



Joyful & Triumphant

Here's to a very merry whatever

BY ELISSA CANTERFINO MANDEL

I was always an innocent bystander at Christmas or, at best, a sideline complainer. Every year I railed at Doug to shop early. I hated the mad rush to Toys “R” Us where we’d blow down the aisles like crazies on Christmas Eve filling the cart with small tricycles, the shiniest soccer ball that we wanted Andrew to love and he never did, and the gadget du jour. “Materialistic,” I’d scream like some throwback to the leftist I had been in college. “Museum for the mindless,” was the lovely invective I’d hurl when our quest for gifts would take us to the mall. Yes, I was a version of the Jewish Grinch.

And sometimes I recall two Toys “R” Us carts, as well as my benighted efforts to make Chanukah as appealing. No can do: My boys attended the JCC preschool and the entire family learned the prayers, sang them, made (or in truth, ordered in) latkes – and still my boys seemed to prefer the magic attendant on Christmas.

Perhaps it was the magic attendant on their father. There was urgency and an importance about everything he did.

Christmas was Project One, and there was a set of rituals that Doug’s family adhered to. Presents were opened one at a time, so that everyone could kvell over how well the gift giver had done his or her job. Aha, I thought. Here was my opening.

While my wrapping skills were horrible and usually dismissed and reworked (by Doug), I had been well tutored in the art of buying by my own mother. So I earned a reputation from my mother-in-law as the one who always picked out just the right gift. I was a young woman in a strange land, and I had to have some role at Christmas.

Rule two was that no gift could be opened until all gifts were put in front of the receiver. This custom seemed barbaric to me, especially when it involved children. My family exhibited no such restraint involving gifts. If I buy something for someone, I usually tell the person what I’ve purchased weeks in advance and sometimes err by giving my gift prior to the birthday or holiday. In my 20s and 30s, I did not appreciate the value of sitting with an unopened gift. What did it teach? Some sort of weird respect for delayed gratification? This kind of thing never would have played well in my family. No one in my family sits staidly. I wanted to dig in, make a mess. More to the point, I wanted my boys to be able to do the same. But now that I’m 53 and both my first husband and my in-laws are gone, I kind of understand what the presents on the lap represented: patience, respect for other people. It was different than what I had grown up with, but it wasn’t wrong.

And then there was the Chanukah bush I purchased. It stood, proud and scraggly in our first New York City apartment. It distinguished itself mostly because it was small and inexpensive and, in fact, was a bedraggled Christmas tree that I had adopted and repurposed. It sported a dreidel, a menorah, and an ornament of Santa on top of it.

Being in a family in which we celebrated everything made us ecumenical and open, but I know we focused more on the accoutrements of the celebrations than the religious rites. My memories are of the matzoh ball soup and the tinsel, but in a relatively complex world, the compromises we arrived at somehow seem okay. 

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