

December 23, 1971

Deprive Them:
Can Christmas permissiveness fail
to weaken Jewishness of the
coming generation?

A Jewish parent's lot is not a happy one at Christmas time. Even if one lives in a preponderantly Jewish community it is still impossible to keep one's child unaware of Christmas, Christmas trees, Santa Claus, Christmas carols and the themes and greetings of the season. These converge on everyone from the street, from the shopping centers, from radio and television, literally from every portion of the atmosphere.

If the family lives, as I did for the major part of my life, in preponderantly Christian communities, then the problem is aggravated by the presence of the child's friends in the street and his classmates in school. I sincerely believe that many Jewish parents simply found the challenge too difficult to cope with and that is why they indulged their children Christmas trees and dreams of Santa Claus.

I am not so sure that it was a genuine desire to escape their Jewishness or to commit treason against their ancestral heritage that prompted them to embrace Christmas and "be like all the nations." It was rather a sense of hopelessness in the face of an environment that engulfed them and against those pressures they felt like lost sheep.

For children too it has not been easy. One of my dearest friends tells the story about his four-year-old grandson in a Midwestern university town who attends a pre-kindergarten school run by University psychologists. He came home from school one day bubbling over with excitement about Santa Claus. His mother explained to him that he was Jewish and they did not believe in Santa Claus but while she thought the boy understood, he went

out to play and came back a few minutes later only to say, "Mommy, maybe Santa Claus doesn't know we're Jewish."

What is one to do in such a situation?

I can only suggest several approaches but in the final analysis every parent must solve this problem in the light of his or her own way of life and within the scope of his or her own religious commitment.

The easy way out, already suggested, is to pretend that Christmas is an American holiday and that the child is simply acting as an American when he or she participates in what is the hallmark of his environment during the Christmas season. Yet the parent ought to be forewarned that while this course may be an easy one to take it is fraught with many evil consequences.

First, the parent is forfeiting the first real opportunity to make the child aware of the fact that he or she is different. The time to make the child aware of this is not when the child is prepared to assimilate and intermarry but rather when the child is young and in the process of having his or her character molded.

Second, the child will become aware of differences sooner or later and when that happens he will be angry at his parents for having concealed the facts of real life. Third, parents might thus induce in the child an ambivalence with regard to his or her own Jewishness and at the same time the child may lose his respect for his parents because they were spineless and without a sense of their own identification.

In addition this approach is an insult to Christians. For Christians, Christmas is a religious holiday and when Jews embrace it as if it were a national celebration without any theological implications we are demeaning the religious meaning of the holiday to devout Christians. That is why there are so many posters around reminding Christians that they should put the "Christ" back into Christmas.

This is a subtle "dig" to Jews who secularize the festival, commercialize it, reap profits of business, and denude the holiday of its profound religious significance. In that way we do damage not only to the child but to the image of the Jews in Christian eyes. Certainly such an easy way out, which has such dire consequences, is to be avoided.

Another approach which I used myself but do not regard as necessarily the best one is to make Chanukah so attractive in one's home and within the ranks of one's family that the glamour of Christmas is lost.

When my wife and I raised two young boys in a Long Island community which was preponderantly Christian we celebrated the eight nights not only with candles but with gifts every night and with parties and celebrations all through the week to such an extent that the Christian friends of our children wondered why they couldn't be Jewish. Perhaps this was a compliment to my wife's ingenuity and in that way we spared our children any sense of hurt that they were being disadvantaged because they were Jewish.

Certainly eight nights filled with presents and candle-lighting can compete favorably with one night even if several stockings are filled. We spared our children a sense of hurt and at the same time communicated to them a sense of Jewish identity which they never lost despite the fact that they spent at least a decade on university campuses and never lost their pride in being what they are. Yet I am not so sure that even that is the only or the best way.

Perhaps I should want to make Chanukah a very attractive festival but I am becoming more and more convinced that it is important that as early as possible a Jewish child should be made aware of the fact that to be Jewish also means to sacrifice, to be denied, to be challenged by privation.

I am becoming more and more convinced that we have failed as parents and grandparents because we did not allow our children often enough to be without that which they craved. Moreover I would want them to know that this denial is because they are Jewish. Of course it is important to have them feel their lives are enriched because they are Jewish but equally important is the knowledge that because they are Jewish they cannot have everything. They must sacrifice. They must even suffer.

Not too long ago I raised a very important question with my congregation. Indeed it was suggested by one of our members. Is it right to teach children about a God who wants Abraham to sacrifice his favorite son upon an altar to prove his devotion? What kind of a God is that? What kind of compassion does He have?

Recently this topic was discussed by a Christian woman who never wanted to hear the story of the binding of Isaac because she

felt the story was so inhumane that it made her sick every time she heard it. She finally discovered after very careful self-analysis that she loathed the story because when she was a child she suffered from a very severe illness which required long surgery and she had the most vivid recollection of her father delivering her to the hospital to men in white who performed the surgery giving her only a local anesthesia. This horrible memory she always associated with Abraham placing his son upon the altar. She then understood why she never wanted to hear the story.

However, my problem was that this question has never been raised by Jews before. Why is it that in thousands of years of pondering the subject no one questioned the wisdom of narrating the story unto children?

It occurred to me that the reason this question did not bother Jews of antiquity was that they saw nothing wrong in having children understand from their earliest childhood that to live Jewishly means to sacrifice; to live Jewishly means to be prepared to do without.

I am becoming more and more convinced that it is important for Jewish children not to be sheltered. Perhaps that is why they are not prepared for Jewish living when they grow up. Perhaps that is why they are incapable of assuming leadership in the Jewish community even though they say they want it. They are simply unprepared for the sacrifices that leadership involves.

Even sacrificial giving is more often made manifest by Jewish adults than by Jewish youth. This is the consequence of our having been so careful for so long to see to it that our children had everything and were denied nothing.

Perhaps the Christmas season is the time to have children have their first experience with being denied something because they are Jewish. Because of the dietary laws my children have been denied for a long time many opportunities to eat what they might have wanted then, but a line was drawn. There were only some things they could eat and not others. Perhaps they coveted those who could eat everything. But that was the beginning of their Jewish education - knowing what it is to deny one's self because one is Jewish.

In any event only a fool would venture to say that he had all the answers. I do not want to be a fool. I have no final answers.

However, I submit all of these considerations for the guidance of parents who cannot help but be troubled at this season of the year because they love their children dearly. The ultimate question is: Do we not sometimes demonstrate our love more by denying than by giving?