After getting dumped, Brooke (Brittany Bristow) enlists the help of a Jewish actor (Matt Cohen) to pretend to be her boyfriend when she goes home for Christmas, in the Hallmark Hanukkah film “Holiday Date.”

SALT LAKE CITY — When I was little, I loved to sing. At age 5, I joined a nationally renowned youth choir based in Seattle, my hometown. During the wintertime, we performed dozens of Christmas songs, exquisite choral melodies in multipart harmony, in churches across the city. Next to the other choristers, all of us dressed in identical red and white choir robes, I blended right in.
Except for one thing: I’m Jewish.

While in choir I sang songs about Christmas, I didn’t celebrate it. My family didn’t decorate a tree like our neighbors, and I was under strict instructions not to spill the beans about Santa Claus to my non-Jewish friends. Christmas was just a day off: We would ski down blissfully empty slopes in the Cascades, or, like many American Jews do, we would catch a movie and eat Chinese food.

But I never had Christmas-envy: I had a rich tradition of my own. Each year, I was giddy about getting to play dreidel and eat too much chocolate **gelt** and too many fried **latkes** at our annual Hanukkah party, when we lit 10 menorahs at once and watched dozens of candles dance in our dining room. Hanukkah is a celebration of freedom — the hard-won freedom of the Jewish people to freely practice our faith, even when living in the midst of a non-Jewish majority.

So even when I was surrounded by Christians, singing Christmas songs in a church, I only felt **more** Jewish, more proud and committed to my unique heritage and religious
tradition. Under my choir robes, I wore a Star of David around my neck.

I’ve felt the same way since moving to Utah, where the Jewish population numbers just about 5,000 — for comparison, there are nearly 2 million Jews in New York state. Though I’m invited to far more Christmas dinners than Hanukkah parties, my feeling of pride in being Jewish has only grown stronger (despite my mom’s constant worry that I’ll never find a nice Jewish husband here).

So when I heard last week that Hallmark was making two Hanukkah movies this year to include in its annual Christmas movie lineup, I was intrigued: How would Hallmark portray Hanukkah and its celebration of Jewish freedom? Would Hallmark produce a musical reenactment of the ancient, mystical story of Hanukkah, with the magical oil that lasted eight nights, like a Hanukkah “Prince of Egypt”?

I was deeply disappointed when I found out that both films have essentially the same story line — a Jew abandons Hanukkah and embraces Christmas. They aren’t really Hanukkah films at all: They are Christmas movies, the Jewish characters merely ornaments.

A “Hanukkah movie” about Jews embracing Christmas is deeply ironic. After all, Hanukkah commemorates a 2000-year-old battle in which Jews took up arms against the Greeks, who were forcing the Jews to abandon their faith and assimilate into Greek culture.

“The Greeks sought to wipe out what makes us different,” said Rabbi Avremi Zippel, program director of the Chabad Lubavitch of Utah. “Hanukkah was specifically the victory of Jewish spirituality over assimilation.”

Inclusive — or anti-Semitic?

The Hallmark Channel’s “Countdown to Christmas” movie marathon has become an annual holiday tradition for many and is a huge source of ratings and revenue for the network, garnering 85 million viewers last year, the New York Post reported.
But Hallmark has been criticized for lack of diversity in their films, which primarily feature white, heterosexual couples who celebrate Christmas. The network was hoping to address such criticism in part through the addition of this year’s Hanukkah films, said Michelle Vicary, Crown Media’s executive vice president of programming, to the New York Post. (Crown Media is the Hallmark Channel’s parent company and at press time, they did not respond to interview requests from the Deseret News.)

“Our audience is very vocal, and they tell us when they’d like to see more of something,” Vicary told the Post. “We’ve heard over the years that they would like to see (a Hanukkah movie) if a script came in that we liked. And that happened this year — twice.”

In Hallmark’s “Double Holiday,” career-minded Rebecca (Carly Pope) sets Hanukkah plans aside to plan a Christmas party with her office rival (Kristofer Polaha). | Albert Camicioli

In “Double Holiday,” a Jewish woman’s boss requires her to plan the office Christmas party with her office rival, who is a non-Jewish man. To impress her boss, she must set aside Hanukkah to focus on planning the Christmas party, and in the end she and her office rival fall in love.
In “Holiday Date,” a non-Jewish woman goes through a breakup right before heading home for Christmas. To save face, she hires a Jewish actor to come home with her and impersonate her boyfriend. He must learn how to celebrate Christmas to fulfill his role, and as he does, their fake romance turns real.

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“If this is an attempt at being inclusive it’s a major failure,” said Dianne Ashton, professor of religious studies at Rowan University and the author of “Hanukkah in America.”

In part, that’s because while they may be billed as “Hanukkah movies,” both films actually revolve around Christmas, said Ashton. Hanukkah does not stand alone in the films as its own holiday, it only appears to exist in reference to Christmas, with Christmas ultimately seeming more appealing than Hanukkah, she said.

“It’s defining Hanukkah in terms of Christmas,” said Rabbi Hara Person, the chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. “It’s offensive.”

The storyline of “Holiday Date” may also perpetuate anti-Semitic tropes, said Person. The “fake” boyfriend who pretends to be Christian echoes an age-old anti-Semitic stereotype of the duplicitous, deceitful Jew.

As Vicary described to the Post: “Unfortunately they have not discussed if he knows all the traditions. As the family becomes more suspicious whether he knows how to celebrate, our two leads begin to fall for each other.”

The Jewish man is presented as an untrustworthy stranger, the target of the family’s suspicion.

“It does contain the trope of Jewish duplicity, and the idea is nothing really inherently valuable in Judaism that would make him willing to resist the larger culture and fight for his own religion,” said Ashton.
The films may not be intended for Jewish viewers at all, said Ashton.

“These films are for a Christian audience,” said Ashton. “The majority of what’s going on in these movies is intended to make Christians feel comfortable.”

A deep irony

It’s safe to say the Hallmark Hanukkah films don’t delve deeply into the deeper religious significance of the holiday.

I don’t entirely blame them. I went to full-time Jewish day school until eighth grade, where I spent half of each day learning Jewish history. But when I started calling scholars to report this story, I realized in embarrassment that I only knew the child-friendly version of the Hanukkah story: a jar of oil that miraculously lights a menorah for eight nights.

Here’s the full story: During the second century, the Jews living in Judea (present-day Israel) were under the imperial control of the Greeks, whose emperor wanted to assimilate Jews into Hellenism, a culture that glorified the physical pleasures of the body and denigrated religious belief. After the emperor’s forces desecrated the Jewish
temple by slaughtering pigs inside it, a small group of Jewish warriors called the Maccabees led the Jews in a successful rebellion against the Greeks.

The word Hanukkah means “dedication.” It refers to the “rededication” of the temple after reclaiming it from the Greeks — and the deep dedication of the Jewish people to their faith.

Jewish people have a joke that most of our holidays go something like this: “They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat.” But the Hanukkah story is more nuanced. The Greeks didn’t want to kill the Jews for being Jews, they wanted Jews to abandon their Jewish beliefs and assimilate into Greek culture.

“Hanukkah is unique from every other Jewish holiday on the calendar in that we are not celebrating victory over physical persecution, we are celebrating the victory over spiritual persecution,” said Rabbi Zippel. “The Greeks had no problem with the Jews as a people, the Greeks had a problem with Judaism.”

But Hallmark’s Hanukkah movies embrace the very phenomenon that Hanukkah fights against: Jews forgoing their own faith in favor of Christmas, the “hallmark” holiday of the majority culture (pun intended).

“They learn that while the traditions and celebrations are different, the feelings of holiday and celebration and family and togetherness are the same,” said Crown Media’s Vicary of the storyline of “Double Holiday” to the New York Post.

But that’s just it: Hanukkah is not about Jews being the same as Christians. Hanukkah is about Jews fighting for the freedom to be different from Christians.

“Hanukkah is about Jewish distinctiveness and it’s about standing up for what you believe. It’s about not being afraid to be a minority.”
— Rabbi Hara Person

“Hanukkah is about Jewish distinctiveness and it’s about standing up for what you believe,” said Rabbi Person. “It’s about not being afraid to be a minority.”
My own life has taught me that lesson. When I was little, my mom and dad worried that they were making a mistake by allowing me to spend so much time singing Christian music in churches, that I’d lose my Jewish identity. But when I donned my choir robes, I didn’t feel the same as my fellow Christian choristers, I felt proud of being different.

And that is the essence of religious freedom, the very thing that the Maccabees fought and died for 2,000 years ago: a world in which a Jewish girl, without fearing persecution or compromising her faith, can sing in a church, and after the concert, return home with her family to light the menorah.

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