

## Pagan Symbols, Sacred Meaning

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Some folks imagine that they may safely speak derisively about Christianity around rabbis. They are wrong. Nevertheless, at this time year, some well-meaning if self-righteous person will inevitably harangue me about the allegedly pagan characteristics of Christmas.

Whether made by a triumphalist Jew or a disaffected Christian, the claim will be that symbols of Christmas were adopted from pagan practice and are not nearly as spiritually elevated and original as Jewish holy days and their symbols. The favorite targets are Santa Claus and the Christmas tree, which may indeed have pagan origins.

My first response is always to alert the person to the facts: Many aspects of some Jewish celebrations also find their origins in preexisting pagan practices.

Chanukah, for example, was no doubt preceded by pagan rites for the winter solstice. Very likely, the kindling of lights in this darkest of months in part hearkens back to some pre-Israelite attempt to distract the demons of darkness. Chanukah is not alone. The Torah refers to Passover sometimes as “the feast of matzah,” and at other times as *Pesach*. Scholars have determined that “feast of matzah” likely refers to an earlier – and yes, pagan – spring harvest festival, which was later vested with religious meaning to commemorate our experience of God’s salvation in the Exodus. The starkest example comes on Sukkot, when we take a long, pointy symbol, composed of vegetation, and wave it in every direction. Never did anybody practice a more obviously pagan fertility ritual than shaking the *lulav*.

Be all that as it may, Jews find deep religious meaning in Chanukah, even though it’s a relatively minor holiday, and even more on Passover and Sukkot. Similarly, Christians experience profound religious significance on Christmas.

The likely pagan origins of some of the observances of any of our holidays are no longer relevant, except in terms of historical and academic study. Just as Chanukah, Passover and Sukkot are deeply religious Jewish observances, Christmas is a sacred Christian holy day.

Pagan threats to our holidays, particularly the ones in December, come not from their histories, but from the ways they are celebrated in popular culture. Today, the sacred meanings of Christmas and Chanukah, in particular, risk being lost, as spirituality vies with materialism for our attention during this season.

I cannot tell you how many people, most of them at least nominally Christian, will tell me that Christmas is entirely a secular, cultural, family celebration. They mean that families and communities gather, admittedly a sacred endeavor in itself, but that the activities in which they engage are primarily gluttony and greed, pagan endeavors even in 2015.

Religious leaders of today need not worry that Jews and Christian will bow down to the pagan gods whose worship might have inspired some of our sacred symbols. Instead, we must be concerned with the very real idolatry of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as it is expressed at this season.

We perform acts of kindness for one month of the year, and then ignore the need for the bulk of the year. We shower our children with material goods instead of love and attention.

Captains of industry multiply their own earnings at the expense of workers, and then assuage their employees, who permit themselves to be mollified, with lavish Christmas parties and perhaps a token bonus or gift. Cities erect expensive holiday decorations while they neglect basic human beings. Hunger, homelessness, and poverty; unplanned pregnancy, drug abuse, and violent crime; racism, sexism, and discrimination against gay men, lesbians, and transgender people; global climate change, American gun violence, and even the all-too-real threat of terror – all can be obscured by the holiday cheer that is almost forcibly required in our society this time of year.

We gorge ourselves on holiday treats, while we hide our eyes from millions who are starving across town and around the globe. We sit down to mounds of festive food, failing to consider the costs to our own health or to be bothered by the fact that thousands of Arkansans lack access to basic nourishment.

One president after another lights a Christmas tree and Chanukah menorah with great public pageantry, speaking of “peace on Earth,” while submitting to the special interests who fund campaigns and then stand in the way of real leadership that would bring peace to his world and save lives sacrificed on the altar of extremist protections of the Second Amendment.

Let this new idolatry end, and let all of us again embrace the historic spirituality of this season. Let us all see the light of religious meaning in every faith's festivals, in the winter and at other times. Let us keep the light burning, not just for one day, for eight days, or for a month, but throughout the year, every year. Let no idolatry dissuade us from the religious mission we share with folks who are celebrating Christmas today, and with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and those who practice many other religions or none, to bring light where there is darkness, at this season and in every season. And may the one God of us all be our Partner, shedding divine light on a terribly dark world.

Amen.