

SHABBAT SERMON
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Religious Liberty; For Christians and Muslims, as well!

It is beginning to look a lot like Chanukah! And that's good! That's good for the Jewish people and that's good for all people! As many of you know, Chanukah was never considered a major festival but the message of Chanukah has taken on great meaning in our day and age, for its message deals with a major world problem today ... the problem of religious liberty. Chanukah represents the first victory in human history for religious freedom; the right to believe and practice as one wishes.

Do you remember the Chanukah story? The emperor Antiochus wanted all of his citizens to be united in a single culture, a single calendar, a single set of habits. He didn't want to destroy the Jews; he wanted to destroy Judaism. "You can still call yourselves Jews," he said, "But for some of your distinctive habits and patterns, you will substitute the Greek way of doing things." The Maccabees rose up in protest, a struggle that had universal implications. For what was really being defended was the principle that in a diversified society, the state has to embrace various cultures and religions and not to subordinate any of them. The reality is, had the Maccabees been defeated it not only would have put an end to Judaism, but Christianity and Islam never would have come into being! In fact, until the 6th century the Christian church had a special day set aside to commemorate the Maccabee victory.

The Maccabees were victorious 2000 years ago in their battle for religious freedom and liberty. But surely it was not a permanent victory ... it is a battle that has to be fought at all times and in all countries. And in our day and age, it is a battle being fought in the unlikeliest of places.

Switzerland ... when you think of it, what comes to mind is: clean, neat, the snow-capped Alps. But recently we discovered that there is a dark side to the Swiss people, who in a national referendum banned the building of minarets on Muslim mosques. The fact is, the minarets weren't a problem; there are only four minarets in all of Switzerland. No, for the good Swiss people it is the Muslims who are the problem! It is Islam that is the problem! Of course, the many Muslim countries in the Middle East had to mute their criticism of the Swiss decision because those Muslim countries restrict the building of churches and synagogues in their countries! So who came to the defense of the Swiss Muslims? Jews! The Conference of European Rabbis, France's Chief Rabbi, Switzerland's two main Jewish groups, The Board of Deputies of British Jews all protested. Here in America our own Sen. Ben Cardin led the protests! We Jews know how the Muslims feel. You see, decades ago the good Swiss people banned Jewish ritual slaughtering in their country. They did it in the name of animal rights, but everyone knew its intention was to make it inhospitable for Jews from Russia to enter their country.

To this day, the Jews living in Switzerland have to import kosher meat from other countries in Europe. Believe me; I understand that there is a concern about Islam in the world today. But does anyone think that the solution comes from making Muslims feel uncomfortable in their country? Sure, there are millions of Muslim jihadists in this world, but there are hundreds of millions of Muslims whose hearts can be won over not by suppressing their religion and making them feel like outsiders, but by incorporating them into the culture of the countries in which they live. This is a lesson the good French people can learn as well. The French think they are going to solve their problem with Muslims by banning the wearing of the burqa in schools, and along the way skullcaps as well. The Chanukah story reminds us that there must be room for all, or else there will be none.

And you know what? You don't have to be a minority in this world to feel that your religious liberty is being limited. Just ask the Christians living in America! America is not a Christian country, but it is most certainly a country primarily of Christians. And yet, along comes Christmas, a most sacred moment for Christianity, and Christians here in America are made to feel uncomfortable about its celebration. Every time they put up a nativity scene somebody sues to take it down! Stores are pressured not to use the words "Merry Christmas," but rather to say "Happy Holidays" or "Seasons Greetings." "Xmas" becomes the kosher name for Christmas. In Las Vegas a nativity scene was put up at the capital, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation – a group of atheists – put up a sign facing it with the words, "Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds." Would somebody tell me why it was necessary to rob Christians of their joy? I, for one, fully agree with the words expressed by Ben Stein, the humorist and columnist, when he wrote: "I am a Jew, and every single one of my ancestors was Jewish. And it does not bother me even a little bit when people call those beautiful lit up, bejeweled trees Christmas trees. I don't feel threatened. I don't feel discriminated against. That's what they are: Christmas trees. It doesn't bother me a bit when people say, "Merry Christmas" to me. I don't think they are slighting me or getting ready to put me in a ghetto. In fact, I kind of like it. It shows that we are all brothers and sisters celebrating this happy time of year. It doesn't bother me at all that there is a manger scene on display at a key intersection near my beach house in Malibu. If people want a creche, it's just as fine with me as is the Menorah a few hundred yards away. I don't like getting pushed around for being a Jew and I don't think Christians like getting pushed around for being Christians." If I, as a Jew – one of less than 6 million living in America – don't like being pushed around for my religious beliefs -would I like if people called it "Xnuka?" - then certainly the nearly 300 million Christians living in America have every right to feel the same! What's the big deal? Let Jews put up menorahs for their beliefs, and Christians put up crèches for their beliefs, and atheists I guess put up nothing for their beliefs!

Let me tell you something that many of us don't want to admit to ourselves: we Jews have a problem with Christmas. We really don't know what to do with it! The songs, the lights, the celebrations ... they are all around us, but they're not ours. And what should we do about that? It seems that Jews go to different extremes in answering this question. A few weeks ago an ultra-Orthodox blogger wrote that he had noticed a

serious problem in his community: the Coca Cola bottles sold in the local stores had a picture of Santa Claus on them. And so the blogger writes, “Would you take your child to sit on Santa’s lap? This notion is too far-fetched; we all know the terrible affect it would have on the spiritual growth of our youngsters. Certainly we wouldn’t place a picture of Santa on our wall, even to make fun of it! But if Coca Cola utilizes this image to sell its product, not only will we buy it, but it will also be placed on the shabbos table in front of the children! Why? We have to have Coke! Is it really that difficult to buy another brand or flavor? Did you know that this picture symbolizes the holiday? Did you also know that the affect of this *tumah* (impurity) will cause you and your prodigy to learn Torah improperly.”

Yes, big problem what Santa Claus on Coke bottles can lead to! And so for many in the ultra-Orthodox community, the best way to deal with Christmas is to totally isolate yourself from it and make believe it’s not happening. But it’s not only ultra-Orthodox who take this approach. Sometimes this approach is taken by the most liberal and secular Jews. They were the ones who, for years, fought against the U.S. Postal Service coming out with a Christmas stamp; saying that it violated church/state relations. So, stamps of Marilyn Monroe are okay, and stamps of Elvis Presley are okay ... but Christmas stamps are not okay? In a country of hundreds of million of Christians, what was the big problem for us as Jews? Nobody was forcing us to use those stamps. What were we fighting over?

But if some Jews try to totally isolate themselves from Christmas, an even greater problem is the extremes that some Jews go to in trying to incorporate Christmas into their lives. How else to explain the Jewish families that bring a tree into their home and claim that it is a “Chanukah bush?” And how else to explain those Jews who every year have their Chanukah party on Dec 25 – whether it is still Chanukah or not? Indeed, sometimes without our even being aware of it, we find ourselves as Jews imitating Christmas traditions. How else to explain Chanukah cards? Believe me when I tell you, our grandparents did not send out Chanukah cards! There is nothing in our tradition that speaks of sending cards out on Chanukah. And you know why we do it! Okay ... so we do it. But do we really have to make them sound like Christmas cards? I’ve quoted some of these cards to you in the past but this year I found some new ones:

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHANUKAH

On the 12th day of Chanukah, my true love gave to me ...

Twelve Cohens kibitzing

Eleven Katzmans kvetching

Ten kosher knishes

Nine farshtinkener tchotchkies

Eight gefiltes shvimming

Seven Schlossburgs shlepping

Six bagels shmeering

FIVE GOLDEN-BERGS!

Four challa-ing birds

*Three gelt coins
Two matzah balls ...
And a dreidl for by Bub-be!
Happy Chanukah!*

Doesn't the card have a familiar ring to it? Or try this next one which reads:

'Twas the evening of Chanukah and all through the place
excitement was mounting, hearts quickened their pace,
when all of a sudden, through a window half open, zoomed a colorful figure for
whom all were hopin'.

He smiled and declared in a voice loud and steady,
"It's me, Captain Chanukah, How are you, already?"

Captain Chanukah? Ho, ho, ho! Or what about this one which reads:

I had a little dreydl, I made it out of clay,
And when it was dry and ready . . . some fat guy
In a red suit took it and gave it to a little Gentile kid.

Have we lost our minds? What would our grandparents and great-grandparents have said about all this? Indeed, speaking of grandparents, there's a service available for Jewish children at this time of the year to write "Bubbe" and "Zaide" in the North Pole asking for Chanukah presents. Why Bubbe and Zaide are in the North Pole and not in Miami Beach at his time of the year is beyond me!

What bothers me about all this is that it is demeaning ... demeaning to Judaism and demeaning to Christianity. We are making a joke out of Christian's sacred day! We as Jews can do better, and Christians deserve better from us. Let me teach you a law ... a Jewish law. It comes from the Talmud. In the Mishnah we are taught, "On the three days preceding the festivities of idolaters, it is forbidden to transact business with them, to lend articles to them or borrow anything from them, to advance or receive money from them, to repay a debt or receive payment from them." We are being told here that we are not allowed to do business with gentiles before their holidays because in so doing, we will be making their holidays merrier, their celebration more joyous. And that is the law! But don't tell that to little Isaac Cohen and his family!

There was teacher who was very curious about how each of her students celebrated Christmas. She called on young Patrick Murphy. "Tell me, Patrick, what do you do at Christmas time?" Patrick addressed the class: "Me and my 12 brothers and sisters go to midnight Mass and sing hymns, then we go to bed and wait for Father Christmas to come with toys."

"Very nice, Patrick," the teacher said. "Now, Jimmy Brown, what do you do at Christmas?" "Me and my sister also go to Church with Mom and Dad and we sing

carols, and after we get home we put cookies and milk by the chimney and we hang up our stockings.”

Realizing there was a Jewish boy in the class and not wanting to leave him out of the discussion, she asked Isaac Cohen the same question. “Now Isaac, what do you do at Christmas?” Isaac said, “Well, we go for a ride and we sing a Christmas carol.”

Surprised, the teacher questioned further. “Tell us what you sing.” “Well, it's the same thing every year. Dad comes home from the office. We all get into the Mercedes, and we drive to his toy factory. When we get inside we look at all the empty shelves and we sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus.” Then we all go on a cruise to the Bahamas.”

There are lots of Jews like Isaac Cohen and his family ... lots of Jews in our synagogue and all others, ultra-Orthodox Jews, who are doing lots of business with Christians before Christmas! But how can they? I just quoted the law from the Mishnah! But you know what? It is okay ... not because the law has changed but because Christians changed. By the time the Code of Jewish Law was written we are told: “There are those who say that all these things were only said in those times, but in our times they are not idol worshippers and therefore it is permissible to do business with them on the day of their festivals and to loan them money and all other things.” And then we have the additional statement, “And even to give money to their priests – they don’t use the money for sacrifices or idol worship, they only use it to eat and drink.” The law, when codified in the Mishnah, was talking about non-Jews who were pagans, who were barbarians ... by the time the Code of Jewish Law was written, the non-Jews we were talking about were Christians and Muslims; people whom we considered to be “religious” people ... people whom we could most certainly do business with.

If in the 16th century the Jews recognized that Christianity had changed, five hundred years later we should recognize that it has changed even more. We are living in a new age in our relationship with the Christian world. After Vatican II, and after most every Protestant church denounced anti-Semitism and any anti-Semitic roots in its beliefs, our relationship with our Christian neighbors here in America is a new one. We live in a country where a Jew can marry into American royalty ... where a Caroline Kennedy and a Chelsea Clinton can marry a Jew! In America they don’t hate us ... they love us so much that they want to marry us! We’re living in a day and age when the strongest supporters the Jewish people have for the security of Israel are Christian Zionists. During the Intifadas when we Jews stopped going to Israel, Christian Zionists kept coming! There used to be a time in our East European days when the arrival of Christmas sent fear through the Jewish community ... the fear of pogroms. We’ve come a long way from that. In light of all this, the newest issue of Azure Magazine – a wonderful product of the Shalem Center, a think-tank in Jerusalem – has an editorial entitled: “Coming to Terms with Christianity,” which ends with the words: “Christianity must realize that the vast majority of Jews will never abandon their religion and traditions and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Judaism, for its sake, must let go of its historical bitterness and stop demanding public expressions of Christian remorse at every

turn. It must learn to see the great religion to which it gave birth as a partner and an ally, one deserving of our appreciation and respect.”

Yes, the enemies of Judaism and Christianity are no longer each other. We both share common enemies – atheism, materialism, warfare, poverty, bigotry and ignorance, and tragically, to some degree, elements of Islam. And the goals and messianic dreams of Judaism and Christianity are shared in common as well – justice, brotherhood, love and peace.

So let’s put the “Ch” back into Chanukah! And yes, let Christians put Christ back into Christmas. Let us not attempt to secularize our religions, or to blur our religious differences. Let us learn to respect each other’s religion. Then there will truly be “peace on earth and goodwill toward all men” ... and women as well!

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