Torah Study on Christmas Eve

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A fascinating custom exists in segments of the Ashkenazic community, in particular amongst the Hasidim, whose origin is shrouded in mystery. I refer to the practice of not studying Torah on Christmas Eve. This custom is found nowhere in Talmudic or medieval rabbinic literature, and it is difficult to determine when it first came into existence.1 However, even before attempting this it is appropriate to examine the word “Christmas” and how it is referred to by the rabbinic authors we will be examining.

As far as I can tell, the actual word “Christmas” never appears in all of rabbinic literature. The reason for this is not hard to see, for it is halakhically forbidden to mention the name of an idolatrous holiday when this name expresses the idol’s divinity and lordship.2 This would, therefore, suffice for most Jews not to mention

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1 It is also not found in the Shulhan Arukh. Louis Jacobs, “Attitudes toward Christianity in the Halakhah,” in Gevuroth Haromah, ed. Ze’ev W. Falk (Jerusalem: 1987) XXX, no. 44, writes that Isserles to Yoreh Deah 148:12 refers to the custom “only in a very indirect way.” This is totally incorrect as Isserles’ comment has nothing to do with the issue at hand. Indeed, there is no reason to assume that he was even aware of the custom we are looking at. The uncensored text of Isserles, as found in the first edition (Cracow: 1578), reads as follows: והב אמ שדולה ורדה וני בומז הוות אוסר את שדיהו מקסירתו במיאו אירא שדיהו מקסירתו במיאו לא יריש למד רדד. In this comment, Isserles is only repeating the formulation found in Terumat ha-Deshen, referred to in note 5.

2 R. Eliezer of Metz, Sifer Yereim (Vilna: 1881), no. 245; Mordekhai to Avodah Zarah, no. 809; Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 147:1-2. Cf. Sifer HaHasidim, ed. Margaliyot (Jerusalem: 1989), no. 427, that one should even avoid saying “Michaelmas.”
Christmas. Of course, even without a clear halakhic prohibition, Jews were accustomed to use derogatory expressions in speaking of elements of the Christian religion. This explains why they often refrained from using the name “Jesus,” although as *Haggadot Maimoniyot* points out, there is nothing wrong with saying “Jesus,” and the name even appears in the Talmud. The name for Christmas in rabbinic literature is *Nittel*. Once again, it is impossible to know when this name came into being, but it is already found in a number of medieval texts. As to the

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4 *Avodat Kokhavim* 5:10 (Constantinople, 1509 edition): וליהלום הוליר יש הנקיר תפלמיזיםアイ אולא הווה הדר מכסה. (The version of *Haggadot Maimoniyot* in the Venice, 1524 edition is almost identical. Current editions are censored.) See also the Vilna Gaon’s comment to *Yoreh Dash* 147:3; R. Solomon Lippman Walder in the journal *Va-Yelaket Yosef* 3 (1901), no. 206; and R. Erziel Hildesheimer, *She’elot u-Teshuvot Rabbi Ezeriel* (Tel Aviv: 1969) 207–209. However, it must be noted that although יesh appears in the Talmud, Jesus’ proper name, ישו, does not. This led some, e.g., R. Elijah Levita, *Ha-Tishbi* (Bnei Brak: 1976) 29b, s. v. ישו, to speculate that since Jews do not accept Jesus as the redeemer (ישו), the Talmudic sages deliberately altered his name. See also the similar explanations of R. Simeon ben Zemah Duran, *Kedos u-Magen* (Jerusalem: 1970) 4a, the anonymous *Amanah* (Isnae: 1542) 24 (Hebrew section), and the two versions of *Toledot Yeshu* in Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: 1902) 68, 140. (Others claimed that ישו is an acronym for ישו שמו הוליר.) It is Maimonides, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:10 (uncensored version), *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 10:1 (uncensored version), *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4 (uncensored version), who actually refers four times to ישו. Similarly, Abarbanel refers to ישו on a number of occasions (other times he writes ישו). See Samuel Krauss, “Le nom de Jesus chez les Juifs,” *Revue des études juives* 55 (1908): 148–151, idem., “Yeshu u-Shemo ba-Sifrat ha-Yehudim ha-Me’uhedet,” *Ha-Shiloah* 45 (1926): 119–130. Incidentally, a number of authors (e.g., Louis Jacobs, *A Tree of Life* [Oxford: 1984]101) have referred to the above mentioned note of the Vilna Gaon without realizing that his entire comment is taken from the uncensored *Haggadot Maimoniyot*, which he abridged somewhat.