

TEXT OF SERMON DELIVERED FRIDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 28, 1962,
by RABBI SIDNEY H. BROOKS,
to CONGREGATION OF TEMPLE ISRAEL, OMAHA, NEBRASKA.

RABBI, SHOULD MY CHILD SING CHRISTMAS CAROLS IN SCHOOL?

The best time to talk about the problem of Christmas in the public schools is on a hot day in June. When you deal with legal matters and search for a sane resolution of conflictual attitudes, it is not good to get emotionally involved. Each year at Christmas time the same questions are raised, the same doubts voiced, the same anxieties suffered as Jewish parents and their children find themselves enveloped in the Christmas mood. The position of a minority is seldom, in our time, as clearly and mightily felt as at this season. And, naturally problems arise. Let me, therefore, share with you some attitudes and responses to one of these problems

Parents, probably reflecting their children's feelings, frequently ask the same basic question begging in advance for two different replies. Some say: Why should my child sing Christmas carols in public school? And others: Why shouldn't my child sing Christmas carols? Strong feeling demands the desired answers to both questions. How shall we reply?

All of us are conditioned in our thinking by high-sounding pronouncements from national bodies about the separation of Church and State, the decision of the Supreme Court prohibiting the official New York State Regents' prayer and the unconstitutionality of sectarian religious instruction in the public schools. Our major national defense agencies hew to the line of stalwart defense of the principle of separation. Thus well-disposed public school officials who cannot escape the feelings of both Christians and Jews, are caught in the swirling currents of trying to please everybody without too flagrant violation of the letter of the law.

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schools, the secular elements in the religious season are being counteracted.

Nothing is easier for Jews than to criticize the commercialization of Christmas and the secularization of a fundamentally religious holiday. But, in my view, it is highly inappropriate that we do so. In the first place, we, no less than others, have contributed to and benefited from that commercialization. Secondly, we ourselves are well on the way to doing the same thing with our own festivals. The festival of Chanukah is the most flagrant case in point.

So let us begin, if we object on that score, by some self criticism and self-control. And let our discussion of public rights deal not with what is wrong with the celebration of Christmas by Christians, but directly with our relationship as a minority to our Christian neighbors.

My answer, therefore, to what Jewish children should or should not do in the public schools relates to how any Jew should behave when asked to participate in non-Jewish religious observance. In deciding we ought be aware of the relationship between Judaism and other religions and what does and does not constitute an act of faithlessness or a compromise of our heritage. One aspect of the problem deals with public relations; the other with preserving the basic integrity of our personal faith.

First, public relations: Much is and must be made of the rights of a minority in matters of faith and conscience. In our land, personal belief is not decided by vote. A man may be compelled to obey the common civil and criminal law, but he need not review his personal faith before the tribunal of public approval.

On this score, parenthetically, we may well dissent from the inclusion of the phrase "under God" in the pledge of allegiance to the flag. Though it now be law, it is not in the tradition of American democracy that a man's patriotism is contingent upon his belief in a Supreme Deity. I would insist that in America a citizen may be irreligious, non-religious or anti-religious, atheist, agnostic or heretic and still be a loyal American. It is this principle which removes the church from the control of the state and guarantees freedom of belief or disbelief for every citizen.

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We as Jews may worship or not worship as we please. Our is not legally a Christian nation. Christianity is not the official religion of the United States. We are not, therefore, constrained to follow Christian practices in order to hold public office or to maintain our citizenship. Our rights of religious preference as a minority are guaranteed by the Constitution without prejudice to any exercise of citizenship. But as the majority must defend the religious rights of the minority, it should be equally obvious that the minority cannot impose its prohibitive will upon the majority. Here the waters muddy. Because here the strict letter of the law is as ill-advised as in the case of the pledge of allegiance to the flag. Since Christmas is a specifically Christian religious holiday, it has legally no place at all in the public schools. And the celebration of Chanukah in whatever manner in a public school is equally a violation. Then, by analogy and consistency there should be no religious symbol of any kind on public property. The Christmas tree on the White House lawn must go. There should be no sectarian chaplains in the Armed Forces, Christian prayers as invocations in Congress are out of place. And the phrase "in God we trust" on our coinage and paper money should be removed.

Again, parenthetically, I cannot conceive how placing the name of God on the most mundane and material of human symbols -- money -- leads to religiosity. Surely there is question whether we are spiritualizing the mundane or defiling the sacred! And I doubt that you bring God into the hearts of men merely by printing His name on anything and everything.

Obviously, the absolute separation of Church and State is a legal fiction. Christmas should not and cannot totally be removed from public observance or school programming. And, in my view, common sense in public relations, fair play, and good manners would say that it does not become the right of the minority to cause the majority to abstain from their celebration simply because we do not share their point of view. The majority, too, has rights.

From a practical standpoint, I would much prefer controlled Christmas observance in public schools with strict limitations on time devoted to it and the careful avoidance of theological doc-

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trine (which is as offensive to differing denominations of Christianity as it is to us) to the legally enforced total removal of Christmas from schools and other public affairs. Such would be unwise, unkind, and disastrous to inter-religious amity.

This being the case, we can ask that teachers be sympathetically aware that non-Christians are present not by sufferance, but by right. The proper teacher will protect the psychological comfort and understand that religious sensitivities of non-Christians have validity and are to be warmly and sympathetically recognized. This requires skill. And unfortunately, all teachers do not possess this capacity. Many teachers are not trained to recognize their class as a mixed group. They should be. The public school is no place for doctrinal religious preachment projected from a particular teacher's personal faith, or church hymns that are theological confessions. The Classroom is certainly not the place for Christian worship. These demands should not be compromised.

Now, from the point of view of our personal faith: No people on earth has more zealously guarded its traditions than have we. The martyrology of the Jew testifies to his piety and his spiritual courage. The inevitable small discomforts of our children at Christmas can well be the opportunity for teaching a powerful lesson in the need to sacrifice for principle and in the truth that a price is often demanded for personal integrity. Let us teach our children we can win the respect of others far faster by self-respect than through impersonal organizational programs of defense. Jews who ape Christians in self-defense and in the fear of being different have no place in this discussion. We are concerned not with Jews who try to look like Christians by the possession of a Christmas tree under whatever name, or Christian protective coloring in whatever guise. Our concern is with affirmative Jews, puzzled by what is and is not right procedure under the circumstances. My answer may not be the answer for all Jews, but for liberal affirmative Jews I think it sound.

It is a fact of normative Judaism that we do not have proscribed and permitted books, songs, or literature. There is no

control over our reading, our singing or even our prayers. A Jew may, for instance, read and study the New Testament. Indeed, New Testament literature is an important area of study in our best rabbinical schools. We Jews are not afraid of truth no matter from what source it comes. We may attend worship in any Church and we are asked to regard the worship of others with respect. If a Jew enters a Church to share a Christian service, he has not compromised his faith. He may and should decline to repeat the creed or any confession of Christian doctrine contrary to Jewish belief. He is not disloyal, in my view, if he repeats the Lord's Prayer in company with Christians. But would be improper and a compromise of Jewish fidelity to substitute Church for Synagogue, Christian hymn for Jewish melody and the Lord's Prayer for his own devotion in personal observance.

If a Jew should sing a Christian hymn he does not become a Christian, nor has he confessed Christianity as his faith. I think a Jew has the right to dissent from participating in any prayer or song, the words of which, he does not mean and does not believe. For these reasons and since the theological discrimination of children is far from skilled, I would allow any child in the public schools to sing Christmas carols, if he likes and is comfortable doing so. I would permit him to decline to sing them if participation makes him uncomfortable. He is entitled to either alternative both by his faith and his rights as a citizen. Surely, no blame or guilt should attend either choice. If a child has been so raised that he feels guilty singing Christian hymns, let him remain silent. The words of many Christmas carols proclaiming Christ as Saviour are unacceptable to any Jew. Some Jews are mightily disturbed to sing these sentiments.

So let me be clear: I strongly resent and consider highly improper the use of a Christian hymn containing clear confession of Christian dogma improper on any occasion when Jew and Christian meet, pray and celebrate on common ground. It is awkward but true that there is no Jewish liturgy or song that compromises Christian faith, but many Christian prayers and hymns do run counter to Jewish belief.

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To return to our question: I do not believe that any sound purpose is served by making it impossible for a Jewish child to share a Christian celebration with his friends, so long as within his own positive and affirmative Jewish home and in his own life he does not appropriate it for himself. I would wish the Jew to be sympathetic to the Christian as I pray the Christian will be sympathetic to the Jew.

Tonight our holiday of Chanukah enters its last day. And at the end of the festival the Menorah is ablaze; it grows in brilliance each night. Unlike other flames which wane as they burn, the light of the Menorah grows as it burns. The light of any Faith is like that. Left alone it dies; the more it burns the brighter it gets.

Let us find every way we can in consonance with our tradition that will give us the opportunity to join in song and prayer with men of spirit everywhere still cherishing our heritage and faithful to it without compromise.

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