

Hanukkah - the other December holiday

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The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah is being celebrated all this week, ending tomorrow afternoon, December 16. Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday commemorating the miracle of the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Revolt of the Maccabees in the 2nd century BCE. One of the major observances is the kindling of the lights in an eight-branched Hanukkah Menorah, also called a Hanukkiah. Jamaican Jews have celebrated this holiday in Jamaica since our arrival here in Port Royal more than 360 years ago.

Hanukkah is called the Festival of Lights, even though the major historical sources do not mention the miracle of the single cruse of oil that was enough to burn for a single day but lasted for eight days and nights! We use a shamus, an extra candle, to kindle the rest of the Hanukkah candles. This is based on two customs: we should not kindle one light with another; and we should not use the Hanukkah lights for illumination. The candles are there strictly to remind us of the miracles that God performed - and continues to perform even today.

Hanukkah was instituted by Judah Maccabee and his followers in the 2nd century BCE. They resisted being forced to abandon their traditional practices and were willing to die rather than lose their identity. The true historical implications of the holiday are difficult to decipher, and even harder to explain because it involved different approaches to Hellenism, the Greek way of thinking and living. Hellenism was an extremely important way of thinking that influenced everyone in the Mediterranean geographical area and beyond.

The Greek leaders wisely promoted their intellectual concepts while advocating tolerance towards minority groups of various types. King Antiochus III of the Seleucid Empire of Syria guaranteed his Jewish subjects the right to "live according to their ancestral customs" and to continue to worship in their great Temple in Jerusalem according to traditional Jewish rites. The crisis developed when Antiochus IV Epiphanes took over from his father.

Instead of accepting pluralism and the formula of tolerance that had been working so well, he decided to plunder the temple and persecute Jews for practising their religion. We don't know why he decided to deviate from the usual policies of non-interference. Historians have been trying to analyse the considerable documentary evidence as well as archaeological remains. Nevertheless, we remain uncertain.

The Temple in Jerusalem was looted and sacrifices stopped. In 167 BCE, Antiochus ordered an altar to Zeus erected in the temple, ordering pigs to be sacrificed to the Greek gods. The result was the outbreak of the Maccabean revolt. Mattityahu and his five sons led a rebellion which took advantage of their intimate knowledge of the geography of the land of Israel, leading the Greek Syrians into traps.

The altar that had been defiled was demolished and a new one was built. Judah then made new holy vessels (among them a candelabrum, an altar for incense, a table, and curtains) and set the 25th of Kislev (which is not the same as December 25 and does not usually fall on the same day), as the date for the rededication of the Temple. The day coincided with the third anniversary of the evil proclamations of Antiochus Epiphanes in which he had decreed that idolatrous sacrifices should begin to be offered on a platform erected upon the holy altar. An eight-day celebration was held during which the Jerusalem Temple was to be consecrated with the renewal of the

daily sacrificial service, accompanied by jubilant song, the playing of musical instruments including flutes and harps, the chanting of Hallel, a special celebratory prayer, and the offering of sacrifices.

It became the custom to feast on Hanukkah and since the miracle of the lights was due to the continued presence of oil, holiday foods were fried in oil - how Jamaican! Potato pancakes called latkes are eaten as well as doughnuts. Jews, and indeed many Jamaicans, celebrate Hanukkah with games as well as food, prayers as well as special holiday study. We give presents for eight nights, although we try not to promote excessive materialism.

Many Jamaicans will listen to Hanukkah music, either the traditional songs or the new music composed by the Maccabeats, Mattisyahu, the Bare Naked Ladies, and many others. Most of all, we celebrate the freedom to practise our religion that we have here in Jamaica - and that we have enjoyed for so many decades - indeed, for almost four centuries. The fact that we are still here today is proof enough that miracles are possible!

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