



Among the Christmas People

By Vanessa L. Ochs

If you are a reader of CLAL publications, you may recall that I am the one who likes to "observe" Christmas by volunteering, along with my daughter, in the hospital ER in order to free up the Christian staff. This year we took a different approach, but one similar in spirit: we delivered decorated candy canes to pediatric oncology. I was imagining we'd finish up our Christmas "observance" with the traditional movie and Chinese restaurant when, on the spur of the moment, my daughter suggested, "Let's do Christmas with Aunt Janet."

Aunt Janet, my husband's sister, is Jewish. As a child, she, along with my husband, did not - as they both adamantly claimed -- celebrate Christmas. However, they did "do" Christmas, which is a whole other matter, they insisted. It means that they lit a menorah at the right time of the year and then, on Christmas day, they awoke to find a bounty of presents, followed by a holiday brunch. It had nothing, nothing to do with Jesus.

Aunt Janet's second husband and his children are Christian, which means that not only does Aunt Janet now do Christmas, but she does it big time. A wonderfully decorated tree; a festive dinner with venison, eggnog, and mincemeat pie; a morning spent madly wrapping dozens of presents; and a fabulous brunch with panettone and other Christmas delicacies whose correct names have never made it into my provincially Jewish vocabulary. They invite us to join them every year, but we demur. Even though Aunt Janet's new Christian family joins us each year at Grandma's Passover seder, it has never seemed that we were obligated to accept her Christmas invitation: to show up and participate in whatever it is that interfaith folks cobble together in December.

We drove up to DC to do Christmas. Everyone else but Aunt Janet's husband was Jewish. And here was the curious part: At Passover seder time, the rest of the family looked to us, the sole observant and knowledgeable Jews, to legitimate the seder and get it right. Now, we were the onlookers, and the Jews who did Christmas were the ritual experts. They knew exactly what they were doing.

It felt a lot like Thanksgiving, just with a tree instead of a turkey as the focal point. Potential sources of conflict or confusion went unnoticed: the menorah lit with one too few candles on the breakfront behind the dining room table, my husband who wore a yarmulke to dinner, his kosher-keeping family who ate only the fish and not the venison, the Christmas stockings for us that had been filled with chocolate dreidels and menorahs, as well as bags of Christmas tree pasta.

Much of Christmas day I sat on the couch next to the Christmas tree reading Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*. One passage I read seemed to strike me as utterly descriptive of this generation of Jews who "do" Christmas. Roth says they were living in the:

"anticipated American future that was simply to have unrolled out of the solid American past, out of each generation's getting smarter for knowing the inadequacies and limitations of the generations before, out of each new generation's breaking away from the parochialism a little further, out of the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-American insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals." (Roth, p. 85)

Having been born a generation after Roth, I can't say I ever felt I needed to get rid of "traditional Jewish habits" in order to achieve the status of being a real American. Honestly, if anything, I have felt smug about my total disinterest in getting into the Christmas spirit.

I never expected to have that attitude challenged. But we had been having a wonderful day. Family warmth, fooling around with cousins, looking at photographs from the last family wedding, a glowing fireplace: a simcha, you could say, something you wouldn't want to be left out of. We, who brought only some wine and a fruit basket, went home with presents from various family members: chocolates, three packets of Christmas tree noodles from the Dollar Store, two new paperback novels, hand lotion, lavender honey, oil laced with comfrey, fine English crackers, a vanilla scented candle, a poem my nephew composed that morning and recited, a sweater, a bracelet, framed photographs, and a black bowl with a nose on the bottom (from my husband's brother, with the curious sense of humor).

My husband explained that this was the feeling of his childhood Christmas that wasn't really Christmas: a sense of crazy abundance, of having your every desire satiated, of being utterly showered with the love and wonder that gets transmitted with things. The curiosities we were bringing home didn't fill me with the kind of child-like wonder my husband spoke of, but I could almost get what my husband was talking about from one particular gift: a framed photo Aunt Janet had taken of my family, something I knew I would treasure long after the noodles were cooked.

So this is what all the Jews who celebrate (excuse me, who "do Christmas") have been doing all along -- they have found a way to make one day of the year warmer, happier, more joyous. Was that so very bad?

It was hard to keep feeling smug about my disinterest, my Jewish parochialism.

Driving home, my daughter, who had had a simply wonderful time, said something that was more troubling than funny. She said, "Remember how you always joke that I should marry a Sephardic man so that I could eat rice on Passover? (The Sephardim, unlike the Ashkenazim, consider rice acceptable for Passover consumption.) Well, consider this! If I married a Christian man, I could eat bread on Passover...and celebrate Christmas, too!"

"Yeah," I said. "And you could read from the Haggadah, 'Why WAS this night ONCE different from all other nights?' "

