christmas tree (Greenberg).

Over the years, this “Christmasization” of Chanukah has escalated further and further. There are large menorah displays next to Christmas trees outside and in offices. There are Hanukkah bushes^[18,19] instead of Christmas trees. There’s Chanukah cookie decorating and Chanukah greeting cards. There’s Mensch on the Bench instead of Elf on the Shelf (Curry). There’s Hanukkah Harry or Uncle Max instead of Santa Claus. There’s Smiley Shalom instead of Frosty the Snowman. There are blue and white electric lights, baubles, and stockings instead of the red, white, and green originals (Schwarz). This merger of Christmas traditions and the

¹⁵ Before the giant immigration wave, the Jewish population was tiny, consisting of about 250,000 people by 1880 (Green).

¹⁶ This also explains why Chanukah songs are absolute rubbish. All the good Jewish composers spent all their energy on Christmas music.

¹⁷ Chanukah is a Jewish holiday that tends to fall around Christmas time (its date varies based on the lunar calendar).

¹⁸ Hanukkah bushes are usually smaller Christmas trees but with Chanukah and Jewish-themed decorations, most commonly with a Jewish star as the tree topper. These are mostly for children or interfaith couples.

¹⁹ There are multiple ways to spell the holiday Chanukah in English, since it comes from a Hebrew word (Hannukah, Hanukkah, Hanukah, Hanuka, Chanukah, Channukah, Chanukkah, and Chanuka (Schwartz)). I have my reasons for spelling it with the “Ch,” but quotations from other sources (and the “Hanukkah” bush) may have a different spelling.

Jewish holiday of Chanukah has led many to refer to and see Chanukah as the “Jewish Christmas.”

But is this Christmasization of Chanukah really a bad thing? Is something being lost because of it? Is Christmas killing Chanukah? And more generally, does Christmas pose a greater threat to Judaism as a whole?

Before delving into these questions, we should probably go into a deep dive of: what actually *is* Chanukah?

Despite how it’s displayed, Chanukah is one of the most minor holidays in Judaism, since it has no backing from the Torah (i.e., it was not a God-ordained holiday). But it still has religious importance, nonetheless.

Chanukah is celebrated for eight nights, in which candles on a menorah²⁰ are lit (one for each night). The most widely known explanation for this eight-night menorah-lighting fiesta is that for some reason, long ago, a menorah needed to be lit, but only one jar of oil (meant to last one night) was available. The dejected priests lit the menorah with the scarce supply of oil, and BEHOLD!²¹ the menorah miraculously lasted for eight nights! We should light a menorah for eight nights to celebrate this awesome act of God!

Keen observers may have noticed the phrase “widely known” used. Yes, this is not the entire story of Chanukah (in fact, it may not be the story at all).²² The less well known but incredibly vital story of Chanukah is one of a military victory, known as the Maccabean/Hasmonean Revolt, that occurred long ago.

²⁰ A menorah is a religiously significant seven-branched candelabrum. The menorah used for Chanukah is a special kind of menorah with nine branches called a chanukiah. The menorah is one of the oldest symbols of Judaism, while the chanukiah is exclusive to Chanukah. For simplicity’s sake (and because the rest of world has never heard this word before), I will be using the term menorah.

²¹ I understand that fully capitalizing a word is grammatically and narratively unsound, and that it can represent the cyberbullying tactic known as “flaming.” No English or cyber trauma was meant by this; I just wanted a lot of emphasis.

²² Spoilers.

The Persian Empire and then Alexander the Great's Empire controlled Judea, but essentially gave the state religious autonomy. But Alexander introduced the Jews to Hellenistic Greek culture, which many in the cities soon began to assimilate to. They largely abandoned their Jewish backgrounds to become wealthy traders or elites in society. However, the majority of Jews were farmers who lived outside the cities and were burdened by oppressive taxes introduced by the Greeks and then imposed by the Seleucids and the Ptolemies.²³ Tensions rose to a climax when Seleucid Antiochus IV invaded, took control of Judea, and immediately attempted to force Jews to assimilate to the Hellenic culture. He had the Holy Temple in Jerusalem used for sacrificing pigs to Greek gods, and he "forbade the practice of circumcision, kashrut, and observance of the Sabbath."²⁴ These rules weren't too much of a burden on the wealthy elite of the cities, but to the already oppressed farmers, this was the straw that broke the camel's back.²⁵ Under the leadership of the priest Mattathias and his five sons (the most famous being Judah Maccabee), a rebellion was organized, and through guerilla tactics, they were victorious in a bloody war against the Hellenic Jews and their backing of Seleucid military forces. In 164 B.C.E., the Maccabees "rededicated"²⁷ the Temple, relit the menorah, and eventually founded the Hasmonean Empire ("Chanukah"). The desecrated Temple, however, had only one cruse of still-sacred oil to be used to relight the menorah. Magically, this oil lit the menorah for eight nights, and thus, the previously mentioned "miracle of Chanukah."

²³ After the death of Alexander the Great, his generals fought for succession. Two of the main empires of this conflict were the Seleucid Empire (also known as the Syrian Greeks) and the Ptolemaic Empire (the Egyptian Greeks), which fought for control over Judea.

²⁴ While most Jews do not observe the Sabbath or practice kashrut nowa days, at the time these practices were crucial to the religion, and if someone wasn't circumcised, he wasn't Jewish.

²⁵ Maybe the special arson committing ones.²⁶

²⁶ This is actually a really funny joke, but the context is in a future footnote.

²⁷ Chanukah means "dedication" in Hebrew, but most just translate the name to mean the "Festival of Lights." There is also an alternative (and popular) definition, in which the word "Chanukah" is actually an acronym for "Chanu be-Kaf Hei," meaning "they rested [from battle] on the 25th (of Kislev)" (Leibtag). To explain what the heck I just said, I would need to elucidate the Hebrew language, the Jewish calendar, and how Hebrew numbers work. Just know that some rabbi somewhere figured out a clever way of defining Chanukah and is probably acting rather smug about it.

Besides the oil miracle, the great miracle which occurred was the fact that the Maccabees, the underdogs, won a war against a far more powerful military force to save the Jewish religion. That sounds hyperbolic, but the reason why we celebrate this unfortunate civil war of Jews fighting against assimilated Jews is because this is one of the few times in history when an attempt to eradicate the Jews almost succeeded. Rather than a violent genocide (as is so upsettingly common in Jewish history), the Greeks almost wiped out the Jews through a cultural genocide. Chanukah isn't just about a war on assimilation, it's about a war on *forced* assimilation.^[28,29]

Given this religious context, it's clear why the "Christmasization" of Chanukah is such a divisive issue among rabbis and Jews in general. The worry of new traditions like gifting presents is less an issue of secularization and more an issue of secularization due to assimilation. Because Christmas is a Christian holiday, and Christianity is the dominant culture, adopting certain Christmas practices for Chanukah is clearly a form of assimilation. It isn't forced assimilation (although some Jews may feel the need to take part in the holiday season), but it's assimilation, nonetheless.

And, by focusing on the "Christmas-y" aspects of Chanukah, are Jews losing the true meaning of the holiday? There's a prevalent argument that by making Chanukah more like Christmas and by portraying Chanukah to the greater population as "Jewish Christmas," Chanukah will lose its individuality — a unique holiday with special meanings and religious significance — and instead end up becoming a distorted reflection of the dominant culture. It seems deeply problematic that a holiday about Jews fighting for the right to be Jewish is turning

²⁸ A more modern day parallel could be the forced assimilation of American Indians.

²⁹ Through my research, I was upset to learn that the telling of this story can easily be told in a very negative light. Some argue that, while leaving out key points of context, Chanukah is the celebration of religious zealotry/extremism, violent nationalism, and religious fundamentalism. These terms completely undermine the importance of Chanukah and stray away from why we would want to celebrate Chanukah in the first place.

into a holiday about embracing the traditions of another culture. But, even disregarding Chanukah's true meaning, there's a problem with Jews being unable to have their own holiday and instead having to leech off the more popular, dominant one. To be succinct, the argument is basically: Chanukah should be celebrated in its own right, not because of Christmas.

So, is Chanukah's adoption of Christmas traditions completely antithetical to what Chanukah is about? Is Chanukah being stripped of its individuality, becoming more of a Jewish version of Christmas? *Is Christmas killing Chanukah?*

Given these big important questions (especially the repeated italicized one), one can only ask: How valid are these concerns? Is the situation really that dire?

One of the primary grumblings about Chanukah found online is the pedantic complaint that Chanukah is a minor holiday, and Christmas culture makes it appear to be the most important holiday in Judaism.³⁰ But there is an argument to be made that this popularization of Chanukah is a good thing.

From a religious standpoint, there is a special mitzvah (commandment) that needs to be fulfilled on Chanukah called *pirsumei nisa* or "spreading the miracle." The reason you see menorahs in peoples' windows is because Jews are required to light their menorah in a place where it will be visible to passersby to let people know of "the miracles of the festival, the miracle of Jewish survival in general and the miracles of God's hidden presence in the world" ("Pirsumei Nisa"). The exception was during times of persecution, where it was dangerous to announce to the world that you were Jewish.

Imagine then how well Jews have performed this mitzvah. We see giant menorahs standing next to Christmas trees, not trying to hide from antisemitism. Since lighting the

³⁰ In my World History class, my teacher asked us, "What is the most important holiday in Judaism?" One student immediately raised his hand and said, "Chanukah."

Chanukah candles is the most popular mitzvah (Greenberg), Jews are unintentionally fulfilling *pirsumei nisa* in flying colors.

Another benefit to the popularization of Chanukah is as a “gateway holiday.” According to a 1990 study, 52% of Jews were married to non-Jews, a sharp increase from the 9% in 1965. The study also found that 28% of the children born to those families were being raised as Jews (Lebovic). Jewish Orthodoxy immediately began to panic.³¹ They were primarily worried on two fronts: since interfaith marriages are mostly common in Reform³² circles, the statistics showed a general inclination of Jews overall to become less religious; and interfaith couples tend to leave their religion or raise their kids without their religion. Additionally, roughly 25% of Jews identify as being “Jews of no religion” (“Jewish Americans In 2020”), so it’s a genuine fear. But there is something to be said about the helpfulness of the secularized Chanukah.

The Jewish organization, Chabad, went on a campaign to exhibit big menorahs everywhere to challenge keeping-your-head-down Judaism.³³ Initially, these menorahs made Jews uncomfortable, but eventually the displays helped bolster confidence in Judaism and celebrating Chanukah over Christmas. But why would Chabad want to put the most advertising into the one of the least important holidays which lacked Jewish theology, law, and morals? Josh Plaut, the head rabbi at the Reform Metropolitan Synagogue in New York City, argued that “the thinness of the theological basis—in some ways, it makes it easier to reach out to the younger generations who might not want that religious depth initially... Hanukkah can be an easy way to celebrate one’s Jewish identity without a lot of baggage” (Green). In other words, while it seems paradoxical to endorse the least Jewish-like holiday, it makes the holiday work more easily as a

³¹ And I mean really panic. Some even used (in my opinion) excessive metaphors, calling this event a “second Holocaust” or a “silent Holocaust.”

³² Judaism is divided into three main sects: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, with Orthodox being the most religious and Reform being the least. (This is a simplified version of things — don’t worry about it.)

³³ One of the most unique aspects of Chanukah is forcing Jews to stand out, which is something Jews do not like to do.

gateway holiday since Jews are not encumbered with the “baggage” of Judaism. And Judaism comes with quite a lot of baggage: 613 rules and a boatload of antisemitism.

It's also a bit of a relief that Chanukah is the holiday to become Christmasized; it would be far worse if a more significant holy day in Judaism became highly secularized. Perhaps this can be ascribed to Chanukah's unique nature. Not only is Chanukah one of the most religiously thin holidays in Judaism, but it's also one of the most malleable — its meaning, how it's been celebrated, why it's been celebrated, and why it's changed multiple times throughout history.

As alluded to earlier (see footnote 22), the history of Chanukah isn't as clear as it should be. To start, the most well-known reason for the holiday, the oil wizardry, probably never happened. I'm not being overly cynical and saying, “Something which goes against the laws of nature didn't actually happen, and also I hate fun.” I'm saying that the oil story didn't appear in writing until the Babylonian Talmud,³⁴ numerous *centuries* after the first written accounts of the Chanukah events. Both the primary sources for the events of Chanukah and sources in close chronological proximity to the events³⁷ do not include anything about the miracle. It's unclear

³⁴ The Talmud is a series of books compiling the rabbinic discussions about Jewish laws and traditions. (Don't ask why it's Babylonian.) In Talmud Shabbat 21b, the rabbis write as follows: “On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them. What is the reason? When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of *hallel* and special thanksgiving in prayer and blessings.”³⁵

³⁵ Amusingly, in the next paragraph of the Talmud, we learn that if a guy walks by a store with a camel, and that camel is bearing flax, and that flax somehow “enter[s] a store” and catches fire from the storekeeper's lamp, and the building therefore catches on fire, then the guy with the camel is liable. The fact that this is a scenario that had to be discussed means this likely happened on multiple occasions.³⁶

³⁶ Please go back to footnote 25 and give a hearty guffaw.

³⁷ The primary sources for the story of Chanukah (i.e., the war) are Maccabees 1 and 2 of the Apocrypha (written around 100 B.C.E, not too long after the events of Chanukah), and they do not include any mention of the miracle of oil. Jewish (albeit biased) historian Flavius Josephus, when describing the first Chanukah in the *Antiquities of the Jews* (written around 95 C.E.), also does not mention the miracle (Schwartz). The scholia of *Megillat Ta'anit*, written sometime before the Talmud's explanation, do not mention the oil miracle and actually offer alternative explanations. Ancient poems known as *piyyutim* do not include any mention of the oil miracle (Noam). The *Pesikta Rabbati*, written in the Land of Israel around the same time as the Babylonian Talmud (this Talmud was completed around the year 500 C.E.), also offers an alternative explanation for why we light candles on Chanukah (Schwartz). The only early source which mentions the oil miracle is the Scroll of Antiochus, which was allegedly written

whether talk about this miracle originated before this writing, but Chanukah, whether intentionally³⁸ or unintentionally, had been rebranded from a holiday about a war to a holiday about a miracle.

The total disassociation from the war element of Chanukah did not last long. During the Middle Ages, there was a sudden revival of interest in the holiday of Chanukah. The roots of traditions of eating latkes (previously-cheese-but-now-potato pancakes) and spinning dreidels (Chanukah version of teetotum³⁹) originated during the Middle Ages (Gilad). The Scroll of Antiochus, a very popular, albeit erroneous, account for the Maccabean Revolt which provided new legends and details about the war, was written during this time (“Hanukkah in the Middle Ages”). Moreover, during the Middle Ages, a more concrete liturgy for Chanukah was created with several prayers being created. For instance, the most famous prayer, “*Al Hanisim*” (meaning “about the miracles”), was composed around this time based on the Scroll.⁴⁰ Also, the song traditionally sung after candle lighting, “Rock of Ages,” was composed during the Middle Ages (Gilad). Why this sudden boom in popularity? Perhaps having a bright holiday in a very dark time of the year was highly favorable. During a time of unfathomable levels of oppression and

between the second and fifth centuries C.E. (or even later). However, the historical inaccuracies of the Scroll have led many to doubt its authenticity, and whether it was truly written before or after the Babylonian Talmud remains unknown.

³⁸ Initially, I meant to include some examples, but after an unhealthy amount of research, I’ve discovered an unreasonably large number of theories and possible explanations. To summarize my findings, no one has even remotely any idea why the miracle of oil was created or where it came from. As to why the holiday is eight days long, none of the primary sources offer any explanation. I’ve only found four explanations which do not involve the oil miracle, and thirteen explanations based on it.

³⁹ What? You *don’t* know about the hit, critically acclaimed game teetotum?

⁴⁰ Take this piece of information with a grain of salt. In the explanation for Chanukah given in the Talmud (see footnote 34), the Talmud mentions that there needs to be “thanksgiving” — future scholars assumed this to reference *Al Hanisim*. Also, later in the Talmud (Shabbat 24a), a reference is clearly made to a special prayer said during Chanukah in the places where *Al Hanisim* is said. What’s absolutely baffling is that this special prayer is never named, and the first time *Al Hanisim* is specifically mentioned (that we know of) is in the 8th century, and the oldest complete text of *Al Hanisim* recorded comes from the 9th century. Also, there’s an odd error in *Al Hanisim*, which has been attributed to the Scroll of Antiochus. Perhaps the *Al Hanisim* we know now replaced whatever was previously said?

antisemitism, it would make sense why Jews would want to celebrate a holiday about being victorious over persecution (Peeples).

However, over time, this heightened interest in the holiday began to wane. Eventually, Chanukah became a minor celebration only celebrated by the very religious.⁴¹ This only changed quite recently with the commercialization of Chanukah. So, the argument, “Chanukah can stand on its own” isn’t really feasible since Chanukah was basically esoteric to most Jews. Until the 20th century.

There are also other reasons why Jews have celebrated Chanukah over time. For immigrants who appeared in that great wave in the beginning of the century, Chanukah meant success. These strangers in a strange land “needed reassurance that they were succeeding... [and] one measure of success was being able to buy presents for their children” (Green). So, while many Jews today adopt gift-giving to assuage children with Christmas envy, these immigrants adopted gift-giving to measure how successful they were in America.

Another meaning of Chanukah is tied with Zionism — the belief in the need for a Jewish homeland. Allegedly, Theodore Herzl, the father of Zionism, nearly gave up on his dreams until he lit a menorah for the first time (Stern).⁴² This wasn’t just some niche political group that liked Chanukah; many resonated with the war-aspect of the holiday after Israel was founded. Those who fought for independence were seen as a “Maccabee-like army” (Schwarz), and Jews saw a clear parallel between Israeli independence and Chanukah — a small heroic group of people fighting a larger enemy to establish a Jewish state (Shuback). Chanukah gave Jews a sense of nationalism and strengthened their competition with Christmas (Cardillo). Because, after all,

⁴¹ It became so bad that in 1880 a Jewish newspaper “had pleaded with its readers to ‘try the effect of the Hanukkah lights’” (Schwarz).

⁴² And this isn’t just some cute myth — he literally wrote an article about his self-discovery called “The Menorah.”

Chanukah today is about asserting Jewish identity and self-determination in a multicultural society (Greenberg), and, of course, anti-assimilation.

At this point, some of you may hastily be scrolling to the bottom of the page to search for a hilarious and inciteful footnote you may have missed. Noticing that footnote 42 was unhelpful, you may have scrolled back up some pages to reaffirm that one of, if not the, primary fears of modern-day Chanukah is its contradiction to its anti-assimilationist message. You may have then assumed you misunderstood the end of my last paragraph, or that I made a typo.

But fear not, I said what I meant and meant what I said. Besides the unintentional benefits of the Christmasized Chanukah I mentioned earlier and the arguments for why it is not a threat to Judaism, the Christmasized Chanukah still conveys an anti-assimilationist message. And the reason many overlook it is because they underestimate one simple fact: Christmas is a ruddy-good holiday.

What's not to love? There's great music (debatable), great sweaters (debatable), great sparkly Christmas trees which are fun to decorate and look at, great jolly fat men who suddenly spawn in every mall (a child's favorite place to be), great food (probably), and absolutely fantastic presents.

Little Jewish Daniel, a celebrant of Chanukah, doesn't care in the slightest about a war against assimilation. He doesn't even know what assimilation, or naturalization, or acculturation means! All he cares about is how Little Christian Peter from down the street is getting a really cool toy race car from a magical, corpulent, festive grandpa.

In other words, the allure of Christmas to Jewish children is a genuine threat — *that* is the big threat Christmas has to Judaism. There is a risk that those who don't have close ties to

Judaism will want to be Christian⁴³ because it's easier, and if you're a child, more *fun*. So, paradoxically, by adopting a bunch of Christmas traditions, Jews are trying to get adults and children alike to magnetize to Chanukah, and therefore, Judaism.

Previously, Jews in cities where there were strong Jewish neighborhoods and communities did not see assimilation as a threat. But when they dispersed to the suburbs, they noticed how much of a minority they were, and felt the pressure of Christmas to conform. Luckily, “the little used holiday of Chanukah offered an easy way to re-emphasize Judaism, especially for children, who were most susceptible to the lure of the false god Santa Claus” (Schwarz). The religious thinness and malleability of Chanukah made it useful for gravitating Jews away from Christmas. And these aren't just glittering generalities: in 1985, journalist Charles Silberman noted from a study that “more American Jews than ever were preferring Hanukkah to Christmas” (Greenberg). Therefore, the Christmasization of Chanukah is actually working as a means to reaffirm that Judaism is *different* from Christianity — *they* celebrate Christmas, *we* celebrate Chanukah. We celebrate Chanukah so that we *don't* assimilate to Christmas.

Ultimately, perhaps Christmas isn't killing Judaism, but saving it. By causing direct competition, there is an incentive for Jews to make Chanukah as appealing a holiday as possible. To make Jews be more confident and proud in their own religion. To allow Jews to participate as enthusiastically in the holiday season as Christians. Is it such a bad thing that our competition to put up more lights just makes the winter solstice — and my dorm room — that much brighter?

⁴³ Herzl, before his Chanukah experience, genuinely believed that the only way to save Jews from antisemitism was for everyone to convert to Christianity (Stern).

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