

ISRAEL BANS CHRISTMAS

Had it not been for Pope John Paul II, the Cuban people would still be barred from publicly celebrating Christmas. Now he needs to bring his message of tolerance to Israel as well.

This past Christmas all crucifixes and Christmas trees were banned from Israeli hotel lobbies because they were deemed offensive to Jews. It wasn't the prime minister who did this, nor was the legislators in the Knesset. It was Chief Rabbi of Israel Meir Lau who issued the edict. And this was a compromise!

Some rabbis have wanted to ban Christmas and New Year's celebrations outright. But the hotel and tour operators in Israel have been fighting the rabbis, saying it would cost them money by losing Christian guests. So in stepped the Chief Rabbinate with his compromise: Christians could only celebrate Christmas behind closed doors.

In actual fact, however, even this compromise didn't work. A manager of a leading hotel chain told reporters that "We could not put up a Christmas tree or hang decorations from in the foyer. We have been allowed to put aside a private room, out of sight, for anyone wanting to celebrate the New Year." However, even this concession was rescinded in 1999.

New Year's celebrations were also suppressed. Because New Year's Eve fell on the start of the Jewish Sabbath, no cooking, no lifting food and no music was allowed. Hotel operators were warned that they would have their kosher food certificates revoked if they allowed New Year's Eve parties. And Handel's Messiah was cancelled because the Finance Ministry wouldn't pay for security.

Moreover, fundamentalist Christians in Israel who believed that Jesus's second coming was imminent were deported as were Irish pilgrims who wanted to visit holy sites.

In a Gallup poll published at Christmastime, three out of four Israelis could not identify the date of Christmas and nearly two-thirds said they did not have a single Christian friend. Just under half said they either did not care about the pope's planned trip to Israel or were hostile to the idea.