

Rabbi Lewis' Message for January 2008

When I was growing up in suburban New Jersey, my public school made no pretense of separating church and state. We unapologetically sang Christmas carols without the token addition of "I Have A Little Dreidel." We made Christmas cards and drew Christmas trees. In my fifth grade class, we counted down the days to Christmas on an Advent Calendar. The counter in the main office proudly displayed a nativity scene. Winter vacation was called Christmas vacation. We began our day with a reading from Scripture and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. It wasn't until years later that I learned that the formulaic beginning, "Our Father, who art in heaven," was a rather awkward translation of the simple rabbinic phrase "*Avinu she'bashamayim*."

It was painful and yet, in many ways, it was better than what we have now. In my childhood, there was no pretense of separation; today, there is a pretense of separation disguising the lack of true separation. Menorahs and Christmas trees share space on school and municipal property, except in towns like mine where the town has deemed the tree secular and the menorah religious. School choirs add in token Chanukah songs whose melodies don't begin to compare to the grandeur of medieval carols.

Instead of trying to enforce the idea of separation, we have created the worst kind of amalgamation. We pay lip service to a superficial diversity that masks real Rabbi's Message, theological divisions. Attempting to paper over these differences under the rubric of "inclusion" implies that no separation of church and state is necessary after all. We are one big happy country, a melting pot of dreidel and tinsel.

So pardon me if I say Bah, Humbug, to all of it. I really do believe we should call a Christmas tree a Christmas tree, not a Tree of Lights. And that's why we should not display it on public property. I really do believe that we should keep Christ in Christmas and menorahs in the windows of Jewish homes. I would never argue against teaching children to appreciate diversity but that isn't what they are experiencing this time of year. Ask them. They feel uncomfortable. This is not genuine dialogue and appreciation for each other's traditions. They experience a pastiche of apologetics all in the name of equal time. That is why the idea of separation to begin with. Once you break that law, how do you know where to stop? Wouldn't it be a better lesson for our kids to know that they are different, to accept that they are a minority in a Christian society and there is nothing equal or fair about it? Singing Hebrew songs in public schools doesn't mitigate that sting nor should it.

Our tradition is most meaningful when it is celebrated in our homes and synagogues, not when it is displayed in the public square. I know that many of my Christian colleagues feel the same way about their traditions. If you have a choice between fighting for the inclusion of Chanukah songs in public school choirs and fighting for a

commitment to home celebration of Shabbat and holidays, you know how I would vote.

I admit it; I am a purist (you can say Scrooge, if you want) when it comes to separation of church and state. And I may be fighting a losing battle, but that has never stopped me before. In this day when too many governments around the world are ruled by religious extremists, it is that much more imperative that we preserve this American value. It is good not just for Jews but also for all Americans.

The issue will be moot by the time you read this message. In the public square, the tinsel will be off the tree and the menorahs will have been taken down and stored until next year. We shall heave a collective sigh of relief until this time next year when we are again challenged to defend our constitution.

My experience in public school choirs has guaranteed that I still know all the words to hundreds (well it seems that way) of Christmas carols. I would rather have learned them on Sunday morning going to church with my friends, just the way they learned about Judaism by going to Temple with me. That is the way I like to appreciate and share other traditions. That is why I am always happy when our kids bring their friends to services on Friday night and Saturday morning or to Sunday School on Sunday. It is the blessing of living in this country that we can invite them to come see a menorah on our bimah, not in the town square.

May the secular new year bring brightness into these dark days.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis