

The Menorah and the Wreath
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The imprint for the holidays is stamped upon us long before we even have words. Holding the baby up to see the menorah. Carrying the toddler down the stairs to look at the twinkling red and green and blue lights on the tree. Big smiles and music, potato latkes or Swedish meatballs, and no holds barred on the sugar. Candy canes and cookies or dreidels spun for chocolate coins. A home that is suddenly full of talking and laughing – or arguing, another holiday tradition, I'm afraid – and people we don't see all the time. So many changes in our little worlds for which we have absolutely no understanding. Well, no verbal understanding, that is. Somewhere inside, I think we were learning a lot.

All of these things will imprint on you, perhaps as deep down as the reptilian brain. Similarly, if you did NOT have big, buoyant holidays, or if they were tense and difficult, that imprints on a child before there are words, too. You have no language to make sense of this. In fact, it goes much deeper than things that make sense. That may just be why we go so nutty this time of year. It has nothing to do with what you believe, or what religion you practice, but everything to do with who you are. Christmas and Hanukkah both have a lot to do with who we are. Identity, memory, our sense of tribal belonging. We carry these with us.

So kick this up a few notches when you have partners who grew up in different faiths, most notably for our discussion today, Christians and Jews. It all has to be negotiated. In fact, Robin Abrahams, also known to Boston Globe readers as Miss Conduct, an etiquette columnist, thinks that interfaith couples may have an advantage over others, because we negotiate how we will celebrate the holidays. She makes it sound so easy.

Take my first holiday with Robert. We had been dating for about three months, and I was trying to figure out how to celebrate the holidays with my handsome, new Jewish boyfriend. I already knew that his family had not made much of Hanukkah since he was a very young child. Christmas was just fine, he said, knowing how much his pretty, non-Jewish girlfriend loved Christmas. Looking back, we could have talked more. But as a romantic, I wasn't ready to be so practical. I asked my best friend, who happened to be a rabbi – can't get more

authoritative than that, right? I asked her what I should do for him. She said that as a child she had always wanted one of those fancy, embroidered Christmas stockings. “One with my name on it”, she said dreamily. Great! I thought.

My own imprint of Christmas as a child was lavish, over the top, and it had been many years since I had had anyone to really lavish all this pent-up Christmas energy upon. So I didn't just go to the kiosk at the mall that personalized Christmas stockings while-u-wait, uh-uh. I got a pattern and some fabric and *sewed* him a Christmas stocking, and embroidered “Robert” across the top. That didn't seem like quite *enough*, so I also sewed little jingle bells on it. It was adorable. Then of course I stuffed it with fun toys and an orange, and presented it to him on Christmas morning. We should have talked more. He looked about as excited as someone trying to look excited could be. He also looked very tired. It was not what I had imagined.

He didn't know what to do with a stocking at Christmas, it was definitely not part of his imprint. Nor did he know what to do with it afterwards. A few months later, I was doing laundry at his house, and putting away his things, I found it in his sock drawer. Well it is a sock, I guess. I was disappointed, but more than that, puzzled by this glaring difference between us. Neither of us was particularly Christian or Jewish in any kind of religious sense, so what was the problem? It was the first difference between us that went beyond anthropology, that was not merely interesting.

We were a bit more honest with one another about the holidays after this. I've since learned that Robert struggles during the month of December. It's known among some Jews as simply “the December Dilemma”. Another Jewish friend of mine explains it this way: “I'm cranky because there's this big party that I'm not invited to. And then I think, ‘But I don't WANT to be invited.’ And I'm still cranky about it.” So having some respite from the holiday can be important. Robert relishes his teaching at the Jewish Community Center. He calls it a “Christmas-free zone”. He learned that I love Christmas trees, and has grown accustomed to having one – even offered to go with me to get it this year. We light a menorah, when we remember to. These are, apparently, beloved, traditional Jewish words to say around the holidays: “Shoot, we forgot to light the menorah!” I've learned that a little compassion for his Christmas blues goes a long way. He's learned that a little concerted effort toward lightening up is a gracious gift to me.

I know that there are quite a few interfaith families in our congregation, so in preparation of this sermon, I sent out an e-mail query to some of you. I found it quite reassuring, since I still feel like a novice as a non-Jewish, Christmas-loving spouse. Families have to learn how to do the holidays, I realized. We may not be automatically good at it. Interfaith families in particular.

Pam Finkelman wrote me, “Yes, there is some struggling, and I let Roy pick and choose his level, or refusal, to participate in the events of the season. However, I would say he has been a good sport and I attempt to be sensitive. [Our two sons] have had the best of both worlds: lots of eating and presents without having to memorize catechisms or Torah passages.” Their boys did learn enough Hebrew to say the blessings over the menorah, and were allowed to light it at fairly young ages. Pam says that she had to learn not to give presents to them each night of Hanukkah, apparently, since “the boys began to jump up and down with matches in their hands in anticipation.”

Several of you said that for you, Christmas was a national holiday, an American holiday, or even a Pagan holiday. David Klein's grandparents started celebrating Christmas right away when they moved to America. It was their new country's custom. It wasn't until world war two, he said, that they began to feel guilty, that they weren't being true to their Jewish heritage.

The times in which we live can have a lot to do with how comfortable we are in mixing identities. In times of ease and acceptance, it becomes easier for Jews to choose whether or not they wish to mix traditions. Robert pointed out to me that it is a modern phenomenon for people to choose whether or not they will identify as Jews. In other times and places, this identity is thrust upon them.

As one Jewish website put it, “Hanukkah is a minor holiday with the same theme as most Jewish holidays. They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat.”

David Brooks, columnist for the New York Times, wrote in his excellent column last Friday that the story Hanukkah itself has much to do with keeping Jewish identity as much as defending Jewish worship. The Maccabees, whom he said could best be described as “moderate fanatics” were militantly enforcing their notion of who was Jewish and who was not. After rededicating the temple, he says, “their regime quickly became corrupt, brutal and reactionary.” So, he says,

“Hanukkah is a holiday that accurately reflects how politics is, how history is, how life is.” (“The Hanukkah Story”, New York Times, December 11, 2009)

And in a way, so is Christmas. A few years back, there was a lot of flap about the so-called “war on Christmas” by some Christian triumphalists. They were not so happy with all this mixing, with substituting the phrase “happy holidays” for “merry Christmas”. The pagan or secular versions of “their” holiday became too much for their taste. “Christians were urged to fight this 'war',” says Robin Abrahams of the Boston Globe, “by sticking proudly to their guns and wishing everyone around them a Merry Militant Christmas. This is utterly ridiculous – and utterly against the spirit of Christmas.” (“How to Survive the Holidays Without Angering Your Family, Annoying Your Friends and Alienating Your Neighbors” by Miss Conduct, aka Robin Abrahams, Boston Globe November 19, 2006) And if there was a war, well, I'm afraid the pagans have won it. Or rather, we have reverted back to our pagan roots, and are celebrating Yule, which preceded Christmas by centuries, and for which the birth stories of Jesus were celebrated on December 25 – solstice.

“Hallelujah, Christmas is largely a secular celebration for most people!” writes Rebecca Fisher, who admits to deep irritation with all the expressions of Christian triumphalism this time of year. (Amen, Rebecca!) “Scott and I have a pretty stress-free Christmas together,” she says, “with a tree, a modest lawn display, some cookie-baking, and plenty of gifts. We love taking the kids out to various light displays. It hasn't been a big deal.”

David Weiss wrote that yes, there would be arguments about decorations and trees and excess – like buying an ornament at every single Christmas Shoppe in America. (Um, is there something wrong with that?) “But,” he says, “I did enjoy trimming the tree. Kathi did light the Menorah a number of years. We talked to each other and to (her son) Michael about how we celebrated and didn't celebrate the holidays. And so each of us saw the world from another perspective.”

Sometimes I think that when it comes to this time of year, we can take all the different beliefs and religions and cultures and make just two basic categories: people who want to make a fuss about holidays, and people who don't. And living together - finding room to respect the worth and dignity of each person - is

something that we must learn how to do. In other words, if you're not great at it right away, don't feel bad. It takes practice.

And things may be allowed to change within families. Now, David Weiss says, without a child living at home, they don't do as much celebrating of either holiday. And that's fine with both of them. Miss Conduct of the Boston Globe says that allowing yourself to change the way you celebrate the holidays over the years is important.

The culture around us evolves. “The Trees of the Dancing Goats” is a sweet story, and a true story – it really happened to Patricia Polacco and her family. I love its magic and generosity, its bold risk-taking and abiding friendship. It is set in the early 1950s, and in our time, we forget what it must have been like to be a Jewish family in rural Michigan. Her sweet grandmother and grandfather, her bubbe and zayde, in Yiddish, were not able to return to the Ukraine or Georgia, the story says. What it does not say is that this is because they were driven out in a pogrom. What it does not say is that the Holocaust is a fresh memory for this family. Jewish families that emigrated to America before the late '30s counted themselves blessed.

Friendships between Jews and Christians was not automatic in these times. “Friendship means something,” says her grandfather, whose very life had depended on such friendships. Even in America. The presence of anti-Semitism in the 1940s and '50s was more common than its absence, especially in rural places, which meant anywhere outside New York. We hadn't even coined the term “interfaith family” or “mixed marriage” when this story takes place.

Lew and Mary Collat were married in 1955, in front of the angel window that had been in our church downtown Wilmington, now in Brunner Chapel upstairs. The Unitarian church was often the only place an interfaith couple could marry, and it has certainly helped many people find a spiritual home to raise their children in a way that tries to respect both heritages.

A number of years ago, the UUA published a pamphlet for interfaith couples considering our religion. In answer to the question, “Do I have to convert to become a Unitarian Universalist?” they answer, “Religious conversion means giving up one faith to take on another. If you become a part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we do not ask you to give up the religious convictions of your heritage. We do ask you to bring those convictions with an open heart and

an inquiring mind, knowing that others in the congregation bring their own ideas and beliefs that may not be the same as yours.”

No matter what your previous history with religion, holding strong convictions and keeping an open heart and inquiring mind is asked of each one of us in our church, and is no easy task. Listening to what someone else believes or how they practice – and not arguing with them in your head, not thinking that what they are saying somehow cancels out what you believe – is a spiritual discipline that you learn how to do here. It too takes practice.

It is much, much easier in our country to marry someone of a different faith these days, especially Christians and Jews. And yet the work of accepting people across differences is ongoing. The urge to “make everybody the same” and not honor differences, the assumptions we make about how someone in a religious minority – or any minority - feels are still too easy to make. We are by no means perfect in this regard.

There are some universal messages in the holidays. Aaron Hamburger wrote, “I don't think of Christmas as the birth of 'our savior', but the birth of hope.” Lighting Hanukkah candles is a way to keep light in the darkness, to keep your ancestors in your heart, to honor their struggles, and to celebrate the possibility of miracles.

Mary and Lew Collat write, “Christmas and Hanukkah have for us and our children been an opportunity to light our heirloom menorah and enjoy the greens and lights of our tree, reminding us that dark days are followed inevitably by light.” Amen, Mary, Amen, Lew. Merry Christmas and Happy Hanukkah, to all who try every day to help bring the world more understanding and more light.