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Another December dilemma

Very soon Jewish newspapers, magazines, online blogs and even synagogue sermons will address the recurring theme of the “December Dilemma.” That phrase refers to the sense of alienation many Jewish people feel in the midst of a culture that makes so much of Christmas. Not only do many feel out of step or excluded, but they also struggle in contending for their children—many of whom don’t understand why they can’t celebrate with their non-Jewish friends.

Some elevate Hanukkah—a minor festival—in large part as an attempt to address this problem. But the attraction of Christmas with all of the beautiful lights, catchy tunes, office parties, gift-giving and Santa celebrations still presents a challenge for many Jews.

For others, there is no dilemma as they have chosen to enter into a kind of Christ-less Christmas—a celebration with all of the decorations and gift-giving but none of the spiritual meaning. A secular celebration of Christmas presents no problem for them or their children so why not enter in? Perhaps they are closer to mainstream culture at Christmastime than are many Christians.

Followers of Jesus have our own December Dilemma; we often find ourselves at odds with the culture, attitudes, morals and religious sentiments that surround us. Our society is known for being pluralistic, yet many misuse that term to make it increasingly uncomfortable (and in some cases, illegal) for Christians to participate publicly in traditions that were part of our nation from its inception. It is increasingly necessary for us to contend—not for favored status in a Christian nation—but for normal expressions of our faith in a secular one.





We find the season extremely advantageous for pointing to the Savior, not only because of the masses of people out and about doing their Christmas shopping but because it creates a natural bridge for conversation. Try asking someone, “What does Christmas mean to you?”

People in retail stores apologize nervously if they slip and say “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays.” Displays of crèches and sometimes even Christmas trees (which have no religious significance to most people) have been banned from public and government owned property.

But there is a silver lining in all of this; Christians can learn something from Jewish people who take seriously the “December Dilemma.” At this time of year, they find a certain amount of reflection and self-evaluation essential. They must think through their priorities and principles, discerning what is genuinely important for them and their families. The decision to avoid involvement in all the celebratory activities of the Christmas season is a choice that costs these Jewish people something, but it reflects a loyalty, a commitment that is admirable.

Now of course I wish that more Jewish people would see that Christmas truly is a Jewish holiday celebrating the birth of the greatest Jew of all, the Messiah Y’shua (Jesus). But in the

absence of that revelation, I have to say I respect Jewish people who weigh the issues, consider the cost and choose to abstain from any Christmas celebration rather than imbibe the secular spirit of the holiday—seemingly without considering Jewish loyalties or reflecting on the deeper meaning and implications of their participation.

Such serious reflection may be helpful for followers of Jesus as well. Does the secularization of Christmas create in us feelings of alienation? I hope so. Will our loyalty to Jesus cause us to seriously consider how we enter into the celebration of Christmas in our communities, in our churches, in our homes? It should. Watching “It’s a Wonderful Life” on television does not make for the most compelling of traditions surrounding the celebration of Jesus’ birth.

I don’t want to be a scrooge or rob anyone of the joy of celebrating Christ’s birth. Every year, some people write to scold me for any positive mention of Christmas, insisting that it is a pagan holiday and should be avoided like the plague. That is not what I am saying. But for those of us who truly love the Lord, it seems to me that our hearts should be grieved at how Christless Christmas has become, its meaning smothered and the beauty of the Savior’s birth tarnished beneath layers of commercialism and every kind of excess.

Indeed, the danger for us this Christmas might be in not feeling alienated. If we don’t sense the true December Dilemma confronting us as followers of Jesus, if we don’t reflect on where our loyalties are (or should be) then we won’t do anything to help ourselves and our families withstand the pressure that surrounds us. But if we do feel that sense of alienation and discomfort, what can we do about it?

There may be some who argue for a complete and total boycott: “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. . . .” (2 Corinthians 6:17). There is an admirable quality to this stance because it costs something for those who take it—and they are willing to pay the price as a mark of loyalty to Jesus. But that choice is not so cut and dried for everyone, so if it is your choice I admire you, but please don’t insist that it be everyone else’s choice as well. (Romans 14)

Those who choose to celebrate Christmas, even amidst the secular symphony of syncretism that is our surrounding culture, have to work hard to emphasize the Christ of Christmas, and to ponder anew the real meaning of our Savior’s birth. In Jews for Jesus this comes easier because we make the season a time to expend extra effort to proclaim the gospel.

We find the season extremely advantageous for pointing to the Savior, not only because of the masses of people out and about doing their Christmas shopping but because it creates a natural bridge for conversation. Try asking someone, “What does Christmas mean to you?” Then, “Who do you think Jesus really is?” We hand out lots of tracts at this season. You might want to order 100 from us, hand out your own or send appropriate literature out with your Christmas cards this year. If you are near one of our branches, maybe you’d like to join us when we hand out tracts.

If giving people gospel literature isn’t necessarily “your thing” perhaps you will come up with other ways to be intentional about making Jesus the center of your Christmas celebration.

Last year I did something I hadn’t done in a while. I went Christmas caroling with my children and my daughter-in-law’s family. I think we were the only ones who did any Christmas caroling in the neighborhood that year because everyone who opened their doors (and most did) seemed surprised and delighted. We sang only the Christmas carols that spoke of Christ; none of the “deck the halls, jingle bells” variety and I had the strongest sense that we were truly proclaiming the gospel as we sang “born is the King of Israel” and other pointed lyrics. This year Hanukkah coincides with Christmas (December 20-28) so I suggest carolers learn a Hanukkah song to sing at Jewish homes. The gesture will not be lost on your neighbors.

There are many ways we can respond to the secularization that is all around us this Christmas. Let’s not be too quick to ignore the sense of alienation. Let’s use that dilemma to energize us to reflect more deeply, to speak more boldly and worship more reverently the Christ of Christmas.

Bits from (European) branches

LONDON

Kata Tarr reports, "I used to play in a Klezmer band in Hungary. The other Jewish musicians knew about my faith in Jesus. Recently Judith, one of the band members, contacted me. Her mother had become really ill; she had already been through a surgery but her pain soon returned and she had to go back to the hospital.

"I had arrived in Hungary for a short holiday, when my friend Judith passed on her mother's request that I visit and pray for her. I sent out a quick prayer request to all my praying friends, then got a small Hungarian booklet about the Messiah and off I went. On my way to the hospital I phoned her only to find out that she had been taken away for two hours of examinations; given my short stay I was unable to see her after all. On my way to the airport I managed to mail the booklet to her with a letter. In my note I asked her to consider that God wants much more than to restore her health. He wants to give her eternal life in the Messiah Jesus.

"I recently heard that she had been taken to another hospital where they discovered the reason of her pain and operated on her. She walked home. Praise the Lord! I phoned her from London. She said she had read the booklet and thanked me for praying. While she is still hesitant about Jesus, she is open and recognizes the Messiah's role in addressing her pain. It seems as if God used the difficult moment of Zsofi's life to open a gap in her heart towards her Messiah. Please pray for her salvation."

ISRAEL

Oded Cohen reports, "We first received David's* contact info during our Behold Your God Campaign in 2009. From the very first meeting, he was quite curious and open. I usually visit David with Vlad, another of our Israeli staff members. Each time we'd show David a Scripture,

he'd say, 'Wow! I never saw that before.' He has always had a certain excitement to know more—a good sign that people are walking the path toward faith and salvation in our Lord Jesus.

"During our last visit before leaving for our Passover tours, we left him a few books to read and encouraged him to re-read the Scriptures that we had shared with him. When we got together after a time of not seeing each other, it was a joy to learn that David not only read most of the books we gave him, but he had come to believe that Jesus is his Savior and Messiah! He had also copied the sinner's prayer so he could take it wherever he goes—he'd been praying it daily!

"I explained that it is good to repent of specific sins daily, but Y'shua is now his Messiah and Lord and it's not necessary to continue to pray that prayer. David understood, but said he likes to pray the prayer regularly anyway. He is a well-established, well-educated professional who is influential in his field, and has already shared his faith with some of his friends.

"Please pray for David to grow in his faith and become all God is calling him to be."

GERMANY

Leonid Dolganovsky reports, "I have often testified to Yura, one of my Jewish contacts. He reads the Bible I gave him from time to time, but he hasn't shown much interest. While I knew that the Word of God was working, there were no apparent results.

"Then I turned to God in prayer and asked, 'Father, show me please what I must do so that his heart of stone will become a heart of flesh.' I recalled how, when I first began my ministry with Jews for Jesus, I visited my people with my wife Inna. People responded differently to us as a couple and that is when I saw the most people come to faith in Christ.

"I talked with Inna, and we decided to go together to visit Yura. When we arrived, there was not only Yura, but also his wife Lena, who is a good acquaintance of my wife. To my surprise, Inna began to talk to Lena. The power of the gospel filled the room. Yura was all ears; he listened to Inna very attentively. When she finished talking, Yura said, 'Yes, one can bow down before such a God!' At last, I could see God's Word had worked in him. That day, Yura received Jesus.

MOSCOW

Olga Ammosova reports, "Last year, Esther, a 70-year-old Jewish woman came to our Rosh Hashanah holiday service for the first time. At the end of the meeting, she responded to an altar call. Then we didn't see her for a long time. I phoned Esther to remind her that we meet every week to study the Bible and give praise to God, and that we would be glad to see her join us. Esther said she would come, and she kept her promise and began attending regularly. "I began to visit with her periodically and found that her decision for Jesus was sincere. She is especially interested in prayer, perhaps because her sister is gravely sick. Esther asked me how she should pray for her sister. I reminded her that sin is the most serious problem and ultimately the cause of all problems, so repentance before God is very important for every person. Also, prayer must come from our heart, because the Lord knows our thoughts and will put the necessary words of prayer into our mouth.

"Esther and I prayed for the Lord to bless her in prayer and grant her necessary words during prayers. She began to tell her sister about God and her faith in Y'shua. She prays for her sister's repentance and health. Pray for Esther, for her growth in God and for her sister's salvation."

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VOLUME 12:5, November 2011.

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JEWS FOR JESUS



by Karol Joseph

We Plan, God Laughs

The old Yiddish adage, “We plan, God laughs” is a great reminder of His sovereignty. So much so that I have the saying posted on a refrigerator magnet in my kitchen. Many have commented on the truthfulness of that saying when they visit my home; often they themselves laugh when they read it, or at least give a knowing smile. As believers, most of us have seen that truth lived out many times in our own lives, but it’s much more fun to watch it played out in someone else’s life right before our eyes. I feel that this is what has been happening in our experience with Marty (not his real name). Marty attended his first Jews for Jesus weekly Bible study in my home several months ago. We were introduced by one of our regular attendees, Sherry, who leads us in worship through music every week. She and Marty had recently met and he was interested in coming to spend some time with her, and to hear her sing. He was very pleasant but made it quite clear from the outset that he hadn’t come to learn about God, since he was agnostic at best, with very strong leanings towards atheism. He also made it clear that he certainly wasn’t interested in believing in Jesus, since he was Jewish—though he believed that Jesus lived and had many good things to say and teach. He also wanted me to know from that start that he didn’t believe that the Bible was true, either, so that anything we might say based on the Bible would hold no weight with him. What he did believe in, however, was science and evolution. He was firmly committed to the idea that the Bible couldn’t possibly be true because “we know” that the world wasn’t created in seven days but has been around for millions, if not billions, of years. I wasn’t sure that Marty would make

it through that first Bible study, as we spend about an hour each week working line by line through a passage of Scripture. I was quite surprised that first week that Marty not only stayed for the entire study, but he was the last one out the door at the end of our fellowship hour. He asked question after question, raising objection after objection. And I, along with others, answered each one as best I could. The following week Marty returned for more, and has returned almost every week since. At some point I discovered that he was a voracious reader, so for several weeks he would leave with a book (or even two) that I would recommend he read; whatever I loaned him he finished reading by the next week. He would usually call me sometime during the week with questions and comments about the reading material, but he would also come back with a list of things that he wanted to discuss. Marty continues to insist that he will never believe what we believe,

and sometimes asks me why I would want to “waste my time” with him in light of that fact.* When he asks me that, I simply remind him that he has actually shifted quite significantly over these last few months from being an almost total atheist to finally acknowledging (based on all he has read and heard) that there actually is a God. I told him that some of his questions and comments sound like someone who is sincerely searching for the truth. And then I ask him what he thinks keeps him coming back week after week if he’s really so closed to the idea. My prayer is that one day Marty will look back over this season and see that while he had his plans, there was God all along, laughing. Karol Joseph leads our work in Brooklyn.
*Editor’s note: in fact, Marty is not the first to ask this question, and more than one person who did not want to “waste our time” has since come to faith in Jesus. Pray Marty will, too!

Moishe’s Musings*

One reason why God gives us holidays is to help us navigate through our own forgetfulness. Certain events remind us that He is real during the ordinary or even disappointing moments of our lives. Apparently, God does not want the kind of relationship where He must prove Himself to us every minute of every day. It seems He wants us to remember what He has done for us in the past and trust Him for our present and future. While holidays help us to memorialize the reality of what He has done corporately, we should also memorialize and remind ourselves of the things He has done for us individually. Each time I remember what God has done it helps me know He is caring for me still. It is remembering who He is, not who we are or how we feel, that enables us to “keep the faith.”



*Excerpted from: A Message from Moishe in our November 2003 newsletter



Australia Update

By Bob Mendelsohn
National Director, Sydney Australia

With all that God is doing around the world through the ministry of Jews for Jesus and others, it's humbling and joyful for us to let you know about the work in Australia. Our little team, Mark and Rahel Landrum, David Reid, and my wife Patty and me, serve together in a little office in the back of our book shop on Oxford Street in Bondi Junction. We pray together for God to overwhelm us with opportunities to witness of His love. We watch God answer those prayers. And we rejoice. We hope you will stand with us in agreement. Here are some stories:

Joseph is a Holocaust survivor. He lives around the corner from our little shop and has made it his 'local' of late. He comes in to buy Judaica products and to chat about spiritual things. He bought books by a couple Messianic Jewish authors and brought his wife in to meet us. He's curious, yet reluctant about receiving our DVD "Survivor Stories." God is working on his heart, to be sure.

Kate is a young European Jewess who first heard of us when my 'stickered' car drove past her North Shore home, and she rang to enquire. She has come to the shop, received a Bible, joined our Hebrew class and is coming along. The mother of another woman in our class grew up near Katherine's home. Coincidences? Not at all.



Rahel continues to share the Gospel with another Rachel, who attends our Bible classes weekly, and appears to be on her way to personal faith in Jesus as Messiah. Her reluctance is based on

anti-Semitism, which the church has lived in for centuries. She's hearing our answers; she's hearing God's answers.

Joe is another Holocaust survivor. He came into our shop to yell. He was angry. He had "ridden past our shop in the bus for years," he said, and had to come in today to let us know his feelings. How could we put the words "Jews" and "Jesus" in the same phrase? After he vented for minutes, I asked him if he "was done." He said yes. I asked him, "Could I share with you a story in one minute that might answer your question?" He agreed and we sat down.

I wasn't sure what story to tell him and I had promised him one in "one minute!" I shot up an 'arrow-prayer' and God heard and answered. I told him that I didn't know a Jewish family anywhere that wasn't affected by it. I mentioned other peoples of the world and their sufferings as well, and that I could read about it, but didn't deeply understand what they are suffering. But (and I pointed to the banner above me at the time. It says "Y'shua" in Hebrew), "there is someone who does understand. He had done no violence. Nor was any deceit in his mouth." He was an innocent, who suffered the pains of rejection by his friends, and brutal execution at the hands of Romans on their cross. Y'shua alone can well understand what you went through and what all people go through in their suffering."

Joe was taken aback. He replied, "Then why don't they teach that the Italians are to blame and not the Jews?" We had 25 more minutes together. Questions. Answers. God getting through to Joe.

Leah is an Israeli, self-admitted secular Jew, and had a very hard time with the issue of Jesus' name on our banner. She came in to complain that it was misspelt. Of course, it is not, but she was informed by the Israeli method of (mis) spelling the name of Jesus. She stayed about 15 minutes and left with a copy of my testimony book after asking,

"How did you get into all this?"



One by one Jewish people are considering Christ. In Sydney, in Melbourne, Brisbane, and around the country, and the Lord is not done yet!

Sarah is a flight attendant who lives in Brisbane. She came to visit our shop and to buy a product for a girlfriend. When she and I sat for a coffee in the shop, she told me of many woes she was experiencing. Just then, a Sri Lankan man named David came inside. He came straight to me. We had spoken three days earlier. He was living nearby and seeking spiritual answers. I gave his information to a local pastor who invited David along to a prayer group that night. David went along and during the 'prayer time' David asked for prayer for his sleeping. Seems he had not been sleeping a full night in months. Worries, anxieties, etc. So he asked for prayer at the very first Christian meeting he had ever attended.

David came into the shop to 'report' to me that he had attended the meeting, asked for prayer, and that 'IT WORKED!' He was so excited that he had slept 13 hours the night before. What a great testimony, from an unbeliever! And in front of Sarah who was desperately seeking peace as well. How good is God to orchestrate all this, amen?

Please keep praying for our efforts, for volunteers to help us in the shop, for more space to carry on our public ministry, for Jewish people, for their eyes to be opened to the Gospel of Messiah Jesus. He's listening. He's answering. We are humbly rejoicing. We hope you do, too!

Parallels & Contrasts of Hanukkah Christmas

MACCABEES

A small band of guerilla fighters supernaturally defeat the King of Syria and all his resources

KING

Antiochus falsely claimed to be Epiphanes, God incarnate

TEMPLE

- The Temple had to be cleansed before it could be used for worship
- The Temple had been defiled by an unholy sacrifice
- Even after the cleansing of the Temple, the Hanukkah story tells us we did not have enough oil to properly dedicate God's house; He had to provide it supernaturally
- The desire to worship God became the basis for this joyous holiday

LIGHT OF MENORAH

The shammas or servant candle brings light to the rest of the candles on the Hanukkiah (the 9-branched candelabrum used during the holiday)

FOODS

In Israel it is traditional to eat special donuts because fried foods remind us of the oil needed to dedicate the Temple
Others of us grew up with latkes (fried potato pancakes). They can be served with a dollop of sour cream or apple sauce.

MESSIAH

Baby Y'shua (Jesus) supernaturally survives despite Herod's death warrant on all boys his age:
"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him'" (Matthew 2:13).

IMMANUEL

Y'shua truly is God incarnate:
"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

TEMPLE

- Jesus came into the world so that we could be cleansed and each become a Temple wherein God is worshiped:
". . . For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people'" (2 Corinthians 6:16).
- Jesus came in order to cleanse what was defiled through His holy sacrifice: "how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Hebrews 9:14).
- Even when we are cleansed by Jesus' sacrifice, we do not have enough spiritual power to live a life dedicated to God; He provides it supernaturally through His Spirit:
"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16).
- The desire to worship God is the basis for this joyous holiday

LIGHT OF MESSIAH

Jesus, the Light of the World, gives His light to all who will receive it: ". . . I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12).

FOODS

You guys can probably answer this one better than we can. If you have some really interesting sounding traditional foods drop us a line and maybe we'll mention them in a subsequent newsletter!