

# A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

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## Our December Dilemma



In 1958, the United Synagogue published a pamphlet by Rabbi Abraham J. Karp, who was the rabbi of Temple Beth El in Rochester when I was growing up, and who was a formative influence in my life.

It was titled *Our December Dilemma*. What was “our December dilemma?” The dilemma was how Jews would deal with Christmas. “Christmas is all about us,” Rabbi Karp wrote, “and one way or another, all of us are involved in it. Gaily decorated streets proclaim it. Stores

trumpet it. Magazines and newspapers write about it. Radio and TV carry it into our homes, and our children often are caught up in its celebration at school.”

How should a Jew respond? The dilemma was finding a way to acknowledge the all pervading Christmas presence without our children feeling deprived because Jews do not celebrate Christmas.

In some ways, the dilemma seems so anachronistic. The world has changed considerably since the 50’s. The premise of “The Dilemma” was that there was a wall of separation between Jews and the world in which they lived.

But that is not the case today. Jewish families are much more complex than they were then. In our communities there are many couples of dual faiths, where love binds the couple together, not religion. In their homes there has to be mutual respect for both of their values and religious commitments. And there are very few of us who do not have family members we love who are married to spouses who are not Jewish. We embrace them, visit them, even celebrate with them on Christmas.

Some of our community are Jews by Choice. But although they are committed Jews, they love other members of their family who are of other religions and for whom Christmas is a cherished holiday.

So today there is no wall separating the Jewish community from Christmas. Nor is it possible to erect one. What was once “other” is now part of the family.

At the same time, I believe that we as Jews are less threatened by the lure of Christmas than were families a generation ago. Our pride in being Jewish is strong. We know that we can be faithful Jews and still appreciate the beauty of the Christmas atmosphere all around us, and respect the cherished beliefs of members of our own family who are Christian.

While intermarriage creates potential impediments to perpetuating the Jewish people, we know that people do not seek out non-Jewish spouses because of the beauty of Christmas. It is love and the desire to share their lives with the people they love that binds them together. If there remains a “Dilemma,” the root is love and not Christmas.

So as we enter this month of Christmas and *Hanukkah*, of holiday spirit and family connections, we need to be able to embrace all the people we love, and respect all of their traditions, even the ones that are different from our own. We may feel uncomfortable being in the presence of Christmas observances, but we ought to remember that our non-Jewish relatives come to our *seders*, light *Hanukkah* candles with us, attend our *b’nai mitzvah* and *brit milahs* and *simhat bats*, dine with us on our holidays, and accept us for who we are. We can do no less.

Here at AJ, we are committed to being an inclusive congregation. Our short mission statement which appears on our website, on our *Shabbat* pamphlet, and on other literature says, “Congregation Adath Jeshurun is an inclusive, egalitarian Conservative synagogue. All are welcome irrespective of gender, race, or sexual orientation. We welcome dual faith families who want to be involved in the Jewish community.”

We need to live that acceptance in synagogue and in our homes. We need to live our principles, and treat the values of others with honor and dignity. We need to recognize that where there is honor and mutual respect there is no “Dilemma.” Rather there is a sense of shared humanity and the feeling of being privileged to live in a land that empowers us all with freedom.

I wish you and your families a season of joy, with blessings appropriate to our commitments and beliefs, and with family love that transcends that which threatens to divide us.

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