

## **The December Dilemma: Turning Holiday Blues Into Holiday Blessings**

By Rabbi Debra Orenstein

*The following advice was written for a class of prospective converts to Judaism, many of whom were already partners in a Jewish household. Not every Jew experiences a "December Dilemma," but many do. I hope that this essay will prove useful for those who choose Judaism, those who were born into it, and those who serve and teach Jews.*

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For Jews and non-Jews alike, there are many lovely aspects of the Christmas season. You don't have to be Christian to appreciate beautiful decorations, sparkling lights, frequent parties, and good holiday cheer. But Christmas can also represent a challenge for Jews, and especially for Jews by choice. If you used to have a tree, it can feel "less than" to admire other people's trees. It may be difficult to know how to relate to the customs and celebrations of a Christian family of origin.

Hanukah, while a significant historical holiday, is not the Jewish equivalent of Christmas. It doesn't have the importance or pageantry in the Jewish community that Christmas has for so many of our neighbors. Although both holidays fall around the time of the winter solstice, they have different foods, symbols, and ultimately very different messages.

Following are some tips about how to make this holiday season enjoyable and meaningful as a Jew, a prospective convert to Judaism, a Christian partner in a Jewish household, or anyone interested in honoring and exploring Judaism.

### ***If you miss certain Christmas holiday traditions:***

- Not every tradition has to be abandoned. If you loved baking Christmas cookies, change the coloring, check to be sure you have kosher ingredients, and they can be Hanukah cookies. If you loved singing carols, learn some Jewish holiday tunes and volunteer to put on a Hanukah show at your local Jewish home for the aged.
- You may be able to get your "fix" on a different holiday. If you used to love decorating your tree, then go all out in the fall decorating your Sukkah. Or, if your attachment is to trees, wreaths, and their smells, then plant trees for Tu Bishvat, the Jewish New Year for Trees. (Of course, it's fine to put up some Hanukah decorations and banners, as well.)

- Create a new Christmas holiday tradition as a Jew. Offer to trade vacation time with Christian colleagues, so they can have their special holiday off. Volunteer at a hospital or homeless shelter on Christmas, when they are likely to be understaffed. Join a Jewish group engaging in *tikkun olam* (social repair and justice). Later, get together with a bunch of friends, as Jews often do, for a movie and Chinese food on Christmas afternoon.
- Mourn your loss - and put it in context. Once you commit to living as a Jew, you probably won't be attending midnight mass and you certainly won't be participating in all the prayers or accepting the Eucharist. It is the end of one era in your life and you may have some grieving to do. However, it is also the beginning of an era and of many new and wonderful spiritual expressions around the year – from Shabbat to Shavuot, from Brit to Bar Mitzvah.

***To stay connected with family and friends:***

- It's fine to continue exchanging gifts. You can give Christmas gifts to Christian friends and relatives, and it would be thoughtful if they choose to give you a Hanukah gift.
- Feel free to attend your friends' and family's parties and special dinners. You can eat selectively to protect your *kashrut* (kosher) observance, and you can listen politely as someone says grace, invoking Jesus. Rabbi Neal Weinberg helps new and prospective Jews by choice set appropriate boundaries with this bit of humor and advice: "Very rarely do you get confused at someone else's birthday party and start to think it might be your birthday, too. Christmas is someone else's celebration. You can attend, you can be glad for them, and you can raise your glass in a toast to good will toward all, while still remaining clear that this is their holiday, not yours."

***To enhance your Hanukah celebration:***

- Don't treat Hanukah as a "mini-Christmas." Enjoy it on its own terms, for its own messages. This is the holiday when the Maccabees fought the dominance of the prevailing Hellenistic culture. They interacted with Hellenism and even practiced some aspects of it, but when they were ordered to give up Shabbat or circumcision for the sake of uniformity and conformity, they rejected the government's claim on them and fought for religious freedom. It would be a horrible irony if Jews today decided to "fit in" with the general culture on the very holiday that celebrates the bravery of people willing to die for the right to be different.

- Study the story of Hanukah.
- Invite people over for candlelighting. Let it be a communal event, with all the “Hanukah trimmings”: *latkes* (potato pancakes), *sufganiyot* (jelly donuts), *dreydl* (spinning top) games with chocolate coins as prizes. Ask each person to bring one fact, teaching, or song about Hanukah which they suspect will be new to others.
- Supply enough Hanukiot for every family member and every guest to light candles. Let the candles in your window testify to the miracle of the lights.
- Meditate on light. On faith. On the few, through righteousness, overcoming the many with power.

Chag Urim Sameach!

May you enjoy a happy Festival of Lights!