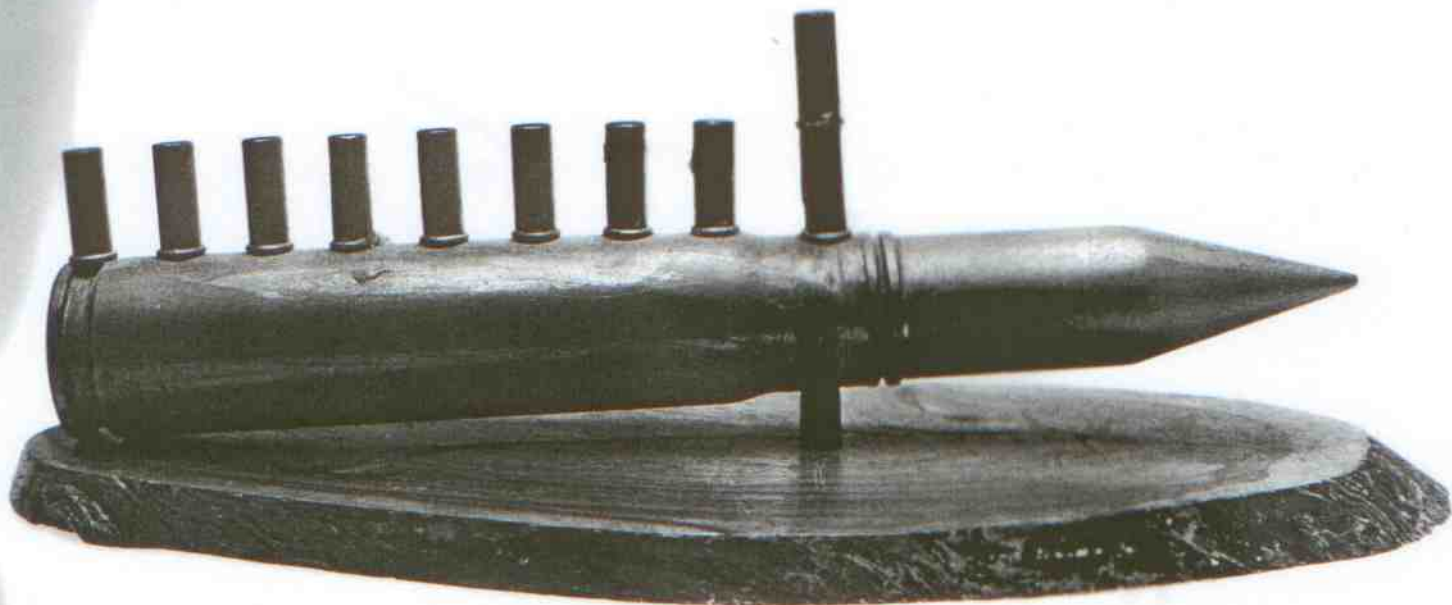


# LIGHT MY FIRE

Jonathan Fishburn celebrates the diversity of Chanukiot.





There's a very holy elephant in Thailand schlepping a Chanukiah on its back. You can always rely on Lubavitch Chassidim to be there when you need them and many a traveller perched on the Great Wall of China, surfing the waves at Bondi Beach or indeed, backpacking through the youth hostels of Thailand, have benefited from the opportunity to light a candle, sing a familiar tune and scoff a free donut during Chanukah.

Asked to visualise a Chanukiah, most of us would see a fairly standard candelabra with space for eight candles and an extra raised space for the shamash, the ninth candle used to light the others. Who would imagine a row of chairs or a series of shell casings and bullet cartridges? Unlike many other ritual obligations, the Talmud [Shabbat 21b] is relatively scant on halachic details regarding the Chanukiah. The disagreement between Shammai and Hillel regarding the lighting of the candles is explained: the former maintains that on the first day, eight lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually reduced while the latter counters that that on the first day, one candle is lit and each day afterwards, an additional candle is lit. The Rabbis also wrote that to publicise the miracle, the Chanukiah should be placed by the door of one's house on the outside; but if one dwells in an upstairs apartment, it should be placed at the window nearest the street. Over the centuries, this lack of proscription encouraged

craftsmen and artisans to design Hannukiot [pl.] in a variety of shapes using a range of materials and imagery that also reflected the social, historical and cultural sensitivities of the specific Jewish community in which the artist worked. In an outstanding catalogue of holdings, *Five Centuries of Hanukkah Lamps from the Jewish Museum — A Catalogue Raisonné*, Susan Braunstein clearly shows these influences on the design of Hannukiot and explains that there are four basic shapes of the Chanukiah:

1. A bench lamp with a row of lights attached to a backplate that serves as a reflector (this can be hung on a wall or have feet for standing it on a tabletop or windowsill)
2. A menorah: a central shaft and eight branches that simulate the lampstand in the Temple.
3. A line of eight individual cups or oil lamps. Interestingly, it was not until the Middle Ages that we find Chanukah lamps in which eight lights were combined into a single object. Jews in Iran, Afghanistan Central Asia preferred individual ceramic and metal cups or lamps, and this tradition was echoed in the lamps of the eight chairs that became popular in Germany and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century.
4. A circular lamp, either suspended from the ceiling or mounted on a shaft with eight spouts for the lights.





Braunstein explores the artistry of the backplates and notes that while many take the form of an actual structure with architectural elements such as arches, gables, columns or colonnades, others draw on the secular decorative arts to embellish the backplates with flowers and animal imagery. Human imagery was also popular and the rabbinical tradition linking the heroic figure of Judith to the Hasmonean family ensured her image in the Hannukiot of Western and central Europe, but was avoided in Islamic countries, while the most popular animal imagery was a pair of lions, linked to the tribe of Judah, fiercely guarding the Ark. In Nancy Berman's scholarly work, she cites many examples to support her argument that the development of the 'architecture' of the Chanukiah reflected the

time and place of where it was made. For example, a 14th century Italian lamp shows Sicilian influence in the treatment of the crisscrossing arches while a lamp from Damascus has a back panel in the shape of a the lamp that is characteristic of an arch consistently utilized in Islamic exterior and interior structures. The domes on an eighteenth century Ukrainian filigree lamp can be interpreted in two ways: through a Jewish lens as the ubiquitous symbol of the crown, or as a reflection of the onion-shaped domes of Russian architecture epitomised in the sixteenth century domes of St. Basil's in Moscow.

Designs that are more contemporary reflect the relatively affluent culture in which they were created and many hip designs tend to convert one







object with a specific function into Chanukiah by simply adding a row of lights. I have seen Hannukiot made of tobacco boxes and cigarette cases; given my wife's antipodean roots, her favourite is a Chanukiah made out of an Australian souvenir decorated with emus and kangaroos, with a row of small oil containers taken from a Moroccan lamp added to the base.

The iconic figure of the Chanukiah is not lost on contemporary leaders of the State of Israel: on the 50th Anniversary of the State of Israel, the Foreign Ministry and Israeli embassies abroad ensured that 33 world leaders, including those from Latvia, Macedonia, Philippines and Korea, lit candles on the first night of Chanukah. It is regarded as a symbol of Jewish victory and in their beautiful book, *Lighting the Way to Freedom: Treasured Hanukkah Menorahs of Early Israel*, Aaron Ha'Tell and Yaniv Ben Or reflect on the connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. Their collection of more than five hundred Hannukiot from the 1920s to the 1970s demonstrate the changing identity of the Jewish community in Israel: heroic

figurines reflect the unbridled machismo of the early settlers, quaint images of youngsters building up the land could be taken directly from a 1950s JNF poster and the use of discarded artillery demonstrate the strength of Jewish people in control of its own destiny in their own land.

It's difficult to put a value on many of these items. Auction records for Hannukiot show they have been sold for thousands of pounds and inevitably, solid silver, ornate or antique Hannukiot will increase in value over time. However, occasionally there are some that have absolutely no value, like the huge sculpted ice Chanukiah that the Lubavitch in Stockholm place in a public square. It literally melts after the candles have done their job — now that's pretty cool.

*Jonathan Fishburn is an antiquarian bookseller specialising in Judaica and can be contacted at [fishburnbooks@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:fishburnbooks@yahoo.co.uk). Request a copy of his latest catalogue: *The Jewish Experience: 150 unusual manuscripts, books, posters, photographs, ritual objects and artefacts reflecting the modern Jewish experience.**