

Every good speaker knows his audience, and I know I am addressing a group of Jewish Colts fans tonight. I will tell you with total sincerity that I have been very impressed with how much Indianapolis loves their Colts. It truly is like the love affair between the city of Philadelphia and the Phillies. It's nice to see. So I know you are Colt fans, but I would bet that many of you know what recently happened in Philadelphia vis a vis an NFL game between the Eagles and the Minnesota Vikings. The NFL postponed the game from Sunday night until Tuesday night because of the snow expected in Philadelphia.

The governor of Pennsylvania is a nice Jewish man from Philadelphia named Ed Rendell. I had the pleasure of meeting him once, long before he was governor. He was then the District Attorney of Philadelphia. He's not only a huge Eagles fan, but a Phillies fan. He was waiting for a friend of his to come out of the men's room in the third base concourse just before the Phillies were about to play.

I noticed him and asked if he was not Ed Rendell. He confirmed it and happily signed my ticket stub (which eventually got lost) and we chatted for a few minutes about the upcoming game, until his friend arrived and we shook hands and went off to our seats.

The Governor had some very strong opinions about the postponement of the game, a decision made Sunday morning before any snow had fallen. The terrible blizzard that was predicted never materialized, but the Governor thinks the game should have been played no matter what the weather. I agree with him. I don't know how many football games I've watched and played in, but two stand out more clearly than any in my mind. I remember vividly watching the Green Bay Packers beat the Dallas Cowboys in what became known as the Ice Bowl, and I remember with crystal clarity most of the game in which Cherry Hill East, with your rabbi starting at defensive tackle, defeat Pope Paul VI 20-0 in a relentless, driving rain. That's one

of the things that makes football what it is: no matter what the weather, the game gets played.

Governor Rendell saw something deeper than just the timing of a football game in this story. He sees it as evidence of what he later called “the wussification of America.” Here was his original quote:

“My biggest beef is that this is part of what's happened in this country. We've become a nation of wusses. The Chinese are kicking our butt in everything. If this was in China, do you think the Chinese would have called off the game? People would have been marching down to the stadium, they would have walked and they would have been doing calculus on the way down.”

I don't want to talk about the part of the quote about Chinese people doing calculus. But I do want to talk about the wussification of America.

This past Wednesday night, I got chills up my spine. I had gone to watch our member Lou Silverman coach the North Central wrestling team in a match against Carmel. The match began with the playing of the Star Spangled Banner. Laugh at me, call me silly, or respect me more for it, whatever you want. The Star Spangled Banner gives me chills, every single time I hear or play it. The music gives me chills, and the words make me choke up, especially “O say does that star spangled banner yet wave oe’r the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Is a wussified America still the home of the brave?

I cried watching the news this week when I saw a home video of an eleven year old girl being surprised in her classroom on her birthday by her soldier father coming home from leave from Afghanistan. Clearly there are ways in which America still is the home of the brave, and I do

not just mean the soldier, but his brave, heroic family as well. Are they the norm, or the exception?

For me, my friends, this is something relevant to us as America's Jews. There are ways in which we have become "wussified" as a country. Children's sports with no winners or losers, so no one has to feel bad about losing. At the same time, no one learns to deal with being a gracious sportsman, win or lose. Peanut butter being banned more and more because of the risk of a child being allergic and dying. It's one thing if there is an allergic child in a particular classroom, but if not, I've read that students have a higher chance of being hit by lightning than they do of being harmed by a peanut allergy.

Yale University published a book last year about the controversial Danish cartoons depicting Muhammed. At the last minute, they decided not to publish the cartoons themselves in the book, lest Muslims be offended.

I would rather be offended than live in a wussified America, and there are ways in which the wussification of America is designed to protect me, and you as well. Big box chains ban the Salvation Army from ringing their bells outside the stores so no customer is offended by their presence. Greeters at some stores are told to say Happy Holidays—God forbid that a Jew should get wished a Merry Christmas. Nina Totenberg actually said “forgive the expression” on the air on NPR before using the term “Christmas party.” A performance of Handel’s Messiah in a church in December is being billed as a “holiday concert,” as if even a church cannot have a Christmas concert. And just last night, I heard that Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is being reprinted without the “N” word. The character “N-word” Jim is being renamed Slave Jim. I’m no fan of the N-word, but rewriting Mark Twain reflects worse on American society than the fact that one of our national treasures, Twain, used it in his writing.

I have two thoughts to share with you on how this is an issue for us as Jews. The first is that there are certain things that the Jewish community wants the community at large to recognize. We want, for example, public schools to recognize the needs of Jewish students at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Where do we get thechutzpah of saying we want you to recognize Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and while you're at it, stop using the words Christmas and Easter because we might be offended by hearing about holidays other than our own.

The second thought is that I believe there is an inverse proportion between one's Jewish identity and the degree to which one is offended by terms like "Christmas party." I believe that I am not offended by those kinds of terms because I have a deeply and richly Jewish life. If someone wishes me a Merry Christmas, that's the same thing as if I accidentally wish a Canadian visitor to America a happy

Fourth of July. It's not his holiday any more than Christmas is mine, but do you think he would be offended and say, "Excuse me, but I am Canadian! This is not my holiday."

But what about someone whose entire Jewish identity runs no deeper than "I am not a Christian?" For someone to whom being Jewish simply means not being Christian, an innocent "Merry Christmas" is an attack on that person's Jewish identity. Perhaps that is why some find it so offensive. It takes away the only Jewish piece of their life, their non—Christianity.

I did not get to watch the Eagles play on Sunday night two weeks ago. I had to wait until Tuesday. The way the played, better I had watched reruns of the Three Stooges. But when I heard Governor Rendell's comments, I knew I had to speak to you about this. I know some rabbis would not. But if you ever hear other complain about the wussification of the rabbinate, I want you to be able to say

“My rabbi is no wuss.” I wanted to conclude by saying I would consider that a great complement even though “wuss” is not in the dictionary. But I looked it up, and guess what? Even my dictionary is wussified.