



INSIDER'S GUIDE TO COLLEGE LIFE CAMPUS LIFE

Campus Life 200: The Menorah/Tree Dorm Dilemma

It's your first Chanukah in college: time to eat latkes till it hurts, spin the dreidel upside down like a pro, and light the menorah in your new Jewish home, right? Wrong.

As a freshman, chances are you'll be living in a dorm, which will have strict fire-safety rules, no matter how liberal or Jewishly welcoming the university. Also, chances are, if you sign up for random rooming, your roomie won't be Jewish. He/she might have a different holiday home in mind, too—Christmas lights and a tinsel-strewn tree.

Luckily, there are ways to exhibit Jewish pride in the dorm at those precious but pesky holiday times. Here's what to do:

► **"Would you light my candle?"**

Face facts. Candles and other fire paraphernalia such as incense will most likely be banned from your dorm. Instead of acting like a rebel and trying to light Shabbat or Chanukah lighting candles without getting caught, go to your university's Hillel, where candles can be lit every Friday night before services. And at Chanukah time, buy and use an electric menorah (about \$35).

► **The Menorah/Tree Challenge** If your idea of the winter holiday is Macabec pride and your roomie's is Xmas night, it's time for a friendly sit-down. Try first to compromise, suggesting that your shared room feature both Christmas and Chanukah decorations. If you're initially uncomfortable about having a Christmas tree in your dorm room, keep in mind that it's not the same as having one in your home before or after college; in college, your home is a shared home.

If your roommate isn't open to the menorah/tree compromise, go see the residential adviser in your dorm, whose job it is to help resolve such disputes. If



your RA can't solve the issue, each dorm has a staff person who oversees all the RAs. You can also gain some perspective by talking the matter over with your local rabbi. And keep in mind that your roommate isn't a monster—it's a new situation for him/her, too; s/he probably doesn't know how to handle this either. Be understanding of his/her side, and try to keep the disagreement under control: these holidays come only halfway through the year, so if a fight blows up it can make for a long spring semester.

► **The Passover Predicament:**

Passover, too, can be a challenge in the dorm, as University of Florida student Shaina Akrish can tell you. To make sure that none of her Passover food touched a surface or appliance that had been used with bread items, Akrish decided to cover all the countertops in her dorm with aluminum foil and tell her roommate not to share her microwave for a week. So her roommate wouldn't be caught off-guard, Shaina explained the regulations and reasons three weeks in advance. But when the time came, she says, her roommate didn't grasp why putting a piece of toast on the countertop or in the microwave would violate Passover rules. Shaina stayed patient, understanding

that she'd lived with these rules all her life, but for her roommate they were completely new.

Eventually Shaina's roommate agreed to stop using the microwave for a week and keep her bread items away from the foil-covered countertops. Sometimes she would forget, though, and ask Shaina if she wanted to go out to eat, at which point Shaina would calmly remind her that it was still Passover.

Now a junior, Shaina says that one thing she wished she'd done—and now would advise others to do—would be to sit down with her roommate at the beginning of the semester and say something like, "Hey, I'm Jewish. Do you know what that means?" Then, she says, you can explain to your roommate how you personally observe Judaism. Clearing everything up from the start may make it easier to solve any specific issue that might arise along the way.

Also, it's wise to try to anticipate and be prepared to answer your roommate's holiday questions, such as, "What does Passover mean?" and "Why are you throwing out perfectly good bagels?" As Jews, it's our responsibility to be knowledgeable enough about Judaism to explain our traditions and rituals. To bone up ahead of time, ask your Hillel rabbi or checking out www.religionfacts.com and www.hillel.org. And if your roommate stumps you, don't be embarrassed. Compliment him/her for asking such a good question, say you'll be back with the answer—and find out! It's also good to be up to date on the situation in Israel—check out www.jpost.com and www.jta.org.

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