

Christmas and Converts

Rabbi Van Lanckton
Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
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My dear friends,

This Wednesday is Christmas Day.

47 years ago was the last time I celebrated Christmas.

I was 24 years old. Four months later, I converted to Judaism.

Converting to Judaism is a journey that begins long before the day of the conversion ceremony. And that journey continues long after that day.

My journey began with losing faith in the Christian understanding of God. In the years that followed I saw that I also wanted a community where I could belong. Moreover, I needed more celebration and ritual than I found in the religion of my youth.

I began studying Judaism. I began to see that being Jewish would fit the real me better. I came to believe that I was born with a Jewish neshama, a Jewish soul. I realized that I had to live as a Jew in order to express my Jewish inner identity.

By completing that initial study and concluding the ceremonies of conversion I officially became Jewish. But the journey continued. I still had much to learn.

I knew that by Jewish law I was fully Jewish, but I was different from Jews by birth. They had always been Jewish. I was and always would be a Jew who used to be a Christian. I would always have memories of my Christian life. Those memories were most powerfully rooted in the celebration of Christmas.

My original family was Protestant. Protestants do not generally have a rich ritual life. No dancing. No lively singing. Not a lot of food. Very little pageantry.

But on Christmas? That's different.

We celebrated Christmas in the Congregational Church in our home town of Darien, Connecticut. The family went to church together on Christmas Eve.

Here is the scene. The church is crowded. Every pew is filled. The service ends after midnight. It is the first minutes of Christmas Day. We all light candles. Each person carries a candle, including the children. We walk out of the church holding our lit candles. The night sky at first seems dark. Then we see that there are a million stars to light our way along with the candles. As we walk, and then as we gather in a group when everyone is outside, we sing Christmas carols and hymns to welcome the birthday of the baby Jesus.

At dawn, my sisters and I are eager to get downstairs to the living room. The tree stands there, bright with the decorations we put on the tree during the previous days. Dad turns on the lights. We stand there wide-eyed in wonder at the beauty of that sight. Then we see that there are many presents under the tree. Mysteriously, there are even more than when we went to bed. We exchange presents, rip off the colorful wrapping paper, read the books, play with the toys, and later enjoy a very special Christmas meal.

When I converted in 1967, those memories were still fresh. I had celebrated Christmas just four months earlier. But eight months after my conversion, when it got to be Christmas time again, I did not go back to my childhood home for Christmas, and I never did again.

So many years have passed that I cannot remember clearly now making a decision not to be with them for Christmas that first year. But I do know that nobody in my family expected me there and until last year, nobody invited me.

Last year my sister Alison did invite us to come to her home on Christmas afternoon. We went had a lovely time. We are going again this year.

Although I never went back to my childhood home for Christmas after I became Jewish, we visited often at other times. And when we did, we encountered some of the same issues that arise for other converts who visit their original families at Christmas.

The most common issue is what to eat. Even with all good intentions, a Christian family is likely to serve non-kosher food. Forget about the issue of separate plates and a kosher kitchen. I'm talking about the Christmas ham that is the main entrée in many Christian homes on Christmas Day.

My family never served us ham. I think my mother understood that it was treif. It also was not a food of her childhood since she grew up in Beirut and ham was also not eaten at her family's meals.

But beyond the absence of ham, the details of kashrut were understandably challenging for my mother. She understood that meat and milk were not to be mixed. But what about chicken? Is that meat? What about cheese? Is that milk?

I usually found a way to eat as much of the food that was offered as I could. When it comes to a contest between kashrut and peace in the home, shalom bayit, I believe that shalom bayit should win most of the time. I did not want to make my mother uncomfortable if I didn't have to.

When Alice and I visited my family, Alice faced an additional challenge. I knew my family's practices. But Alice had no experience of them. She sometimes had no idea what was expected of her.

Alice and I visited my parents once on a Sunday early in our marriage. At about one o'clock that afternoon, after my parents returned from church, we were chatting over drinks with the other lunch guests. As we then gathered for lunch around the table, but before we sat down, my mother said, "Now we will have the doxology."

Alice had never heard that word. She had no idea what my mother meant.

Everyone else then started singing. The doxology is a Christian prayer. It is often sung as a grace before meals.

Alice and I did not join in. Alice remained silent because she did not know we would be singing and she did not know the song.

I also remained silent. That was partly to be in solidarity with Alice. But I knew the words of the doxology. And I knew how it ended.

It is very short, just four lines. The first three lines are straight out of the Psalms. Here they are:

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;

Okay. But the last line of the doxology is, "Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost." I was not going to say that. So I said nothing.

My mother noticed our silence, but we said nothing about it, then or ever. Alice and I remember the moment well. It is the kind of moment of awkward tension that comes up for converts visiting the Christian family, whether at Christmas or any other time. Alice and I always try to be sensitive, but we won't say or do anything that is just too much in conflict with being Jewish.

Christmas for converts does not have to be only about awkward moments and distance, however. For example, Alice does a great deal to bring the extended family together, even at Christmas time. For many years, right up to now, Alice has bought and wrapped Christmas presents for our Christian nieces and nephews. Alice bakes cookies. She bakes coffee cakes. She writes notes to my family. We send the presents and goodies to my family

What about my own feelings about Christmas?

In the early years after I converted, I didn't know what to do when someone would greet me by saying "Merry Christmas." The person might not know me, or might know my name but not think that the name Van Lanckton is a Jewish name, so they could easily think I was Christian.

When someone says to you, "Merry Christmas," you have two choices. You can reply "Merry Christmas to you." Or you can say something like, "Gee, thanks, but that's not my holiday. I'm Jewish."

When I first converted, I knew I was Jewish but also knew I had been Christian. I wanted to make it clear I am Jewish and not Christian. I did not want to respond with a simple "Merry Christmas" because I thought that might imply that I was Christian.

As the years have passed, three changes have reduced this problem. First, I learned that a response saying "that is not my holiday" is unwelcome. The other person then has to say, "Oh, I'm sorry." Then you have to say, "No, that's all right." To avoid that awkward exchange, I just got cooler about it and replied with "Merry Christmas to you."

The problem diminished for a second reason: society now recognizes minority religions more than it did. People now generally just say "happy holidays."

And for the last ten years or so, ever since I've been wearing a kippah all the time, not many people mistake me for a Christian.

The early years after conversion presented a more serious problem for me than the question of exchanging Christmas greetings. When I heard a Christmas carol or other music of Christmas, I remembered very positively the joy and family solidarity that I associated with Christmas. But then I felt conflicted about my emotional reaction. I felt guilty and embarrassed. I thought, "I should not be feeling this fondness for Christmas; I'm Jewish."

This would happen for example when I heard Handel's Messiah. The words are quotes from the Bible story of the birth of Jesus. That's a story I learned by heart as a child. When I heard those words, and the

gorgeous voices singing them, I would cry. Then I would try to hide those tears. I would think, "I am a Jew. I'm not supposed to be moved to tears by Handel's Messiah."

Over time, that changed. I learned that it's okay to recognize that, look, I am Jewish, I have been ever since I converted, but of course the memories of my youth are still powerful. Some of that music is so beautiful it moves me to tears, but that is not a reason to feel guilty. In fact, in about 1990, I finally bought a recording of the music. Now, at this season, I will sit and listen to that music. I may even cry. But I am no longer guilty about that feeling.

And I do know that there's more to those tears than just the beauty of the music. I also do have a sense of loss because of my more distant relationship from my birth family, particularly at Christmas.

Converting to Judaism is a journey. I am still on that journey.

Jewish now for 46 years, I still remember fondly the Christmas celebrations with my original family.

Alice and I have learned how to eat with them. She has learned some of what to expect from them, and she helps us to stay close with them.

I no longer worry about how to return a greeting of "Merry Christmas." And I don't try to fight the feelings I experience when I hear Christmas music.

This Wednesday is Christmas Day. It is a holiday for Christians, a day of rare celebration for them.

As a Jew, I am grateful for our many days of celebration throughout the year. The rabbis regard today as the most important of them all. It is a day we are commanded both to remember and to guard. The reference to this day in the Ten Commandments is the only reference there to anything that is called holy. And in the creation story, in Genesis, God rested on the seventh day. God blessed it and declared it holy.

Next Wednesday is not our holiday.

Today is our holy day.

Today we do not wish each other "Merry Christmas."

Today I wish us all "Shabbat Shalom."