

Christmas and the Jews

Another Christmas has come and gone. Jews variously enjoyed it, were indifferent to it, and troubled by it.

There are two Christian holidays which especially impinge on the Jews: Easter and Christmas, but they have two quite different effects. Easter is a religious occasion, pure and simple, related to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the central drama of Christianity. Easter has also been related historically to the Christian oppression of Jews.

On Easter Eve, 1144, when the dead body of a young apprentice named William was found in Norwich, England, the story was spread that he was killed by the Jews in order to mock the Easter Passion. The story was further embellished: Christian blood was needed by the Jews in order to remove the foetor Judaicus (the "Jewish odor" with which Jews were supposed to have been born); or the blood was to be used in the Passover rites. In 1177, the entire Jewish community of Blois was exterminated on the basis of the Easter blood libel. Easter has always lent itself to anti-Jewish pogroms.

Christmas is of a different temper. In Jewish medieval literature, Christmas was known as Nittel, from the base "natal," meaning "birth." Indeed, the day corresponding to December 25 was an ancient festival of rejoicing, celebrating the birthday of the sun. It is the time when the sun starts to make longer daily appearances. The Gospels suggest that Jesus was born sometime in the Spring or Summer, but that birthday began to be celebrated by Christians on December 25 in about the third century, perhaps as a substitute for the ancient pagan festival

of rejoicing.

Whatever its origin, Christmas has of course become a religious Holy Day. However, it has also taken on other qualities, especially in America; it has become a general cultural holiday. Atheists, agnostics, humanists, non-Christians and non-serious Christians of all kind, have embraced it as a secular holiday - which it has been officially declared; a time off in which to have parties, exchange gifts, and generally be festive, often in the old pagan mode.

All of this is understandably dismaying to serious Christians who emphasize the religious dimensions of the holiday.

And all of this created a bit of confusion for American Jews. If they were raised in America, it is likely that their childhood experience marked this as a time of universal vacation, lights and giddy merriment, starting the general celebration of the secular new year. Most of them hum carols, non-devotionally unthreatened; festive Christmas does not carry the ominous, brooding overtones of Easter.

Nevertheless, the organized Jewish community is wary. It will not fight cultural aspects of Christmastime; it could not win that fight, even if it wanted to. But the Jewish community properly remains alert to any tendency to make the religious aspects of Christmas official, or government-sponsored.

Making the distinction between the religious and the cultural, however, is often a tenuous business, and a source of constant debate within the Jewish community.

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This season, one San Francisco school set up a Christmas tree, without religious symbols, and a Nativity Scene. The Nativity Scene was removed, at the insistence of the Jewish community; the tree was not. Is that a proper result?

A handful of Christmas carols have been traditional school fare. They continue to be - but increasingly, school officials have tried to keep these songs away from any explicitly devotional framework; and have added Jewish songs to the program to emphasize the cultural context. Is that a proper result?

Perhaps you have a comment on this continuing debate. Everyone else does.