

Von: Shel Israel <shel@shelisrael.com>
Gesendet: Donnerstag, 22. Dezember 2022 14:31
An: Dr. Wolf Siegert
Betreff: ISTM #41 A Jew's View of Christmas



ISTM #41

A Jew's View of Christmas

(NOTE: I first posted this in December 2003 and have reposted it every December, tweaking it lightly so it would continue to feel current, which becomes more daunting each year, and this very well may be the last time I post it. In any case, I wish you and yours the happiest of new years.)

I grew up in the 1950s in New Bedford, MA, a working-class and overwhelmingly Christian city. Christmas was indisputably the biggest day of the year. Schools closed and parents enjoyed rare paid days off. The ground was usually covered by snow, and churches were gathering places in almost every neighborhood.

From dawn until dusk, chimes and bells resonated on the days leading to Christmas.

The bells did not chime for me.

I was a Jewish kid. My parents were both born in Europe at a time when it was unfortunate to be Jewish. They got to America before World War 2 broke out. They were infinitely grateful for this good fortune and they were loyal Americans, but always saw themselves as Jews in a Christian land.

I was born here and it would be many years before I fully appreciated the ordeal and challenges of being an immigrant in this alleged land of the free. Somehow all this impacted a certain ambiguity in the House of Israel each year at Christmas.

My parents, brother, and I adored the lights and sounds of Christmas. It had nothing to do with religion, we just loved the decorations and rituals of that time of year.

Every December my folks drove my brother and me around to admire these Holiday sights, and each year they persisted in reminding us that these wonderments were not intended for us, and that Christmas was not a special day for Jewish kids. We were merely observers of a joy to other worlds and shared the as-yet unfulfilled promise of peace on Earth.

Live Reindeer & Lovely Music

Sometimes, we would journey 60 miles to Boston, a two-hour drive, to see the magnificent Boston Common displays.

It was there, I saw my first live reindeer. There were tinsel-covered trees, plastic angels that were taller than me, a spectacular display of blinking lights, and lovely Christmas Carols everywhere.



As we drove home, I remained mesmerized by the experience until my mother reminded us that Christmas was not for us. It was for Christians.

This confused me. I was allowed to stay up later than any other night in the year and we were in Boston, which had to be the largest city on Earth. Why was this not for us, I asked each year and each year I was reminded that Christmas was for Christians and we were not Christian and each year that reminder made my effervescence go flat.

And the confusion continued. Each Christmas, my parents got days off from their jobs and my brother and I enjoyed Christmas vacation from school. We enjoyed a family turkey dinner.

But we hung no stockings by our chimney with care; had no holiday tree, and we received gifts that were never placed by the chimney with care. On this day we ate challah and never, ever, uttered the word Christmas.

Jewish kids were told we were celebrating Chanukah, but we seemed to always be doing it on Dec. 25. We had gifts, and latkes, and the Jewish delicacy of chopped liver. While we didn't do everything the Christian kids did, and we didn't use their terminology, we had our Jewish equivalents.

Dreidels, not Angels

Instead of Carols we sang Chanukah songs and played with toy tops called dreidels. The American name for our holiday was the Festival of Lights, which would have been pretty cool except that our lights paled in the shadow of all that glitter and tinsel on the lawns and roofs, of Christian neighbors, the stores where we shopped and even public schools, and no one objected.



We even got to visit Santa in our local department store, but we could tell he wasn't the real Santa, the one with the red suit and sleigh, the one who employed a bevy of toy-making elves, and traveled via flying reindeer, one of whom had a nose redder than my uncle who drank too much.

While our Chanukah lasted eight days my Christian pals had only one day, theirs was the bonanza, and their gifts featured Lionel electric trains and Schwinn bikes while I got a sweater and socks.



Wondering about Santa

I wondered about Santa. He looked too fat to slide down chimneys and I wondered why he never got hurt or sooty or burned by smoldering embers, and he never triggered burglar alarms. He apparently drank gallons and gallons of cocoa and never had to pee like all the other old people I knew.

And then there was the Christmas story, which is about the miracle of a God's child in a manger, and ours was about a candle that stayed lit in a synagogue. Our most popular Chanukah song was, Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel, which has the same melodic merit as Row, Row, Row Your Boat, and just didn't match the melody of Silent Night. We had no Mormon Tabernacle Choir, no TV special with Perry Como crooning Ave Maria on our 16-inch black-and-white TV.

We never dashed through the snow, laughing even part of the way.

Jewish Machismo

As I grew, however, the story of Chanukah evolved in importance to me. It had a feature that I saw nowhere else--Machismo

The star of our story was Judah Maccabee successfully who kicked the Roman butts out of what is now Israel (not named after me). It was in that spirit that Israel became a state in 1949 as Concentration Camp survivors returned to a land they felt was promised to them.

Times have changed, but when Israel was formed, the stereotyped perception of Jewish male was as a wimp whose greatest aspirations could be found in retailing, law or medicine.



Maccabee made me proud. He was our Iron Man, our Joltin' Joe DiMaggio, our Jackie Robinson. He was Jewish, tough and if you gave him trouble, he could kick your butt.

Many events have shifted perceptions of Jews over the years. Israel's strident and aggressive militancy have virtually eliminated earlier perceptions. Schoolyard bullies have found other newcomers to pick on.

Redefining Heroes

We live in a very different time today. Many of us still enjoy sports heroes who swing bat or pop three-pointers from 45 feet out. Most of us no longer regard masters of war as the heroes as we did in the post World War 2 era when I grew up. Today, I respect people who fight for human and environmental protections over guerilla fighters.

One who gives to those in need and protects those unable to defend themselves. We would still rejoice in a Judah Maccabee capable of turning back powerful, well-equipped invaders so that an oppressed people may enjoy the same sort of freedom that everyone wants.



I have always admired the story of Christ. Likewise, I admire religious leaders of all faiths who evangelize humility, giving, and peace. The current pope is a great example. The American religious right is not.

Still ambivalent

But I digress. My point is that I grew up ambivalent about Christmas and in 2003 when I originally wrote this piece, I was thinking about that, as I drove through what was then the sad city of East Palo Alto (EPA).

It has improved a great deal since then, with the gentrification of some housing, destruction of street gangs and drug overlords, and new corporate residents including Facebook, and brands

like Home Depot, and Ikea. But it was still a dangerous place in 2003, when I sat in my car at a traffic light watching a transaction between a dude in a long leather coat and a kid on a bike, I saw a sign that reminded me about what I envied most about Christmas.

It hung in huge, slightly lopsided letters across University Avenue.



It said: “Peace on Earth.”

This year will be my 79th Christmas and not once has there been anything like peace on Earth. It has been a particularly ugly time with pandemics, layoffs and crazy people being elected to office. We sure could use a little more peace all over this fractured Earth.

Christmas shopping is mostly online, and no parent would allow their kid to sit on Santa’s lap. I have seen no signs, nor have I heard anyone utter the words Peace on Earth. I guess it has become too much to expect these days.

And yet they echo in my mind. It was a great many Christmases ago when I first heard someone say, “Peace on Earth”, and fewer Christmases ago when I came to understand the bigness of the concept and the power of the thought.

Peace on Earth is much, much bigger than Maccabee kicking Roman butt.

Enter Paula Israel

In 1989, I met Paula Berman—pictured above—who is now my wife, Paula Israel. She had loved Christmas all her life but by the time I met her, my ambivalence toward Christmas was in full bloom. I had become more of a Bah-Humbug type.

But Paula loved the planning and decorating; the gifting and wrapping and opening and the silliness of putting ribbons on her head; she loved the cooking and filling the house with unlikely assortments of people who somehow enjoyed each other. It had always been a big deal for her and her daughters Mindi and Melanie. Christmas brought her tidings of comfort and joy.

This became an issue for us. I’d never been able to explain the way I felt about Christmas in any way that made sense to her, and my presence in her life at the season she loved most was like a dart piercing her balloon.

I found myself mulling this over as I sat at that traffic light in 2003, watching a blatantly obvious drug deal in a city where more than one person was being killed every day under a sign proclaiming Peace on Earth.

The moment gave me one of those epiphanies I so often read about but so rarely experienced. It allowed me to see more of what Paula feels. The big thought of the day is about the hope and promise of goodwill for humanity, something we need more of this year than at any point in the many years that I have lived.

There are now two things special about Christmas for me. The first is a big thought, a dream or illusion of peace and goodwill between Earth’s many inhabitants— it’s Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists, Confucians, and even Republicans—at least some of them.

I also hope that we can share at least the common goal of keeping the Earth a fit place for the human race to reside. In my travels, I've come to know people of many faiths and hues, and I always marvel at how very much alike we are when we sit down and try to know each other. I find it in my social media activities where I meet so many people of diverse ethnic origins who share so many of my interests and passions.

Rekindling Hope

It may be a Christian day for you, but for me, it is a day of hope for humankind. It redoubles at times like these when hope seems out of reach for so many.

I may not pray, but I do hope. If you do pray for these issues, I hope they come true, and I will be grateful if prayers bring peace to this very troubled planet.

My second thought is smaller and more personal. It's about Paula and how she catches the season's joy as if it were something contagious. Whatever the germ, I've caught it as I find myself looking forward to the planning, and decorating; the gifting, wrapping, and opening—albeit without ribbons on my head. Monday our home will be filled with unlikely assortments of people and I already know it will work out just fine.

Happy holidays, whichever you choose to observe, and may the New Year bring all of us closer to peace on Earth.

+++

This e-mail has been sent to info@iris-media.com, [click here to unsubscribe](#).