

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I grew up in a family that observed all our Jewish holidays with relish. We lit candles and sang blessings every Friday night for Shabbat. I dressed up as King Ahasuerus for the Purim parade and ate candy apples at shul. We decorated the sukkah, scoured the house, and brought out bright-yellow dairy plates for Passover. But Hanukkah held a special place for me as a child. And it wasn't just the dreidel games at the family party and the latkes! Oh, latkes! For sure it was also the anticipation of . . . presents.

Hanukkah celebrations have long borrowed from extra-Jewish culture. One of the classic holiday songs, "Maoz Tsur" ("Sheltering Rock"), drew its tune from two popular German folk songs in the sixteenth century. Dreidels came from a central European gambling game in the 1500s. But it turns out that present giving on Hanukkah is a peculiarly American innovation. As far back as the late 1800s, settling into our new home as the fear of pogroms in the old country began to fade, we looked for ways to experience and express the first whiffs of economic progress. And one of the ways that seemed most satisfying to parents was buying gifts for their children.

This sparked what has been called the "Hanukkah industry." Historian Dianne Ashton, author of *Hanukkah in America*, tells us that Yiddish newspapers of the time started to make money by running advertisements for holiday gifts and that "'presents' was among the first English words to appear in Yiddish newspapers."

There's still debate about whether or not this was a good thing, but I can raise my hand as one little boy who was anything but ambivalent.

And yet presents didn't completely overcome, for me and many others, the challenge of being a Jewish child during Christmas. It was hard not to feel what we now call "erasure" as advertisements, holiday specials, and school concerts made the time of year seem like one reserved for Christians. Christmas decorations made everything pretty, with twinkling lights and festive wreaths everywhere, but not for us. And Christmas creativity was everywhere—such great songs (many written by Jews, but still), such great food, and such great stories!

I always felt, "Hey, these stories don't even really have anything to do with religion!" *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*? "Frosty the Snowman"? SANTA CLAUS? Even *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*! They came out at Christmastime, but they were part of a whole wonderful supplementary mythology.

In my memories, and especially lately, with my own son, I have often wished that we could build up a bit more mythology too. In the same way that new recipes for matzah brei or a beautiful new piece of music can enhance our experience without changing the religious observance and meaning of Jewish holidays, I wanted to do that with a story. I hope you enjoy!

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