

Uncle Hanukkah Stamps?

By ROBERT E. SEGAL

Here goes a trial balloon: Why not march on the Post Office Department in Washington and demand that the busy artists there design, promote, and sell a Hanukkah Stamp in 1972 about this time of year?

This would mark the 2139th anniversary of the uprising by courageous Jews who stood up to Antiochus IV when he tried to wipe out Judaism and any other form of religion except that which he considered suitable for his Syrian empire.

Foolish, you say. And correct you are. For we don't need a special stamp issued by Washington to mark the most significant battle for religious liberty mankind has ever known. Granted that lion-hearted Mattathias

and the indomitable Maccabees would delight the hearts of any artists setting out to depict that titanic struggle of a small religious band against a dictator's might, you just can't compress the story of Hanukkah into a postage stamp.

For the essence of Hanukkah is mightier than anything a bit of paper can convey: Hanukkah is light emerging from winter and pagan darkness; it is freedom, the determination of an heroic band to worship as the heart---not the government---proposes; it is prayer; it is blessing; it is hope; it is a clear call for eternal peace; it is a reminder of the obligation to be charitable; it is an appeal for rededication to the unending struggle to drive all tyrants into retirement.

By coincidence arising from the need of mankind in antiquity to get a breather from the winter solstice, Hanukkah and Christmas share a debt to light---to a small measure of oil for illumination in the name of freedom in the instance of Hanukkah and to a mystical respect for "holy light" insofar as Christmas is concerned. And so, a quarter of a century or so ago, some of our well-meaning but somewhat shortsighted public relations men decided the American community should have joint Hanukkah-Christmas celebrations. In North Cupcake, South Dakota, and other such outposts, this kind of hybrid observance still flourishes; but people with a somewhat more enlightened regard for the value of honest religious differences have long since abandoned this fuzzy adventure into Brotherhood, Unlimited.

In this country, of all countries, each man should be free to observe the religious festivals dear to him in his own way and without prompting from the government. Hence, our hope is that nobody will take off on the above-mentioned lark of trying to get Washington to print a Hanukkah stamp.

If you disagree, consider what has now happened on the Christmas stamp side of the issue: Some six years ago, the U.S. Post Office ventured out gingerly with a Christmas stamp. The first effort consisted of a wreath and a couple of candles. By 1970, the government featured Gabriel as depicted in Jan van Eyck's painting, "The Annunciation." This year, we have the nativity scene borrowed from Giorgione's "Adoration of the Shepherd," painted early in the 16th century. Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus, along with two shepherds, are on the top side of the stamp with the single word, "Christmas" lettered in a mode popular in Giorgione's time. You can, of course, also buy a Christmas stamp just showing a partridge in a pear tree.

Repeatedly, the Joint Advisory Committee of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council and the Synagogue Council of America has protested these sorties into religious programming by the federal government. "We're sorry you don't approve," the

head of the U.S. Post Office Department's Division of Philately replies. "The stamp is based on a very famous work of art and IS NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF ANY PARTICULAR DENOMINATION."

With muddy thinking like that at the top, who could possibly need a Hanukkah stamp?

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