

## **Chanukah & Christmas: When Hope Triumphs Over Cynical Realism**

By Rabbi Michael Lerner

Christmas and Chanukah share a spiritual message: that it is possible to bring light and hope in a world of darkness, oppression and despair. But whereas Christmas focuses on the birth of a single individual whose life and mission was itself supposed to bring liberation, Chanukah is about a national liberation struggle involving an entire people who seek to remake the world through struggle with an oppressive political and social order: the Greek conquerors (who ruled Judea from the time of Alexander in 325 B.C.E.) and the Hellenistic culture that they sought to impose.

Though the holiday celebrated by lighting candles for 8 nights recalls the victory of the guerrilla struggle led by the Maccabees against the Syrian branch of the Greek empire, and the subsequent rededication (Chanukah in Hebrew) of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 B.C.E., there was a more difficult struggle which took place (and in some dimensions still rages) within the Jewish people between those who hoped for a triumph of a spiritual vision of the world embedded (as it turned out, quite imperfectly) in the Maccabees and a cynical realism that had become the common sense of the merchants and priests who dominated the more cosmopolitan arena of Jerusalem.

The cynical realists in Judea, among them many of the priests charged with preserving the Temple, argued that Greek power was overwhelming and that it made far greater sense to accommodate to it than to resist. The Greek globalizers promised advances in science and technology that could benefit international trade and enrich the local merchants who sided with them, even though the taxes that accompanied their rule impoverished the Jewish peasants who worked the land and eked out a subsistence living. Along with Greek science and military prowess came a whole culture that celebrated beauty both in art and in the human body, presented the world with the triumph of rational thought in the works of Plato and Aristotle, and rejoiced in the complexities of life presented in the theatre of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Aristophanes.

To the Maccabees, the guerrilla band that they assembled to fight the Greek Empire and its Seleucid dynasty in Syria, and to many of the Jewish supporters of that struggle, the issue of Greek militarism, social injustice and oppression were far more salient than the accomplishments of Greek high culture. Whatever might be the value of Athenian democracy, the reality that it exported to the world through Alexander and his successors was oppressive and exploitative.

The "old-time religion" that the Maccabees fought to preserve had revolutionary elements in it that went far beyond the Greeks in articulating a liberatory vision: not only in the somewhat abstract demand to "love your neighbor as yourself," "love the stranger," and pursue justice and peace, but also concretely in Torah prescriptions to abolish all debts every seven years, allow the land to lie fallow every seven years, refrain from all work and activities connected to control over the earth once a week on Sabbath, redistribute the land every fifty years (the Jubilee) back to its original equal distribution.

The identification with the oppressed, enshrined in Judaism in its insistence that Jews were derived from slaves who had been liberated, and in its focus on retelling the story of being oppressed that was central to the Torah, seemed atavistic and naïve to the more educated and enlightened Jewish urban dwellers, who pointed to the reactionary tribal elements of Torah and sided with the Greeks when they declared circumcision and study of Torah illegal and banned the observance of the Sabbath.

The miracle of Chanukah is that so many people were able to resist the overwhelming "reality" imposed by the imperialists and to stay loyal to a vision of a world based on generosity, love of stranger, and loyalty to an invisible God who promised that life could be based on justice and peace. It was these "little guys," the powerless, who sustained a vision of hope that inspired them to fight against overwhelming odds, against the power of technology and science organized in the service of domination, and despite the fact that they were dismissed as terrorists and fundamentalist crazies. When this kind of energy, what religious people call "the Spirit of God," becomes ingredient in the consciousness of ordinary people, miracles ensue.

It is this same radical hope, whether rooted in religion or secularist belief systems, that remains the foundation for all who continue to struggle for a world of peace and social justice at a time when the champions of war and injustice dominate the political and economic institutions of our own society, often

with the assistance of their contemporary cheerleading religious leaders. It is that radical hope that is celebrated this Chanukah by those Jews who have not yet joined the contemporary Hellenists.

Radical hope is also the message of Christmas. Like Chanukah, it is rooted in the ancient tradition of a winter solstice celebration to affirm humanity's belief that the days, now grown shortest around December 23rd, will grow long again as the sun returns to heat the earth and nourish the plants. Just as Jews light holiday lights at this time of year, so Christians transform the dark into a holiday of lights, with beautiful Christmas trees adorned with candles or electric lights, and lights on the outside and inside of their homes.

Christianity took the hope of the ancients and transformed it into a hope for the transformation of a world of oppression. The birth of a newborn, always a signal of hope for the family in which it was born, was transformed into the birth of the messiah who would come to challenge existing systems of economic and political oppression, and bring a new era of peace on earth, social justice and love. Symbolizing that in the baby Jesus was a beautiful way to celebrate and reaffirm hope in the social darkness that has been imposed on the world by the Roman empire, and all its successors right up through the contemporary dominance of a globalized rule of corporate and media forces that have permeated every corner of the planet with their ethos of selfishness and materialism.

Seeing Jesus as the Son of God, and as an intrinsic part of God, was also a way of giving radical substance to the notion that every human being is created in the image of God. For God to come on earth, bring a holy message of love and salvation, and then to die at the hands of the imperialists and be resurrected to come back at some future date was and is a beautiful message of hope for a world not yet redeemed, and became an inspiration to hundreds of millions who saw in it the comforting message that the rule of the powerful was not the ultimate reality of existence. And yet, using the specificity of one human being and identifying him as God, a move made by St. Paul but not by Jesus himself, did not fit into the framework of Judaism, which could not accept Jesus as messiah either because of its view that the messiah would bring an end to wars and all forms of oppression, an end that had not yet taken place during or after Jesus' death.

Jews and Christians have much in common in celebrating at this time of year. We certainly want to use this holiday season to once again affirm our commitment to end the war in Iraq, to end global poverty and hunger by embracing the Network of Spiritual Progressives' version of the Global Marshall Plan, to reduce carbon emissions and population growth and to save the world from ecological destruction. We live in dark times--but these holidays help us reaffirm our hope for a fundamentally different reality that we can help bring about in the coming years. And that despite the fact that we must acknowledge that the Chanukah revolution led to the rule of the Jewish Hashmona-im whose rule devolved into tyranny and self-destructiveness, and that the beauty vision of early Christianity devolved into the tyranny and anti-Semitism of Constantinian forms of the merger of religion with state power.

There are reasons to not mush together these separate holidays. The tremendous pressure of the capitalist marketplace has been to take these holidays, eliminate their actual revolutionary messages, and instead turn them into a secular focus whose only command is "Be Happy and Buy." One might have imagined that the current economic meltdown would significantly modify these messages, but that has not yet happened in December, 2008. The huge pressure to be happy and the media's ability to portray others as beaming with joy makes a huge number of people despondent because they actually don't feel that kind of joy, and imagine that they are the only ones who don't, and hence feel terrible about themselves, something they seek to repair by buying, drugging or drinking themselves into happiness. And when that too doesn't work for very long, they become all the more unhappy with themselves or with others. The pressure to buy as a way of showing that you really care about others puts many people into the position of spending more than they have, putting themselves into further debt, and then feeling depressed about that. Still others have no way to buy "enough" on credit, and then their children, saturated by a media specially attuned to the best ways to market to toddlers and everyone older through their teen years, make their parents or others feel inadequate because they have not bought what the media portrays as the standard for what a "normal family" buys for the holidays. Jews, seeking to fit into American society, grabbed onto this path of the holidays "not really being religious but only a time to

celebrate," and thus many embraced Christmas in the one way they could—buying presents for their non-Jewish friends and neighbors and celebrating Christmas as a "non-sectarian, American holiday." But this well-intentioned move to fit into American society only helped the capitalist secularists, and unintentionally further undermined the ability of Christians to hold on to the religious and spiritual intent of their holiday. This is why spiritual progressives of the Christian faith have urged Tikkun and the Network of Spiritual Progressives to NOT celebrate the holiday as one undifferentiated "holiday season" but to celebrate them as religious and spiritual holidays and to affirm the specific religious message of each one depending on which fits your particular faith.

Yet we also want to affirm the goodness in what secularists have tried to do with these holidays in removing them from their religious specificity. There has been far too much anger and killing in the name of religions in the history of humanity. We at the Network of Spiritual Progressives do not believe that most of that killing was actually motivated by religious differences so much as by power struggles that were given religious justifications and appearances. And we are all too well aware that in the 20th century over a 150 million people were slaughtered in the name of secular belief systems and secular powers (1st WW, 2nd WW, Korean War, Vietnam War, Stalinist gulag, Maoist gulag, colonial and anti-colonial wars, etc.), so we are not going to buy any notion that says that eliminating religion will increase world peace (though we wouldn't shed any tears if the fundamentalist and ultra-nationalist forms of religion disappeared into the dustbins of history). Many of those who have sought to secularize the holiday season do so from the fear that without that kind of secularization, it will be harder for people to express caring and mutual support if they have to do so through the frameworks of religions of which they are not apart. Certainly, when it comes to interfaith marriages and families, the need for this kind of smooth path to affirming both traditions is really much needed. And yet, as a Jew, I want to recognize the particular importance to Christians of having Christmas be about Christ, not about gifts and drinking and merry making but about the meaning of the Christ for Christian belief. In this respect, there is a fundamental asymmetry here. Christmas and Easter are the main Christian holidays, while Chanukah is only a minor holiday that has become major only because some (mostly assimilating) Jews in the West felt the need to provide their children with something that could compensate them for not having Christmas with its attractive glitz and lights and toys. But our major holidays are Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur and Passover (and of course, weekly Shabbat), and so when Chanukah gets secularized we don't lose as much as Christians do when Christmas is secularized.

As we enter this holiday season, let us stay conscious on all these levels, resist the allure and the seductive charm of the capitalist marketplace and its capacity to reduce all reality and all loving to the consumption of "things," and instead return to the deep spiritual messages of our own traditions, while lovingly supporting each other to stay true to our own deepest truths.

**And as we affirm hope, so we must also remind ourselves to not allow our hopes for the Obama presidency to silence our prophetic critique of the powerful should it turn out that those hopes are not realized in the actual policies followed by Obama and his array of establishment-oriented politicians appointed to high offices in his Administration. We can at once celebrate the incredible advance of having white America vote into the presidency a Black man, and yet still insist that this new Administration embrace policies that favor peace and abandon the fantasy that security will come through domination or military victories, that economic and environmental well-being can be consistent with endless "growth" and expansion, or that the quality of human relationships can be improved while living in an economic system that values selfishness, materialism and "looking out for number one."**

So just as Christmas and Chanukah represent ideals that were quickly distorted by those who tried to make them consistent with the power-structures of a world based on inequality and domination, so too our contemporary victory of the Obama forces can be distorted. Our job is to stay true to the ideals and challenge the distortions, even while celebrating the moments of hope. Chag urim sameyach—happy holiday of lights. Chag Chanukah sameyach—happy Chanukah. Merry Christmas. Happy Kwanza. Mubarak Eid. Rabbi Michael Lerner Editor, Tikkun [www.tikkun.org](http://www.tikkun.org) Chair, (with Sister Joan Chittister and Princeton U. Professor Cornel West) The Network of Spiritual Progressives

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