

My Voice . . .

By Susan Kramer

One of the questions I was frequently asked after I converted to Judaism was, "But don't you miss Christmas?" Although the obvious answer was "How could anyone miss Christmas when it is so pervasive in our culture?", my response was a resounding "NO!" In fact, I would often add that one of the nicest things about converting to Judaism was that I would never have to celebrate Christmas again.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about the sacred aspects of the Christmas holiday — "O Holy Night" still sends shivers down my spine. What I gave up with nary a backward glance were the stresses and rampant commercialization of the Christmas season. I can remember the foreboding that would assail me around Thanksgiving each year (I guess these days it would begin around Halloween.) I never seemed to have the time, money or inclination to "do" Christmas like Good Housekeeping told us we should. I would usually ignore the whole thing until two or three days before the 25th and then make a mad dash to the picked over store shelves only to find that buying

meaningless gifts that I couldn't afford just to have something under the tree made me feel even worse.

Not being a particularly religious person during most of my adult life, I didn't relate to the sacred aspects of Christmas. In fact, I think I have a much greater appreciation of the beauty and power of the Christmas story now that I am Jewish than I ever did when I was a Christian.

At first after I became Jewish, I thought that I was simply exchanging Chanukah for Christmas. Then as I began to learn more about the origins of Chanukah, I realized that the way we celebrate the holiday today was more a result of living in an overwhelmingly Christian culture. The secular celebration of Christmas has led many Jews to respond with a celebration that in many ways reflects the pervasive Christmas themes that abound this time of year.

Erin Naman, in her essay on page 11 captures the nuances of that dilemma for parents as well as for kids. It is hard to be the parent of a Jewish (or Muslim, Buddhist or whatever-is-not-Christian) child

when everywhere we are bombarded with images — the Christmas trees, Santa Claus and — oh, yeah — peace on earth yada yada yada.

At our house, we try to de-emphasize some of the more blatant Christmas-imitating aspects of Chanukah, but I fear Chanukah decorations have found their way into our home, and we do buy Chanukah presents, though we have drawn the line at a gift for each night.

What we do do with pride is light the Chanukah candles each night, making sure the menorah's light shines brightly through a window, proclaiming this to be a Jewish home (the only one on the block.) We invite in the neighbors, tell the story of the Maccabees and we feast on latkes and applesauce. We rejoice that, 2200 years after Judas Maccabee and his brothers persevered in the face of religious intolerance, we are still fiercely proud of being Jewish and ever so grateful that we live in a country where religious freedom is not something we must take to the hills to fight for.

May the Chanukah lights shine brightly in your window this year.

Susan Kramer

Rome And Jerusalem: the latest landmark (Continued from page 1)

Churches had enjoyed certain status and privileges, granted by the magnanimity of the ruling authority. In the Fundamental Agreement, Israel committed herself not only to the de jure confirmation of these rights pertaining to the Church's educational and philanthropic institutions, but also to enshrine the authoritative structure of the Church's hierarchy and religious orders in Israeli law. To do so required Israel to formulate a special statute and it was understood and agreed upon by the parties, that it would take a couple of years to work this out.

The agreed formula has now been ratified and it is a dramatic step without precedent. For wherever in the world arrangements exist between states and the Catholic Church, the latter is authorized to register its various bodies under the laws of the country like secular non-profit organizations. Israel has gone way beyond such arrangement and has provided special legal status for the Catholic Church and

its internal structure in which "full effect" is given to Canon Law. As a result the Holy See is given precise legal jurisdiction under Israel law over its own institutions and assets in the Holy Land. This, as indicated, is an historic precedent, as no ruling authority in the Holy Land — especially not a non-Christian power — has ever granted any Church such de jure status. It has moreover been obtained in a country in which Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular constitutes a very small minority.

In accordance with this legal recognition of the internal, structure and authority of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, a special register of some 130 ecclesiastical bodies and organizations has been drawn up. Any disputes, transactions etc. pertaining to them, will accordingly now be fully adjudicated and resolved under and by Israeli law. This of course is a remarkable vote of confidence in Israeli law on the

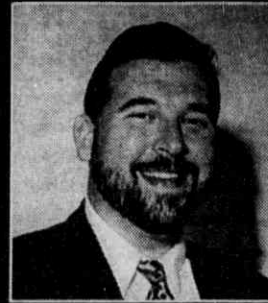
part of the Holy See, the significance of which in terms of regional interests cannot be minimized. It also serves as something of a model for the Holy See, who undoubtedly would wish to achieve a similar agreement with other states and national organizations in the region, to safeguard her interests with them as well.

However, she achieved this agreement with Israel precisely because the latter is not a theocracy, but a modern democracy committed both through its Declaration of Independence and under the law of the land, to the principle of freedom of religion for all the faith communities in the country. Indeed this agreement, which will be followed by the necessary legislation and regulations, serves as eloquent testimony of the maturity of Israeli democracy and the commitment of the State to the development of a society in which all the different communities in the Holy Land may live freely and flourish. ✪

Point of View

Each issue of the CJN features an article written by one of three rabbis active in the Charlotte Community.

This Month:
Rabbi James Bennett
Temple Beth El



Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav was known for the spirit and joy he taught through his stories and songs. He used to say, "Don't despair — when difficult times arrive, we must be happy."

A more contemporary song writer put it this way: "Don't worry — be happy!"

We in the Charlotte Jewish community would do well to listen to these words.

The findings of the recently completed Demographic Study of our Charlotte Jewish Community will echo within the halls of our communal institutions for many months or perhaps even years to come. The entire community is grateful to the many who joined with our Jewish Federation to make this study possible. Already, discussions and debates are underway, exploring the many imperatives derived from all the statistical data. Our community, our synagogues, our Jewish Community Center, and our Jewish Federation, have all learned a great deal about from where we have come, where we are now, and where we are going. Our future as a community may depend upon the decisions we make today, informed by the data we have gleaned.

As with all statistics, there are many ways to interpret the findings. I have already begun to hear cries of alarm and concern, as the numbers are reported. Some are expressing their dismay over the small numbers of Jews in Charlotte who keep kosher, light Shabbat candles, attend synagogue worship services, or who participate in the philanthropic life of the community. Others are disappointed to learn of the size of our Jewish community (7600) and the large percentage of unaffiliated Jews in our area (47%). Still others have despaired over the number of interfaith families participating in our community, the number of families who claim to have a Christmas tree, and the number who are predicted to marry out of the Jewish faith and or not raise their children as Jews.

There are some negative implications of such statistics. Clearly, there is the need for more Jewish commitment, practice and participation in the life of the Jewish community. One of our chief obligations is to fight assimilation, to inspire Jews to live Jewish lives. But the statistics do not spell doom.

There is much about which to rejoice. There are thousands of Jews affiliated with our Jewish community, and the numbers grow each day. An increasing number of Jews seek our assistance in living Jewish lives, and are dedicated to making their Jewish religious faith and identity a part of their day to day lives.

There is even reason to celebrate the statistics about interfaith families. The growing number of Jews who marry those not born Jewish is balanced by the growing number of interfaith families who come to the Jewish community and seek our assistance in living Jewish lives. When we open our arms to these members of our Jewish community, when we tell them that we value them and appreciate them as part of our community, we celebrate their choice to remain Jewish. When we include them in our community, help them explore how they might be more comfortable as Jewish families, and make them feel welcome, we enhance our Jewish future. When we reject, condemn and blame them for the choices they make, we turn them away, perhaps forever.

That is why I rejoice to see the results of the demographic study. We must not criticize and condemn those who are not affiliated with our institutions, who do not give money, who do not celebrate Shabbat or come to Temple, who have not married Jews, who have Christmas trees in their homes, or who are not raising their children as Jews. We must first celebrate those who are doing these things, and rejoice that there are so many Jews who do care about such Jewish acts. Then, we must find ways to inspire the rest of the Jewish community to care as well.

We cannot simply tell people that they should care about being Jewish, that they should light Shabbat candles, keep kosher, marry Jews, raise their children as Jews, give their money to our institutions, or affiliate. Doing primary Jewish acts for their own sake is not enough. We must inspire people to want to do Jewish acts not as an end in themselves, but as the result of caring about being Jewish in the first place. We ourselves must be role models of Jewish joy, meaning and commitment. We must demonstrate our own joy of Jewish living, our own reasons for believing in the Jewish tradition. We must be "a light unto the nations," starting with our own people. We must care enough about being Jewish to do primary acts of Jewish life, and hope that others who see how much meaning we find in these primary acts will want to do them as well. We must turn our thinking on its head and first help Jews to feel good about being Jewish, then to do primary Jewish acts as a result.

What are these primary Jewish acts? Pirke Avot teaches us: "On three things the world stands — on Study of Torah, on worship, and on deeds of lovingkindness." When we show other Jews that being Jewish means learning Torah, rejoicing in communal prayer and worship, and doing acts of tzedakah, they will want to commit themselves to Jewish life as well.

The Demographic Study gives us reason to rejoice, to be happy, about Jewish life in Charlotte. Together, may we share this joy with the rest of our community, so that we may continue to flourish and grow. ✪

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