

Jewish in a Winter Wonderland

By **Cindy Chupack**

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I BLAME the Pottery Barn holiday catalog for the fact that my husband and I, both Jews, spent last weekend at Home Depot picking out a Christmas tree. I cannot blame our kids who begged us mercilessly for a tree, because we do not yet have kids. I cannot blame my parents, because although my dad initially supported George Bush, he never supported the Hanukkah bush.

In fact, I recall that he was extremely judgmental of one Jewish family in the place I grew up (Tulsa), who did have a Christmas tree every year. Even though it was decorated exclusively with blue ornaments and silver bows, my dad made it clear to my sister and me that he thought the whole Jews-with-trees movement was in very poor taste.

Then again, my dad was a man who, in his wood-paneled wet bar, had highball glasses featuring busty women whose clothes disappeared when the glass was full. So I learned early on that taste was subjective.

Fast forward to last month. My husband and I have been married a year and a half, and I am flipping through the Pottery Barn holiday catalog while he sorts the mail, and page after page is something beautiful and not for us, because we

are Jews. In my humble opinion, Jews have yet to make Hanukkah decorations beautiful, unless you consider a blue-and-white paper dreidel beautiful, but what can you expect from a holiday whose spelling is constantly up for debate.

So as I browsed past velvet monogrammed stockings and quilted tree skirts and pine wreaths and silver-plated picture frames that doubled as stocking holders (genius!), I said to myself, as much as to my husband: “This is why I sometimes wish I celebrated Christmas. Everything looks so cozy and inviting.” And much to my surprise, he said, “We can celebrate Christmas if you want.” And like a 12-year-old, I said, “We can?” And he said, “Sure.”

It seemed so subversive. Christmas? Really? I thought about it for a moment. Or rather, I thought about what my parents would think. But my parents live 1,200 miles away. They weren’t visiting this season. They wouldn’t even need to know. (Unless, of course, they read about it in The Times. Merry Christmas, Mom and Dad!)

Still, even just considering the idea felt wrong and dirty and, well, totally exhilarating, like your first night away at college, when you realize you can stay out until dawn because nobody is waiting up for you. My husband and I were consenting adults. This was our house. Why couldn’t we celebrate whatever we wanted?

We decided we could, and proceeded to embrace the holiday in all of its materialistic glory. For example, I know it can be annoying to you Christmas veterans, but right now I love nothing more than hearing “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” while I’m shopping for stocking stuffers. I love stocking stuffers. I love having stockings to stuff. I love the fact that whole sections of many stores, from CVS to Neiman Marcus, have opened up to me. I love tinsel. It’s so simple, yet so elegant!



Gary Hovland

I love that as soon as I told a Catholic friend what I was up to, she invited me to a gingerbread-house decorating party. How fun is that? And why wasn't I invited before? What does a gingerbread house have to do with Jesus?

So here we are: two newlywed Jews celebrating our No No Noel (or Ho Ho Hanukkah) not because we secretly want to convert to Christianity, but because the rampant commercialization of Christmas works! Like your kids who desperately want the toys they see advertised on TV, I wanted monogrammed velvet stockings and my husband wanted the model train that goes around the tree and puffs actual smoke.

That train (which took two hours to assemble) was the first sign that our Christmas may not be all peace on earth, good will toward men. The vision dancing in my head was clearly Pottery Barn, whereas his, I fear, was SkyMall.

He bought blinking colored lights when I was definitely thinking white, and he ordered old-timey glass ornaments — a slice of pizza, a mermaid, a hippo — instead of the jewel-colored balls I had in mind.

And he keeps talking about the fake snow ("Should we get the blanket or just use cotton balls?") when I wasn't thinking fake snow at all. I definitely haven't seen any fake snow in the Pottery Barn catalog. And then at Home Depot, I practically had to pry the mechanical lawn snowman out of his hands. He's like a Christmas crackhead — had a taste and now he can't stop.

But despite our differences, we both love our little winter wonderland. Some nights, I put on our Starbucks Christmas CD, light a fire, turn on the tree and play with the different settings, put liquid smoke in the train's smokestack and turn on the choo-choo sound effects and then I sit back and enjoy my first Christmas, in all its kitschy splendor. I feel a little guilty when I look at our lone menorah on the mantel (the only evidence of my faith other than my guilt), but I ask you: how can this much pleasure be wrong?

Before you answer that in a snappy letter to the editor, fellow Jews (including you, Dad), let me just say that I'm pretty sure that if we're fortunate enough to have children, we will raise them with the same arbitrary rules we were raised with, trying our best to sell that old chestnut (roasting on an open fire) that "eight nights is better than one," and putting this tradition behind us until the kids go off to college, if not forever.

On the other hand, maybe it's nice to teach children that holidays can be done à la carte. Every religion, every culture has so many beautiful rituals and traditions to choose from. Maybe celebrating is a step toward tolerating. I can hardly wait for Hanukkwanzaa.

Cindy Chupack, a writer and executive producer of “Sex and the City,” is the author of “The Between Boyfriends Book: A Collection of Cautiously Hopeful Essays.”