

My name is Seth Riemer; I'm the rabbi at Congregation Beth El in Bennington. One incident from my childhood illustrates succinctly the persistent fact that educational systems in this nation treat with disrespect Jewish students' religion and ethnicity. Shortly before Christmas vacation, my 8th grade teacher decided, for a treat, to have everyone in the class draw a picture of Santa Claus. Being a dutiful student but also a religiously observant Jew, I felt uncomfortable; to say that I felt marginalized and was, in fact, invisible would be understatement. On the one hand, I saw all the other students, without missing a beat, get out their crayons and paper and begin drawing. I glanced over to the two or three other Jewish students and noticed that they were going along with the exercise and showing no concern at all about complying with the teacher's instruction. So, fumblingly, awkwardly, nervously, I began to sketch, figuring that I had better go along or look like a fool in everybody's eyes and maybe get in trouble too. Then, one of my classmates (I can't remember if this was a Jewish or non-Jewish person), noticing my extreme discomfort, called it to the attention of the teacher, who immediately came over and, speaking with me quietly, his tone soothing, his manner sensitive, invited me to do something Hanukah-related. Perhaps he suggested I make a picture of a menorah - the candelabrum central to Hanukah tradition. So I did as my teacher proposed. While his condescending gesture relieved me and calmed me down slightly, it did not dispel my sense of unease. Having been temporarily rescued from having to violate my religious convictions, I was sinking into a deeper sense of malaise. I felt, but was not yet mature enough to understand, that something was wrong with this picture. Only years later did I come to realize just how egregious - how insulting and utterly unacceptable - that entire situation had been. Instead of completely erasing my cultural identity, the system in place then - and still in place now - had thrown me a bone, allowing my Jewishness to be conveniently tagged onto an existing norm that basically does not recognize my history, values and practices. The tokenism of the teacher's gesture - absurdly equating a minor Jewish festival with a preeminent Christian holy day (which is also an official national holiday!) - thus, to inflate the importance of Hanukah, not out of respect for Jews and Judaism but to assuage Christians' guilty consciences about their dominant social status in this society - was due not only to his ignorance but to the careless disregard that entire educational system showed for Jewish students. We, here in this time and place, have to do better. Thank you.