

Tis the Season: Some thoughts on Chanukah and Christmas

Bruce Ruben

December 21, 2007

Chanukah and Christmas have come to be linked due to the proximity in the calendar. Of course, Chanukah is really a minor festival in the Jewish year while Christmas is the equivalent to Rosh Hashanah (assuming Easter is like Yom Kippur). In the popular mind there is a lot of blurring of symbolism and customs, at least from the Jewish side. We have an increased emphasis on gift giving in imitation of Christmas. Some jokingly refer to Chanukah bushes. There are songs like “On the first day of Chanukah my true love gave to me, a picture of Judah Maccabee.”

However, there are some deeper parallels between the two holidays. First, both arose out of older pagan festivals of light associated with the loss of daylight during the dead of winter. It seemed as if the sun might die and ancients created rituals to encourage its rebirth. Both Judaism and Christianity have made light central to their holiday. We think of the Menorah and the Christmas tree (not to mention all those decorative lights on houses.)

Light is a symbol of salvation in all religions. Religions believe that for salvation to happen, we need to reconnect our world with the heavenly realm. We must allow the sacred to manifest in this world. My reflections are based on the comparative religion studies of the great scholar Mircea Eliade, who taught at the University of Chicago in the middle of the previous century. He studied religions all over the world, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. He found basic symbolism that permeated virtually all of them. A religious community experiences the sacred by the establishment of sacred space and time. This is done by making distinctions between what is holy and what is profane. Without making these distinctions, all is undifferentiated chaos. In the Bible we are taught, we are a holy people – in contrast to the other nations; our city Jerusalem is holy, in contrast to other cities. Our Temple was the holiest spot in the holy city. Within that the Holy of Holies was even holier. It was the very center of the world, where God and his people communed. In Eliade’s terms, it was an axis mundi, a sacred axis at the center of the world, which allowed heaven and earth to meet.

Each religion has its symbols for the axis mundi. It can be a sacred mountain (Mt. Sinai) or a sacred tree (the Torah is a tree of life). The Menorah is also a tree of light, bringing a sense of holiness into our homes. In Christianity, the tree is also important,

but no symbol is more important than the cross. On the cross, Jesus is believed to have bridged heaven and earth and through his sacrifice redeemed this world.

The first and second centuries of the Common Era were a time of searching for salvation. It was not so different from the profound spiritual searching of young people in the late 1960s and 1970s - - as they rushed to Zen Buddhism, meditation, even drugs in an attempt to find a deeper meaning in life. Throughout the Greco-Roman world there was a profound disillusion with the old pagan faiths. People were hungering for meaning and a sense of grace. During these centuries Jews and Christians competed for souls, sharing their increasingly different world views. Jews taught that it was through adherence to the Law that holiness was achieved. Christians believed that faith in Jesus and his ultimate sacrifice was all that was needed. Christians adopted the dualism of the Greek world. The body was sinful, the soul sacred. This world was corrupt. True salvation would come in heaven. Judaism kept its faith in this world. It was through performing mitzvot that this world was made sacred. You didn't have to escape it.

These differences are reflected in the contrasting notions of salvation attached to Chanukah and Christmas as well. Christmas is celebrated because Christians believe that G-d's son was born into this world, in order to redeem it. Like the Avatars of Hinduism and the Bodhisattvas of Buddhism, God must come down to our realm in order to save us. The salvation of Chanukah was very much of this world. Though G-d's hand is seen in the background, Maccabees won a military victory that allowed the survival of our religion. Ultimately, salvation in Judaism is through actions by people in this world -- this brings Tikkun Olam. For us, our sense of salvation is more compelling - - for Christians theirs is. It is my hope that in this holiday season, we can appreciate the beauty of each other's faith, while feeling nurtured and blessed by our own.

Shabbat Shalom