MERRY CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH
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December 17, 2004

MERRY CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH! What? What did the rabbi just say? I'll repeat it for those who missed it or didn't believe it the first time. MERRY CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH!

Have you heard of this new holiday, now made popular by the good people in the PR department of Virgin Wireless? Over the last month, on TV and radio, in short clips before feature films and in full page ads in the New York Times, the corporate giant Virgin Wireless has been promoting its new pricing plan on camera phones with the announcement of a holiday for all of us, CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH, a blending and merging of Christmas, Hanukah and Kwanza into one big, consumer oriented shopping feast. As George Castanza first declared on Seinfeld about 10 years ago, a "*Festivus* for the rest of us." As he termed his own catch-all winter holiday *Festivus*.

In fact here is the video that's been playing around the country for those who have missed it.

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Seinfeld made me laugh, well Seinfeld pretty much always makes me laugh, the Chanukah present I am still hoping someone will get me is the DVD box set. But CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH, at first indeed I did laugh, and when one of my eighth grade students proclaimed to the class that he was celebrating CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH this year, I thought, well there is an example of effective marketing, maybe the temple needs a jingle. But then when one of his

classmates who had not heard the ad asked what CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH was, and he explained it not as a clever marketing campaign but as a sociological fact, a new holiday for everyone so that we can all celebrate together, I had to stop the class.

I asked my students, all of whom had a B'nai Mitzvah in the past year at Temple Judea, how many of them had heard of CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH. About 80% of the class had heard of it and could correctly identify its origin as being the Virgin Wireless commercial jingle. When I asked them how many thought it was a good idea to blend these three holidays into one giant mega-holiday, about the same 80% said yes it was. One student proclaimed, it's just easier then we don't have to deal with all the different holidays at school, we could just have one!

Friends, we live in a deeply divided country, Red States and Blue States, Christians and Gentiles, Religious and Secular, Black and White, Pro-War and Anti-War, Yankee Fans and everyone else. I don't think any of us want to add to the divisiveness of our country, but there is a difference between division and distinction, and while I am dedicated to less division in our country, I do long for more distinction.

CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH is just the latest example of the homogenization of America. It's a good example because it has at its roots the designs of corporate America that would love it we would all celebrate the same holidays over an elongated holiday shopping season. Over the past two weeks I was in Washington DC, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Honolulu. Do you know what I found in all of those places? Nothing I hadn't seen any of the others. In fact other than the weather being somewhat different one to the other, everything else was the same. You go out to eat, you have the same choices, you go shopping it's the same stores, you turn on TV even the local news,

it's the same news, different shootings and local scandals, but basically the same. I left these places with the same feeling I have been having on similar trips over the last few years, why go anywhere if everywhere could be anywhere?

We are all so similar. And while we rightfully revel in that fact that there is so much more that unites us than divides us, we should not dismiss that which distinguishes one person from another, or faith from another. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote of his encounter with a non-Jew who he once engaged in a theological debate: He recalled of the meeting,

"First and foremost we meet as human beings who have much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a souls, fears, hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding, the kingship of being human. My first task in every encounter is to comprehend the personhood of the person I face, to sense the kinship of being human, solidarity of being. To meet a human being is a major challenge to mind and heart. . . . [each person] is a disclosure of the divine and all men are one in God's care for humanity. To meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the image of God, the presence of God. . . . [So] when [I] engaged in a conversation with a person of a different religious commitment, if I discover that we disagree in matters sacred to us, does the image of God I face disappear? Does the difference in commitment destroy the kinship of being human?" No is Heschel's answer, the differences we uncover about each other make us <u>more</u> human not less. They highlight the grand scale and scope of God's creative power, what would be the point of creation if we were all just carbon copies of each other, God could have stopped with Adam and been done with it. But there was Eve, and Cain and Able and Seth and my grandparents and your parents, and

your kid's teachers and coaches and friends and spouses and children. In our differences is our humanness, and how we confront and deal with our differences there in lies our humanity.

So let me ask you, which is better for our world that we are all the same, or that we are all different and learn to respect and honor our differences, so that we might live in a peaceful world. Is it better to have CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH, one holiday fits all, or to celebrate Christmas as Christmas, Hanukah as Hanukah and Kwanza as Kwanza? and in doing so respect each religion's distinctiveness from all the others. The answer is found in the story of Hanukah itself.

When King Antichos sent his armies to Jerusalem to confront the Jewish people, he did not, as is commonly held propose that they stop being Jewish, rather he simply wanted to add a statue of himself to their temple, that Jews might pray to God and to his statue at the same time. What he proposed in essence was his own version of CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH just without the catchy jingle. The statue had stood outside the temple for months if not years, archeologists continue to this day to dig up pagan idols in the ruins of Jerusalem, but when the proposal was to bring it into the house, the holy temple, the synagogue,. A line had been crossed

And what did our people do? Some liked the idea, seemed simple enough, but Matathiaus and his sons the Maccabees they saw in this seemingly small concession to the ruling majority the loss of Jewish distinctiveness and with it the inevitable dissolution of Judaism and the Jewish people.

Friends I don't have a crystal ball, only the lens of history informs my view of the future, but in that view CHRISTMAHANUKAWANZAKAH, and the Chanukah Bush,

and wishing people happy holidays rather than Merry Christmas and Happy Hanuakah, they are all I fear like Matathiaus feared, too far down a slippery slop that the loss of our distinctiveness as a people is inevitable. Each family must for sure debate and discuss where they will draw their lines, and each community too must do the same, but we must have lines. Not of division, but of distinction. We must agree, not so much that we disagree, for in fact if we are to have peace in our world and our community and our homes, we must agree on more and disagree on much less. But rather we must agree first and foremost that we are dissimilar and that is ok, indeed that is what makes us human.

I truly believe that we a Jews must hold fast to and celebrate that which makes us Jewish and that which makes all other religions, exactly that, other religions. To be so similar, and yet so unique from each other is the beauty of our creation and it is what makes the world interesting. And as the Chinese proverb teaches all of us, may we be blessed to live in interesting times.