

Rare 'Thanksgivukkah' kicks off festive season

Thanksgiving and Hanukkah fell on the same day last week – something that will not happen again for more than 70,000 years. The winter festival season is off to a unique start.



HISTORY
RELIGIOUS STUDIES & ETHICS

Thanksgiving and Hanukkah are very different sorts of festivals. Thanksgiving is a relatively new invention. It celebrates the arrival of European settlers in America in the 1620s. Hanukkah, by contrast, commemorates the rededication of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem after a war in the 2nd century BC.

But last week, the Jewish and Western calendars found themselves in a rare alignment that meant Thanksgiving and Hanukkah fell on the same day – something that will not happen again for another 77,000 years.

Jewish and American Protestant culture made an interesting combination. Thanksgivukkah, as the new combined holiday was called, quickly spawned a whole set of fusion recipes, posters and T-shirts. One enterprising ten-year-old made a killing with his Thanksgivukkah invention: a Jewish candlestick, or menorah, in the shape of a Thanksgiving turkey.

Thanksgivukkah was an unusual start



HANUKKAH



DIWALI



KWANZAA



CHRISTMAS

Keeping out the chill: Winter festivals from around the world.

to the winter festive season, which is now in full swing. Advent, the religious countdown to Christmas, began yesterday. Diwali, the Hindu festival of light, has already passed. So has Eid al-Adha, the Muslim festival of sacrifice. In less than three weeks, neo-pagans will celebrate the winter solstice. A few days later, most Christians will celebrate Christmas, then many African Americans will celebrate Kwanzaa, and then there is New Year – a festive occasion for almost everyone.

There are very few cultures that do not have at least one big festival over this winter season. Back in the days when most people still made their living from farming, the middle of winter could be a time of hardship – of scarce food and cold evenings in unheated houses. It was important to have some sort of ceremony to keep people's spirits up.

The ancient Romans, for example, chose the darkest week of the year for their

festival of the Unconquered Sun. Pagan Germans, meanwhile, cheered themselves up at the festival of Yule by lighting great fires in their feast halls and sprinkling each other with the blood of sacrificed animals.

FESTIVE CHEER

Winter festivals have often also involved the giving of gifts. Christmas is particularly looked forward to by those who can hope for a good haul of presents under the tree. In this modern, less religious age, it may be that festivals really are no more than opportunities to over-eat and add some more expensive toys to our collections.

But more philosophical types see something more valuable behind all the noise and bustle of the big winter festivals: a chance to mark the changing rhythms of the passing year; a chance to reflect on what has gone and what is to come; a chance for humans to get together and help each other stay cheerful in the face of an unforgiving world.



Q & A
Q Why does anyone care what festivals I celebrate?

A What really matters is how you celebrate them. The cumulative impact of millions of people doing the same thing at the same time can be huge.

Q What do you mean?

A At Thanksgiving, for example, Americans typically head home to see their families. That means American roads and airports on the day before Thanksgiving become nightmarishly overcrowded.

Q Christmas must be big too.

A It is. Christmas shoppers will spend more than £40 billion this year in the UK alone. For many retailers, a good Christmas sales

period is the only thing that keeps their business alive. That is why shop owners are so alarmed when people try to encourage a more spiritual vision of Christmas.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Festivals are outdated traditions that have lost all meaning.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

European settlers – In popular legend, the first Thanksgiving feast was held by the English puritans who famously landed at Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts in 1620 to found one of the first European settlements in North America. Local Native Americans of the Wampanoag tribe helped the settlers survive their first year and were invited to a Thanksgiving feast in 1621. The kindness

of the Wampanoag tribe was not well rewarded, however. Disease and violence led to the near extinction of Native Americans in the Eastern USA.

Temple – Built by the legendary King Solomon, the Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of Judaism for a thousand years until its final destruction by the Romans in 70 AD. Today, only one wall of the ancient building remains. It is revered site for prayer and pilgrimage and is commonly known

as the 'Wailing Wall'.

Calendars – The dates of many religious festivals are determined by ancient calendars that do not necessarily match the modern calendar that is generally used today. The Jewish calendar, used to fix the date of Hanukkah, is a lunar calendar – the months track the cycles of the moon. A lunar year of 12 months is only 354 days long, instead of the usual 365, so every few years an extra month has to be added on.

YOU DECIDE

1. You have to cut either food or gift-giving from your winter festival this year. Which do you choose?
2. Do festivals have to be religious to be meaningful?

ACTIVITIES

1. If you could design a festival from scratch, with its own traditions and ceremonies, how would you do it. In groups, come up with some preliminary ideas and invent a name for your new festival, then compare notes with the class.
2. Choose one winter festival from history, then research and write a short report on its traditions. What is or was your festival's social function?

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 **NOTES**

