Dissecting the “December Dilemma”: Post-WWII Rabbinical Opinions on Jewish Participation in Christmas Celebrations

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In 1958, the Conservative movement’s United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education issued the eighth volume in its continuing pamphlet series, *Your Child and You*, aimed at providing American Jewish parents with childrearing guidance. The author, Rabbi Abraham J. Karp of Temple Beth El in Rochester, New York, had already contributed another volume to the series, entitled “When Your Child Asks About God.” In his second work, Karp transitioned from the realm of theology to the realm of Jewish-Christian relations. Having addressed how Jewish parents should talk to their children about God, the rabbi now turned his attention to a more vexing and more practical problem: how should Jewish parents deal with Christmas?

“‘Comes December and the questions begin,’” Karp wrote. “Anxious parents phone and visit; the P.T.A. chairman organizes a discussion; the Bulletin editor solicits a column, and the annual question is asked: ‘What shall we do about Christmas?’”¹ Karp’s new pamphlet coined a term—the “December dilemma”—to encapsulate the tensions and anxieties that many American Jews wrestled with every winter as members of a minority faith living in a predominantly Christian society, in which the Christmas holiday evolved by the late nineteenth century to assume center stage on the national calendar. As Jonathan Sarna and others have noted, Christmas complicates the notion of an American civil religion apart from

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Christianity that accommodates and welcomes members of other faiths under its
tent. While Christmas is celebrated in the United States as a federal holiday, and
while some of its associated customs have secular or pagan origins, its primary
rituals and narrative stem from Christianity’s most central principles and
convictions. For Jews and other non-Christian religious minorities, as well as
Americans of no religious orientation, Christmas therefore raises difficult issues
around the relationship between church and state, and between Christianity and
American culture.2

In the decades after World War II, American Jewish parents voiced the
concerns that coming to terms with Christmas for themselves and their children
elicited. In a 1950 Commentary article subtitled “December is the Cruelest Month,”
Grace Goldin described with heavy ambivalence the challenges of raising Jewish
children in Iowa in December—how she relented to let her son participate in the
school Christmas pageant, and how the family overcompensated in response to the
allure of Santa Claus and “Silent Night” by purchasing Chanukah records and
decorating their home with paper menorahs and Stars of David. “If Chanukah comes
earlier than Christmas, it’s an inoculation; if later, an antidote,” Goldin observed,

2 Jonathan D. Sarna, “Is Judaism Compatible with American Civil Religion? The
Problem of Christmas and the ‘National Faith’,” in Religion and the Life of the Nation:
American Recoveries, ed. Rowland A. Sherrill (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,
1990), 153-154; Joshua Eli Plaut, A Kosher Christmas: ‘Tis the Season to Be Jewish
(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 2-4. On the history and evolution
of Christmas, see Penne L. Restad, Christmas in America: A History (New York:
Oxford University Press, 1995); and William Leach, Land of Desire: Merchants,
83-90, 328-338.
describing the Jewish encounter with the winter holiday season, in stark medical terms, as a brush with illness.³

Augusta Saretsky, a parent educator affiliated with the Jewish Education Committee of New York, dramatized the issues surrounding Christmas, Chanukah, and the American Jewish family in a short play, published in 1965 and written to be performed and discussed by parents. In this scene, titled “The Hanukkah-Christmas Dilemma,” four Jewish mothers meet for tea and consider the pros and cons of Mrs. Leff’s son’s participation in a public school Christmas play. While Mrs. Abelow argues that Christmas is a national holiday and that healthy children need such opportunities for self-expression, other mothers in the group argue that Christmas is an inherently Christian celebration and that Jews should not take part in Christmas celebrations of any sort. Discussion questions accompanying Saretsky’s script then prompted participants to share their own feelings about Jewish approaches to Christmas and holiday celebrations in school.⁴

In pamphlets such as Karp’s “Our December Dilemma,” along with several similar publications and numerous sermons and editorials, rabbis and communal leaders attempted to help parents resolve these questions and conflicts surrounding Christmas. While this generation of American Jews was by no means the first to confront the issue of whether and how to join in Christmas celebrations, as will be

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discussed below, the social and cultural context in which they grappled with the question was markedly different than that of previous generations. In the post-World War II era, the age that witnessed the ascendance of both the Judeo-Christian ethic and Dr. Spock in American culture, the concerns of rabbis and communal leaders about Jewish involvement with Christmas gravitated in two particular directions, in a reflection of the times. ‘

First, they argued that Jews should refrain from many forms of Christmas celebrations out of respect for the practices and beliefs of their Christian neighbors. In earlier decades, by contrast, communal leaders often invoked the history of Christian mob violence against Jews on Christmas as an important reason for Jews to avoid the holiday. While this argument did not completely disappear in the postwar era, it was superseded by a different kind of appeal, focused on cultivating positive interfaith relations in the present as opposed to rehearsing painful and offensive episodes from the past. This line of reasoning rose to prominence in a postwar era in which improved interfaith relations helped to break down barriers and create space for Jews to be welcomed as Jews in mainstream American life.

Second, many rabbis, along with other voices in the American Jewish community, warned that Jewish children exposed to Christmas could suffer mental and emotional problems into adulthood. Claims about the negative consequences of Christmas trees for Jewish children’s mental health and personality development gained frequency in the baby boom era, in which American parents hoping to raise well-adjusted children placed greater trust than ever before in the advice of child psychologists. Here, as with the argument for respecting Christmas as a Christian
holiday, the advice literature on how American Jewish parents should treat Christmas with their children reflects the needs and concerns of the American Jewish community, which were shaped by the political and cultural climate of the post-World War II period.

While scholars such as Dianne Ashton, Joshua Eli Plaut, and Jeffrey Shandler have examined the reactions of rabbis and other American Jews to Christmas from the nineteenth century into the present, their analysis of the post-World War II era shifts primarily to explaining how American Jews magnified and commercialized the holiday of Chanukah to resolve the “December dilemma.” Other scholars, including Deborah Dash Moore and Jonathan Sarna, have studied how American Jews debated the merits of joint Christmas-Chanukah celebrations in schools and other public spaces, and how these arguments translated into activism.5

In turning their attention away from Christmas to trace the postwar development of an Americanized Chanukah, historians have yet to consider how Jewish views of Christmas changed in the context of the Cold War and the baby boom. A close reading of the concerns and claims in the postwar advice literature for Jewish parents about Christmas, written primarily by rabbis, speaks to broader issues in American Jewish history: the dynamics of acculturation and acclimation to middle-class American values and mores, the narrative of Jewish-Christian relations

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in the United States, the use of scientific and medical evidence to defend Jewish traditions, and the rise of survival anxiety as a dominant theme in American Jewish letters after World War II. Exploring the nuances and changes in how American Jews responded to Christmas illuminates one example of how minority groups in the United States steer between adaptation to American culture and preservation of their own traditions.

**Jewish Encounters with Christmas: A Brief History**

Celebrating a secularized Christmas—decorating a tree, exchanging presents, and singing carols—was a widespread but not universal custom among Jews in Central Europe in the nineteenth century, a part of their process of adaptation and integration into middle-class German culture. Many prominent Jews, including Theodore Herzl, the leader of the political Zionist movement, and Fanny von Arnstein, the salon hostess and philanthropist, displayed Christmas trees in their homes. In the United States, Jewish immigrants from these German-speaking lands commonly maintained these Christmas customs into the twentieth century, although such practices became increasingly controversial as Christmas took on vastly greater cultural significance in American public life.⁶

For the vast majority of the two million Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who came to the United States between 1880 and 1924, by contrast, Christmas held very different connotations. In Russia and neighboring lands, as had occurred throughout Europe since the Middle Ages, Christmas and Easter brought

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⁶ Plaut, *A Kosher Christmas*, 15-28; Restad, *Christmas in America*, 157-159. Sometimes Christmas trees were incorporated into Chanukah celebrations, both public and private. On this practice in the late nineteenth century, see Plaut, 24-25.
periodic episodes of antisemitic violence to Jewish communities when local mobs of Christians sought vengeance against Jews for their alleged role in the crucifixion of Jesus. Jews therefore frequently spent the holiday indoors for safety’s sake.

Numerous superstitions and traditions developed in Eastern European Jewish communities with regard to how to pass the time on Christmas Eve, such as refraining from the sacred duty of Torah study in a conscious rejection of the religious significance of the evening. Instead, many Jews took up more frivolous pursuits, such as playing chess or cards, which were otherwise generally frowned upon by the rabbinic establishment.7

As they adapted to American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe sometimes found the allure of Christmas difficult to resist, though strong negative reactions to the holiday continued. The Jewish Daily Forward, the most popular and most influential Yiddish-language newspaper in the United States, published frequent commentaries and news stories related to Christmas throughout this era. As an unabashedly socialist publication, the Forward sometimes used Christmas as a rhetorical opportunity to issue critiques of American capitalism and religious hypocrisy. At the same time, however, the paper, along with its competitors in the Yiddish vernacular market, devoted extensive coverage to explaining Christmas customs in the course of

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introducing its readers to the intricacies of American culture. The Yiddish press took note of the increasing ubiquity of Christmas trees and gift exchanges among Jews in settlement homes and tenements over the ensuing decades. In one oft-reproduced quote, the Forward recorded the following impression: “Among the thousands of people now filling the big stores are many Jews [...] buying Christmas presents. [...] This has become fashionable among Jews in America; they go about it with a holy fervor. [...] Here in New York, the first thing that shows you’re not a greenhorn is buying Christmas presents.” Scholar Andrew Heinze has argued that, much like Jews in Central Europe a few generations earlier, some Eastern European Jews adopted the practices of decorating trees and giving gifts at Christmas in order to embrace the folkways of their new home and to mark their improved socioeconomic status.

Over the course of the twentieth century, some American Jews continued to mark Christmas with trees and presents, according to both anecdotal and statistical evidence. Without citing sources, a 1940 article in Time magazine claimed that

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9 “They Are Pious, But They Also Celebrate Christmas,” Jewish Daily Forward, December 25, 1904, 4, quoted in Shandler, Jews, God, and Videotape, 194-195.
11 See, for example, the various anecdotes and recollections recorded in Dianne Ashton, Hanukkah in America: A History (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 212-213. See also Milton Matz, “The Meaning of the Christmas Tree to the American Jew,” Jewish Journal of Sociology 3 (1961): 129-137. Matz, who surveyed Chicago Jewish parents about their feelings and habits with regard to Christmas trees in 1958, found that nearly 18 percent of them had Christmas trees as children, and more than 20 percent continued the practice to some extent as adults. Matz
“perhaps half of the Jews” in the United States “gave their friends Christmas presents, told their children about Santa Claus; some even put Christmas trees in their living rooms and wreaths in their windows.” According to a 1953 survey of American Reform Jewry, 21 percent reported placing a Christmas tree in their homes, while a slim majority, 54 percent of those polled, expressed an opinion that it was inappropriate for Jews to do so. A 1962 study of the Kansas City Jewish community found that 12 percent of Jewish families, most of them either Reform or unaffiliated, had Christmas trees, and many of these same families exchanged gifts. By 2013, in a reflection of the significant rise in the number of interfaith families in America since the 1960s, the Pew Research Center found that 32 percent of American Jews reported having a Christmas tree in their home the previous year, including 71% of those married to non-Jewish spouses.\footnote{According to a Pew Research Study of American Jews in 2013. See Pew Research Center, 2013 \textit{Survey of U.S. Jews}, \url{http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-4-religious-beliefs-and-practices/#combining-judaism-and-other-faiths}, accessed November 12, 2015.}

\textbf{Rabbinical Reactions}

With exceptions, members of the American rabbinate strongly disapproved of Christmas celebrations among American Jews, urging them to satisfy their social and emotional needs with festive Chanukah celebrations instead. From time to time, speculated that some third-generation American Jews were paradoxically attracted to the symbolism to Christmas trees as a means of “affirming [their] at-homeness in America,” even as they joined synagogues and purchased Jewish ritual objects for their homes to mark their Jewishness, because they viewed the Christmas tree as a secular object.

however, some rabbis insisted that Jews could observe Christmas—or, at least, participate in gift-giving and decorate a tree—"without in the least disgracing [their] religious convictions or interfering with the building up of a stronger and nobler Judaism," because the holiday had been sufficiently secularized in its evolution into a national American festival, as Reform Rabbi Dr. Solomon Sonnenschein of St. Louis argued in 1883.\textsuperscript{13} Twenty years later, Rabbi Judah Magnes expressed the opinion that Jews need not fear or reject Christmas out of hand. While acknowledging that many Jews “silently bring in the trees and the lights” into their homes in December, Magnes averred that the central message of Christmas, "peace on Earth and good will to men," should resonate with Jews as “a Jewish thought.” He hoped that Jews might even be inspired by the Christmas spirit all around them to “give added importance to our religious life.”\textsuperscript{14}

The vast majority of rabbis and communal authorities, however, vigorously objected to Jews’ observing Christmas in almost any fashion. As Dianne Ashton and others have demonstrated, they marshaled a variety of arguments in opposition to Christmas trees and gift exchanges in Jewish homes, in order to persuade as many Jews as they could to maintain their distance from Yuletide activities. One common argument invoked the history of antisemitic oppression tied to Christmas. Writing in the \textit{Jewish Times} in 1869, Felix Adler, who would go on to establish the

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Jewish Tribune New Series} 1, December 14, 1883, 498, quoted in Plaut, \textit{A Kosher Christmas}, 25-26.
universalist Society for Ethical Culture, decried those who would "celebrate a day which has cost us so much pain, so much blood," as engaging in "a bitter and cruel mockery" of their ancestors’ trials and tribulations. This line of reasoning also appeared in a 1950 editorial in *Women’s League Outlook* editorial, a magazine affiliated with the Conservative movement. According to the author, “No right-minded faithful Jew can permit a Christmas tree in the home if he stops to think of the untold misery” that Jews experienced throughout the ages on this day. Nevertheless, this argument declined in frequency after World War II in favor of other claims that did not rehearse Christian offenses against the Jewish people, for reasons that will become clear.

Another frequent appeal to American Jews advised them to see the Christmas tree and other trappings of the festival as inherently Christian in nature, and therefore out of bounds for faithful Jews. In 1879, Reform Rabbi Max Lilienthal admonished young readers of the *Sabbath Visitor*, a Jewish children’s periodical no doubt read by many parents, that “the Christmas tree reminds the Christian world of Jesus of Nazareth,” because its evergreen quality symbolized the immortality that

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15 Felix Adler, “The Christmas Tree,” *Jewish Times*, December 31, 1869, quoted in Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979), 31. I thank Dr. Jonathan Sarna’s work on Jewish responses to Christmas for pointing me to this source. It should also be noted that Adler later had a change of heart about Christmas. See ibid., 176. For other iterations of Adler’s argument, see Ashton, *Hanukkah in America*, 97.

Jesus promised to his believers through his death. The Jewish Daily Forward echoed this message in 1941 when a reader wrote in to the newspaper’s popular advice column, seeking guidance on how immigrant parents should react upon learning that their son’s family had a Christmas tree. In response, the Forward advised its readers that “Christmas is the most religious Christian holiday […]. Jews, religious or not, should respect the Christmas holiday, but to celebrate it would be like dancing at a stranger’s wedding.” This line of reasoning, which stressed the fundamental religious character of Christmas observance in all its forms, continued to serve the interests of rabbis and others opposed to Jewish Christmas observance after World War II, though, as we will see, it served new purposes in the postwar era.

Finally, rabbis and others in the American Jewish community opposed Jewish participation in Christmas celebrations out of concerns tied to assimilation and conversion to Christianity. In the words of the biblical book of Proverbs, Rabbi Julius Eckman of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco counseled his fellow American Jews in 1867 to “‘[d]rink water from thine own cistern’ and do not ape the stranger.” While Jews should admire and respect the customs of other religions, Eckman wrote, “for Jews to ignore their holy days and celebrate those of Christians is perverse, and must meet with the condemnation of the sincere Jew and the contempt of the intelligent Christian. The latter can only look upon the Christmas

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tree [...] in the house of the Jew, as an act of denial of identity—an attempt to appear to be what he is not.”\textsuperscript{19}

Other comments on American Jews and Christmas in Cincinnati’s Jewish newspaper, the \textit{American Israelite}, took Eckman’s argument about Jewish passing and self-denial a step further, declaring that Jews who exposed their children to Christmas risked their eventual conversion and alienation from Judaism. An 1888 article insisted that while a Christmas tree might appear to be nothing but an “innocent amusement” in a Jewish home, this seemingly harmless act would lead to intermarriage, conversion, and the rupture of Jewish families. Similarly, in 1907, the \textit{American Israelite} advised readers that “[i]f your convictions tell you that Christmas thoughts must not enter into the life of your little ones, if you fear the contamination of young souls by the tinsel of foreign symbols, keep them away from places where such danger is lurking.” The newspaper called on American Jews to keep themselves and their children far from Christmas celebrations, both to protect their children from Christian influences, and also to respect the customs and the feelings of their Christian neighbors: “We must cultivate a spirit of amity with those amongst whom we live, and we must respect the traditions of the majority.”\textsuperscript{20}

Here, in anticipation of two rhetorical trends that would become more prevalent and more significant in the postwar era, the newspaper linked concern for the hearts and minds of Jewish children with concern for the emotions of American Christians.


\textsuperscript{20} \textit{American Israelite}, January 10, 1888, 5, quoted in Sarna, 160; \textit{American Israelite}, January 3, 1907, quoted in Sarna, 163-164.
Postwar Opposition to Jewish Christmas Celebrations

Between the 1940s and the 1960s, opposition to Jewish participation in Christmas centered around two primary arguments: first, that Jews who observed Christmas callously disrespected the religious traditions of pious Christians, and second, that Jewish children who participated in Christmas activities risked incurring serious and debilitating emotional harm. The first claim was rooted in an older rhetorical tradition, which stressed the Christological connotations of the Christmas tree and other aspects of the holiday in an effort to dissuade Jews from participating. After World War II, however, as interfaith cooperation between Jews and Christians became an important cultural and political tool in America’s Cold War struggle against the secular Communist enemy, the focus of this argument shifted. While rabbis and other commentators continued to urge their fellow American Jews not to observe the customs of Christians, in the spirit of the times they based their claims more often upon principles of interfaith goodwill than upon fear of apostasy.

The second claim also drew upon a previous argument, which concerned how Jewish children might be affected by exposure to Christmas. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, commentators warned American Jewish parents that celebrating Christmas with their children could lead to conversion, intermarriage, and the dissolution of the Jewish family in the next generation. In the middle of the twentieth century, along with the increasing popularity of Dr. Spock and other disseminators of child psychology among the American public, the focus on children shifted to address the potential ramifications of Christmas for the
healthy personality development of American Jewish boys and girls. Here too, rabbis and commentators adapted their arguments in an effort to address the shifting needs and concerns of American Jews at mid-century, which evolved in response to cultural and political developments.

“Respect the Convictions of Your Non-Jewish Neighbors!”—The Interfaith Tolerance Argument

The December 24, 1948 issue of The Message, the weekly bulletin of Congregation Beth Yeshurun, a prominent Conservative synagogue in Houston, Texas, carried a stern message for parents weighing whether to succumb to their children’s wishes to decorate Christmas trees. In an editorial titled, “Jewish Christmas Celebration an Offense to Christianity,” the author acknowledged that “[e]very Jewish parent is faced, during these days of the Yuletide season, with the problem” of demonstrating to one’s children that Hanukkah is just as joyous and wonderful an occasion as its calendar companion, in “an environment where Christmas is in the air, where Christmas trees are the fashion.”

According to the author, while Jewish parents do their best to make Hanukkah attractive to their children with gifts, parties, and decorations, they would do well to consider and impress upon them “another angle to this matter that should be explored more effectively than it has been so far” — the attitudes of Christians toward Jewish co-optation of Christmas celebrations:

Christmas is, to the Christian, a serious religious festival and is bound up with his belief in the founder of Christianity, whose birth it celebrates. Christians who are interested in the doctrines and

21 “Jewish Christmas Celebration an Offense to Christianity,” The Message, Congregation Beth Yeshurun (Houston, TX), December 24, 1948, 2.
ceremonials of their religion, are resentful of the manner in which their festival is vulgarized and commercialized in the America of our day. [..]

It is therefore quite natural for them to resent the use which some Jews make of their sacred symbols simply for the sake of getting presents, entertaining children and general revelry and merriment.22

Whereas Jewish children might be inclined to see their dalliances with Christmas as harmless amusements, the author claimed, Christians are deeply hurt by the misappropriation of their traditions by those not of their faith. Along those same lines, Jews too would be offended if Christians were to “take our Hanukkah Menorah, which, to us, is a memorial of the heroism of the Maccabees, and use it as a means of illumination for noisy parties and boisterous celebration.” The author expressed the hope that if Jewish parents could bring their children to understand how their Christian friends would be upset by a Christmas tree in a Jewish home, then Jewish children would abandon “their selfish desire” to have Christmas and embrace Hanukkah instead.23

Similarly, Rabbi Robert Gordis, a leading figure in the centrist Conservative movement and clergy at Beth-El Congregation in Rockaway Park, New York, exhorted his congregants to “Respect the Convictions of Your Non-Jewish Neighbors!” in a bulletin article, later reprinted by the Chicago branch of the American Jewish Congress. Citing the principle of the Golden Rule, “Thou shalt love

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid. The author concluded the editorial by taking the argument in a different direction, arguing that it is an embarrassment that Jews “borrow a festival of our daughter religion to cover up for our lack of appreciation and understanding of our own great and ancestral faith.” Along with an appeal to interfaith tolerance, the author thus called on parents to instill Jewish pride in their children through the celebration of Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah.
thy neighbor as thyself,” Gordis explained that this code “includes respect for the convictions of those who differ from us.” Accordingly, Jews should shun the excuse that Christmas is a secular festival and refrain from celebrating it. “Let us respect ourselves by observing our own great Festivals and let us respect our neighbors by honoring their religious convictions, so that in a spirit of mutual respect we may extend to them the Season’s greetings,” Gordis wrote.24

This argument, tying Jewish abandonment of Christmas to principles of interfaith respect, found expression in numerous outlets during the 1940s and 1950s, from rabbis at various points in the liberal-to-traditional spectrum. In a 1949 newspaper editorial on the Christmas tree published in Boston’s Jewish community newspaper, Rabbi Morris Landes of Pittsburgh’s Orthodox Congregation Adath Jeshurun concurred that “[t]he truly pious Christian resents the Jew who takes the tree without the theology.” He added that his gentile clergy counterparts are never bothered by his rejection of Christmas, but that they sometimes ask of him, “‘Then why does So-and-So, a Jew, have a tree? What right has he!’”25 Rabbi Landes supplied an opinion from a Christian colleague, albeit likely a paraphrased or manufactured one, to convey to his Jewish audience how Christians receive such actions as a slight. Other authors followed this strategy—quoting or paraphrasing the thoughts and wishes of Christians—to demonstrate to their coreligionists that

incorporating Christmas trees and other aspects of the holiday into their homes was inappropriate.

In this vein, Rabbi Jacob Weinstein, spiritual leader of the liberal Reform Kehilath Anshe Ma’arav Temple in Chicago, opined in 1947 that “[i]t would appear as sabotage of our neighbors’ faith to contribute to the secularization of the festival which marks the birth of their Saviour.” He recalled that a Christian colleague of his once related to him that he “resented the large, elaborately-lighted Christmas trees on the lawns of Jewish homes,” which “confused the children of his Church.” Weinstein declared that his colleague had therefore pleaded with him to instruct his congregants to refrain from decorating trees.

In a similar fashion, Rabbi Abraham Karp’s “Our December Dilemma,” the pamphlet produced by the Conservative movement for Jewish parents in 1958, concluded with “A Letter from a Christian,” addressed “[t]o one of my best friends—a Jew.” The author of the letter described how “[y]ou showed me the Christmas tree you placed in your home. You thought I would be flattered and pleased.” While the tree was beautiful, the letter writer went on to state, “I am neither flattered nor pleased. I am somewhat resentful, a little ashamed, and deeply sorry.” The author explained that the tree was a powerful religious symbol for Christians, as it served to remind them of Jesus’ birth during the Christmas season, and expressed disappointment and resentment to find a tree erected “as no more than a pretty decoration,” rather than a testament of faith. At the same time, the letter included

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admiration for the festivity and the “exciting and significant story” at the heart of Hanukkah on the part of the Christian author, along with a plea to the friend to “give your children an opportunity to partake of its joy and share in its celebration.”

For his own part, Karp echoed the sentiments expressed in the letter included at the end of his pamphlet. A few pages earlier, addressing the question of whether a Jew can display a Christmas tree at home, since it is a custom with pagan roots, Karp argued that the origins of the Christmas tree tradition mattered less than its current symbolism and usage. While Christians might ultimately differ on the meaning of the Christmas tree, he contended, “[t]he Jew, who has respect for the religion of his neighbor, must view the tree in its most spiritual aspect—as a symbol it is sacred to Christianity (author’s emphasis). […] It is precisely because of respect for the faith of which this tree is a symbol that a Jew should not bring it into his home.” Karp thus rejected any attempt to label the Christmas tree as a secular object acceptable to Jews, following an older pattern of reasoning. His objection, however, hinged not upon fears of conversion or assimilation, but rather upon the notion that Jews should abstain from such practices in deference to the cherished beliefs of their Christian neighbors. American Jews should feel guilty in this case, he

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asserted, both for neglecting their own traditions \textit{and} for abusing the traditions of another faith.$^{29}$

Rabbis thus called on American Jews to act in a spirit of tolerance and respect in shunning Christmas trees and other aspects of the holiday. Their pleas did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they were forged in the political and cultural climate of the early decades of the Cold War, in which religion took center stage in American public life, and in which interfaith organizations such as the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) worked to build bridges between members of different faiths as part of a demonstration of America’s moral and spiritual strength in its fight against the Soviet Union.

During this era, “In God We Trust” was added to the nation’s paper currency and declared the country’s official motto. Only a few years earlier, the story of the four chaplains—one Catholic, one Jewish, and two Protestants—who sacrificed their lives aboard the doomed \textit{USS Dorchester} during World War II to save many of their fellow Americans emerged as a powerful symbol and rallying cry for understanding and cooperation between Jews and Christians. “Interfaith in Action,” the slogan on a 1948 United States postage stamp issued in honor of the chaplains, became a guiding ideological force in American cultural and political life, through which Judaism and Jews would move from the periphery to the center of American society. Within a decade of the end of World War II, in his bestselling book \textit{Protestant-}

Catholic-Jew, sociologist Will Herberg famously described America as a “triple melting pot,” a society consisting of three faith communities bound together by common values and traditions.30

Nevertheless, even as Jews enjoyed a period of unprecedented acceptance and socioeconomic mobility in the decades after the war, the espionage trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in the early 1950s heightened continued anxieties within the community about their place in American society. Many Jews had openly subscribed and affiliated with left-wing political causes and organizations during the first half of the twentieth century, and thus the threat of being tarred with the label of “un-American” and losing the gains in status and goodwill that the past decade had brought, became a major cause of concern in the age of McCarthyism.31

Viewed in this light, the exhortations of rabbis to American Jewry to respect Christians and Christianity at Christmastime, and to rediscover and embrace

Hanukkah and other Jewish traditions, represent not only a call to honor the spirit of interfaith cooperation that was a postwar cultural touchstone, but also an attempt to erect defenses around the charge that Jews were disloyal Americans with Communist sympathies. In urging their congregants and coreligionists to shun Christmas and adopt Hanukkah, rabbis called upon Jews to flex their religious muscles in such a way that would both advance the cause of tolerance and demonstrate how well Jews, as good, faithful Americans, fit in alongside their Christian fellow countrymen.

“A Psychology of Escape”—The Mental Health Argument

In 1956, Simon Glustrom, a Conservative rabbi in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, wrote *When Your Child Asks*, a resource guide for Jewish parents. Glustrom’s book aimed to provide mothers and fathers with information about the basic tenets and practices of Judaism, as well as answers to hypothetical questions that their children might pose to them, such as “If I can’t see God, how do I know He exists?” and “Why do adults fast on Yom Kippur?” In the introduction to his work, Glustrom explained his motivation for producing such a book.

“In the light of modern psychology,” he wrote, “it is almost needless to emphasize that the attitudes which the young child formulates will have a significant effect upon his later development.” Therefore, Glustrom reasoned, parents who wished their sons and daughters to have a positive orientation towards Judaism must prepare to nurture this outcome from an early age, since children are quick to perceive that they are different from their peers, and Jews constitute an often-stigmatized minority group. “Learning that they are unlike their friends in
certain ways can bring a great deal of unhappiness, especially if being a Jew is merely a label rather than a meaningful way of life,” he added. Glustrom sought to provide parents with the knowledge and answers they would need to fortify their children’s “sense of self-esteem and personal worth in belonging to the Jewish group.”

Glustrom’s concern for the emotional state of the Jewish child, as well as the child’s ability to cope successfully with being a member of a disadvantaged minority group, illustrates a broader trend in the literature on American Jewish education and parenting in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In the same era in which millions of American parents turned to Benjamin Spock, Arnold Gesell, and other psychologists for childrearing wisdom, Jews looked to psychology for advice on how to raise happy and well-adjusted children who fit in comfortably as Americans but maintained an attachment to Judaism and the Jewish community.

Kurt Lewin, a German-Jewish social psychologist who came to the United States in 1933, served as a leading voice for this movement. In his 1940 essay,

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32 Glustrom, When Your Child Asks, viii.
“Bringing Up the Jewish Child,” Lewin introduced the view that American Jewish children needed positive social and cultural experiences with Jewishness as early as possible in order to form a sense of “belongingness” that would anchor them both to the Jewish community and to American society at large. Without such experiences to shield them, he warned, Jewish children would inevitably suffer from feelings of inferiority and alienation later in life, when confronted with the fact of being part of a stigmatized group.34

Rabbis, psychologists, and educators seized upon Lewin’s concepts as scientific evidence of the “mental hygiene” value of Jewish learning and living for the well-being of the American Jewish child. In particular, they stressed the importance of family Jewish holiday celebrations, complete with rituals, songs, decorations, and food, as prime opportunities to inculcate positive Jewish attachments in young children. Reform Rabbi Samuel Markowitz illustrated this point in his Adjusting the Jewish Child to His World, reprinted in 1961, in which he argued that Jewish holiday celebrations instill Jewish children with enough pride to withstand episodes of discrimination. Describing one such hypothetical youngster, he wrote,

To the taunt, “You are a Jew,” a little Jewish five-year old nonchalantly replied, “I know it.” Growing up in a pious Jewish home where the Sabbath, Festivals and Holy Days were regularly and beautifully observed, this Jewish youngster had imbibed the feeling of being different and the psychic support which Jewish observances and

regular religious habits provide. To be a Jew was not to be inferior; it was only to be different.35

At the same time, because they invested so much significance in the psychological power of Jewish holiday celebrations to inculcate identity, many rabbis and other commentators warned that American Jewish parents who brought Christmas into their homes risked engendering the opposite effect. Instead of giving their children emotional security through Jewish festivals, they claimed, these parents exposed them to feelings of confusion and inferiority and set them up for future adjustment problems later in life.

The American Jewish Congress (AJC), an interdenominational advocacy organization, issued an editorial to this effect in December 1948 in its periodical, Congress Weekly, which was subsequently reprinted in various outlets. In addition to repeating other arguments against most forms of Jewish involvement with Christmas, such as the holiday’s essential Christian character, the Information Department of the AJC stressed the psychological dimension of the Christmas conundrum in a series of broad rhetorical questions: “Is group adjustment in a multicultural society rendered easier if each group adopts and participates some of the other’s religious customs? Or, is it best achieved by a proud and dignified

affirmation of one's own heritage and its expression?” The article went on to ask whether Jewish children are negatively affected by being excluded from non-Jewish festival observances, which leads to an early realization that they are different from their peers.36

With respect to these questions, the article continued, “scientific research has begun to demonstrate what well-balanced Jews always knew intuitively: that a good deal of Jewish maladjustment and insecurity among youth […] can be traced to a lack of adequate knowledge of Jewish tradition and history and appreciation of the cultural symbols of the Jewish people.” Borrowing arguments from Kurt Lewin and other experts in Jewish child psychology, the American Jewish Congress contended that Jewish children who do not receive a proper grounding in their own customs and thus are not aware of and positively oriented toward their belonging to the Jewish community would suffer emotional difficulties in later life. Therefore, parents who believe they are shielding their children from prejudice or helping them fit in by celebrating Christmas with them “are thus unwittingly rendering them a grave and lifetime disservice.” Through the rhetoric of child psychology, the AJC claimed to offer “objective thinking” on these difficult issues, which it hoped would appeal to parents already inclined to heed the advice of psychological experts.37

Rabbi Samuel Glasner, a Reform educator in Baltimore, presented a similar argument in the pages of The Jewish Teacher, a pedagogical journal, in November

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37 “Christmas and Jews,” 1A, 10A.
1954. Glasner prepared a sample “Letter to Parents” about Christmas as part of a larger unit for teachers to prepare lessons about how Jews should approach the holiday in a balanced and informed manner. Glasner cautioned that those parents who give into their children’s wishes to have a Christmas tree and gifts “are doing their children no favor. They are bringing them up with a psychology of escape from their Jewishness, which may color their whole adult emotional life, instead of with a glad acceptance of their Jewishness, which will enable them to attain an inner peace and self-respect.”

While also invoking the argument that Christmas was a religious holiday for Christians, and historically a time of great suffering for the Jewish people, Glasner also appealed to the “Spock generation” of parents wishing to raise happy, healthy children, sound in both body and mind.

Like his Reform colleague, Rabbis Abraham Karp and Morris Landes, respectively affiliated with the Conservative and Orthodox movements, also looked to psychology to justify their positions that Jewish parents should not allow their children to have Christmas trees and participate in other aspects of the holiday.

“Our chief concern is for the welfare of our children,” Karp wrote, adding that fear of the child’s converting to Christianity was not a reason for objecting to Christmas. Rather, he explained, “[w]hat we do fear is that the impact of Christmas upon the Jewish child might produce a sense of inferiority, a feeling of exclusion, or frustration born out of unsatisfied longing and envy.”

To protect Jewish children from emotional damage, he counseled, parents must embrace the fact that they are

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Jewish and give their children a sense of “joy and security” through festive home celebrations of Jewish holidays.

Rabbi Morris Landes concurred with Karp in a newspaper editorial in which he implored parents to shun Christmas celebrations to safeguard their children’s mental health. The Jewish child who yearns to decorate a Christmas tree and receive a stocking full of gifts wants most of all to feel a part of something larger and greater than himself, he argued. “To give him the tree without all the religious trimmings around it is to give him the shadow without the substance and to do irreparable harm to him psychologically,” Landes wrote. “To give him both Christmas and Chanukah is to add confusion to psychic injury and to pave the way for maladjustments later in life.”

Like Karp, Landes turned to psychology to justify to Jewish parents why they must not celebrate Christmas with their children. Instead, Landes implored readers to satisfy their children’s inner needs (and, implicitly, their own) through Judaism: “The child craves religion. Let him find it in Judaism. The child seeks status, the feeling that he belongs to something. Let him belong to the Jewish people.” This notion of attachment could not be cultivated only in December, Landes argued, but is the result of regular engagement with Jewish holidays throughout the year—decorating a sukkah, or outdoor hut, in the fall; listening to the Exodus story at a Passover seder in the spring; and lighting the Hanukkah candles in the winter.

In at least one case, a Christian also voiced concerns about the impact of Christmas celebrations on the Jewish psyche. Laura Pienkny Zakin, while

40 Landes, “Pro and Con,” 7.
41 Ibid.
interviewing Jewish and Christian clergy for her 1955 *Congress Weekly* article, “A View of the ‘Christmas Problem,”’ spoke with a Catholic priest in Manhattan who “stressed the damage to a personality that may result from confusing the traditions embedded in different faiths, and noted that he liked to see a Jew be a Jew and to take pride in his distinguished heritage.” In the same article, however, a Protestant expressed the view that he was not bothered by Jews who co-opt Christmas, “as long as they don’t mock or desecrate it.”

Zakin’s piece, incorporating the perspectives of Protestants and Catholics on the issue of the “December Dilemma,” thus highlighted the two central objections to Jewish observance of Christmas shared by many rabbis—that Jews should shun Christmas celebrations in their homes to honor the religious beliefs and practices of Christians, and to help their children avoid potential psychological problems later in life. These arguments speak to two pressing concerns in the American Jewish community that arose in the context of the Cold War and the baby boom—maintaining positive relations between Jews and Christians, and promoting emotional security in Jewish children—which reflect the needs and anxieties of American Jewry in the first decades after World War II. Examining the rabbinic advice literature on Christmas helps us better understand the processes of negotiation whereby American Jews attempted to navigate between a desire to become Americans and a desire to remain Jewish.

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