



Winter Holidays and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union

Introduction

New Year's Tree: the New Year's tree, a "magical" night when "Ded Moroz" (pronounced Dzed) brought presents with the help of his granddaughter "Snegurochka" (Snow Maiden). Although the Santa-like Ded, with his long white beard and red robe, along with the tree, may look a lot like Christmas, this was a decidedly secular holiday in Soviet times, open to all ethnicities, including Jews.

Learning Objectives

To explain ways in which Jewish identity interacts with other cultures and practices.

Procedure

Trigger

Watch this scene from the movie Avalon about Jews celebrating the holiday of Thanksgiving. Pay attention to the discussion about upward mobility, Jewish identity, and how to balance these concepts. <https://youtu.be/OEEI7uV6YQU>

- Ask the students if they celebrate Thanksgiving? Have they ever felt celebrating that holiday was at odds with their Jewish identity. Why or Why not?
- What about other holidays in American "culture"?
- Do you consider yourself Jewish first or American/Canadian etc first? What are the implications of either?
- Do you feel that being Jewish in a majority non-Jewish place is mostly challenging or mostly rewarding?

Read and Discuss

The article found at this site: <https://www.vox.com/2015/12/22/10634320/soviet-union-christmas>

Note: It may be worth printing out the article with the accompanying pictures. The images will add color and depth to the discussion.



- What do you think about this practice from the perspective of your own Jewish identity?
- In the last article, the author writes:
“We walk out of the store. I realize I won't be getting a tree this year. Or the next year. Or ever.
Not because my husband would disapprove, but because the tradition is mine, not his. Because for him a fir tree in December is a Christian ritual, and engaging with it would designate him a bad Jew.
And because for me the essence of the *novogodnyaya yolka* is lost if I decorate it alone.”
- What do you think about her conclusion? Is that the conclusion you would make too? Why or why not?
- Do you know of other immigrants who struggle to either incorporate their traditions or give them up? What do you think is harder, maintaining your identity or giving up some of the traditions you love?

Wrap up

Ask students whether they think there is a difference between celebrating Thanksgiving and celebrating the Soviet New Year, and have them explain their opinions.

For more research:

<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/russian-new-year-as-celebrated-by-the-jews/>

<http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/157346/why-soviet-jews-have-christmas-trees>