



Temple Beth Sholom

Honoring Our Past...Building Our Future

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Genesis, Exodus, and the December Dilemma

By Rabbi Daniel Aronson

Ever heard of the December Dilemma? The "dilemma" comes in many forms but, in general, relates to the quandary in which Jewish parents find themselves when their children – whether of one Jewish parent or two – express a desire to celebrate Christmas. Feel free to Google "December Dilemma." You'll find no shortage of perspectives on how to address the various issues involved. You might not like any of them, but you will certainly have your conflicting feelings validated by the sheer volume of responses you find.

I'd like to add my own thoughts on the issue, thoughts that arise from an uncommon occurrence in the Jewish calendar. The same phenomenon that led to Chanukah beginning on Thanksgiving this year has also given rise to our finishing the Book of Genesis on the Shabbat of December 14 and beginning the Book of Exodus immediately thereafter. While we will finish Genesis and begin Exodus in December twice over the next ten years, this year Shabbat Exodus occurs earlier than ever (or almost ever).

"What is so special about finishing Genesis and beginning Exodus so early in December?" you might ask. Good question. The answer lies in the very different experiences of the Jewish people between Genesis and Exodus, differences that help shed light on the December Dilemma. The focus of Genesis is on the origins of the Jewish "family," as it were, going all the way back to the first humans. The focus of Exodus, on the other hand, is on the formation of a Jewish national identity arising first from the Exodus from Egypt and then from receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai. The former narrative invites us to appreciate our connectedness to all of humanity; the latter has us embrace what makes us unique or particular among all peoples.

When my daughter Katie expresses Christmas envy, I remind her of two things. First, we have family and friends whose joy in Christmas we can share even if we don't celebrate the holiday with them. While living in Philadelphia, we would gather with my Christian sister-in-law's family to open gifts, share a meal and enjoy being together as a family. It gave my wife Beth and me much pleasure to see Katie playing with

her cousins, and we happily embraced this time together with our loved ones. As for Katie, she appreciated that her cousins, aunt, uncle, and grandmother are Christian and, therefore, celebrate Christmas, and that we could share their joy in the season even though our faith and practices are Jewish.

Second, we have much to be proud of and many opportunities to celebrate as Jews. Yes, we have Chanukah, but we also have other great holidays -- Purim, Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot – to name but a few. We also have Shabbat, which is a holiday in itself that comes each week! As a parent, I avoid my daughter's temptation to compare Chanukah and Christmas and to establish one as better than the other. The two are different, plain and simple, and have special meaning for those who celebrate them. We can thoroughly love our own traditions without feeling the need to put other traditions down.

The story of the Jewish people in Genesis teaches that we are forever linked to our ancestors Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. True, when our patriarchs and matriarchs received the Divine promise to be a great nation and to inherit the land of Israel, they did separate themselves from their family members and others whose destinies and relationships with God differed from their own. At the end of the day, though, Abraham was much aggrieved over having to send Ishmael away with Hagar and, for what it's worth, Isaac and Ishmael were still brothers as were Jacob and Esau. The lesson from Genesis for us in December is to remember that all of humanity is interconnected and that, for better or for worse, family never really ceases to be family.

Exodus counterbalances Genesis by exhorting us to remember who WE are as a people, to remember what it is that God expects of US. This message hardly negates what we learned from Genesis. Rather, embracing our particularism can enhance our sense of the universal. We are a great people with much to be thankful for. Other peoples have their own greatness. Knowing who we are and being confident in our own identity frees us up to experience joy in
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other people's happiness. In December, we should acknowledge that we have a separate set of traditions and teachings and be proud of who we are, while also being present to our non-Jewish relatives and friends as they proclaim what is meaningful to them.

This year, the December Dilemma is attenuated by the early celebration of Chanukah. Still, the juxtaposition of our readings of Genesis and Exodus provide an important perspective for those years when the "dilemma" is felt more acutely. Embracing Judaism and helping other people experience joy in the season of light is not an "either/or" proposition. It is "both/and." We are both proud to be Jewish and eager to increase the joy of loved ones of other faiths.

It is my hope that as you and your family make your way through the darkness of December, the teachings of our Torah will help light your way.

With blessings,

Rabbi Dan Aronson

Doctors without Borders

Herb and Ruth Aschkenasy's daughter, **Dr. Miriam Aschkenasy**, is serving in the Philippines as a member of the International Emergency Physicians. She and her group are on the island of Leyte, providing emergency medical triage to those who were so seriously affected by the recent typhoon. Miriam selected and is in charge of a team of five doctors. The team arrived on Monday and will remain until December 8th.

Miriam has served on other missions with the International Emergency Physicians group. Miriam is an example of those who put their own lives on hold to help others. We at Temple Beth Shalom are immensely proud and send prayers for her, and all those in the Philippines, that they may know they are thought of in Salem, Oregon.



Religious School News

By Cassidy Weisz, Youth Education Director

The students of our Religious School have been learning a lot this year thanks to the wonderful students and teachers. **Amy Maltz's** class has been learning about Noah's Ark and Chanukah. **Kathi Shuirman's** class has been learning about Israel, Friday night services, and the Tower of Babel. **Bob Hector's** class has been learning about Jewish American History.

Please save the date for our mock naming ceremony of the PreK-1st class on Sunday, December 15th at 11:30 am. Each class will be participating in the ceremony in some way, and then we will have some nosh and music to celebrate this joyous occasion. All are welcome to attend!

Cassidy Weisz

December Religious School Calendar:

- Dec. 1 -** No Religious School, but please attend the Community Hanukkah Party and Latke Cook-off at 5:00 pm
- Dec. 6 -** Kabbalat Kids at 5:45pm with Rabbi Aronson followed by the Community Potluck
- Dec. 8 -** Religious School
Parent B'nai Mitzvah meeting at 11:15 am
- Dec. 15 -** Religious School
Baby Naming Celebration at 11:30 am
- Dec. 22 -** No Religious School
- Dec. 29 -** No Religious School

Spinning in Space

Jewish astronaut David Wolf, who spent four months in 1997 aboard the space station Mir, was in orbit during Hanukkah. Although he couldn't light his menorah due to the danger of fire inside the oxygen-rich atmosphere, he was able to spin his dreidel. Because of zero gravity, he reported that it twirled for a record hour and a half until it spun away from him. He found it a few weeks later stuck in an air filter. He estimates that the dreidle spun about 25,000 miles.

