

Growing Up Without Santa

At Christmastime, many Jewish children feel their noses pressed up against a window of resplendent activities — which they do not enjoy in their own homes. Here's how one Jewish writer remembers dealing with the pangs of Christmas — and coming to love the miracle of Hanukkah.

By Francine Klagsbrun

Willie Malloy had the most beautiful Christmas tree I had ever seen. Its rich green branches (plastic trees had not yet come into fashion in those early post-World War II years) glowed with colored balls and candy canes, and tiny angels bobbing at the ends of silken threads. Perhaps it was the strangeness of the tree, more than its beauty, that dazzled me, for I never had a Christmas tree: my family celebrated Hanukkah.

I didn't know Willie very well although he and I lived in the same five-story apartment building on a mellow, tree-shaded street in Brooklyn. He was Irish and I was Jewish, and while our parents had a cordial "Hello, Lovely day isn't it?" relationship, we lived our lives and the Malloys lived theirs.

My life centered around my family and the small Hebrew day school I attended, where the study of Hebrew language and literature was intertwined with the usual academic subjects of math, English and history. Although not Orthodox, my parents felt a deep commitment to Jewish culture and traditions. We welcomed the Sabbath on Friday nights with candles and fresh-baked challah (the traditional Sabbath bread), with crisp white linen and sweet red wine. Passover was a noisy family affair with aunts and uncles and cousins crowded round a huge table at my grandparents' home.

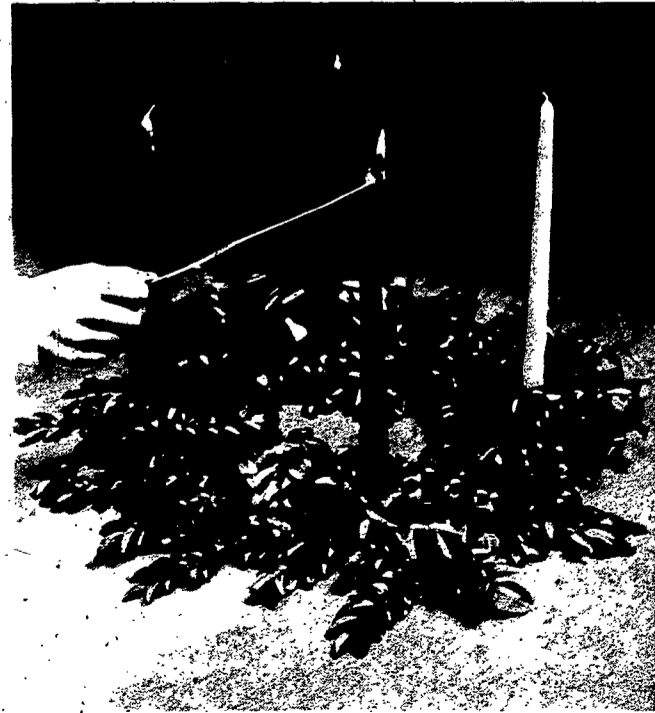
And Hanukkah — well, it was like no other time. All eight days of the festival made up winter vacation in my school, a cause for joy in itself. But there was far more to it than that. There were the little candles that we lit every night, with my brother and me joining in the blessing and songs. There were crisp, golden potato latkes, the traditional pancakes, that we ate dipped into homemade applesauce. And there was the shiny silver dollar I received every year. It was my Hanukkah gelt, the special gift of money whose origins go back to the extra portion of charity that is traditionally given to the poor at Hanukkah time. Each silver dollar I received went into a small leather pouch that I kept hidden in my bureau drawer, and as I added to my bounty, I counted the number of dollars I had, less a measure of my riches as it was a measure of the passing years and how grown up I had become.

I was aware, of course, of the Christmas decorations in the lobby of my building, of the bright lights on neighborhood homes, of the stores bursting with all kinds of Christmas fare. Aware but uninvolved; my life was comfortably sheltered within the warm embrace of my family traditions.

Then one Christmas day, the Malloys invited us to their home. They would be moving out of town soon: Mrs. Malloy explained, and they wanted to say good-bye. As I walked through the door of their apartment, I entered a wonderland of color and fragrance, a fantasy of wreaths and mistletoe and lighted candles, and at its center stood that beautiful, jeweled tree. While my parents chatted and drank eggnog with the Malloys, and my brother and Willie examined the array of toys "Santa brought," I walked round and round the tree, absorbing every spark of color and light that shone from it. In the midst of the noise and excitement, I was overcome with a sense of loneliness. "So this is what it's like to have Christmas," I kept thinking. "This is what most people have." I felt like an outsider. In spite of all I had, I ached for what I had not.

The Malloys moved shortly after that Christmas. I thought of them but I never discussed my feelings of that day with anyone. As my own roots grew stronger and deeper, those feelings faded into memory.

Shortly after we married, my husband and I moved away from the family and friends we had known all our lives. He



A Catholic child lights the candles of the Advent wreath.



A Jewish child lights the candles of the menorah during the celebration of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights.

entered a large midwestern medical school and I began an editing career. For the first time in my life, I had no Jewish friends; for the first time, we would celebrate our holidays alone.

At Christmastime that first year, some of my office friends invited me to help prepare for a Christmas party they were planning.

Patiently they taught me to shape cookie dough into Christmas trees and gingerbread men. They laughed when I confessed I hadn't the slightest idea of how to hang an ornament, let alone make one. As the evening ended, and they stood near the newly decorated tree singing carols, I suddenly felt again, in sharper relief now, the pangs that had gripped me long ago at the Malloys'. I felt cheated, left out. I was a child pressing my nose hard against a window, looking into a glistening world I could see, but not be part of.

This time I gave into my feelings. The next day would mark the beginning of Hanukkah, and I had preparations to make, but my heart wasn't in it. How could those little lights of Hanukkah compare with the great blaze of Christmas that filled the streets?

At home, I began listlessly polishing the silver menorah, the Hanukkah lamp my in-laws had given us as a wedding present. It was one of the few possessions they had managed to smuggle out of Belgium when they fled before the Nazi onslaught of World War II. I loved that menorah because it was a symbol of my husband's survival. As I looked at it now I began to see in it what I had forgotten, its broader symbol of survival, the survival of a people against all odds over thousands of years.

The story of Hanukkah has been told many times: A small band of Jews defeated formidable forces who wanted to wipe out their religion. When they went to light the great candelabrum in their temple, a miracle occurred. A single cruse of oil, enough to last for only one day, burned for eight. From then on, Jews have commemorated that miracle by burning Hanukkah lamps for eight days. At times, over the centuries, the lights have been mere flickers of flame, lit in the dark recesses of a basement by people forbidden to practice their religion openly. The Hanukkah lamps were rotted potatoes once, carved out to hold bits of fat and scraps of thread, salvaged to be used as a candle by inmates in a concentration camp. But the lights went on burning. Through centuries of hardships and persecutions, in ghettos and big cities, in Israel and the United States, in Russia and Iran, the lights burn, and the miracle is renewed year-after-year.

I looked again at the little menorah in my hands. I was part of the survival it symbolized, and it was up to me to perpetuate it. In an instant I was on the phone, inviting my new friends to a Hanukkah party. "We call it our Festival of Lights," I told them.

Years have passed since those early days of my marriage. My daughter Sarah, now 11, lights the Hanukkah candles with us and sings in perfect Hebrew the age-old blessing. The single silver dollar of my youth has given way to Hanukkah presents for her — a reluctant concession to the commercialism of our times. But together, she and I make crisp, golden latkes and applesauce, and we spin little wooden tops — dreidels, they're called — painted with Hebrew letters that stand for the slogan, "A Great Miracle Happened There." Every Hanukkah, my

husband and I give a big party for our family and friends, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

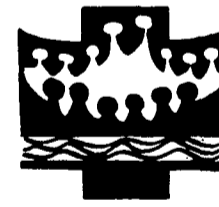
Every year, too, at Christmastime, Sarah and I push our way through the crowds to gaze at the lavishly decorated store windows. And we go to the museum, to admire its magnificent Christmas tree hung with Medieval ornaments.

"Do you ever miss Christmas?" I asked her one day.

"It's so beautiful," she says. Then she smiles. "But we have Hanukkah, and that's special to us."

Francine Klagsbrun, a New York-based author, editor and lecturer, originally wrote this article for the Ladies Home Journal.

Insights In Liturgy



Here Is Your God

By the Liturgy Office Staff

Church of Rochester, take off your robe of mourning and misery;
put on the splendor of glory from God forever.
Go up onto a high mountain, and cry out at the top of your voice,
Fear not to cry out:
Here is your God!

For the glory of the Lord has been revealed, and all shall see it together.
The mouth of the Lord has spoken;
His word has become flesh and he has pitched his tent among us.
Behold! Here is your God!

All the ends of the earth, behold the salvation of our God.
Break out together in song, bring glad tidings, announce peace, bear good news, and say to one another:
Behold! Here is your God!

Look, do not miss him; listen, he speaks.
Call him — Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast and forever peaceful.
Here is your God!

Paraphrased from the Book of Isaiah

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