

What We Learned from the Seventh Annual December Holidays Survey

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Abstract

In October 2010, InterfaithFamily.com conducted its seventh annual December Holidays Survey to determine how people in interfaith relationships deal with the competing demands of Hanukkah and Christmas. The confluence of those holidays, the so-called “December dilemma,” has been considered one of the most significant potential flashpoints in intermarriages between Jews and Christians.

Of the 586 respondents, we focused on the 176 who were in interfaith relationships and raising children exclusively Jewish. The overwhelming majority of these respondents participate in both Hanukkah and Christmas celebrations. The vast majority plan on participating in Hanukkah celebrations at their own home, while less than half (48%) plan on celebrating Christmas at their own home. Their Hanukkah celebrations are much “denser,” in terms of rituals, than their Christmas celebrations. They report that they see Hanukkah as more religious than Christmas, and Christmas as a largely secular celebration. This year we observed essentially the same levels as last year of participation in secular Christmas activities, keeping the two holidays’ celebrations separate, and feelings that participating in Christmas celebrations did not compromise the children’s Jewish identity.

These results suggest that interfaith families raising Jewish children make clear distinctions between the holidays and are giving clear priority to Hanukkah over Christmas, as both a family celebration and a religious holiday.

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Introduction

One of the most significant flashpoints in intermarriages between Jews and Christians has been the so-called “December dilemma,” the confluence of Hanukkah and Christmas. In October 2010, we conducted our seventh annual December Holidays Survey to determine how people in interfaith relationships deal with the competing demands of Hanukkah and Christmas.

The survey attracted 586 responses, about the same as received in 2009. Of all respondents, 376 reported being in interfaith relationships (as the Jewish partner or with a Jewish partner). Of those 376 respondents, 251 said they had raised or were raising children, and of those respondents, 176, or 70%, said they had raised or were raising their children exclusively as Jews. Our survey is not a representative sample of all interfaith families.

As in past years, this report focuses on the responses of the *176 survey participants who are in interfaith relationships and raising their children exclusively in the Jewish religion*. The report does not reflect the behaviors of interfaith couples in general, or the behaviors of all interfaith couples with children.

We chose to focus on this population for several reasons:

1. One of the goals of our organization is to empower interfaith families to make Jewish choices. We therefore want to know more about the exact dynamics of how the process of raising children as Jewish in interfaith families works, especially during potential periods of conflict, such as the December holiday season.
2. Studies of intermarriage have looked at intermarried Jews as an undifferentiated group and failed to make the important distinction between those intermarried couples that have chosen to create a Jewish home and those who have not. Our holiday surveys are some of the few to date that have looked at the behaviors of those interfaith families who are raising their children Jewish.
3. We hope that Jewish community policy-makers will focus increasing attention on engaging interfaith families with the Jewish community with the end goal of the families deciding to raise their children Jewish.

Because we collected a fair amount of data about Jewish people not in interfaith relationships, we were also able to make some fruitful comparisons between the intermarried raising Jewish children and the inmarried with children. We received responses from 120 people not in interfaith relationships, including 111 inmarried Jews with children.

The Report

Please note: Unless otherwise noted, any use of the term "cohort" or "respondents" refers to interfaith families raising Jewish children. This is not a report on all interfaith couples, or all interfaith couples with children.

Almost all of the intermarried respondents who are raising Jewish children¹ expect to participate in Hanukkah celebrations and Christmas celebrations this year: 99% plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations while 76% plan to participate in Christmas celebrations. There are telling differences in where they plan to celebrate each holiday, however.

The overwhelming majority (97%) plan on celebrating Hanukkah at home while less than half (48%) plan on celebrating Christmas at home. Conversely, 75% plan on celebrating Christmas at the home of relatives, far more than the number that plan on celebrating Hanukkah at the home of relatives (41%). Almost six times as many plan on participating in Hanukkah celebrations at synagogue (71%) as plan on going to church for Christmas (12%) (see Table 11. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11).

Table 1. Location of Hanukkah and Christmas Celebrations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

Where will you be participating in Hanukkah celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 174)	Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 134)
Own home	97	Own home	48
Home of relatives	41	Home of relatives	75
Home of friends	30	Home of friends	16
Workplace/off-site work party	5	Workplace/off-site work party	23
Temple or synagogue	71	Public activity (such as tree lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	19
Jewish Community Center	14		

The majority of these respondents plan on doing multiple activities relating to the celebration of Hanukkah in their own home. Ninety-nine percent plan on lighting the menorah, 93% plan on giving gifts and 89% plan on making or eating Hanukkah foods. The smaller number of people that are planning to celebrate Hanukkah with friends or relatives plan on doing a similarly high level of Hanukkah activities.

¹ Respondents were only considered Jewish if they reported that they were Jewish and no other religion, and respondents' children were only considered as being raised Jewish if they were reported as being raised Jewish and no other religion.

Table 2. Hanukkah Behaviors in Various Locations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children (n = 174)

Which of the following are you planning on doing in the following places:	Own home (%)	Home of relatives (%)	Home of friends (%)	Workplace/ off-site work party (%)	Temple or synagogue (%)	Jewish Community Center (%)
Light menorah	99	41	26	4	57	10
Give gifts	93	45	16	3	2	2
Put up Hanukkah decorations	71	10	2	2	13	6
Sing/play Hanukkah music and songs	68	23	14	2	61	12
Eat/make Hanukkah foods	89	39	29	5	42	9
Watch Hanukkah movies	17	1	1	1	2	1
Tell the Hanukkah story	55	10	7	2	44	8
Play dreidel	70	20	14	2	23	4

The picture is somewhat reversed for Christmas activities. Seventy-nine percent plan to give gifts at the home of relatives (vs. 53% giving gifts at their own home) and 59% plan on eating and/or preparing Christmas foods at the home of relatives (vs. 30% planning on eating/preparing Christmas foods at home). Overall, 48% plan on putting up or decorating a Christmas tree at their own home or the home of a relative or friend. Thirty-two percent said they would watch Christmas movies at home.

Table 3. Christmas Behaviors at Various Locations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children (n = 134)

Which of the following are you planning on doing in the following places:	Own home (%)	Home of relatives (%)	Home of friends (%)	Workplace/ off-site work party (%)
Decorate a Christmas tree	42	26	4	1
Put up a Christmas tree	43	20	0	0
Hang stockings	37	24	0	0
Give gifts	53	79	19	8
Put up other Christmas decorations	27	16	1	4
Sing/play Christmas music and songs	34	34	10	8
Eat/prepare Christmas foods	30	59	20	16
Drink egg nog	20	16	6	6
Watch Christmas movie(s)	32	16	5	0
Tell the Christmas story	1	2	0	0

In contrast to these more secular activities, the lack of religious content in the respondents' celebration of Christmas can be seen by their low level of attendance of Christmas religious services (12%), down slightly from 14% reported last year (see Table 11. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11). In

addition, few participate in the more religious behavior of telling the Christmas story – only 1% will do so in their own home, 2% at the home of relatives.

This lack of religious Christmas activity aligns with the respondents' views of the religious nature of their holiday celebrations. Only 2% of respondents participating in Christmas see their Christmas celebrations as religious, compared to 23% of respondents participating in Hanukkah who see their Hanukkah celebrations as religious. Ninety percent of those participating in Christmas celebrations see their Christmas celebrations as secular in nature, whereas 28% of those participating in Hanukkah celebrations see their Hanukkah celebrations as secular in nature. (See Table 12. Level of Religiosity of Hanukkah vs. Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11)

We also investigated how our respondents who celebrate both holidays felt about being wished "Merry Christmas" by strangers. Overall, a majority said they were appreciative of the holiday cheer (53%), while only 22% indicated they were offended (see Table 16. Feelings About "Merry Christmas," Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11).

While some in the Jewish community are concerned about religious syncretism—the blending of two religious traditions—these respondents are not blending Hanukkah and Christmas. Eighty-seven percent say they will keep the holidays separate or mostly separate (down slightly from 89% last year). (See Table 13. Level of “Blending” of Hanukkah and Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11)

The survey respondents are not particularly concerned that participation in Christmas celebrations affects their children's Jewish identity. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations think it will not affect their children's Jewish identity (down slightly from 81% last year). (See Table 15. Perspective on Whether Participating in Christmas Celebrations Affects Children's Identity, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11)

The patterns of Hanukkah and Christmas celebrations among this year's and last year's survey respondents – again, focusing on interfaith families with children – are very similar, especially in terms of participation in secular Christmas activities, keeping holiday celebrations separate, and feelings that participation in Christmas celebrations did not compromise children's Jewish identity. We did, however, notice some interesting possible trends:

- In terms of Hanukkah, we noted an increase in respondents saying that their celebrations were secular, from 20% in 2009 to 28% in 2010; but at the same time, we noted an increase in respondents saying they would celebrate Hanukkah in their synagogue, from 62% to 71%.
- We found several indications of somewhat less Christmas celebrations in this population – overall 76% said they would participate in Christmas celebrations, down from 82% in 2009; 53% said they would give Christmas gifts at home, down from 60% in 2009; 30% said they would eat or prepare Christmas foods at home, down

from 39% in 2009; and only 2% said they would tell the Christmas story at the homes of relatives, down from 7% in 2009.

Those respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations explain their participation in Christmas celebrations to their children in a variety of ways. Seventy-four percent cite respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family, 65% cite respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions and 52% cite open-mindedness/tolerance. Very few (5%) say participating in Christmas celebrations is an opportunity for their children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt.

Table 4. Explaining Participation in Christmas Celebrations to Children, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

If you participate in Christmas celebrations, how do you explain or talk about your participation in Christmas celebrations to your children? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 159)
Respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions	65
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	9
Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	74
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	16
Open-mindedness/tolerance	52
Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	30
Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	5

These respondents cite a variety of reasons why they are not concerned that celebrating Christmas will affect their children’s identity:

Our Christmas is not religious. Christmas does not make then Christians any more than Thanksgiving turns them into Pilgrims, or turkeys!

-Comment #43

We participate in many events that have religious meaning to others and are experienced as cultural/secular to us.

-Comment #24

Christmas is an important celebration in my own life, and a joyful time. I’m happy to have my children participate. I can’t see where a week of a tree supersedes 52 weeks of Shabbat.

-Comment #57

We raised our children to know that we celebrated Christmas with family because we love them, but it is not “our” holiday – much as we celebrate birthdays with others but they aren’t our birthdays.

-Comment #120

We tell our children that they can help others celebrate their religion. I think this helps them to identify with Judaism while accepting and respecting my husband's relatives' holidays.

-Comment #22

They understand that people come in all different races, religions and cultures. They get that they are Jewish but their cousins are Catholic, and it's OK to celebrate their cousins' holiday with them. (And it doesn't hurt that they get Christmas gifts.)

-Comment #23

If nothing else, it introduces the idea that there is diversity among religions. Although I converted, we are still an interfaith family by virtue of my side of the family. While we only raise our children Jewish, we encourage the acceptance of our relatives despite religious differences and they realize that these Christmas traditions are part of their mom's heritage.

-Comment #82

However, a small minority reported concerns over the impact on their child's identity of participating in Christmas celebrations:

It was confusing for them when we had a Christmas tree in our home, so we stopped having one. Now that we only celebrate Jewish holidays in our home and celebrate Christian holidays in relatives' homes, it is much more clear. They feel lucky to receive the benefits of celebrating both sets of holidays.

-Comment #104

I think it is confusing for them. I clearly tell them we are not Catholic and we don't believe in this, but we do it because it makes dad happy.

-Comment #102

Christmas Behaviors of Inmarried Jewish Couples

Like last year, we continue to be surprised by the prevalence of Christmas behaviors among inmarried Jews. Even those not in interfaith relationships participated in Christmas celebrations to a surprisingly high extent. Looking at inmarried Jewish respondents with children (a cohort of 99 respondents), we find that 48% plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, which includes workplace parties and public events. Seven percent plan to participate in Christmas celebrations in their own home, but almost a quarter (23%) of these respondents plan on celebrating at the home of relatives while 11% plan on celebrating at the workplace or at a work party.

Table 5. Location of Christmas Celebrations, Inmarried Jewish Families Raising Children

Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 99)
Own home	7

Home of relatives	23
Home of friends	20
Workplace/off-site work party	11
Public activity (such as tree lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	8

Some of this can be explained by the fact that 30% of the inmarried respondents are converts or in a relationship with a convert. Sixty-three percent of conversionary inmarried families with children plan to participate in Christmas celebrations, compared to 41% of non-conversionary inmarried families with children. Conversionary families tend to participate in Christmas at the home of relatives (43%). This suggests that conversionary families don't abandon the Christian side of their families, while less frequently celebrating Christmas (10%) in their own home. Among non-conversionary inmarried families, the Christmas celebrations that do take place happen most often at the home of friends (20%), the home of relatives (14%) and work functions (7%).

Table 6. Location of Christmas Behaviors, Conversionary Inmarried Families with Children vs. Non-conversionary Inmarried Families with Children

Respondents in a Conversionary Inmarried Couple		Respondents in a Non-conversionary Inmarried Couple	
Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 30)	Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 69)
Own home	10	Own home	6
Home of relatives	43	Home of relatives	14
Home of friends	20	Home of friends	20
Workplace/off-site work party	20	Workplace/off-site work party	7
Public activity (such as tree-lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	13	Public activity (such as tree-lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	6

Conclusions

The great majority of interfaith couples raising their children as Jews plan on participating in celebrations of both Christmas and Hanukkah.

Some observers of intermarriage have cast a skeptical eye on this trend, arguing that interfaith families can't raise their children as Jews and celebrate Christmas, but the results of this survey suggest that they are doing so.

We found that interfaith families raising Jewish children who participate in Christmas celebrations make clear distinctions between the holidays and are giving clear priority to Hanukkah over Christmas, as both a family celebration and a religious holiday. The overwhelming majority celebrates Hanukkah at home, while less than half celebrate Christmas at home. Three-quarters do celebrate Christmas at the home of relatives, suggesting that Christmas is largely centered around the extended family rather than the immediate family.

These families do not see Hanukkah as a deeply religious holiday, but 71% plan on celebrating the holiday in a Jewish house of worship, up from 62% in 2009. Meanwhile, their participation in Christmas celebrations is almost entirely secular. Only 1-2% of these families expect to tell the Christmas story; only 12% expect to attend Christmas services at church.

The vast majority of these families plan on celebrating Hanukkah by lighting the menorah, giving gifts and eating Hanukkah foods, and most plan on singing or playing Hanukkah music, putting up Hanukkah decorations and playing dreidel.

Forty-two percent have Christmas trees in their own home, 53% plan to give Christmas gifts at home, and 79% plan to give Christmas gifts at the home of relatives. Despite the high level of participation in secular Christmas activities, these families keep their holiday celebrations separate, and feel comfortable that celebrating Christmas won't negatively impact their children's Jewish identity. For most of them, participating in Christmas is simply a matter of respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish family. Very few see participation in Christmas as an opportunity for their children to make up their own mind what religion to adopt. This suggests that these families are serious about their commitment to raise their children in one faith.

While some observers of intermarriage argue that exposure to Christmas sends a confusing message to children of intermarriage, many inmarried Jews participate in Christmas celebrations, whether at the home of non-Jewish relatives, at the home of non-Jewish friends or at workplace Christmas parties. This year we noted increased participation in Christmas celebrations among inmarried Jewish families raising children – overall, 48% said they would participate, up from 42% in 2009, and this includes 41% of non-conversionary inmarried families saying they would participate in Christmas celebrations, up from 33% in 2009. Just because a Jewish person is inmarried doesn't mean he or she is insulated from participating in Christmas.

Appendix I: Demographic Information

Of the 586 respondents to our survey, 176 said they are in an interfaith relationship and raising their children Jewish and no other religion. More than three-quarters (78%) identify themselves as Jewish:

Table 7. Religion of Respondents in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

What is your religion? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 176)
Jewish	78
Catholic	5
Protestant	7
Agnostic/Atheist	6
None	4
Other	4

Because respondents were able to check multiple religions, some respondents identified themselves as Jewish and something else. Excluding those who identified themselves as Jewish and something else, 74% of the respondents consider themselves exclusively Jewish.

Their partners were a mix of Jewish (28%), Catholic (30%), Protestant (15%) and other religions.

Table 8. Religion of Spouses of Respondents in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

What is your spouse's religion? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 176)
Jewish	28
Catholic	30
Protestant	15
Agnostic/Atheist	17
None	7
Other	4

The great majority of respondents were female (86%) and 66% were between the ages of 30 and 49.

Table 9. Age of Respondents in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

What is your age?	% (n = 176)
20-29	5
30-39	34
40-49	33
50-59	22
60-69	6
70 and over	1

Eighty-six percent of the respondents have one (34%) or two (52%) children, and 57% of the families have children 5 or younger.

Table 10. Age of Children in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

What is the age of your children? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 176)
0-3	38
4-5	20
6-8	26
9-12	22
13-17	15
18-30	19
30 and over	6

Appendix II: Additional Charts

Table 11. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

Which of the following public Christmas-related activities do you plan on doing? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 134)
Attend Christmas religious services	12
Attend a tree-lighting	16
Watch a Christmas parade	13
Attend a Christmas-themed concert, play or performance	16
Go to movie theater to see a Christmas movie	8
Bring kids to Santa at the mall	14

Table 12. Level of Religiosity of Hanukkah vs. Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

If you plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations.	% (n = 174)	If you plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations.	% (n = 134)
5 – deeply religious	3	5 – deeply religious	0
4 – fairly religious	20	4 – fairly religious	2
3 – half secular, half religious	49	3 – half secular, half religious	9
2 – mostly secular	25	2 – mostly secular	16
1 – entirely secular	3	1 – entirely secular	73

Table 13. Level of “Blending” of Hanukkah and Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

If you plan to participate in both Hanukkah and Christmas celebrations this year, will you blend your holiday celebrations, or keep them separate?	% (n = 134)
5 – keep separate	60
4 – keep mostly separate	27
3 – blend moderately	8
2 – blend significantly	3
1 – blend completely	2
Not applicable	1

Table 14. Perspective on Whether Participating in Christmas Celebrations Affects Children’s Identity, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

If you are participating in Christmas celebrations, do you think that your participation in Christmas celebrations affects your children’s Jewish identity?	% (n = 147)
Yes	22
No	78

Table 15. Feelings About "Merry Christmas," Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

How do you feel when someone you do not know wishes you a "Merry Christmas"? I am:	% (n = 134)
Appreciative of the holiday cheer	53
Indifferent	24
Somewhat offended	20
Very offended	2
N/A	1