



Minding Our Beeswax

Tradition, tradition



Check your calendar – Hanukkah is over. Because it's a lunar holiday, sometimes Hanukkah falls early in December, so there's no need to keep wishing your Jewish friends a happy one as you bustle by with your red and green ear ornaments bobbing merrily. We've already lit our candles, spun our dreidles and eaten our potato latkes, and now we're done, thank you very much.

That may come as a surprise to people who think of Hanukkah as "The Jewish Christmas." It's not. Despite its proximity to the dominant culture's annual consumer frenzy, the Festival of Lights is a minor holiday on the Hebrew calendar. And contrary to comments by one well-meaning clueless person, the only difference between the two holidays is not that "Christians believe that Jesus was born on Christmas, and Jews believe He was born on Hanukkah." Sorry.

Truth be known, Hanukkah is the eight days during which Jews around the world attempt to set their homes on fire. We came close this year, stopping just short of calling 9-1-1.

There's something to be said for sticking to tradition. But rebels that we are, Wifey and I strayed from buying our customary box of 44 Israeli paraffin candles from the synagogue gift shop, and, with complete directions clipped from *Living* magazine, we rolled our own, very classy, beeswax Hanukkah candles. Martha promised that these candles would, and I quote, "Give your celebration a special glow." She should've stuck to insider trading.

On Thanksgiving (call me testy, but yes, Jews do celebrate Thanksgiving!) we worked on our craft project while our holiday feast roasted in the oven. What were we were thinking?

As anyone versed in S/M safety can tell you – once you remove their ball gag – beeswax burns hotter than paraffin. A lot hotter. A drip of beeswax will raise a blister; paraffin just stings. Not something you're likely to forget. But we remembered too late.

Hanukkah had us focused on our annual tradition. Wifey dusted off our beautiful, blue-glass menorah, given lovingly to us by our Jewish lesbian circle of friends on the occasion of our nuptials. Our custom is to observe the eight-night candlelighting ritual in front of our fire place, lighting the candles in the menorah on the mantle. Each night we offer a prayer of thanks to our ancestors, exchange small gifts and eat chocolate money.

Normally we just hang out, hold hands, and gaze into the flickering candlelight contemplating the spirit of the holiday, which, by the way, celebrates Jewish resistance to assimilation. But this particular year, on the eighth night, with all the candles aflame, Wifey and I broke with that tradition, too. We left our lit menorah on the mantel while we turned our attention to the TV. That's how we learned why watching television is not a traditional Hanukkah activity.

It's amazing how much smoke can fill your house before you notice it. Who knew they could make something that looks exactly like real glass out of run-of-the-mill, highly flammable resin? In a moment of religious insight, it occurred to me that the bush Moses saw burning in the desert may have not been a shrub at all but rather a replica made of this very resin.

We could surmise that the two of us are the true chosen people among all Jews whose Hanukkah flames are limited to their piddly little candle wicks. Martha sure was right about that special glow. An entire menorah crackling in full blaze is an awesome sight. It makes the word God just fly out of your mouth.

That's what it did to Wifey who, it turns out, can run pretty fast carrying a flaming glob of melting resin. God was invoked repeatedly. Nothing short of Divine intervention could have provided her the wherewithal to grab our NOT-GLASS menorah by its still-cool base, rush it out the door into the pouring rain and ditch it on the front steps.

So no, our holidays are not interchangeable. If you notice that some Jews are particularly cranky this time of year, please don't wish us a Happy Hanukkah. We've already had one.

Award-winning writer Sally Sheklow celebrates at home with her partner of 20 years, two cats and a good, strong fire extinguisher.

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