

Reflections from Rabbi . . .

Hanukkah has garnered a lot of focus much earlier in the year than normal. Yes, it starts very early, but it is actually the fact that Hanukkah and Thanksgiving coincide this year that has been the focus of most conversations. The first day of Hanukkah falls on Thanksgiving Day. In fact, this is the only time it will ever happen! The last time Hanukkah fell on the fourth Thursday of November, Thanksgiving was not yet a holiday and Hanukkah will never again fall this early on the Gregorian calendar. While it is a nice coincidence that the two holidays overlap, these two holidays actually have much in common. As we light the menorah on Hanukkah and enjoy Thanksgiving dinner, we should reflect on the reason for celebrating both holidays.

In America, the Thanksgiving holiday is rooted in the Pilgrims' celebration in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1621. The Pilgrims were a religious group from England who were seeking religious freedom and hoped to establish a new colony in North America. The Pilgrims fled the unrest in England that threatened their religious practices. In fear of losing their identity and culture to other European countries, the Pilgrims hoped to maintain their religious practices and identity by establishing a new colony in North America. The Pilgrims story is a fight for religious independence and part of our American Thanksgiving holiday must be connected to this fact.

The story of Hanukkah is very similar to that of Thanksgiving. The Jews of Jerusalem experienced relative calm for many years under the Seleucid Empire. But once a new king came to power, their religious freedom

was threatened. The Seleucid army attacked Jerusalem and the Temple and the great Maccabees fought to defend both of them. The Maccabees were fighting against the external forces of the Seleucids as well as Jews who were convinced that they should abandon their Jewish roots and adopt Hellenistic culture. The story of Hanukkah ends with the famous story of the rededication of the Temple with the one jar of oil which lasted for eight days.

As we gather for Hanukkah and Thanksgiving this year, we recall the experience of both the Maccabees and the Pilgrims and their fight for their religious freedom and identity. While our religious freedom may be less of a concern today than it has been in the past, our religious identity continues to remain under attack. Jews have successfully integrated into all aspects of American life, but we face the same concern as both the Maccabees and the Pilgrims. How can we maintain our religious identity in the face of another culture?

As we celebrate these two Holidays on the same day, we learn that we are not alone in fighting for our religious identity and that both our Jewish and American ancestors were successful in preserving their unique religion and culture, while also becoming part of the surrounding community. May Hanukkah and Thanksgiving coinciding on the same day push us to better learn how to preserve our Jewish tradition while also remaining part of American society.

B'vracha,

Rabbi Michael Kushnick