



A Jewish Mom's Dilemma

Should I try to compete with the Christmas spectacle? **By LINDA K. WERTHEIMER**

An illuminated plastic snowman glowed in the yard and multicolored lights twinkled on pine trees and the home's eaves. My 3-year-old son gasped in his car seat. "Wow, look at those lights," Simon said. "Mom, I want to put lights on our trees."

"Those are for people who celebrate Christmas," I said. "We don't celebrate Christmas."

"Yes, we do," he replied, his voice climbing to the whine octave. "We celebrate Happy Christmas."

Ever since Christmas decorations began appearing around town just after Thanksgiving, this exchange has grown familiar to our Jewish family. Last year, Simon was oblivious to them. This year, every time he sees Christmas lights, he wants them, too.

"Remember, we have a holiday where we light candles," I told him. "We also play with the dreidel and eat latkes."

"Hanukkah," he said. "I want to celebrate Happy Christmas."

I'm not the first Jewish parent to face this conundrum. How do I make sure that my son's fascination with the Christmas spectacle doesn't diminish his enthusiasm for his family's religion? If I don't make Hanukkah a bigger deal, will Simon start to think that Christianity

is just more fun than his own religion?

Hanukkah marks a military victory and celebrates a miracle, but its lore offers no Santa Claus or toy-making elves and no sleigh driven by flying reindeer. Instead, we have *Saturday Night Live's* Hanukkah Harry, who delivers presents by flying on a donkey-led cart. For Jewish parents, it's impossible to compete.

Christmas makes Jewish parents worry about how to keep their children from feeling marginalized, though their response to that concern has changed over time. For instance, until the 1960s plenty of Jewish parents put up Christmas trees, says Rabbi Joshua Plaut, a former MIT chaplain and author of an upcoming book about Jews' responses to Christmas. But after Israel's 1967 victory in the Six-Day War,

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he says, Jewish pride grew in the United States, and many people no longer felt the need to include anything Christmas in their home.

"Increasingly, Jews are looking at Christmas as something Christian but saying, 'Ah, we have a ready alternative, so we don't have to do Christmas,'" says Jonathan Sarna, a Brandeis University professor of American Jewish history. "We can do parallel activities on Hanukkah. As Hanukkah has become inflated, that has become easier." Jews have developed alternative rituals, such as volunteering, going out to dinner at a Chinese restaurant, or catching a klezmer band concert.

And, yet, I still wonder about my little boy, who is so in love with Christmas lights. I don't really want to engage my family in a Hanukkah-vs.-Christmas contest. Hanukkah may not be the most important Jewish holiday, but I want Simon to be proud of who he is.

Rosalie Gerut, who has a 10-year-old daughter, says she used to string clear lights inside her house to emphasize that Hanukkah is the festival of lights. But the lights became unnecessary as her daughter began to appreciate Hanukkah more, says Gerut, director of adult programming at Kerem Shalom in Concord. However, they still go to every Hanukkah party they can, and Gerut's daughter receives gifts from friends and relatives. "Do we do it to keep up with Christmas?" Gerut muses. "I think in a way we do."

My family will not put up holiday lights, but we will let Simon share in some of his neighbors' Christmas celebrations. We just attended Lexington's holiday concert, which featured Santa as a guest star, and an office party where Santa handed out gifts. However, we drew the line at letting Simon sit on Santa's lap, even though it was something my mother let me do when I was a kid. I didn't want Simon to hear a question that isn't for him: "What do you want for Christmas, little boy?"

So this year, we will again create a theme for each night of Hanukkah – Simon will get a book on book night; on menorah night, we'll give him one modeled after Noah's Ark. He will get intangible gifts, too: time with friends and family as we play dreidel, eat latkes, and watch flames dance on candles lighted by hands big and small.

Simon, I'm sorry there will be no Happy Christmas in our home this year, but you'll still have a very happy Hanukkah. I hope.

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