

COMMENTARY

Conversion: L'Chaim

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My grandfather, Walter Nash, sat straight in the saddle on his quarter horse, Cherokee, watching me become a Jew last Saturday night. It was the fifth night of Chanukah (a.k.a. Hanukkah, or Hannukah).

His rope, neatly looped, remained secured to the saddle and hanging over his right leg. He wore blue jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt that rose, buttoned, all the way to his neck. Above that, his dark Stetson, the working hat, sat straight on his head. His left hand closed the reins in a calloused grip about a foot above the horse's mane, and his right rested where it should, on his upper thigh, ready for anything required.

Cherokee was wired tight, a muscled mahogany bay with three white socks. His nostrils flared while his ears turned backward to listen to the rider, who could track a cow across glass or cut a calf from a herd of nervous mothers as easy as slipping a knife from butter.

Walter set his boots deep in the stirrups with the heels down, rarely employing his small spurs; none had a better seat than he did. He was ready to ride, and would — after our ceremony.

My grandfather said nothing as we played dreidel in the living room, while a Chanukah meal evolved in our kitchen, where exceptional fare is the rule. My wife, Amy, opened the Chanukah CD she'd picked up at the supermarket, and pretty soon I was clapping and hopping and crowing with all the grace of an injured rooster, while some

men apparently shouted, "Schlemiel! Schlemiel! Verklemp! Schlemiel!" over and over again. In every song.

It was arguably the most awful joyous music I'd ever heard — awful not because of the music itself, I suspect, but because of its execution, and I mean murder, by a bunch of brassy singers from New Jersey, or somewhere.

My grandfather didn't care. His character was a tight weave of tolerance and a lifelong determination to judge other people only by whether they kept their word, minded their own business and tried hard.

The guys singing Chanukah songs tried very hard. Neither my grandfather nor I, however, had any idea what the words meant, or whether they kept them. But the way he held his horse told me that he approved of my new religion, with a caveat: When you ride into unknown country, keep your eyes open, and think for yourself.

So we did. Amy and I, with our two youngest boys, D.P. and Nash, had decided that since no one was going to choose us, we'd just up and choose ourselves to join the tribe of Israel, the chosen people.

One of the wonderful things about the Jews we've known is that they don't proselytize. We were compelled to conversion only by Nash, who, at five years of age, has no problem proselytizing, or at least asking insistently.

Nash has stumbled into a moment of magical good fortune this year, and with him, us: he's become the ward of a public school kindergarten teacher who is extraordinary, to use that word precisely. Somehow, without sentimentalizing it or patronizing them, Ms. Chernow can teach the world, and its basics, to 18 children arriving from almost every corner of our national experience.

She can coax from each little person a triad, joining their delight, understanding and even the first semblance of hard, factual knowing. Now, they can count, they can write, and they can read. They can even ask how, or why.

So Nash, with his classmates at Alva Elementary School, had been drawing dreidels, and then playing that little top-spinning gambling game since Chanukah's eight-day celebration began on Dec. 4.

His teacher fetes a variety of cultures and customs the same way when they appear on the calendar, giving some of her children their first glimpses of a world beyond their own.

In this case, she drew in part on her own experience. Her mother was a Scottish immigrant and her father a Jew who owned one of the only shops maintained by an anglo in New York City's Chinatown, decades ago, she told me. Her tales of battles and food and candles that wouldn't stop burning (a huge appeal to a candle-loving kid) captured the fancy of young Nash. Why couldn't we become Jews, too, he reasoned?

But how, and which Jews? we asked, applying typical adult obfuscation. Should we become the orthodox or Hassidic ones, the irreverent ones, the eastern European ones, the Israeli ones, the American or Canadian ones, the wandering ones, the sad ones, the mad ones, the tolerant ones, the judgmental ones or the happy ones?

And then we answered our own question with another: Who cares?

We decided to define it for ourselves. Amy and I have long admired what we take to be the classic middle-of-the-road American Jew: not orthodox, and not entirely lost to ancient traditions, either. Someone who reveres family, celebrates the culture, loves the democracy, refuses to hit anybody over the head with their Judaism or their patriotism, and takes great pleasure in the gifts and opportunities of the world: food and intellectual sparring and sex and

achievement and philanthropy and the arts and sciences.

Someone passionate about education, and someone who isn't afraid to debate or question authority — the authority of parents, politicians, police, preachers or rabbis, or even the authority and judgment of God, in true old Testament and new American comedic fashion. Someone who remains a good-hearted skeptic, in other words — an experienced, and perhaps a sobered optimist.

And someone who loves food.

Amy and the boys manned the kitchen, where she had them peeling potatoes and making latkes (fried potato pancakes), along with homemade applesauce. They bent to it with a will, shying away from the special bean dip she made to go with the broccoli, and wary (in Nash's case) of the darkly burnished cast of the Sephardic chicken, roasted and fragrant with fruits and nuts.

The Chanukah menu, of course, came from a food resource named after some old Greek — Epicurious.com. But that's a Jewish tradition: adopt and adapt and make the best of the moment. Which is pretty much what my grandfather, that tougher-than-rawhide rancher, thought, too.

When Amy finally settled the feast on the table, Nash and D.P. lit the candles on the hanukiah (as distinguished from the Temple menorah, which originally had 7 oil-burning wicks). The hanukiah, which many call the menorah, has a single shamash or helper candle mounted above a star of David, and flanked by four candles on each side. The Shamash is used to light the others.

And then we ate and laughed and fancied for an hour or more, while Nash's great-grandpa Walter Nash, framed in an old photo on my desk, road off into the night, almost grinning.

Another day, no doubt, we'd be celebrating something else, and we'd become something else, but on this night, we were the chosen ones. And we celebrated only l'chaim. ■

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