

“The Wrapping Paper War”

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The wrapping paper war began in the early morning hours. I had just gotten out of the shower and poured my second cup of coffee when my phone rang. Before I even picked up the receiver I knew it was my mom probably on her second cup of coffee too. She most likely had already spoken to one or both of my sisters and discussed what the new day would entail. I would say we are the classically enmeshed all female family. This is not to leave out my father but the poor man had for the last 23 years of his life, since I was born, only estrogen filled beings living under his roof. I was his third born. His last hope. Needless to say he is a man of few words, mostly because he could hardly get one in!

I had been preparing for this war for a few weeks since Hanukkah and Christmas were fast approaching. I had been a Jew-by-Choice for nearly a year and had recently become engaged to Michael, a born Jew. This was to be our first “December Dilemma” we would be dealing with as a couple.

I explain, “Michael, I know my family, once precedent is set it is difficult to change policy. Once we do the holidays a certain way it will be written in stone, like Moses bringing down the tablets from Mt. Sinai!”. Maybe we can think about what we would want when we have kids and work from that point of view.”

“When I was little Hanukkah just was never as fun as Christmas. My house never felt as alive as my friends who did Christmas. I want my kids to really feel it.”

“Feel what?,” I ask puzzled.

He stopped and thought for a minute. "Happiness and just plain fun without feeling left out or less than because of Christmas. Believe me I as an adult know that Hanukkah is not a big holiday according the Jewish calender and blah blah blah but when your five and your house is not festive and the holiday is minimized to make some adult statement about not wanting to become too commercial like Christmas it sure doesn't make your sadness or feeling of incompleteness any less as a kid!"

"What if we host a Hanukkah party every year with our family and friends? We can decorate, make latkes and light the menorah together. Believe me, give me some fabric, dreidles and a glue gun and I will have Santa Claus wanting to trade in his candy canes for some gelt! I don't want a Hanukkah bush or any of that. I want an all out Jewish experience sprinkled with visions of menorah's dancing in our heads."

"That sounds better than what I had growing up."

"What about the presents?" My family is big on gifts.

Michael suggests, "What if they give us our gifts on Hanukkah and we give them theirs on Christmas?"

"No, because then they have to get our gifts early because Hanukkah is usually earlier. That seems too demanding. I know, what if we say we will open all family gifts when we go down on Christmas day but ask them to wrap ours in Hanukkah wrapping paper. That way it will feel like we are each acknowledging each other's holiday with the least logistical inconvenience."

"Do you want me to talk to them about it with you? Since I was born Jewish maybe that will help them understand."

"No, I should speak with them and try to make it casual rather than some holiday intervention."

It was now my mission to express our plan to my family. Up to this point my entire family had been very supportive of my conversion to Judaism. When I was selected to go to Israel as part of Hillel during my senior year of college my parents happily well really nervously and happily payed my way. My mom had even given me a beautiful seder plate when I converted. So I knew they accepted and respected my decision, however, I knew the latkes would really hit the fan when I requested that they alter their holiday routine.

I was never given any grief about no longer being Catholic because my family is not religious. My family is your typical nonreligious celebrators of Christmas. It is not about the birth of Jesus but like many others it is about Frosty the Snowman and Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer. In many ways this can make it harder for them to understand because on the outside it seems Christmas shouldn't be a big deal to us because they don't see it as religious. But to many Jews it is viewed as religiose no matter how much they replace their nativity scene with a Santa Claus snow globe. Part of it is that they need to understand that we see Hanukkah as a religious holiday and not just a time to decorate with dreidles and give our children gifts. When someone is a practicing Christian they may not believe in Hanukkah the way Jews do but they understand the desire to experience and uphold it as distinct and separate religious experience from Christmas. But for my family this was not the case.

I take a big swig of my coffee and hear my mom's voice say "hello". I fired the first shot, holding my breath after some chit chat, I said, "Mom, I wanted to talk about the

holidays. Michael and I are hoping the family could wrap our gifts in Hanukkah paper rather than Christmas paper.” Silence. Then she said, “Okay, I understand but you need to talk to your sisters.” My mother, the ultimate peace negotiator or rather conflict avoider, was “kosher” with it but I knew by the sound of her voice and the pit in my stomach that the big battle was yet to come. My mother avoided conflict at all cost even to the point of sometimes losing herself along the way. That is why I am so different than her. I try to look at the conflict straight in the face which I guess has gotten me into trouble a few times with my family. You see I am the youngest of the daughters and truly a rebel at my core. It is no surprise that I chose a different religion, became a psychologist and seemed to be the one always pointing out the elephant in the room. This does not always make me popular in my family but I must say that even with all the feelings of fear I still keep doing it. My fear revolves around rejection and disconnection. You see when you come from an enmeshed family that is the ultimate weapon in any war: Disconnection. My need to be heard and understood by my family was always greater than my fear of losing them. I am willing to risk the disconnection for the small but ever hopeful possibility of being truly seen by them. The wrapping paper war seems small and to some silly but in the scheme of one’s life it is these small acts of noticing that we give to those we love that can be so deeply meaningful.

I can feel my face get warm and my heart's pace quicken as I dialed my sister’s number. I sense my own awkwardness and worry she does too as I try to think of way to drop the Hanukkah bomb. I am twisting the phone cord so tight around my finger that they begin to turn white. It is strange how even as a 23 year old woman I still feel the

effects of my big sisters power. I have always desired her approval and attention. In many ways her rejection would be the most painful of all.

"I wanted you know that I spoke with Mom about the holidays this year. Michael and I would like if you wrapped our gifts in Hanukkah paper rather than Christmas since that is really our December holiday."

"Why does it matter what we wrap the gifts in?"

I could feel her annoyance. I tried to explain how it would be important for when we have children to acknowledge all of our holidays.

"Michelle, Christmas is not religious for us. We just celebrate like it is the winter solstice not Jesus's birthday. Are you not going to let your kids sit on Santa Claus's lap at the mall? I mean you can't hide from it."

"No, you're right you can't hide from all the hoopla of Christmas but we can make Hanukkah something special with our family and we just want our kids, and ourselves to feel like even if nobody else in the world acknowledges our holiday at least our family will."

The phone call lasts two hours and when it ends the wrapping paper war is at a stand off with no peace negotiations on the horizon. On both sides there is anger, frustration, sadness and so many tears. It is a painful examination of our beliefs and our differences. For her it feels like I am trampling on something cute, sweet and, for her, non-religious. In my sister's eyes I am executing Santa Clause without a fair trial. It is difficult for her to understand our need to celebrate Hanukkah and have our holiday honored and celebrated on a parallel level with hers. It felt intrusive and demanding. I am sad, angry, hurt, confused and feel guilty. The guilt is about asking for what I need

from them. My family is very generous but like many families it is best to take what comes to you and not ask for what you truly need. In the act of asking for what you need it somehow implies that they are not doing the “right” thing or you are ungrateful for what you have been given.

I was torn by my desire not to hurt my family and the desire to create a spiritual life for myself, Michael and our future Jewish children. I want my children to feel honored and respected for their beliefs and holidays as I will raise them to honor and respect my family’s traditions. When I converted to Judaism it was like having holiday amnesia. I could choose to celebrate and create holiday traditions without any baggage from my past. Michael, who as a child felt alienated by society during the December holidays, wanted something very different for his children too. Together we could create a spiritually based joyous home. I want my children to remember the Jewish holidays as meaningful, infused with joy and dare I say a little wacky too! Michael and I want to experience the joy, laughter and knowledge of Hanukkah. The wrapping paper war is something much larger than the packaging of a gift. It is about love, respect and not just tolerating differences but truly celebrating them. It is not just about our holidays it is about ourselves and all of our differences and how we choose to either turn towards or turn away from each other. My hope is we continue turn toward and try to face each other even when it is painful to do so.

The white flag is waived a few days later at my parent’s house. The entire family is there. Another one of my sisters voiced her opinion.

“I am the giver of the gift so I can give it in the paper I want to, which will be Christmas paper.”

I was so saddened by what I was hearing that I simply started to cry. I looked at her and my whole family with tears running down my face and said, “Why would you not want our kids to feel like their family respected their holiday too? Why would you want them to feel less? Explain it to me please, why is this so hard?”

She stopped and her face became very soft and she said, “I don’t know.” In that moment I knew she got it, I knew they all got it. It was very basic really.

A few weeks later, when they came to light the menorah at our home, they brought our gifts wrapped in the cutest Hanukkah paper. My dad brought us Jewish bingo and Jewish old maid. He was so amazed he found them at a Wal Mart in Riverside. My mom and sisters told of their complaining to the manager at Target because they didn’t have one single Hanukkah card!

She said to him, “Do you think no Jewish people live in Corona.” The way she tells it I guarantee next Hanukkah Target will have a nice blue and white section!

With tears in my eyes, Michael told the story of the Maccabees and their fight for religious freedom as my nieces lit the menorah candles. As I watched my family with the warm glow of the candles washing over all of us I thought how difficult and painful it can be to turn towards one another but the reward is true freedom. Freedom to be who we deeply desire to be in this world. We truly had it all at our Hanukkah celebration, joy, laughter and knowledge.