

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
SHABBAT EVENING, 23 DECEMBER 2016

The New December Dilemma: Chrismukkah

I've trimmed a Christmas tree exactly twice in my life. Both times were at the home of one of my high school girlfriends, where my foray into Christmas tree trimming took place for two years running.

This high school girlfriend was something of an enigma. Halachically, she was Jewish because her mother was. But she was raised Protestant, following her father. Today, given our Movement's stand on patrilineality (Either parent Jewish, you're Jewish if you're raised Jewish by our Movement's position on what "raised" means; either parent Jewish, you're not Jewish if you are not so raised)...following that, one would say she wasn't Jewish. Then, though, there was no such thing as patrilineality. It was all about *halakhah*, and it didn't matter how you were raised. If your mother was Jewish, you *were* Jewish. Period. And that's how I, Jewish as I was even then and already having aspirations for the rabbinate, convinced myself that this was all okay.

My mother, *aleha hashalom*, had other ideas. And she told the rabbi on me. And he summoned me to his office the very next day. To his credit, he never commented on whether my high school girlfriend was Jewish or not. But he did comment on my high school dating choice by casting it in the context of my having participated in the trimming of a Christmas tree. "Howard," he said sternly, "There are certain things that don't mix with the rabbinate!" That to a sixteen-year-old.

Were someone's mother to come to me with the story my mother brought to my rabbi, I wouldn't respond to it in the way my rabbi did with me. I wouldn't because these are different times. Further, the issues are quite different today. And our challenges are different.

Twenty years ago and for a number of years before and after that, every year in December we held a discussion called "The December Dilemma." The people who came were either partners in interfaith marriages or partners in marriages where one partner had converted to Judaism. In both of them the children typically were being raised Jewish, but in the first the dilemma was over how to represent and/or present the non-Jewish December practices of the Christian parent. In the second it was over how to deal with the issue of the Jewish children also having a set of Christian grandparents who had every right to be celebrating Christmas. Either one raised problems, or at least they did for the couples who attended. And, in the end, there was no "standard" way

through the dilemma. Typically there were a number of different ways that the participants handled what they thought was the dilemma.

Today, and especially this year when, for the first time in a generation the first day of Hanukkah and Christmas coincide, there is a different December dilemma. It even has given rise to its own name. It's Chrismukkah. Chrismukkah is the combining, in interfaith homes, of both holidays. Is that Jewish? Is that Christian? You all, I'm sure, have thoughts on those questions. I'll give you my take in a few minutes. But first the background.

I don't know if any of you saw it, but there was an interesting article that appeared in the Sunday *Boston Globe* this week. In fact, it made the front page of the paper. The article was entitled: "Leave a plate of cookies beside the menorah."¹ In the electronic version of the paper it had another title, one I thought even more telling. It was, "Now bring us the Yuletide brisket: Dec. 24 is Chrismukkah."² I'd like to bring you some of the article's highlights.

It began, "Deck the challahs! Sip some eggnog with those latkes, light the menorah by the glow of the Christmas tree..." But "how, exactly, to ring in Chrismukkah?"

One woman "mapped out an elaborate schedule of Dec. 24 festivities for about a dozen friends and family — she and her husband are Christian; both of her sons-in-law are Jewish, and a daughter converted to Judaism. Christmas tree decorating, with carols playing in the background, will commence in the afternoon. Some will attend the 6 p.m. Christmas Eve service at First Church Cambridge, then everyone will regroup for the lighting of the menorah at home. After that, a latke dinner party, topped off with her husband's traditional reading of 'The Night Before Christmas' and the hanging of stockings before bed...."

The article continues, "Such whirlwind celebrations are becoming commonplace in the Boston area, where a recent study found that 47 percent of couples in local Jewish households have a non-Jewish partner. Twenty-two percent of children with interfaith parents are being raised in both religions or a religion other than Judaism, according to the Combined Jewish Philanthropies survey."

It turns out that "Every clan has its own philosophy on how best to approach the Christmas-Hanukkah conundrum.

¹ *Boston Globe*, December 18, 2016, page A1 and continued on page A10.

² *Boston Globe*, December 18, 2016, http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/12/17/now-bring-yuletide-brisket-dec-chrismukkah/9yomidudXn1w8UA4pdTfgO/story.html?s_campaign=email_BG_TodaysHeadline&s_campaign=

“Some are purists.” Said one who is “part of a multigenerational interfaith family...[and who] is not a fan of putting tinsel on the menorah, ‘We let each of the two holidays be separate historically and culturally, in part because we wanted our children to understand the individual significance of each religion and of each holiday... Observing both Jewish and Christian holidays throughout the year, she said, takes the pressure off pumping up Hanukkah at Christmastime. For Jews, Hanukkah is a relatively minor [*sic*] religious holiday commemorating the recapture and rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem in the second century BC. Christians consider Christmas, which celebrates the birth of Jesus, one of the two most important holidays on the calendar.”

Another, whose “kids are young adults now will on Dec. 24 set aside a moment to light the first Hanukkah candle, then devote the rest of the evening to Christmas. They’ll “lean into Hanukkah” – an eight-day festival – later in the week.”

“Other families are joyfully making a mishmosh of the two.”

One such, “a Christian, and whose chef-husband...is Jewish, will start Christmas Eve at her husband’s restaurant where he will take a break from the kitchen to light the first Hanukkah candle with his family and some of the staff. Then she and the couple’s 8-year-old son will head to church for the Christmas service. They’ll open presents at home the next morning around their Christmas tree – topped with a homemade Star of David – and share bagels and lox with his family. Then, they’ll head to her parents’ house, bringing latkes for her son’s Christian cousins. ‘Living in these times, we don’t feel pressure to be one or the other, or to walk on eggshells around any of this,’ the article quoted her as saying.

The article went on to quote “Sheila C. Gordon, founding president of Interfaith Community, a community and resource for interfaith families, [who] was outraged in 2003 when a character on the TV show ‘The O.C.’ proposed ‘Chrismukkah’ as a compromise for his quarreling interfaith parents.

“‘I hope that our religious differences don’t just deteriorate into, ‘we can all get along by wearing a red yarmulke with white fur,’ said Gordon...who is Jewish and married to an Episcopalian.

“But she says she has come to see the upside of the overlapping holidays – an opportunity to think about the values Christians and Jews share, ‘that we are all children of God, and that the birth of a child has great power and gives people great hope, and that you help other people, especially poor people.’

“That’s true for the Rev. Angel Marrero, a Lutheran pastor in Waltham, whose Jewish husband will meet him at church for the reception after Christmas Eve services.

Back at home, they'll light the fourth candle on their Advent wreath, and complete a Christmas devotional together.

"Then, they'll blow out the Advent candles and light the menorah...

"And then... We will literally open Christmas presents by the light of the Hanukkah candles.'" End of article.

So what is my take? Years ago, I would have answered, "You can't have it both ways." Today I'm a little less dogmatic. It's not about what I would like. It's about what is the reality of the non-Orthodox American Jewish community we are living in. And with the astoundingly high rate of interfaith homes, the issue is, "How do we insure that, from such homes, we will, in the end, see Jewish continuity.

First, let me be clear: I want to welcome interfaith families into our congregation, want them to feel totally welcome here and embraced by us. The alternative to that is, short of their finding a synagogue that will provide such a sense of welcome, is non-affiliation. And in that scenario, we don't have a chance on getting received the word on what we know to be the joyousness of Judaism.

Certainly, we stand for something. We are a Jewish institution, and I for one don't ever want someone who isn't Jewish to be compromising his/her religious integrity when walking through our portals.

With their children, though, we want our Jewish message – and this is the work of our congregation's religious education program – to be fully presented. And while certainly, I believe, that it is impossible for someone to hold certain "truths" of Christianity and Judaism simultaneously (You can't at the same time proclaim Jesus, for instance, both to be and not be the messiah), at the same time we can teach that different religions very much believe different things theologically. And, at the same time also, we can teach that there are so many things that we do share and both promulgate.

The reality is that the homes for which Chrismukkah is the practice of the family are homes that we cannot either deny the reality of or can disparage. The fact, simply, is that they are out there. And I would rather have the families where they are to be part of us, rather, say, simply, that the only affiliation will be in an accepting institution of another faith. In other words, while, no, I am *not* pushing for Chrismukkah observances, at the same time I am not turning my back on those for whom such observances are the new norm either.

Today I would not be trimming those Christmas trees that I trimmed back in high school. On the other hand, as we drive home from services tonight and see the many Christmas-decorated homes out there, I will enjoy the beauty they display even as I

know they belong to someone else. But I would also, had I been invited to a Christian home for a Christmas party, likely have attended. And at the same time, I would happily invite someone of another faith to enjoy Hanukkah with me in my home. We do have things to offer one another and to learn from one another.

And the one thing I believe from all of this is that except for us accepting the reality of what is out there and dealing with it, our faith community will be the worse. And so, my hope is that through this all, like it and/or find it weird or not, we will survive and, in the end, Judaism and our practices and the light from the menorah will still be burning in our windows a generation from now.