

SHABBAT HANUKKAH 5768 - DECEMBER 2008

I've always liked certain aspects of Christmas. This time of year up north there'd often be a soft patina of shimmering snow on the ground; colored lights would hang like garlands of sparkling jewels on the boughs of stately evergreens. And the music, well, the music is undeniably beautiful. When I was a child I loved watching *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* on TV; later on I enjoyed reading Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and watching Jimmy Stewart in *It's A Wonderful Life*. And if you really want to know the truth, I -- the son of a Conservative rabbi and a product of day school education -- once believed in Santa Claus in some vague way until my 6th birthday. Hopefully, you won't now call for my resignation as your rabbi . . .

O.K., so the synagogue will let me keep me job. But some of you might be thinking, "Rabbi, we never figured *you* for a confused Jew. How could your parents let you believe in Santa Claus?" That question is easy to answer: they chose to raise me in an overwhelmingly non-Jewish place called America, a country in which Christmas is an all-pervasive phenomenon. Having had the occasion to spend December 25th in Israel on several occasions -- and God willing look forward to doing so again this year -- I know that if my folks had raised me in the Jewish State, I wouldn't have thought about Santa. No, my folks never celebrated Christmas in any form, shape, or manner; but on the other hand, they also didn't hang black-out curtains on our windows, throw out our TV set and radio, or insist that I wear blinders outside the house during the month of December to avoid seeing the sights of Christmas.

The fact is Christmas offers a wonderful set of lessons to families raising Jewish children. The very first one is not to sweat the inescapable -- for if parents imbue their offspring with a strong sense of Jewish identity, they need not worry their kids will trade in *latkes* for a tree and a jolly grandpa with a long white beard.

On the contrary, parents do more harm than good when they make invidious comparisons between Christmas and Hanukkah, or worse yet, attempt to demonstrate Hanukkah's pseudo-superiority with an 8:1 gift-ratio. These efforts don't work because, forgive the pun, Hanukkah simply can't hold a candle to the overwhelming consciousness of Christmas in our society. Do the math: Jews account for less than 2% of America's population. "I made a little

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dreidl” pales in comparison to the joys of caroling . . . and how many times a day can you sing *Ma’oz Tzur*, a song whose melody came from an old German folk tune also used by Martin Luther for Protestant hymns? Placed in competition with the 26,000 lights of the tree at Rockefeller Center, eight candles probably won’t fare well; and what do we have that compares with that jolly old and kindly man, who looks like everyone’s dream *zayde* and whose only desire in life is to give gifts? It is both poignant and sad when parents tell their children that, even if Santa Claus isn’t coming, Hanukkah Harry is . . .

When we try to create parity between Hanukkah and Christmas for our kids or grandkids, we send the unintended message that Hanukkah is second best, a kind of sop for boys and girls who are ineligible to celebrate the real McCoy. Equally important, the false equivalency undermines one of Hanukkah’s most important messages, for this holiday is about the right to be different.. The Maccabees struggled against the seductiveness of Hellenism, its attractions as a majority culture, its emphasis on hedonism. Antiochus, the Syrian king, did not seek the physical extermination of the Jewish people, but sought to compel their disappearance through assimilation. It would have been far easier to acquiesce in the tyrant’s plan rather than resist it -- but resist it the Maccabees did.

Sharon Duke Estroff, in a wonderful book entitled, *Can I Have a Cell Phone for Hanukkah? The Essential Scoop on Raising Modern Jewish Kids*, suggests that Jews should approach Christmas as cultural anthropologists exploring another culture. Estroff writes, “When anthropologists set foot on foreign turf, they don’t feel threatened by unfamiliar customs . . . they don’t worry that in allowing themselves to experience someone else’s traditions, they’ll be turning their back on their own. [They are instead] fueling themselves with insight into a rich culture that does not belong to them. It’s the same situation with Christmas. [We need not] shield our children from the yuletide festivities, as if allowing them to breathe in the Christmas spirit will somehow reduce their Jewishness. To the contrary, it will only confirm who they are.”

So how might a “Jewish anthropologist” handle the December dilemma? He would certainly celebrate Hanukkah with his family, while avoid making the Festival of Lights a replacement for Christmas . . . no Hanukkah bushes or blue-and-white stockings! A Jewish

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anthropologist wouldn't bring Christmas into her home, but she'd certainly allow her children to attend the Christmas celebrations of gentile friends and neighbors, and would permit them to give Christmas gifts to non-Jewish friends, teachers, and other special people. He wouldn't worry if his kids felt a little left out of the Christmas fun, knowing this is just part of building a strong Jewish identity living in an overwhelmingly non-Jewish world.

For interfaith families raising Jewish children the issues are significantly more complex and the boundary lines more difficult to draw, but the basic guidelines are the same. Given that Christianity and Judaism are truly irreconcilable religions, even if mutually respectful, parents have a responsibility to choose a spiritual identity for their kids that is consistent with itself and free of inherent contradiction. And if that choice is for a Jewish upbringing, both parents must ensure an environment free of religious confusion, particularly at the youngest and most formative ages. At the same time they must engender a non-anxious relationship in which the non-Jewish parent need not pretend he or she is Jewish or otherwise hide his or her identity.

Would I advise an intermarried couple raising Jewish children not to have a Christmas tree in their home? My answer would be "yes" because I believe that all children being raised as Jews are entitled to a clear and wholesome sense of self free of confusion. And while adults are very capable of delineating boundaries for themselves, toddlers cannot. And if you have any doubts, attend the birthday party of a three-year-old and watch as his or her friends grab at the gifts with emphatic shouts of "Mine!" -- which is precisely why some very wise soul invented party favors . . .

Yet why shouldn't children from interfaith families, or conversionary ones for that matter, visit non-Jewish grandparents, admire their tree, and spend Christmas with them? There *is* a difference between celebrating Christmas as one's own holiday, and being with loved ones who aren't Jewish as the latter observe a day important to them.. Let gentile family members give their Jewish relatives Hanukkah gifts, and by the same token, let Jewish relatives give their non-Jewish family Christmas gifts. Approaching the December Dilemma in this manner reinforces Jewish identity in a healthy way, for it creates boundaries of self while accepting and loving other family members who happen not to be Jewish.

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Indeed, Christmas has much to teach Jews. We need to learn that the December Dilemma is only a problem to the extent that we make it the primary component of our children's religious identity, as if we could ever teach our kids how to love being Jewish through deprivation. Some of you may know Adam Sandler's *Hanukkah Song*, a Saturday Night Live spoof that makes Jewish kids feel better about Christmas by offering a list of famous Jews who celebrate Hanukkah. It's a very funny song, but it's also a little sad -- for the song's basic premise is "Let's celebrate our Jewishness because we don't get to have Christmas." To my knowledge, Adam Sandler has never been motivated to write a Purim song, a Shabbat tune, or one for Passover, Tu b'Shevat, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simhat Torah, or Shavu'ot.

The best answer to December loneliness begins with parents having faith that, in making Judaism a defining force in their family's lives throughout the year, they will ensure their children's souls remain filled with Jewish excitement from one end of the calendar to other. The answer to the December Dilemma is found in the smell of freshly baked *hallah* on Shabbat, the fragrant smell of an *etrog* on Sukkot, the sweetness of a bedtime *Sh'ma*, the echoing sound of a Shofar blast on Rosh Hashanah -- and dozens of other annual, monthly, weekly and daily experiences. When Judaism is tangibly felt from January to November, December is no longer a dilemma, but simply the name of a different month in which kids simply have a another set of Jewish experiences

Christmas can also teach us the lesson of *gemilut hasadim*, the commandment of performing acts of loving kindness, the *mitzvah* of sharing and helping others -- no, not in the Christmas spirit, but in its Jewish counterpart. Our religious tradition is rich with allusions to the importance of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, helping the needy. When we volunteer to work in hospitals, shelters or soup kitchens on December 25th, we not only enable our Christian friends and neighbors to spend their holiday with loved ones, but also ensure that the work of *tikkun olam*, repairing this fragmented world, continues unabated. Misery and despair, after all, never take a day off.

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Yes, we need to accept that being different at Christmas is natural for Jews. But more important, we can take that feeling and transform it into a blessing, seeing it as an invitation to a deeper and richer appreciation of Jewish life. And if you can't be in Israel this December 25th, use the season to celebrate your Jewish self.

So tonight, my friends, when the skies grow dark, and the stars twinkle in God's very own heavenly candelabra, put your *hanukiyah* in the window, light candles, and then go outside with your loved ones. Look up and down the quiet street, and admire the sparkling colors of your neighbors' Christmas decorations. But then turn back to your own window and watch quietly as the small yellow flames of Hanukkah dance before you. And as you watch those tiny points of light flicker against the enormous darkness of a winter night, you will realize that a miraculous spark of God's light lives inside you, a Jewish flame whose ignition requires but a moment and a single match to kindle.