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[Print entire issue](#)

Web Magazine

Approaches to Christmas

Issue 198: December 19, 2006

FEATURED ARTICLES



The Spouse Who Stole Christmas

By Sue Eisenfeld

Her non-Jewish husband decided not to do Christmas, but now *she* misses it.

[Read More](#)

Bringing Christmas Back



By Gina Hagler

If you convert, can you still have a tree?

[Read More](#)



Don't Bring Christmas Back

By Dawn C. Kepler

An outreach professional responds to [Bringing Christmas Back](#).

[Read More](#)

Learning to Let Go of Christmas



By Alice Hale

Now that she's converted, she's ready to stop celebrating Christmas. But her kids aren't.

[Read More](#)

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

More Articles on Approaches to Christmas

[What Will We Do About Christmas? \(After the Grandparents Are Gone\)](#)

By Suzanne Koven



Hanukkah at home, Christmas at the in-laws. But what happens when the in-laws die?

[Planning "Far Enough"](#)

By Rosanne Levitt



An outreach professional responds to [What Will We Do About Christmas? \(After the Grandparents Are Gone\)](#).

[The Greatest Game: Playing Dreidel in Iowa](#)

By Susan Freudenheim



A self-avowed East Coast liberal introduces her husband's devout Catholic family to gelt and latkes.

["In the Mix": \(Out of the\) Home for Christmas](#)

By Julie Wiener



A Jewish woman struggles to keep Christmas at arm's length from her interfaith family.

News



[Survey: Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Kids Can Negotiate Christmas](#)

By Sue Fishkoff

Our December holidays survey shows you can have your tree and be Jewish, too.

Arts and Entertainment

[Interfaith Celebrities: Is Harry Potter Half-Jewish?](#)

By Nate Bloom

Daniel Radcliffe's "mum" was Jewish, he tells an Australian interviewer. Plus, Jack Black's Hanukkah plans and the latest on Adam Brody and Rachel Bilson.

[For Your Consideration Deserves None: One Interfaith Couple's Response](#)

By Helene and John Dunbar



Christopher Guest's new comedy gets stuck in shtick.

[The Jews Who Wrote Christmas Songs](#)

By Nate Bloom

Of the 25 most popular holiday songs of all time, more than half were written by Jews.

[It's Chrismukkah Time... Again](#)

By Cheryl Coon



Oy. The hybrid holiday is back.

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For more information, visit our [December Holidays Resource Page](#).

The Spouse Who Stole Christmas

By Sue Eisenfeld

It seemed like a fine idea. "Let's not do Christmas this year," my Protestant-born but non-practicing husband had suggested. "It's just too commercial, too materialistic." Easily, I said, "OK." After all, I am Jewish. Who am I to say we have to celebrate Christmas?

So, unlike the previous eight years of our marriage, we did not buy a Christmas tree; we did not wind our way through the pines, spruces, and firs, touching and smelling and assessing heights and widths. We did not haul the boxes of glass fruit, vegetable, animal, and outdoor-themed ornaments from the basement and vie over who could hang each precious one; we did not buy more of them at craft stores and art galleries to add to our collection. Of course we did not put up our multicolored lights, the rainbow aura of which our cat loved to nestle into under the tree. We did not buy 60 feet of pine boughs to decorate our wrap-around porch. We did not bake cookies. We did not buy each other gifts: no CDs, no jewelry, no books. We did not even do Christmas stockings, usually full of unusual little finds and cheap necessities like deodorant and dental floss. We did not wake up early on Christmas morning.

I didn't think any of this would matter when I agreed to abandon the holiday. After all, we had still planned to light the Hanukkah lights, and my husband had even purchased fancy tie-dye Hanukkah candles made by a local artist. Hanukkah is a minor holiday, after all, not really intended to beget so much fanfare. But I had forgotten how festive and warm the pagan rituals of Christmas had felt, how special that time of year had become, even though these traditions had never been part of my upbringing. When we walked the streets of Old Town after dinner at a nearby restaurant on Christmas Eve, beneath a halo of lights wound around tree branches and street lamps and amidst a neighborhood full of festivity, I felt left out.

I debated whether I felt left out because 96 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas in some way and I wasn't part of it this year. Or because I am a minority in a mostly Christian nation who often feels underrepresented and misunderstood. Or because some Americans want to imbue even more of our secular institutions with Christianity, thereby impeding my religious freedom and negating the separation of church and state. Or maybe simply because my husband and I had developed a tradition, something we had created together out of love and unity and sharing, and we abandoned it this year, out of cold practicality, to save energy and paper and plastic and other natural resources (and money) by taking our own personal stand against the national affliction of materialism and consumerism.

I can't say exactly why I felt I missed Christmas this year. I certainly don't advocate the purchase of unnecessary "stuff." I don't want to have anything to do with the hysteria in malls and supermarkets. I think Christmas as it is practiced today in America strays far from its original roots. I don't even think that Christmas should be a federal holiday in today's day and age. I don't subscribe to any of its religious tenets, and I don't think they should be forced upon me.

But somehow, I did miss it. In some ways, for a Jew in an interfaith marriage, celebrating Christmas is like visiting a foreign country. You go, you partake of foods you wouldn't normally eat, you see sights that you've never seen before, you immerse yourself in a new culture. You marvel, you take pictures, you write home. You forge bonds and understanding with the locals. But then you return and go about living your normal life, glad to be home, among the familiar.

And you talk about how you can't wait to go back next year, because you had so much fun.



Sue Eisenfeld is a writer whose work has been published in [*The Washingtonian*](#), [*The Washington Post*](#), [*Virginia Living*](#), and [*Blue Ridge Country*](#). She plans to find a way to do a waste-free Christmas this year. She can be reached at earthwords@earthlink.net.

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Bringing Christmas Back

By Gina Hagler

When I married my husband more than 20 years ago, I assumed we'd celebrate Jewish holidays at his parents' home, Christian holidays at my parents' home, and Jewish and Christian holidays in our home. I knew it would be hectic, but at the time it seemed it would be the nice sort of hectic that comes with having too much of a good thing. For a variety of reasons, those holiday expectations didn't pan out.

At first, there was so much going on with raising and adopting kids that I didn't pay much attention to the lack of Christmas in our home. I was not a practicing Catholic. We were raising our kids to self-identify as Jews. They knew I was Catholic and they knew about Christmas.



That seemed like enough for a while, but after a few years I missed Christmas, so we shared in the holiday with friends a couple of times. Probably because I was missing my own family, our participation felt flat and staged. I eventually gave it up and focused instead on the ways I could incorporate the aspects of Christmas that were important to me into our Hanukkah celebrations. Once I included my traditional foods and made sure there was plenty of festive music during the season, the Jewish holidays really felt like my own.

Yet lately as December approaches each year, as much as I enjoy and value our Jewish holiday celebrations, I find myself astonished to be facing a variant of the December dilemma. Should we celebrate Christmas in our home? It's not that straightforward because at this point my children are definitely Jewish and I converted to Judaism about 10 years ago. But I find myself contemplating buying a tree. It isn't part of my religious practice and hasn't been for years. So why would I even consider celebrating Christmas?

Flimsy as it sounds the answer is *because I grew up Catholic*. I grew up with a Christmas tree and stockings. Presents under the tree. A traditional Italian Vigile (meal) on Christmas Eve. The restless anticipation of Santa's arrival. The bustle of activity and family. Christmas carols, advent calendars. Mistletoe and a wreath on the door. But more to the point, I grew up sharing the excitement of that December holiday season. I want my children to understand what that's all about.

I suppose we could affiliate with a church and experience Christmas through that community, but that feels as irreverent as celebrating such a significant Christian holiday simply for the tree and the stockings. That's not my purpose, so a couple of years ago I announced we were going to celebrate Christmas. Each of my kids took the opportunity to let me know that Jews don't celebrate Christmas, but I was determined to use the ornaments that had been sitting in a box all those years. I wanted to decorate my home. I wanted to play Christmas music at Christmas time. Now that my children were old enough not to be confused by a mixed message about their religion, I wanted them to share this part of what my life had been like when I was young.

My kids were great, treading carefully around me in the way they reserve for slightly deluded people. They sort of threw tinsel in the general direction of the tree but definitely got into hanging the ornaments. For them it was an alien ritual; they were clearly participating only out of respect for me. That might have been reason enough to get rid of the ornaments and forget Christmas but for the pleasure I took in telling them the story behind each ornament and Christmas carol. And the reaction of my oldest son when I took him with me to buy the tree.

For anyone who celebrates Christmas, picking out the tree is about as basic a step as you get. For my son it was as much a revelation as my first High Holy Day service had been for me. Here were people involved in an activity he'd never encountered. And there were definite conventions to it that he'd entirely missed. By the time he was enjoying his second glass of hot apple cider--with a cinnamon stick--and could recognize the difference between a balsam and a spruce, I could tell he was getting the point I wanted to share about Christmas. That Christmas is not just about the gifts or the tree or even about the religious significance. It's about an entire whirl of activity--from selecting the tree to finding the exact, perfect gift to choosing the wrapping paper to singing along with the music. It's about being part of a community that only exists at that precise moment.

My preference is still to share in the holiday and holiday preparations with another family who would, in turn, like to share in Hanukkah and our Hanukkah preparations. Barring that, I'll be introducing my younger children to a significant part of my childhood by celebrating our form of Christmas.

I think.

I won't know for sure until December.

For outreach professional Dawn Kepler's perspective on this article, read [Don't Bring Back Christmas](#), by Dawn Kepler.



Gina Hagler lives in the Maryland suburbs with her husband and three children. You can see more of her work at www.ginahagler.com and <http://ginahagler.blogspot.com>.



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Don't Bring Christmas Back

By Dawn Kepler

An outreach professional's response to [Bringing Christmas Back](#), by Gina Hagler.

First I want to compliment Gina for her honesty. This is a difficult subject and she has done a lot of self-reflection. There are several concerns here. I ran Gina's article by several Jews-by-choice since I believe that her experience is unique and deserves the reflection of others who have walked her path.

Gina has made two significant and demanding life choices, first to raise her children as Jews, not the tradition of her own family and second, to convert to Judaism herself. What she decides now will deeply impact her children. Although she feels they are past the age to be confused, that is simply not true. They are clearly confused by her "changing the rules" of their family, as expressed by their feelings that she was "slightly deluded." Why is Mom giving up on what our family is committed to? They expressed to her that "Jews don't celebrate Christmas," thus letting her know that what she had taught them didn't coincide with what she was now teaching them. Also, since Gina has adopted kids who don't look traditionally Ashkenazi Jewish, if they celebrate Christmas too, they invite the general community to see them as Christian when that is apparently not what the kids or Gina want.

Another message from a Jew-by-choice was that the memories of childhood last a lifetime. But they may not be something that can be recreated. Parents die, siblings move away, many Christian couples mourn the loss of Christmas Past.

And further, developing a Christmas practice with your children may only extend into their generation the sense of a longing and a loss.

Gina's taking up Christmas has the potential to undermine her community's belief that she has completely embraced a Jewish identity for herself.

What to do? First, I would like to see Gina's husband be a loving and committed partner in seeking with her a solution to her sense of loss. Second, where is her community, her congregation, her rabbi? They too owe her their love, their ear, their active commitment to alleviate her situation. Finally, I would suggest that Gina and her family explore celebrating more of the Jewish holidays in ways that emulate the things she misses--family togetherness, familiar repeated traditions, anticipation, the whirl of activity, gift-giving, being part of a community.

I wish Gina a joyful year of exploration and want to tell her that my phone and the phones of my comrades in Outreach are always open.



Dawn C. Kepler is director of [Building Jewish Bridges: Outreach to Interfaith Couples](#), located in Oakland, Calif.

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Learning to Let Go of Christmas

By Alice Hale

"I'm always going to have a Christmas tree," I said bravely to my Jewish college boyfriend.

Fast forward 10 years. The boyfriend has long since become a husband, and the two of us, after years of struggling with infertility, finally adopt a baby girl. It occurs to us that this baby was going to have two families (birth and adoptive) and two races (African-American and Caucasian), so maybe it made sense to give her just one religion. As I was ambivalent about my Episcopalian upbringing, and felt very comfortable with my husband's religion, that religion would be Judaism.

But, I said, we'd still "do" Christmas. And we did--with a tree, visiting relatives, a huge meal and way too many gifts. We traded off being at home and going to visit my parents, but it was definitely our holiday.



When we enrolled our daughters (a baby sister had come along in the meantime) in a Jewish preschool at a Conservative synagogue, I was relieved to find we were not the only family living this double life in December. There were several families with one non-Jewish parent who celebrated Christmas and had a Christmas tree in their house. When we took the girls to a mikvah (ritual bath) to officially convert them, I was afraid we'd be questioned about this issue, but no one mentioned a word. Maybe they should have.

As we became more involved with the synagogue, I found myself becoming more interested in Judaism. I took classes, learned about the service, volunteered--to the point where some people were surprised to find out I was the non-Jewish parent, and not my husband! I even started down the path to conversion, but in December was stopped dead in my tracks.

Growing up, Christmas was our only big family holiday, the only time of the year associated with any kind of rituals or traditions. I knew that if I converted, I would have to give up some of those traditions, and it was difficult to imagine. Without Christmas, I thought, the year would be pretty drab.

But as my family became more and more Jewishly observant, our year became filled with

occasions for rituals and traditions. The fall was busy with Rosh Hashanah dinners with friends and building a sukkah. We joined a havurah (group of friends to study and worship together) with whom we met regularly. We hosted or attended seders on the first two nights of Passover. I started to bake challah, and we lit candles and said the blessings every week.

Suddenly, December--with eight nights of Hanukkah, and getting ready for Christmas--seemed very busy--too busy. And it felt odd for a Jewish family to be celebrating Christmas in as big a way as we did. I started to pull back, and tried to spend the holiday at my parents' house when we could, making Hanukkah the more central holiday in our home.

Finally, three years ago, I converted to Judaism. And suddenly, the girl who had bravely declared that she would always have a Christmas tree was ready to say goodbye to the whole thing. No tree, no carols, no gifts. I was ready to just accept the holiday as an extra day off from work, and leave it at that.

"Not so fast, Mom," said my kids.

While I had been learning to let go of Christmas, my daughters had been learning to love it. As the only grandchildren in the family, they got tons of gifts from my parents and siblings. They loved decorating the tree. They assembled plates of cookies for Santa and carrots for the reindeer.

So here I am today, a Jewish outreach professional and wife of the synagogue president--and can you guess what my daughters' favorite holiday is? I'll give you a hint --it's in December, and it doesn't involve lighting a menorah.

And that makes me sad. My husband and I have worked so hard to give our children a rich Jewish life, with lots of friends, a wonderful community--and yet, to them, the best time of year involves that "other" holiday.

Now, my girls have pretty solid Jewish identities. Their closest friends are still the ones they met in preschool. They can recite the Shabbat blessings and the Sh'ma with ease, and they know that, as Jews, we believe Jesus was an important historical figure, not the son of God.

But I worry. It's tough to be a committed Jew in this Christian-dominated society. I feel like Christmas is a crack in the door of their Jewish identity and someday they might push that door open and walk away from Judaism altogether. When so many Jews only define their identity in terms of what they don't do--celebrate Christmas--I almost feel like doing so makes my girls a little less Jewish.

I remind myself, however, that honoring one's parents and family is an important Jewish value, too, and all those celebrations with my family drew them closer to my daughters. After all, they are Jewish children with Christian family members and will always have to balance those influences in their lives.

I just wish I had been a little less insistent on that Christmas tree.



Alice Hale is program associate for [Building Jewish Bridges: Outreach to Interfaith Couples](#) in Oakland, Calif. She and her husband and their two daughters live in Oakland and are members of [Temple Beth Abraham](#), a Conservative synagogue.

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What Will We Do About Christmas? (After the Grandparents are Gone)

By Suzanne Koven

"What will we do about Christmas?" my 12-year-old son asked recently.

"We'll do what we always do," I answered. By that I meant that we'd drive 500 miles to my in-laws' place where we'd eat dinner on a holly patterned tablecloth, listen to CDs of Bing Crosby and Johnny Mathis singing carols and, the next morning, exchange wrapped gifts under a tree loaded with lights and tinsel. Then, after a few days' delightful visit, we'd drive 500 miles back to our own holly-, carol- and tinsel-less home. We all look forward to the annual ritual. I particularly love the fact that I get to celebrate Christmas and yet still maintain a Jewish home which, to me as a relatively non-observant Jew, means not "without pork and shellfish" so much as "without Christmas." By having Christmas at my in-laws' house I'm able to have my plum pudding and eat it, too, so to speak.

So what did my son mean? Why would we "do" anything about such a felicitous arrangement?

"No, Mom," my son said. "What will we do about Christmas in the *future*... after Baba is gone?"

My son has this way of asking questions that make me realize I haven't thought very hard about something. "Baba," an Italian nickname for grandfather, is what my kids call my father-in-law. He's healthy and active, thank goodness, but, now in his late 80s, he can't go on forever--a fact of which we were all made sadly aware when his wife, my wonderful mother-in-law and my kids' beloved "Nonna" (Italian for grandmother), passed away a few months ago. My son was asking an obvious question that I, myself, had avoided asking for well over 20 years of marriage: Did I have any relationship with Christmas other than as a holiday I shared with my in-laws? And, if I did, what was it? What, indeed, *would* we do with Christmas?

I often tell Christian friends--just for the fun of seeing the incredulity on their faces--that as a child I could not have told you the date that Christmas falls upon. I grew up in a Jewish enclave of Brooklyn. My neighbors, my school friends, our teachers, our parents' friends, my doctor, my dentist and the guy who owned the corner candy store were all Jewish. Christmas was, to me, an annual party to which I had not been invited and about which I was not aware enough to care. What little awareness I did have was entirely devoid of religious connotation; the giant Santas and reindeer on the roofs of the houses where the Irish kids lived, the "snow" sprayed on the Italian

greengrocer's glass storefront, the Rockettes at the Radio City Music Hall's Christmas Spectacular to which my Orthodox Jewish grandparents (perplexingly, in retrospect) took me every December.

In high school and college I no longer lived among Jews, but Christmas was still easily ignorable. The winter vacation was taken up with ski trips or catching up on term papers. If I marked December 25 at all it was in a Chinese restaurant, partaking in that clichéd and often joked about yearly commiseration between two non-Christmas celebrating peoples.

Then I met my future husband, and we fashioned a mutual vision of interfaith life, made easier by the fact that neither of us had much in the way of faith. My interest in Judaism was primarily based on culture and family, and his affection for his Italian heritage had nothing to do with Catholicism. We would be part of a synagogue community, raise Jewish children who would have Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, eat Italian food at home and celebrate Christmas with my husband's family. Twenty-five years and three Italian-Jewish children later, it has all worked out as planned.

The problem was, as my son inadvertently pointed out, we hadn't planned far enough. Consigning Christmas to my in-laws could not last forever. As I pondered my son's question I imagined a December without my in-laws and concluded that, sadly, there would be no more Christmas for us. I could not see overcoming my own deep discomfort with having a Christmas tree, stockings or even Bing Crosby in my home.

But was I really answering my son's question? He didn't ask what *I* would do with Christmas, but what *we* would do. This wasn't, as they say, just about me. First, there is my husband to consider. His happy associations with Christmas run as least as deep as my discomfort with it. Could he imagine a Christmas without a tree any more easily than I can imagine a tree in my home? And can I really expect my children who, unlike me, did not grow up Christmas-less, to give up the holiday now?

Maybe, I think, when it becomes necessary (in many years, I hope) we will find a new Christmas tradition, one which honors both my sense of a Jewish home and our family's warm feeling about the holiday. Perhaps we will still travel to someplace with a Christmas tree; other relatives, a country inn... Paris. And after that, when my children grow up? I can imagine them marrying Jews who don't celebrate Christmas and, at that point, holding on to the holiday in happy memories only. And I can equally imagine them marrying non-Jews and finding, as we did, some way to celebrate Christmas which does not conflict with their identities as Jews.

A more traditional Jew would, of course, find this to be an oxymoron, an absurdity. What sort of Christmas would *not* compromise a Jew's identity? To this I answer that the Christmases we have shared with my husband's family have deepened my children's bond with their paternal grandparents beyond measure. The tree, the lights, the carols, were the props--the love of one generation for another was the point. You could call this a rationalization. I call it entirely consistent with Jewish values.

For outreach professional Rosanne Levitt's response to this article, read [Planning "Far Enough."](#)

Suzanne Koven practices medicine and lives with her Italian-American Jewish family in the



Boston area.

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Planning "Far Enough"

By Rosanne Levitt

An outreach professional's response to [What Will We Do About Christmas? \(When the Grandparents Are Gone\)](#), by Suzanne Koven.

"What will we do about Christmas?" is one of the first questions that arises for interfaith couples when they begin talking about getting married. Or if not then, it arises when they have their first child. Suzanne and her husband talked about a "mutual vision of interfaith life." Everything felt decided, comfortable and secure. And many couples choose to do what Suzanne and her husband has done over the years--honoring her husband's family by being with them on Christmas. Being with their Christian grandparents does not compromise their children's Jewish home or Jewish identity unless the children look upon Christmas as their holiday.

But when their son (12) said, "What will we do about Christmas in the future after Baba (grandfather) is gone?" a number of issues surface. First, Suzanne missed an opportunity to pursue the conversation with her son. What is the question your son is asking? What was he thinking? Does the loss of Christmas represent for him the loss of both of his grandparents, the fear of the pain when the Christmas holiday season arrives without Baba and Nonna (grandmother) being there? Or does the question represent the loss he will feel of not celebrating Christmas filled with so many memories, as he has done his entire life? Does he have ideas of what the family should do at that time? Rather than trying to guess how your husband and son will feel when that time arrives, why not call a family gathering to discuss the future. Your husband will be able to state his needs, as will you and your children. Through discussion you will be able to fashion a changed-future mutual vision that will fit your family and the facts at hand.

Over time couples may sometimes need to revisit decisions made when first married. Suzanne said, "We hadn't planned far enough." Most couples deal with questions for the near future, not anticipating the far future. As situations and people change they need to be given an opportunity by their partner to revisit decisions. But revisiting decisions doesn't indicate that the couple wasn't honest with their partner or themselves in the original deliberations. In this instance Suzanne's and her husband's plan needs to be revisited because the situation will change.

Rosanne Levitt was the creator and director of the [Interfaith Connection](#), a program of the



Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, from 1986 to 2004.

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The Greatest Game: Playing Dreidel in Iowa

By Susan Freudenheim

Reprinted with permission from [The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles](#).

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We sat at my sister-in-law's kitchen table, 11 of us from three generations of my husband's family, absorbed by a wicked game of dreidel on the fifth night of Chanukah, howling with abandon and anticipation at each seemingly endless spin. My 10-year-old daughter, the youngest present, was killing us all, amassing huge quantities of chocolate gold.

But this typically Jewish gathering was really something quite different than what it might have seemed at first glance. We were in one of the least Jewish places in America, in a farmhouse on the icy plains of eastern Iowa. Twinkling Christmas lights lit up the front of the house, and a tree burned bright in the living room just beyond where we were sitting. The table was laden with a mix of beautifully crafted traditional holiday cookies, and my daughter was taking more than her share of the green wreath-shaped ones. The people, too, were not what you might expect--everyone other than my husband, my daughter and I was a devout Catholic.

This year my nuclear family--the three of us--had gathered together with my husband's family, and we were taking advantage of the odd coincidence that overlapped Chanukah so directly with Christmas. It was the first time my husband's family had ever seen a dreidel. Before this night they'd never tasted a latke, let alone a piece of gelt.

The Jewish rituals are now familiar to Richard, my husband of 15 years, although he sometimes still feels a bit new to all of it. He takes nothing for granted in his dreidel game, now that he's gotten pretty comfortable with the Hebrew letters and their designations. As we lit the candles on the menorah we'd brought with us from Los Angeles, he was the one to translate the prayers for his family--taking care to explain the meaning behind the Hebrew words we'd chanted, because he especially knows what it means to not understand.

Richard is in the process of converting to Judaism, a step that's been a long time coming, although he long ago moved away from the heartfelt faith his heartland family sought to instill in him. It's been a big move; he knew of only one or two Jewish families growing up in this region, where the most popular museum features John Deere farm equipment, and a local chain of ice cream shops is a main attraction. As we laughed through this Chanukah evening together, it was easy to

understand how much he respects and loves his German, Scots-Irish family, who have stayed close to their Midwestern roots, even though they no longer till the land. His decision to change religions has been a very careful and prolonged one.

It wasn't easy for me to enter his family, either; at least the anticipation of it was intimidating for this East Coast-born, deeply ethnic Jew. In 1989, I made my first trip to the Quad Cities, along the banks of the Mississippi at the border of Illinois and Iowa, and I was scared. I feared that Richard's family would see me as an alien being--an aspiring intellectual, art-loving liberal. These were interests, I presumed, that they knew little about.

I was afraid they'd reject me because Catholicism is so important in their lives; it wasn't just of passing interest that I was not one of them. Just as we Jews hope to preserve the sanctity of a Jewish family, they believe in their traditions and the need to perpetuate those beliefs. Mary, the oldest of my husband's three sisters, is a nun; one of his brother's sons studied to be a priest for a while. I'd had Catholic friends my whole life, but Richard's family was somehow more Catholic, more devout and more lovingly committed to their faith than any I'd ever known.

Yet from our first hug when they met me in the airport on that first trip, they've never let me down. That embrace was the first of many, and I can no longer even imagine them rejecting our ways. Their early misgivings about their Richard marrying a Jew--and even about his gradually becoming a Jew--have not stopped them from accepting us for who we are. Over time, my mother-in-law has let us know that she is concerned first that we have faith in God. As for their granddaughter, she brings home stories not from a Catholic school, nor a public school, but a Jewish day school. Both of Richard's parents joyously take in these tales like the doting grandparents they are; and they have come to Los Angeles to visit her and see her school performances.

So there we were in Iowa, playing with a dreidel because Christmas and Chanukah coincided and because this family of Catholics is always ready for a good game. As Richard patiently taught them the Hebrew letters on the dreidel--it took some effort, as those little squiggles all seemed to baffle them--I cooked the latkes with the help of my two 4H-proud nephews. Good food is a universal language. My mother-in-law knows this, too. As dinner was being prepared, she surprised me with a kugel she'd made, inspired by a recipe she'd gotten years ago from my father's mother.

As the game ended, Mary picked up a couple of pieces of gelt to take home to her monastery. There was a picture of a menorah on the coin, and she wanted to share it with the sisters.



Susan Freudenheim is managing editor of *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*.



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"In the Mix": (Out Of The) Home For Christmas

Julie Wiener

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As the December holidays approach, I can't stop thinking about the boy who got Christmas presents from the family dog.

Interviewed years later, as an adult, the boy--the product of an interfaith marriage--complained that when his family joined the Christian relatives on Dec. 25, "my cousins would all be getting toys from Santa, and I'd be getting gifts from the dog because my Mom felt bad. ... because she [thought I shouldn't] get gifts from Santa. Like that's just outrageous."

The quote appeared five years ago in a [study about behavior of interfaith families](#)--one arguing in part, that even those intermarried couples who say they are raising Jewish children give them a diluted Jewish identity by celebrating Christmas and, in some cases, Easter.

Which, of course, raises the question: can you be Jewish and still celebrate Christmas with your Christian friends, relatives--and, er, the dog? According to a new survey released by the Web magazine, Interfaithfamily.com, [the answer is yes](#).

Although admittedly unscientific, given that it is based on an Internet survey of self-selected participants, the survey does give some insights into how families are managing the so-called December Dilemma. The majority of respondents raising Jewish kids report celebrating Christmas in some manner, generally quite secular, and--like my family does--only in someone else's house.

Indeed, keeping our home Christmas-free but celebrating the holiday elsewhere may be our generation's version of keeping a kosher home but eating treif at restaurants. On the one hand, it can be dismissed as hypocritical; on the other, it's a way of setting some boundaries, without

completely segregating ourselves from non-Jewish friends and family.

But, like the mom who dreamed up replacing Santa with the family dog and ended up embittering her son, many of us are not sure just how to balance boundaries and openness at Christmastime. Her solution was clumsy, but I can empathize: If my kid gets gifts from Santa, will he still be Jewish? If he doesn't get gifts at all, will he feel he is being punished for being Jewish--and then wish he were Christian? If we skip the Christmas party altogether, will we alienate the Christian relatives?

In my own family, the Christmas boundaries are relatively easy to maintain. My husband Joe has no desire for a Christmas tree, and all our Christmas-celebrating relatives live in New Hampshire and Maine--whereas most of the Chanukah-celebrating ones are here in New York. Also, my daughters' Catholic cousins are all considerably older than them--the youngest is 11--so they tend to talk more about their iPods and Xboxes than about Santa.

One year, before Ellie was born, we arrived in town early for a family Christmas party where Santa suddenly appeared and began calling up each guest--young and old alike--to come sit on his lap. Joe and I hid in the kitchen to avoid the awkwardness of refusing the fat guy, until we discovered that he had been briefed ahead of time to exempt Jews and husbands of Jews.

Usually we don't get to New Hampshire until Christmas Eve, and although many his relatives attend Mass, no one pressures us to join them. The celebration at his mom's house is quite low key, basically just an open house where people drop by, chat a little, drink a lot and exchange gifts.

There is no caroling, no talk of Jesus or even Santa and no Christian symbols, except for a tiny fake tree and some miniature nativity scenes displayed alongside the miniature Currier & Ives-reminiscent villages my mother-in-law collects.

Now that she's 3, and more verbal than before, it will be interesting to see what Ellie makes of all this--and when she will realize that some people are Jewish, like her, and others are not.

However, since we live in a Christmas-obsessed country and Ellie attends a preschool where they spend more time learning Christmas songs than I would like, New Hampshire is hardly her only exposure to the big holiday. A Christmas tree stands in our co-op lobby, just a few feet from our apartment, and I must confess that Ellie, 6-month-old Sophie and I have passed many a cold or rainy December afternoon admiring its colorful lights and sparkly ornaments. Having a tree in the lobby is actually the best of both worlds--it satisfies any desire for a Christmas tree at home, yet since it's outside our door, we can still feel like our house is fully "kosher."

As for our out-of-the-house Christmas, I have to give Joe's Catholic family credit for being extremely Jewish-sensitive. Other than Joe's aunt, who always gives us a Christmas tree ornament, most of the family gives us neutrally wrapped gifts--his mom even gave us a menorah one year. Joe's siblings generally make a point of wishing Ellie and me a "Happy Holidays," or sometimes a carefully pronounced "Happy Chanukah." Our nieces and nephews demonstrate their Jewish creds by referencing Adam Sandler's Chanukah song. And last year, when Chanukah and Christmas overlapped, Joe's sister's family politely sampled my mediocre low-fat latkes, (nothing like the fried ones my Jewish brother-in-law makes) and listened as I led Ellie in a rendition of "Chanukah O Chanukah."

Sensing a good audience amid all the careful, ecumenical cheer, our Jewish daughter then smiled and launched into a boisterous solo of "Jingle Bells."



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Survey: Interfaith families raising Jewish kids can negotiate Christmas

By Sue Fishkoff

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 18, 2006 (JTA)--Judy and Curtis Carson light Chanukah candles in their Waxhaw, N.C., home. They also put up a tree--but not a Christmas tree, Judy insists.

"I don't think any religion has a corner on greenery," she says.

Judy is Jewish; Curtis is not. They're raising their 9-year-old son Jewish--religious school, synagogue, the works. But they also explain to him that Daddy, Grandma and Grandpa are not Jewish, and that doesn't seem to confuse him.

"We give each other small gifts for Chanukah, and he gets his big gifts on Christmas. He knows they're from daddy," Judy explains. "He knows what Christmas means, and he honors" his grandparents for celebrating it.

The Carsons' negotiation of the "December dilemma"--the tug of war between Chanukah and Christmas in intermarried households--reflects the findings of the third annual December Holidays survey by InterfaithFamily.com, a group that supports intermarried families making Jewish choices.

The survey suggests that marking both holidays in some way does not seem to affect the children's developing sense of Jewish identity.

The online survey was answered by 759 people, including 342 intermarried couples raising their children as Jews.

Within that group, 99 percent light Chanukah candles at home, 93 percent give Chanukah gifts and 63 percent tell the Chanukah story.

By contrast, while 44 percent decorate a Christmas tree and 51 percent give Christmas gifts at home-- activities the survey organizers call "secular"--just 5 percent tell the Christmas story and 18 percent attend Christmas services, two activities deemed "religious."

Yet 90 percent said they would not ask their non-Jewish relatives to refrain from giving Christmas gifts to the children. Most say it's a matter of respect for grandparents.

Survey organizers acknowledge that these results only reveal the holiday practices of a self-selecting group: intermarried families who are choosing Jewish paths for their children. But they say it indicates that these parents are able to raise their children as Jews while honoring the holiday traditions of the non-Jewish spouse, and can do so without confusing the children.

"The concept of the December dilemma is overblown," says Micah Sachs, InterfaithFamily.com's managing editor. "If you're making Jewish choices, there are good, healthy ways you can do these things, and it's not going to affect the kids' Jewish identities."

The key, says InterfaithFamily.com President Ed Case, is keeping Christmas celebrations secular, which 79 percent of respondents say they do.

Don't sweat the Christmas tree, he says. Times have changed.

"When I was growing up, Jewish identity was formed in opposition to Christmas. You don't see that anymore," he notes, adding that 75 percent of survey respondents believe their Christmas celebrations do not affect their children's Jewish identity.

Case's analysis of his survey runs counter to what other key Jewish education experts say.

"The fact that more than half" of respondents "have Christmas-related activities in the home is significant," says Sylvia Barack Fishman, a Jewish studies professor at Brandeis University.

She points to one result showing that a third of the Jewish parents who put up trees feel comfortable with it, while another third feel uncomfortable.

"There are competing narratives in the home," Fishman says.

Parents can raise their children as Jews despite such practices, she says, but "The question is, is this an effective strategy for creating Jewish adults who will create their own Jewish households?"

Sociologist Steven Cohen of Hebrew Union College, author of several studies on intermarried families, says those who minimize the impact of symbols like Christmas trees are deluding themselves.

"In intermarried homes that light Chanukah candles, just 32 percent are raising Jewish children when a tree is present. But when no tree is present, the Jewish child-rearing shoots up to a very respectable 73 percent," he says. "The moral is clear: For intermarried Jews to raise Jewish children, they need to celebrate Jewish holidays and avoid such symbols in the home as Christmas trees, even if they are interpreted neutrally."

InterfaithFamily.com doesn't advocate that intermarried families put up a Christmas tree, but says it's simply reality.

"Twenty years from now, there will be an awful lot of Jews who grew up having a Christmas tree in the home," Case says.

That's something the organized Jewish community might just have to get used to, some

intermarried families suggest.

Cheryl Hemley, who is Catholic, and her husband Larry, who is Jewish, are raising their two young children in Thousand Oaks, Calif., as Jews. They belong to a synagogue and only celebrate Chanukah at home.

But the children receive Christmas gifts from her parents, "and we explain to our son, who is 6, as much as he can understand, that we honor Christmas" because of his grandparents, Cheryl Hemley says.

Kids get it, Hemley insists, and experts who worry that such practices will confuse children "don't know what they're talking about," unless they themselves are involved in an interfaith marriage.

"As long as you're honest with your children, and you explain things," she says, it doesn't have to be confusing.



Sue Fishkoff is the West Coast correspondent for JTA. Formerly a features writer and New York correspondent for *The Jerusalem Post*, her first book, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (Schocken, 2003), was named one of the best religion books of 2003 by *Publisher's Weekly*.

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InterfaithFamily.com
Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

Interfaith Celebrities: Is Harry Potter Half-Jewish?

By Nate Bloom

Radcliffe's Surprising Disclosure

Well, here's big news that almost nobody outside Australia knows yet: one of the biggest stars in the world--Daniel Potter, 17, best known for playing Harry Potter in the *Harry Potter* movies--just disclosed, for the first time, that his mother is Jewish.

The English actor appeared earlier this month on "Today," an Australian news and talk program that is very similar to the American show of the same name.



British actor Daniel Radcliffe, who plays Harry Potter in hugely successful movies based on J.K. Rowling's books, told an Australian morning show that his "mum was of Jewish blood." Photo by REUTERS/Toby Melville

Radcliffe was in Australia to promote *December Boys*, an Australian film in which he stars. *December Boys* is a family drama about four orphans. It opens next month in Australia and in very limited release in the United States.

The Australian "Today" show interviewer said to Radcliffe, "You spend so much time as Harry Potter wrestling with the dark side. Are you a religious person?"

Daniel replied: "No, um, I'm not at all. I've grown up [pauses] my mum was of Jewish blood and my dad was a Protestant, so I grew up in a very [pauses] I am very interested in religion as something to study, but I am not a religious person in the slightest."

The interview, which runs about five minutes, can be seen on [Youtube](#).

Despite his use of the past tense when referring to his parents, Radcliffe's parents are very much alive. He is an only child. His father, Alan Radcliffe, is a literary agent. His mother, Marcia Gresham, is a

casting agent.

It sounds a bit strange to American ears to hear Radcliffe describe his mother as being of Jewish "blood." However, it is not that unusual a way to say that somebody is Jewish in Britain. It is still fairly common there to describe someone of being of English, Irish, Welsh, Jewish, etc, "blood."

I should add that it may be a long time until we hear anything more from Daniel about his Jewish background. British actors rarely talk about their religious/ethnic background and the British media rarely asks them about it.

A Busy December for Jack Black

Comedian/actor/musician Jack Black, 37, who is currently co-starring in the romantic comedy, *The Holiday*, got married last March to musician and artist Tanya Haden, 35. Tanya gave birth to their son last June.

As Black recently told radio reporter Bill McCleary, it is going to be a busy holiday period for him and his wife:

"We have four families because my mom and [my wife's] mom celebrate Hanukkah with their new husbands. My dad and her dad celebrate Christmas with their new wives. So we've got four different families to hit. I figure that's four days of Hanu-Christmas-kah."

I'll "translate" Black's statement based on what I know about his background. The actor's mother is Jewish and his father converted to Judaism after marrying his mother. Jack was raised Jewish, went to Hebrew school, and was a bar mitzvah--but confesses to not doing much in a Jewish religious sense since his Bar Mitzvah--except celebrating a few Jewish holidays.

Jack said in another interview that his father didn't practice any faith since his parents divorced. I gather, from Black's comment above, that Jack's father recently re-married a non-Jewish woman and he now celebrates Christmas with her.

Tanya Haden's mother is Jewish and her father, famous jazz musician Charlie Haden, is not Jewish. Tanya's sister, musician Petra Haden, formerly of the rock band That Dog, said in an interview that she and her sisters were not raised in any faith. (Tanya is one of a set of triplets, along with Petra--and musician Rachel Haden).

I surmise, from the quote above, that Tanya's parents are now divorced and that her mother re-married a Jewish guy and that Charlie Haden re-married a non-Jewish woman. Whew!

So, Jack Black not only "married into" a set of triplet sisters, but he now has four different families--two that celebrate Hanukkah--while the other two celebrate Christmas.

"O.C." and Out?

The Fox TV series, "The O.C.," now in its fourth season, centers on an interfaith family. The father, Sandy Cohen (played by Irish Catholic actor Peter Gallagher), is supposed to be Jewish. The mother, Kirsten Cohen (Kelly Rowan) is supposed to be Protestant.

"The O.C." was created by and is mostly written by Josh Schwartz, a young Jewish guy. It is one of the few T.V.

series to frequently address interfaith issues, most notably, in its annual Chrismukkah episode.

This year's Chrismukkah episode aired Dec. 14, but don't worry--you can catch the re-run. However, the sad news is that the "O.C." appears to be running out of gas--a lot of people say the scripts have gone downhill--and this might be the last Chrismukka" celebration.

Fox, which is struggling across-the-board this season, is trying to goose the show's flagging ratings. It remains to be seen whether they will have any success.

Apparently completely kaput is the off-screen relationship between series stars' Adam Brody, 27, and Rachel Bilson, 25.

Brody plays Seth Cohen, the son of Sandy and Kirsten--and Adam's quirky charm and geeky good looks help propelled the show's high ratings in its first seasons.

Bilson plays the steamy Summer Roberts, a non-Jewish sexpot who got a social conscience in the last season or so. The characters of Summer Roberts and Seth Cohen have been dating for the last two seasons.

Adam Brody's real-life parents are Jewish, although not religious. Bilson's real-life father, director Danny Bilson, is Jewish, and the Bilsons have worked in Hollywood for four generations. Rachel's mother is not Jewish. (Other than a newspaper report about Rachel attending a Hollywood Passover seder, not much is known about her religious beliefs, if any.)

Brody and Bilson had been dating--for real--for the last three years and in November there were even credible reports that they had been engaged. But, they broke up, apparently for good, early in December.

I don't suppose Adam and Rachel will be giving interviews anytime soon about what its like to break-up in real life while pretending to still be together on-screen.

All Hanukkah, All the Time

XM satellite radio will celebrate Hanukkah with a channel devoted exclusively to Jewish music and conversation. Radio Hanukkah will broadcast on XM 108 through Dec. 23. The lineup will feature sports specials, children's shows, and Hanukkah music--traditional, modern, and funny. Participating are: rock band Barenaked Ladies (featuring Jewish singer Steven Page), Kinky Friedman, Matisyahu, Ruth Westheimer, Al Franken, Neil Sedaka and comedian Larry Miller. Also appearing are Jewish Senators Ben Cardin of Maryland and Carl Levin of Michigan.

You can listen for free via the Internet by going to [XM Radio on-line](http://xmradio.com). The normal three day free trial of Radio Hanukkah (and all of XM radio on-line) is extended through Dec. 23 by entering the promotional code "The Chosen" after signing-up at <http://xmro.xmradio.com>. It's a no-strings



Rachel Bilson (best known for her role as Summer on the show "The O.C.") has a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother--although little is known about her religious beliefs. Photo by REUTERS/Mario Anzuoni (CANADA)

attached free trial--NO refundable pre-payment or credit card is required to enjoy the free trial.

If you are a Direct TV subscriber, you can simply listen to Radio Hanukkah on Direct TV channel 108.

Nate Bloom writes a column on Jewish celebrities, broadly defined, that appears in five Jewish newspapers. If you have any comments or wish to republish parts of this article, please contact Bloom via editor@interfaithfamily.com.

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For Your Consideration Deserves None: One Interfaith Couple's Response

By Helene and John Dunbar

Helene Dunbar's Response

Christopher Guest's *For Your Consideration* is one of those movies that smart, artsy, urban people are meant to like. Filled with in-jokes about the movie industry, the film which stars Catherine O'Hara, Eugene Levy, Parker Posey, Fred Willard, Jane Lynch, Harry Shearer, and Michael McKean, with an appearance by Ricky Gervais, is a movie about the making of a horrible melodrama called *Home for Purim*.

The story of *Home for Purim* is pretty much what you'd think: dying mother whose favorite holiday is Purim is visited by son home from the Navy and daughter who takes the opportunity to come out of the closet. The story of *For Your Consideration* revolves around the rumors of who might actually receive an Academy Award nomination, although it's clear to anyone watching that they don't give Oscars for the worst performances of the year. Neither movie is particularly interesting or clever. Just so you don't think that I don't "get" inside jokes, irony, and satire, know that I'm a fan of Aaron Sorkin's "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip." The difference is that that show is smart and funny. If you're going to make fun of something your jokes had better stand up, and those in *For Your Consideration* are just trite and predictable.



The cast of Christopher Guest's *For Your Consideration* includes (from L to R) Christopher Moynihan as Brian Chubb, Harry Shearer as Victor Allen Miller, Catherine O'Hara as Marilyn Hack and Parker Posey as Callie Webb. Photo by Suzanne Tenner © 2006 Shangri-La Entertainment, LLC

I wondered ahead of time how much of the "Jewish humor" my non-Jewish husband would understand. As it turns out, he pretty much understood as much as I did. Yes, he asked what kugel was (noodle pudding for those who didn't grow up with it) and yes, we had a short discussion after the film in which I recounted the Purim story of Queen Esther (although he'd managed to remember that Purim was the holiday where you dressed up and were meant to drink until you couldn't tell right from wrong).

I realized quickly that it wasn't religion that was going to confuse him; after all, since we'd been together I've had a number of jobs with Jewish organizations; he's read the newsletters I edited and

commented on my holiday-based write-ups. He's even learned to understand my father's very "Jewish" sense of humor. But I had been a theatre minor in college and still had a number of friends in the arts at various levels. I "got" the Hollywood story that was being spoofed: the "Entertainment Tonight" take-offs, the backstage posturing, the over-botox'd aging actress. He would never watch the actual entertainment shows and never remembers actor's names and resumes. It just doesn't interest him.

And so, early on in the film, I was struck by a case of typically Jewish guilt for having dragged him to a movie he never would have seen voluntarily (where were the car chases? the gadgets? This is a man for whom the new James Bond doesn't even have enough!) "Why won't these people just stop talking?" I felt him think from the seat next to me.

As we walked out though, I knew that whatever differences of thought we brought into the theater, we were leaving with a shared one: this movie is "dreck" (worthless) whether it's said in Yiddish or English.

John Dunbar's Response

There is really nothing "Jewish" about *For Your Consideration*.



Fred Willard stars as entertainment reporter Chuck in *For Your Consideration*. Photo by Suzanne Tenner © 2006 Shangri-La Entertainment, LLC

Yes, there is the movie-within-a-movie that is Jewishly called *Home for Purim*, but even that is changed to *Home for Thanksgiving* in order to give it, the producers think, a wider audience base.

Yes, there are people wearing crowns like Queen Esther and spinning noisemakers to drown out Haman's name which they're speaking in strange put-on Southern drawls.

And yes, I think I heard someone say "Oy vey," but perhaps that was someone in the audience who was trying, as I was, to figure out if this 86-minute film was ever going to make a point, tell a story, or say anything remotely funny. In fact, I'm still not sure if this was meant to be a comedy, drama or someone's really bad home movie. I can't say any part of the movie made me uncomfortable from a religious standpoint; but it certainly did from an entertainment one.

For the uneducated, the movie did not actually make any attempt to explain the meaning of Purim. In fact, I'm not even sure why the subplot of this movie *was* Jewish. Was it because there is the perception that Hollywood studios are run primarily by Jews? Was it to automatically confuse those audience members who weren't already confused by the pointlessness of what passed for a plot? Certainly, the sub-movie could have been about a Chinese family and nothing would have changed. Perhaps their Southern drawls might have sounded even stranger, but then, what difference would have that made?

I would be remiss if I didn't fess up to having actually laughed once during this film. A weathercaster. A monkey... Perhaps you had to be there, but believe me seeing the film wasn't worth it for that one laugh. Nevertheless, in the end, to be honest, I think the monkey should have gotten the Oscar nomination!



By day, Helene Dunbar is a Marketing and Communications manager for a Jewish non-profit in New York City. By night, she writes about traditional Irish music for *Irish Music Magazine* and other publications.



Professionally, John Dunbar spends his time taking things apart and putting them back together. He recently moved to New York from the United Kingdom and thinks it's great that so many Jewish holidays involve the drinking of wine.

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The Jews Who Wrote Christmas Songs

By Nate Bloom

Every year the American Society of Composers and Publishers publishes a list of the 25 Most Popular Holiday Songs. The old favorites--"The Christmas Song," "White Christmas," etc.--are always on the list, but songs enter or leave the list based on the popularity of recent covers of the song.

Among the 25 songs picked this year, more than half--13 to 14--were composed, co-written or performed by verifiably Jewish artists. Here's a rundown on the songs with Jewish connections. Click on the links below to see information about a particular song.

[The Christmas Song \(Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire\)](#)

[Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer](#)

[Do They Know It's Christmas? \(Feed the World\)](#)

[Santa Baby](#)

[Holly Jolly Christmas](#)

[Santa Claus is Coming to Town](#)

[I'll Be Home for Christmas](#)

[Silver Bells](#)

[It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year](#)

[Sleigh Ride](#)

[Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!](#)

[There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays](#)

[Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree](#)

[White Christmas](#)

The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)

Number one on the list, this song was written in 1945 by Mel Tormé (1925-1999) and Robert "Bob" Wells (born 1922)--both of whom are Jewish. "The Christmas Song" has gained in popularity since 2000, the first year I looked at the ASCAP list. In 2000, it was third, with "White Christmas" holding the #1 spot.

Tormé, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, is most famous as a jazz vocalist, but he did write

about 250 songs, mostly with Wells. Tormé wrote the music for "The Christmas Song" and Wells penned the lyrics.

As it says in this [article](#), this song was written in July, in the hot desert.

Santa Claus is Coming to Town

Back when I first wrote on the subject, I caught a newspaper reference to a university seminar in which one of the professors, reportedly, said that Fred Coots, co-writer of the song, was Jewish. I reported that Coots was Jewish. However, upon reflection, I am not sure that this newspaper source is unimpeachable and I haven't, yet, been able to find an independent reliable source that confirms or refutes the newspaper article's information on Coots.

White Christmas

Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" is the historical "biggie" of popular Christmas songs. Its incredible success inspired scores of other songwriters to try and write a Christmas song.

Berlin, one of the most famous songwriters in American history, was born Israel Baline in what is now Russia, or possibly Belarus. He came to the States in 1891. His father is alternately reported to have been a cantor or rabbi, but didn't work in either capacity when the family moved to America. His father's death, when Irving was 13, forced Irving Berlin to find work--like singing in the streets--just so he and his family could eat.

Berlin's early dire poverty fits the stereotype of the successful Jewish American songwriter--but not quite the reality. Most top Jewish American songwriters, especially those who worked in the Broadway theater, were from families that fit in an income range from upper working class to upper middle class. Also, most Jewish Broadway composers were American born and not immigrants.

Berlin certainly never hid the fact that he was Jewish, even though he changed his name (he adopted "Berlin" because that was how his last name, Baline, was misspelled on the sheet music cover of his first published song).

Despite his rabbi father, Irving Berlin was never a religious man--although he supported Jewish causes--like the State of Israel. He was absolutely very much an American patriot--and "God Bless America" was a sincere statement of his beliefs. (The royalties to that song go to the Boys and Girls Scouts).

For Berlin, personally, Christmas was not a happy time. His second wife, and the love of his life, was a Catholic. While Berlin remained a secular Jew, he allowed his children with his second wife to be raised as Episcopalians. One of their children, a son, died very young on Christmas day in the 1920s.

Berlin celebrated Christmas with his wife and his surviving children when those children were young, but he was always reportedly sad on that day--mourning his dead child. He did not celebrate the holiday at all when his surviving children were grown-up.

Let It Snow! Let it Snow! Let it Snow!

This song was written (1945) by the Jewish songwriting team of lyricist Sammy Cahn (1913-1993) and music composer Jule Styne (1905-1994).

In the 1950s, probably half of all Americans would recognize the names of this songwriting duo. Previews of coming movies would actually sometimes say that the film featured a Sammy Cahn/Jule Styne tune--and that tune would usually end up high on the "hit parade."

Cahn won the Oscar for best song four times: once with Styne, and three times with composer Jimmy Van Heusen, who wasn't Jewish.

Cahn was born Sammy Cohen on the Lower East Side of New York, the son of Polish Jewish immigrants. He changed his name from Cohen to Kahn to Cahn--to avoid being confused with a popular entertainer of the day with a similar name and, then, a songwriter with a similar name.

Jule Styne was born in London to Jewish parents from the Ukraine. His family moved to Chicago when he was 8. He is best known as a top Broadway and movie musical composer and the list of the great shows he wrote is staggering. Maybe the biggest are: "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," "Peter Pan," "Bells are Ringing," "Gypsy" and "Funny Girl."

Cahn and Styne also wrote "The Christmas Waltz." That tune has appeared in past years on the ASCAP top 25. But it is not one of the 2006 ASCAP top 25.

Sleigh Ride

Composer Leroy Anderson wasn't Jewish, but lyricist Mitchell Parish (1900-1993) was.

Parish was born Michael Hyman Pashelinsky in Lithuania, but his family moved to Louisiana and settled in Shreveport when he was an infant. (I don't know if living in Louisiana inspired the name change to "parish"--the term used for counties in Louisiana.)

Parish's family moved to New York City when he was about six and he got his education, through college, in New York. For decades, he was a leading lyricist.

Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer, Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree, Holly Jolly Christmas

Johnny Marks (1909-1985), who was Jewish, was an interesting man, but his main claim to fame is writing three of the most popular Christmas songs of all-time.

Marks was born in a New York City suburb and graduated from prestigious Colgate University before going off to Paris to study music. Besides writing songs, Marks was a prominent radio producer. He had a heroic World War II combat record, winning the Bronze Star and four battle stars.

Marks also served as President of ASCAP and my friend, composer Ervin Drake, got to know him in that capacity (Drake served as ASCAP president some years after Marks). Drake confirmed to

me that Marks was Jewish--and he helped me with a few other songwriters on this list that he knew personally and knew to be Jewish.

The full story of how "Rudolph" came to be is laid out in detail in [this article](#). In short, Marks' brother-in-law, Robert May, who I think was Jewish--but I am not sure---invented Rudolph.

It's The Most Wonderful Time Of The Year

The Jewish composer, George Wyle (1917-2003), was born Bernard Weissman in New York City, got his start playing piano in the Catskills and moved to Los Angeles in 1946 to write and conduct music for the Alan Young Radio Show.

He is also famous for writing the music to the theme song for "Gilligan's Island," the endlessly popular '60s TV show. (The lyrics to that tune were by Sherwood Schwartz, the show's Jewish creator).

Wyle's grandson is Adam Levy, a very talented guitarist who is best known for playing guitar in singer Norah Jones' band. He is also a composer and recording artist in his own right. His grandfather, he says, was an important influence on him.

I'll Be Home For Christmas

Walter Kent, who wrote the music, and Buck Ram, who co-wrote the lyrics with Kim Gannon, were Jewish. "I'll Be Home," like "White Christmas," was first sung by Bing Crosby and released (1943) during World War II. Like "White Christmas," it hit a nerve among those separated from their loved ones, and was an instant hit and holiday classic.

There is a legal dispute about this song. In short, Buck Ram, who was born Samuel Ram, wrote a poem--later a song--with the title "I'll Be Home for Christmas." Maybe Kent and Gannon saw Ram's version before they wrote their song and maybe they didn't.

In any event, Kent and Gannon wrote the song we all know--which bears little relationship to the song Ram wrote, except for the title. But Ram felt he deserved a writing credit--he sued--and he got a co-writing credit.

Silver Bells

This song was written (1951) for *The Lemon Drop Kid*, a Bob Hope movie.

Jay Livingston, who wrote the music, and Ray Evans, who wrote the lyrics, were a famous (Jewish) songwriting team with many big hits to their credit. Livingston (1915-2001) was born Jacob Levinson in a small industrial suburb of Pittsburgh.

Evans (born 1915) was born in Salamanca, a small city not that far from Buffalo, New York. He went to the Univ. of Pennsylvania, as did Jay Livingston, and the two met when they joined the University dance band.

They formed their songwriting partnership in 1937 and it endured until Livingston's death. (By all

accounts, these two guys were like brothers and Evans was absolutely devastated by Livingston's death.)

According to ASCAP, the most popular (most current airplay) version of "Silver Bells" is the one by saxophonist Kenny G, who is Jewish.

Do They Know It's Christmas? (Feed the World)

Written by Midge Ure and Bob Geldof, this is the newest song on the list, was composed in 1984 for the "Live Aid" concert.

Rock musician Bob Geldof, who is now more famous as a humanitarian than a musician, was raised a Roman Catholic.

While I wouldn't call Geldof a "Jewish songwriter," he has some Jewish ancestry--apparently a Jewish grandparent. He told *Hello* magazine in 2002: "I'm Irish. My grandparents were Belgian, German, English and Irish. They were Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. I married a Welsh woman. We had English children. I live with a French girl. I luckily have flats in London, Paris and Rome."

There's No Place Like Home For The Holidays

I am still researching Bob Allen, a talented songwriter who is now deceased. This song's lyricist, Al Stillman (1906-c.1986), was Jewish.

Stillman being Jewish was confirmed, to me, by composer Ervin Drake. Stillman was one of Drake's co-writers on the lovely song, "I Believe." (A song that appears on many Christmas albums).

Al Stillman was born in New York and was a writer for Radio City Music Hall for 40 years. He had several other big hits, which are listed on [this biography](#). Mr. Drake tells me that he was not a practicing Jew.

Santa Baby

This song was mostly written by Joan Ellen Javits (born 1928), and was first recorded by Eartha Kitt back in 1953. Madonna's 1987 version has proven popular enough to put this tune into the top 25.

Joan Javits, who is Jewish, was kind of a one-hit wonder so not that much is "out there" on her post-Santa Baby career. Joan is the niece of the late (Jewish) Senator Jacob Javits, a Republican who represented New York State from 1956 to 1981 and had a very distinguished career. Joan's father, Ben, was a prominent attorney and he was very important to the career of his brother, Jacob Javits.

I couldn't find any real biographical material on Philip and Tony Springer, who wrote the lyrics.

Nate Bloom writes a column on Jewish celebrities, broadly defined, that appears in five Jewish newspapers. If you have any comments or wish to republish parts of this article, please contact Bloom via editor@interfaithfamily.com.

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It's Chrismukkah Time... Again

By Cheryl F. Coon

Review of [*Chrismukkah: Everything You Need to Know to Celebrate The Hybrid Holiday*](#), by Ron Gompertz (Steward, Tabori and Chang, 2006).



Yikes--I thought we had disposed of this unappealing concept, first widely popularized in the television show "The O.C." Unfortunately, it's alive, well and now perpetuated in a new book titled *Chrismukkah: Everything You Need to Know to Celebrate The Hybrid Holiday*, by Ron Gompertz. The publishers, an imprint of Harry N. Abrams, Inc., normally specialize in high-color hardback books about homes and gardens, with the occasional lightweight humor book about a baseball team. But they've struck out with this one; its humor quickly wears thin and its smattering of sexist jokes and images is downright distasteful.

Let's start with the idea. When we last heard about it, it was trumpeted by Seth Cohen on "The O.C." as the solution for interfaith families. But Seth's television family, an interfaith family, was portrayed as having no faith at all. For them, Chrismukkah was a holiday without meaning, just a matter of what gift-wrap and music to choose, and how many days to give and get presents. Indeed, Chrismukkah is portrayed on "The O.C." as a holiday so dedicated to material consumption that no one bothers to consider what either holiday really signifies.

In *Chrismukkah: Everything You Need to Know to Celebrate The Hybrid Holiday*, that disregard for the history and meaning of the two holidays is similarly present. The Introduction comments:

. . . for the growing number of interfaith families whose living rooms sport both a menorah and a tree, Chrismukkah is a good solution to the so-called 'December Dilemma.' For we intermarried folk, Chrismukkah is a 'merry mish-mash.'

But how merry is it, when the entire meaning is lost? *Chrismukkah* provides a brief history of Christmas traditions but doesn't bother to do the same for Hanukkah. Aside from jokes, quizzes and pseudo-explanations, the book provides a few craft ideas (Matzo Bread House or Bagel Menorahment, anyone?) and recipes (Matza Pizza, Blitzen's Blintzes). Conversion of The Dreidel Song into a song about eating pork isn't likely to inspire singers in anyone's home. So what's the point of this book?

Save your holiday money. This one isn't funny and it doesn't add anything to an interfaith family's interest in finding a meaningful acknowledgement of traditions, rituals and beliefs. Whether or not Chrismukkah truly reflects the practice of any interfaith family, this particular book provides a powerful argument against blended holidays. Then again, we can only hope that that's the real message the author was trying to convey.



Cheryl F. Coon is the author of [*Books to Grow With: A Guide to the Best Children's Fiction for Everyday Issues and Tough Challenges*](#). Cheryl lives with her husband and children in Portland, Oregon.

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