

honeymoon | israel
It's about the journey

How Christmas transformed Hanukkah in America





"Who says we haven't Americanized?
The purchase of Christmas gifts is one
of the first things that proves one is no
longer a greenhorn."

- A 1904 newspaper quote from
a Jewish Christmas shopper

For real, Rachel, take
some of this American
Christmas cheer.
It's all the rage.

Thanks, I love it!
We didn't have this
in Poland!

Where's
the
chicken
feet?



By the 1890s, Christmas was firmly established as America's most important holiday and the premiere season for gift giving. For the millions of Jewish immigrants who came to America at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, Hanukkah became a little ambiguous and conflicted because of its proximity on the calendar to Christmas. For Jewish immigrants feeling pressure to shed their European ways, exchanging gifts with neighbors at Christmas time signaled their assimilation and adaptation to America.

"How can the Jew, without losing self-respect, partake in the joy and festive mirth of Christmas? Can he without self-surrender, without entailing insult and disgrace upon his faith and race, plant the Christmas tree in his household?"

-Rabbi Kaufman Kohler, quoted in 1890

"Christmas's focus on family celebrations, gift giving, decorations, and Santa Claus gives a zest to life that all the Hanukkah hymns, backed by all the Sunday-school teaching and half-hearted ministerial [rabbinic] chiding, must forever fail to give."

-Jewish homemaking advisor Esther Jane Ruskay lamenting in 1902

While lots of Jewish immigrants embraced Christmas and enjoyed the elevation of Hanukkah because of its proximity to Christmas, this shift induced a lot of anxiety in others (and still does today!). Some Jewish leaders criticized the immigrant Jews who accepted Christmas as an American consumer ritual.



**Around the 1920s,
merchandisers began
advertising their wares
as ideal Hanukkah
gifts for Jewish
customers.**

Der Tog carried an ad in Yiddish for Hudson automobiles, which were proclaimed “A Hanukkah Present for the Entire Family–The Greatest Bargain (*metsiah*) in the World.”



Colgate promoted toiletries
as Hanukkah gifts



Food purveyors such as
Loft's and Barton's candies
marketed chocolates
wrapped in gold foil to
simulate Hanukkah *gelt*
[money]

Aunt Jemima
flour proclaimed
itself “the best
flour for latkes”



Image of a Maccabee fighter on a postage stamp



Image of an early Zionist fighting for Israel
("Revenge and redemption!")

With the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Hanukkah took on a new — or rather, renewed — meaning. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the valor and success of Israeli military forces helped rebuild the image of the Jew as "fighter." Zionists proudly identified the Haganah and Irgun [pre-statehood Zionist militias] as Maccabean descendants.

Incorporating imagery of newer, younger, stronger, liberated Jews, Barton's produced an "Israelized" Hanukkah version of Monopoly whose board featured a map of Israel, miniature Israeli flags, and menorahs.

American/Jewish meaning-making around Hanukkah, especially as it relates to Christmas, continues to evolve today.





Members of HMI D.C. Cohort 8
enjoying a Hanukkah feast



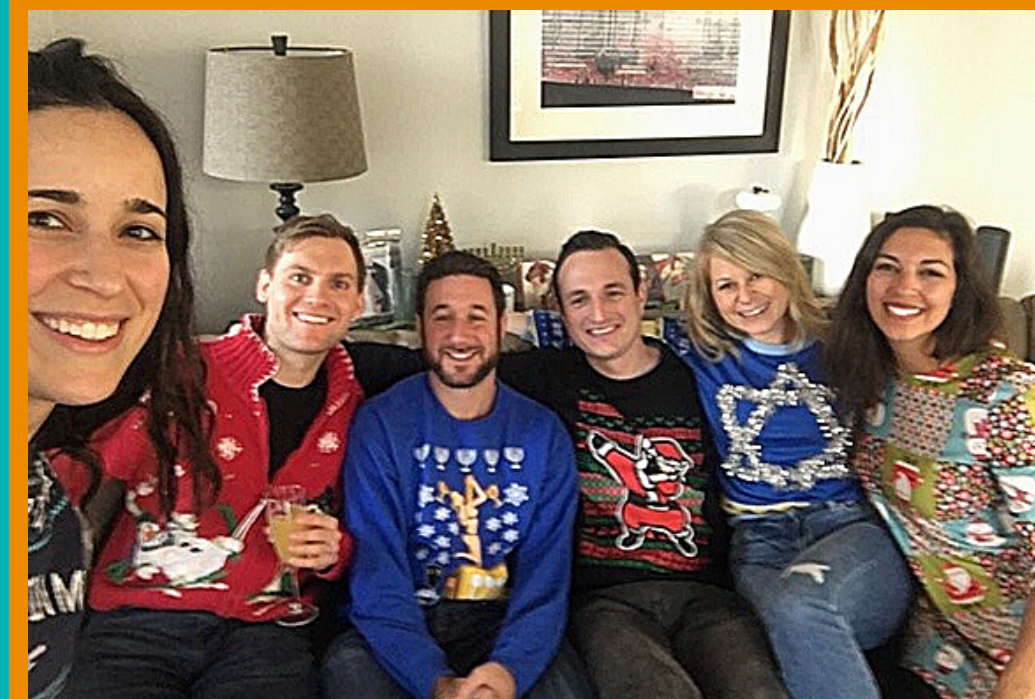
Santa lighting the menorah
during an HMI D.C. Cohort 5
Chrismukkah holiday bash

Our Community

Feelings about Hanukkah and the ways we observe it are as diverse as the families that celebrate it. Some Jewish families keep things as traditional as possible, and others incorporate elements of Christmas that feel right to them. Some Jewish families have only Jewish family members, and others (like many of our HMI alums) bring many traditions into the fold!



HMI alums from LA celebrating
December holidays



Members of HMI Chicago
Cohort 7 celebrating Christmas
and Hanukkah together



So what do you think?

- What December holiday traditions are important to you and your partner?
- How do you make decisions about how to celebrate the December holidays?
- In what ways, if any, has the American love of Christmas influenced the ways your family celebrates Hanukkah?

References & Resources from HMI Partners

- [How Christmas Transformed Hanukkah in America](#)
My Jewish Learning
- [Resources for couples to navigate the holidays](#)
18Doors
- [For families with children](#)
PJ Library
- [Hanukkah guide with blessings, rituals, and other fun stuff to do](#)
JewBelong