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A Rabbi's Christmas

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In order not to raise false hopes in the hearts of those who still have the expectation that one day all Jews will convert to Christianity, it might be best to begin with a few disclaimers. The writer of this article does *not* believe in the Trinity. He does *not* believe that Jesus of Nazareth was either a part of the Godhead or the Messiah expected by the Jews. In other words, the writer of these lines is *not* a Christian.

But the writer of these lines also dissociates himself completely from the annual battle waged each winter by various Jewish organizations against the festival of Christmas, or at least against the public observance of Christmas. For one thing, although he does not himself celebrate Christmas in his own home, he rather likes the sights, the sounds, the smells, and the tastes of Christmas. Nor is he beyond relishing such traditional German Christmas delicacies as *Lebkuchen* and *Stollen*–coming, as he does, from a German–Jewish background where those bakery goods figured prominently in the observance of the Jewish winter festival of Hanukkah. Colorfully decorated Christmas trees and crebches, in the homes of Christian friends and in public places, delight his eyes; the sound of Christmas carols is music to his ears; and he avidly follows the rubrics and the pageantry of the Papal Midnight Mass on his TV screen.

Still, all of that is a matter of mere externals. What really intrigues him is the fact that millions of his non–Jewish fellow human beings are celebrating the birthday of a *Jewish* child. And they are doing so by extolling the values of peace and good will. All the more misplaced, he thinks, are the efforts by some supposedly Jewish organizations to arouse, through their battles against Christmas symbols in public places, the ill will and resentment of Christians–at the very time when the Christian religion, more than at other times of the year, inspires its followers with irenic and philanthropic sentiments.

Suppose that one day half of the world, including the United States, were to take note of the contributions made to human thought by the seventeenth–century thinker of Jewish origin, Baruch Spinoza, by instituting an annual celebration of his birthday–including the public display of Spinoza's lens–grinding workshop. Would the various Jewish organizations now fighting public Christmas displays also fight the public observance of Spinoza's birthday? Hardly. In fact, they might even enthusiastically welcome it–in spite of the fact that Spinoza had severely criticized the faith of his Jewish ancestors, and had been excommunicated by the rabbinical authorities of Amsterdam.

Or what would happen if there were an annual International Sigmund Freud Day, including public displays of replicas of the couch which once stood in Freud's Vienna consulting room? Would Jewish organizations now fighting public Christmas displays fight that display, too? Hardly. In fact, they might even enthusiastically welcome it–in spite of the fact that Freud had proudly proclaimed his own atheism, and had included the religion of his Jewish ancestors among the rest of the world's religions, all of which he described as illusions.

What, then, is so different about celebrating the birthday of that Palestinian Jew through whose influence, as already noted by the great twelfth–century Jewish thinker, Moses Maimonides, the words of Israel's Torah have been spread to the far corners of the earth? Why does the public celebration of the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth, including the public display of replicas of the Bethlehem crebche, arouse such Jewish animosity?

The reasons are varied and complicated. Traditionally, in spite of its role in spreading major Jewish teachings throughout the world, Christianity, to put it mildly, has not been an unmixed blessing for Jews. Not only the words of the Torah were spread throughout the world in Jesus' name; that same name was also invoked when, throughout the centuries, Christians murdered Jews by the thousands, burned them alive, confiscated their goods, restricted the way in which they could earn their livelihoods, and confined them to overcrowded and unsanitary quarters. The Christian ideals of peace and good will did not extend beyond the entrance of the ghetto. This may no longer be the case today. But Jews have long memories. To many of them, the sign of the Cross is still a reminder of pogroms and persecutions. Their attitude toward Christianity and toward Christianity's founder is, therefore, a highly ambivalent one.

That is particularly true of those Jews–and they tend to be the most Orthodox followers of the faith–whose own personal and family background in Eastern Europe still approximated most closely the conditions of Jewish life in the Christian Middle Ages. Those Jews certainly cannot be expected to "enjoy" Christmas.

Yet, and here we come to an apparent paradox, these East European Orthodox Jews are *not* in the forefront of those who protest most vociferously against the public display of Christmas symbols or the public celebration of that festival. In fact, not only are they not in the forefront; most of them have nothing at all to do with the organizations that lead the battle against the public observance of Christmas in the name of *the* "Jewish Community."

That battle is led by a different type of Jew altogether. He or she is most likely to be a secularist of Jewish origin, who has no use for any kind of religion; and that includes the religion into which he or she was born. And in that battle, the secularist of Jewish origin is liable to be joined by a fellow Jew of the Reform Jewish denomination, which–in its increasingly radical departures from traditional Jewish belief and practice–is itself more and more becoming a wing of American secularism. Such Jews seek alliances with all the other secularist forces in the country that want to denude the "public square" of every last trace of religious influence. They keep insisting upon a strict enforcement of the separation of church and state–enforcement to a degree certainly never anticipated by the founders of the republic.

In other words, what we are really dealing with in this annual battle against public Christian observance is not so much a "Jewish" attack on that observance as it is a *secularist* one–with some of the prominent secularists identifying themselves as Jews. They are the same people who fight *non–denominational* prayers in public schools, the use of public school facilities for meetings of high school religious–interest groups, and state support of private schools. They fight with equal vigor the attempts by other Jewish groups to have Jewish religious symbols exhibited alongside the Christian ones, such as the efforts of the Chabad (Lubavitch) group of Orthodox Jews to place a Hanukkah candelabrum on the public square when a Christmas tree is put up there, which would be a fitting demonstration of America's religious pluralism. They are, in other words, not singling out Christianity. They are against the public manifestation of religion *per se*–even (or perhaps particularly) against the public manifestation of the religion of their own ancestors.

The invocation of the First Amendment as authority for the campaign against the public display of any and all religious symbols seems to involve the demand that the state "establish" the religion of Secularism as the official religion of the United States–which would, to say the least, be a rather curious use of the First Amendment. But even if one were to grant, for argument's sake, that the lawyers employed by the American Jewish Congress, the (Reform) Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and similar organizations have established the "true" meaning of the First Amendment, i.e., that the amendment really and truly rules out the public display of a crebche or a Hanukkah candelabrum, one would still be entitled to wonder what those organizations hope to gain by stirring up animosities every winter.

Traditional Jewish teaching includes the principle of *liphnim mishurat hadin* (cf. Babylonian Talmud *Baba Qamma* 100a and elsewhere), which means that, on occasion, it is preferable not to make use of the full extent to which the law, strictly interpreted, entitles one to go. For there is, after all, a "higher law," which is adumbrated in Deuteronomy 12:28, "You shall do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God." Several passages in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount seem to incorporate that principle. It is not a case of "abolishing" the law, but rather, if one so desires–and if one does so to one's own, and not the other person's, hurt–of not pressing the full extent of what the law provides. That, admittedly, may not be an everyday occurrence in traditional Jewish life (although the pious will always strive for it), but it is a manifestation of a higher degree of piety. Some of the ancient rabbis even sought to find biblical basis for such transcendence of biblical law.

It would seem to this writer that, even if the strict constructionists of the separation of church and state could demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that the public display of Christmas symbols infringes upon that "separation," Jews might still prefer to abide by the principle of *liphnim mishurat hadin*, of *not* running to the courts in order to get the spontaneous expression of their neighbors' piety interfered with by the law. After all, what are we to think of a "Judaism" that is so weak that it feels threatened by the display of a crebche at City Hall, or by the sound of a Christmas carol at a public school assembly? Why, then, not show some generosity on the Jewish side at a season of the year when Christians celebrate the birth of the Jew in whose name they proclaim peace and good will to humankind?

And it is, to be quite honest, not *only* a matter of superior generosity. Life in the medieval Christian world–in which, by the way, we no longer happen to live–certainly was no bed of roses for the Jews. But Jews fared infinitely *worse* in those modern societies from which the God of Abraham and of Jesus had been banished. If Jews cannot forget the Middle Ages, they owe it to themselves to remember the most recent past, too. One could argue, therefore, that the very self–interest of the Jews is at stake in preventing the United States from becoming a totally godless society.

Jews may not accept the dogmas and the theology associated with the Christmas story. They would, in fact, cease to be Jews if they did. Nor would they be acting in good taste if, without accepting the Christian belief structure, they were to celebrate Christmas in their own homes. (And it does not help much if they try to justify the Christmas tree in their home by saying that it was originally a pagan, rather than a Christian, custom–as though Judaism approved of paganism!) But they can still recognize in the *Christian* observance of Christmas one of the factors that help maintain the religious character of our society–in which Jews, too, with their own beliefs and practices, and with their very lives, have a considerable stake.

That is why this writer will continue to wish his Christian friends a "Merry Christmas" at Yuletide, and rejoice in the fact that those friends join the angelic choir in proclaiming glory to God in the highest, and peace among humankind on earth. He will most certainly not object at all to the public display of his friends' symbols of religious faith. Indeed, he will continue to be moved by awe and wonder that, through the influence of one of his own remote cousins, some of the words of Judaism's Torah have been spread to the far corners of the earth.

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