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The Magic of the Festival of Lights

BY JERRY D. BARACH

Most of us know of the Hannukah menorah as a rather simple affair, even though our menorot or "Hannukiot," as they are more properly called, may range from inexpensive tin to heavy, solid objects made of silver, copper or brass.

Generally, the Hannukiot familiar to most Jews today are of two basic types: the multi-branched menorah shaped ones, with arms or candle holders extending from a central elongated stem; or the "bench" type where the Hannukiah sits squatly on the table, with candle holders in a horizontal row.

In spite of this generality, the Hannukah over the generations has appeared in thousands of design variations, ranging from quite simple stone oil containers to elaborate silver, brass, and porcelain artifacts. Indeed, the Hannukiah has become a highly developed form of Jewish ceremonial art. Even a short visit to the notable display of Hannukiot at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem - or for that matter to any museum displaying Judaica - will soon open one's eyes to the tremendous creativity that has been poured into the design of Hannukiot.

Not surprisingly, the designs of Hannukiot in various communities and in various epochs are highly reflective of the art of the period and place in which Jews have found themselves. Surprisingly, the Hannukiot also display many of the elements of architecture of those same periods, so much so that three years ago the Israel Museum presented a special exhibition and printed a catalogue illustrating the close connection between Hannukiah designs and the local architecture over the past several hundred years.

Thus, for example, Yemenite Hannukiot are generally made of stone and show, in some designs, typical Yemenite houses. Those from Poland, in elaborately detailed brass or bronze, have elements of Polish architecture and motifs, including the use of animal figures, which is highly typical of Polish folk art and architecture. One Hannukiah on display in the Israel Museum from Galicia is a miniature reproduction of a section of a wooden synagogue in that region of the past century. Hannukiot from Morocco show extensive use of the crescent, an Islamic motif, and or Moorish arches.

In German communities there was even a vogue of producing Hannukiot that were designed as replicas of furniture of the period. An Italian Hannukiah that can be seen at the Israel Museum has the loose cross-lace pattern that one can see in the frontal designs of the palaces of the Doges along the Grand Canal of Venice. Elements of Rococo and Baroque

design are common in European Hannukiot until very nearly modern times.

Even Christian symbols, somewhat disguised, can be noted in the Hannukiot of the last couple of hundred years from Europe. The rosette window of Gothic churches, for example, can be found on some Hannukiot, as can the crowns of various royal houses of Europe, with the perennial cross at the top of the crown replaced discreetly, say, by an eagle.

Chaya Benjamin, curator of Judaica at the Israel Museum, explains why the Hannukiah took on shapes and designs familiar to architecture. First, the Hannukiah is of course reminiscent of the rededication of the Temple, itself a building. Then, the Hannukiah is generally lit in the home, although in some cases (as can still be seen in very Orthodox quarters in Israel today), it was lit and hung just outside the doorway. Third, Hannukiot were very often designed and made by non-Jewish craftsmen since Jews were not permitted into the various craft guilds of Europe. Naturally, these craftsmen used the symbols and motifs with which they were most familiar in executing their designs.

The oldest Hannukiah of the 718 owned by the Israel Museum dates back to 14th century Spain or France (curators there are not sure which). Mrs. Benjamin says she knows of an older one, from the 13th century, which is in a private collection in Paris. There are drawings in manuscripts of somewhat older ones than that.

What, then, has happened to the truly ancient Hannukiot? We know that they have been in use

for centuries -- since just after the Maccabean revolt against the Syrian-Greeks in the time of the Second Temple, when the "miracle of the oil" that burned for eight days occurred in the Temple in Jerusalem. Why, then, have no Hannukiot been found from earlier periods, for example in the many archeological excavations that have been conducted all over Israel?

Mrs. Benjamin feels that Hannukiot as a "unit" or special ceremonial object probably did not exist until some several hundred years ago and that people may have used rather plain everyday stone oil containers or cups in which to kindle their Hannukah lights. Thus, it would be difficult for archeologists to show that small oil containers found in excavations were used specifically for Hannukah lights. The use of small stone oil cups for Hannukah had been the practice in Persian Jewry up to recent times.

Fortunately for us, however, the Hannukiah or Hannukah menorah, with all its magical associations in Jewish life, did begin to develop as an art form among both Eastern and Western Jewry. Today, therefore, we are able to admire and enjoy the many innovative and lovely designs that have been created for its use on this most warm and enjoyable of holidays.

ARAB MODERATE DIES OF WOUNDS

JERUSALEM (WNS) -- Yussuf Al-Khatib, an Arab moderate shot by terrorists Nov. 17, died of his wounds recently at the Hadassah Medical Center here. Al-Khatib, 60, was the chairman of the Ramallah Farmers Association which cooperated with Israeli authorities on the West Bank. He was ambushed while driving to Ramallah with his son, Khazem, 23, who was killed instantly by a fusillade of bullets. The Palestine Liberation Organization in Beirut claimed responsibility for the act and repeated death threats to other Arab moderates.

Mustapha Doudin head of the Hebron Region Farmers Association has been under 24-hour guard since the assault on the Al-Khatibs. His colleague, Bishara Kawmissiya of Bethlehem, said that the village association would continue to function despite the assassination of Al-Khatib and the threats to others. The associations were established with the encouragement of the Israel Military Government to counter pro-PLO elements on the West Bank.

Scattered incidents were reported on the West Bank. Security forces used tear gas to disperse youthful Arab demonstrators in Banina village near Hebron where tires were burned and rocks were thrown at Israeli vehicles. The demonstration followed

complaints by villagers that Jewish

settlers had smashed the headlights on their cars. Youths threw rocks at a vehicle passing the Dayaishe refugee camp slightly injuring a passenger.

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