

# A GUIDE FOR JEWISH FAMILIES REGARDING CHRISTMAS

ADOPTED BY THE MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF RABBIS

In response to many inquiries, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis suggests the following answers to questions posed during the Christmas season. It is not our intention to issue a dogmatic pronouncement on this subject. It is our purpose, however, to provide some measure of guidance and understanding for those members of the Jewish faith who desire counsel on these matters.

**1. IS CHRISTMAS A NATIONAL HOLIDAY WHICH ALL JEWS CAN OBSERVE IN GOOD CONSCIENCE?**

A. Christmas is not a national holiday. It is an important Christian holy day which celebrates the birth of Jesus, the Christian Messiah. Christmas is not in the same category as Thanksgiving Day, Fourth of July, Decoration Day, or any other American holiday. CHRISTMAS is a sacred festival for Christians who regard Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Inasmuch as we Jews believe that God alone is Savior and Protector, we cannot in good conscience observe Christmas. To ask us to do so is to violate our religious principles.

**2. IS IT NOT TRUE THAT MANY AMERICANS DO CONSIDER CHRISTMAS TO BE A NATIONAL HOLIDAY?**

A. Responsible community leaders deplore the perversion of the Christmas season and are trying to do something about it. Bishop Arthur C. Lichtenberger, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, has declared in his annual Christmas message: "We cannot have Christmas without Christ."

**3. IS IT WISE, HOWEVER, FOR JEWS TO MAKE SUCH AN ISSUE OVER CHRISTMAS? WOULD IT NOT BE BETTER PART OF DISCRETION TO "GO ALONG" WITH OUR CHRISTIAN NEIGHBORS EVEN IF IT MEANS OBSERVING CHRISTMAS?**

A. No matter involving the violation of strong religious convictions can be regarded as trivial or minor. The true spirit of Americanism would never compel anyone to act in conflict with his freedom of conscience. Our early American forbears came to these shores precisely for the opportunity to worship God according to the dictates of their hearts.

**4. WHAT ABOUT THE CHRISTMAS TREE?**

A. The Christmas tree is a Christmas symbol which, for many Christians, has important christological significance. The Christmas tree has no place in the Jewish home.

**5. IS IT APPROPRIATE TO GIVE CHRISTMAS GIFTS TO CHRISTIAN FRIENDS?**

A. It is appropriate to give Christmas gifts or cards to our Christian friends if we so desire. Christmas gifts or cards should not be given to our fellow Jews. We present a gift to someone in honor of the holiday he celebrates.

**6. SHOULD JEWISH CHILDREN PARTICIPATE IN CHRISTIAN PLAYS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS?**

A. Christmas plays generally portray Christian church themes which have no place in a public school. Jewish children should not be expected to participate in these plays. On the other hand, some schools hold a so-called "Winter Festival" in which an attempt is made to avoid all religious connotations. It is exceedingly hard, however, to draw the distinction. If the parent feels that the performance is free of all sectarian religious overtones, children may participate.

**7. SHOULD JEWISH CHILDREN SING CHRISTMAS CAROLS?**

A. Carols are Christian religious hymns and do not belong in the public school. Jewish children should not be required to sing hymns which embody a theology which they do not accept.

**8. DO WE HARM OUR CHILDREN BY DIRECTING THEM NOT TO PARTICIPATE?**

A. The classroom is but one among many places which reveal the existence of difference among Americans. Religious differences are significant differences. We further our children's personal growth when we teach them this fact by such simple statements as "This is what we do," and "This is what we don't do." Non-participation in Christmas celebrations will not harm the Jewish child whose parents have given him a warm appreciation of his own Jewish heritage. Such harm can ensue only when the absence of affirmative Jewish education leaves the child in a spiritual vacuum.

**9. WHAT ABOUT OTHER JEWISH CHILDREN WHO PARTICIPATE IN CHRISTMAS OBSERVANCES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS?**

A. There are parents who do not accept the guidance of informed and responsible Jewish leadership. They proceed on their own when they permit their children to participate in Christmas observances. This may confuse the children of parents who do follow the thoughtful recommendations of Jewish leadership. Jewish parents will help their children most if they (1) know and understand the thinking of responsible Jewish leadership and recognize that most parents want to follow it; and (2) assure their children that despite the participation of some Jewish children, Jewish leaders have taken a strong position for non-participation in observances of a holiday not their own—and that this is also their position.

**10. SHOULD CHANUKAH BE CELEBRATED IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS?**

A. To do so uses taxpayers' money for sectarian purposes and jeopardizes the principle of the separation of church and state, without which there can be no religious freedom. The proper places for the observance of Chanukah are the synagogue and the Jewish home. We must not ask the public school to assume the responsibilities of our congregations and families.

**11. SHOULD WE ENCOURAGE JOINT CHANUKAH-CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS?**

A. The addition of Chanukah observances only compounds the evils noted above. Separation of church and state, a principle precious to American life, requires neither Christmas nor Chanukah be celebrated in the public school. The subject of Christmas and Chanukah represents a highly sensitive area. We recommend that parents who are in doubt about the application of these principles to specific situations consult their own Rabbi.

This statement, based on a similar message issued by the St. Louis Rabbinical Association, has been unanimously adopted by the Massachusetts Boards of Rabbis.

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(Continued from Page 1)  
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