

# HISTORY



The world's largest hanukkia, standing 9.7 meters (32 feet) high and weighing 1,810 kg. (4,000 pounds), is seen at the beginning of the holiday season in New York, in November 2013. The hanukkia was certified by 'Guinness World Records' as the world's largest one. (Shannon Stapleton/Reuters)

## Burning bright

How Hanukka in the US became infused with a renewed spirit

By DAVID GEFFEN

**G**rand revival of the Jewish National Holiday of Chanukka at the academy of Music in Philadelphia on December 16, 1879."

The above advertisement, reprinted in *American Judaism: A History* by Prof. Jonathan Sarna, declared the new spirit of Hanukka among Jews in the United States.

"This winter holiday [Hanukka], which commemorates the Maccabean victory and the rededication of the ancient Temple, seemed in danger of falling into 'oblivion' in post-Civil War America," Sarna writes. "The holiday's message of anti-assimilation and national renewal ran counter to Reform's universalistic ethos, and its comparatively minor status in the Jewish calendar made it an easy festival to neglect."

What was behind this comeback of Hanukka? Sarna writes, "For those seeking to revitalize Judaism... Hanukka celebrations, complete with convivial pageants and extensive publicity, served to counteract the growing allure of Christmas."

Emma Lazarus (1849-87), a renowned poet from New York City, expressed similar sentiments in her poem "The Banner of the Jew," a piece that may have contributed to the holiday's revitalization.

Sarna attributes the creation of this new spirit to Keyam

Dishmaya, a group of young Jews based in Philadelphia. One of its members, Cyrus L. Sulzberger, grandfather of C.L. Sulzberger, a leading correspondent at *The New York Times*, "set down the three cornerstones of the revival." First, the group wanted to deepen the religious and spiritual lives of American Jews. Second, it sought to strengthen Jewish education. And third, it worked to "promote the restoration of Jews as a people - including their ultimate restoration to the Land of Israel."

Curiously, this group supported the Zionist ideal two decades before Theodor Herzl began to push for the idea of a Jewish homeland. But the large influx of Jewish immigrants to America beginning in 1881 dampened widespread advocacy of Zionism.

How did this revival of Hanukka manifest itself in other parts of the country?

In Savannah, Georgia, in 1874, five years before the Philadelphia awakening, a local newspaper described the holiday in the following manner: "Hanukka commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrians. With praise and thanksgiving, the Jewish champions marched into their Temple, which had been defiled."

"They banished the heathen priests," the paper continued, "who brought idol worship to the sacred site. They renewed the service to God." The paper then described how Hanukka is observed in this Southern community.

"The holiday starts tomorrow when the local Jews begin lighting candles for eight nights." Savannah was one of the smaller cities in the US where both Reform and Orthodox synagogues existed side by side even before the Civil War.

A good number of Jewish immigrants headed to California during the Gold Rush, starting in 1848. In 1878, as many as 18,000 Jews lived in San Francisco, where they built grand synagogues. The overwhelming majority of them were Reform and observed Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Hanukka and Passover.

In the *Sacramento Union* newspaper in 1901, an article about Hanukka read: "With the setting of the sun tonight, the Jews of this city, in common with those of their race throughout the world, will begin celebration of Hanukka, or feast of dedication."

The following year the *San Francisco Call* newspaper wrote about the winter holiday. "Feast of Dedication Fittingly Celebrated" ran the story's headline. "The program prepared by the children - Leho Dodi, Hanukka service, Adon Olam, Lighting of the Candles, the Star Spangled Banner."

While America's West Coast welcomed more and more Jews, it was the East Coast where their numbers swelled dramatically after 1881, and where ideas about what Hanukka is, or could be, proliferated. Commenting on

these communities, Prof. Jenna Weisman Joselit, an expert on the Jewish observance in America, believes the impetus for the revival came from Reform Jews. "The Reform rabbinate was among the first to reformulate the holiday in terms consonant with dominant American spirit, by endowing the Feast of Lights with the characteristics of the secularized Christmas in America."

Joselit quotes Rev. Dr. Gustav Gottheil, who in 1884 emphasized "a growing willingness to observe Hanukka in ways more congenial to the temper and taste of our time and generation, such as the exchange of gifts and the creation of a festive atmosphere at home." Such festivity, Gottheil felt, should be grafted onto the traditional candle-lighting ceremony.

"Gottheil's recommendations," Joselit writes, "and those of his colleagues for a high-spirited, theologically neutral Hanukka of 'merry making and gifts' caught on quickly within the American Jewish community."

Joselit adds that there was a growing interest among American Jews in making the observance of Hanukka a

clear statement that they were following the Maccabees in their battles with the Syrian overlords. Such sentiments coincided with their desire to cloak the observance of Hanukka in a patriotic mantle, in tandem with the dominant culture of American patriotism.

A Hanukka celebration in Thomasville, Georgia in the 1920s fits this patriotic mold. The Jewish community there, numbering some 350 members, were preparing for the holiday. A local newspaper recorded that they were gearing up for "their Festival of Lights called Chanukah." It added (incorrectly) that the word means "courage" and the synagogue would be draped in the Jewish national colors of blue and white while The Star Spangled Banner would be proudly flown.

What did Thomasville's Hanukka celebration entail?

It began with songs, the first of which was "America" and the second, "Hatikva." Then "Eli Eli" was sung by Anna Kolesky, accompanied by Rosales Rosenberg. A local newspaper wrote: "A proud Joseph Feinberg marched in carrying the American flag while Joseph Kolesky entered

with the blue and white flag." It added that over 100 people attended the event, which concluded with lighting of the Hanukka "candelabra."

The irony is that the same Georgia town was not so hospitable to Jews during the Civil War. In 1862, its leading merchants hoped to expel Jewish merchants from their midst. They were temporarily banned from the city while Jews in other parts of the state saw their stores being broken into and damaged.

In the 1920s, however, America was resurgent following the massive global upheaval. The Hanukka celebration expressed the growing confidence of American Jews, who fit more easily into the social fabric, while Zionist sentiments received a stamp of approval with the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

AFTER 1920, when Jewish immigration slowed significantly, Hanukka became more of a gift-giving occasion. Companies were eager to promote products coinciding with the holiday. Colgate advertised toiletries specifically suited for Hanukka. Aunt Jemima flour proclaimed itself the best for latkes. The Hudson automobile company put out advertisements in Yiddish: "Buy it for your family car - a real *metzia* [bargain]."

Another distinguishing mark of Hanukka in the US was the making of hanukkiot. Many Jews, unless they inherited silver hanukkiot, possessed wooden, brass and bronze ones. During the waves of Jewish immigration between 1881 and 1925, various American-Jewish organizations and wealthy individuals set up small factories to make Jewish objects, giving many unemployed Jews jobs. A favorite product was the metal hanukkia.

Many of them are still extant; some even have minting marks. We possess one, fashioned in New York in the 1920s. It was used annually by my grandmother Sara Hene and grandfather Rav Tuvia. When they came to the US in 1903, the few ritual objects they brought with them were the kiddush cup from their wedding and another one likely used on Passover. The hanukkia they bought in the US features lions raising the *shamash* (the candle that is lit first and used to light the others) higher than the rest of the eight candleholders. My father, Louis Geffen, inherited it before handing it down to me.

Wooden hanukkiot were made right after World War II when the sources of metal had diminished. The designs were simple and the nine candleholders were usually glued to the wood. Some featured simple carvings.

Peter Schweitzer, a collector of American-Jewish memorabilia, once loaned me some of the patina hanukkiot made in Israel and sold widely in the US in the 1950s. His hanukkiot and his entire collection of Judaica can be seen in the American Jewish History Museum in Philadelphia.

Beyond Judaica and shared sentiments of patriotism, what else fueled the renewal of Hanukkia in the US?

Joselit writes, "In a rare show of communal consensus, rabbis of all three denominations joined with Jewish educators, housewives and retailers in the 1920s and the 1930s to promote the celebration of the holiday as a powerful antidote to Christmas. Once remembrance of the Maccabean victory came to serve as a viable and equally fulfilling cultural substitute for the Christian holiday, the modern American Jew, it seemed, no longer had cause to fear the 'cruel month' of December."

Citing the conclusions of a noted American Jewish sociologist, Joselit adds: "Revealingly, the number of post-war Jews who observed this formerly minor festival grew markedly during the 1950s." Hanukka, the late Prof. Marshall Sklare of Brandeis noted, "is the single religious practice that registers any gain." In all current surveys, more American Jews observe Hanukka than conduct a Seder at Passover.

In his scholarly treatment of the holiday today, Sarna says, "The big story, I think, is how Chabad has turned public menorot into a symbol that stands opposite public Christmas trees. Where once Jews felt bereft of public acknowledgment of their winter holiday, now every community has a large and visible menorah offering Jews a sense of pride in their own holiday."

To add one other major development, Hanukka is the only Jewish holiday represented on an American stamp - the hanukkia is featured.



President Reuven Rivlin (center) lights a hanukkia as he joins then US president Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama for a Hanukka reception at the White House in 2015. (Jonathan Ernst/Reuters)



An audience waits for the lighting of the US National Menorah on Washington's Ellipse in 2015. (Sait Serkan Gurbuz/Reuters)