

Religion is Religion and Visceral is Visceral

My beloved wife Ingrid, originally from Germany, is a Jew by choice. To expedite choosing me, a rabbi, she chose being Jewish. She brought immense goodwill and love to our marriage, and very little knowledge of those things visceral to those of us born and raised Jewish in a Christian environment. And though as a student of human behavior I should not have been surprised, she brought her own visceral attachments to Christmas with her.

The first Christmas Eve family gathering I ever attended took place shortly after we met at her home, There was a beautifully decorated tree, an exchange of gifts, a delicious meal, but beyond all those, which she experienced as merely cultural, no overt religious observance. It was as close to secular as you could get.

The first December Chanukah time, after Ingrid moved into in my lakeside Home, I returned from a psychotherapy conference in Phoenix and as I turned into our street, saw lights in the window of our home. Indeed, as I approached I made out three wooden stars, beautifully carved and lit in the window. I went inside and with some “agita” indicated that the stars were unacceptable. Ingrid offered,

“They are only stars—not in any way religious”.

I responded that though,

“they are only stars, a Jewish home was marked around Christmas time by being dark”.

She glumly said that she would save the stars for her daughter Kirsten’s future home.

The next year returning from the same conference I confidently entered our home having during my approach seen no stars in the window. As I entered I saw a chanukiyah full of candles, laid out on a bed of holly and evergreens. Beyond that, Ingrid had carefully picked all the red and green candles from the candle box, and placed them in the chanukiyah. I knew I had some explaining to do.

“You see Schatz, it’s true that red and green are just colors, but red and green around Christmas time signify Christmas.”

The following year when I came home from the self-same conference, all the candles were blue and white, and no greenery in sight.

One year, at the beginning of December, our local Home Depot was having a sale on poinsettias. Ingrid indicated that she wanted to get some, one of which was to be taken to her former in-laws Malcolm and Lucille's home where we were invited for Christmas Eve. I offered that I would be glad to come back to Home Depot on the twenty-fourth and pick up a poinsettia to take with us as a gift. Ingrid said;

“You don’t want them in the house, but they’re just a plant!”

I gulped and once again had to explain about how poinsettias were symbols of the season. Ingrid’s son Kenneth was scheduled to meet us at our home to accompany us to his grandparents that evening. When he arrived at the front door, there he was holding in his arms a poinsettia for Malcolm and Lucille. They got two poinsettias that evening.

In the early years, before Ingrid’s daughter Kirsten (she who was to have the three stars for her window) was married to Phil and had a home of her own, and a concomitant Christmas celebration- one year when Ingrid’s former in-laws couldn’t do it, Christmas Eve was to take place at our home. Ingrid to whom Christmas Eve with her family was precious, very much wanted to be with her children on Christmas Eve and celebrate in some way. We had a decidedly secular celebration -no tree, no red and green decorations, no holly or poinsettia’s, -just a family gathering around a beautifully set table, a delightful meal and an exchange of gifts.

One of those years, Ingrid’s children, Kirsten and Kenneth were preparing the house for the celebration. I was upstairs studiously trying to ignore what was going on. As I heard the preparations, I found myself getting angrier and angrier, and wondering why in the world I had even imagined that such visceral things would end with conversion. Finally from as far as I could be from the setting up, hearing Kirsten and Kenneth tune the stereo system to Christmas music, (which at other times of the year I consider absolutely beautiful,) hearing Silent Night on my Jewish music system, I finally after some inner turmoil, came down and offered that THIS WAS A JEWISH

HOUSE AND THAT MUSIC COULD NOT BE PLAYED. It was the first and to my memory the only time Kirsten and Kenneth got into shouting match with me.

“BUT YOU SAID LAST SPRING THAT YOU LOVED Christmas MUSIC AND BESIDES, WE PUT ON YARMULKES WHEN WE COME TO YOUR SEDER!!! “

I responded somewhat lamely, that I would be glad to participate in their celebration, in their way, when Kirsten has her Christmas Eve celebration but

“THIS WAS A JEWISH HOUSE AND THAT MUSIC COULD NOT BE PLAYED,”

especially on Christmas Eve. Religion is Religion but Visceral is Visceral.