

## **WHAT IS A JEW TO DO? by Rabbi Tom Heyn, December 2011 for BAJC Newsletter**

Why is it not a 'Jewish thing' to celebrate Christmas? Hundreds of thousands of Jews, many being members of interfaith families, observe the occasion in one way or another. The song "White Christmas" was written in 1940 by a Jew – Israel Baline, better known as Irving Berlin. The most obvious fact is that Jesus himself was a Jew.

But a lot has happened since Jesus sat with rabbis and studied Torah. In the two millennia since then, our respective religions have taken very different paths. While our religions have a common origin, our 'meta-stories' are very different. That is to say, the religious narratives we look to for direction and purpose are not entirely compatible. And so it's often around holidays, when these sacred narratives come to the foreground, that we find ourselves wondering, "how do we find our place in relation to a narrative that is not our own?"

For this reason, Jews have long had an ambivalent relationship with Christmas. Over time, it seems the dominant responses have shifted from rejection to acceptance to accommodation. But a fourth response, gaining strength in recent decades, is for Jews to find a place for themselves through volunteering and performing *mitzvot* - good deeds that many consider to be moral or religious obligations.

This fourth response was already well-established by 1886 when an article in Cincinnati's Jewish paper, *The American Israelite*, described Jewish volunteerism around Christmas:

It is the custom here, as in other cities, to provide a hearty meal for all the poor children of the vicinity during the Christmas holidays, also to give each child presents, in the shape of toys, candies, books, etc. Some of our leading citizens form themselves into a club to

manage the affair...Many of our Hebrew families, recognizing that the movement was to make children happy, set aside all questions of faith and doctrine and contributed very liberally in money and material. In fact, so bountifully did they subscribe, that public notice had to be given that no more gifts could be received from any quarter.

Since then, we have many more detailed accounts of this kind of engagement. In 1969, a Milwaukee resident by the name of Albert Rosen encountered a man who was upset about not being with his family on Christmas because he had to work. That night, he called a local radio station and asked the disc jockey to announce that a Jewish man wanted to work for a Christian on Christmas.

For the next twenty-eight years Rosen stood in for strangers, doing their jobs on Christmas Day. He filled in as a police dispatcher, bellman, switchboard operator, television reporter, chef, convenience store clerk, radio disc jockey, and a gas station attendant, taking the time to train for each position in advance. Occasionally Jews asked him why he would want to ingratiate himself with Christians. He replied by saying, "I do this because I'm a Jew. Judaism is about being a light unto the world."

Perhaps the most ironic manifestation of performing a *mitzvah* around Christmas is for a Jew to fill in as Santa. Jay Frankston of New York City took up the role of Santa in 1960, at first to amuse his children. Later, upon discovering that the third floor of the city's main post office served as the storage place for letters addressed to Santa Claus, he managed to gain access to the letters and decided to send telegrams to eight of the children saying, "Santa is coming." Dressed as Santa, Frankston then made good on the promise, bringing the delighted children their presents. By 1972, he was providing gifts to 150 children. Publicity about Frankston's good deeds attracted donations which he, in turn, gave to charitable organizations to

distribute at Christmas.

Today, thousands of American Jews have found a place for themselves during Christmas by doing *mitzvot* – volunteering in soup kitchens and hospitals, visiting the homebound, preparing or delivering Christmas meals, buying Christmas presents for the poor, or substituting for colleagues at work. Increasingly, volunteerism has become an established means of combining the Jewish values of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, with the Christmas spirit of bringing joy to the world.

This year our winter holidays coincide more closely than usual as Chanukah begins the evening of December 20<sup>th</sup> and ends the evening of December 28<sup>th</sup>. Jews and Christians will be able to celebrate their respective holidays at the same time. But there is still the need for building bridges and so on Sunday, December 25<sup>th</sup>, BAJC will be serving dinner at the Overflow Shelter. If you're not home celebrating the sixth night of Chanukah, come join us.

Although it's not 'a Jewish thing' to celebrate Christmas, we can choose a way of being in relation to the holiday that goes beyond withdrawal on the one hand and acquiescence on the other. By “being a light unto the world,” we end up creating for ourselves a better place in it.