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A Jewish Christmas? Some say 'Oy Tannenbaum'

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Dec. 16, 2011

(CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Frances Dinkelspiel attends a Reform synagogue, is raising her teenage daughters Jewish and plans to host a Christmas party this year.

As her family has for decades, Dinkelspiel will exchange presents, decorate a tree and invite friends over for Christmas Eve.

Dec. 25 has no religious significance for Dinkelspiel, a writer in Berkeley, Calif. "We don't celebrate the day for the birth of Jesus," she said. "I am 100 percent Jewish."

Rather, she considers the day a winter festival, as was common in Europe before the advent of modern Christmas celebrations.

Her Christmas traditions have deep family roots. While researching a biography of her great-great-grandfather, Dinkelspiel found a clip from a Jewish magazine in 1897 advertising her great-grandmother's "Santa Claus party."

Still, Dinkelspiel knows she's a minority among contemporary American Jews. She's been told that Jewish families should spend Dec. 25 in Chinese restaurants or movie theaters, not quaffing eggnog and exchanging presents.

"The vast majority of Jews in America regard Christmas as a Christian holiday and are revolted by the idea of a Jew celebrating Christmas," Dinkelspiel said.

"At the same time, there are a group of Jews who consider themselves fully Jewish who have been celebrating Christmas for hundreds of years while not regarding it as a Christian rite."

The so-called "December dilemma" -- how to navigate around Christmas in an predominantly Christian country -- has confronted American Jews for generations. In pop culture, at least, coping strategies have run the gamut from admiration (songster Irving Berlin, the son of a cantor, pining for a "White Christmas") to isolation (Kyle of "South Park," lamenting his fate as "lonely Jew on Christmas") to imitation (Hanukkah Harry,

anyone?).

A recent Israeli government ad touched on the dilemma and urged American Jews to avoid assimilation by moving to Israel. The ad, which showed a young girl eagerly anticipating Christmas rather than Hanukkah, was pulled after American Jewish groups called it "deeply insulting."

Still, the allure of Christmas customs, carols and commercialization is real, said Ron Wolfson, a professor of education at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

"It's a tricky time of year," said Wolfson, author of *Hanukkah: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration.* "People don't want to be left out of Christmas."

Wolfson draws a bright line, though, between appreciation and assimilation. "You can appreciate someone else's holiday without bringing it into your home," he said.

Still, 9 percent of Jewish households in America decorate a Christmas tree each year, and another 8 percent said they usually or sometimes do, according to the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, the most recent year for which national data is available.

A survey of 22 mid-sized American cities released last year found that 2 percent of Jewish households always have a Christmas tree, with about 4 percent saying they sometimes do, according to Ira Sheskin, director of the Jewish Demography Project at the University of Miami. In both studies, all household members were born Jewish.

San Diego entrepreneur Morri Chowaiki said the main market for his new "menorahments," such as Star of David tree-toppers, have been interfaith families who want to honor both their Christian and Jewish heritage.

Occasionally, though, Jewish households have come calling for his products.

"Most of the time it's Reform, sometimes it's Conservative families," he said. "Putting this star on top of the tree gives it Jewish significance."

Chowaiki married into an interfaith family but is raising his children Jewish. They celebrate both Christmas and Hanukkah.

"I'm not trying to make Hanukkah and Christmas into one holiday," he said. "We're not here dressing up Hanukkah Harry or painting Santa Claus blue."

His tree-toppers, however, have some Jews singing "Oy, Tannenbaum."

Lubavitch Rabbi Sholom Lipskar, founder of the Shul of Bal Harbour in Surfside, Fla., said the practice of adopting Christmas customs is "idolatrous for Jews."

"It's completely contrary to Jewish thought and practice," Lipskar said. "It's blasphemous."

Nor should Jews attempt to make Christmas kosher, he added, with "menorahments" or other Jewish touches. "Christmas, by its very definition, is a Christian holiday."

Lipskar said the December dilemma could be solved by making Hanukkah exciting for children and spiritually satisfying for adults. But Wolfson, for one, sounds skeptical of setting off a holiday competition.

"The basic problem is that Hanukkah can't hold a candle to Christmas."

Still, modern Jews can find worthy role models in the Maccabees, whose revolt against the prevailing culture and triumph over the Syrian empire is celebrated at Hanukkah, Wolfson said.

"The Maccabees stood up and said we're not going to assimilate, we're not going to give in," Wolfson said.

Sherry North, a children's book author in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., said she begged her parents for a Christmas tree when she was a child.

Her parents resisted, but a family tradition was born when she and her sister brought home stockings from elementary school one December and informed their parents that Santa would fill them.

"They didn't have the heart to say that we're Jewish, so our stockings wouldn't be filled," North said.

This year, as in years past, Dec. 25 will find North and her family exchanging stocking stuffers -- a secular but meaningful family tradition, she said.

"Any excuse to get together with family and to celebrate is a good one," she said.

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