

## “The Religion of Madison Avenue”

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### Sermon:

Every year I start with a lot of resolve. I tell myself, ‘I’m not going to cave. I can walk down the holiday aisles and maintain self control. I don’t need any of that stuff just because everyone else is getting it. It’s not going to get me what I really want – a truer meaning of the holidays. A feeling of togetherness. Hope. But every year the same image comes to mind: me at some gift exchange, feeling shorthanded. Like I’m the one who brought socks and everyone else brought tiffany crystal. So, even though I feel like I’m being disloyal to my holiday oath, I end up picking up something that would only sell at the holidays: like a mounted stuffed open mouthed bass singing ‘Santa Claus is Coming to Town.’

It’s the very thing I absolve not to do. It always leaves me with the emotional and spiritual equivalent of indigestion. Feeling like I have just been mugged by Christmas commercialism. But I know my problem is that I somehow also don’t want to be left out of the mugging either. I see everyone else giving and receiving tons of presents. And I just can’t get that happy expression out of my mind – on the faces of those people in the commercials whose spouse has just handed them the keys to a new Lexus on Christmas morning. That’s the kind of feeling I want from the holidays. I mean, how can you resist a holiday where you get a Lexus?

But I don’t ever get the Lexus. I get the singing fish. And I keep hoping it’s going to be different ‘next year.’ But it isn’t. And it’s a problem. And it’s not that I’m confused about what class of people I hang out with at the holidays. I know they’re fish people.

The problem is that I know – deep inside - the holidays aren’t about cars and fish. But I can’t resist the commercial allure. Because I don’t always trust that the miracle will happen without these things. So I cave. And I get the fish.

I know I am weak. I have begun to look upon the holidays in the same way a rebel resister might look upon a cyborg army. I imagine my nephews faces and I know resistance is futile. I look into the vast commercialism of the season knowing I will be assimilated. But something deep within me tells me it is sometimes good not to go with the prevailing crowd. Something keeps me hoping that I learn to trust the miracle.

I thought about this while setting up my tree this year. Blanche and I are pretty modest and I was wondering whether or not I should even get a tree this year. But when I mentioned this to a friend she called me a grinch. I didn’t want that. And I didn’t think a tree would be caving into commercialism. Besides, I wanted something that Blanche could knock over. It’s sort of a ritual. Blanche is my cat.

The tree I got was small – about 3 feet. Actually, it was the top of a tree that was damaged during shipping. I spotted it lying on the ground and I asked the man if he would put a stand on it and sell it to me. It looked like it needed a home. I felt like Charlie Brown – who, as I remember, was also resisting the commercialism of the season.

I took it home and while I was setting it up, I was listening to NPR talk about the tree at Rockefeller Center. Apparently, they chose one slightly bigger than I did. The Rockefeller tree is 71 feet high. I learned that was small for Rockefeller standards, but not quite small enough where I felt any thread of solidarity between us. Theirs weighed 9 tons and took 31 people and cranes to put in place. I carried mine through the front door with three sacks of groceries in the other hand. They had 30,000 lights strung on five miles of wire. I used half a strand and let the other half dangle off the side. They added extra, artificial branches. I turned the bare spot to the wall. They put a star on top that had 25,000 crystals. I cut off the gold star from a left over burger king crown.

And I bet you think I'm here to tell you that my tree is every bit as good as theirs is. But I'm not. I'm here to tell you what it feels like to live with a holiday inferiority complex. A complex that is very personal with me and goes back to a Christmas when I was five. I had made my mom a clay pencil holder in kindergarten. My teacher said it was very nice and I felt proud of it and held it in my lap, waiting to give it to her. But before I could she opened my brother's gift: what looked like about a gallon bottle of perfume. My heart sunk. 'How can you compete with that!' I thought. I mean, a whole gallon, for crying out loud! That really says love. Even in my wildest dreams, I couldn't afford to get her even half that. She looked so happy. And so, sitting there, that morning, was the first time I felt it – a burning need for a singing fish.

Have you every had that? A holiday inferiority complex? Does watching a gift exchange make you feel insecure? Have you ever felt like the only one at the table without a Lexus or a fish? Have you wondered about what, in all this, is the miracle in the holiday you want to remember?

I was reading yesterday in the paper how two Atlanta neighbors were having a rivalry over whose lawn display could use more sheer electrical wattage – and I came upon an interesting thought: I wonder what their Jewish neighbors think of all this? I wonder what those of the Jewish faith make of all the commercialism of the holiday. Whether, because Hanukkah is not really about extravagance and gift giving, if they bypass all this angst and inferiority? Or whether they too are swayed by the seductive allure of singing fish? The commercialism of the holidays?

I decided to research it and discovered some interesting things. While they have not quite dipped to the low standards of Christmas – which seems to have been officially released from even a perfunctory connection to a religious premise – they have not been unaffected by Madison Ave.

Did you know that the world's largest menorah lies near the main Jerusalem – Tel Aviv highway and is more than 60 feet tall weighing 17 metric tons. It takes up an area of 600 square meters and is lit by a rabbi lifted up by crane.

And the world's largest mound of sufganiyot - fried jelly donuts, a Hanukkah tradition - was recently amassed on the first night of the Jewish holiday. It numbered over 6,400 and stood over 12 feet high.

This past year, the people at Rutgers University tried to get in the record book for the largest spinning dreidel. It stood 16 feet tall. There was no mention on how they got it to spin.

Apparently, like me – and millions of other people - Hanukkah has not managed to resist the seductive allure of the holiday extravaganza. Consider this: according to statistics, Hanukkah is the third most observed religious holiday in the Jewish Calendar, behind Yom Kippur and Passover. It's certainly the third most well known. However according to Jewish law it is only

the seventh most important of the holidays. In fact, in importance, it ranks below observing the Sabbath.

The reason for the undue prominence is that the little holiday is awash in a great sea of Christmas which saturates every aspect of culture. It can't help but run aground in the debris of television Ads, carols on the radio, signs in department stores, parties at the office, or lawn decorations.

But, it was not always like that. Hanukkah, many Jews remember, was once a very simple holiday. Before the 1950's it was celebrated by a simple lighting of the candles, reading the scriptures, playing the dreidel and the giving of coins – either real or chocolate – called gelt.

But then it collided with the Christmas Corporation fueled originally by Macy's, Gimbles, Coca-Cola and the Saturday Evening Post. Before long, toy companies were using radio and television spots. And the Jewish culture could no longer remain immune to the temptation.

Jewish supply stores soon began to market new lines of holiday merchandise. It is an interesting statistic that the volume of Jewish merchandise sold is always higher the closer the holiday's proximity to Christmas.

Some of you might also remember something of a Christmas tree rival, the Hanukkah bush which was popular for a while. Or the invention of Santa's counterpart, Hanukkah Herman. Today, in Party City, you can pick up a whole assortment of plug in twinkling menorahs, computer dreidel games. Or if you browse the internet you can score - and I really saw this – an electric star of David that advertises 'real Christmas-like lights.'

Now, the prospect of gift-giving has filtered it's way into the Jewish holiday. Tsipora Wagner, a transplant from Israel, sees Hanukkah in America through different eyes. Astounded, boggled and dumbfounded eyes.

A lifelong Israeli, Wagner teaches modern Hebrew at Emory University and moved to Atlanta five years ago to be with her grandchildren. And each Hanukkah has surprised her. "Every year I'm amazed again and again," she says, "because it just keeps getting bigger."

Wagner acknowledges that there are many things in common between Hanukkah here and in Israel. Jews in both places spin dreidels and light the candles, both fry up latkes and sufganiyot. But here, says Wagner, "you really buy gifts [for many on each of the eight nights]... and each gift is expensive."

"The Christmas season [in America] is an extremely seductive season for Jews," admits Rabbi Jeff Salkin of the Temple in Atlanta. "While it is delightful to be able to enjoy the festive nature of this season," he says, "Hanukkah reminds us that there are times when we must stand apart from the majority religious culture."

What does he mean by that? To understand, it is good to look to the event behind the holiday. Far beyond what most of us goya commonly know – that a scant quantity of oil found in the desecrated temple lasted for eight days when it was only supposed to last one. Like most miracles, there is more to the story.

The story of the miracle actually goes back centuries before, when Jerusalem was conquered by Alexander the Great. Most assume that the Jews became hostages at that time, but that is not exactly true. They were free to live – even worship – as they pleased. But they were ruled by a

foreign king. Jerusalem was an outpost, not particularly important to their rulers. And as long as Jews paid their taxes all was well.

But a couple things happened. First, something called hellenization – which is the powerful Greek influence which swept over the land. Since the Greeks were leaders in philosophy, mathematics, critical thought, rhetoric, art and anything cultured, these ideas eventually filtered into the Jewish community – and fascinated the people there. This was all well and good, except that with hellenization came new religious ideas and practices. This threatened the purity of Jewish law – which, for centuries, measured its cultural identity by its religious practice.

The second thing that happened is that a man by the name of Antiochus IV came to power. Antiochus IV was not very nice and he didn't particularly like the Jews and he was determined to completely Hellenize them. And, one of the most effective ways to do so was to take over the temple and use it for paganism – or Greek religion.

Although the Jews were counseled to resist this influence, it was everywhere, and too alluring and seductive. Many Jews wavered. And Jewish authorities lived with the anxiety of extinction - if people failed to live out the practices of the faith, their people would die out or be assimilated.

It was in this context of anxiety that a rebel Jewish leader, Mattathias Macabee, killed an apostate Jew for taking part in a pagan sacrifice in the temple. Then, he killed the attending royal officer. Things escalated. A bloody battle and years of guerilla warfare followed.

Finally, three years later, Mattathias' son, Judas Macabee, led a sneak attack that overtook the temple whereby a band of Jews rededicated it by lighting the sacred oil. Only a single vial was found but it burned for eight days until more oil could be consecrated.

This is the miracle of Hanukkah – the story for which Jews remember the holiday each year. It is important to note, however, that the real miracle is not the oil. “The real miracle,” Rabbi Salkin notes, “is that a small army of Jewish loyalists were able to defeat the most powerful army in the world. The spiritual miracle of Hanukkah is that Judaism was able to stand up to the tempting culture of its time.”

The irony is that, today, Jews are feeling the similar pull of another tempting culture. Only, instead of being Hellenized, they are being commercialized. Keeping up with the Greeks is now keeping up with Christians – although, since there is usually very little that is Christian about Christmas in our modern culture, it is really keeping up with the Joneses.

Maybe it's true. To face the holidays is like facing a cyborg army. Maybe resistance is futile. Maybe everyone must be assimilated. Maybe there's nothing to do but watch Hanukkah go down the same commercial path as Christmas. But I still believe there are a million reasons 'to stand up to the culture of our time.'

There's an even more important story than even the Macabees that I wish was told more often in the holiday season – to both Jews and Christians. It is the story of the Schnitzers. It happened eleven years ago, about this time of year, in Billings, Montana, when a brick was thrown through 5-year-old Isaac Schnitzer's bedroom window. The brick and shards of glass were strewn all over the child's bed. The reason? A menorah and other symbols of Jewish faith were stenciled on the glass as part of the family's Hanukkah celebration.

Billings, Montana Montana is designated a “white homeland” for the Aryan Nation, Klan members, and other white supremacists. Hundreds of hate crimes every year. Many against Jews - desecration of Jewish cemeteries, threatening phone calls to Jewish citizens, swastikas painted on the home of inter-faith couples.

The account of the incident in the Billings Gazette reported that Isaac’s mother, Tammie Schnitzer, was troubled by the advice she got from the investigating officer. He suggested that she remove the symbols. ‘How would she explain this to her son?’ she wondered. Another mother, Margaret McDonald, was deeply touched by that question. She tried to imagine explaining to her children that they couldn’t have a Christmas tree in the window or a wreath on the door because it wasn’t safe. She remembered what happened when Hitler ordered the king of Denmark to force Danish Jews to wear the Star of David. The order was never carried out because the king himself and many other Danes chose to wear the yellow stars. The Nazis lost the ability to find their “enemies.”

So Ms. McDonald phoned her pastor at the First Congregational United Church of Christ, and asked what he thought of having Sunday school children make paper cut-out menorahs for their own windows. He got on the phone with colleagues and soon menorahs appeared in the windows of hundreds of Christian homes. Asked about the danger of this action, police chief Wayne Inman told callers, “There’s greater risk in not doing it.”

Five days after the brick was thrown at the Schnitzer home, the Gazette published a full-page drawing of a menorah, along with a general invitation to put it up. By the end of the week nearly ten thousand homes had put them in their windows

A sporting goods store got involved by displaying “Not in our town! No hate. No violence. Peace on earth” on a large billboard. Someone shot at it. Townpeople held a vigil outside the synagogue during Sabbath services. That same night bricks and bullets shattered windows at Central Catholic High school, where an electric marquee read “Happy Hanukkah to our Jewish Friends.” Windows were broken at a United Methodist Church because of its menorah display. The car and house windows of six non-Jewish families were shattered. A note that said “Jew lover” was left on a car.

Eventually these incidents waned, but people continued in their efforts to support one another against hate crimes. During the Passover holiday the following spring, 250 Christians joined their Jewish brothers and sisters in a traditional Seder meal. New friendships have formed, new traditions have started, and greater mutual understanding and respect have been achieved.

Each year in Billings, Montana, people still put up their menorahs to reaffirm their commitment to peace and religious tolerance. The light they shared in the community must be continuously rekindled until hate has been overcome. There are some things we must always resist – we must never become assimilated to.

I said there were a million reasons why it’s important to stand up to the prevailing culture. But I think I underestimated. In the case of the Jews there must be six million reasons. And new ones every year.

What I don’t want to say is that buying a singing fish makes us bad. After all, most of us, whether we’d like to admit it or not, are ‘fish people.’ But I am saying that when that allure leads us to overlook the people who need miracles more than a singing fish – we have lost our connection to what’s really important. No matter how much we cave during the holidays, let us

not forget: miracles do still happen. They are still necessary. And we can be part of them – even if we are fish people. And there is always another way besides the Lexus.

To the Glory of Life.

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