

## FOCUS: Reinventing Chanukah

# The Comeback Holiday

*In the late 1800s, Chanukah almost disappeared from the American Jewish landscape....but thanks to cultural ingenuity, it's come back strong.*

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

Well into the 1880s, Chanukah fared poorly in America, a victim of neglect.

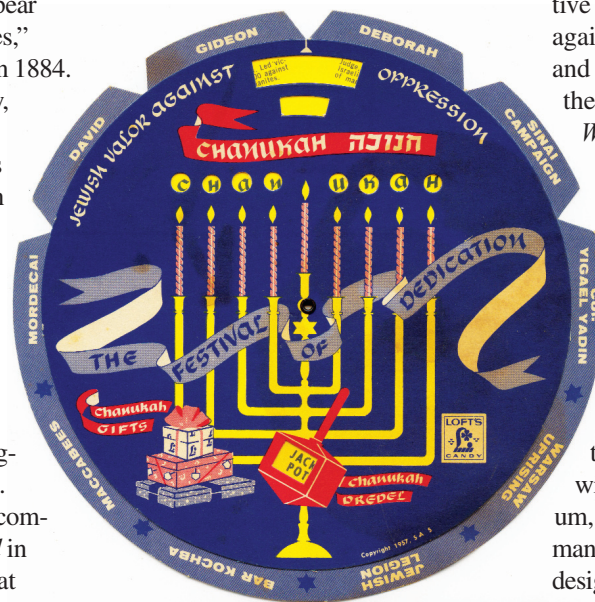
"The customary candles disappear more and more from Jewish homes," lamented Rabbi Gustav Gottheil in 1884. "Kindle the Chanukah lights anew, modern Israelite!" declared Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler just a few years later. "Make the festival more than ever before radiant with the brightness and beauty of love and charity."

Instead, American Jews—well-established and immigrants alike—were adorning their homes with greenery and parlor illuminations and eagerly exchanging gifts in the spirit of Christmas. The purchase of Christmas gifts, commented the *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1904, "is one of the first things that proves one is no longer a greenhorn."

In the 1920s, Chanukah began to undergo a transformation. Ads in Yiddish newspapers touted Chanukah gifts ranging from waffle irons to automobiles—including the Hudson motorcar trumpeted as "A Chanukah present for the entire family—The Greatest Bargain [*metsiah*] in the World" (*Der Tog*, December 1925). Colgate Company ads extolled such "Chanukah Pleasures" as perfumes, shaving emollients, and dental crème. Consumers were encouraged to partake of food products "*lekavod Chanukah*" (in honor of

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Chanukah), from Canada Dry ginger ale and Goodman's noodles to Aunt Jemima pancake flour, "the best flour



Ad novelty for Loft's chocolates, 1957.

for latkes." And ads for the East River Savings Institution advised depositors to "Save for Chanukah," suggesting that its Jewish customers take advantage of the bank's popular Christmas plan.

Editorials accompanying these solicitations encouraged parents, particularly mothers, to add the exchange of presents to the roster of "Chanukah *minhagim* [customs]." Recounting the heroic exploits of the Maccabees is not enough, counseled the *Morgen Zhurnal*; to command the attention and affection of Jewish children, the holiday must become an occasion for storytelling, gift-giving, and merrymaking.

By the 1940s, gift-giving had become an integral aspect of

Chanukah. "Jewish children should be showered with gifts, *Hanukkah gifts*, as a perhaps primitive but most effective means of making them immune against envy of the Christian children and their Christmas presents," advised the authors of *What Every Jewish Woman Should Know*, a guidebook to modern Jewish living. And although children remained the chief beneficiaries of the holiday largesse, grown-ups were not immune to its pleasures. As the *Hadassah Newsletter* pointed out, "Mah-jong sets make appreciated Chanukah gifts."

Judaica manufacturers played up the Chanukah spirit by fashioning a wide array of menorahs in tin, chromium, silver, and silverplate. By the 1940s, many new Chanukah lamps of modern design were in stores—electrified menorahs, menorahs from the Jewish homeland, "authentic plastic" menorahs, and musical menorahs that played fragments of either "*Hatikvah*" or "Rock of Ages," which were themselves available in forty-seven different styles.

After 1948, kosher chocolate manufacturers capitalized on American Jews' fascination with Israel by also producing a line of nationalistic games. Loft's Chocolates introduced "Valor against Oppression," a spin-wheel game featuring such latter-day "Maccabees" as Israeli General Moshe Dayan. Barton's introduced the "Barton's Race Dredel," an Israelized version of Monopoly sporting a map of Israel, miniature Israeli flags, menorahs, and the text: "Every Jewish boy and girl thrills to the heroic story of