

A Rabbi Family's December Dilemma

"Some Jews have Christmas and some Jews don't. We don't but I want one of those round things you hang on the door."

So says the rabbi's kid

What happens when the rabbi's family is the only one without Christmas?

Our small remote resort town Jewish community is amazing - almost all of our families hail from multiple traditions and we still maintain a great sense of Jewish identity for us and our kids. With many of us having non-Jewish spouses and family members, almost all of us have Chanukah and Christmas and still maintain a strong sense of Jewish family - this is a success story.

And yet, the rabbi will not have a wreath (or a tree or Santa)!

My American Jewish kishkes (gut) says quite clearly that Jewish homes, especially emblematic Jewish homes of rabbis, don't have Christmas.

I love the compromises that our community's families have managed, such as: "we do Christmas for Mommy (or Daddy) even though it isn't our holiday" or "Christmas is time for a family get-together and Chanukah is our holiday". I have a lot of sympathy with these solutions.

Up until now, in addition to providing Jude with a rich Jewish home and social life, our idea on Christmas was to travel and spend it with Ginny's family. Ironically, due to seasonal illness, we haven't done this in the last few years, so Jude has never joined us for his grandmother's Christmas. Perhaps, if he had a history of knowing this, we wouldn't have the issues with him over Christmas this year.

Since we can't lock ourselves in our home for one month every year, our solution this year is:

We are NOT putting a wreath on our front door, or on the grill of our car.

We will celebrate Christmas at Jude's non-Jewish grandmother's home, and Santa will deliver there.

When he encountered Santa in a public place, we let Jude sit on his lap (and took a photo), hoping that Santa would be a smelly repellent person, which unfortunately wasn't the case.

We say "Christmas isn't a Jewish thing," instead of "Jews don't do Christmas".

We attempt to let Jude explore Christmas without making it a taboo.

I truly believe that we get to learn from and have a richer life when we experience lots of cultures and traditions. I know Jude will choose his own Jewish path, and I am relatively confident that letting him explore his Santa issues now will enrich that path in the future.

We'll see what we have to come up with next year!

So, in response to my last piece, my cousin Emily Skaftun asks, quite reasonably:

“What about thinking of x-mas as a secular holiday, akin to Independence Day or Halloween? I know I do. I celebrate x-mas, to some degree, without being a Christian. Christians are always complaining that we've taken Jesus out of x-mas, but perhaps you could use that to your advantage!”

That's the funny thing about my background and Christmas - I am totally fine with the secular nature of Christmas outside of my home, but the line in the sand starts around my physical dwelling.

As a Jew from New York, Christmas was entirely an external cultural event. My Jewish parents' anniversary was Christmas Eve, so they often went out for Midnight Mass, not as a religious event, but for a cultural concert with good music. Once they even ran into the rabbi who married them at Midnight Mass! Our family custom was to go to the ballet to see *The Nutcracker* in December. I love Dr. Seuss' *The Grinch*, and bawl like a baby every time I watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. That is to say that I have an emotional attachment to the secular celebration of the spirit of Christmas - family, community, caring, kindness.

None of this touched or influenced the practice that took place inside our home - we did Chanukah, and Christmas stuff wasn't for us, even if we watched Christmas specials on TV. A defining understanding of Jewish culture has always been “no Christmas” - the inclusion of a tree into one's house in December was historically viewed as the end of strong Jewish identity. This isn't felt in the same way today, but such an instinct still resides deeply in my personal cultural fabric.

Jews in general seem to have no problem embracing other big American secular celebrations that have non-Jewish origins - Thanksgiving and Halloween are widely and enthusiastically observed by Jews of many denominations and identities without raising the specter of assimilation.

Despite the inherently secular nature of contemporary Christmas, I feel at its heart, and in my “kishkes”, that Christmas is “not-Jewish”. Even though none of its symbols originate in Christianity, and its observance has little Christian content for most Americans, the incorporation of Christmas into a Jewish home has always been a sign of surrender - the last straw of Jewish identity being tossed out the window so that we could “pass” as members of the majority culture.

The celebration of Christmas in my home would be capitulating to majority culture. I revel in the non-normal status of being an American Jew - doing the different thing that very few others do. Difference is cool after all, and Christmas seems like the ultimate surrender to a mass idea. Assimilation, the evil against which minority cultures strive, looms at our doors tempting us to look and act like everyone else. It's been said before, and I have to agree, that the America that I love is the mixed salad, lots of different flavors independently enhancing each other, not the melting pot, dissolving differences into one flavorless mush.