

Sick of buying into holiday gift frenzy?

I HAVE to admit it. I was jealous.

I was sitting through a showing of "What Would Jesus Buy?," the new documentary on the wacky Rev. Billy, the preacher who has taken his anti-consumerism campaign to Wal-Marts and Starbucks across the country.

As I sat in the theater, I had to wonder why my tradition, Judaism, hasn't spawned someone similar to the Rev. Billy, whose real name is Bill Talen, even if he is more performance artist than man of God. Then I came across a gem of a new book, "Can I Have a Cell Phone for Hanukkah?" by Sharon Duke Estroff.

With the eight-day festival arriving Tuesday at sundown, the book couldn't be better timed.

Estroff, the mother of four young children, is no Talen. She has not founded a synagogue or engaged in civil disobedience. She doesn't even eschew materialism, but she does say that things have gotten out of balance.

"My whole book is about trying to find a happy medium between the 21st century and tradition," she explained in an interview from her home in Atlanta.

Chanukah was never about presents.

"It's a minor Jewish holiday" that has gotten derailed because of its "coincidence on the calendar with Christmas," she said.

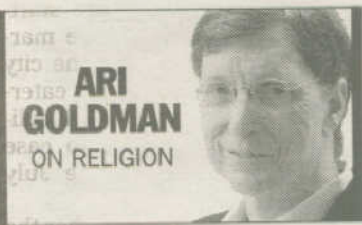
Chanukah is a celebration of the ancient Jewish victory over the Greek armies that wanted to destroy the Jewish faith. The miracle of the holiday is a small one: a cruse of oil meant for one night burned for eight. Jews light the menorah today as a symbol of freedom and joy.

How can American Jewish families recapture the true spirit of the holiday? In her book, Estroff suggests that families establish themes for each night. Here is her plan:

- **First night:** Chanukah memories. Invite friends and relatives over to share remembrances of Chanukah's past. Bring pictures. As an activity, make and decorate frames for the photos.
- **Second night:** Remember the poor. Take the kids to the toy store to buy a gift for someone less fortunate.
- **Third night:** Dreidel showdown. Play the traditional spinning top game. Keep the stakes low.
- **Fourth night:** Movie night. She recommends Adam Sandler's "Eight Crazy Nights," but even "It's a Wonderful Life" will do. Just pretend the tree is a menorah.
- **Fifth night:** Latke making. Potato latkes became a Chanukah dish because of the oil involved in cooking them. This is the night to bring out the potato peeler, the scrubber and the frying pan. Everyone can help.
- **Sixth night:** Book night. There are some great Chanukah reads, like Eric Kimmel's "Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins." Gifts are okay on this night, as long as they're books.
- **Seventh night:** Share the magic night. Invite non-Jewish friends to the lighting ceremony and holiday dinner.
- **Eighth night:** Big-present night. "Okay, so it's materialistic," Estroff acknowledged. "But when balanced with seven nights of meaning and ritual, it feels just right."

So, can one have a cell phone for Chanukah?

"Yes, but only on the eighth night," Estroff said. "That means all their other values are in check."



ARI GOLDMAN
ON RELIGION

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