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COMMUNITY VOICES

There should be plenty of holiday greetings to go around this month

As daylight decreases, our mutual light and cheerfulness should rise to meet the darkness boldly.

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Happy Hanukkah! Merry Christmas! A joyous Kwanzaa! And a festive shopping and holiday season to all!

It's that time of year again when we try to think of the appropriate words to say to people when greeting them and saying farewell.

Is it best to say, "Merry Christmas" to everyone since the vast majority of the people in this nation celebrate Christmas? Or is it better to go with "Happy Holidays"?

I'm not sure about the answer, but I do know that, as a Jew, when I go shopping at this time of year and someone in the store says to me, "Happy Holidays," it makes me really happy. I think it's great that even though I'm in the minority celebrating Hanukkah, the majority of people celebrating Christmas are reaching out to include me as well in the holiday season.

It doesn't have to be an either-or choice between "Holidays" and "Christmas." Last week, my wife and I went shopping and there were two big banners in the store: "Happy Holidays!" and "Merry Christmas!" The store seemed to make a special effort to recognize that some shoppers were celebrating other holidays besides Christmas.

My wife spent the next few hours trying on what seemed like every single item of clothing on the racks.

So, I had plenty of time to wander around looking to see if there was anything that I could buy for Hanukkah, which began this year on Tuesday night and will continue for eight days.

I soon found a menorah with Hanukkah candles. This, I thought, was a miracle.

On Hanukkah, in the ancient world, a miracle occurred in the Temple in Jerusalem. There was only one flask of oil in the Temple, and even though the menorah had enough oil to last for only one day, the light burned for eight days.

"Here," I thought, "is another minor miracle, finding Hanukkah candles for sale in the same store where my wife is buying a dress."

When I looked at the price on the candles, however, I decided that I was not in the spirit of giving. Hanukkah candles whose value, I thought, should only be at \$1, were here miraculously priced at \$12. I put the candles aside and looked for something else to buy.

I couldn't find any dreidels, the toy that is traditionally spun on Hanukkah, nor any latkes, the potato pudding dish that is traditionally eaten on Hanukkah, but I did find a holiday bargain, a great big bottle of Ajax dish soap for only 99 cents.

Ajax, or the great foaming cleanser, as my classics professor in college used to call him, was a Hellenic hero in the Greek war against the Trojans. Homer's epic poem, the Iliad, has forever glorified Ajax's name.

So Ajax, I thought, would make a good Hanukkah purchase. Hanukkah commemorates the ancient Jewish victory over the Greeks in the land of Israel. This year, I would remember the ancient Jewish Hanukkah victory by doing battle against my bathtub and kitchen sink, with Ajax, the great Greek foaming cleanser, as my ally.

Why do Jews still celebrate Hanukkah, a holiday of the far-distant past, dating back to when Greece was still a world power?

One answer may lie with a legend that is related in the Talmud about Adam, the first man, and his experiences during the first winter of his life. The Talmud states that as Adam saw winter approaching and the days becoming darker and shorter, Adam thought that the world was ending.

When the winter solstice arrived, Adam realized that the days were getting longer, and the world was not in fact ending. Adam thereupon established a holiday of eight days to celebrate the continuity of life.

Thus the Talmud teaches that a holiday of eight days in the winter existed in the world from the time of Adam. At the beginning of time, humanity realized the importance of celebrating life in the dead of winter in order to brighten people's spirits.

In the Roman Empire, this holiday was celebrated as Saturnalia. Hanukkah is a Jewish version of what is essentially a universal need to have a celebration in winter, as the darkness and cold descend.

The victory over the Greeks is an ancient historical event, but the need to express joy in life during the winters of life is a universal message of the present.

The question we should ask one another this holiday season is that of how we can work together to warm each other's hearts during the winter.

As the days get darker, the holidays shift our minds to focus on the sparks of light. The holidays remind us not to shut the shades to our windows, but rather to look outside and light a fire by the window that glows bright enough to share the force of its warmth with others.

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