

Since its Dec 26th and all, I thought I should give a little drash about Christmas. Because its hard for Christmas not to loom large in the Jewish psyche. It was interesting for me this year especially because I spent much of the cultural build up to the 25th in Israel where Hanukkah was already under way. While in Israel, I saw nothing about Christmas -but lots of Hanukkah sales. In the shuk, the open air market in Jerusalem, there were menorahs and dreidels. In fact, I went to a Jerusalem bakery called English Cake and got sufganuyot hot out of the oil.

And then as soon as I hit Newark I was surrounded by Christmas decorations. I am back to listening to music by Ipod only because otherwise I get blitzed by Christmas. Or driving over to Minyan Thursday night with empty roads. Its a holiday that is challenging for us as Jews. Partly, it reminds us, as much as we are integrated into and a part of American culture, that we are a still a minority. There is still a key way in which we are outside, not part of the mainstream. Its easy to forget this the rest of the year, but when the lovely neighbor at the Barron Park Market reflexively wishes me a Merry Christmas, I am reminded.

Jewish songwriters have contributed to making Christmas into an American holiday in key ways. Its Irving Berlin, after all, who wrote White Christmas. Can you imagine, I'm dreaming of a Wisse Hanukkah??? But if you look carefully at the lyrics, its fascinating to realize that a Jew wrote them. Im dreaming of a white Christmas - just like the ones I used to know? what? He grew up the Jewish son of a Rabbi in Belarus... So I suppose it was a white

Christmas..But notice the way in which this popular song strips Christmas of any theological significance. It becomes nostalgia, family, reconnection with a sacred past. And so in a curious way he put some Jewish elements into Christmas, striving to make it a holiday for the public sphere.

Its worse than that of course- Mel Torme wrote The Christmas Song - chestnuts roasting on an open fire... And the list goes on. In other words, Jews have written some of the great American christmas songs, all of which focus on the family, home and hearth element of the holiday and all of which ignore any religious element. Its an interesting reflex below conscious thought to make safe this moment of feeling left out.

and so its appropriate that we are reading the story of Joseph right after Christmas. Joseph is the character in the Bible who wrestles with otherness, with being both Egyptian and Jewish. He has become so Egyptian that his own brothers fail to recognize him. Why? The midrash tells us that he was wearing Egyptian dress. He is married to an Egyptian woman, the daughter of a priest. He has made a place for himself in Egypt and the brothers have no idea who he is.

המ קוספ אמ קרפ תישארב

ערפ יטופ תב תנסא תא ול נתיו חנעפ תנפצ פסוי מש הערפ ארקיו
:מירצמ פרא לע פסוי אציו השאל וא והכ

Pharaohs changes Josephs name to Tzphnat Panach and gives him Osnat the daughter of Potipharah the Priest of On as a wife and Joseph goes out on the land of Egypt.

He picks up an Egyptian name - the only character other than Esther who has a Jewish name and a secular name. He marries an Egyptian woman, the daughter of a priest no less. And she is the daughter of none other than Potiphar.

The commentaries spend a lot of time on his choice of spouse. They disagree as to whether Potiphar is being punished or Joseph being rewarded. According to Rashi, Potiphar has been castrated as a punishment for trying to seduce Joseph himself!!. As a result, Potphar became a priest and alters his name to Potipharah. So Josephs marriage becomes the final humiliation for Potiphar. While this makes some sense, it is at odds with my sense of Joseph as a tzaddik. How can he set out to humiliate his formed master and still be righteous?

Hizkuni offers a different explanation. He says that Joseph marries Potiphar's daughter to make clear to all that he was never with the wife. I'm not so sure about that either. To me, it only makes it appear worse. Now he has married the daughter of the woman who allegedly seduced him. You can just imagine the headlines.

Mesheck Hochmah offers the explanation I find most compelling, He says that Joseph marries Osnat to prevent

Potiphar from rebelling. Its a way of tying himself to his greatest potential enemy.

Whatever the reason, the Rabbis are fascinated with this marriage because it, even more than the name change, makes Joseph into an Egyptian. Or at least gives him the comfortable semblance of fitting in, of being fully accepted now into Egyptian society.

And then in the middle of the narrative comes a reminder that Joseph is still out of place, not fully at home in Egypt.
גמ קרפ תישארב

וּלְכוּי אֵל יֵכ ׀דְּבֵל וְתֵא ׀יִלְכֵא ׀יִרְצְמֵלוּ ׀דְּבֵל ׀הֵלוּ וְדְבֵל וְל וּמִיִּשְׂיֵוּ
׀יִרְצְמֵל אֹהֵ הַבְּעוֹת יֵכ ׀חֵל ׀יִרְבַּעָה תֵא לְכֵאל ׀יִרְצְמָה

32. And they served him by himself, and for them by themselves, and for the Egyptians, who ate with him, by themselves; because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.

Though he is second only to Pharaoh, the Egyptians still won't break bread with him. The brothers can't see that divide, as he seats them separately, but its there. Joseph isnt fully at home either in this strange land. And worse, his choices up until now have made him separate from both his brother and the Egyptians. He is truly alone.

This scene of Joseph eating by himself makes me wonder how Irving Berlin felt as he saw Bing Crosby singing the song he wrote. Was he proud of his own success in creating such a

beloved piece of a Americana? Or did he feel even more distant from his own sense of being an American as it brought up memories of his own jewish past in Belarus?

Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers. He is after all still of them. And they rejoice and are amazed that he has survived and thrived. They accept him without question - he is their brother!

Yet even in that moment of revelation, his Egyptian self remains part of who he is. He rides out to see his father in an Egyptian chariot. Boastful? A little showy? IN the same vein, I wonder how Israelis see American tourists as we spend and donate and show off just a little bit when we go to Israel.

But as much as its showy, its also loving, a token of respect. Come - ride with me in style!! Let me share with you my success because I care about you and my success finds meaning when you see it. We donate and are partners with you in building this land and supporting its economy.

So perhaps Joseph is righteous because he finds a balance between these various elements of his own personality. He discovers his hidden wholeness in a pivot point between what he knows of Egypt, what he has become of Egypt, and his own yiddishe neshama.

My own relationship to Christmas has evolved over the years. I used to find it overwhelming and frustrating. I think I am a little more mature now - I can appreciate the beauty of the holiday and take pleasure in my neighbors celebration.

I have to wrestle with family at this time of year as well. Every few years we spend Christmas with Carol's family because its a meaningful celebration for them. My inlaws open up their kosher crate with all our dishes and make a great effort to let us feel a part of things. But we are visiting, not really celebrating. My mother in law has spent many Shabbatot with us - and I wonder if its similar to how she feels when we say Havdalah? Its lovely, its clearly meaningful to its celebrants, but its not mine. We have visited them irregularly enough that when we visit my kids sleep in, much to the frustration of my inlaws. They have no idea they are supposed to be all excited and rush down for presents. We are part and not part. Family for sure but still other. I feel like its the right thing to visit them and join in this key celebration of theirs. But I admit I always feel a little guilty about it too.

I don't like Irving Berlin's choice because it gives up too much. There's no room for Jewish identity and God in that song. Further, it blurs distinctions that matter to Christians as well. There is a move to "put the Christ back into Christmas" that shows Christian frustration with the secularization of a key holy day for them.

But Joseph finds a way to be part of and yet other in Egyptian society. I wonder about Joseph - did he visit Potiphars house for the Egyptian equivalent of Christmas? did he have a special crate of kosher dishes that davka got opened at Christmas time so he and his family could eat with the rest of the Potiphars? I sort of wish the Torah would tell us how he navigated these

kinds of challenges because these are our challenges, especially highlighted at this season of the year.

We don't live in a world where Irving Berlin wrote, Im dreaming of wisse hanukkah. But we do live in a country that has accepted us, allowed us to find a true home here. The example of Joseph then becomes an inspiration to find the righteous choices that allow us to appreciate and learn from the other ness of our neighbors at the same time that we continue to recognize our own Jewish identity. May God grant us the strength to find that balance between being of and yet still being other. Amen.