



Observing Christmas: A Jewish Perspective

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Most American Jewish families likely have a favorite Christmas story. Mine comes by way of my wife, Phyllis. She was in third grade at Horace Mann School in Kansas City. In December 1955, her teacher, Miss Ferguson, began casting parts for the Christmas pageant. Her eyes settled on Phyllis, who has always been petite. In a flash, the role had been assigned! Phyllis, one of only two Jewish children in their inner-city school (her cousin was the other), had been chosen to be “the baby Jesus in the manger.” As she now recalls it, when she announced at home that evening that she was going to star in the production, her parents were amused, but not upset. Neither was the sort “to make waves,” and like many middle-class parents in that generation, whatever the teacher did was pretty much beyond censure.

Miss Hollister, who was the principal, apparently found the casting inappropriate. All Phyllis recalls is that by the next day her “star” status had been stripped away. In its place, she was given the much less awesome duty of being a candy cane.

In its own way, this story speaks to the crucial challenge that Christmas has presented to America’s Jews. What should they do with this holiday of their Christian neighbors; and how should they maneuver through the Christmas season, beginning in November and extending until the last holiday decorations are taken

As their place in American culture has changed, American Jews have demonstrated different responses to the overwhelming reality of Christmas in their world. Their task will be to find ways to respect both their neighbor’s faith and their own.

down in midwinter? How best to respect their Christian friends and coworkers, without themselves being swallowed up by the season? How best to honor both their neighbor's faith and their own?

FROM EUROPE TO AMERICA

At one time, from medieval days up to the nineteenth century, the answer to those questions was simple enough: stay home. That is what most Jews in Central and Eastern Europe apparently did at holiday time. It was just plain safer, in a world and a time when Jewish faith and life were routinely an object of scorn or worse, to avoid any and all trappings of the festival.¹

Not all European Jews felt that Christmas was to be avoided, however. In Western Europe, especially in nineteenth-century Germany, Jews claimed Christmas, not as a religious festival, but as a national one. Historians point to many examples—from diaries, memoirs, paintings, and photos—of German-Jewish families gathered about the home Christmas tree, with gifts and warmth in obvious abundance. Here, for example, is how the eminent Gershom Scholem, who was to become the greatest scholar of Jewish mysticism in the twentieth century, recalls his youth in Berlin, and later Munich:

Christmas was celebrated in our family—with roast goose or hare, a decorated Christmas tree in our family which my mother bought at the market by St. Peter's Church, and the big distribution of presents for servants, relatives and friends. It was asserted that this was a German national festival, in the celebration of which we joined not as Jews but as Germans.²

It is no wonder that our earliest evidence of American Jews and their maneuvering through the Christmas season appears strikingly similar, for the first major wave of European Jews to make their way to these shores was from those Prussian lands. Here, like back in Germany, it must have seemed natural for those recent immigrants arriving at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century to accommodate to the prevailing Christmas customs then conquering America.

Christmas was, in fact, then increasingly sweeping its way into American life. As historian Daniel Boorstin tells us, Christmas observance, once prohibited by New England Puritans as a dangerous example of “popish idolatry,” had by the late nineteenth century become “the American Festival of Consumption.”³ In keeping with that newfound rush to buy and give, American Jews adopted Christmas as their own, as a sort of national American festival.

Yet already in those years, Jewish leadership was lamenting such practice: “Vanquish the Christmas tree and enable the Hanukah lights to speak to our

¹Joshua Eli Plaut, “The Xmas Mirror,” *Reform Judaism* 33/2 (2004) 8.

²Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1980) 28.

³Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage, 1973) 157–158.

hearts!” That’s what one editorial in a New York Jewish newspaper pleaded, as it urged its readers to turn away from the Christian holiday and return to their own midwinter holiday, Hanukah.⁴ In those years, Hanukah was a minor little festival, with hardly much attention given to it. It was, to be sure, a significant story, celebrating the ancient victory of the Hasmonean Maccabees against the Syrian Hellenistic Greek emperor Antiochus, who was seeking to force his way of life down the throats of those second-century B.C.E. inhabitants of Judea. But for complicated historical reasons, Hanukah never had made it to the “A-list” of Jewish holidays. It thus seems to have been hardly observed by the first waves of Jewish immigrants to this country.

Christmas was different. Researchers have unearthed plenty of evidence that American Jews, and not only those from Germany, were increasingly attracted to the holiday. Neither that 1900 editorial referred to earlier nor the pleadings of prominent rabbis made much difference. That was surely the case with the German Jews already in this country, who already were more acculturated. Surprisingly, though, many of their more traditional Eastern European coreligionists, arriving by the hundreds of thousands in those decades, were also attracted to the Christian festival. Buying Christmas gifts and setting up decorated trees, though hardly what meticulous Christians would consider proper observance of the day and its meanings, were a staple for many Jewish families. For them, Christmas was an American holiday, and since they aspired to be new Americans, what better way to leave behind the old and embrace the new than by celebrating this day like their fellow citizens.⁵

THE RISE OF HANUKAH

But something—and historians are not certain what it was—changed in the first decades of the twentieth century to alter the situation here in this land. Maybe it was an increasing comfort with one’s Jewishness, perhaps a stark awareness that Jews still really were outsiders and different, certainly the reality of anti-Semitism festering in some cities in the first decades of the twentieth century. Most likely, it was a combination of those factors and others that prompted Jews to do exactly what their leaders had been urging them to do all along: cease any practice of their neighbor’s festival, but make a big deal out of Hanukah.

Beginning in the first three decades of the twentieth century, then, and with increasingly heightened emphasis in the decades that have followed, Hanukah became to American Jews what Christmas was fast becoming to American Christians.

⁴*Tageblatt*, 19 December 1900, 4, quoted in Jenna Weissman Joselit, “‘Merry Chanuka’: The Changing Holiday Practices of American Jews, 1880–1950,” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992) 306. See also Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 72–79.

⁵Joselit, “Merry Chanuka,” 307–308. See also Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994) 219–263.

It became a celebration of “new-fashioned” American consumerism, combined with a dose or two, even more, of spiritual fervor.⁶

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I am not certain exactly what year it was—sometime in the early 1950s—that my St. Louis Jewish congregation sponsored a home-decorating contest for Hanukah. Our family, which had just moved into a first-ring suburb not far from the synagogue, joined in the merriment. We had streamers, centerpieces, a door decoration to rival any of our neighbor’s holly wreaths, and judges who stopped by to see if we ranked high enough to win the contest. Alas, we didn’t triumph!

In retrospect, I see that moment as a powerful sign of my parents’ desire to “fit in” with America, with their desire to celebrate Judaism in a quasi-public fashion, somehow on a par with our Catholic and Protestant neighbors and their very public Christmas festival. We were one of the few Jewish families in our particular neighborhood, and we didn’t make much of a display of our faith outside the home. But the synagogue Hanukah contest allowed us to be more demonstrative about our religious identities, and my parents, both of whom had been born in the “Old World,” must have felt a new freedom in being able to show their neighbors who they were.

A PLACE FOR JEWS IN AMERICA

I didn’t understand it at the time, of course, but we were also living out the “facts on the ground” that would become the basis for the groundbreaking work of social thinker Will Herberg. In his celebrated 1955 book, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew*, Herberg illustrated how far American Jews had made it in their adopted land. Herberg’s extended essay, written at the midway point of a decade of enormous religious ferment in this country, traced the way in which ethnic identities (“I’m Swedish,” “I’m Irish,” and “I’m a Jew”), labels that had once defined the first and even second wave of immigrant life in this nation, had by midcentury been displaced by religious identities (“I’m Lutheran,” “I’m Catholic,” and “I’m Jewish”).⁷

My parents might have been a minority on that city block, they and their fellow Jews just a tiny percentage in all of St. Louis, but somehow they had achieved a certain numerical parity. They were one of three faiths, and they could exhibit their faith proudly. Hanukah had become, literally, front and center.

⁶For a background on these issues, see Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*, and David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago and New York: University of Chicago Press, 1954), *passim*.

⁷Will Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1960), *passim*.

Over the years Herberg's contentions have been altered. Ethnic labels have not completely disappeared in our multicultural nation. Nor does his tripartite division of American religious life show sufficient sensitivity to the much wider presence of the multitude of religions in America today. But fifty years ago, Herberg was surely onto something about the transformations of American religious and social life, including his claim, toward the end of his book, that "there are unmistakable indications of interest in, and concern with, religion that goes far beyond the demands of mere social 'belonging.'"⁸

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That is very much the case when it comes to how today's American Jewish community wrestles with its faith and those of its neighbors. As a number of studies have suggested in the last several decades, American Jews, like many other faith communities, have grown increasingly comfortable not only with "belonging"—not only, that is, with their religious identities—but also with the distinctive messages and meanings of their own faith.⁹ For these Jews, Hanukkah increasingly has become a sign of religious and communal pride. It has also meant that they must contend anew with the ubiquity of Christmas, seeking to honor the faith of those among whom they live while also seeking to demonstrate their individuality.

In some cases, among the most traditional elements of the American Jewish community, this has meant continuing to hold on to the old model, seeking to keep Christmas "at bay." As in medieval Europe, there are some few Jews who would deny this omnipresent December reality any place in their lives.

Others have incorporated slivers of it into their own homes and families. For example, in December 2006, the *New York Times* published a tongue-in-cheek paean to Christmas written by Jewish author Cindy Chupack, a writer and noted TV executive. The week her snappy essay appeared in the "Lives" endnote in the *Times* Sunday magazine, it was sent by e-mail more frequently than any other *Times* article save one, suggesting it had struck a responsive chord—perhaps in contrasting ways—with newspaper readers, amusing many and infuriating others.

The meagerness of Hanukkah, she laments, with its "lone menorah on the mantel," stands in stark contrast to the Christmas gaiety of her surroundings. Therefore, she writes, she and her husband had decided to "embrace the holiday in all of its materialistic glory." Chupack writes glowingly of the Starbucks Christmas

⁸Ibid., 273.

⁹See Samuel G. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the 20th Century* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995), and Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).

CD and the Pottery Barn Christmas catalog, wishing wistfully for the comparable Jewish versions of each. Yet she writes,

I'm pretty sure that if we're fortunate enough to have children, we will raise them with the same arbitrary rules we were raised with, trying our best to sell that old chestnut (roasting on an open fire) that "eight nights is better than one," and putting this tradition behind us until the kids go off to college, if not forever.

On the other hand, maybe it's nice to teach children that holidays can be done *à la carte*. Every religion, every culture has so many beautiful rituals and traditions to choose from. Maybe celebrating is a step toward tolerating. I can hardly wait for Hanukkwanza.¹⁰

It's hard to estimate how much Ms. Chupack speaks for the younger generation, though there are certainly suggestions from today's observers of American Jewish life that denominational and institutional labels are much less significant than they once were. Perhaps her comment about religion "*à la carte*" reflects the views of a greater number of young folks than one might imagine, and not only among young Jews.

OBSERVING CHRISTMAS

We do know that for many other Jewish Americans, Christmas has evolved in remarkably interesting ways recently. Joshua Eli Plaut, a rabbi and author of a dissertation on the subject, points to many examples of the way Jews are again divided about the place of Christmas in their lives. Some have hit on a new way of observing Christmas joyfully, but decidedly unlike Cindy Chupack, while others are realizing that the holiday introduces personal problems inside their own homes.

For that first group, the best way of living out their Jewish identity, while acknowledging the presence of this important Christian festival, is to perform a classical Jewish rite. On the holiday, they carry out *mitzvot*, the traditional Hebrew term for "religiously commanded good deeds." A typical technique, Plaut notes, is for Jews to relieve their Christian coworkers from their workaday duties: to go, literally, to work, so that their Christian neighbor can have the day off.¹¹

I can recall, though never having thought much about it until I read Plaut's dissertation, that I actually lived out this rite. Routinely during my pulpit days, I would volunteer on Christmas to be the "chaplain on duty" at a local hospital, thereby relieving my Christian colleagues from their responsibility so they could rejoice at home. Rabbi Plaut puts forward the view—and he may well be right—that doing so is a subtle psychological procedure for Jews, a way of affirming minority status and identity within a larger culture.

For other Jews, mates in increasing numbers of interfaith marriages, they, with their Christian partners, must cope with ways of honoring their own faith and

¹⁰Cindy Chupack, "Jewish in a Winter Winterland," *The New York Times*, 24 December 2006.

¹¹Plaut, "The Xmas Mirror," 8. Rabbi Plaut is scheduled to publish a book based on his research, entitled *Silent Night? Being Jewish at Christmas Time in America*.

that of the other. It frequently means bringing both holidays—Christmas and Hanukkah—into their homes. It means sending out “Merry Hanukah” cards, having “holiday” or “midwinter” parties, placing a tree and a Hanukah menorah side by side in their homes.

Here again, then, we see Jews, 350 years after their forebears first arrived on these shores, contending with the problematics of December. More so than at any other time, these weeks at the end of a year are fraught with possibilities and perils, as the Jews of this land seek to understand what it means to be a tiny community of faith learning to live within a nation of increasing pluralism.

Over forty years ago, a highly regarded rabbi affiliated with Conservative Judaism contributed a brief essay to what was then the American Jewish version of *Reader's Digest*. Rabbi Hershel Matt, who exerted profound influence on many younger colleagues through his personal piety and sensitivity to others, wrote an essay entitled “Should Christmas Mean Anything to Jews?” He reviews briefly why the holiday might seem alienating to many Jews; but then, in an astute turnaround, one consistent with his outlook on the roles and responsibilities assigned uniquely to Christians and Jews, he says that Christmas ought to mean a great deal to his fellow Jews:

For it [Christmas] marks the beginning of the enlargement and extension of what we [Jews] stand for and exist for. Through Christ and Christianity the gift and hope of the Jew—our approach to life and our perspective on life, involving our relationship to both God and human beings—are spread through much of the world. Christianity is thus a denationalized, de-particularized form of Judaism: Judaism for the nations of the world.¹²

In our own time and place—America in the first decade of a new century—Rabbi Matt's words from nearly a half century ago still speak, certainly to me and undoubtedly to many of my coreligionists. Our place as a tiny minority here, at home in this remarkable land my parents found for us, is to rejoice for our Christian neighbors as they mark the joyous Christmas season of expectation and promise. In so doing, we can evoke together the “people of good will” represented by the season. Then, in fullness of self-respect, each of us in our own distinctive faiths, we can join together in working for *Shalom*, completeness of peace, in our nation and for our world. ☩

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¹²Hershel J. Matt, “Should Christmas Mean Anything to Jews?” *Jewish Digest* 19/3 (1973) 7–9, reprinted in *Walking Humbly with God: The Life and Writings of Rabbi Hershel Matt*, ed. Daniel C. Matt (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1993) 211–212.