



“What a mess.” Rabbi Anson Laytner shook his head as he read the media coverage¹ of Christmas trees at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac). Laytner didn’t agree with the request for a menorah to be added to the holiday display, the threatened lawsuit or the airport’s decision to remove the trees. He thought, “This is all such silliness.”²

Airport puts away holiday trees rather than risk being “exclusive” (*The Seattle Times*, December 10, 2006) As odd as it might seem, Sea-- Tac Airport officials were hoping to avoid controversy when they had maintenance crews working Friday’s graveyard shift dismantle nine holiday trees festooned with red ribbons and bows.

The airport managers ordered the plastic trees removed and boxed up after a rabbi asked to have an 8-- foot-- tall menorah displayed next to the largest tree in the international arrival hall.

Port of Seattle staff felt adding the menorah would have required adding symbols for other religions and cultures in the Northwest, said Terri-- Ann Betancourt, the airport’s spokeswoman. The holidays are the busiest season at the airport, she said, and staff didn’t have time to play cultural anthropologists.

“We decided to take the trees down because we didn’t want to be exclusive,” she said. “We’re trying to be thoughtful and respectful, and will review policies after the first of the year.”

The decision, made in consultation with the Port’s elected board of commissioners, interrupts a decades-long tradition at the airport. No sooner had the trees come down than their removal spread something less than holiday cheer across religious groups.

Elazar Bogomilsky, the rabbi who last month asked that a menorah be displayed, said he was “appalled” by the Port’s reaction to what he believed to be a simple request. There are public menorah lightings at the White House and cities across the Northwest, he said. Next week, Gov. Christine Gregoire will help light a menorah under the Capitol Dome in Olympia. Why not the airport?

“As a liberal Jew who lived in Seattle for 20 years, I wasn’t offended by seeing Christmas trees in public places. It didn’t bother me,” Laytner explained. “What bothered me was the Port’s reaction, because I knew it was going to create backlash in the community, and sure enough, that’s what happened.”

Laytner soon began receiving emails and phone calls: “Are you people the ones responsible for pulling down our Christmas trees at the airport? You people shouldn’t do things like this – it will make people hate you more.”³ Laytner, the Executive Director of Seattle’s American Jewish Committee (AJC), was concerned. Earlier that year, a shooting at a local Jewish organization left one person dead and several wounded. “The Jewish community was still very much traumatized by that, and so we would take even mild threats more seriously than we would have otherwise. That included me.”

The issue of the Christmas trees quickly became a matter of public debate in Seattle and beyond. Some questioned the request for a menorah; others criticized the airport’s response. One *Seattle Times* online article about the removal of “holiday trees” received more than 800 reader responses, most of them opposed, some of them angry. Laytner recalled, “I think when the Christmas Tree Crisis hit, many people were talking like, ‘Why should we change? We don’t need to change. … This is our community and we are going to do things the way we’ve always done it.’ By the Port yanking the Christmas trees, that really yanked their chain.”

Within the Jewish community, Laytner described conflicting concerns. “As with any other issue, I heard it in stereo. From one side, I was getting, ‘This is terrible, we need to protect the separation of church and state,’ ‘This is putting our community at risk’; … but on the other was: ‘We Jews need to stand together’ and ‘What’s wrong with having a menorah at the airport, are you ashamed of who you are?’”

Laytner stated, “I wanted to see a separation of church and state. And for me, a menorah is a religious symbol, not a secondary religious symbol; it’s *the* symbol of the holiday of Hanukkah.” A dreidel, he thought, was more “comparable to the Christmas tree”; however, he added, “…my preference was ideally always no Christmas tree and certainly no menorah.”

Within a few days, with the Port under public pressure and with the threat of a lawsuit withdrawn, the trees returned to the airport. That year, no other symbols would be added. Laytner noted, “I think that soothed the most vociferous complainers. That kind of diffused the crisis in the short term, and then the Port decided, ‘OK, let’s look at this in a non-crisis mode.’”

Shortly after, Laytner received an invitation to join the Port’s “Holiday Decorations Advisory Committee,” together with other faith leaders and representatives from the Port, business, law, and academia. The twelve-member committee included Dr. Marilyn Gist, a professor of management at Seattle University, and Imam Jamal Rahman, a local Sufi Muslim leader active in interfaith work.

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Gist brought expertise in diversity and leadership; she also understood the perspective of the Port’s managing director: “I could feel the pain from all of the criticism in the newspapers. He was a leader embroiled in a controversy he didn’t intend to start.” She added, “They were trying to acknowledge the right of a minority community to not be offended. They took the rabbi’s concern to heart and removed the trees with the right intent. The public backlash had been surprising.” Months later, she observed, there was still “tension and woundedness” around the issue. Gist recognized that the airport was technically a municipal and private space but was thought of by most as a public space. Accordingly, for Gist, the question was simple: “As leaders, we need to ask: do we want to be welcoming to all, or welcoming to some?”⁴

Rahman observed, “The Christmas trees at the airport brought up the issue of authentic inclusivity.” He emphasized the reverence for Jesus and Mary in the Islamic tradition, and explained, “We have respect for what Christmas symbolizes. We honor Jesus, but how can we also honor founders of other traditions? Inclusiveness is essential in a multi-- religious society.” At the same time, he recalled, “I was particularly

sensitive to the demonization and dehumanization of the Jews that was happening. … It was important not to generalize over particular incidents.” Rahman wondered, “How do we live our interfaith ideals?”⁵

Laytner reflected, “I wanted to see a community in which all of the different religions, different ethnic groups were treated with respect.” Although initially he had no problem with the airport’s holiday display, he noted, “Once the Christmas tree issue was raised, it kind of became an issue of respect.” He wondered, “Are we going to remain the way we’ve been since Seattle’s founding, or are we going to move and take significant steps towards a different kind of vision for our community? And as a Jewish community and individual, I was invested in seeing change happen.”

But another question remained, for Laytner and the rest of the committee tasked with making a recommendation to the Port: What form should the holiday display take?

Endnotes

¹Jonathan Martin, “Airport puts away holiday trees rather than risk being ‘exclusive’,” *The Seattle Times*, December 10, 2006, <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/airport-puts-away-holiday-trees-rather-than-risk-being-exclusive/>, accessed December 2015.

²All quotes from Rabbi Anson Laytner: Anson Laytner, phone interview by Ellie Pierce, January 15, 2016.

³American Jewish Committee, untitled and undated article by Rabbi Anson Laytner, <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=1531915&ct=3297599&printmode=1>, accessed December 2015.

⁴All quotes from Dr. Marilyn Gist: Marilyn Gist, phone interview by Ellie Pierce, January 8, 2016.

⁵All quotes from Imam Jamal Rahman: Jamal Rahman, phone interview by Ellie Pierce, January 8, 2016.

Note: Mary “Polly” Hamlen, Pluralism Project Intern, developed the idea for this case study.