

# HANUKKAH'S "MELTING POT" MORAL

*We Can Both Honor and Fight for Our Religious Distinctives*



Svanoë

I knew I was in trouble when, while strolling down the Easter egg-laden grocery aisle, my daughter asked me, "Daddy, was Jesus born in an Easter egg?"

It's hard enough to sort out for ourselves and children the religious and cultural meanings of a single religious heritage. In our home, there are two.

One week we light the Christmas tree lights. Another week we light the first of eight candles on the menorah (a Jewish candlestand), saying the opening prayer for the Hanukkah season, joined by six gathered families, scrunched in our living room.

More than half of us, like many Americans, are cross-cultural.

According to a demographic survey conducted by the World Jewish Congress, more than 50 percent of the U.S. Jews who married in the 1980s married a non-Jewish partner. Vicki and I were among them.

Of those, only one-fourth are raising their children as Jews. But that raises for me the central question of Hanukkah for celebrants and onlookers: In our culturally mixed society, is it worthwhile to fight for our religious distinctiveness?

The story of Hanukkah, which is Hebrew for "dedication," tells about the revolt of the Jewish Maccabees against their Syrian religious oppressors in the 2nd century B.C. It is a grisly story of four bloody battles, the desecration of the holy temple in Jerusalem, and the rededication of the temple after a heroic, victorious struggle of this minority group against the dominant culture in which it lived.

But the story becomes more interesting, and has striking relevance to America in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when seen against the backdrop of the previous 150 years. Like the last 150 years in our own country, it is the story of the gradual assimilation of ethnic minorities.

Under the conformist pressure of successive Greek rulers, many saw no harm in wearing Greek-style tunics, in taking Greek names for social or business reasons, or in building synagogues that resembled Grecian temples. For generations, rulers tolerated the co-existence of Jewish customs and religious practices. It was when non-negotiable lines were crossed that blood spilled.

The history of the Jewish people is one of enduring foreign rule. They are experts in adapting without acquiescing. We can learn from this.

America's religious diversity is

in full display each December. Hanukkah's eight candle-lighting days overlap Christmas advent, and often coincide with the rich African-American celebration of Kwanzaa.

The celebration of every holiday in every religious tradition is a matter of self-perpetuation, a fighting for what we believe in the midst of genuine cultural variations and mock alternatives. Almost everyone I meet is struggling to make their holiday meaningful underneath the ubiquitous, superficial expressions.

I had my son circumcised on the eighth day, according to an old Hebrew custom, under no pressure from my Jewish in-laws, for the same reason we will make latkes (potato pancakes) and played dreidel (the top-like-spinning game) last night. I'm following an ancient Christian command, "Outdo one another in showing honor."

It's not a competitive thing. It's a religious experience. As it was to watch my Jewish father-in-law cry and embrace me during the "brith," a circumcision ceremony held in our home. We may not have done it the way it was done when he was a child, but he is allowing me the space and the freedom to learn because he knows I care about his daughter's tradition.



Vicki helps Rachel light a Hanukkah candle.

We're extending that same sympathy to my parents, who are learning right along with us. As if celebrating two holidays this month is not enough, my wife's birthday is in December. Thus, my father recently dropped off two bags of gifts, throwing up his hands with a smile, as if to say, I hope this will cover it!

*Todd Svanoë is a correspondent for The Capital Times.*