

“Between Chanukah and Christmas”

This is something like religious no-man’s-land, this strange year with most of month between Chanukah and Christmas.

I’ve always liked it when the calendar allows us to celebrate Chanukah without any spillover from Christmas. By the time everyone else shifts into high gear in the days just before the 25th, we have already lit the lights, fried the latkes, and quietly moved through the eight days of Chanukah, like it really was just our own holiday. Those years when the celebrations overlap, I always feel as if some of our “specialness” is swallowed up in the red and green extravaganza that is America’s Christmas. So it’s always nice when we can have ours— and they can have theirs, with a few days of buffer in between, a sort of “religious no-man’s-land.”

Though the calendar this year allows at least a temporal separation, there is still a social friction that seems to be perpetually problematic. I remember a discussion with 1st grade parents of our Religious School when our talk turned to Christmas in the schools, nativity scenes on the courthouse square and the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. I have spoken often over the years about the “wall of separation” between Church and State, specifically as it would seem to apply to what happens in our public institutions, each year, come December. What surprised me in the discussion with our 1st grade parents, was that as I listened to what I was saying-- it didn’t sound at all like what I had said years before.

The issues sparked by Christmas celebrations in our schools, nativity scenes and huge *menorote* in front of the courthouse, are challenges to what we have always called the "wall of separation" between Church and State. Although the term "wall of separation" appears nowhere in the Bill of Rights, and was in fact first used in a speech by Thomas Jefferson, it has become the most readily identifiable phrase in the ongoing church-state debate, even to the exclusion of the actual words of the amendment. And it should be pretty obvious that if indeed there is a "wall of separation," it is hardly firm, and in fact may be crumbling.

The 1st Amendment to the Constitution states “there shall be no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In 1971 the "establishment clause" was defined by the Supreme Court as forbidding everything from public-school prayers to Christmas trees on the court house lawn. What has happened since that Supreme Court decision is that the state is now more “permissive” than it is “objectively neutral.” We see that *unless* a public religious practice provides benefits to a religion, or a public religious practice compels participation—it is allowed. So even though we “shouldn’t” be singing Christmas carols at a school assembly, or lighting a national Christmas tree at the White House, or erecting a 12 ft electric menorah at the Southfield Civic Center— because these events don’t provide substantive benefits to a particular religion and are not coercive upon the general public, there they are.

In my discussion with parents that Sunday morning, the point was made that if something is wrong, should we not at least try to correct it? Should not our parents object to carols by the choir, tree ornaments as crafts projects, and Christmas assemblies? Yes, we should voice our objections— but to what end? I have come to realize, over the years, that though some battles are worth fighting-- they not worth winning! And perhaps more importantly, we tend to choose the wrong venue in which to engage the issue.

What do we gain, as a Jewish community, if we insist that our Christian neighbors not set up a creche on public property? Granted, the nativity scene should not be funded from city, state or country coffers, but what is won if we disallow a donated display? I’m tired of hearing: “Why won’t they let us proclaim our celebration of ‘peace on earth, goodwill toward men’?”. And even if our objections to school or city officials do manifest a change, how significant is it, really, when the creche is replaced with Santa Claus? Yes we should fight for principles that affect how I live, how I do business, or where I go to pray. Yes we should be diligent and protective of our rights of privacy and personal privilege, freedom of movement and assembly, and from persecution and

oppression. But I do not believe that *these* rights lay threatened at the bottom of the “Santa Claus” slippery slope. December, it seems to me, is a time to be graciously permissive, even though publicly disapproving.

I surprised myself a bit when I said that to our parents. I remember past objections that I raised in Indiana about public Christmas displays and school programs. I remember my frustration at having Christian celebrations imposed on my children in elementary school, and of course my own unease, long ago, when I sang in the 3rd grade choir and had to decide what I would do with *Silent Night*. I surprised myself to hear how much I had apparently mellowed. And I suppose I only now, fully realize, that singing *Silent Night* did not, in the long run, take much away from my Jewish identity, nor did similar events for my kids when they were young, affect in any way, their sense of Jewishness.

But that does not mean that we ought to be passive in the face of what still is an inappropriate conjunction of Church and State. I told our parent group that as a representative of the Jewish community, I would always speak out for proper separation, and that as an individual rabbi, I have additional options. When asked to participate in the dedication of a public Christmas/Chanukah display, I have and will say that because I think such displays violate church/state separation, I cannot lend my presence to the effort. When public school teachers invited me to their classes to teach about Chanukah, that the children may hear it “from a real Jewish rabbi”, I explained that I would be happy to teach about Chanukah—just not at this time of year, when it “might appear” that my Chanukah presentation validates a Christmas “recognition”. Bringing *both* into the class, only makes it doubly wrong.

And recently, others are stepping up to the front line of this battle. As the American Muslim community has become more secure and settled in public life, they are taking up, in their own self-interests, the call for public separation. We are, of course, supportive of their efforts, and quietly pleased that as they fight the Christmas windmill, they’re taking the heat off the Jewish community!

I have come to believe that our community’s response to the public display, commemoration and observance of Christmas, and for that matter Easter, ought to be one of persistent objection, followed by permissive resignation. While it is always important to register our public disapproval of church/state violations, it is far more important that we deal with those issues in our homes. I said earlier: “we tend to choose the wrong venue in which to engage this issue,” meaning that if we are concerned about not confusing our children, we need to make decisions about what happens, on a regular basis, in our homes. In the long run, it is not the singing of *Silent Night* in school, or the courthouse crèche that will affect our children—it is the clear (or not so clear) message of Jewish identity they receive at home that will form and fashion their sense of Jewish well-being.

I told our 1st grade parents that the most important Jewish gift they can give their kids is the unqualified and straight-forward message that theirs is a Jewish family. It doesn’t matter if one of the parents is not Jewish, or if there are non-Jewish grandparents or relatives, it’s only important that our children recognize from early on that theirs is a Jewish home, identified as a Jewish family that celebrates with its community in the synagogue. Children who know who they are, who sincerely appreciate and identify with a singular faith-tradition, are able to easily move through and interact with the non-Jewish world without problems or anxieties. It is only when we are not clear in the religious messages we give our children, that they become confused and unsure of themselves, and begin to challenge parents with identity questions.

Children who know who they are, and why they “do Jewish” as a family and with their community, are able to share in the Christmas celebrations of their Christian friends or family members, in *their* homes, without wondering why they can’t do it also in their own homes. We share Christmas and Easter, and even church on Sunday with our friends, with our relatives, even with Mom or Dad—because we love them, because we want to be a part of their lives. Since Christmas and Church belong to them, we can visit that joy and celebration, we can rejoice with them. But because ours is a Jewish home, because my family has, as a family, made that faith commitment, why would I even ask about bringing “their” celebration into “my” home?

We all know the reality that in America we live in a non-Jewish, if not a blatantly Christian, world. We have chosen not to segregate ourselves from or refuse to interact with our neighbors. And we do not engage “Christian America” with a self-righteous and disdainfully defensive posture. We teach our children that they must step confidently into the world, with self-assurance and determination, engaging society, that they may become successful within it.

So instead of becoming upset when our children bring home a tree ornament from a school crafts project, we need to nod knowingly, so that our children understand that we understand that even though *they* think of their Christmas as everybody’s Christmas— *we* know it is not. And so, we should say, “Who has a tree that we can give this nice ornament to?”

This religious no-man’s-land between Chanukah and Christmas gives a breather to get our bearings. And if we haven’t, in our homes, *already* made the distinction that because we are Jews we do things one way, even though Christians often do things differently— well, there’s always next year. The issues are not about to go away! We find ourselves “between” Chanukah and Christmas, but that’s what happens when we choose to live Jewish lives in a non-Jewish world. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

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