



Video Story Transcript

Riding the Dog: A Talmudic Christmas in the Suburbs

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Link to YouTube Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5hGBIemHxc>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My name is Joseph Sobol.

And let's say it's holiday season, 1961. My dad and our neighbor Harold are arguing over the true meaning of Christmas for Jews. Harold is saying, "So what's with the... What's with the Christmas tree? How's a nice Jewish boy like you having the Christmas tree in the living room?"

Harold is our close friend and adviser on all things Jewish. He's the most conservative Jew we know in our neighborhood. Conservative on a spectrum that runs from orthodox to conservative to reform to us.

My dad is a psychotherapist and a militant proselytizing agnostic. "Agnostic," he says, "is someone who is not afraid not to know."

Well, Harold has some different opinions on this. He works for the United Jewish Appeal in New York City. His wife runs the nursery school, of which I'm a recent graduate. It's 1961, a.d. year of somebody's lord.

Dad says, "The tree is for my son so he doesn't miss out."

Harold's not satisfied with this answer. So, they sipped their cognac. They smoke. They talk on and on about these questions. Meanwhile, his son, me, I'm over in the corner of the room playing with the tree. The tree is magnificent. I adore the tree. The tree to me is like a god. If by god, you mean something immeasurably magnificent and powerful that's been chopped down and stuffed into a space too small for it, like a church or a living room. But we don't go to church. We don't even go to synagogue.

So, all I have is this once a year encounter with the sacred tree. But I'm six and I don't know how to worship sitting still so, I'm playing with the tree. I'm hiding behind it; sneaking around it. Sneaking up on our dog Freckles curled up on the rug in front of the tree. I mean to ride him!

My mother sticks her head out of the kitchen and says, "Danny, back up. You can't ride the dog!"

I turn around. I disagree. I think I can ride the dog if they let me train him. Freckles is an English Setter, white with orange spots. He's the least Jewish dog that's ever been bred. Goyish is the term for Yiddish. He's the most goyish dog in the world but they sent him to obedience training school to learn all these useless things like sitting down, lying down, standing up, fetching a stick. Why can't they let me do the most natural thing in the world? Ride my dog. He's big enough; I'm small enough. He loves me. I know it. He lets me know this every day when I come home from school. What more gracious act of love than to take me upon his back?

So, this is my plan, my training model. I'm going to catch him while he sleeps. I'm going to sneak up behind him, preferably while he's sleeping in front of the Christmas tree 'cause it's easy to access. I'm going to put one foot behind his back; one foot in the curl of his belly. I'm going to reach down, take him by the collar and pull, "Giddyap!" And off we'll go like the Lone Ranger and Silver across the living room. Hi-ho, Freckles! And awaaaay! After that, I have no plan.

But before I can get to him, out of the kitchen rumble's Lilly, the Glaswegian au pair girl. She's solid muscle. She's got a righteous leer and a Chesterfield hangin' out of the corner of her mouth. She's on fire. "Git away from that dog, ya creepin' divil!"

And I take off behind the couch. Freckles jumps up, runs back to the laundry room where he was born a year and a half ago in a box by the sink. That's his safe place.

Lilly grabs me up from behind the couch by the collar, plants me between Harold and my dad and said, "Sit still and listen to yer elders. You might learn, learn somethin'!" Well, off she goes back to the kitchen.

Harold and Dad are still arguing about the tree. "So, what's with the goyish tree again? Ya haven't explained."

Dad says, "It's not a goyish tree, Harold. We converted it."

Harold says, "How do ya figure that?"

Dad says, "We cut the tip off before we put the star on top." Bada-boom.

Harold says, "But it's a five-pointed star not a six. And anyway, why can't you be content just to worship Hanukkah like the rest of the Jews?"

Dad says, "It doesn't appeal to me."

And I understand this. Hanukkah really, when you come right down to it, is sort of a second-tier Jewish holiday that's been promoted by American Jews. They have something to go up against the Christians at Christmas. But decoratively and narratively, it's a little bit lacking. Decoratively, I mean, consider the optics. What's with that little chintzy eight-pointed candelabra next to this magnificent indoor tree?

And then, the story line is the same story as every other Jewish holiday, one after another. It goes basically like this. Jews just want to be Jews. And everybody else wants them to knock it off and fit in with the rest of them. So, the Jews call upon their God and a whole lot of people get smited, one after another. It's Persians. It's Egyptians, it's Greeks. It's Romans, it's Nazis, it's soldiers of the Inquisition. When is it gonna end?

And, Dad, when you come right down to it, he just wanted to fit in too. He was brought up in a secular Jewish household where their heroes were people like the anarchist, Anna Go... uh, Emma Goldman, or pacifists like Tolstoy and Gandhi, not to mention that funky Jewish community organizer from Galilee named Jesus.

Dad says, "I don't have a problem with the birth of Jesus, Harold. Who can object to peace, love and understanding. It was a great moment in Jewish radical politics."

Harold says, "Tell it to the Nazis. Tell it to the KKK. Tell it to the John Birch Society." And he's winning the argument.

But I've stopped listening the moment I see Freckles' long, spotted nose come out from behind the end of the foyer there, back into the living room. I see him sniff both ways for Lilly (*sniff, sniff*). And now he shambles up, back into the living room, clickety clack across the floor, over the white rug, to his favorite spot in front of the tree. He turns himself around two and a half times. And then folds up in a nice doggy ring, puts his face on his paws and starts dreaming of chasing pheasants.

And the moment I feel myself ignored, I slip off the couch between Harold's knees and the edge of the coffee table, over to the hearth of the unlit fireplace, across the hearth. Past the giant glass penny jug where my parents toss their pocket change when they come home from work every day. Over to the tree; and then I make the turn and I start toward Freckles. This is my chance; everybody's busy.

I hear Lilly and my mom in the kitchen. I hear the clinking and clanking of pots and pans, the clunking of cabinet doors. I smell the roasting meats and the baking pies. I hear the drone of Dad and Harold and their endless Talmudic disputation.

And it's just me and the dog. I'm the Secret Agent. I am the Lone Ranger and the Invisible Man. And this is my moment. I'm going to get to him. I'm going to plant one foot on the front of his belly, one in the small of his back. Then we're gonna go. And I get there, I'm right there. I'm gonna ride him and I do... for about a second and a half. I get my feet planted. I reach for his collar. I, I shout, "Giddyap!"

Up he comes. His bony spine right in the middle of my crotch. Ow! Freckles leaps up. He starts bolting! He starts rearing back just like the Lone Ranger's horse and he throws me backwards across the living room! Crash, onto the rug! Harold and my dad jump up, start running around the coffee table. Lilly and my mom come crashing out of the kitchen toward me. And Freckles, in a panic, leaps straight into the Christmas tree! In mid-air, he does a little flip and he manages to hit the tree, just a glancing blow, with his rump and his tail. But he's got his big floppy paws caught in the wires of the Christmas tree lights so the tree rocks backward and forward. Freckles bounces off, goes careening into the penny jug, which hits the wall and explodes! Pennies and shards of glass all over, careening, spinning all across that part of the floor!

And now, in a slow, stately swoon, down comes the tree in a shower of spruce boughs, tinsel, little colored balls, flashing lights. It's just like a beached whale, covers the whole end of the room.

Freckles is gone, back to the laundry room. There are four adults standing stock still, gaping at the destruction. I'm lying on my back with the wind knocked out of me, my eyes shut tight, waiting for a certain death.

And Harold, our Jewish neighbor, friend and adviser intones in his best rabbinical voice, "Terrible and mighty is the judgment of the Lord."