

Hanukkah in America: A History

Dianne Ashton

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Hanukkah is one of the least important festivals in the Jewish religious calendar, yet it is one of the two holidays celebrated most often by American Jews. In *Hanukkah in America: A History*, Dianne Ashton invites readers to consider the many reasons for the holiday's prominence on the Jewish American cultural landscape. Because Hanukkah's rites are quite simple and minimally defined, argues Ashton, American Jews were able to adapt the practices to speak to the unique complexities of living in a society where Jewish and American cultures coexisted.

The book begins with a chapter on Hanukkah's ancient origins. Ashton gives a concise history of the Hasmonean rebellion against Hellenism, which the holiday commemorates, as well as the Talmudic interpretation of events that focus on God's power and intervention on behalf of the Jews. From here, the content shifts to a comprehensive treatment of Hanukkah's rituals, meanings, and history in America. Ashton structures her book chronologically. She touches upon early Jewish American history, before moving through internal struggles for leadership in the mid-19th century, women's involvement in the post-civil war period, eastern European immigration from 1880-1924, the interwar and post-war periods, and the development of countercultural and Chasidic movements in the late 20th century. This allows Ashton to weave Jewish American history and Hanukkah practices together seamlessly, showing how Jews dealt with the particular dilemmas of each age through their holiday practices.

Ashton shows how Hanukkah became particularly relevant for American Jews in the mid-19th century as Jewish reformers and traditionalists vied for religious leadership. During this time period, American Jews gained unprecedented legal, political, and labor rights along with growing social acceptance while religious leaders challenged one another's authority,

leaving the community without a cohesive voice to guide their response to these modern freedoms. Reformers and traditionalists both sought to nurture Jewish life and both used the Maccabean story to legitimize their actions and revitalize Jewish observance. Reformers, who rejected ritual law in the hope that it would improve Judaism's chance of survival in the contemporary era, pointed out that the Maccabees allowed Jews to defend themselves on Shabbat, in violation of ritual law. Traditionalists inspired Jewish devotion through performance, creating impressive pageants that highlighted Maccabean military prowess and bravery—and Jewish manliness by extension—in the years following the Civil War. The masculine emphasis was muted by the 1880's, as women organized communal Hanukkah celebrations for children to combat the growing appeal of Christmas. Giving small gifts, eating sweets, and celebrating at home became increasingly common as Jewish literature emphasized the joy and familial bonding that accompanied the holiday.

The 20th century brought a new wave of Jewish immigrants to America, who found different meaning in Hanukkah's rituals. In their desire to assimilate, the trend toward laxity in Jewish observance continued. Despite this, Jews continued to celebrate Hanukkah, giving larger gifts in their desire to convey their newfound security and abundance to their children. Ashton shows how these immigrants enacted a range of identities through their Hanukkah preparations. They ate latkes, an inexpensive and simple food which hearkened back to the pancakes eaten in eastern Europe, but could now assert their Americanness simultaneously by using American ingredients such as Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour and Mazola Oil. Music also became a pivotal element of the celebrations as cantorial soloists modeled American commercial success and Old World Jewish values.

The holiday transformed again to help Jews navigate domestic battles as they moved to the suburbs and dealt with Christmas trees and carols in public spaces. Hanukkah plays, with messages promoting religious dedication and navigating social tensions, became important as anti-Semitism increased in the middle of the 20th century. Ashton also captures the many political meanings conveyed in the holiday's symbols during this time. She shows how American Jews depicted the Maccabees as forerunners to Russian Socialist revolutionaries, connected God and Maccabean morale with victory during World War II, sung hymns while marching in the Soviet Jewry Movement in the 1960's, and saw the Hanukkah lights as forces countering darkness and evil after 9/11.

With this work, Ashton corrects the common misbelief that Hanukkah's popularity derives from its proximity to Christmas. Though Ashton addresses the impact of Christmas in each chapter, we see that its influence is both smaller than we thought and indicative of greater concerns dealing with assimilation, Jewish renewal, and navigating the possibilities and dangers inherent in American Jewish life. We learn that American Jews have attributed a range of political, psychological, and religious meanings to the rites. Even the increased commercialization of the holiday is not a straightforward reaction to Christmas.

Ashton offers us the most comprehensive history of Hanukkah to date. She delves deeply into the role women and youth organizations had in shaping the holiday, Chabad's public rites, and the changing musical and dramatic components to the festivals. The real contribution the book makes, though, is in its concomitant treatment of American history. The book illuminates the role context plays in shaping the meaning and enactment of religious practices, and Ashton conveys this message in a voice suited to both academic and lay audiences. It would be a joy to find this book nestled under one's Hanukkah bush or in front of the menorah.

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