

Posted on Sat, Dec. 24, 2005

MY HANUKKAH

Ignoring go-shopping message

BY JO ANNE BANDER

joanne@fromthesource.info

The ornaments and paraphernalia of Christmas and the candles, latke mixes and gelt of Hanukkah crowded the aisles of our local supermarket before I could complete the Thanksgiving grocery shopping. I am nostalgic for last year, when Hanukkah began as it always does on the 25th day of Kislev on the Jewish lunar calendar -- Dec. 7. It appeared while remnants of Thanksgiving cranberry sauce remained in the refrigerator and I had not given Hanukkah thought or preparation as I concentrated on a family Thanksgiving feast.

Its stealth arrival liberated me from making any preparations other than to enjoy its essence, an eight-day Festival of Lights and celebration of religious freedom, without any confusing overlap with the religiously important Christian holiday of Christmas.

This year we're not so lucky. The 25th day of Kislev falls on Dec. 25 and the message to shop for Hanukkah has been everywhere weeks before the festival.

Christmas store displays in South Florida, with the fourth largest Jewish population in the world, some 500,000 individuals, are balanced by tables of Hanukkah decorations and reminders to purchase gifts. Neighbors, colleagues and acquaintances have been wishing me a Happy Hanukkah in the same way they wish Christian friends a Merry Christmas, really not necessary since Hanukkah has none of the religious significance of Christmas.

While not a holy day, Hanukkah is a festival whose origins and essence have meaning for all who live in a world plagued by wars about religious beliefs. It recalls the military victory of the Jewish Maccabees in 168 BC over their Syrian oppressors who had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. The Maccabees successfully fought to reclaim the seat of their religious observance and to regain freedom to worship their own God.

Our family celebrates Hanukkah as a time of candle lighting, potato latkes, family togetherness and modest gift exchange.

For each night, one needs a *shammash*, the candle used to light the others, and the number of candles for the night of Hanukkah it is. Jews light candles for eight nights to commemorate the miracle of the one night's oil for the Temple's eternal light, extinguished by the Syrians, which lasted long enough for replacements to arrive.

While I have piles of latke recipes, weight and carb concerns trump my craving for this deeply fried treat, oil-based like all Hanukkah foods, so I will indulge only once or twice.

Even with adult children, I have bought for tradition's sake the gold covered chocolate coins -- gelt -- to use as money in the Hanukkah game of dreidel, a game of chance played with a four-sided top, a Jewish version of craps.

Each night we will light our candles while reciting the simple prayers of blessing, one hallowing God and the other acknowledging God's miracles. I am always mesmerized by how much light two small candles give in a dark room, let alone the blaze of nine.

The lights draw me to remember other Decembers and Hanukkahs: lighting candles in 1971 at the Israeli Embassy in Asuncion, Paraguay; standing with some 200,000 others on a freezing December Sunday in 1987 as part of the national March on Washington for Soviet Jewry; and holding candles on the tarmac of Ben Gurion airport in Israel at midnight one December night in 1990 to greet planeloads of Russian immigrants fleeing communism for religious freedom while Israel braced for a Scud missile attack.

The melody and words of Peter, Paul and Mary's *Light One Candle* reverberated down the mall that December afternoon in 1987 as they played and sang from a platform in front of the Lincoln Monument while we swayed and sang the choruses. The words are as meaningful today as they were then.

Light one candle for the Maccabee children

With thanks that their light didn't die --

Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice

Justice and freedom demand

But light one candle for the wisdom to know

When the peacemaker's time is at hand

We will be at our cottage in Spruce Head, Maine, on Dec. 25, far away from commercial Hanukkah displays.

We will light our first candle in a new ceramic menorah, made for us by a Christian neighbor and proudly placed on the windowsill overlooking the street. We'll sing the words of *Light One Candle* along with the traditional Hebrew *Rock of Ages* in the reverberating silence and peace of a Maine December night and think about their lyrics.

In spite of the commercial commands to celebrate through consumption, even with our nation at war, I will have what I value most -- a sense of peace on earth, goodwill and gathering with my friends and family by candlelight.

Jo Anne Bander is a consultant and author who has lived in Miami for more than 30 years. She was CEO of Donors Forum of South Florida for nine years before stepping down at the end of 2003 to pursue her passions, sustainable agriculture and writing on topical issues.