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December 16, 2009: The Fight for Chanukah

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Title: The Fight for Chanukah

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12/16/2009—Despite our overheated religious politics, this year we have apparently avoided a new round of “Merry Christmas” wars. Either salespeople in stores are saying Merry Christmas or Christian activists have forgotten to be offended. In the place of Merry Christmas, this year we have the Chanukah wars. Chanukah, which began last Friday night, celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over Antiochus IV and the Seleucid Empire in 165 B.C.E. The Hasmonean Kings, who were the heirs of this successful struggle, did not prove to be better rulers of Israel. Ironically they oppressed the rabbis whose heirs would later create the rabbinic Judaism we know today. Eventually, members of the Hasmonean Court invited in the Romans. The fight over Chanukah concerns the nature of the Maccabean struggle. Naturally, it was Christopher Hitchens who launched the attack in Slate on December 3. (Bah Hanukah). The struggle was one of Hellenistic modernizers versus the Taliban and it is ridiculous for modern Jews to side with the Taliban. David Brooks was a little more subtle, actually quite good, on 12/11/2009 in the New York Times) Then, Rabbi Michael Lerner sent out his response, sort of defending Chanukah (although not the traditional view). From Lerner’s point of view, the Maccabees represented the peasants against the imperialists. I don’t think this kind of antiquarianism works. Their time is not our time. My take on all this: Chanukah is no celebration of liberty, religious or otherwise. The Greeks did not allow the celebration of traditional Jewish rites. But those who revolted had no intention of allowing any fellow Jews a religious choice.