



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Giving

MRS. LEWIS' HANUKKAH TREE IS A CHERISHED MEMORY

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

When my parents emigrated from Ireland to the U.S. in the mid-1920s, they experienced a great number of new cultures and religions here. Before their arrival at Ellis Island, their experience was limited to Irish and English cultures, and Catholicism and Protestantism.

After leaving Ellis Island, they ventured on a few miles inland to the West Bergen section of Jersey City, N.J., where Dad began working for the Western Electric Company.

To add to their modest income, and with a growing family, they took an apartment in a fairly large building. With their apartment went the duties of being janitors for the entire building. This included keeping the furnace going through the sometimes long winters, hauling out barrels of ashes each week, sweeping and mopping the hallways, keeping up with general maintenance and the needs of the various tenants.

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Friendly Neighbors

The residents were a microcosm of European immigration at that time. Many Western European nations were represented, including Catholics, Protestants and Jews. There was a sizable Jewish group in our neighborhood, focused around the Bergen Avenue Synagogue. They were a ~~devout~~ devout people who made the predominately Catholic population aware of their Saturday Sabbath (Shabbat) and cycle of ~~holy days~~ ^(Holy Days) throughout the year. We were more than aware of Yom Kippur in the Fall, and Passover in the Spring.

Among the tenants at the apartment were Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, a quiet and devout Jewish couple who worked hard and appreciated the better life in America.

Mom and Mrs. Lewis became great friends as they both strove to adapt to their new life in America without losing their religious or ethnic identity. It was difficult, Mrs. Lewis shared with my Mom, to try to observe the Sabbath on Saturday as a day of rest when much of the neighborhood observed Sunday.

"The Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday till sundown on ~~Saturday~~ Saturday," Mrs. Lewis explained to Mom. "We prepare each week for our holyday by the good clothes we wear, the meals we eat, by the lighting of the Sabbath candles, and by chanting the 'Kiddush' or blessing over the wine used at the meal."

At times the Jewish people, the Lewises among them, would gather at the (local) synagogue for a great Sabbath meal and service. Most of the time, however, the Sabbath was celebrated at home.

Mom helped Mrs. Lewis to understand that the Catholics in the neighborhood did much the same on Sundays with Mass in the morning and a family dinner in the afternoon on their day of rest and worship.

A friendly compromise was reached in the neighborhood, especially along the shopping areas of West Side Avenue, when the Jewish merchants closed early on ~~F~~^Friday evening and hired Gentiles to staff their stores on Saturday. Almost all stores then closed on Sundays.

"The Sabbath gives our family a time to come together to rest and celebrate our heritage," ~~added~~ added Mrs. Lewis. "We prepare our food beforehand since God gave us six days for work but the Sabbath for rest."

There was a problem, though, that Mrs. Lewis asked Mom to help solve. After the traditional foods of gefilte fish or chopped liver, chicken soup with matzo balls or noodles, and roast chicken or brisket of beef were all prepared in advance, there was still the need for someone to light the gas in the stove to re-heat the food for the family on the Sabbath.

It was forbidden, according to Mrs. Lewis' beliefs, for her to do so. Would it be possible for my Mom to come each Sabbath to fulfill this task?

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Mom readily agreed, and for years went across the hall to the Lewis apartment each Sabbath to light the gas to heat the food for the meal.

Hanukkah/Christmas

In the Fall of each year, we were aware of the great Jewish ~~holiday~~ ^(HOLYDAY) of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) by the larger crowds at the synagogue and the piety of our Jewish neighbors. "The Jersey Journal," our daily newspaper, also printed feature articles to explain the celebration.

Much, too, was written about Hanukkah in December. But it was Mrs. Lewis who explained to my Mom about the Menorah, and why the celebration lasted for eight days.

"Our celebration reminds us of the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem," explained Mrs. Lewis. "In the 2nd Century, a group of Jewish warriors called the Maccabees fought against the Syrians under their King Antiochus. When they had driven out their enemies, the Maccabees restored the Jerusalem Temple for ~~our~~ ^{our} worship and lit the Menorah each night. We call it the ~~holiday~~ ^(FESTIVAL) of Lights."

What made the ~~holiday~~ ^(HOLYDAY) very special, added Mrs. Lewis was that there was only enough oil for the lamps to burn one night but the oil lasted all eight. Mrs. Lewis then showed Mom the Menorah which their family lit each night of Hanukkah. They also exchanged little gifts with family members.

"That's a great reason to celebrate," said Mom who went on to explain what Christmas meant to her and other Catholics. The coming of the Messiah was a difficult point for both women to understand. Mom said she believed that the Messiah was already here, and Mrs. Lewis contended that he hadn't come as yet.

Mom likewise explained the meaning of the Christmas Tree and giving of gifts, and even the origin of Santa Claus as St. Nicholas.

Dad, too, had added to the Christmas decorations in our apartment by buying an eight-branched candelabra at Olin's Department Store on West Side Avenue. It reminded him of home in Ireland, he explained, where candles were set in the window of Irish cottages on Christmas Eve to guide the Holy Family on their journey.

"It looks just like our Menorah," exclaimed Mrs. Lewis when she saw it in our ~~XXXXXXXX~~ window. We can certainly share this part of the holidays!"

When Mom and Dad had finished decorating our Christmas Tree, and laid out our gifts underneath, they invited both Mr. and Mrs. Lewis to our apartment.

"Oh! it looks so beautiful," cried Mrs. Lewis, and then turned to her husband, said, "Do you think we could have one, too?"

Mr. Lewis frowned and seemed very negative about having such a Christian symbol in their apartment. But she insisted and persisted, and then he finally relented and agreed.

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"But only if we can call it a Hanukkah Tree," he insisted.

For years afterwards, Mom and Mrs. Lewis both decorated for the Hanukkah/Christmas season, each one according to her religious beliefs and ethnic customs. Both remained great and loving friends for many years who helped and respected each other unconditionally.