

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Quick to the Party: The Americanization of Hanukkah and Southern Jewry

by

Dianne Ashton*

Observers commonly note that Hanukkah attained an importance among American Jews that it did not achieve for others except, perhaps, pre-state Zionists. In 1960 Hebrew Union College rabbinics professor Jakob Petuchowski noted the holiday's "magnification" for readers of *Commentary* magazine.¹ Three decades later, historians began to assess its transformation. Jonathan Sarna explained that the late nineteenth-century effort by tradition-minded young Jews to revitalize Judaism included a Hanukkah pageant at New York's Academy of Music in 1879.² Jenna Weissman Joselit judged that Hanukkah's "success was tied to commercialization and a search for religious parity" with Christmas.³ She described its development in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the Jewish press encouraged Jews to "add the exchange of presents to the roster of Chanukah *minhagim*."⁴ Andrew Heinze discovered "presents" to be one of the first English words to filter into the vocabulary of Yiddish-speaking immigrants who used it at Hanukkah.⁵ Looking over the twentieth century, Sarna concluded that Jews' sense of belonging in American culture became most unstable each December, when ubiquitous signs of Christmas blanketed the national culture. In response, Jews grasped their own December holiday, Hanukkah, and molded it to resemble Christmas.⁶

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Joselit, Heinze, and Sarna (in his early work) arrived at their conclusions by studying Jews living in the urban North, especially New York City and its environs, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But if we look to the South, we find earlier evidence of Hanukkah “presents.” Writing to his sweetheart from Petersburg, Virginia, in December 1864 while serving in the Army of Northern Virginia, Edwin Kursheedt recalled enjoying the “Hanucka lights” and “presents” during his childhood in the 1840s. He hoped to provide similar happy experiences for his own children someday.⁷ By broadening our view to include Jews living earlier in the nineteenth century, and in the South, the Midwest, and in small towns, we find trends that suggest a new value for the old holiday, one that emerged in a nationwide movement.

Hanukkah gifts marked only one change among many that reshaped the holiday in an American mold. In those changes, the historic commemoration of God’s miraculous rescue of ancient Jews from Syrian rule via the Maccabean revolt became a vehicle for affirming Judaism’s relevance in the modern West, for promoting Jewish domestic and communal good feeling, and for indulging Jewish children while interesting them in the synagogue. Surprisingly, Hanukkah developed a public face as Jews used the holiday to engage their non-Jewish neighbors in conversation about their own religious lives.

This Hanukkah transformation was an American version of an ancient practice. Jews have reshaped elements from the surrounding gentile culture to enhance their own since the biblical era. Elements of Genesis creation tales and stories of Noah and the flood draw upon the Sumerian creation story *Enumah Elish*. Much of the Yiddish literature produced in medieval Europe aimed to “produce a suitable offset, and a possible substitute for the alien ‘fictitious’ adventure stories which had found their way to the mass Jewish public,” explained Hebrew University literature professor Chone Shmeruk.⁸ Historian Paul Kriwaczek commented that “Yiddish civilisation was always receptive to inspiration from outside.” He pointed out that the *Sefer Chassidim*, or *Book of the Pious*, a Hebrew text that provided “the basis of much Yiddish religious observance,” judged that “Jews generally adopt the

behaviour of the gentiles among whom they live. For example, if in a certain locality the gentiles are heedful to refrain from adultery, the Jews who live there will be equally scrupulous in that regard.”⁹ By looking closely at the ways American Jews reshaped Hanukkah we can deepen our understanding of their religious experience in the United States and their relationship to the surrounding gentile society.

Gentiles in Hanukkah's Guides

Judaism's guides for Hanukkah's observance give no hint that this holiday would lend itself to good interreligious relations. Hanukkah focuses Jews' attention on a moment in their past when they believed God had rescued them from oppressive gentiles, hardly an enticement to engage with non-Jews. Talmud tractate *Shabbat* 21b says Hanukkah commemorates the drop of pure oil, which miraculously burned for eight days until priests could prepare more after the Maccabean revolt retook the Jerusalem Temple from Syria's Antiochus IV in 165 BCE. To carry out the rite, Jews kindle and bless the candles of a *hanukiyah* for eight evenings beginning on the twenty-fifth of the Hebrew winter month of Kisle. The Talmudic traditions, codified in the *Shulchan Aruch* by Joseph Caro in the sixteenth century and, with the *Mappah* of Moses Isserles, widely consulted as the guide to Jewish practice by Jews in Europe, reiterated that the rite for Hanukkah honored the oil through which God conveyed to Jews that divine intervention had carried them to victory. The early rabbis wrote after the Temple had been destroyed by Romans in 70 CE and did not construct a Hanukkah rite that praised the Maccabees' military accomplishment. They molded Hanukkah worship so that Jews would not admire any military power—not even that of the Maccabees. The prayers they wrote, which became normative for Hanukkah, thank God for delivering the strong into the hands of the weak. By not admiring even their own military successes, rabbis discouraged Jews from envying the more powerful armies of foreign nations.¹⁰ Instead, Hanukkah's rite suggests that power is in God's hands. In order for Jews to be powerful, they must move God to act on their behalf through their faith.

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Early rites for Hanukkah mixed interaction with separation from gentile society. Because the lighted *hanukiyah* commemorates a miracle, the rabbis instructed Jews to place it where passersby could see it. However, in times of danger or persecution it could be placed so that only the household could view it.

Hanukkah songs discouraged conversation with non-Jews. By the sixteenth century, Ashkenazi Jews customarily sang a hymn called “Maoz Tsur,” sometimes translated as “Sheltering Rock” immediately after lighting the Hanukkah candles. Sung to the tune of an old German folk tune, “Maoz Tsur” probably was composed three centuries earlier. Its six verses praise God and offer thanks for saving Jews at various occasions in the past. The song’s first and last verses beg God to speedily restore Jews to their former land and so escape the perils of living among non-Jews.¹¹

The word Hanukkah means “dedication.” Sephardim customarily sang Psalm 30 at Hanukkah, noted in the Bible as a song “for the dedication of the house.” Its four stanzas begin, “I extol you, O Lord, for you have lifted me up, and not let my enemies rejoice over me.” It thanks God for being merciful and promises to praise God forever.¹² Those two song traditions endured for centuries and continue to be popular.

American Changes

Despite those Hanukkah cautions against trusting gentiles, in America, Jews enhanced Hanukkah in ways that reflected a more complex interaction with gentile society. First, American Jews explained Hanukkah’s meaning to themselves in ways that included ideas of both Christianity and American civic values. Those explanations lent themselves to interreligious conversations and sometimes grew out of them. Second, in addition to Hanukkah’s domestic ritual involving the blessing and lighting of candles, usually by adults, American Jews organized communal children’s festivals in the synagogue or in other Jewish public venues. Concern for Jewish children growing up in a non-Jewish culture lent Hanukkah greater significance. Third, for that reason also, Hanukkah became the Jewish alternative to the most widely

celebrated religious holiday in the country, Christmas. As Christmas grew into a national celebration in the late nineteenth century, Jews elaborated upon Hanukkah's traditional customs in ways that reshaped it to conform to the national festival. Serious concerns underlay the festive atmosphere.

Initial Americanization

The earliest changes to Hanukkah occurred in 1842 in Charleston, South Carolina, home to a relatively large, historic, and thriving Jewish community. When Congregation K. K. Beth Elohim introduced a new hymnal that year, it included a new song for Hanukkah that voiced a different approach to the holiday. Largely written by Penina Moïse, the hymnal blended Jewish and American religious viewpoints. Moïse enjoyed a national reputation as a poet and supplemented her small income with her writings. Nine years before the hymnal's completion, she had published a widely praised volume of her original poetry and Charleston called her its poet laureate.¹³ At the time she penned her Hanukkah song, her congregation had reunited after a breakaway group called the Reformed Society of Israelites demanded the worship service be made more meaningful to congregants who did not understand Hebrew. Moïse was part of that group. About fifteen years later the congregation absorbed the splinter group, although significant tensions remained. Not long thereafter, the synagogue burned down, and the congregation determined to take the radical step of installing an organ to augment its worship in its new building.¹⁴ A new songbook in English, largely Moïse's work, suited the new situation.¹⁵

Moïse wrote a Hanukkah song that spoke to her American experience and modified the holiday's historic perspective in two ways. First, unlike both Psalm 30 and "Maoz Tsur," her song is intended specifically for Hanukkah, suggesting that her congregation felt the need to sing something special for that holiday. Borrowing her Protestant neighbors' terminology for religious songs, she titled her work "Hanucca Hymn." Yet, its opening line affirms her belief in Judaism's God. It begins by addressing God directly: "Great arbiter of human fate! Whose glory ne'er decays,

To Thee alone we dedicate, the song and soul of praise." In those words Moïse counters the evangelical assertion that Jesus is the deity to whom prayers ought to be offered. The rest of the hymn supports her opening assertion by briefly recounting the Hanukkah story by which God provided the "power . . . Which . . . to triumph led."

Second, Moïse's hymn mines the Hanukkah story for ways to describe an individual's spiritual crisis. When Antiochus installed Greek worship in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, he deprived Jews of the best place to obtain forgiveness for their sins. Moïse's hymn imagines the personal anguish of an ancient Jew whose sacred Temple had been desecrated, asserting "in bitterness of soul they wept." After describing the Temple restored and the "priest of God his robe resumed," she concludes by using the defiled Temple as a metaphor for a contemporary "blemished heart" needing cleansing. "Oh! Thus shall mercy's hand delight, To cleanse the blemished heart; Rekindle virtue's waning light, And peace and truth impart," she wrote. The hymn addresses the inner turmoil that results from a spiritual crisis. It asks not for an end to exile, as does "Maoz Tsur," but for a comforting personal salvation that soothes religious anguish. Jews might sing it during synagogue worship or at home during candle-lighting ceremonies. Although Moïse, like most rabbis in her century and earlier, believed that God guided the Maccabean victory, her hymn turned the familiar story in a different direction. Throughout, she elaborates the personal anguish of ancient Jews whose sacred Temple had been desecrated, and she assures readers that just as God ultimately purified that Temple, He could lead nineteenth century Jews to their own pure spiritual lives. Her poem gave Hanukkah a place in the emerging religious style of American culture that was dominated by the language of individualism and personal conscience derived from both Protestantism and the Enlightenment. However, neither the Talmud nor the *Shulchan Aruch* identifies Hanukkah as a special occasion to ask for the forgiveness of sins. Why is Moïse focusing on sin?

Moïse's hymn shares a particular religious discourse that reigned in her area of the United States. Born in 1797 she lived in a

Penina Moïse.

Oil on canvas, attributed to her nephew, Theodore Sidney Moïse, ca. 1840.

*(Collection of Anita Moïse Rosefeld Rosenberg,
Special Collections, College of Charleston Library.)*

South dominated by a Protestantism that emphasized the anguish suffered by individuals who were unsure of Jesus's mercy. A half century before her birth, religious revivals erupted among Christians living up and down the East Coast in towns from Massachusetts to Georgia. Evangelicals spilled into the South from the Mid-Atlantic region and began transforming the established Anglican order. In the South especially, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists challenged the religious status quo by reaching out to women, workers, and slaves. After the American Revolution dismantled legal and tax support for the Anglican (now called Episcopalian) Church, evangelicals expanded their influence. By the time Moïse wrote, southern female evangelicals, now reinvigorated by the Second Great Awakening, helped their family, friends, and neighbors to find salvation in Jesus.¹⁶ In Petersburg, Virginia, Ellen Mordecai accepted the "Beacon light of heaven, the star of Bethlehem" proffered by the Christian women around her.¹⁷ Her sister Rachel, living in Wilmington, North Carolina, converted to Christianity after such remonstrances by her friend, Lucy Ann Lippitt.¹⁸ The procedure would be the same: convince neighbors of their deep unhappiness and fear because their sins would provoke God's vengeance, then offer salvation through accepting Christ as savior. Moïse's hymn suggests that she had heard those arguments. She offered American Jews a way to speak of their own personal religious confusions or turmoil using Jewish images and provided a well-formed Jewish plea for God's reassurance at a particular time in the Jewish religious calendar, whether speaking to God, to other Jews, or to Christian neighbors. She provided an individual voice for prayer and an expression of an inner need for God, and tied those elements to Hanukkah's story through the hymn's imagery. Finally, by not mentioning exile, Moïse suggests that Jews are satisfied with life in America, an idea found in letters written by American Jews since the mid-1700s, an idea very alive in Charleston. In 1841 Rev. Gustavus Poznanski famously dedicated Beth Elohim's new building by stating that "this synagogue is our temple, this city our Jerusalem, and this happy land our Palestine."¹⁹ Moïse's hymn proved so popular that it was reprinted many times, and as

Penina Moïse's Hanukkah hymn.
(*Union Hymnal, Central Conference of American Rabbis,*
New York 1957.)

recently as 1959, in hymnals and other publications used by both Reform and Conservative Jews. With Moïse, American Jews began reshaping Hanukkah to fit their American experience.

Moïse never married, and although she led her congregation's Sunday school for many years, she aimed her original hymn at an adult rather than a children's audience. Others soon voiced their special concern for Jewish children at Hanukkah. Four years after Moïse published her hymn, Rabbi Max Lilienthal sent the text of the Hanukkah sermon that he had delivered before his three congregations in New York City to the congregation in Augusta, Georgia. Translated from German into English by his brother, Samuel Lilienthal, this sermon may have reached the southern congregation as part of the rabbi's effort to use his authority as head of a newly organized *beth din* in New York to promote the growth of small congregations nationwide. Lilienthal addressed his audience primarily as Jewish parents urging them to do everything for the "holy heirloom," that is, Judaism. "Fathers and elders," he said, "show by your life how Jewish faith ennobles you. You mothers—good and pious—prove . . . by the education of your little ones, that you too belong to the pious mothers in Israel."²⁰

Lilienthal stands out among his peers for his attention to the needs of Jewish children. His early career focused on Jewish education. Born in Munich in 1815, he earned both rabbinical ordination and a degree from the university there. In 1840, with those credentials in hand, Lilienthal became the first principal for the newly established Jewish school in Riga. That school instructed its pupils in secular knowledge as well as a somewhat liberal approach to Judaism. Czar Nicholas I endorsed the school, and his support made Riga's Jews even more suspicious of it than they were after hearing of its modern curriculum. The school failed. After a few years, Lilienthal left Europe and came to the U.S. to serve as chief rabbi of three New York congregations who formed what they called a united community. He preached every Sabbath, ran a Jewish school, and, as the best-educated rabbi in the country, presided over a short-lived rabbinical court. His liberal views on religion soon stirred conflict in his congregations. There-

fore Lilienthal resigned and, with his wife, ran a successful Jewish boarding school instead. When his friend Isaac M. Wise urged Lilienthal to join him in Cincinnati, Ohio, and take over a more congenial congregation in the Midwest, the Lilienthals relocated after a decade in New York. In Cincinnati he served as congregational rabbi, educator, and author until his death in 1882. Lilienthal was among the first to argue that American Jews ought to make Hanukkah into a more important holiday.²¹

In the 1840s, when Lilienthal and Moïse penned their Hanukkah works, Christmas was a widely disputed custom and not yet the widespread festival with decorated trees, Santa, and gifts known today. The Calvinist tradition disdained those practices as pagan, too Anglican, and too Roman Catholic. In the early nineteenth century, the influential Connecticut Congregational minister Lyman Beecher preached against the “unscriptural practice of keeping Christmas,”²² although his children received Christmas gifts from their Episcopalian grandmother.²³ In those days, American fathers typically gave small gifts to their children on New Year’s Day, not Christmas.²⁴ But when five million German immigrants added to an already substantial German American population over the course of the nineteenth century, their customs reshaped American standards.²⁵ The country’s most popular women’s magazine, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, whose circulation reached 150,000 at midcentury, featured illustrations of Queen Victoria’s family Christmas tree and made the custom fashionable in the U.S.²⁶ After the Civil War, politicians and social critics called for domestic holidays that could unite the nation and talked of Christmas as a national holiday.²⁷ In the heavily German settlement of Cincinnati, Lilienthal noticed that many American Jews, themselves immigrants from Germanic lands, also enjoyed the German Christmas customs. Between 1820 and 1870, almost 150,000 Jews from central Europe came to the U.S., and by 1860 Cincinnati’s Jewish population reached ten thousand.²⁸ Most of its Jews hailed from Bavaria, Bohemia, and environs, and they stamped the Jewish community with Germanic color.²⁹ Nonetheless, rabbis and editors of the Jewish press viewed the German Christmas customs as too Christian for Jews.³⁰ By 1870 Lilienthal

and Wise addressed what they saw as a religious problem for Jewish children with a new Hanukkah activity held in a synagogue.

Children and Hanukkah

Lilienthal proposed a plan for a new sort of Hanukkah celebration that suited the Jewish community he served. He was the first American rabbi to preach in Christian pulpits and that experience gave him an idea for Hanukkah.³¹ Observing the ways Christian churches cultivated interest in religion in their youngsters, he noted that festivities, religious socials, and gifts seemed to keep Christian children “in happy expectation” and sparked their interest in their church and in religion. Many Christian Sunday schools customarily held special Christmas festivals featuring hymns, decorations, and pageants. By contrast, he asked Jews “what are *we* doing? Nothing!! . . . [The] only ceremony which really arouses youngsters’ interest is Confirmation . . . [We] must do something too, to enliven our children. Our children shall have a grand and glorious Chanukah festival nicer than any Christmas festival.”³²

*Florette Visanska’s kindergarten class at
the Temple, Atlanta, Hanukkah 1914.*

(Courtesy of the Cuba Archives of the Breman Museum, Atlanta.)

By 1870 he and fellow Reform rabbi Isaac M. Wise established special Hanukkah celebrations in which Cincinnati's Jewish children enjoyed a Hanukkah festival where singing and instrumental solos, dramatics, and refreshments framed a holiday candle lighting ceremony. He explained, "Chanukah is entirely neglected in so many of our Jewish families . . . [but] we [should] celebrate it publicly in . . . every congregation. . . . [The] children . . . shall have it as a day of rejoicing [in] our religion."³³ In Lilienthal's own Jewish magazine designed for children and families, he assured readers that "Hanukkah can be celebrated to delight young and old."

One anthropologist who studied ritual in its many forms noted that because ritual "is good for conveying a message as if it were unquestionable, it is often used to communicate those things which are most often in doubt."³⁴ Elaborating on the Hanukkah ritual seemed to Lilienthal the ideal way to impress young Jews with its importance and to show youngsters that Judaism holds special appeal for them. Within his congregation, Lilienthal organized a festival attended by more than two hundred children who answered to the holiday blessings in a chorus and enjoyed ice cream and other sweets, all in a room festively decorated by the "ladies of the congregation" who had worked "with a will."

Lilienthal and Wise described the first celebrations to their readers, beginning with Wise's account in 1870. Lilienthal's magazine for children, *The Hebrew Sabbath School Visitor*, founded in 1874, described parallel Hanukkah festivities for his readers.³⁵ Held in the vestry rooms of the Mound Street Temple, where he served, Lilienthal read a prayer and lighted the holiday candles before members of the school committee delivered speeches, the choir offered musical selections, and gifts were given to the teachers from the children. Then the children were treated to "eatables" and sent home before an entertainment planned by the women of the congregation for adults "lasted into the night." Wise arranged for similar celebrations for the children of his congregation and Jewish school, the Talmud Yelodim Institute, to be held at his synagogue. There, Wise spoke to a large audience that included 250 students. The cantor lit the candles and led the singing,

children said blessings over the food, ate sugary treats, and everyone went home at 10 PM. These communal Hanukkah celebrations designed to entertain, symbolically instruct, and treat children presented the new Hanukkah customs to American Jews.

Lilienthal also wrote didactic fiction for Hanukkah. One such piece depicted teachers in a Sunday school joining with women of the congregation and the rabbi to create a grand festival for the congregation's children. In case anyone missed the point, the story ended with Lilienthal's advice: "The Chanukah festival, as proposed by the *Visitor*, should be celebrated in every congregation; and the officers of our Sabbath schools throughout the land should take good care that it might be omitted nowhere" because "the children like it."³⁶

Lilienthal and Wise did not invent the new celebration out of whole cloth. Like much of nineteenth century Jewish innovation, it drew upon three sources: customs remembered from Europe, Jewish religion, and practices learned from Christians in America. The Hanukkah dance for adults that lasted far into the night echoed the socializing likely to occur among Ashkenazi Jews in Europe during Hanukkah.³⁷ In European Jewish communities as distant as Alsace and the Lithuanian shtetl of Eishyshok, families and neighbors enjoyed social visits on Hanukkah evenings.³⁸ Parents who brought their children to synagogue events in Cincinnati recognized the familiar candle-lighting ceremony, even if they heard little mention of miracles.

Lilienthal worked closely with Isaac M. Wise, a Bohemian immigrant who led the Reform movement in American Judaism in the second half of the nineteenth century. One of his biographers claimed that Wise thought Hanukkah should be dropped from the Jewish holiday calendar, but, in fact, Wise only objected to the holiday's association with miracles.³⁹ Wise touted a religion of reason and omitted mention of miracles from the Hanukkah blessings and prayers in the prayer book he compiled in 1857.⁴⁰ He found great contemporary importance in Hanukkah and retained the candle blessings and other prayers. Wise believed Hanukkah's importance lay in its commemoration of a momentous event in human history, as he described it, the defeat of

*Hanukkah Talent Show, 1954, The Temple, Atlanta.
(Courtesy of the Cuba Archives of the Breman Museum, Atlanta.)*

“Greek superstition by revealed religion.” The Maccabean victory was “armed by the will of Providence,” he said, and without that victory, there would have been no Jesus and no Mohammad.⁴¹ Moreover, Wise believed that children needed to be taught to admire great men of the past and often expressed his thoughts in Hanukkah editorials in his periodical. It was “a radical error in our American system of education . . . [that children are] not taught to imitate the sublime virtues of classic men. Their pantheon is limited to the nineteenth century and to the narrow spots on which the history of the United States was enacted.” By contrast, Wise reminded readers, “Every feast in Israel admonished you: Remember the days of old, understand the years of past generations.”⁴² The *McGuffey Readers* that became the standardized

reading text for most schools across the United States during the mid to late nineteenth century sought to instill morality while polishing language ability. Written by a professor of “mental and moral philosophy,” the books contained poetry and Bible quotations, but spent little if any time on history.⁴³ Wise and Lilienthal extended the line of heroes important to America back in time to the Maccabees.

Yet, they wove ancient Jewish history into the American present. Taking their cue from the libretto of the popular 1747 oratorio *Judas Maccabeus* by George Frideric Handel, Wise and Lilienthal often wrote that the Maccabees fought for liberty and freedom of religion, two values unheard of in the ancient world. Lilienthal, for example, told readers of the children’s magazine that he edited that Matathias, father of Judah the Maccabee, began the revolt against Antiochus with the battle cry, “Give me Liberty or Give me death!”⁴⁴ In 1860 Wise serialized his own original romantic popular history of the Maccabean revolt for thirty-nine weeks.⁴⁵ Lilienthal then ran a children’s version of that story in his own magazine.⁴⁶ These accounts cast the Maccabees as progenitors of the American Revolution and fighters for its ideals.

Jews young and old who read those original works and attended those Hanukkah festivals learned that their own Jewish holiday celebrated American civic values. Those works and activities erased the cultural and religious boundary between the Jewish past on the one hand and the linked American and Christian world views touted in the *McGuffey Readers* on the other. Thus, the new synagogue celebration did more than provide Jewish children with the same sort of happy festivity enjoyed by their Christian friends in December. In prayers and recitations their festival commemorated values shared with their fellow Americans. The celebration of Hanukkah emphasized that Judaism was a modern religion.

Because their new explanation of Hanukkah claimed Judaism supported American values, Hanukkah also could safely further religious piety among American Jews. As rabbis, Wise and Lilienthal aimed their Hanukkah festivals at invigorating Jewish religious life in the United States. Both men touted the festival in

their periodicals. "I would recommend to teachers in our Jewish Sabbath school, that they would try and make the feast of Chanukah . . . a feast of joy for our children to which both teachers and children would look forward with longing and delight," Wise wrote in the *Israelite*.⁴⁷ Lilienthal addressed his Hanukkah advice directly to children. "And the *Visitor*, my young readers . . . hopes you will . . . forever be as true to your God and your religion as the [Maccabees]."⁴⁸ A joyous synagogue-based festival also furthered the Reformers' goal of enhancing the synagogue's importance in Jewish religious life.⁴⁹

Although Reformers led the drive to make Hanukkah as festive for Jewish children as Christmas was for their Christian playmates, tradition-minded Jews quickly joined the effort. New York's anti-Reform editor, Rabbi Samuel M. Isaacs, complained that many American Jews neglected to light the holiday candles. If Jews did not light Hanukkah candles at home, then he too agreed that a synagogue-based Hanukkah festival that enchanted children and that included the candle-lighting ceremony ought to be organized by rabbis.⁵⁰ He printed Henrietta Szold's brief essay urging Jews to reshape Hanukkah in just that way in his Jewish periodical, the *Jewish Messenger*, in 1879, only nine years after news of Cincinnati's synagogue-based Hanukkah festivals first reached Jews elsewhere. Szold obtained her Jewish education from her father, a somewhat tradition-minded rabbi in Baltimore. She went on to become a leading figure in twentieth century Jewish life by founding Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization. She added her voice to those urging greater attention to Hanukkah. "Christmas truly fulfills its mission of bringing peace and good will to men. All this and more, Chanukah should be to us," she wrote.⁵¹ Although Szold did not entirely approve of the Reformers' approach to Judaism, she too felt that Hanukkah ought to be reshaped along the lines of contemporary Christmas festivities that created such good feelings among coreligionists.

Most of the young editors of a new, New York-based national weekly called the *American Hebrew* also opposed Reform, yet they, too, vigorously promoted communal Hanukkah festivals for Jewish children in the same way as Lilienthal and Wise, by

encouraging their readers to create those events for local young people. And like the Reform leaders, they printed reports of local Hanukkah festivals submitted by readers from around the country. "Practical illustrations such as these, of Israel's feasts and festivals, are worth a thousand sermons," the editors announced in 1880. "In our charitable institutions and in our Sunday Schools . . . the season has been marked by rejoicings and merry-makings."⁵² In 1888 in Baltimore alone, six different Jewish institutions including congregations, Jewish charities, and a Sunday school celebrated Hanukkah with festivities similar to the one Lienthal organized in Cincinnati.⁵³

The number of communal Hanukkah celebrations grew each year, in part due to a growing number of communal organizations sponsoring them. Jews in Louisville, Kentucky, organized a comparable festival in 1876.⁵⁴ By late century, as immigration raised the number of American Jews to more than a half million, older organizations like congregations, fraternal associations, and women's clubs planned new charitable efforts that provided expanded religious school activities. Industrial schools, penny lunches, orphan asylums, kindergartens, free libraries, mission schools, and settlement houses offered various services including medical aid to new Jewish immigrants and especially to their children. The new organizations often organized Hanukkah festivals. Yet, since the North counted the largest Jewish population and, therefore, most of the Jewish organizations, Hanukkah festivals most often appeared there. By 1890 the *American Hebrew* claimed that ten thousand people participated in these communal Hanukkah events in New York alone. Thus, American Jewish traditionalists, like Reformers, believed that carefully adapted Jewish customs might invigorate American Jewish life. The *American Hebrew* editors concluded, "The happy result was that Chanuka was this year properly celebrated in many a Jewish home where the pleasing rites had for many years lain in abeyance."⁵⁵ It is impossible to determine if the number of Jews who lit the Hanukkah candles in their homes increased. At least one Reform family began lighting the Hanukkah candles at home in this era, their only Jewish domestic rite.⁵⁶ But it is clear that those who

*Children floating Hanukkah candles in the pool at the Samuel M. & Helene Soref JCC, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, c. 1989.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

promoted communal Hanukkah celebrations hoped to achieve that goal.

Reports of Hanukkah celebrations sent to the *American Hebrew*, to Lilienthal's *Sabbath School Visitor*, and to Wise's *Israelite* from Jewish readers around the country suggest the power of the national Jewish press to influence Jews nationwide. Correspondents to those magazines understood that they would be placing their congregations on a national stage. In 1898 the correspondent from Memphis, Tennessee, boasted to *American Hebrew* readers, "formal ceremonies are always observed [here] on this occasion and . . . the children take the leading part." Yet the reports also show that Jews created Hanukkah ceremonies that expressed local differences in American values and expressive styles of their

regions. In 1898, at Boston's YMHA, an organization begun as a literary society, its Sabbath school's Hanukkah festival featured a number of speeches delivered by young women and men, including the story of Hanukkah, an original poem, an acrostic, and a valedictory address. One hundred children attended.⁵⁷ Boston's Jews filled the intellectual forms familiar to that university town with Hanukkah content. By contrast in Atlanta, Georgia, at a Hanukkah festival held in the Reform Temple, "the United States flag was wrapped around (the) sacred (Torah) scrolls in the ark and national airs were sung. . . . Rabbi Marx . . . told the children to do their duty to religion and country." Atlanta's congregation expressed its understanding of harmony between American and Jewish values by entwining their two different sacred objects.⁵⁸ While both Boston and Atlanta integrated their Hanukkah celebrations into their local and institutional cultural styles, those styles differed markedly. One featured a secular location, lay leadership, and linguistic expression. The other took place in sacred space, enjoyed rabbinic leadership, and featured a material expression of values that may have reflected the patriotic emotions stirred by the Spanish American War that year. Because the new Hanukkah elaborations only supplemented the holiday's rites, they were not confined to historic religious rules. Creativity was king.

By the turn of the new century, more reports about southern Hanukkah celebrations appeared in the national Jewish press. Richmond, Virginia's Beth Ahabah offered a prize for the best Hanukkah composition written by a student and boasted of its annual Hanukkah "entertainment" by and for the children of the Sunday school.⁵⁹ Yet, adults shaped these festivals to reassure parents that the religious schools were instilling Judaism in the next generation, in addition to eliciting smiles from youngsters. The reporter from Louisville, Kentucky, movingly described the "children of both Adas Israel and B'rith Sholom congregations "conducting "beautiful and impressive" ceremonies, and remarked, "It is always a most interesting sight to behold the little ones ascend the altar and like their ancestors of old, kindle the [Hanukkah] lights."⁶⁰ The correspondent from

Owensboro, Kentucky, reported a “pleasing” program “rendered . . . at the Temple . . . by the members of the Sabbath School.”⁶¹

Women and Hanukkah

Whatever the differences or similarities in local programming, Hanukkah festivals depended on women for their success. Cincinnati’s Jewish women provided such crucial assistance in assuring that city’s festival’s success, that the board of the local Jewish school thanked them publicly with notices in two of the national Jewish newspapers published in Cincinnati, the English language *Israelite* and the German language *Die Deborah*, both edited by Isaac M. Wise.⁶² Lienthal reported in his newspaper that women who assisted at communal Hanukkah festivals were “loudly praised and cheered for their good will and motherly love.”⁶³ In some years women in Lienthal’s congregation financed the festival.⁶⁴ Women also sometimes shaped the Hanukkah festivals to answer other local needs they perceived. In Philadelphia, younger charitable women invited local Rabbi Marcus Jastrow to speak at their entertainment to benefit the local Jewish Foster Home.⁶⁵ Charitable women who helped support an industrial school in New York instituted annual Hanukkah celebrations where they distributed garments, books, and various prizes to the children.⁶⁶ In New Orleans Minnie Wexler led other local women in organizing a Hanukkah program that featured a performance of traditional melodies by a female choir for residents of the city’s Jewish Home for the Aged and Infirm.⁶⁷ New Orleans Jews also arranged a celebration for children at the Jewish Orphans Home that featured the Orphans’ Band, the candle lighting ceremony, speeches, and charitable donations.⁶⁸ In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, women organized a Hanukkah festival designed to convince their community to support its Jewish Sunday school, an institution especially likely to rely upon female instructors.⁶⁹ In many locales, Jews looked to Sabbath schools to create Hanukkah festivals. Such schools were a novelty in Jewish education and were first adapted to Jewish education by a group of Philadelphia Jewish women in 1838.⁷⁰ The schools quickly spread to Charleston, Savannah, and other southern towns as they did elsewhere.

Parents seem to have been more willing to experiment with their daughters' education than their sons', and Jewish girls comprised the majority of Sunday school students. Girls did not become bar mitzvah, as boys might, and so they did not require education in reading Hebrew to prepare them for the rite. The largely female faculties of Sunday schools also may have marked them as best suited to girls. Young Jewish women and girls often took leading roles in Hanukkah entertainments. For example, girls' performances dominated the 1887 Sabbath school Hanukkah entertainment in Detroit, where the program included a juvenile operetta based on the story of Little Red Riding Hood. In Quincy and Evansville, Illinois, too, girls performed most of the Hanukkah songs and orchestral pieces.⁷¹ As financiers or Sunday school teachers, in formal ladies auxiliaries or Sisterhoods, or informally as mothers of Sunday school children, women performed much of the labor to mount the Hanukkah celebrations.

Rabbis sought women's assistance because the new Hanukkah festivals demanded a good deal of expertise in how to manage and please children. Any lack of specialized religious knowledge among the women was moot. The rabbis or cantors themselves could provide that. But, as Lilienthal suggested, Hanukkah celebrations focused on entertaining children while instructing them, aiming for a Hanukkah that would be as much fun for Jewish children as Christmas was for Christian children. These new celebrations that merged childcare with worship provided nineteenth-century Jewish women a concrete way to fulfill the enhanced religious responsibilities expected of them. As industry and commerce consumed men's time, Victorians in Britain and the United States idealized women's religious sensibility and expected so-called "true women" to interest themselves in religious rites and instruction.⁷² Among Protestants, women seemed to be the "backbone of the church" despite having little voice in church governance.⁷³ Reform rabbis often noted that women dominated the pews during worship services as men seldom attended.⁷⁴ Women of local congregations, as Sunday school teachers, mothers of students, or as members of Sisterhoods or ladies auxiliaries, heard the Hanukkah appeal for their help.

*"Chanuka Dance," 1952, at the Hotel Texas, Fort Worth.
(Courtesy of Max Kaye Collection, Congregation Ahavath Sholom, Fort Worth.)*

Women often organized the events, managed the children, and provided the food and other items used in the celebrations, such as those organized in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1905 by the Bertha Feusterwald Kindergarten and Sewing Class.⁷⁵ In New Orleans the Women's League of the Touro Synagogue arranged a "very entertaining program" for their Sunday school children and organized the annual Hanukkah festivities.⁷⁶ Nearby, members of the Gates of Prayer congregation judged their ladies auxiliary, a "noble band of workers," and a "power for good."⁷⁷ Women's free labor made the child-centered Hanukkah festivals possible even for small congregations in rural areas. Those voluntary responsibilities sometimes became annual duties.

When the Reform movement's National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, under Carrie Simon of Washington, D.C., organized local female synagogue volunteers into a national network in 1913, its committee on religion marshaled national resources to promote these now familiar communal Hanukkah events as well as the traditional domestic Hanukkah rites.⁷⁸ When the woman known to us only as Mrs. Leon Goodman of Louisville, Kentucky, chaired the organization's committee on religion in the 1920s, she began instructing the local chapters in preparing for Hanukkah with her September letter and reminded members each month thereafter until January. In 1925 she wrote that "the Chanukah festival is one of the few instances . . . [when] the religious atmosphere may permeate the household." The next year she explained, "it is especially our desire to overcome the practice of observing Christmas in Jewish homes." She deemed more elaborate Hanukkah celebrations to be the strongest weapon in a Jewish mother's arsenal against Christmas.

Urbanist Witold Rybczynski explained that the modern concept of "home" rests on changes in urban living that emerged first among the Dutch in the seventeenth century. There, in a country with neither much land nor landed gentry, where urban life became common, a domicile that allowed for familial privacy served as the foundation in the development of allied notions of comfort, intimacy, and domesticity.⁷⁹ "Domestic comfort . . . begins in the

appreciation of the home as a setting for an . . . interior life," Rybczynski wrote.⁸⁰ One eleventh century report hints that among Europe's Jews, architecture suggests that the sense of home privacy linking ideas about comfort with domesticity and interiority may have appeared much earlier than in Amsterdam. Some European Jewish homes exhibited a sharply defined distinction between public and private space six hundred years before that distinction developed among the Dutch. A 1008 description of the home of Samuel Belassar, a Jewish merchant in Regensburg, described the external view of the place resembling a "dark grey, moss-covered hideous pile of stones, provided with closely-barred windows of various sizes." But once inside a "well protected door," one "entered into an apartment cheerfully decorated with flowers, with costly and splendid furniture . . . Here, the walls panelled and decorated with polished wood, with many-coloured waving and winding hangings and artistic carved work, was the owner's domestic temple, in which the Sabbath festival was celebrated."⁸¹ This sense of the privacy of the home also is woven into Hanukkah's different rules about the placement of the *hanukiyah*. Goodman's ambition to keep Christmas out of Jewish homes and Hanukkah in them reflected her underlying concern for American Jews' interior lives. Although this concern had old roots in Jewish culture, it would be expressed in modern rhetoric more often in the twentieth century, especially after World War II.

In the meantime, however, American Jews adapted another commercial Christmas custom to Hanukkah. In 1926 the Reform Sisterhoods embarked upon a new Hanukkah project, the sale of specially designed Hanukkah greeting cards. By then, commercial greeting cards for Christmas had been available to American shoppers for fifty years.⁸² Among Jews, local benefactors might occasionally provide souvenir cards with Hanukkah designs for children who attended synagogue Hanukkah festivals. But Jews typically did not exchange greeting cards at Hanukkah. Yet, because by 1926 America's Jewish population numbered more than two million and because the Sisterhood's national membership provided many potential customers for this new product, one manufacturer agreed to supply them with two simple cards. The

first, a modified version of a Christmas card, featured a single lit candle in a dish, with a trail of flowers in front. The second displayed a plain candle along with the first stanza of Emma Lazarus's poem for Hanukkah, which began "Kindle the taper like a steadfast star."⁸³ The card instructed families in what to do (light the candles) and why they should do it (to be steadfast). It offered a famous, accomplished Jewish woman's work to inspire other Jews' pride in being Jewish. By exchanging Hanukkah cards, Jews underscored the Jewish identities of both the sender and the recipient. The cards provided American Jews with another way to participate in widespread activities associated with Christmas while performing a Jewish act. The Sisterhood's national leadership urged members to sell cards at two for a nickel in their congregations to assure sales. Hanukkah cards became an annual feature of the Reform Sisterhood's work and established a new Hanukkah custom. Ultimately, their success with Hanukkah cards convinced manufacturers and retailers of a new niche market for their holiday goods.⁸⁴ By the 1970s, and earlier in some areas, Hanukkah cards could be purchased in stores alongside Christmas goods. Their blue and silver or white color scheme, reminiscent of both *tallesim* and the Israeli flag, marked them as Jewish. In November 2007 Hallmark's website offered seven different Hanukkah cards—all in that color scheme. Greeting cards gave Hanukkah a distinctive, recognizable place in American stores alongside the red and green Christmas goods.

In 1961, almost a century after Lilienthal and Wise created the synagogue Hanukkah festival in order to interest Jewish children in their religion, psychologist Samuel Markowitz urged Jewish parents to revitalize Hanukkah with parties in order to better "adjust the Jewish child to his world. . . . Plan to use the entire week . . . for education, stimulation, and reinspiration of our people with regard to Jewish ends and hopes," he wrote. "Make . . . [Hanukkah] colorful and attractive . . . through symbol and ceremonial." Dr. Markowitz explained further that he believed that "Jewish life can flourish in America only if Jews find pleasure in Jewish living." Markowitz penned his thoughts about the importance of a festive Hanukkah only sixteen years after the end of

World War II. The emotional impact of the Holocaust remained palpable. "Jewishness has come to mean mainly negations," he maintained. He believed contemporary American Jews had been "forced to rely altogether unreasonably on intellectualized appreciation of a past which we . . . transmit mainly as . . . a tale of martyrdom and privation." That attitude would not help young Jews to embrace Jewish life. "Unless our life is built upon a positive basis," he wrote, with "pleasurable experience lived through and embodied into our normal routine from childhood, we shall . . . meet in our children a growing resentment at Jewishness." Therefore, "make festivals attractive . . . for the perpetuation of Judaism, [and] for the psychic welfare of the children." His suggestions included household Hanukkah decorations, ice cream, candy, and cakes in the molds of images with religious meaning such as menorahs. "Give the children gifts every night," he urged. "They need not be expensive. . . . Give books, unbreakable Chanuko records . . . [and] . . . modern Israeli products," he advised. American Jews should not be timid about creating a visibly vibrant Hanukkah home, he suggested. After all, he added, "Difference is the essence of democracy." He offered a list of books and party guides to help readers implement his advice. The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods published his pamphlet and marketed it through its many local chapters.⁸⁵

By the closing decades of the twentieth century some Jews used Hanukkah as an occasion to both elaborate upon their own Hanukkah customs and to instruct their gentile neighbors about Judaism. In 1978 the *Women's League Outlook*, a magazine published by Conservative women, printed their local chapter reports on Hanukkah events. Amid many familiar activities for Jewish children conducted in homes and synagogues, one custom among New Orleans Jews stands out. In New Orleans, garden clubs encouraged their members to decorate the front doors of their homes during December, according to one of three thematic categories: religious, seasonal, or novelty. For several years some Jews participated in that local custom by using their front doors to educate their neighbors about Judaism, calling them "Hanukkah doors." They used inexpensive, everyday materials: paint, bottle tops, egg

cartons, plastic spoons, sock hangers, Styrofoam cups, drinking straws, rice, beans, Mardi Gras beads, acorns, pine cones, popcorn, cardboard, typewriter spools, nuts, barley, cords, or flash cubes. Out of those humble objects they created Hanukkah menorahs, scenes of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the Western Wall, or the Eternal Light. To help their neighbors understand an image, each homeowner placed an explanation beside their door.⁸⁶ Clearly, these Jewish families in New Orleans viewed Hanukkah as an opportunity to engage their neighbors in an educational conversation about Judaism. Far beyond simply advertising the miracle by displaying the *hanukiyah* in their windows, those Conservative Jewish women in New Orleans offered lessons in Judaism.

Jews in the South continued to use Hanukkah as a light-hearted occasion in which to point out their Jewish identities to their gentile neighbors while offering simple lessons about Judaism. In 2004 Floridian Marianne Zoll initiated a Chabad Hanukkah celebration in Lakewood Ranch, near Sarasota, Florida, a town which she judged to be only “15 percent Jewish.” Week-long festivities included street parties, a song concert, a Family Heritage Night hockey game at the *St. Petersburg Times* Forum, gifts, latkes, doughnuts, and balloons. “I just want to educate people and show them what fun we have,” Zoll explained to a reporter for the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*. Chabad had been organizing public Hanukkah festivals, often featuring the lighting of a gigantic menorah, since its first effort in Los Angeles in 1978.⁸⁷ On Florida’s east coast, Jews who publicized other Hanukkah activities made sure to include a brief lesson about Judaism. In Pompano Beach, Florida, Sunday school teacher Melissa Mayersdorf coordinated a Hanukkah Tzedaka Art Contest where students raised money to purchase Hanukkah gifts and clothing for children served by the Jewish Adoption and Foster Care Options. In 2008 a volunteer for the JAFCO explained to a local news reporter that “charity . . . is part of the philosophy of Judaism.”⁸⁸

Through varying efforts, Jews had made themselves and their Hanukkah holiday visible throughout the South. In 2008, Winn-Dixie Stores, headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida,

announced that “for the first time, all Winn-Dixie stores are stocked with top Hanukkah items like Hanukkah candles for the menorah, and kosher items such as potato pancake mix and chocolate coins.” Significantly, Winn-Dixie did not restrict its Hanukkah items to stores in areas with exceptionally large Jewish populations, like southeast Florida or Atlanta. Instead, all 521 retail grocery locations including those in Alabama and Mississippi were to offer Hanukkah goods. Moreover, the store announced its holiday season product lines by linking Christmas, Kwanzaa, and Hanukkah. “All three holidays share a common theme—celebrating with family and loved ones,” the supermarket’s spokesperson explained to *Business Wire*. “We want to help families continue these traditions . . . by having these items available.” Food suppliers recognize that American domestic celebrations typically feature special foods and customers extend their ordinary food budget to obtain them. Sarasota, Florida, caterer Maggie Glucklich specializes in home dinner parties and often caters Hanukkah dinners. “The heart of Hanukkah is getting together with friends and family,” she explained to a reporter for the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*.⁸⁹ By the twenty-first century, newspapers in the South expected to run stories about Hanukkah in December, and Jews they interviewed explained it in ways that made its celebration similar to domestic Christmas festivities. Yet, at the same time, by being happy to celebrate Hanukkah, these southern Jews showed that they could be happy at Christmastime without becoming Christians.

Conclusion

Those six new Hanukkah ventures, Moïse’s 1842 Hanukkah hymn, the mid-nineteenth-century recasting of Hanukkah as a celebration of religious liberty by Lilienthal and Wise, the new communal Hanukkah children’s festival, Hanukkah cards in 1926, Hanukkah doors in 1978, and in 2007, eight-day Hanukkah street parties, demonstrate an early and continuing interest in Americanized Hanukkah activities among Jews in all parts of the country. In the South, in the 1840s, Reform-minded Jews found a new way to express a religious sentiment at Hanukkah that linked

that holiday to the religious mood of their region. In the booming, post-Civil War, midwestern city of Cincinnati, Reform-minded rabbis redefined the holiday to align with contemporary American political values and ideas of manliness linked to militarism. Amid the growing popularity of Christmas festivities, new communal Hanukkah festivals offered Jewish children celebrations comparable to those enjoyed by their Christian friends. Both Reform and traditionalist rabbis joined with women to enhance Hanukkah's importance for Jewish children in big cities like New York and Philadelphia, mid-sized Richmond, Virginia, and even in small communities with few resources like Owensboro, Kentucky.

Among American Jews, the holiday commemorating both military success and divine rescue surprisingly also held new opportunities for women. Jewish women found in the children's Hanukkah festival a way to promote the Jewish education of their children and sometimes worked closely with their rabbis in creating and executing the events. In the nineteenth century, before Jewish women counted as members in most congregations, their efforts in those events argued for their right to greater influence in their congregations. As late as the 1920s, just after women won the right to vote in United States elections, Deborah Melamed, a member of the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, urged more of her sisters in Conservative congregations to undertake this sort of synagogue activity if they hoped to gain more power in their congregations.⁹⁰ Supported by their national federation, women's associations linked to Reform congregations stirred marketplace innovations for Hanukkah comparable to those that had become commonplace for Christmas. Forty years later, women also funded and marketed a psychologist's explanation of Hanukkah's importance to post-Holocaust Jewish children living as minorities in the largely Christian United States. In 1961 Samuel Markowitz told Jewish mothers that Hanukkah parties contributed to the healthy psychological adjustment of American Jewish children. Seventeen years later, in New Orleans, Conservative Jewish women took unusual steps to explain their distinctive customs to their neighbors using commonplace objects to create

symbols of their faith. Those changes transformed Hanukkah from a commemoration of God's rescue of pious, faithful Jews from the dangers inflicted by alien powers, to a celebration of civic virtue and piety that Jews shared with other virtuous Americans, even those of other faiths, and of God's support of that virtue in ancient days. Southerners' Hanukkah activities support Mark K. Bauman's argument that southern Jewish life shared national models because southern Jews were not isolated. Jews arrived in the South from other parts of the country and often maintained those connections through business ties. Southern Jews traveled outside the South to visit Jewish family and friends.⁹¹

The national Jewish press further promoted commonalities in Jewish American culture by linking Jews around the country and encouraging activities and attitudes promoted by the various editors. By printing reports of local Hanukkah celebrations sent to them by Jews in distant towns, those magazines created a national conversation about Hanukkah's importance and about the variations in ways Jews might appropriately commemorate an ancient event in the progress-minded nineteenth century. In the 1920s national Jewish women's organizations, like the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, further linked widespread Jewish communities and urged them toward common activities. Local variations in the national trend are ultimately part of the overall movement of Hanukkah toward greater significance to American Jews and greater visibility for Judaism, albeit a Judaism reshaped in an American mold.

The effort to enhance Hanukkah emerged most energetically among Reformers, underscoring that movement's sense of providing an alternative to assimilation, as Alan Silverstein phrased it.⁹² Jews selected and found elements within Judaism that corresponded to elements of Christianity in order to resist Christianity. Moïse's hymn did this by assuring individual Jews of personal salvation. Lilienthal provided Jewish children with a fun Hanukkah that aimed to help them embrace Judaism. The new Hanukkah stories offered Jews helped them imagine their own ancient heroes with pride and pleasure. The National Federation

of Temple Sisterhoods initiated a December Jewish shopping experience that reminded Jews who sent and received Hanukkah cards of their Jewishness in the midst of the national Christmas fervor. At public Hanukkah parties, Jews invited their gentile neighbors to come and learn about Judaism, identify their Jewish neighbors, and have a good time. In each instance, new Hanukkah customs provided Jews with a way to explain their distinctive Jewish religious life to inquiring gentile neighbors while also referring to ideas and activities they held in common.

Jews in the South especially understood the contours of Christianity as it impacted their lives. Memoirs by southern Jews attest to their close everyday contact with their gentile neighbors.⁹³ Moïse could point to her own hymn whenever confronted by an evangelically minded friend. More than a century later, the doors of New Orleans Jewish homes, with their homemade visual emblems of Jewish themes and figures, reflected the influence of Roman Catholicism, in which visual images explain divine mysteries. In 2004, week-long public Hanukkah festivities in Sarasota, a town known for its retirees and vacationers, provided local Jews with an occasion to explain their difference to their gentile neighbors while also showing them a good time.

Those American Hanukkah elaborations helped Jews feel part of a national celebration *as Jews* and to ease what Durham, North Carolina's Eli Evans described as the "emotional reality of religious isolation [that] came crashing grimly into life during the Christmas season."⁹⁴ None of the new Hanukkah customs that I described voiced the Jewish fear of non-Jews suggested by the holiday's traditional rite and its historic songs. Synagogue festivals, home parties with decorations, specialized foods, and nightly gifts, greeting cards, decorated doors, and public Hanukkah parties lent Jews' engagement with the American Christmas season a light-hearted tone. Through those Hanukkah re-castings Jews provided themselves with a way to talk easily with their gentile neighbors about their own religious lives at any December party.

NOTES

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¹³ Penina Moïse, *Fancy's Sketch Book* (Charleston, SC, 1833), <http://www.ajhs.org/publications/chapters/chapter.cfm?documentID=234> (accessed August 10, 2008).

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¹⁹ *Courier*, March 20, 1841, quoted in James W. Hagy, *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston* (Tuscaloosa, 1993), 236; Theodore Rosengarten and Dale Rosengarten, eds., *A Portion of a People: Three Hundred Years of Southern Jewish Life* (Columbia, SC, 2002), 93. See also Rebecca Samuel, Petersburg, Virginia, to her mother in Hamburg, Germany, 1790, in *The Jews in America: A Treasury of Art and Literature*, ed. Abraham Karp (Southport, CT, 1994), 48–50; Penina Moïse, “To Persecuted Foreigners,” in *Secular & Religious Works of Penina Moïse* (Charleston, SC, 1911), 177; and <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=5kg0AAAoiseAIAAJ&dp=penina+Moïse&printsec=frontcover&ver8M1> (accessed August 10, 2008); Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Detroit, 1997), 175–177; Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai N. Noah* (New York, 1981).

²⁰ Max Lilienthal, “The Festival of Chanukah” (1841), translated for the Jewish congregation of Augusta, Georgia, by his brother, S. Lilienthal, MD, American Jewish Historical Society.

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²² Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York, 1994), 12.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, 1995), 105–191.

²⁵ “Immigration: German,” Library of Congress, American Memory, Learning Page, <http://memory.loc.gov/features/immig/german3.htm> (accessed May 8, 2008).

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