

ISSUES

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JEWES for CHRISTMAS

Paradox, Propaganda or Perhaps a Legitimate Choice?

By Moishe Rosen

It was September of 2006. Jews for Jesus had just finished their largest-ever effort to proclaim to the people of New York that Jesus is the Messiah. They'd written many new pamphlets to draw attention to their message, using various icons from popular culture as the theme. They distributed the pamphlets in public venues throughout July, and were surprised to find a lawsuit filed against them in September from, of all people, Jackie Mason, the subject of one the pamphlets. To so many he was like their own Zeyde with such a superb and canny ability to see what is so funny in what is so ordinary.

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Perhaps the pamphlet writers were naïve. They thought Jackie would appreciate the tribute to his humor when they satirized his “difference between Jews and Gentiles” shtick. After all, if a comedian doesn’t understand satire, then who should? And, the group had reason to believe that Mr. Mason was in possession of a particularly tolerant nature. After all, who else in the Jewish community set out to encourage Christians to be public in celebrating the birth of Y’shua (Jesus)?

Last December 15, *WorldNetDaily* reported that Jackie Mason is a founding member of a group called “Jews Against Anti-Christian Defamation.” As such he planned to “ride down 5th Avenue . . . in a 15-foot Ford Excursion with banners proclaiming, ‘Jews for, “It’s okay to say Merry Christmas.”’

Jackie’s courage and his activist stand on reversing the secularization of Christ were impressive. He certainly challenged people to live up to their ideals of open-mindedness and tolerance.

Yet it seems such open-mindedness only goes so far. Perhaps Jackie and others meant that it was all perfectly fine for Jews to say “Merry Christmas” to Christians, out of respect for their religion . . . or for Christians to say it to one another. But, what about Jews who actually believe that the birth of Jesus should bring joy to all because he is the Jewish Messiah? How might Jackie feel about them? If it’s not okay for Jews to celebrate the Christ of Christmas, then Jackie and others still miss the mark when it comes to religious freedom because apparently they are not pro-choice!

By pro-choice, I’m not referring to reproductive rights. I mean that people can choose to follow what they believe to be true, wherever that leads them. That includes the right to choose how they want to worship according to their own conscience.

Pro-choice behavior can have dramatic results with far reaching consequences. If Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans

had not been pro-choice, there would be no Jewish people today. He was not limited to a set of beliefs just because he was born into a certain family. Abram chose to obey God, who told him, “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). If Abram had stayed, he never would have become Abraham and the Jewish people would not exist.

Whether one’s parents are Hindu, Christian, Muslim or Jewish, one does not find religious beliefs to be true because they’ve been passed down from one generation to the next. If people’s conscience leads them elsewhere they have to be able to turn where they truly believe. What one believes cannot be determined by genetics.

What we learn in our homes and are taught in the tradition of our synagogues and churches is not education in the truest sense. It is indoctrination. Indoctrination (instruction on a belief system that is normally not processed critically) is not inherently true or false, and as such it should always be questioned when we become old enough to do so.

Someone may argue, “Fine, if a Hindu wants to turn his back on the Hindu religion, let him. But he doesn’t call himself a Hindu anymore. If some Jews want to turn their backs on the Jewish religion, that’s their right. But they shouldn’t continue to call themselves Jewish.”

But that is an oversimplification of a complex matter. Whereas Judaism bespeaks a particular religious movement, Jewishness goes beyond adherence to particular tenets of the religion. It’s a culture that involves a lot more than belief and religious practice.

When people call themselves Messianic Jews, or Jews for Jesus or Jewish believers in Jesus, it has to do with culture and ethnicity. It is the way they identify themselves and their people. It has to do with self-understanding and one’s duty to one’s people. One can argue that the culture came out of the religion, but that’s like asking which came first, the egg or the chicken.



Nevertheless, those who see themselves as the guardians of Judaism would like to restrict what other Jews are allowed to believe.

In the July 12, 2006 edition of the *New York Daily News*, columnist Lenore Skenazy commented on pamphlets she saw that “explain why Jews should accept Christ.” To which she replied, “Sorry, Jews can’t. That was decided 2,000 years ago.” She doesn’t say who decided that Jews can’t believe in Jesus. But she is sure.

Others, such as David Berger, professor of religion at

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Brooklyn College (quoted in the same article) say that, “They [Jews who believe in Jesus] are trying to appropriate the label of Jewishness.” Yet such a statement is diametrically opposed to reality. One need not appropriate what one has had since birth.

Be they columnists, professors or rabbis, some see themselves not only as guardians of Judaism, but as those who have authority to determine and define what is and isn’t Jewish. And many, probably most, Jewish people would agree that it is their place to do so. But not all.

And those of us who disagree wish to challenge people to decide for themselves whether or not believing in Jesus is or is not a Jewish thing to do.

Most cannot or will not take the challenge because to open themselves to even the possibility that Jesus is the Messiah seems to them disloyal. After all, we are told over and over that it is disloyal for a Jew to turn to Jesus. Why? Because if we do so we are no longer Jews, according to the guardians of Judaism. And while I would argue that believing in Jesus does not mean that I am no longer a Jew, I can’t argue with the fact that many believe that Jews who follow Jesus are traitors and liars. And while other people’s beliefs or opinions do not determine who or what we are, no one wants to be misunderstood by those who matter to them. For many people, the fact that they might be ostracized by their community if they believe in Jesus is enough to prevent them from learning anything about him.

So, while some Jews may heed Jackie Mason’s plea to stop making Christians feel guilty that Christmas is indeed a religious holiday, most would also agree with him that Christmas is *their* holiday, that is, the holiday for Gentiles, and not *our* holiday.

Now all of the tumult of the good will, ill will, nil will, and the “we’ll do it” versus “we will not” really means very little on its own. Religion loses its meaning unless it is reality-based, unless it deals with things that are historically true. For example, if Moses did not receive the commandments from God, they should not be considered commandments at all. Instead they should be seen as Moses’ ten best suggestions. If the Jewish people are not descendants of Abraham to whom certain promises were made (Genesis 17:1-8; 26:3; 35:12), then the notion that Israel deserves a land now or at any time is a fable to back an idea of nationalism and justify a separation from neighbors.

Likewise, if the New Testament account of Jesus’ birth and subsequent acts are not historically true, then

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THE WRONG ADDRESS?

by Jhan Moskowitz

I was raised in the Bronx and like many other Jewish boys who grew up there, I attended Talmud Torah daily from 3 to 6 P.M. There I learned Hebrew, Jewish history and Jewish culture, and I was taught the traditions and obligations of being a Jew. My father's tailor shop was located only two blocks away from my Hebrew school. Directly across the street from my father's shop was one of the largest churches I had ever seen. I passed by there every day as I walked to my father's shop after Hebrew school. Then at 7 P.M. my father and I went home together.

One December as I was walking to my father's store, I was met with an unusual sight in front of the large church. I stopped dead in my tracks. There on the lawn stood three figures of turbaned men, each carrying a box. Nearby there were several life-sized toy animals (cows and goats). There was also a small shed, and in it, two more figures, obviously a mother and father, on either side of a little doll that lay in

a wooden box filled with hay. Above this entire scene I saw a wooden sign that even a seven-year-old could read. It said, "Born is the King of Israel." I might not have known much when I was seven, but I did know that we Jews were Israel and they, the Gentiles who attended that church, were not. The first thing that came to my mind was, "The people who delivered this stuff went to the wrong address. They should have brought it down the street to the synagogue."

I ran to my father's shop as fast as my legs could carry me and yelled, "Daddy, Daddy! Somebody made a big mistake. OUR king is on THEIR lawn!" My father smiled and assured me that there was no mistake. He told me that the baby in the manger didn't belong in front of the synagogue. That king, he said, was not our king. From that point on, I wondered about this strange, strange thing: that Gentiles would acknowledge that baby who was born the King of Israel and we Jews would not.



A look at one of the predictions of the Messiah's coming in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Where the Messiah would be born.

But as for you Bethlehem, Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from You one will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from everlasting. (Micah 5:1 in the Hebrew Scriptures; in most English translations it is Micah 5:2)

This passage, written around 700 B.C., has been recognized by traditional Jewish sources to indicate that the Messiah would be from Bethlehem. See the references below:

- Targum Jonathan, probably put into writing after 70 A.D. paraphrases Micah's prophecy, "Out of thee Bethlehem shall Messiah go forth before me to exercise dominion over Israel; . . . he whose name was mentioned from before, from the days of creation."
- The Jerusalem Talmud (y. Ber.2.4*) comments, ". . . King Messiah is born . . . he is from the royal palace of Bethlehem."
- The Soncino Press commentary on Micah, as part of *The Twelve Prophets* volume, has this to say, "This prophecy of the Messiah is comparable with the more famous *shoot out of the stock of Jesse* prophecy in Isa. xi. To hearten the people in their calamitous plight, Micah foretells the coming of one from Bethlehem (i.e., of the house of David) who, in the strength of the Lord, will restore Israel to their land and rule over them in God's name in abiding peace."

It is interesting to note that the Soncino Press commentary goes on to suggest, "Not that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but that his origin of old, through David, would be Bethlehem." However, it

begs the question: if the prophet meant ancestry and not geography, why would such a statement be necessary? Nevertheless, Jesus fulfilled this Messianic prophecy both in terms of his lineage (Luke 3:23-38) as well as his birthplace:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)

Critics have said that Mary and Joseph arranged to have Jesus born there to fulfill the prophecy, but the historical events of that day refute that. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth but had to return to Bethlehem to meet the requirements of the census. Joseph (as well as Mary) was from the lineage of King David (Matthew 1:1-17) and that place of family origin is where the count needed to be taken. Interestingly, a petition for tax relief from the Jewish people to Caesar postponed the taking of the census for a period of time, which "allowed" Mary to come to full term and give birth to Jesus while still in Bethlehem. These were not circumstances she could have planned herself.

*As cited in Alfred Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendrickson edition, 1993) p. 143, who says that "in an imaginary conversation between an Arab and a Jew, Bethlehem is authoritatively named as Messiah's birthplace."



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Christmas is no more than an occasion to exchange gifts and have parties to counteract the bleak cold of winter.

On the other hand, if the “Old and Newer” Testaments’ accounts about the birth of Jesus, his life filled with miracles, his atoning death and his resurrection are true, then people who believe in Jesus are not merely celebrating his birth—they are celebrating his life and what he means to them.

When people make a birthday party for a family member or a best friend, it’s because that person has come to mean a great deal to them and they appreciate who they are, what they’ve done and what they mean to their friends and family. These are the things that birthday celebrations commemorate. Holidays provide us with the occasion to remember what something or someone means to us, particularly on the anniversary of their birth. Christmas (while it probably does not fall on the exact anniversary of his birth) celebrates who Jesus is and what his followers believe he has done for them. If Jesus did not do the things for which he is celebrated, then Christmas is of no value for anyone but the retailers.

The questions whose answers can determine the real value of Christmas are as follows: Does God exist? Does he care? Does he want to communicate with the human race? And if we can admit that the possibility exists that the answers to the above are yes, yes and yes, then dare we ask a few more? Did God decide to become a man? Is it even possible? Finally, if God became a man 2,000 years ago, what does it have to do with us today?

How do we answer those last three questions? Do we parrot what others tell us, or do we explore for ourselves—reading, researching and relying on God to guide us to the truth of these matters? Do we journey through the Hebrew Scriptures to gaze upon the portrait the prophets painted of the Messiah’s arrival? (One prophetic passage is featured on page 5.)

And what if such a journey leads one beyond the commonly accepted boundaries of the Jewish religion? What about people who were born Jews, educated as Jews, and love their own people, but believe that there are more than 39 books in the Bible? What about Jews who sincerely believe that Jesus is the Messiah?

Interesting, isn’t it, that the Gentile convert to Judaism is seen as a wise and thoughtful person who chose to be a Jew because he is well-studied and astute. Yet it doesn’t work the other way around. Jews who want to follow Christ are seen as sincere but misguided at best, or they are demonized as being ignorant, insincere, and traitors who do not care at all for their family and friends. Are any of the above self-serving perceptions? Or are they based in reality?

Is it possible for rational people who are born Jews and have practiced the Jewish religion to conclude that Jesus is the promised Messiah?

True enough, the first-century Jewish believers were



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treated as renegades and eventually isolated from other Jews. But suppose the Jewish priests and the rabbis of their time had confronted those first Jews for Jesus and said, “Give up this Jesus or you won’t be Jews.” Who then would have taken that demand seriously? Everyone knew that Jesus and his followers were Jewish and no one could disallow their Jewishness or pronounce them to be non-Jews.

Moreover, to his followers, the Jew Jesus was the supreme rabbi and greater than any other religious leader. To renounce him on pain of being declared “no longer Jewish” by lesser rabbis would make no sense.

To put it in modern terms, imagine this: a young doctor (part of a select group under the personal tutelage of the chief of staff at Johns Hopkins) returns to his hometown to practice medicine. The doctor that he grew



up with, the doctor the whole town trusts, tells the young man that what he learned isn't true medicine. He'd better give it up or he's no doctor. Well, he's got a choice to make. Of course he'll still be a doctor if he continues to practice medicine as taught to him by his mentor. Neither the local doctor nor the people in his hometown made him to be a physician in the first place. But if he doesn't renounce the chief of staff and what he taught, neither the doctor nor the people he grew up with will recognize him.

In a way, that's what we who are Jewish believers in Jesus face. Most rabbis are not pro-choice when it comes to Jews believing in Jesus. Some would even define being Jewish as rejecting Jesus and his teachings. But the rabbis didn't make us to be Jews. And like those early disciples, we have chosen to follow the supreme rabbi Y'shua (Jesus). Many who reject him are not even aware of what he taught or the healing those teachings bring. Many have no idea why we would want to celebrate him at Christmas or any other time of year. For them, Jesus is simply the dividing line between Jews and Gentiles. But is that what or who he really is?

Everyone is entitled to their opinion of who Jesus is. But he either is the promised one or he isn't. And it's impossible for someone to know the true answer without making a personal quest to find out.

In any case, it makes little sense to be offended by someone else's celebration of Jesus. And yet for decades, Jewish defense groups and others have sought to banish the real Christmas from public view. Perhaps it was commentator Bill O'Reilly who coined the phrase "War on Christmas" to describe the assault on the holiday from all kinds of agencies and individuals. From school boards to secular activists, the pressure to withdraw the mention of Christ and Christmas from public discourse and display is powerful. No crèche or depiction of the birth of Christ is allowed in a public park. No matter what one's politics might be, anyone can observe that even saying "Merry Christmas" is considered politically incorrect and insensitive to those of other faiths or those of no faith. Indeed it does seem to be a war or at least a campaign to insist that "Season's Greetings" replace "Merry Christmas" even if the words "and/or Happy Hanukkah" are added.

We applaud the courage of people like Jackie Mason and his group who have concluded that it's wrong to embarrass Christians out of celebrating Christmas in public. They have gone against public opinion to affirm that, "It's okay to say 'Merry Christmas.'"

This writer says, "Good for them! It's a step in the right direction." But the next step is to seriously consider that there might be truth in what Christians are celebrating . . . and that truth is not restricted to either Jews or Gentiles.

The secularist needs to learn that religion is a lot more than a personally held opinion. True religion is a heartfelt conviction of what is false and what is true. It provides imperatives concerning what we ought to do according to the transcendent reality, i.e. God. If there's no actuality to it, then all religion should be discarded for whatever is the next best thing—except there is no "next best thing" to God.

Feelings—not only about Christmas, but other events that people commemorate—need to be based in reality. No one should allow themselves anxiety over whether or not a cruse of oil really lasted a whole week. Nor should they look for their life to change if bunnies don't lay eggs at Easter time. And if there is no reality to what Christmas celebrates, the holiday should be of trivial concern to anyone and everyone!

That includes Jackie Mason, or any rabbi or any Jew for Jesus for that matter. The issue is whether or not Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. And frankly, if he's not, then Christmas is all a humbug whether you're Jewish or Gentile, religious or secular.

If Christmas is no more than brightly-colored red or green globes of thinnest glass to be hung on a dead tree, then the controversy of whether Jews can be for Christmas is a non-issue. But in reality, one was hung on a dead tree and to that end was he born. There was one who was the Lord of all reality, the ground of being, the uncaused cause who caused himself to become a man and live among us and subject himself to all that a human being might suffer, even the ignominious death of the cross. And if he's not real to you, could it be that your sense of reality is based on opinions (your own or other people's), when God is waiting to show you something more? ■

OPENING NIGHT

By Mark Greene

It should have
been standing room only
In the shed in that Judean town.
Though this was where they said it would be,

Not many came.
Some out-of-towners from the east,
A handful of night-workers taking a break

Not many came
To see this ordinary sight
A Jewish baby
The new life lit
by a singular beam.

The Star is born.