

A CONCISE GUIDE TO THE CELEBRATION
AND UNDERSTANDING OF CHANUKAH
THE FESTIVAL OF AFFIRMATION

by

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The Institute of Creative Judaism

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Chanukah, The Festival of Affirmation

The Freedom Covenant, to which all Polydox or liberal Jews subscribe, establishes clearly the right of individual Polydoxians or Polydox groups to celebrate festivals and rituals at such times and in such ways as provide the most meaningful observance.

It has been in the cause of the most meaningful observance of Chanukah that I have long proposed the concept and celebration of Chanukah as the "Festival of Affirmation." The first written presentation of Chanukah as the Festival of Affirmation appeared in the Institute of Creative Judaism journal, Polydoxy, Vol. 1, No. 2. Subsequent to this initial presentation, the view of Chanukah as the Festival of Affirmation was further developed in a number of statements that appeared in the ICJ newsletter,

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Communicator.

To facilitate access to the basic information regarding the celebration of Chanukah as the Festival of Affirmation for all those who have requested it, the following statement has been prepared. Much of this material has appeared in prior ICJ writings. One point, however, is new,—a point so important, I believe, that it deserves special attention although it is repeated again below. This is that:

The most reliable scientific scholarship fixes the original first day of Chanukah as having taken place on the winter solstice, which falls on December 21/22. December 21/22 is, of course, the first day of the general celebration of Chanukah as the Festival of Affirmation.

The presentation below is divided into two sections. Described first are basic features of the way in which Chanukah as the Festival of Affirmation is celebrated. A discussion then follows of the rationale for celebrating the Chanukah in the manner so described.

A.

Basic Features of Chanukah Celebration

1. Significance of Chanukah: Chanukah is a festival that celebrates the power of the human person to triumph over the existential meaninglessness that threatens the individual owing to the finite condition of human life. The freedom of individuals to choose their own authentic responses to the finite human condition is an essential constituent of humankind's capacity to overcome meaninglessness and attain

ultimate meaningful existence or soteria. Accordingly, Chanukah is a Festival of Affirmation, a festival that affirms the human potential to attain soteria, and a festival that affirms the essential role of individual freedom in realizing that potential. (For further discussion of the finite human condition and soteria see Polydoxy, Vol. 4, No. 2, The Word Religion.)

2. Date: The general community celebration of the first day of Chanukah takes place on the winter solstice. The date of Chanukah is, therefore, fixed in the New Style calendar, and the general community celebration begins each year on the evening of December 21,—when the first candle is lit,—and on the day of December 22. Chanukah as the Festival of Affirmation is

celebrated for eight days as it has been traditionally:

a. Note on Date of Chanukah:

The view that the general community celebration of Chanukah in America takes place on December 21-29 is based ultimately on the organic harmony that exists between this date and pervasive natural, economic, and cultural factors in the general environment. Such organic harmony between festival and environment results in a richer, more meaningful experience. Cognizance is taken, however, that as individuals we not only live in the general American environment, but in subenvironments as well. Such subenvironments can at times provide a more meaningful context for the celebration of a

festival than does the general environment. Consequently, if a conflict should arise between the celebration of Chanukah on a date in harmony with the general environment and a date in harmony with a sub-environment, persons who find the date in harmony with the subenvironment more meaningful will naturally wish to celebrate Chanukah then. Subenvironments can range from Hillel Houses to neighborhoods where everyone celebrates Chanukah on the Kislev 25 date of the traditional Jewish holiday calendar. The Freedom Covenant grants every person the right to celebrate Chanukah, or any festival, in the most

meaningful way, and this includes the right to harmonize the celebration with its most productive time in a subenvironment. Often the most constructive way to deal with the problem of a difference between the date indicated for Chanukah by the general environment and one indicated by a subenvironment is to celebrate Chanukah more than one time. Such multiple celebrations possess numerous advantages. For example, college students can celebrate Chanukah at their Hillel houses on one date, and then when home on their vacations celebrate an equally valid Chanukah with their families on another date.

3. Chanukah Services: Chanukah as the Festival of Affirmation is a major holiday, and is celebrated by special

services. (In the traditional holiday scheme, Chanukah is a minor holiday, and has no service of its own.) The Institute of Creative Judaism has now published two Chanukah services: A Chanukah Service For The Family and A Service For Chanukah: The Festival of Affirmation.

4. Symbols of Chanukah:

- a. The winter solstice, in which the relationship between sun and earth produces the longest night of the year, is a cosmic symbol of the forces of existence that produce the darkness and pain of finity. Yet during the period of Chanukah that follows the solstice, days become longer. This increasing light points to the positive

power within the forces of existence that gives humankind ground for hope and confidence.

- b. The candles of the Menorah, with each evening bringing more light and warmth, symbolize the progressive, even if gradual, victory of the human spirit over the negative forces of existence. The increase of a candle each evening synchronizes with the increasing light of the days following the solstice. Thus Chanukah, The Festival of Affirmation, is also Chanukah, The Festival of Lights.
- c. The change of seasons from fall to winter at the solstice symbolizes the hostile elements of the natural environment that confront the finite human. With courage and good will, particularly the good will of a

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united humankind, the harshness of nature can be overcome, and the benevolent forces of nature made to triumph.

- d. The victory of the Maccabees over the Syrians, and the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem at the winter solstice in 165 B.C.E., symbolize the ability of a courageous humankind to triumph over the hostile elements of the human environment, the dark forces of tyranny and despotism that seek to destroy the right inherent in all persons to respond in freedom and authenticity to the condition of finity. (The report of a miracle having occurred at the rededication of

the Temple, in which a lamp with oil sufficient for only one day burned for eight days, is unhistorical.)

- e. The cactus is a symbol of Chanukah. The cactus was first made into a "Jewish" symbol by its use as a name for the native-born Israeli, or "Sabra." Sabra is the Hebrew-Arabic term for cactus. The cactus, which thrives under difficult conditions, points to the indomitable human spirit celebrated by Chanukah, a spirit that has the power to triumph over the limitations of life and find pleasure in existence.
- f. Giving gifts has long been a feature of Chanukah celebration. Gifts symbolize the benevolent, supportive, and mutualistic forces that enrich human life and provide assistance in coping with finity.

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B.

Rationale For The Celebration of
Chanukah as the Festival of
Affirmation

1. The original first day of Chanukah was celebrated on the 25th of Kislev in the year 165 B.C.E.,— and in the year 165 B.C.E., the 25th of Kislev fell on the winter solstice, that is, on December 21/22 in our present civil or New Style calendar. (See Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.—A.D. 45, R.A. Parker and W.H. Dubberstein, The University of Chicago Press, 1942, p. 40.) December 21/22 is the date of the general celebration of Chanukah as the Festival of Affirmation.

2. Changes of the dates and meanings of festivals have taken place continuously in the history of the Jews. Thus Sukkot, The Feast of Tabernacles, originally had no fixed

calendar date, but was celebrated immediately after the harvest was collected (Deut. 16:13). Later Sukkot was assigned a fixed calendar date, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (Lev. 23:34). The meaning of the celebration of Passover was changed when necessary (Num. 9:10f). Regarding the Passover, it received at least three different meanings in the course of its history: It was first a pastoral holiday, when the Hebrews were semi-nomads and shepherds; it then became an agricultural holiday, when the Israelites settled in Canaan and took up farming; and still later the Passover became a celebration of the Exodus from Egypt. Numerous other examples may be given but these suffice to make the point that changes of both the dates and meanings of holidays have occurred continuously in the history of the Jews from the earliest times.

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3. Indeed, not only have changes of festival dates and meanings taken place continuously in the history of the Jews, but there have been repeated changes of calendars in their entirety. I am indebted to Dr. Max Vogelstein, the noted authority on the history of the calendars of the Jews, for the following list:

- a. There exists evidence that in early times the Egyptian Sun Calendar was in use.
- b. Before 1050 B.C.E., probably as early as 1194 B.C.E., the Spring Calendar was in use.
- c. David, after the conquest of Jerusalem, changed to the Fall Calendar.
- d. After the United Kingdom was divided into Israel and Judah, Jereboam I returned Israel to

the Spring Calendar while Judah retained David's Fall Calendar.

- e. In 715/14 B.C.E., Hezekiah changed Judah to the Spring Calendar.
- f. Manasseh reintroduced the Fall Calendar.
- g. Josiah in 623/22 B.C.E., changed back to the Spring Calendar.
- h. In Babylon, the Judeans employed the Babylonian Calendar, which was identified with the Judean Spring Calendar. This development brought about the use of the Babylonian month names: Tishri, Marcheshvan, and so forth.
- i. In the Seleucidian empire, the Jews employed the Babylonian Calendar. (See Dr. Max Vogelstein's Biblical Chronology I: Jereboam II; and Fertile Soil.)

It is quite clear that historically, when there was a need, the Jews

have felt free to change the dates of festivals and even entire calendars. From the viewpoint of history, then, no good reasons exist why we are not free to do the same.

4. Jewish festivals in their origins were always organically related to their general environment, that is, to the natural, economic, ideological, and cultural context in which they were celebrated. The reason for this is evident. Without the environment to nourish a festival, it is cut off from its lifspring. Existing in a vacuum, the festival becomes insignificant, withers, and dies. When festivals are in organic relation to their environment, they do not have the task of originating the basic feelings

and emotions that are necessary for meaningful celebration. These feelings and emotions are initiated primarily by events in the environment. Festivals by themselves, without the cooperation of the environment, are by their nature unsuited to originate the sentiments required for significant observance. For the basic function of festivals is not to originate feelings and emotions but to give form to feelings and emotions, environmentally induced by providing them with expression, values, and ultimate meaning.

We may take the Biblical holiday of Sukkot to illustrate this point. Sukkot in its beginnings was celebrated as stated earlier, at no fixed date, but simply when the harvest had been gathered. Clearly, from the Biblical description of Sukkot, it is the feeling of gratitude and joy initiated by the harvest that energizes the

thanksgiving celebration expressed by the Sukkot. A Sukkot celebration, isolated from its harvest context, obviously has little meaning. And as we may, therefore, expect in the technological, industrial society of our age, isolated from its harvest context, Sukkot has indeed withered, going largely unnoticed, let alone observed.

Thus in ancient and medieval times, all Jewish festivals, in one way or another, were organically related to the general ideological, economic, and cultural environment of the Jew, even if that environment extended only to ghetto walls. It is only in relatively recent times, with the emergence of the Jew from the ghetto into Western society, that the organic relation of Jewish

festivals with the general environment has been substantially severed. It is also in recent times that the Jews in Western society find themselves in a crisis of existence so severe that their continued survival past the next century is problematical. There seems little reason to doubt that one of the fundamental reasons for the American Jewish decline is that the dates of Jewish festivals are seriously out of harmony with the basic rhythms of American Jewish experience, interlocked as these rhythms inevitably must be with those of the general American environment. It is difficult, probably impossible, to conceive of a workable solution to the current crisis of American Jewish survival that does not involve to some degree changing the dates of Jewish festivals so that they are brought into harmony with the natural, ideological, economic and cultural

rhythms of the American environment.

5. This final point is stated with great emphasis. The special enrichment Chanukah receives when the first day begins on December 21/22, the winter solstice, is not to be attributed to the fact that Christmas falls during this period. The same integrated feeling of joy would be present if there were no Christian holiday of Christmas at this time. The enrichment Chanukah receives from its winter solstice date derives from the fact that in late December, our commercial, technological, and industrial society comes to a natural, economic and cultural climax. Christmas, itself, has the special meaning it has for most Christians primarily because it is in harmony with the basic rhythms of the general American environment. Proof of

this may be found in the fact that for many Christian theologians, Epiphany, which falls on January 6, is a more significant day than is Christmas. Yet for most American Christians, Epiphany goes largely unnoticed. The reason is clearly that Epiphany has no relation to the general American environment, and is thereby drained of life.

We contemporary Jews who possess a scientific knowledge of the many changes of festival dates and calendars in the Jewish past, and who possess the freedom granted us by Polydox Judaism have no excuse for seeing Chanukah drained of life. Particularly unjustifiable is the refusal to change the date of the Chanukah to eight days beginning with the winter solstice because Christmas falls during that period. Such a refusal surrenders to Christmas the power (which it does

not seek) to interrupt the natural, internal development of the Jewish festival structure. For Christmas would thus prevent the Jewish festival structure from fulfilling its historic role of providing the Jews with the means in every age to celebrate their profoundest beliefs, values, and sentiments in harmony with the basic rhythms of the natural, economic, ideological, and cultural environment in which their lives are rooted. We Jews have not only the right, but, I believe, a moral obligation to our children today and the future tomorrow, to bring Chanukah into an organic relation with the general American environment of which we are inextricably a part.