

## Rabbi's Message

### Sharing Spirit

When I was a teenager, I remember walking into my regular barber shop while a conversation was in progress. My barber turned to me to settle the argument. He had proposed a theory: "Jews don't get the 'Christmas Spirit,' right? They have the Hanukkah Spirit,' don't they?"

The question confused me. I didn't know what a "Hanukkah Spirit" was. I hardly knew what a Christmas spirit was. I knew that my neighbors decorated the outside of their homes with lights and the inside with trees and stockings. I remembered art projects in elementary school in which I colored my Santa Claus like the other children, even though I knew he wasn't coming down *our* chimney. I remember the music classes in which I didn't understand why I was expected to know and sing songs like *Silent Night*, *Deck the Halls*, *O Christmas Tree* and *The First Noel*. I sat on Santa's lap in the department store and tried to invent a Christmas wish that I didn't expect to be fulfilled.

The barber explained that what he referred to as the Christmas Spirit was the good feelings that come this time of year, how people are nice to each other because, after all, it's Christmas time. At the time, I thought, "Well, if people are in a good mood and being nice to each other because of the Christmas lights and the Christmas trees and the Christmas music, how could anyone call it a Hanukkah spirit?"

I remember my first Jewish friend who had a Christmas tree. She was a former teacher of mine, one who I liked and respected. When she saw the shocked look on my face, she said, "Don't give me a dirty look. When it's cold and gray and ugly outside, I've got something green and pretty and smells nice inside." Her comment didn't talk me into adopting a Christmas tree for my personal practice, but it made me less judgmental about someone who might make that choice.

When I was in college, I taught Religious School at Temple Beth Emeth, the local Reform synagogue in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Beth Emeth means "House of Truth." We had Sunday School on Saturday because the temple was co-owned with St. Clare's Episcopal Church. The Jews used the building Saturdays and the Christians used it on Sundays (this shared relationship still exists!). The students in my fourth grade class provided my first experience with children of interfaith marriages. In December, some of the children were talking about their Christmas trees and other things that I had never heard spoken about in a synagogue. So I asked my students the question, "What's the difference between Christmas and Hanukkah?"

The answers began with comments that I judged as superficial about a Christmas tree versus a menorah, and how many days of presents and the different foods we eat. And then, a bright little girl said, "Christmas tells a story and Hanukkah tells a different story." Simply put, it's all about the story.

Sometimes I wonder if we've lost the spirit of the spirit. The "holiday season" now includes a day called "Black Friday" that is all about shopping. It seems ironic to me that people can push and shove each other for the right to be the first to express kindness during the season of giving.

It seems that the season and spirit all depend on how we observe. Some say Christmas is no longer a religious holiday. Hanukkah was never very religious; we have a *mitzvah* of lighting candles, but beyond that, it's a celebration of a military victory. The real spirit seems to come when we gather to light a menorah and feel the presence, rather than the presents. The days are shorter, the darkness comes earlier, and we light the lights that remind us that faith, family and friendship can brighten the darkest days.

Peter, Paul and Mary sang, "Don't let the light go out!" However you celebrate December holidays, whether it's with green trees, brightly colored candles or some other tradition, take some time to remember what's most important.

L'shalom,

*Dan Gordon*