

'Tis the Season...
Vayechi 5776
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How did you spend Thursday night?

Who went to a movie? Who had Chinese food? Who was extra punctilious and did both?

Jews eating Chinese food on Christmas Eve seems to be an ever expanding and deepening practice. It almost seems to have the status of *minhag*, custom. Anecdotally, in New York City, the Kosher Chinese restaurants understand just how seriously Jews take their Christmas Eve Chinese food. Some restaurants only accept orders in advance; you can't just order off the menu. Some require larger minimum orders for delivery. It's a complicated – and profitable – cultural phenomenon.

What's the connection between Jews and Chinese food on Christmas Eve? A number of suggestions have been offered. One is that neither Jews or (many) Chinese are celebrating Christmas. This makes for a perfect match: Jews looking to go out to eat, and Chinese restaurants open for business. Another suggestion is that, while not anywhere near Kosher, Chinese recipes don't have any mixing of meat and milk. Also, many Chinese dishes make it harder to identify just exactly

what the “*treyf*” (non-kosher) meat ingredient is the primary ingredient. It is often all chopped up and hardly recognizable. For the many Jews who are not careful about kosher, their guilty consciences won’t bother them as much as a cheeseburger or bacon might.¹

Christmas was not always as light-hearted a topic for Jews.

Rabbi Nathan Adler, the 18th century scholar, Kabbalist, and Chief Rabbi of Frankfurt, Germany, claimed that Jews are in mourning on Christmas.

This may be the idea behind Christmas Eve being referred to as *Nittel Nacht*, the night of nothingness. Among the most prominent features of this evening was that no Torah was to be studied. (There are various versions of the specifics of when not to study and what to do instead of studying.) The birthday of Christianity is marked as a time of mourning for all of the tragedies perpetrated against Jews by Christians throughout history. Torah study is considered a joyous activity, so refraining from Torah study is a sign of mourning.²

¹ See <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/why-american-jews-eat-chinese-food-on-christmas/384011/> and <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/53569/jewish-christmas> for further discussion of the topic.

² For more on Nittel Nacht, see Marc B. Shapiro, "Torah Study on Christmas Eve," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999): 319-353.

We can understand Christmas not being a good time for the Jews. When Jew hatred was far more rampant, the celebration of Christmas would only reinforce the disdain for the Jews. Parish priests would deliver homilies filled with anti-Jewish rhetoric. Christmas Eve was a notorious time for pogroms and violence against Jews.

Whether it is theologically or physically, Jews have been understandably uncomfortable with Christmas. Some *halkhic* opinions even forbid saying the word “Christmas.”

Oh, how the times have changed.

Earlier this week, Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of the UK, joined other faith leaders in condemning a crackdown on Christmas in Brunei. Authorities on the island in southeast Asia have threatened to imprison anyone who celebrates Christmas in public for up to five years or a fine of \$20,000. [Mirvis said:](#)

The shocking ban on public celebration of Christmas in Brunei is reflective of an intolerance that, as Jews, we simply cannot countenance.

A Jew defending Christmas. *Mosiahch tzeiten!* It must signify the arrival of Messianic times!

Times are different, religion is different, and Christmas is different. Think about all the Christmas songs written and composed by Jews. (Maybe that's why Jews love them so much.) Around 80 years ago, a Jew, Morris Propp, had a virtual monopoly on decorative or Christmas lights in both Europe and America.

As Christians celebrate their holiday season, **'tis the season** for us as Jews to reflect on what these changing times mean for our own religious lives.

'Tis the season to appreciate that we have a very different relationship with non-Jews and Christians today.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the document that completely transformed the way Catholics relate to Jews. No longer are Jews held collectively responsible for the crucifixion. In addition, the Jews have not been completely replaced by a New Israel – Christianity. *Nostra Aetate* radically changed Catholic attitudes towards Jews and, effectively, made anti-Semitism a sin.

Two weeks ago, the Vatican issued a document entitled “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable.” The document states that Catholics should not try

to convert Jews because Jews can achieve salvation through Judaism without accepting Christianity.

That's a big theological step for Catholics to take. They're acknowledging that, while the only way for the whole world to achieve salvation is accept Christian doctrine, Jews have a different path.

So what? I knew I was going to heaven without this declaration!

This latest declaration is yet another step forward in the ability of all people of faith to find ways to cooperate for the good of humanity. Jews and Catholics still have differences – and the religious landscape is very different when it comes to Protestants, but we have an even better foundation through which to build appropriate cooperation.

Issues like poverty, healthcare, hunger and immigration are important to all people of faith (and, yes, even those without). When there is more agreement, acceptance, and validation between faiths, more good can be accomplished.

'Tis the season to appreciate the role of religion in public life

Last month, a brouhaha erupted over Starbucks' holiday cups. In the past, the cups during the holiday season had a more distinctly holiday theme. I just figured they were the Christmas cups.

This year, they had a simpler, cleaner look. No snowflakes. Some people took offense and felt Starbucks was sanitizing religion from their seasonal cups. An evangelical Christian started an online media campaign to protest this terrible affront to religion.

Most people didn't notice - although Starbucks did find the need to respond to its critics. I did not think it had anything to do with religion in the public sphere, but the issue highlighted the sensitivity some people have to what seems like sanitizing religion from public conversation. We live in a time when there is a growing voice to take God out of the public arena.

For Jews, secularism is not an option. As is the case with many Americans, however, Jews are no immune to the increasing chorus of books and opinions that want overt displays and expressions of religion removed from where the public can see them. To quote Rabbi Benjamin Blech, we live in a time "when the greatest challenge to our faith is not another faith, but faithlessness."

As Americans, we believe in freedom of expression of religion. At the same time, today, the Pledge of Allegiance ends with the words “One nation under God,” the national anthem is sung at all sporting events, and every elected official ends his/her speech with “God bless America.” There should be no reason to shy away from appropriate public expressions of faith. Let the store windows have Christmas displays without having to call them “holiday” displays. We can tolerate “Merry Christmas” without making do with “Seasons Greetings,” and the Menorah can be lit right next to a Christmas tree.

In the 21st century, we see tremendous challenges to public expressions of faith. Thank God, we live in a place where we can have such disagreements, but we need to be very careful when every issue during the holiday season turns into a zero-sum game between freedom of expression and religious coercion.

We should reinforce the role of religion in our overall worldview and in making the world a better place. It is interesting that it is during this time of year that we have no problem drawing attention to the good works of religious organizations in helping people. When it comes to Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner, many are served in churches. The “Neediest Cases” segment in the *New York Times* tells the stories of those helped by charity given this season. To contribute, readers can send their donations to RELIGIOUS charities.

Religion is not so bad, and it can make a positive difference year-round and not just the holiday season.

At this time of year, we should appreciate the closer connection between Jews and Catholics and people of other faiths as well as the importance of religion in an appropriate way in our public activities.

‘Tis the season to think about and better appreciate our own faith

Seeing the religious celebration of this holiday season can lead to thinking more deeply about our own faith. Jews have a different system of beliefs and practices than other religions, but when I encounter different practices, I sometimes think about my own religious and spiritual life.

Let me give you an example.

I have watched parts of Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. I am intrigued by what is done and what is said. I am no expert, but I notice a tremendous appreciation of the sacred, expressions of faith, and acceptance of the mysterious in the portions I have seen.

Now is not the time to go into a more detailed theological discussion – nor may such a discussion ever be relevant, but I start to think about the role of faith and holiness in Judaism. It goes without saying how fundamental these ideas are in Judaism, but we focus on more on deed than creed.

While Judaism is far more about the *mitzvot* (actions), we ignore the Godly and spiritual aspects at our own peril.

Christmas causes me to think about the role of faith and God and the sublime in Judaism.

On the last day of classes before winter break, I taught my Ramaz 7th Grade Jewish Law class the “*Halakhot* of Vacation.” I gave them a sheet with selections from Rabbi Yechiel Michel Ha-Levi Epstein’s *Aruch Ha-Shulchan*. In the very first chapter (Chapter 1, section 5), he states:

A foundation of Torah and a central pillar of Judaism is to know there is only one, unique, indivisible God who created the universe and continues to supervise the world every hour of every minute.

You may ask what this has to do with vacation. The answer is that being Jewish means knowing and having a relationship with God. Whether it is in school or shul or on vacation, Judaism is built upon a relationship with the Divine. This is

at the core of our religion, yet it is not a theme often heard in the school or synagogue.

My encounter with Midnight Mass got me thinking about how to add more of the sacred and God awareness in to Judaism. The religious celebration of others can and should lead to a strengthening of our own faith and religious experience.

Historically, this season has not held out many positives for the Jews. Thank God, we live in different times. **‘Tis the season**

for recognizing a more positive relationship with peoples of other faiths,
for appreciating the role that public displays of religion plays in bettering the world in which we live,
and for deepening our own religious lives.

Sounds pretty jolly and merry to me.