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## Christmas-izing of Chanukah

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[http://www.jewishjournal.com/tribe/article/christmas-izing\\_of\\_chanukah\\_20101119/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/tribe/article/christmas-izing_of_chanukah_20101119/)

Two seemingly disparate events occurred in my life recently.

The first involved a CD of a sermon Rabbi Ed Feinstein gave at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino during the High Holy Days. I hadn't heard the sermon in person, but because it received rave reviews from my cousin, I enlisted my mother's help in scoring a copy.

To even attempt to distill a 34-minute Feinstein sermon into a few words is on par with summarizing Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech as a "nice little talk on race." So when I tell you that Feinstein's sermon was a "synthesis of his doubts that Americans could weather any sort of tragedy given our current obsession with materialism and individuality," believe me, I'm not doing it justice.

Suffice it to say that, after listening to Feinstein's compelling description of America's "value issues" in the 21st century, I had to exercise a huge amount of self-restraint to keep myself from tossing the computer that was running the CD of that sermon into the trash, disconnecting my kids' Facebook accounts, and cutting up my credit cards and burying the pieces in an unmarked grave in my backyard.

The second event occurred when my 12 1/2-year-old son asked me if I was going to be hosting "one or two" Chanukah parties this year. When I responded that this year there would most likely be just one, he suggested that I make two so that he could get twice as many gifts. Not two so he could celebrate this holiday of religious freedom with more family and friends, or two because he wanted to stuff his mouth full of traditional fried latkes twice, but two so he could double his Chanukah haul.

In his sermon, Feinstein said that when he sits down with preteens before their bar and bat mitzvahs and asks them what they like to do for fun, the soon-to-be Jewish adults inevitably reply that they "like to hang out with their friends at the mall." To which Feinstein commented: "The mall. Someday, 10,000 years from now, archeologists will excavate our civilization and come to the conclusion that the mall must have been a place of worship ... a holy place. Otherwise, how do you account for the central place this institution has come to play in American suburban culture? And what is the message of the mall? Life is an endless cycle of acquisition and consumption. Your happiness, your sense of personal worth, your personal identity are found in the clothes you wear, the gadgets you own, the trinkets you possess. You are what you own, you are what you wear, and the process never ends because there is always something new to acquire."

Suddenly these two seemingly unrelated events — Feinstein's warning that our excessive materialism and our "me" mentality could be our doom, and my son's sense of Chanukah entitlement were not only related but inextricably linked.

As it turns out, it is not my son's fault (or even mine) that if he were playing word association and the word was "Chanukah," he would shout out "presents" rather than "freedom." Ironically, it may be the fault of a couple of well-meaning rabbis and concerned psychologists who transformed Chanukah from a minor Jewish holiday into a Jewish Christmas.

According to Dianne Ashton, a professor of American studies and philosophy/religion at Rowan University and the author of the soon-to-be-released "The American Hanukkah" (NYU Press), the Christmas-izing of Chanukah began in the 1950s when "Jewish child psychologists started writing about how to keep Jewish kids psychologically healthy during Christmas, and they start promoting gifts. Rabbis in the '50s start promoting gifts. People were really concerned about Jewish children being happy to remain Jewish in December, especially post-Holocaust, when Judaism must have seemed negative in a lot of ways. 'You can't do this. You can't do that.' People were trying to find ways to make Jewish kids happy to be Jewish."

Ashton believes that Chanukah's rise in popularity in the United States grew out of the efforts of two rabbis from Cincinnati. The rabbis, both leaders of influential national Jewish newspapers, led a movement to Americanize Judaism.

"[One] rabbi said Jewish children shall have a grand and glorious Chanukah, a festival as nice as any Christmas, with songs, dramatics, candle lighting, ice cream and candy.

"This really shifted Chanukah from primarily an observance of Jewish adults to a festival seen as particularly important for Jewish children, a way to keep them interested in Judaism," Ashton says.

Economists have also confirmed Ashton's thesis that the commercialization of Chanukah is a reaction to fears about the attractiveness of Christmas. In a lengthy paper written by Israeli economists Ran Abramitzky, Liran Einav and Oren Rigbi published in the prestigious *The Economic Journal*, the authors concluded that the answer to the question posed in their thesis — "Is Hanukkah Responsive to Christmas?" — was a resounding "yes."

Their findings:

- Jews with children under 18 are more likely to celebrate Chanukah than other Jewish holidays.
- The correlation between having children at home and having a Chanukah celebration is highest for Reform Jews (who are most exposed to Christmas), followed by Conservative Jews, and lowest for Orthodox Jews.
- Third, the correlation between having children at home and having a Chanukah celebration is higher for more strongly identified Jews. In contrast, these differences in correlation are not present for other Jewish holidays.
- "Jewish products" have higher sales at Chanukah in U.S. counties with a lower share of Jews.

The economists found patterns consistent with the hypothesis that Jews increase religious activity during Chanukah because of the presence of Christmas, that the "response is primarily driven by the presence of Christmas and that this response is primarily driven by the presence of children. Jews with children at home may celebrate [Chanukah] more intensely so their children do not feel left out and/or because they are concerned their children will convert or intermarry."

So, was Feinstein right? Have we raised a generation so materialistic that if our capitalist system collapsed, they would collapse, too? I asked my son what would happen if he stopped receiving gifts for Chanukah. Would he want to stop being Jewish? "How could I stop being Jewish?" he answered. "I am Jewish." And then he added, "but I would definitely not do that to my own kids."

So, this generation? Possibly fine. But the next one? I'm not so sure.

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