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## **Edah Happenings:**

**Rabbi Yehuda  
Sarna on  
“Judaism as  
an Art Form”  
And  
Rabbi Dr.  
Jeffrey Woolf  
on “Religious  
Zionism: From  
Crisis to  
Renwal?”  
Feb. 1, 8, 15,  
22, March 1, 8  
@ JCC in NYC**

**Jewish Town  
Hall: The  
Shidduch  
Crisis  
Feb. 20 @ JCC  
in NYC**

## **Judaism:**

### **A Family Matter**

By Rabbi Mitchell Levine

The concluding portions of Bereshit prepare the groundwork for a remarkable transformation in Jewish identity. Previously, being “Jewish” was evidently understood by its practitioners as being primarily a personal matter. Avraham conferred his distinct and intimate relationship with God upon only one of his two sons. That son, Yitzhak, followed suit, and his son Yakov alone inherited the mantle. It is Yakov’s sons who defy this emerging pattern, and most dramatically. All 12 of Yakov’s sons are to be blessed with a Jewish mission. None will be sent away, to exit the stage of Jewish history. Instead, this family will endure with sibling bonds intact. In Shemot, being Jewish will expand upon this foundation to entail membership in a nation, Am Yisrael. What did Yakov perceive that enabled him to set this new course? The answer is a concept that not only restored hope to Yakov’s scattered and beleaguered family. It provided a durable mechanism for generating Jewish Peoplehood that continues to unify us even today.

Due to the machinations of the Viceroy of Egypt, Yakov finds himself in a difficult situation. His family, teetering on the brink of starvation, desperately needs food from Egypt. The seemingly capricious Viceroy has demanded that the brothers bring the youngest, Binyamin, with them on their next appeal as the price for humanitarian assistance, and is holding another brother, Shimon, as hostage. Having long ago lost Yosef, and now also Shimon, Yakov has learned that leaving the boys to their own devices risks a diminishing of their number. He is understandably reluctant to accede to the Egyptian’s imperious request. It is at this moment that the oldest brother, Reuven, makes a bizarre and disturbing proposal. He says, “You may kill my two sons, if I do not return him [Binyamin] to you”. Although Yakov does not even consider this outlandish offer, perhaps it is worth speculating why it was even made. Reuven seeks to reassure his father by demonstrating his total dedication to the

cause. Conceivably, Reuven took the Akedah, the readiness of his great-grandfather Avraham to sacrifice the life of his grandfather Yitzhak, as a precedent. Regardless of the efficacy of this supreme sacrifice as a way of serving God, it is a non-starter as a basis for the resolve that would force Yakov to relent.

Immediately, the famine worsens and the family’s provisions are depleted. The task of negotiating with their father is taken up by Yehudah. This time, there is no bid to appease through sacrifice. In order to win Yakov’s concession to take Binyamin to Egypt, Yehudah declares, “I will be a pledge for him”. That is, Yehudah commits to becoming a guarantor for Binyamin, as if he were to co-sign a loan on his brother’s behalf. This concept, arevut, transcends the natural obligations implied by filial ties to the point that Yakov now yields to the brothers’ plea. The solemn assertion of responsibility, with one’s own integrity offered as collateral, has achieved what even the offer of terrible personal sacrifice could not. Yakov’s acquiescence at this juncture signals a new framework that will eventually secure the mutual allegiances of his descendants, long after the bonds created by family ties have waned. However, Arevut is even more than the “social contract” of the Jewish people. Halachically, it is the mechanism through which one Jew may discharge a mitzvah obligation on the behalf of his/her fellow. Midrashically, it is the promise of our common destiny.

Yehudah’s innovation was likewise vindicated by history. Aside from the Levites, all of the tribes founded by the sons of Yakov were lost, save that of Yehudah and Binyamin, whose identities eventually merged completely. Yakov’s rejection of Reuvan’s proposal, and his acceptance of Yehudah’s, perhaps accounts for why today the descendants of Yakov are unified as a single nation. And it is perhaps why we are called “Jewish”, and not “Reu-ish”.

*Rabbi Mitchell Levine is the Rabbi of Congregation Beth Sholom in Providence Rhode Island and the Orthodox Rabbi at Brown University.*

## **RESPONSE TO “MENORAH YES, CHRECHE NO” by Dr. Tzvee Zahavy**

By Michael Rogovin

Dr. Tzvee Zahavy's article is an interesting discussion, but I strongly disagree with his conclusions. While I see no point in picking a fight with American Christians, secular or religious, in trying to ban Christmas trees and associated displays of the season, to suggest that there is a substantive distinction between a Christmas tree and a creche is to my mind a dangerous illusion.

Of course, the Supreme Court is not right because they are right, they are right because they are the Supreme Court. That is to say, whether one agrees with their reasoning or not, whether it is sound or not, whether it can be proven objectively to be false or true, matters not at all. The court is the final say on what is and is not legal in this country. Their decision is the law, unless and until they overrule it.

I accept the principle, but think that in trying to maintain civil order, the court felt they had to strike a balance that would permit trees (a ban would never work), and hence menorahs, even if they felt that on principle they had to ban the creche (and even that is not truly banned as Dr. Zahavy implies: the creche is on public property everywhere and only needs a nearby menorah, tree, Santa and some reindeer to make it "kosher").

Most secular Americans, be they Christian or otherwise, no longer see the tree as a religious symbol; at least that's what they say. To them it represents the secular side of Christmas, despite the occasional religious tree (like that at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a NYC government funded institution, which is decorated with angels holding candles, a star on top which represents the Christmas star announcing the birth of the messiah and a nativity scene at its base). It represents presents, families gathering together and of course "peace on earth" (forgetting that the last is because of the arrival of the 'messiah'). But I think that misses the point.

Whatever they think of as "secular Christmas" is still Christmas. It is not solstice, it is not winter vacation. It is Christmas. And it is only for Christians, despite Amazon, Kmart and Hollywood's strong attempts to persuade me otherwise. See a tree decorated with lights and it is a Christmas tree, not a generic holiday tree. If it is truly not a

Christian symbol, then why would it be prohibited from my home.

Hey I LIKE the idea of Christmas. Brought up in a very secular Jewish home, I watched the TV specials, heard carollers in school, visited the tree in Rockefeller Plaza and sat on Santa's lap. We did not have a tree in our house of course, but did visit our housekeeper's home on Christmas morning and there were presents for us under her tree. These are NOT experiences, however romantic to me, that my children will have (they will hopefully have equally positive experiences of Jewish holidays). Unlike any Jewish holiday, there is something magical about Christmas, even in its secular, sanitized version, that is appealing in a way that our holidays are not. But Christmas trees, and all that they symbolize, are not for us.

When I see a tree, wreath, lights or Santa, I think Christmas. And Christmas means Christian. It may not have the same specific association as a crucifix or creche, associations with particular stories in the Gospels, but it still symbolizes Christianity. And when I see a menorah, I think JEWISH. The fact that both tree and the menorah have lights or that the Hebrew word means lamp is irrelevant to Americans, 99.99% of whom (including Jews) don't know enough Hebrew to even realize that. Our synagogues all have menorahs, the 7 branch type rather than 9, but either one says JEWISH to anyone who bothers to notice it. These may not be religious symbols, but they are symbols of religion, particularized religion.

These symbols, decorative lights, menorahs, Santa, etc., may be placed by private individuals and groups in public places where it is clear that they are like other groups placing any kind of display in a public place - equal treatment for everyone is fine. When public dollars are used to purchase and install such displays, or they are placed in front of or inside public institutions regardless of who pays, that is an official endorsement for Christianity (or Judaism) and, despite the Supreme Court, I think that is wrong and violates the greatness of our Constitution and the separation of church and state.

Let the government pave the roads, raise an army and run the railroads (when they are not on strike), but leave religion to the church, synagogue and home.

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