

A warning, my friends: early in this sermon, some of you will smile and others will wince. I assure you that what will cause you to do so is only from the backstory that sets the stage for what I want to say tonight.

I was listening to the news in my car earlier this week, and heard a story about the President-elect's (smile or wince here) Thank You America tour. He had been in Wisconsin, where he had evidently promised to return after the election and wish the people a Merry Christmas, and that is what he did this week.

The conversation on the program turned to the issue of saying "Merry Christmas" instead of something parve like "Happy Holidays." I've spoken about this in the past, so you probably know my feelings. If someone wishes me a Merry Christmas, I thank them and wish them the same in return. They are only being nice and playing the odds; 83% of Americans identify as Christians and 13% are not affiliated with a religion. I would think it a safe bet that most of those 13% celebrate Christmas in a nonreligious way. That gives one a 96% chance of wishing Merry Christmas to someone who celebrates it in one way or another.

You might also remember the Sendrow Doctrine, which says that the degree to which one is offended by accidentally being wished Merry Christmas is in inverse proportion to the richness of one's Jewish life. In other words, if you lead a life rich in Yiddishkeit, it's really not a big deal if someone wishes you Merry Christmas. On the other hand, if the most Jewish thing about a person is the person is a non-Christian, then being wished Merry Christmas attacks the essence of one's Jewishness, and offense is taken. I am not only unperturbed by the words Merry Christmas, I welcome hearing them.

However, this does not mean that I do not draw a line in December. I do. You might do so as well, and our lines may not be in the same place. That's fine. As Dennis Prager says, clarity is more important than agreement, so my intent

tonight is to explain where my line is and why I draw it, not to try to change where your own lines are drawn.

As the discussion continued, it turned to the nonreligious observance Christmas, and one of the broadcasters who sounded like a younger woman said, “In New York, all of my Jewish friends put up Christmas trees.” That was my time to wince. In general, I do not believe in Jewish households having Christmas trees.

I said in general because there are exceptions. In an interfaith marriage, I would not object to the non-Jewish spouse celebrating Christian holidays, just as I would hope the non-Jewish spouse would not object to the Jewish spouse celebrating Jewish holidays. Fair is fair. There is also a situation in which I can understand two Jewish people having a Christmas tree, and that is if one spouse converted to Judaism but has adult Christian children. I can understand wanting to provide one’s Christian grandchildren the ability to celebrate Christmas at their grandparent’s home.

Otherwise, I don’t get the desire to put a Christmas tree in a Jewish household. One might argue that the tree is not really a religious symbol. In 1989, in the case of *Allegheny County vs. the Greater Pittsburgh ACLU*, a 1984 decision was overturned, and in the 1989 case, five justices wrote that a Christmas tree is a secular symbol of Christmas, and said the same thing about the Chanukah menorah. Even if one accepts that reasoning, the tree remains a symbol of the holiday that celebrates the statement in the Gospel of John 3:16—“For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life,” a theological statement that is clearly incompatible with Judaism. But there is more.

It is my belief that we should not be a part of the secularization of Christmas. Again, fair being fair, let us consider how we might react if there was a national movement to celebrate two New Years Days, one on December thirty-first

and one on Rosh HaShanah, with both days being celebrated identically—plenty of alcohol, a mob in Times Square waiting to watch a ball drop, anything you can think of associated with December thirty-first, but nothing to do with the religious meaning of Rosh HaShanah. The analogy may not be perfect, but it is strong enough in my view. I do not think the Jewish community would embrace the secularization of Rosh HaShanah, just as many religious Christians bemoan the commercialization of one of their two most religiously significant holidays.

So that is where I draw my December line, that outside of the exceptions already mentioned, I don't approve of Jewish people having Christmas trees. I hope that the young broadcaster was engaging in hyperbole when she said that *all* of her Jewish friends have Christmas trees. Still, I don't think putting up a tree is the worst thing that some Jews do in December. I am even more bothered when a Jewish member of my family and his Jewish wife celebrate our own December holiday with—wait for it—a Chanukah bush.