

“Dear God: Can I Please Have a Christmas Tree”

By Michelle Golland, Psy.D.

We are driving down Highland Avenue in my black mini-van. My son, Asher, is quietly sitting, staring out the window. Through my rearview mirror I see him shut his eyes and say it! It is in the most innocent way only a child can do but it is simply not the words I want to hear.

He says, “Dear God: Can I please have a Christmas tree?” Oh, an arrow through my heart. He might as well have folded his cute little hands into the prayer pose as he said it!

Believe me his life began Jewishly, the Bris with the whole family which okay does include mine which is not Jewish but my dad happily wore a kippah and my nieces held the challah as we recited the chamotzi. So what went so terribly wrong? My son Asher, see I even named him a Hebrew name, is now 5 years old. This is the 4th official “December Dilemma” in our Jewish house.

We have recently been having talks about why we don’t celebrate Christmas in our home. The standard run down goes like this: We are Jewish, Jews don’t have Christmas trees. Well, we all know that one isn’t necessarily true. Okay, we changed it to, We don’t have a tree because we are so lucky to have Hanukkah. Hey, we get to light the menorah and open gifts for eight nights not just one. With young kids go straight to the gifts that seems to keep them off the subject at least for awhile any way.

I also told him that Hanukkah is about religious freedom. I explained how the Macabees fought for all of us to continue to be Jewish and we honor them by lighting the menorah and not having a Christmas tree in our house. I explain the miracle of the oil.

Not nearly as exciting as the miracle of a fat man coming down your chimney with a big bag of gifts. None of these explanations seemed sufficient for my little boy who just wants to hang decorations on a Douglas Pine.

I know what you are thinking, why is this such a big deal? It was just a little prayer to God. You must understand I have been working on my son’s Jewish identity since before he was even born. I am a Jew-by-Choice and a psychologist. I know, my poor Jewish husband never stood a chance. My doctoral dissertation was entitled “Jewish Identity Development in Individuals who are Jews-by-Choice.” You see, my interest is not simply

emotional it is also academic.

Asher's Jewish identity would be uniquely created because of the circumstances of his parents: One a born Jew and one that converted to Judaism. I want him to have a strong sense of being Jewish culturally, intellectually and spiritually. I don't think I am asking too much. I guess I have always been an overachiever.

To further complicate the story and thoroughly confuse my 5 year old son, My son and I are heading down Highland Avenue on our way to volunteer at a church to help them get ready for a big Christmas dinner that our synagogue runs every year. I tell him how families who don't have a lot of things they need will be coming and getting great big "goodie bags" filled shampoo, toothbrushes, socks and the kids will get toys. Asher's only response after his prayer for the tree was this,

"Mom its good they won't be giving the kids socks and toothbrushes because I sure wouldn't want that for Hanukkah."

As Asher and I walk into the church, hand in hand, the other volunteers are pulling out boxes of ornaments and strings of lights in the corner where a naked Christmas tree sits waiting to be dressed up. In the aisle I kneel down and say, "Go and see what's going on over there and I'll be there in a minute." I give him a kiss on the cheek and off he runs to his friends that have gathered around the big tree.

I watch from a distance as my son begins the ritual that I had done for so many years as a child. I understand his joy.

I thought about how just 5 minutes ago he had prayed for a Christmas tree and I realized what he really wanted was the experience he is now having. As I walk up to Asher digging through a box of very used Christmas decorations, I whisper in his ear, "I think God answered your prayer, honey." He turned to me with a smile and a twinkle in his eye that only a miracle could bring about.