

## SOURCES

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### **PROJECT WELCOME**

Karen Kushner, M.S.W., Director  
Shira Butler, Program Associate  
235 Montgomery Street, Suite 1120  
San Francisco, CA 94104-3304

Phone: 888-756-8242  
Fax: 415-392-1182  
E-mail: [sbutler@urj.com](mailto:sbutler@urj.com)

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SERVING REFORM CONGREGATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

# THE DECEMBER DILEMMA

## Tips to Survive the Holiday Season



“I get sweaty just thinking about it. We were climbing the stairs to our apartment, both thinking the same thing. The Christmas tree in our living room was a source of tension instead of joy, and we were both angry.”

Nothing seems to stir up feelings quite like the holiday season. Celebrations that should be joyful become a source of conflict, making it difficult to find solutions that makes everyone happy.

## **MAKING A DECISION TOGETHER**

Deciding which traditions to celebrate in your family and finding a way to communicate with your partner during this time can be difficult<sup>1</sup>.

- **Make an effort to detoxify the issue.** Try to approach it with humor by poking fun at your own reactions, even if you're not feeling funny. Remember that laughing about something in no way diminishes the importance of the issue. Try arguing your partners side for a new perspective.
- **Use I statements that describe feelings instead of blaming.** What your partner will be able to understand about your feeling may depend on how well they're communicated. Try statements like, “I'm worried that my parents won't come to visit if they know there's a Christmas tree here,” or “I feel like I can't be part of something that was very precious to me,” rather than “You are so selfish and inconsiderate.”
- **Have the courage to make an adult decision for your family.** Celebrating two sets of holidays in one house may seem like the best of all possible worlds, but it may confuse children and complicate their sense of “Who am I?” This does not mean that your family cannot join in the joyous celebrations of extended family. Leaving the choice of religion up to children when they are old enough translates to “Choose Mom or choose Dad.” No child is ever old enough for that choice.

In the year 165 B.C.E., the rebels defeated the Syrian army and cleansed and rededicated the Temple. Uncomfortable with a military victory, the rabbis of the Talmud maintained that Judah Maccabee found only one vial of oil for the menorah, but that it miraculously burned for eight days. This story adds a focus on light at the darkest time of the year, a metaphor for the continuity of Judaism itself. According to some traditions, the Maccabees built a new altar and/or Menorah (candelabrum) since the old ones were profaned by the Syrians. Thus, Hanukkah marks the dedication of these the temple and the victory of religious freedom over religious dictatorship<sup>8</sup>.

## **WHAT IS OUTREACH? AND WHAT IS PROJECT WELCOME?**

Outreach is a Jewish community effort to welcome those seeking a stronger connection to Judaism: Jews-by-Choice, interfaith couples and families, parents of interfaith married children, and everyone interested in knowing more about Judaism.

Outreach does not seek to convert non-Jewish individuals. Rather, it enables them to explore, study, and come to understand Judaism, thereby providing an atmosphere of support in which a comfortable relationship with Judaism can be fostered. Outreach encourages people to make Jewish choices in their lives through community support and adult education, and by making Jewish resources readily available.

**Project Welcome** is an outreach program welcoming interfaith families, unaffiliated Jews and seekers into Independent, Renewal, Reconstructionist, Reform and Conservative synagogues. A project of the URJ, supported by the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund & the Walter and Elise Haas Fund. For more information on Project Welcome and the programs we offer, please see [www.projectwelcome.org](http://www.projectwelcome.org).

## HELPING CHILDREN TO COPE

Whatever their position, it's pointless (and even harmful) to try to talk your children out of their feelings. Why try to get your child to "be reasonable" about Christmas, which itself is all about unreasonable expectations? If your child says, "I don't like Hanukkah. I want Christmas," don't tell him he doesn't mean it. If she says, "I hate Christmas lights," don't defend them as pretty. Just listen and sympathize. Explain how you handle your feelings about the holiday. It's fine to talk about why you like Hanukkah and how it fits into a whole year of Jewish celebrations, but try to keep this from becoming an argument about which is better.

Besides, your child's passionate position will change as s/he grows. By the time they start grade school, most children understand that every family has its own way doing things, so a parent might say, "I know Jane's Christmas tree is wonderful, but that's not part of our religion. We do Hanukkah as part of a whole year's worth of Jewish holidays, including Shabbat<sup>6</sup>."

Hanukkah is an excellent time for reinforcing a sense of identity with Jewish life and history. "It's important for children to feel they have roots, to identify with the miracle of Jewish survival, to be familiar with the contribution of Jewish civilization. Psychiatrists have argued that a well-defined particular identity leads to a much healthier sense of self and to a greater ability to relate positively to others. This, in turn, means a better ability to cope with being an outsider<sup>7</sup>."

## CONFUSED ABOUT THE HANUKKAH STORY?

That is because there are several versions described in the Books of the Maccabees.

Hanukkah marks the deliverance of the Jews from the oppression of the Syrian-Greeks in the second century B.C.E. (Before the Common Era). The Greeks attempted to impose heathen practices upon the Jewish population, but Judah Maccabee and his four brothers led a rebellion against them. The revolt reached its climax when King Antiochus IV of Syria prohibited the observance of sacred Jewish practices, including circumcision, Temple ritual, Sabbath observance, and the study of Torah. The decisive insult was the conversion of the Temple into a pagan shrine.

- **Acknowledge that there are feelings of loss for both partners.** If the issue of loss remains off limits, tension will mount and solutions will become even more remote. Anger, disappointment, jealousy and sadness are all reflections of loss. Even when we make conscious, rational choices about holiday celebrations, there may be sad feelings related to compromise. Often the very acknowledgement of these emotions will shift the focus from looking back toward the past to looking forward with hope.

- **Remember that childhood memories will remain a part of who you are.** Our pasts remain with us, no matter what religious choices we may make as adults. The holiday season is a time when we are often drawn back to our families, and it may be especially important to help one another find ways to share the current season with relatives and friends.

Be creative. Bring what you love from your past into the present. Bake special cookies and cakes, decorate the house and search for music that mimics the tone of what you remember.

- **Consider the possibility of an "Anthropological Christmas."** Many families have successfully managed the December Dilemma by observing Jewish holidays in their own home, but sharing Christmas at the home of a family member. Children will not be confused if they understand that while theirs is a Jewish home, they may visit non-Jewish relatives on Christian holidays.

"By the age of six, most children understand that celebrating Christmas at Grandma and Grandpa's house is like going to a friend's house for a birthday party. You enjoy the cake and ice cream, you give a gift and accept a party favor, but when you go back to your own house, the celebration is over because it isn't *your* birthday. The same holds true when non-Jewish family and friends come to your house to share *latkes* and candlelighting on Hanukkah<sup>2</sup>."

## COPING WITH BEING THE OUTSIDER

Christmas can be a tough season for Jewish families in a world flooded with Christmas decorations and advertisements. As you fry the potatoes and try to decide what to answer when the supermarket clerk wishes you a “Merry Christmas,” remember to stay consistent about your family’s traditions, avoid getting defensive, and, most important, celebrate with joy.

Coping with Christmas is easiest when there is a firm Jewish identity supported by a year of holiday celebrations. “With so many positive experiences year-round, it’s unlikely that either adults or children will be laid low by being left out of a gentile celebration for a couple of weeks<sup>4</sup>.” If you Observe Shabbat with a family day, enjoy Passover seders, decorate a sukkah and celebrate Purim with costumes, carnivals, and hamentashen, the few weeks of the Holiday season will feel less challenging.

## COPING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

As if the holiday season didn’t have enough inherent difficulty, family, friends, and school can exaggerate these pressures<sup>3</sup>.

**“My parents would be so hurt and offended if I gave Christmas up completely.”**

Remember the Anthropological Christmas. Many children enjoy attending their extended family’s Christmas. Create a tradition of holiday sharing. Families will enjoy having your children over for their holiday as much as they will enjoy celebrating Hanukkah in your home.

**“What do I do about inappropriate gifts (stockings, wrapping paper, ornaments, advent calendar, etc)?”**

Firstly, recognize the thoughtfulness and love sent with the gift. Then use the inappropriateness of the gift as an opportunity for conversation. Gently let them know you don’t want to confuse the children, and offer suggestions for more appropriate gifts and holiday activities.

Explain that your family has different traditions and offer to explain them. Extend an invitation to join your family in celebrating.

Do not avoid telling your family of your holiday decisions in the hope of avoiding conflict. Pretense and secrets cause more pain than honesty.

## COPING WITH CHILDREN’S REACTIONS

**“But Bobby gets to celebrate both Christmas and Hanukkah, and he gets double presents! I want that too!”**

This situation may happen in school or within your extended family. Children will respect and defend their own family when your ambivalence has been resolved. Children will always ask for more until they see that you are comfortable with your decisions on gift giving<sup>5</sup>.

Learning that you are an outsider is never particularly easy. But to be a child with his/her nose pressed up against the glass at Christmas is doubly hard because the season is especially geared to seduce and delight the very young. Christmas-envy is not a religious issue for children. They want the tinsel, the flashing lights, the candy, and, most of all, the toys.

Jewish children react in different ways to Christmas and prohibitions against their full participation: jealousy, sadness, outrage. Little children may cry. School-age kids, obsessed with the idea of “fairness,” sometimes express anger at all the TV commercials and holiday decorations. “Why aren’t there as many Happy Hanukkah signs as Merry Christmas signs?”

Some children find it easier to hate everything about Christmas, which is a hard way to live in America from October through January. Still other children will say they feel “sorry” for their non-Jewish friends who don’t have as many holidays to celebrate.