



Reprinted from Moment Magazine, December 2005, "Ask the Rabbis" column

Should Jewish children be allowed to take part in Christmas caroling?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

If one partakes of American culture as most Jews do, it is a simple fact that the Christmas season is an inescapable part of our lives. Whether or not one chooses to participate actively in the holiday, it is impossible to avoid being a passive participant. Streets are decorated with lights, newspapers abound with Christmas sales, and Santa is ubiquitous. Malls are piped full of Christmas music that may be festive and in the spirit of the season. But the repetition often reaches a level of irritation, and it becomes to next to impossible to get some of these tunes – especially “Little Drummer Boy” – out of one’s head.

While most Jews would like to tone down the commercialism associated with the holiday, many are quite pleased to partake of the joy and festivities of the season not just as happy bystanders but even as active participants. Some even welcome the spill over to Hanuka, that increases our visibility and presence.

In my father’s assimilated Jewish home in Germany, Christmas was typically observed with a Christmas tree affixed with candles and tasty lebkuchen, or spice cake. In December 1936, his last before leaving the country, he recalled going caroling with classmates at the American School in Berlin. My mother, raised in this country, told me about visiting her Jewish aunt and uncle with their Christmas tree. That tradition was not passed down to me, without misgivings by my parents nor regrets on my part. However, I remember looking forward each year to watching “Holiday Inn” – made in 1942 with Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire – or its 1954 remake, “White Christmas,” with Crosby and Danny Kaye – and vicariously participating in the holiday. For others, the annual ritual was watching “It’s a Wonderful Life” – and also taking a tour of the neighborhood to see which houses were lit up the best.

For those in interfaith and intercultural families, with partners and spouses and grandparents who directly celebrate Christmas, it is even more a reality and likelihood that Christmas will be observed in some fashion in their own home or at the home of some relative. These homes, as we all know, constitute an ever-growing segment of the Jewish community.

Because we live in an open society where we encourage our kids to have friends of all races, religions and ethnic origin, it should come as not surprise that they will have opportunities to explore each other’s particular celebrations. We will invite their children to our home to light menorahs, eat latkes and sing songs about dreidls. They will invite us to trim their tree, enjoy some egg nog, and sing Jingle Bells.

Some children will feel right at home and join right in. They will sing Jingle Bells and Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer with joy and gusto. But these, of course, are benign in their lyrics, and don't make declarations of faith. What about Silent Night or its ilk? Are these also okay or are they off limits? It largely depends on the child. For some, like my wife when she was a teen, it will be a fun, intercultural experience without feeling the least bit threatening, no different from Jewish adults singing Handel's Messiah in their annual choral concert. My own caroling experience, on the one outing I made with friends in high school, was more ambivalent. I enjoyed the comradery of peers, but I was more reticent about joining in. I might have been better off staying at home. So yes, know your children, talk to them, and let them go with their friends if that's their wish, or help them say no, if that's what they'd prefer.

My cousin, who has a beautiful voice, was once asked to sing "Ave Maria" at a friend's wedding. He was honored to do so. The only mistake he made was showing up on Sunday, a day too late, because he didn't realize that his Christian friend was getting married the day before, on Saturday.

If a nice Jewish boy by the name of Irving Berlin can write "White Christmas," then other Jewish boys and girls ought to be able to sing it.

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer presents a view of Humanistic Judaism as a regular contributor to Moment Magazine's "Ask the Rabbis" column. The response printed here may be slightly altered from the version that first appeared in the magazine. You can find Moment Magazine on-line at www.momentmag.com.