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A RABBI LOOKS AT CHRISTMAS

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

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"The air, the very air, is thought-nourishing in Jerusalem, the Sages themselves said so. I am prepared to believe it. I know that it must have special properties. The delicacy of the light also affects me. ... The melting air presses with an almost human weight. Something intelligible, something metaphysical is communicated by these colors. ... This atmosphere makes the American commonplace 'out of this world' true enough to give your soul a start."

So wrote Nobel prize-winner Saul Bellow about Jerusalem, the "golden city" where it all began. New York is not Jerusalem, but something special, even precious happens to this metropolis and to its 8 million people during this season of Christmas and Chanukkah that should "give your heart a start."

From January to December, New York often imparts, as E. B. White wrote in his classic article, Here Is New York, a "feeling of great forlornness or foresakenness." For most of the year, the city is turbulent, filled with tension, frustration, irritability, so crowded, so uncomfortable, so ruthlessly competitive, in many ways callous to people's deepest feelings.

A bus driver slams the door shut in your face and leaves you in a cloud of exhaust fumes, an affront to your dignity as a person. A taxi driver bellows obscenities as he nearly rips off your car fender. You wait in line interminably at the motor vehicles bureau as "civil servants" chat indifferently, as if you didn't exist. And the 11 p.m. television newscasts throw fear into your nightly heart with brutalizing images of stabbings, shootings, muggings, rape, horrendous fires, the daily corruptions and rip-offs. It is a miracle that we get through the year with our senses reasonably intact.

"But the city makes up for its hazards and deficiencies," White reminds us, "by supplying its citizens with massive doses of a supplementary vitamin - the sense of belonging to something unique, cosmopolitan, mighty, and unparalleled." The privilege of living in the same town with giants, and in a place of incomparable achievements. The excitement of millions of people from every continent of the earth, from every religion, every race, every ethnic group living together - for the first time in human history - in reasonable tolerance, with live and let live as their unspoken motto.

From January to December that goes on. But December to January adds a megavitamin. A warmth, a softness of feeling, a special caring, a rejuvenation of the spirit are in the air. Strangers act more like neighbors in a country village. There is a friendliness and a happiness buoyed by children's gleeful

voices before the magic of F. A. O. Schwarz' windows, brightened by festooned trees and lights that blink on and off making grim streets into fairylands. There is a festiveness and a reaching out that bring families and friends together in love and closeness. And despite the overwhelming tide of commercialism and often compulsory gift-giving, people are brought by Christmas and Chanukkah to turn their minds to words like "peace," "goodwill," and to show they mean it by gifts to the poor and ^{the} forgotten as well as to one another.

When I was a child about ten years ~~year~~ old, I had a memorable Christmas experience. My family lived in South Baltimore, and my parents owned a small grocery store in a poor neighborhood populated mainly by Irish, Italians, Poles, and Germans, all working people. My parents were Russian-Polish immigrants and were devout Orthodox Jews who took their religion seriously. All of us in that neighborhood had suffered desperately through the depression years together. That year, on the eve of Christmas, my mother found out that several of our Christian neighbors were stone-broke and did not have enough money to buy food for a Christmas dinner.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon, I found my mother in the back of our store stuffing canned goods, breads, meats, cakes, and candies into baskets, and then tying red and green ribbons around them. What are you doing? I asked her. "It is Christmas," she said, "and it would be terrible if Mrs. Kirby and her family, and the other neighbors, were to go hungry especially on their holiday."

She asked me to watch the store. And this Orthodox Jewish woman went out into the neighborhood handing out Christmas baskets, as if she had invented Santa Claus. To our Christian neighbors and friends, the brimful baskets must have been a Christmas miracle. For our mother and her family, it was being what a committed Jew was all about, "loving your neighbor," "promoting peace between man and his fellow human being." And that neighborhood in South Baltimore was never quite the same again.

I often think about that lovely moment as I walk the streets of New York at this season of the year. Why just from December to January? Why not from January to December?

