

DECK THE HALLS. OR LIGHT THE CANDLES?

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Christmas was never easy for a young Jewish kid growing up in the 1950s. Everyone seemed to be celebrating the holiday, and I wanted to join the festivities. But somehow, I knew we were different, that we really didn't celebrate Christmas the same way other folks did, and so while I learned some of the carols and exchanged gifts with my friends, I was always aware of the slightly ambiguous situation.

My family was Jewish on both sides. As I recounted in my first Literary Club paper about 20 years ago, my father came from a very orthodox family, headed by a rabbi who had been born in Palestine, but he had rebelled and was not practicing much at all as I grew up. And my mother's family of Russian immigrants was culturally Jewish but not observant. When my elementary school friends began to go to Sunday School, I wanted to go too, and was surprised – and somewhat disappointed – when my parents sent me to a synagogue and not to a church down the block.

All of that was OK, I suppose, and I managed to deal with the situation in Hebrew School on weekends. I began to learn Hebrew, and developed a fledgling sense of Jewish identity, but it was harder in the larger society at

Christmastime. For all of the religious significance, our culture has made Christmas into a monumental secular event, and Christmas was inescapable. Oh, I know that the world celebrates the birth of Christ, along with the miracle of the virgin birth, at the end of December, but that message sometimes gets obscured with all the hoopla that surrounds the holiday. We learned Christmas carols in school – this was a time when it was still possible to sing religious songs in public school – and I loved the music. I liked the decorations, that seemed to go up on city streets earlier and earlier each year. And shopping was fun, too, even for a pre-adolescent kid. It was fine to buy presents for my parents and friends; it was even better to get them myself.

And presents stand out in my mind. Chanukah, of course, extends over an 8-day period, with tradition, at least in America, dictating a present for each day of the holiday. And I liked that a lot. But my family also opened even more presents at Christmastime, as some sort of concession to the culture at large.

We never had a Christmas tree, or a wreath on the door. Somehow, that went over the line. But my mother did send out Christmas cards – usually lovely, homemade cards made by a linoleum-block printing process she learned how to do – that carried a secular and not a religious message. And we always looked forward to the presents. It meant I had new toys to share with my friends at the same time they did, and that made everything easier. I suppose I wanted a tree, too, but contented myself with helping decorate the trees of my friends.

Yet I always felt a sense of ambivalence in these vicarious celebrations, as though I was doing something that I desperately wanted to do, even though I knew somehow that it wasn't quite right.

That sense of religious ambivalence increased when I was in 5th grade and my parents sent me off to summer camp. YMCA camp. Camp Clark in South Sandwich, Massachusetts, to be specific. We lived in New Jersey, but somehow a woman from the area had worked as a nurse at this camp, and eventually she sent her own son there. And then his friends, most of them children of faculty members at Rutgers University, where my father worked, began to go too, and soon there was a healthy contingent of New Jersey kids at this camp. Best of all, the camp was cheap. Many of the campers came from working class families in the New Bedford area, and this was a no-frills experience, affordable for a young faculty member – my father – without a whole lot of money. And I loved it.

When I turned over the acronym YMCA in my mind, I always felt slightly guilty. I knew it stood for Young Men's Christian Association. And I knew that we weren't Christian. But through a process of self-denial – or perhaps cognitive dissonance (whatever that is) – I managed to forget about such wording and simply enjoy what went on. I plunged into the life of the camp, which included a hymn after breakfast every morning, a chapel service on Sunday mornings, and a hymn sing on Sunday evenings. The camp sent the Catholic kids off to Mass in neighboring Hyannis, for they evidently needed special attention. Nobody

even considered Jews, probably because I was the only Jewish kid in camp. Best of all, I was part of the mainstream for the first time in my life.

And so, thanks to that experience, I learned most of the songs in the hymnal. To this day, I can belt out “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” or “On a Hill Faraway Stood an Old Rugged Cross,” or even “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” which was sung just a few weeks ago at my mentor’s memorial service in New Haven. And by the time I became a counselor some years later, I was asked to lead the hymn singing on Sunday nights. Me. The scrawny Jewish kid from New Jersey.

Once, at camp, I had a curious experience. I was usually the only Jewish camp member, but on one occasion, when I was on the staff, we had a Jewish camper, who wanted, and got, special treatment. On each Sunday morning during his stay, instead of going to the chapel carved out in a clearing under the pine trees, at his family’s request, he and I adjourned to another spot in the woods, and had our own version of a Shabbat service. It felt all right at the time, though I felt a haunting resonance with the wonderful Philip Roth story “Defender of the Faith, which appeared in the collection that featured the novella *Goodbye, Columbus*. In that story, which I had read the year before during my freshman year at Harvard, Sergeant Marx, the protagonist, is dealing with Grossbart, a Jewish soldier who is always seeking special favors on the basis of their shared faith. The Captain, Marx’s commanding officer, knows Marx is Jewish, but admires him, even in an age when anti-Semitism was not uncommon, for his

battlefield valor. "I admire you," he says, "because of the ribbons on your chest, not because you had a hem stitched on your dick before you were old enough to even know you had one." And later when Marx is faced with still another unreasonable demand by Grossbart for a favor, because they are both Jewish, he says, "Grossbart, why can't you be like the rest? Why do you have to stick out like a sore thumb? Why do you beg for special treatment?" And that was a question I sometimes asked in such circumstances at Camp Clark. I was OK sitting through a semi-non-denominational service in the pine woods, so why couldn't that kid. But I let it go, and I persevered. And after leading this tiny Shabbat service on Sunday morning, I felt perfectly comfortable leading Christian hymns under the cross on the hill overlooking the lovely lake on Sunday evening. I had no problem. Maybe I just liked to sing.

Christmas came into my life in an even more pronounced way when I began to see the woman who became my wife (now former wife). Her father was an Episcopal minister, and so the family, of course, celebrated Christmas, and I was able to celebrate, too. I sang carols with them at a midnight Christmas Eve service, and generally enjoyed the experience, though by this time, I felt a vaguely disquieting guilt, as if I was doing something that wasn't quite right. Later, several years after we were married, my wife converted to Judaism on her own accord, so that our children would be born Jewish, and that made different kinds of celebrations easier. But I still remember her playing Christmas carols on

the piano at Timothy Dwight College, with a crowd gathered around, belting out the words in full voice.

Later, when I remarried, Sara, too, came from a non-Jewish background. Raised Methodist, and probably Quaker at heart, she was part of a family that relished its huge Christmas tree and liked to go to Church on Christmas Eve. And so I got to sing the carols again, as in our own family we made it a point of celebrating everything – Christmas and Chanukah both – and feeling good about our ecumenical sense in the process. And I was kind of proud that I knew more verses than most members of the family. The only problem in these celebrations is that while I have a stocking, too, it's unlike Sara's in that it doesn't have my name stitched on it (and this after we've been married for 20 years). But I suppose I'll survive.

And so, I still get to enjoy Christmas. Almost 40 years ago, when my father married Bea, she put an end to exchanging presents on Christmas day. But that was OK. Indeed, I think I almost felt a sense of relief. We now do more with Chanukah at home, though as my folks get older, no one really wants presents anymore. But I've still got Christmas in St. Louis, and can look forward to that each year. There are hymns and songs at the Literary Club. In a pattern that continues, to this day, I can have my cake and eat it too. Deck the Halls! Light the menorah candles. At this time of year, I'm ready for whatever comes next.