

## Why and How: Lessons and Carols

Arlington Street Church | Joanna Lubkin | December 17, 2017

---

When I was a young Jewish kid in public schools, I always looked forward to our Winter Concerts. I loved singing Christmas songs, and loved the chance to be a part of the festive, holly jolly season that most of my classmates celebrated. My schools usually made an attempt to include a Chanukah song somewhere in the program, which I appreciated. But then, they'd announce which song we'd be singing: that great Chanukah masterpiece, "I Have a Little Dreidel." *Really?*, seven-year-old me would whine. Cue the melodramatic groan and eye roll.

There's nothing inherently wrong with the dreidel song, and I'm not here to bash it from the pulpit. But I will say that it's kind of the lowest common denominator of Chanukah songs. I imagine music teachers chose "I Have a Little Dreidel" because it was easy for the kids to memorize: it was in English, has a repetitive melody, and it's a song about a toy. Who doesn't like toys? But I remember talking with my non-Jewish friends as we learned that song, and saying to one of them, "So, that song is about a holiday that my family and I celebrate. What did you learn about

Chanukah?” She responded, “I guess Chanukah is, like, about ... clay? And winning at games?” And there was the groan and the eye roll again.

So here’s the thing that’s bugged me since elementary school. It meant a lot to me that my minority religion and my culture were going to be acknowledged. But any time we’re reaching into another person’s culture, we need to be really intentional about why and how we do it.

*Why* commemorate Chanukah in secular and multifaith settings?

We honor Chanukah because we want to learn from the wisdom of all our world’s religions; because we’re resisting Christian hegemony; because we want to celebrate alongside our neighbors and to know them better. But also we commemorate it to be in solidarity - especially in times like these where anti-semitism and xenophobia seem to be loud in the public square.

And *how* to acknowledge Chanukah, or any holiday from a culture not our own? With curiosity, with a desire to understand and appreciate its story and its customs — knowing that sometimes, these values will be different from the ones we ourselves might hold dear. We honor these festivals in relationship, inviting people to share with us first-hand their experience of the holiday rather than impose our own agenda on it.

So, my spiritual family, I would love to share Chanukah with you. To me, especially thinking about it this year, Chanukah is about telling the tale of freedom fighters rising up against oppression. It's about lighting up the dark with light that continues to grow. It's about being generous with each other and playful with each other, including playing with dreidels.

Menorahs, or chanukiyahs, are traditionally lit in the evening, but for the sake of being able to honor the holiday together, we'll light them this morning too. The words to the blessings are printed in your orders of service. I invite you to sing along to the Hebrew words, and then we'll say the English translations together.