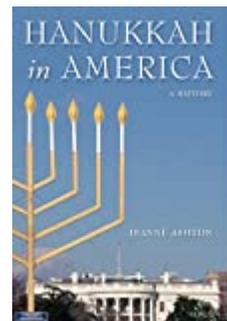




Dianne Ashton. *Hanukkah in America: A History.* Goldstein-Goren Series in American Jewish History. New York: New York University Press, 2013. vii + 343 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-0739-5.



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Creating the December Dilemma

Every winter, public discussions of Americansâ December Dilemmaâ resurface as reliably as poinsettias and electric lights. By now, we expect the usual hand wringing about Jewish children seduced by the commercial delights of Christmas and confessions of intermarried couples who are unwilling to relinquish the holiday traditions of their own childhoods. In this context, Dianne Ashtonâs *Hanukkah in America: A History* contributes a rare and fresh voice to conversations about American winter holidays. Contemporary discussions about Hanukkah and Christmas too often assume that twenty-first-century American Jews were the first to encounter these holidays. Ashton, an accomplished historian of American Jewry whose previous works include an excellent biography of the nineteenth-century Jewish leader Rebecca Gratz (*Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* [1997]), provides a much-needed corrective to these presentist assumptions. *Hanukkah in America* is an engaging journey through American Jewish cultural history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, examining the shifting appearance of a single con-

tentious holiday. As Ashton demonstrates, Hanukkah has long been a lightning rod for American Jewsâ conversations about religious practices, education, authority, and public perception by non-Jews.

The bookâs strength lies in both the comfortable familiarity of its broad theme and in its delightful details, many of which will be unfamiliar to specialists and more casual readers. For example, in 1963, in suburban Buffalo, New York, the Klein family placed a small, pink aluminum tree on a round table in front of their suburban homeâs picture window, ringing it with colored electric lights. They dubbed it their âHanukkah Bushâ (p. 213). Her careful attention to such intimate moments provides the highlights of this book. At long last, the Hanukkah bush is given its due as a significant cultural artifact, alongside holiday pageants, Hallmark holiday cards, âHanukkah Harry,â and public menorah lightings.

Following a brief review of the holidayâs historical basis in the familiar story of Judean revolts against Seleucid Greeks in the second century BCE and an overview of

rabbinic reshaping of the story to emphasize divine intercession from the sixth century CE on in her introduction and first chapter, Ashton moves quickly to nineteenth-century America. In her second chapter, "Modern Maccabees," Ashton uses Hanukkah as a lens to examine conflicts between nineteenth-century reformers and traditionalist Jewish leaders. In chapter 3, "Children Light Up," readers learn that festive Hanukkah experiences have been used to shield Jewish children from the allure of Christmas since at least the 1870s, a theme that continues throughout the rest of the book. Ashton's chapter on the era of immigration focuses on the democratic nature of New York's holiday consumer culture, which, alongside public celebrations, strengthened "the crucial role of kin and communal networks" (p. 110). In her fifth and sixth chapters, Ashton proceeds to examine Hanukkah's development in the American Jewish institutions of the twentieth century, including sisterhoods, synagogues, newspapers, and schools. By mid-century, American Jewish rabbis and lay leaders truly came into their own, creating Hanukkah games, songs, and educational activities, which they distributed in synagogue gift shops and through other religious organizations. Finally, in chapter 7, Ashton turns to late twentieth-century hippies, Hasidism, and havurot groups, who approached Hanukkah from a variety of extra-denominational and countercultural perspectives. In each era, Americans remade the Maccabees in their image, imagining them as encountering cultural opposition that mirrored their own minority status in the United States.

Throughout this historical account, Ashton continually returns to the theme that "Hanukkah festivals ... set in motion a dynamic relationship between clergy and laity, as women framed the Hanukkah rite ... with activities they believed children would enjoy, while rabbis strived to oversee the events" (p. 75). While Ashton's emphasis on lay women's influence on the development of American Hanukkah practices is welcome, it should come as no surprise that women shaped American religious traditions. Women predictably shaped the practices of American Hanukkah because they shaped American Judaism. It has been two decades since Ann Braude published "Women's History Is American Religious History," arguing that the narrative of American Christianity should be told as one of female presence rather than male absence.[1] The pivotal moments in American religious history are not centered on men's continually waning interest in religion but on women's movements toward "spiritual equality" and increasing assumption of public roles.[2] In these broad strokes, American Jewish

history runs largely parallel to that of American Christianity. Choices of section titles in *Hanukkah in America*, such as "Women Prove Pivotal," suggest a reliance on an imagined period when American Jewish women were not essential to American Jewish life (p. 88). On this matter, Ashton is sometimes too close to her subjects and seemingly too willing to take them at their word. In examining Hanukkah practices of the 1930s, Ashton tells readers that when families were encouraged to shore up their Jewish knowledge and identities by "playing Hanukkah games, singing songs, and eating traditional foods,... ironically, women seemed least able to shoulder a new religious responsibility" (p. 202). Were average women in this period "or any other" as incompetent at passing along religious traditions as male rabbis and women leaders portrayed them? More likely, the rhetoric served as a useful jeremiad used to encourage the adoption of new variations on holiday practices. At home and in the public sphere, women did not "prove pivotal" in any particular moment in American Jewish history; they are American Jewish history.

American Jewish cultural historians will find *Hanukkah in America* a rich addition to their bookshelves, though specialists will also find much of its material to be familiar territory, highlighting themes in each period that have been well covered by existing literature, such as conflicts between nineteenth-century rabbis, attempts to masquerade religious education as children's play, and women's roles in creating American Jewish practices. Ashton's careful archival work is often buried by a continual reliance on secondary literature on American Jewish history—perhaps inevitable, given the large scope of her topic. In its attention to the accoutrements of the holiday, much of *Hanukkah in America* should be read alongside the growing literature on American Jewish material culture, though the speed at which Ashton traverses the centuries allows little time for sustained reflection on the particularities of the uses of material objects. Her analysis of American Hanukkah would have been strengthened, too, by greater reflection on the historical development of American Christmas, with which it developed in tandem.

Despite these minor concerns, *Hanukkah in America* is a welcome addition to the growing literature on American Jewish culture and religion. Ashton has taken on a weighty task in analyzing the development of this holiday. Her emphasis on thematic continuity should remind American Jews and scholars thereof that few problems are new, and her sweeping historical overview provides an important balance to many works that focus on a sin-

gle period. Like the holiday itself, *Hanukkah in America* is many things at once—a study of liturgy and amusements, commerce and faith, domesticity and pageantry, glowing brightly across the centuries.

Notes

[1]. Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," in *Retelling American Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87–107.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 88.

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