

Bridges

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

HANUKKAH CAME EARLY LAST YEAR, just three days after Thanksgiving. This meant that by the time Christmas arrived there were no longer any presents hidden around our house for the children to open. Nor were any scattered invitingly under a gaily decorated tree. In fact, there was no tree. Unlike some Jewish families, our assimilation into American life has always stopped short of bringing the symbols of Christmas, even the nonreligious ones, into our home. We don't hang stockings on the mantel or a wreath on the front door or colored lights around the windows.

Yet despite the lack of festive trappings, in spite of not having any presents for the kids or an exalting religious service for the entire family, Sunday, December 25, 1994, turned out to be a day of very real, if quiet, celebration.

That's not the way this particular holiday has usually played out for us. As

Highland terrier, Cassie—stayed home. And after a quick morning run for the paper and some milk (the local deli stayed open for a couple of hours), all five of us wound up spending the entire day together in one room.

This is so far from our usual Sunday routine as to make the day noteworthy even without the presence of Christmas. Like many families, we spend most weekends in a whirlwind of activity, with trips to the post office, the supermarket, the hardware and video stores, at least; sports events and dates with friends for Jake; dinner guests or other engagements for my husband and me.

The author with her husband, Joel, and their children, Jake and Rose



Last Christmas, our first

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Jews, we often feel like outsiders in our own land on Christmas. The rest of society is caught up in the excitement and joy of a day that is for us a day like any other. And yet not like any other. Since most places of business are closed, going to work or doing our errands or even simply shopping is out. And since many of our friends are busy with their families and church services, casual socializing is usually not an option either. There's always the movies, of course, or skiing. But last year the presence of our two-year-old daughter, Rose—too young for the slopes or a movie theater—effectively closed these escape routes.

This didn't distress us. We had waited too long for Rose—she appeared in our lives 11 years after the birth of her brother—to chafe at these constraints on our extracurricular activities. But the result was that the entire family—my husband and me, 13-year-old Jake, Rose and our West

We touch base with one another, but just barely.

Not so on Christmas last, when for once there seemed to be nowhere we had to go, nothing urgent we had to accomplish and all the time in the world to enjoy one another.

When I recall that afternoon, I see that what we did was nothing special. Not really. I remember that I read to Jake, something I often do, but only at bedtime. We were in the middle of *Tarzan*, I think—hardly inspirational stuff. He, in turn, read to his sister—*Hop on Pop*, her favorite—before engaging her in a game of hide-and-seek. Their father and I shared the paper. After a while, everybody pitched in to make a fire in the fireplace. Jake and I helped my husband bring in the heavy logs from outside. Rosie happily crushed pieces of newspaper and handed sticks of kindling to her father. Cassie barked.

We had lunch in front of the fire, pushing the coffee table into the middle of the room and settling ourselves around it, after which Jake turned on a video and Rosie

fell asleep on the sofa. The highlight of the afternoon was the roasting of chestnuts and Rosie's discovery of this hitherto unknown delicacy. We all held our breath as she rolled the first tiny morsel around in her mouth suspiciously, then hesitantly took a bigger bite and chewed thoughtfully, her concentrated expression giving nothing away. It wasn't until she held out her hand and said "More," in that imperious toddler way, that we knew we had a hit on our hands.

It was at just about this moment—as we all smiled down on Rose's determined little face—that the warm glow of happiness that had been building inside me throughout the day crossed over the line into joy and a burgeoning sense of celebration.

Before I knew it was forming, a thought crystallized with breathless clarity, a flash of knowledge that everything I held dear was within arms' reach: a husband with whom I had weathered the emotional ups and downs of nearly 15 years and whom I still loved to distraction; a son who, despite the onset of acute teenage sangroid, possessed enough sweetness to play hide-and-seek with someone who thought that hiding meant turning her face to the wall; and a daughter whose conception had taken years of effort and anguish, but who was now paying us back with daily doses of delight.

As I understand it, the main reason Christians celebrate December 25 is that for them it marks the moment in time when a special loving presence came into the world. It is a day when gratitude for that transcendent love is felt most deeply, and the love itself is reflected in people's feelings for and behavior toward others.

If I've got that right, then last year, I, too, celebrated Christmas.

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