

Why Hannukah is not “the Jewish Christmas”

“Rabbi, is Hannukah the Jewish Christmas?”

Richmond Rabbi Yechiel Baitelman is frequently asked that question about the annual eight-day Jewish festival that this year begins tonight.

The first thing the rabbi says in response is that Hannukah began about 400 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, in whose name Christmas was first celebrated. So there’s no original historical connection.

Even though Hannukah, with its menorah candles and gift-giving, has grown in prominence in the public eye as another key December religious festival, the Hasidic rabbi feels compelled to point out the many differences between it and Christmas.

North American Jewish magazines have frequently published articles lamenting how Hannukah, once a relatively minor Jewish festival, has attracted a lot of hoopla in recent years, reaching a level of gift-giving that in some cases rivals Christmas.

Writing in *American Jewish World*, Mordecai Spektor is among those who have aired their worries about how, in response to the celebration of the Christian secular holiday on Dec. 25, many Jews have commercialized Hannukah – in part to make Jewish children “immune to envy” of Christmas.

Baitelman acknowledges Jews have often made such choices in response to the “dominant” culture. That’s why he’s devoted to educating Jews and non-Jews alike about what he considers the traditional faith of Abraham, Moses and David.

The rabbi’s worldwide movement, called the Chabad-Lubavitch organization, has been responsible in recent decades for erecting large steel menorahs in public spaces, such as in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery and inside Richmond City Hall.

Rather than being motivated by a desire to compete with Christmas, Baitelman maintains it has been the ideal of religious freedom that has provided the impetus for Jews like himself to make Hannukah a significant public celebration.

In many European countries in the past hundred years, Baitelman said: “Hannukah went indoors, so to speak.” It was often “dangerous” to light menorah candles at Hannukah, including in windows. It could result in a Jew being ridiculed, ostracized, thrown in jail or worse.

But now, in a “wonderful” country such as Canada, Baitelman said Jewish efforts to openly mark Hannukah are a “celebration of spiritual freedom and light.”

There are almost 25,000 Jews in Metro Vancouver, representing about one per cent of the population. Some practise the faith of their ancestors; others do not.

The highly visible public menorahs sponsored by Chabad-Lubavitch are not attempts to coerce non-Jews to join the faith, said Baitelman, who came to B.C. from New York 18 years ago. Instead, Chabad-Lubavitch is more focused on reaching fellow Jews.

The dynamic 250-year-old philosophical movement, which began in Russia and now maintains centres in more than 1,000 cities, expanded into a global force among Jews under the leadership of Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994).

In keeping with its educational mission, Baitelman said Chabad-Lubavitch, which is a Hasidic arm of Orthodox Judaism, differentiates Hannukah from Christmas by discouraging giving children lots of Han-nukah gifts.

Instead, the rabbi believes it’s better to give children money, also known as Hannukah “gelt.”

The difference, to Baitelman and many other Jews, is highly significant.

“Giving gelt is a very good educational tool,” he said.

“Money, after all, is very valuable and important. When you get a present, someone has already made the decision for you. But there are choices you can make when you are given money.”

Since some Jewish traditions teach it’s necessary to donate 10 per cent of one’s wealth to charity, the rabbi said children who receive gelt during the eight days of Hannukah are expected to ask themselves how much they want to give away.