



## FAITH FOCUS - An Irish Jewish 'Christmas'

**My mother was one of Santa Claus's elves: the Orthodox Jewish contingent. She assures me that she has retired from all elfish duties now, yet when I was a child, she was there among the pantheon of Santa's helpers. I'm not exactly sure what her job was, maybe**

## **a Rudolph-wrangler, or a toy-maker, writes Melanie Brown.**

She must have been quite high-up in the hierarchy of elves, because I know for a fact that when Santa Claus set out on his global journey on Christmas Eve every year of my childhood, he was fortified by cocoa (supplied my mother) in the very thermos flask which I brought to school other times of the year.

### **Religious identities are shifting**

We live in a time when national, cultural and religious identities are shifting and changing, engendering strength and unity for some; generating division and hatred in others.

It is pleasing to think that rituals most closely associated with Christianity can be appropriated by those from a non-Christian background, and renegotiated to fit into a widely different set of beliefs and practices. This is where acculturation starts, leading (in a perfect world) to a

lifetime of mutual inclusivity, of understanding, and of belonging.

I was fortunate, growing up in a Jewish background in Ireland, that I was given the

opportunity to share in the magic of Christmas-time, without this creating the slightest conflict within my own sense of religious and cultural identity.

The Protestant schools which I attended had a wonderful tradition of carol-singing, and I came to adore these songs of praise and joyfulness just as I appreciated the beauty of the haunting melodies which I sang in the synagogue every Sabbath morning.

## **Celebrating Chanukah**

Although we never erected a Christmas tree at home, we were able to wonder at the sparkling, rainbow lights that adorned trees in our friends' houses. At Chanukah (the Jewish Festival of Lights which endures for eight days in December) we lit our special menorah (candelabra). We would light one extra candle every night until, at the end of the festival, all eight candles were lit, putting on a splendid display.

In our family, Chanukah presents were bundled together and delivered on Christmas Eve, to be opened on Christmas morning, just like our

friends. I suppose my mother had explained the cross-cultural situation to Santa Claus.

Being rather spoilt, my sister, brother and I hung pillowcases, not stockings, at the ends of our beds before we went to sleep. Mysteriously they would be full to bursting when we awoke.

### **Keeping it kosher**

For us, Christmas Eve is a bustling time of shopping, cooking and preparation for a huge family feast. Without wishing to sound too blasé, Jewish families don't stress too much about Christmas dinner. Enormous ritual meals punctuate the Jewish yearly cycle at annoyingly frequent junctures.

Imagine, if you will, preparing Christmas dinner in December. And again in April (up to four times) for the Passover. Twice for the Jewish New Year in the autumn. Twice for the Day of Atonement (before the fast to set everybody up, and again afterwards when they are ravenous).

We have any number of other times for the multitude of major and minor festivals which require family and friends to sit at a table and break bread. Or maybe turkey and stuffing and

sprouts and trimmings and pudding and cake. We never eat ham. But we do constantly celebrate being together, savouring each other's company and creating memories for our lifetimes.

Incidentally, in our family, we always eat our pudding with sweet lemon sauce rather than custard or cream (a tradition instituted by my grandmother) in accordance with the Jewish dietary law of not eating meat and dairy products at the same meal.

### **Peace on earth and goodwill to all men**

This is the message that resonates at this time of year and these sentiments have a truly universal meaning. You see Christmas transcends individual beliefs, religious or otherwise. It gives us all the opportunity to experience one of the gladdest, warmest and most enjoyable parts of Irish culture.

*Dr Melanie Brown is a freelance writer. She is also a Local Centre Examiner at the Royal Irish Academy of Music and represents the Jewish community on the Dublin City Interfaith Forum. First carried on The Journal.ie. December, 25, 2016.*