

## The Smell of a Christmas Tree

Nothing connects me to the sweetest memories of my childhood faster than the smell of a Christmas tree. Deep and fragrant, the scent calls up happy thoughts of being five years old and wanting nothing more in the world than a real ballerina tutu and a Barbie doll.

So the first year I gave up the Christmas tree, my rant reminder of just what I was missing. The decision to become a Jew was still very fresh, and at that point I had only attended one real Jewish celebration, at which I had felt as awkward and socially skilled as a seventh grader.

I had not yet told my parents that I might convert. Instead I told my friends and family that I was simply too busy to put up a tree, since my new job was consuming all of my time. But alone in my little apartment, I cried. I had a box of Christmas ornaments in my closet, but no tangible expression of my new faith. I kept thinking, why have I done this? I didn't want to go back, but I didn't know how to go forward.

So, some time later, upon hearing an old familiar bible story once again, I was suddenly amazed at how a passage seemed to relate directly to the longing I felt. I listened to how the Hebrews had made a break from slavery in Egypt, followed Moses across a desert wasteland, and received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Their lives had been profoundly and radically changed, and they clearly had every intention of observing the new laws that they had received.

Even so, it was still possible out there in the wilderness to tell that it was that time of year when you offer sacrifices and hold feasts and dance around a golden calf. It was true that the Hebrews did not want to go back to slavery, and that the revelation at Sinai was a profound, life-changing event. But at the same time, the Hebrews found that it's hard to worship in the wilderness so far from home.

So, just as I was sitting in my little apartment thinking about Christmas trees of years past, I could also imagine the Hebrews sitting in an open field, thinking of feasts and sacrifices. And, remembering their childhood, they built a golden calf for their worship.

It is true that in the case of the Hebrews, God and Moses were both very much angered by the act. The text records their anger, and the rather harsh punishment that followed. From a strictly logical point of view, the creation of the golden calf so soon after the revelation at Sinai is the worst kind of rebellion against God. From an emotional point of view, however, it is a very human response to the dramatic upheaval in their lives. They were seeking continuity with their past.

It is at this point that the text provides the greatest insight for modern Jews: the next step they take is to build a Tabernacle. In other words, the next step, the way to connect with God in the wilderness, is to build a Jewish place. In the case of the Hebrews, it was a physical place. In my case, it was a place in time: I started observing the Sabbath. And just as the Tabernacle was a movable, temporary, easily-dismantled structure, my observance of the Sabbath was just as impermanent.

In the first months, the only observable difference in my routine was that I would no longer go into the office on Saturday, or bring work home. Then, a few months later, I stopped doing my bills during Sabbath. It took me several months before I started lighting candles; I just felt too self-conscious. But still, having a place in time where I could go and reaffirm my decision made the wilderness recede.

The process has in fact been very gradual. In a lot of ways, my conversion has not been so much from Christianity to Judaism as a conversion from agnosticism to faith. It's

not that I have anything against Christianity; in comparing a Christmas tree to a pagan symbol, I also do not mean to imply that Christianity is pagan. It's just that I have chosen Judaism to give structure to my faith because I do not hold in my heart the pattern of Christian beliefs that a Christmas tree represents.

I can't claim that I have given up Christmas entirely; every year I go and visit my parents and participate in the family rituals. And when I go, I feel that I am honoring my parents. It can be tough, because I have to find ways to reconcile my Christian past with my Jewish present. But each year it gets a little easier.

By Kari Fields