

## Lubavitch Hasidism

When Golda Meir held the office of Prime Minister, she tried to encourage Henry Kissinger to make Israel a top priority. He sent her a letter: "I would like to inform you that I'm first an American citizen; second, Secretary of State; and third, a Jew."

Golda responded, "In Israel we read from right to left."

This anecdote summarizes, in my mind, the struggle of American Jewry over the last half-century. Should we teach our children to read from left to right or from right to left? Linguistically, it's simple: You can teach a child more than one language. Existentially, however, it is difficult: A healthy child needs a singular identity. Attempting to raise children feeling very Jewish (right to left) but not "too Jewish" (left to right) can create ambivalence, uncertainty and confusion in the fragile and pure psyche of children.

Paradoxically, the more children are grounded in their own family, heritage, religion and history, the deeper they can grow to appreciate other peoples and cultures. Knowing who you are deep down allows you the psychological freedom to truly learn about one who is different from you. The deeper the roots of a tree, the wider its branches can extend. Conversely, shallow roots keep you aspiring to establish an identity for yourself.

Judaism is not Christianity, and Jews are not Christians. Christmas and its music may be wonderful for many children, but not for Jewish children, because they are Jews. Yet let us not make the opposite mistake either. We ought never to define the Jewishness of our children by the fact that they do not celebrate Christmas. Identities cannot be molded by the negative alone. Use this holiday season as an opportunity to explain to your children the meaning and history of Judaism. Jewish chil-

## Should Jewish children sing Christmas carols?

dren deserve to learn not only that they are different from Christians, but that Judaism offers a path in life that will allow them to realize their full potential.

Rabbi Yosef Y. Jacobson  
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Chovevay Torah, Brooklyn, NY

### Modern Orthodox

This question really grows out of the broader belief that Christmas, in effect, is not really a Christian holiday but an American holiday, a universal celebration of fun and fellowship and other good things. But if you look at the language of the carols—"Silent Night" ("Round yon Virgin Mother and child"); "Noel" ("Born is the King of Israel")—you can see that these songs, in fact, speak a Christian message. I would argue that Jewish children should refrain from singing Christmas carols not only because they practice a different religion but out of respect for the Christian religion. We should take Christmas carols for what they are and not reduce them to commercial pabulum, entertaining but mindless songs that every American can sing.

When saying no, parents should not teach their children that Christianity is inferior or that singing Christmas carols is

idolatry. Instead, they should explain that Christianity is a valid, independent religion with its own magnificent music, its own great works of art. A Jewish person can certainly appreciate these religious expressions and even be moved by them. If we enrich the level of our own Jewish practice, children will understand that they do not have to deny the beauty of Christian experiences. Thus we not only uphold Jewish distinctiveness but strike a blow against homogenization of American culture. A democracy that is founded on pluralism—a universality that is made up of distinctive individual cultures—is the most promising and most humanistic vision for America's future.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg  
President of the Jewish  
Life/Steinhardt Foundation  
New York, NY

### Conservative

The answer is simply no. Jewish children should not participate in Christmas caroling.

Christmas caroling dates back to the Middle Ages when groups of Christians adopted hymns and chants from their tradition and then traveled from house to house singing and spreading the holiday message.

American society tries to sell us the idea that Christmas is not a religious holiday because its themes—gift giving, good will and peace on earth—are universal. But Christmas is fundamentally religious: It celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, the Christian messiah. Each of its symbols—the nativity scene, the presents, the caroling—has deep religious significance connected to the birth of Jesus.

When your children ask whether they can carol with their friends, tell them it's not singing; it is proselytizing. It is publicly espousing the beliefs of Christianity and spreading them to others. Take this opportunity to teach your children how

we can respect and honor another religion without participating in its ceremonies. Plan an interdenominational evening in your home with your children's friends and families, giving each person a chance to explain the significance of his or her heritage so that this year, Christmas caroling may open a dialogue that not only educates your children but reinforces their identities as Jews.

Rabbi Sherre Hirsch  
Sinai Temple, Los Angeles, CA

### Reform

This question often comes up in response to school-aged children singing in a choir as part of a winter program. For me, the acid test is this: Is it a devotional exercise, or is it a musical event? If one were participating in Handel's *Messiah* over the summer, for instance, people would tend not to think of it as a religious activity. A great deal of the canon of classical music, after all, rose out of Christian liturgy. But if you tell me that a Jewish child is going to go caroling with friends, I have a problem with that, because caroling actually is a religious activity. It's spreading the news of Christmas to the community. To me, that's very different than being in a concert that has rehearsals and professional conducting and is a musical rather than a religious or devotional experience.

Rabbi Fred Reiner  
Temple Sinai, Washington, DC

### Reconstructionism

Living in multiple civilizations is a mixed blessing. We Jews celebrate our acceptance into the homes, lives, businesses and social circles of the majority culture. Everyone wins when friendships ensue, when we're invited to christenings and reciprocate by inviting non-Jews to *bnai mitzvah* celebrations.

From there, it's a short step to caroling together. Yes, key

lines of various carols carry an explicitly Christological message, which Jews in good conscience should not utter. But most lyrics of most carols are fair game for all. Moreover, our Christian friends often view caroling as a purely social phenomenon, missing the theological significance altogether—and while that may be their loss, we needn't take their texts more seriously than they do.

And what about art? When two nice Jewish boys from Queens recorded "Silent Night" in 1964, they juxtaposed it with reports from the seven o'clock news, scoring one for *tikkun olam*. Were Simon & Garfunkel wrong? Though we might have chosen differently, our collective culture is richer for it.

Finally, forcing our kids to think for themselves—choosing on their feet what they can comfortably sing and which words to avoid—is not a bad way to build Jewish identity. And were this the highest price we pay for living in multiple civilizations, that would be good tidings indeed.

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD

### Jewish Renewal

I imagine that I may be taking an unpopular position on this question when I say that, in principle, I see little harm in permitting Jewish children (or adults) to join with Christians in singing the beautiful music written for this holiday. That is, as long as the Jewish participants know that Christmas is not their holiday and that they are guests at this party, not hosts.

I have a vivid memory: I was working at the Tucker Foundation at Dartmouth College and it was the annual holiday party. We had a prominent rabbi as our special scholar-in-residence. A Dartmouth alumnus, he had spent his whole life building Jewish institutions, reviving interest in Judaism, training

rabbis, renewing synagogues and standing up to oppressive regimes. I can think of few people whose Jewish *bona fides* were as impeccable. And there he sat, singing Christmas carols with our staff in his booming voice. Not only was he on key, he knew all the words to all the songs. I, a graduate of New York City yeshivot who knew only the opening lines of each of these songs, marveled at the joy this rabbi expressed and the pleasure he gave to those who celebrated the holiday.

I love spirituality and approaching God through music, regardless of its source. I love contributing to greater openness, learning from and sharing with others. In this world in which, as my teacher Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi says, "The only way to get it together is together," we will not make our children more Jewish by trying to insulate them from others. We will only make them more Jewish by manifesting to them, both through our words and by example, the incredible beauty and power of our spiritual practice. Then when they are with others from different faith communities and spiritual practices, they will have something to give as well as receive.

Whether my opinion extends to every stanza and word of every song is another question. The resolution of that question depends on continuing and deep theological conversations both within Judaism and between Jews and Christians. Rabbi Daniel Siegel  
Director of Spiritual Resources  
ALEPH: Alliance for  
Jewish Renewal  
West Roxbury, MA

### Humanistic Judaism

If one partakes in American culture, as most of us do, the Christmas season is an inescapable part of our lives. Streets are decorated with

lights, newspapers abound with Christmas sales and malls are piped full of Christmas music. But the repetition often reaches a level of irritation, and it becomes next to impossible to get some of these tunes—especially "Little Drummer Boy"—out of one's head.

While most Jews would like to tone down the commercialism associated with the holiday, many are quite pleased to partake of the joy and festivities of the season. We invite our children's non-Jewish friends to our homes to light menorahs, eat latkes and play with dreidels. Christian parents invite our children to trim their trees, enjoy some eggnog and sing carols. Songs like "Jingle Bells" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" are religiously benign, but what about "Silent Night"? Should songs that declare Christian faith be off limits for our children?

It largely depends on the child. When my wife was a teen, she saw caroling as a fun intercultural experience, not the least bit threatening. My father, who was raised in an assimilated Jewish home in Germany, remembers caroling with his Berlin classmates in 1936 shortly before leaving the country. My own experience was a bit different. I took part in one caroling outing during high school, and while I enjoyed the camaraderie of my peers, I was hesitant to join in. I might have been better off staying at home.

So know your children and talk to them. Let them go with their friends if that's their wish, or help them say no if that's what they'd prefer. If a nice Jewish boy by the name of Irving Berlin can write "White Christmas," other Jewish boys and girls ought to be able to sing it. Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer  
President, Association of  
Humanistic Rabbis  
New York, NY

## SUPERHERO

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300,000 letters in the Torah and every one must be written in a precise manner. If even one letter is missing or illegible, the entire Torah can't be used. That's why at the back of the shop, two other *soferim*, members of Youlus's team, are hard at work. Hunched over Torahs that were written before the Declaration of Independence, they stare through plate-sized magnifying glasses ensuring that every character they delicately write with a goose or turkey quill is perfect. Each letter is a small work of art. Even the ink must be made from kosher sources.

And though the business of rescuing and restoring Torahs requires time, energy, precision and lots of money, Youlus's fervor seems without end. "I find Youlus to be one of the true good people in the world," Zitelman says. "His commitment is just spectacular. He's achieved quite a lot and become quite a *tzaddik* in his time. This job has cost him more than supplies. He's been to over 60 countries, accrued massive debt and lost two teeth at the hands of Nazi thugs."

The price, says Youlus, has been minimal given the benefits. Over 400 Torahs have been delivered to congregations around the world, for little or no cost, saving synagogues the fees for financing a new Torah (which can run well over \$50,000). Currently, Save-a-Torah has a list over a thousand names long of congregations worldwide that hope to acquire one of Youlus's future finds.

"Many of these communities in Eastern Europe are gone," says Zitelman. "So being able to rescue and repair their Torahs and put them in other communities that need, but may not be able to afford one, allows these communities to live on through their Torahs. I can't imagine a better way to live on."

—Sham Raviro