

# The Tannenbaum's Tree

**An Instant Lesson**  
by Rabbi Joel Gordon

**S**ome parents were pretty fanatic about the whole thing. Joey's parents told him, "No Christmas anything. Christmas is for Christians. We're Jewish."

My parents were never like that. They respected Joey's parents, but they weren't so strict. Mom used to tell us, "You may sing Christmas songs in school if that's what your teacher tells you to do. Just don't believe them. We don't believe in Christmas. For Jews, all Christmas is, is a nice holiday that some of our neighbors celebrate, and we're happy for them."

I could live with that. When Bridget invited me to her Christmas party, Dad said it was okay. I even brought a present, but it was wrapped in white paper, not red and green. That didn't bother anyone, and Bridget liked what I brought her. (I think it was a pen that wrote in different colors.)



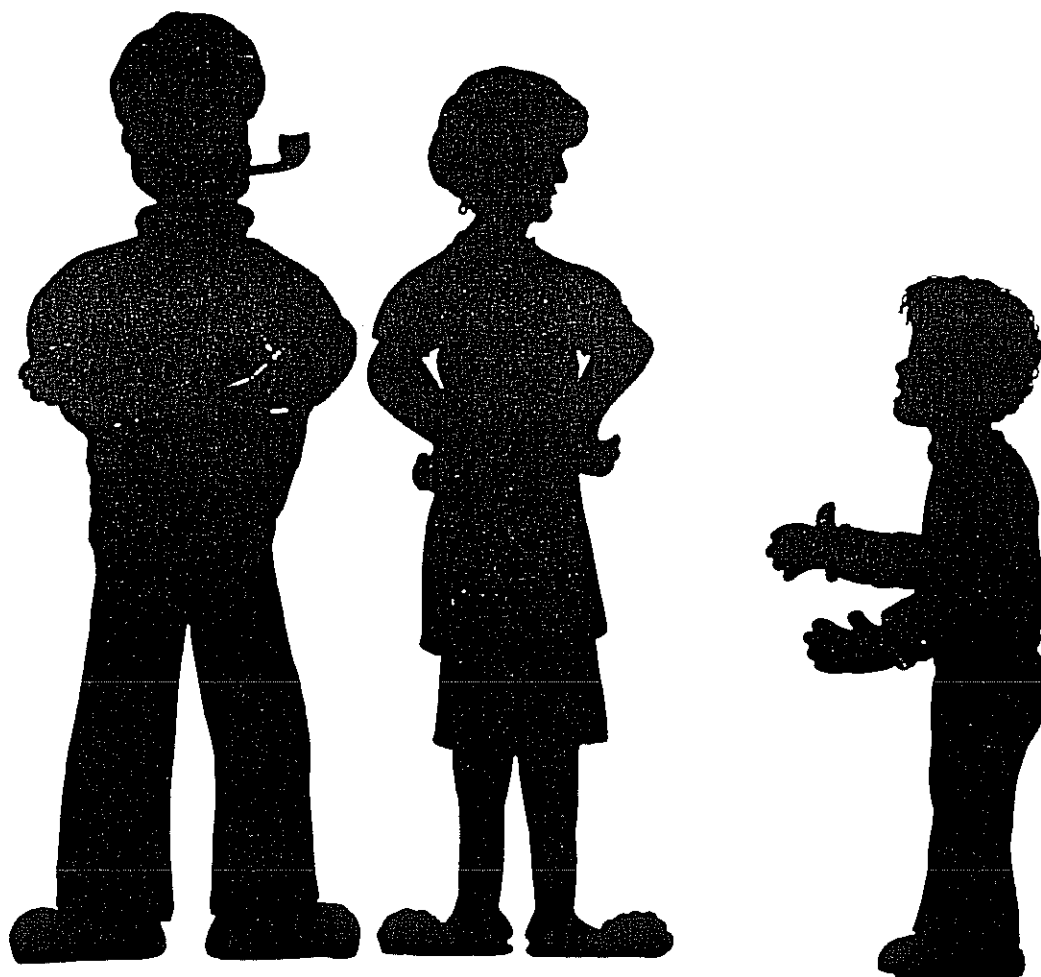
**W**e never sang real Christmas carols in school, just winter songs like "Frosty the Snowman" and "Jingle Bells". But, as Christmas got closer, everybody would wish each other Merry Christmas. I wished my Christian friends Merry Christmas, and some of them said, "Same to you." Usually they just weren't thinking, or they didn't know that I didn't celebrate Christmas, because I'm Jewish. Some of my friends said Happy Hanukkah. Others just smiled at me and didn't know what to say.

In some ways I liked the Christmas season, and in some ways I didn't. Jack loved Christmas.

**J**ack is two years older than me, and he's my brother, of all things. Jack was short and I was tall. Jack was good in art and I was good in writing stories. Jack liked swimming and I liked soccer. Everything he was, I wasn't. I guess that's why he loved Christmas, and I didn't.

**I**t's not that we didn't have a nice Hanukkah and other nice holidays. In our house we lit candles and made latkes and spun the dreidl and sang Hanukkah songs. We did everything. It's just that, when you left our house, it wasn't Hanukkah any more. For us it was Hanukkah; for the whole world it seemed to be Christmas. It got kind of lonely out there.

Jack volunteered and got a leading role in our school Christmas play. It wasn't the holy kind, with Jesus and Mary, but it was definitely a Christmas play. Mom said it was okay, but she didn't say it very enthusiastically. Jack made some Christmas cards and gave them to his Christian friends. Mom said it was nice that Jack was adding to the happiness his friends felt on their holidays. But I felt Jack wanted Christmas to be his holiday.



**N**othing really blew up until Jack asked for a Christmas tree. Dad explained that Christmas trees are for Christians, not for Jews. Jack was not interested in any explanations. He liked Christmas trees, and why couldn't we have one. "They're beautiful," he said. "Everyone else has one," he said. "They aren't really about Jesus," he said. "They're just pretty trees with decorations, that's all."

Dad and Mom explained about Christians having their holidays and we Jews having our holidays. Jack said that the Kleins were Jewish and they had a Christmas tree. Mom said that was all right for the Kleins, maybe, *maybe*. But it certainly was not all right for us. After a while all their arguments sounded the same. No one was saying anything new. Jack wanted a Christmas tree, and my parents said no.

**O**n Christmas day, Jack spent almost the whole day in his room sulking. By the next day, it seemed he had gotten over it. He went out to play, and even spent some time swimming in the J.C.C. pool. By Sunday, Jack was back to his old self. Or so we thought.

Christmas is big, but it doesn't last forever. By Sunday, the TV had stopped showing Christmas programs and the stores had stopped playing Christmas songs. By Monday, some people began taking down their decorations. By Monday night, several Christmas trees were lying by the road for trash pickup. They looked dry and old and tired, and they seemed out-of-place lying there outdoors. It was as if they had gotten used to being inside and no longer felt at home in the snow and fresh air. Tuesday morning was trash pickup time, and by noon they would be gone.

**S**omething in the house was different on Tuesday morning when we got up. Jack was already dressed and acting strange. Dad was in the kitchen starting the coffee. He was the one who shouted first. It was a shout of surprise, of shock, not of anger. We all ran downstairs. Even Jack. And we all shouted when we saw the tree. Except for Jack.

It was propped up against the big chair, balancing, leaning, ready to fall.



"Where did you get it?" asked Mom, trying very hard to sound calm.

"Two doors down. The Anthony's," answered Jack.

"From their house?"

"From their trash."

"Why?"

"So we could have a Christmas tree, just like everybody else," answered Jack. He was having trouble saying the words. His voice was getting very high like it does when you are trying to talk and not to cry.

"It's all dry and awful," I said. "Look, the needles are falling off all over the carpet. Most of the needles are gone."

Jack didn't say anything. He was crying very quietly. Just tears. No sound.

We stood there together, all of us, waiting for Jack to get the crying out of him. Nobody was angry. We were all thinking how awful it looked. Jack couldn't even look at it.

After a few minutes, I told Jack I would help him drag it back to the Anthony's trash. He just nodded. He didn't even argue. Mom got the vacuum cleaner. Dad finished making breakfast.

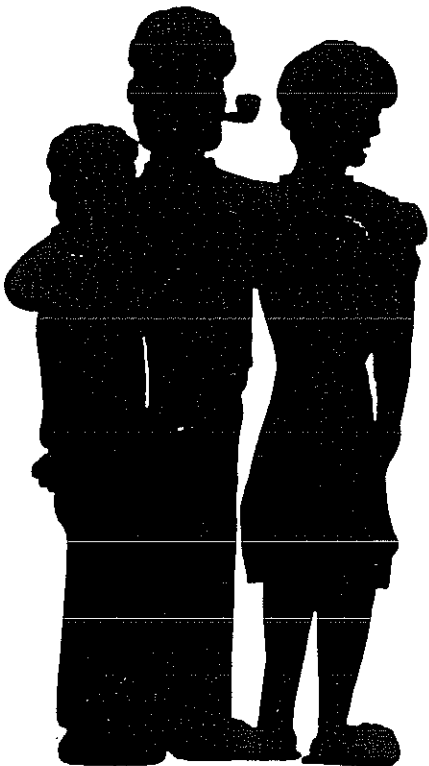
We didn't do a lot of talking during breakfast, out of respect for Jack, who was feeling terrible. But he broke the silence.

✍ "It didn't look right in our house."

"It hardly had any needles left," I said.

✍ "Even with the needles, it wouldn't look right in our house."

"Even with decorations and angels."



**J**ack spent the whole day swimming at the J.C.C. That night he had a talk with Dad and Mom after I had gone to bed. It was the last Christmas tree talk they ever had. I don't know that they said, but it couldn't have been like all the arguments they had had before. It was quieter (I could hardly hear a word.), and they were agreeing. I could feel that. It was the kind of agreeing that you can only do after you have disagreed but kept on loving.

**W**e would always remember that as the year we Tannenbaums had a Christmas tree. We would always smile about it, but never laugh.

**II. Comparison of Chanukah and Christmas**

A. What are the differences between Chanukah and Christmas?

(See if your group can come up with the differences illustrated on this chart)

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Chanukah</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Eight day celebration</li><li>2. Historical, military purification celebration</li><li>3. Celebration by reciting the blessing and lighting candles</li><li>4. Minor holiday, no great religious significance</li></ol> <p style="text-align: center;">B. How are the holidays similar?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Christmas</u></p> <p>One day holiday Historical <b>birthday</b> celebration</p> <p>Celebrate the birth by giving presents</p> <p>Major religious holiday</p>
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**III. Values Session**

Have Kadimaniks answer the questions on the values sheet. (See values sheet)

The purpose of this exercise is to teach about the uniqueness of the Chanukah holiday and of being Jewish and how the Maccabees fought to preserve that uniqueness.

**IV. Conclusion/Wrap up**

Read "The Tannenbaum's Tree by Rabbi Joel Gordon and discuss it.

## **VALUES...FEELINGS...OPINIONS**

1. If I could have a miracle come true it would be...
2. Do you think a miracle has ever happened in your lifetime?
3. Do you think Jewish homes should have Chanukah decorations?
4. How do you feel when you go shopping and see all the Christmas decorations?
5. Are you jealous of your Christian friends at Christmas time.
6. To me, freedom means...
7. How do you think the Maccabees' struggle was like the American revolution?
8. How do you feel about the way Chanukah has changed in America (i.e. become more like Christmas)?
9. If someone could give you anything in the world for Chanukah, what would it be?
10. Should Christmas and Chanukah songs be sung in public school?