

The December Dilemma

A bit of Lotker family folklore. My parents' firstborn child (my older brother, Jack) was born on Dec. 25. My parents, being not very religious, took this as a "sign" that it was OK to have a "Chanukah Bush" for the new baby as a way of "kinda" celebrating Chanukah and little Jackie's birthday. The only problem was that everyone in the family came down with the flu that year. This was the last "Chanukah Bush" in Lotker family history.

What to do about Christmas is not a new Jewish problem. It has, however, become more perplexing as Christmas becomes more commercial and pervasive in our culture and as intermarriage among Jews and Christians increases. Often Jewish families will rationalize that the Christmas tree and celebration of Christmas is not really a Christian holiday having become more of an American cultural holiday. After all, they reason, the origins of the tree are more pagan than authentically religious.

I disagree. Although I know many Christians who today bemoan the way the Christmas holidays are celebrated, Christmas is still a Christian holiday. And the Christmas tree is today a Christian symbol and only a Christian symbol. To claim that such Christian symbols can be universalized and used by Jews is insulting to Christianity and inauthentic to Judaism. To those who would say that they just like the way the tree and lights look, that they're only decorative, I would respond "Fine! Put them up in February!"

I hasten to add, however, that in homes where there are Christian family members as well as Jewish members, it is entirely appropriate and authentic to observe Christmas and its symbols as the holiday of these family members. Furthermore there is nothing wrong with Jews decorating and enjoying the Christmas trees of their non-Jewish friends and relatives. Even small children can appreciate the difference between their own birthday parties and those of their friends. It is wonderful for Jewish children to celebrate Christmas with their Christian friends and relatives with the understanding that this is "their" holiday, while Chanukah is "ours."

And I have to admit that I am a Jew who loves Christmas. I love Christmas decorations, Christmas movies, Christmas music and Christian teachings of love, peace on earth and goodwill so emphasized at this season (these are, of course, also Jewish teachings). Although Chanukah is not the Jewish Christmas, it's important to point out that without Chanukah, there might just not be a Christmas. If the Chanukah revolt of the Maccabees had failed, Judaism might have ended and Jesus and his family might well have been worshiping Zeus instead of the God of Abraham. And, to return the favor, we Jews owe that Catholic Church the preservation of the Books of Maccabees (which are part of the Catholic Old Testament but not included in the Hebrew Bible) which provide much of the information about the political and military victory that we celebrate.

I hope and pray that we all have a holiday season of peace and health and that we are able to appreciate the religious and spiritual depth of our own holidays while sharing the fun and joy of our neighbors'.

B'Shalom