

Every once in a while we are treated to what I call “one of Life's delicious ironies”. They are to be savored and shared, a reminder that we are all inter-connected in ways unimagined.

I remember being asked by a visitor to the synagogue about the early date of Chanukah that year. “If Chanukah is a Jewish Christmas,” he said, “isn't it difficult for you since it comes in November?” Frankly, I didn't know to what part of his question I ought to respond first! Deciding that there were more important issues at hand than explaining how our lunar calendar is adjusted seven times every nineteen years to match the solar cycle, I began with the statement that Chanukah is a historic celebration that predates the birth of Jesus by more than 150 years. Not only does it precede Christmas, but in many ways Christmas is modeled on Chanukah! Ours is the original “festival of lights”, declared so before Jesus was even a twinkle in his Father's eye, and Chanukah's calendar date of the 25th of the winter month of Kislev may very well have been the reason that Christmas was assigned to December 25. Maybe then, Christmas ought to be called the Christian Chanukah!

Seriously, I told him, Christmas and Chanukah are two very different holidays, reflective of our different faith-systems. And though they may appear to share common celebration and customs, they are distinct commemorations. While the historicity of Christmas is best left for Christians scholars to debate, the Chanukah story is true (discounting the fable about the miracle oil lasting for eight days!). There really was a Judah who fought the Assyrian-Greek army of Antiochus Epiphanes. For two years Judah and his followers fought for religious freedom, and in 165 BCE. the Assyrian-Greeks relented and allowed the Temple to be re-dedicated in exchange for a cease-fire. Judah established the festival of Chanukah, comparing it to Sukkot, the eight-day Pilgrimage Festival. Why Sukkot? Because it was a national celebration of thanksgiving (called “The” Festival in the Talmud and Rabbinic literature), during which the king would travel across Jerusalem to re-consecrate the Temple.

The recorded history of Chanukah is found in two extra-biblical books, Maccabees I and II, two of fifteen books which never made the final edition of Hebrew Scriptures. That collection of fifteen is called The *Apocrypha*, and might very well have been lost to us had they not been preserved by the Catholic Church as part of their biblical canon. I find it interesting to think that had it not been for the Church, we might not have today these first stories of Chanukah.

I left our visitor with this thought: It is ironic that our Chanukah history was saved by the Church, for had it not been for the Chanukah victory, there wouldn't have been a Christianity! Why? If Judah and his followers had not led a rebellion for religious freedom, or had lost the fight, the Jews of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C. BCE would probably have assimilated into the Hellenistic world, and 165 years later there would not have been a Jewish community in Judea or the Galilee out of which Jesus could or would come. I suggested to my visitor that because he was a Christian, he too had a special stake in preserving the unique Jewish character of Chanukah, and that not only was it not a Jewish Christmas...it was the salvation that made for Christmas!