



Author: Hanukka linked to American ideals

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Hanukka has become something of an American holiday, intermingling ideas of freedom and liberty with the struggle of the Maccabees.

“People sometimes think Hanukka is important because it’s the Jewish version of Christmas,” said Dianne Ashton, a professor of religion and American studies at Rowan University in Glassboro.

In reality, “Hanukka became deeply linked to American ideals and a celebration of liberty,” said Ashton. “It gave Jews a way to celebrate that was different from the majority.”

Her timely Dec. 10 talk — Hanukka begins Dec. 16 — at the Douglass College Center in New Brunswick was sponsored by Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

“Few people do things that have no meaning to them,” said Ashton, the author of *Hanukkah in America: A History*.

Ashton said as the mostly Eastern European wave of immigrants arrived in America, they were challenged to find a place in society. They did so by “reshaping and retelling their stories.”

Beginning in the 1840s, Jews seized upon Hanukka “as history’s first fight for religious freedom,” as Judah Maccabee and his family and guerrilla warriors defeated the Greeks and lit the menorah to rededicate the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

When Reform Rabbi Max Lilienthal arrived from Europe in 1844, he settled in Cincinnati and began advocating for Hanukka to become a grand public synagogue event with pageants, food, and song. Writing in his monthly journal, he “framed the holiday in terms of American history,” said Ashton, who claimed that Lilienthal “wanted American-Jewish children to have their own Jewish” rituals to counter the outsize celebration of Christmas.

With Rabbi Stephen Wise, Lilienthal promoted this idea around the country, and it gained widespread acceptance.

Others also began to see American-Jewish religious freedom as one of the hallmarks of the Bill of Rights and to recognize a strong thematic link to Hanukka.

These ideas were widely picked up, as when, in his 1892 pamphlet, "The Jewish Revolution," Alexander Harkavy compared Judah Maccabee to George Washington.

Abraham Cahan, editor of the Yiddish Daily Forward, "explained that the Maccabees led the Jews in a fight for freedom and likened it to the Fourth of July," said Ashton.

In 1927, Deborah Marcus Melamed of Elizabeth, then president of the Women's League of Conservative Judaism, argued that Hanukka festivals were ways for women to both assert influence in their synagogues and enhance Jewish traditions.

Bildner executive director Yael Zerubavel said the idea of the holiday being a celebration of freedom, albeit focused on the victory of Zionism, has also been embraced in Israel, where the story began.

"It has become a very important holiday," said Zerubavel, a native of Israel, with gifts being exchanged, celebrations held, and pilgrimages to the graves of the Maccabees in Modi'in.

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