

# What We Learned from the 2011 Passover-Easter Survey

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## Abstract

Deciding how to celebrate Passover and Easter is one of the key potential conflicts in interfaith families. In February 2011, we conducted our seventh annual Passover-Easter Survey to determine the attitudes and behaviors of people in interfaith relationships during Passover and Easter. We also asked questions about people's experiences with Jewish organizations; those responses will be the subject of a future report.

Of the 480 respondents, we focused on the 140 who were in interfaith relationships and raising children exclusively Jewish. Virtually all of these respondents plan on celebrating Passover in some way, while 45% plan on celebrating Easter. Nearly all plan on attending a seder, while a small fraction plan on going to church, or telling the Easter story.

## Introduction

In February 2011, InterfaithFamily.com conducted its seventh annual Passover-Easter Survey to determine the attitudes and behaviors of people in interfaith relationships during Passover and Easter. We also used this opportunity to ask people about their experiences with Jewish organizations; those responses will be the subject of a future report.

The survey attracted 480 responses. Of those 480 respondents, 309 said they were in interfaith relationships. Of those 309, 208 have children. Of those 208, 140, or 67 percent, were raising their children solely in the Jewish religion. Nationally, according to the last National Jewish Population Study in 2000-2001, 33 to 39 percent of interfaith couples are raising their children solely in the Jewish religion.

This report focuses on the responses of the **140 survey participants who are in interfaith relationships and raising their children solely 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 because InterfaithFamily.com's goals include to promote interfaith couples raising their children Jewish, and to encourage Jewish community policy-makers to facilitate that happening. We therefore want to know more about the dynamics of how interfaith couples raise their children Jewish, especially during potential periods of conflict, such as when Passover and Easter overlap. As a 2007 study on the American Jewish population noted, "There is increasing evidence... that more intermarried families are choosing to raise children Jewishly."<sup>1</sup> This report, like our previous reports on the behaviors and attitudes of interfaith couples during the December and spring holidays, is intended to flesh out a portrait of what interfaith families raising Jewish children "look like."

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Saxe, Elizabeth Tighe, Benjamin Phillips and Charles Kadushin, *Reconsidering the Size and Characteristics of the American Jewish Population: New Estimates of a Larger and More Diverse Community* (Waltham, Mass.: Steinhardt Social Research Institute, 2007), 29.

## The Report

**Please note:** Throughout the report, unless otherwise noted, "respondents" refers to respondents to the survey who are intermarried, have raised or are raising children and have raised or are raising their children exclusively Jewish. This is not a report on all interfaith couples, or all interfaith couples with children. These figures should not be reported as representative of all interfaith families.

All but two of the 140 respondents plan on participating in Passover activities (99%). More than half plan to host a seder (56%) while seventy percent plan to attend one. Taken together, almost all (97%) plan on hosting or attending a seder. Two thirds plan on telling the Passover story (67%)--down from 75% in 2010--or eating matzah (80%)--down from 87% in 2010. A majority (53%) plan on following the dietary restrictions for most or all of the eight days of Passover. More than forty percent of the non-Jewish respondents (41%) plan on following dietary restrictions during Passover.

Seder does not just mean dinner for our respondents. The vast majority expect their seders to include food rituals like dipping greens into salt water (92%), a seder plate (90%), readings from a haggadah (91%) and the hiding of the Afikoman (83%).

<b>Q2. What Passover activities do you plan to participate in this year? Please check all that apply.</b>	<b>% (of 140)</b>
Hosting seder	56%
Attending seder at family's place	42%
Attending seder at friend's place	20%
Attending communal or other public seder	20%
Telling the story of Passover	67%
Eating matzah	80%
Following dietary restrictions for most or all eight days of Passover	53%
Other (please specify)	6%

**Table 1. Passover Activities of Respondents**

Meanwhile, forty-five percent plan on participating in Easter activities. Relatively few plan on participating in the more "religious" Easter activities like going to church (6%) or telling the Easter story (4%). Only 32% plan on hosting or attending an Easter dinner--down from 41% in 2010, and compared with the 97% who plan on hosting or attending a seder.

<b>Q8. What Easter activities do you plan on participating in this year? Please check all that apply.</b>	<b>% (of 140)</b>
Hosting Easter meal	4%
Attending Easter meal at family's place	25%
Attending Easter meal at friends' place	4%
Telling the Easter story	4%
Going to church	6%
Decorating eggs	22%
Participating in an Easter egg hunt	23%
Watching an Easter-themed movie or play	3%
Other (please specify)	4%

**Table 2. Easter Activities of Respondents**

These respondents also see significant differences in the level of religiousness of their celebrations of Passover and Easter. Few say their celebrations of either holiday will be deeply religious, but two thirds say their celebrations of Easter will be entirely secular (67%) while only 3% say their celebrations of Passover will be entirely secular. And 38% see their Passover celebrations as deeply religious or religious--down from 45% in 2010--vs. only 5% who see their Easter celebrations as deeply religious or religious--down from 12% in 2010.

Overall, the great majority of respondents say they are very comfortable or comfortable (87%) with participating in Passover celebrations, compared to 40% who say the same about Easter--down from 47% in 2010. Meanwhile, there is a far greater level of ambivalence over Easter's arrival, with 35% saying they're uncomfortable or very uncomfortable about participating in Easter celebrations compared to 3% who say the same about Passover. Non-Jewish respondents are more than two times more likely (67%) to be comfortable with Passover than Jewish respondents are with Easter (30%).

This year, Easter falls on the sixth day of Passover--which could potentially create a conflict, especially for those observing the dietary rules of Passover, which prohibit bread, pasta and many other common foods. In 2010 and 2009, Easter also fell during Passover, but in 2008 it did not. Comparing all three surveys, we find no significant difference between the percentage of respondents who said they planned on celebrating Easter (45% in 2008 vs. 49% in 2009 vs. 51% in 2010 vs. 45% in 2011). This suggests that the confluence of Easter and Passover is not causing our respondents to forgo Easter. And with the almost 100% participation rate in Passover, they are not bypassing Passover either.

Of those celebrating both holidays, most (68%) say the confluence of the holidays will not change their celebrations. Those that are changing their celebrations are adapting, with 30% saying they will not eat prohibited foods at the Easter meal and 5% saying they will eat prohibited foods at the Easter meal but not for the rest of Passover.

Jewish respondents were only somewhat more likely to avoid prohibited foods at the Easter meal (32%, down from 42% in 2010) than non-Jewish respondents (25%), and somewhat more likely to plan on following dietary restrictions for most of Passover (56% vs. 41% for non-Jewish respondents).

<b>Q11. This year, Easter falls during Passover. How will this affect how you celebrate the holidays? Please check all that apply.</b>	<b>% (of 63)</b>
This will not affect my celebrations.	68%
I will attend an Easter meal but not eat food prohibited on Passover (such as bread).	31%
I will what is served at the Easter meal but follow the dietary restrictions for the rest of Passover.	5%
Because Easter falls during Passover, I will not attend an Easter meal.	3%
I will host or attend an Easter meal before or after Passover.	3%
Other (please specify)	5%

**Table 3. Effect of Easter on Passover Celebrations, Respondents Participating in Easter Celebrations**

Eighty-five percent of respondents said they believe that participating in Easter celebrations does not affect the Jewish identity of their children. How do interfaith families raising Jewish children explain their participation in Easter celebrations to their children? Most pointed to respect for the non-Jewish parent (61%), respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent's extended family (68%) or open-mindedness/tolerance (49%). Few explained their participation in Easter celebrations as a way not to upset the non-Jewish parent (13%) or his or her extended family (14%), and few told their children participating in Easter was an opportunity for them to decide what religion to adopt (6%). Almost a third (31%) explained their participation to their children as a way to expose them to faith traditions other than their own. We did not ask what parents' reasons were for participating in Easter so it is possible there is a divergence between their motivations and what they tell their children.

<b>Q39. How do you explain or talk about your participation in Easter celebrations to your children?</b>	<b>% (of 84)</b>
Respect for the non-Jewish parent's traditions	61%
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	13%
Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent's extended family	68%
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent's extended family	14%
Open-mindedness/tolerance	49%
Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	31%
Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	6%
Other	10%

**Table 4. How Respondents Explain Their Participation in Easter to Their Children**

We also asked several demographic questions to understand the Jewish behaviors of the respondents. Basing our questions on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 and the 2005 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study, we asked respondents about the frequency of certain Jewish behaviors (lighting Shabbat candles, attending weekly synagogue services, etc.), number of Jewish friends and membership in religious organizations. Our respondents were similar to the Jewish population in general as reported by the NJPS 2000-01, although our respondents are more likely to light Shabbat candles "always" or "usually" than the general Jewish population (39%, down from 47% in 2010 but still compared



to general Jewish population at 28%), to hold or attend a seder (94% vs. 77%), to light Hanukkah candles (97% vs. 72%), and to be synagogue members (60%, down from 76% in 2010 but still compared to general Jewish population at 46%).

	Respondents to our survey	NJPS 2000-01
Half or more friends are Jewish*	59%	52%
Hold/attend Passover seder	94%	77%
Light Shabbat candles	39%	28%
Light Hanukkah candles	97%	72%
Attend Jewish religious services**	29%	27%
Belong to synagogue	60%	46%
Belong to JCC	16%	21%

\*The NJPS asked about "close" friends.

\*\*The NJPS asked about attending Jewish religious services "monthly or more." We asked whether someone in your household attended weekly services at a synagogue all of the time, usually, some of the time or never. We calculated a comparable percentage by adding the responses to "all of the time" and "usually."

**Table 5. Jewish Connections of Respondents vs. American Jews (NJPS 2000-01)**

### Demographic Portrait of Our Respondents

Of the 480 people who responded to our Passover-Easter Survey, 140 said they were intermarried, had children and had raised or were raising their children exclusively Jewish. Of those 140 respondents, the great majority (80%) are Jewish:

Q21. What is your religion? Please check all that apply.	% (of 140)
Jewish	80%
Catholic	8%
Protestant	8%
Muslim	0%
Other Christian	1%
Hindu	0%
Agnostic/Atheist	3%
None	1%
Other	4%

**Table 6. Religion of Respondents**

Their partners were a mix of Jewish (26%), Catholic (27%), Protestant (13%) and other religions. Because respondents could check multiple religions, there is some overlap where intermarried respondents characterized themselves and their partner as Jewish, as well as other religions. This also reflects some people in conversionary couples--where both partners are officially Jewish--characterizing themselves as intermarried because of the convert's original religious background.



<b>Q27. What is your spouse's religion? Please check all that apply.</b>	<b>% (of 140)</b>
Jewish	26%
Catholic	27%
Protestant	13%
Other Christian	10%
Muslim	0%
Hindu	0%
Agnostic/Atheist	17%
None	9%
Not applicable	0%
Other	8%

**Table 7. Religion of Respondents' Spouses**

The great majority of the respondents were female (83%).

<b>Q20. What is your gender?</b>	<b>% (of 140)</b>
Female	83%
Male	17%

**Table 8. Gender of Respondents**

Two-thirds (68%) were between the ages of 30 and 49.

<b>Q32. What is your age?</b>	<b>% (of 140)</b>
Under 20	0%
20-29	3%
30-39	34%
40-49	34%
50-59	20%
60-69	9%
70 and over	1%

**Table 9. Age of Respondents**

Thirty-six percent have children 3 or younger. Sixty percent have children 8 or younger.

<b>Q35. What is the age of your children? Please check all that apply.</b>	<b>% (of 140)</b>
0-3	36%
4-5	21%
6-8	24%
9-12	22%
13-17	19%

18-30	21%
30 and over	9%

**Table 10. Age of Respondents' Children**

## Conclusions

Consistent with our past surveys, intermarried people who have decided to raise their children Jewish appear to be doing a good job of promoting Jewish behavior and de-emphasizing non-Jewish behavior. The great majority are participating in numerous Passover activities. Virtually all plan on hosting or attending a seder and a little more than half plan on following dietary restrictions for most or all of the eight days of Passover.

Conversely, they continue to participate in far fewer Easter activities. A little more than half are not participating in Easter celebrations at all, while only 32% plan on hosting or attending an Easter dinner, down from 41% in 2010. Only small to very small minorities plan to engage in "religious" Easter activities like attending religious services (which may in fact not be a religious experience for the participants), or telling the Easter story. Despite Easter falling during Passover this year, the percentage that plan on participating in Easter celebrations in some way--45%--is the same percentage that said they would do so in 2008, when the holidays did not overlap.

While this population sees Passover as far more religious than Easter--two thirds see their Easter celebrations as entirely secular compared to 3% who see Passover as entirely secular--this year we observed a general decline in some of the religious aspects of celebrating both holidays.

- There was a decline in telling the Passover story, from 75% in 2010 to 67% in 2011, and in eating matzah, from 87% in 2010 to 80% in 2011.
- The percentage of those who see their participation in Easter as religious declined from 12% in 2010 to 5% in 2011.
- While far more see Passover than Easter as religious, the percentage of those who see Passover as religious declined from 45% in 2010 to 38% in 2011.
- The percentage of Jewish respondents who will avoid prohibited foods at Easter dinner declined from 42% in 2010 to 32% in 2011.
- Fewer of this year's respondents light Shabbat candles (39%, down from 47% in 2010) or belong to synagogues (60%, down from 76% in 2010); but our population still exceeds the NJPS' general Jewish population on these measures (28% and 46%, respectively).

The great majority (87%) of respondents are comfortable celebrating Passover, while only 40% are comfortable celebrating Easter; 35% are uncomfortable celebrating Easter, compared to 3% who are uncomfortable celebrating Passover. But despite a general decline in religious attitude, the percentage who are comfortable celebrating Easter declined from 47% in 2010 to 40% in 2011.

Having decided on a religious tradition for their children, the respondents rarely explain to their children that they're participating in Easter so they can make up their own mind about what religion to adopt. Most respondents say they explain their family's participation in Easter to their children as a matter of "respect" for either the non-Jewish parent's traditions or the traditions of the non-Jewish parent's extended family, or "open-mindedness/tolerance." A full 85% believe that their participation in Easter celebrations does not affect their children's Jewish identity, consistent with past year.

