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Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

What We Learned from the Third Annual December Holidays Survey

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Introduction

In October 2006, InterfaithFamily.com conducted its third annual December Holidays Survey. The survey, which fielded responses from 759 people--nearly double the response from the 2005 survey--was designed to understand how people in interfaith families participate in celebrations of their own and their partners' holidays and to gain insight into those celebrations. Of all respondents, 581 reported being in interfaith relationships (as the Jewish partner or with a Jewish partner). Of those respondents, 455 said they had raised or were raising children, and of those respondents, 342, or 75 percent, said they had raised or were raising their children as Jews.

That figure is significantly higher than the 33 percent of intermarried Jews raising Jewish children reported in the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001. While the survey thus is not representative of all interfaith families, it provides important information about interfaith families who are raising their children as Jews--a very important demographic for Jewish continuity.

For couples in interfaith relationships, the so-called "December dilemma" can be a tricky issue to resolve; for those in interfaith relationships who have made the choice to raise their children Jewish, it can be more so. Our goal in this report is to determine how these families are balancing their celebrations of Christmas and Hanukkah.

Therefore, this year's report focuses exclusively on those respondents who said they were in an interfaith relationship (as the Jewish partner or with a Jewish partner) and were raising their children Jewish. Unless otherwise noted, use of the term "respondents" in the report refers to this subset.

The Report

Almost all of the respondents expect to participate in Hanukkah celebrations and Christmas celebrations this year: 99 percent expect to participate in Hanukkah celebrations while 89 percent plan to participate in Christmas celebrations.

The great majority of these respondents plan on doing multiple activities relating to the celebration of Hanukkah in their own home. Ninety-nine percent plan to light the menorah and 63 percent plan on telling the Hanukkah story:

6. Which of the following are you planning to do in your own home (check all that apply):	Count	% (of 342)
Light a menorah	339	99
Give gifts	317	93
Hanukkah decorations	242	71
Hanukkah music and songs	206	60
Hanukkah foods	298	87
Tell the Hanukkah story	216	63

Significantly lower percentages of respondents plan to do Christmas-related activities in their own home. Just over a majority (51 percent) plan on giving gifts, while 44 percent plan to decorate a Christmas tree and only 5 percent plan on telling the Christmas story. In the homes of relatives or friends, significant majorities plan on giving gifts (77 percent) and eating Christmas foods (62 percent), although again, very few (6 percent) plan on telling the Christmas story:

11. Which of the following are you planning to do in your own home (check all that apply):	Count	% (of 342)	12. Which of the following are you planning to do in the homes of relatives and/or friends (check all that apply):	Count	% (of 342)
Decorate a Christmas tree	151	44	Decorate a Christmas tree	76	22
Hang stockings	121	35	Hang stockings	55	16
Give gifts	175	51	Give gifts	262	77
Christmas decorations	93	27	Christmas decorations	45	13
Christmas music and songs	91	27	Christmas music and songs	135	39
Christmas foods	101	30	Christmas foods	211	62
Tell the Christmas story	17	5	Tell the Christmas story	22	6

In addition, only 18 percent of these families plan on attending religious services for Christmas this year.

Of the 289 respondents who answered the question, “If you are raising your children as Jews, will you tell your non-Jewish relatives not to give Christmas presents to your children?”, 261, or 90 percent, said they would not tell their non-Jewish relatives not to give Christmas presents. Most of the respondents offered explanations for their decision; a significant majority of the responses cited respect for non-Jewish relatives as the reason for their decision:

Because we are an interfaith family and my son is being taught that he is being raised Jewish because it was a decision made by his father and I to do so. But he knows what his mother believes in and is taught to respect her beliefs and traditions.

While they are being raised as Jews, the non-Jews are part of their family too. If I am going to teach my children respect for others and for others' views, I have to start with myself.

I want my children to learn about and respect other people's faiths. If non-Jews want to give them gifts to show their love, that's great.

Both family traditions are important and deserve to be honored.

A number of respondents also said they didn't want to “make waves” or cause “turmoil”:

It is my husband's wish not to "cause waves."

Because it would hurt my parents' and grandmother's feelings.

It would be insulting to my relatives to tell them not to give the kids gifts.

Some in the Jewish community are concerned with religious “syncretism,” or blending of religious traditions. This year, 89 percent of the respondents who said they were participating in celebrations of both holidays said they would keep their holiday celebrations separate, while only 8 percent said they would be blended.

2. If you plan to participate in both Hanukkah and Christmas celebrations this year, will you blend your holiday celebrations, or kept them separate, where 5 = kept separate, and 1 = blended.	Count	% (of 308)
1	13	4
2	12	4
3	10	3
4	34	11
5	239	78

Following up on last year’s survey, we asked if respondents had heard about “Chrismukkah,” a holiday first mentioned on the Fox drama “The O.C.” that combines symbols and celebrations of Hanukkah and Christmas into one holiday. There was an increased awareness of Chrismukkah since last year. Of the 581 survey respondents in interfaith relationships, 71 percent said they had heard of Chrismukkah, as compared to 57 percent last year, and only 29 percent had not, compared to 43 percent last year. Of those who had heard of Chrismukkah, 68 percent said they thought that Chrismukkah is a bad idea, while 10 percent think it is a good idea:

4. Please rate whether you think Chrismukkah is a good idea or a bad idea, where 5 = a very bad idea and 1 = a very good idea.	Count	% (of 411)
1	15	4
2	25	6
3	91	22
4	108	26
5	172	42

Among respondents in interfaith relationships raising their children Jewish, even greater numbers thought Chrismukkah was a bad idea (75 percent) and fewer (5 percent) thought it was a good idea.

4. Please rate whether you think Chrismukkah is a good idea or a bad idea, where 5 = a very bad idea and 1 = a very good idea.	Count	% (of 248)
1	3	1
2	11	4
3	47	19
4	72	29
5	115	46

While most of the respondents who plan to celebrate Hanukkah expect to enjoy their celebrations this year (87 percent), a little more than half (56 percent) said they expect to enjoy their participation in Christmas celebrations:

8. If you plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations this year, please rate how much you expect to enjoy your celebrations, where 5 = a great deal, and 1 = not at all.	Count	% (of 340)	15. If you plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, please rate how much you expect to enjoy your celebrations, where 5 = a great deal, and 1 = not at all.	Count	% (of 305)
1	0	0	1	15	5
2	6	2	2	42	14
3	37	11	3	78	26
4	117	34	4	80	26
5	180	53	5	90	30

However, when it comes to children, more than three-quarters (76 percent) expect their children to enjoy Christmas celebrations, while 91 percent expect their children to enjoy Hanukkah celebrations. This would suggest that children being raised Jewish in interfaith families enjoy both holidays, while their parents are much more ambivalent about Christmas.

9. If your children will participate in Hanukkah celebrations this year, please rate how much you expect they will enjoy your celebrations, where 5 = a great deal, and 1 = not at all.	Count	% (of 285)	16. If your children will participate in Christmas celebrations this year, please rate how much you expect they will enjoy your celebrations, where 5 = a great deal, and 1 = not at all.	Count	% (of 244)
1	0	0	1	3	1
2	2	1	2	12	5
3	23	8	3	44	18
4	82	29	4	61	25
5	178	62	5	124	51

For interfaith families raising Jewish children, a primary way to resolve potential conflicts over the December holidays is to participate in celebrations of both holidays but treat Hanukkah as a religious holiday and Christmas as a secular one. Only 23 percent of respondents who are celebrating Hanukkah reported that their Hanukkah celebrations would be more secular than religious. In contrast, 79 percent of respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations said their Christmas celebrations would be more secular than religious, a point verified by the very low number of respondents who plan

on telling the Christmas story either at their home (5 percent) or the home of relatives and friends (6 percent).

7. If you plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations, where 5 = deeply religious, and 1 = entirely secular.	Count	% (of 340)	14. If you plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations, where 5 = deeply religious, and 1 = entirely secular.	Count	% (of 305)
1	15	4	1	188	62
2	63	19	2	51	17
3	179	53	3	42	14
4	76	22	4	17	6
5	7	2	5	7	2

Despite the evidence of ambivalence over Christmas, three-quarters of respondents feel that participating in Christmas celebrations will not affect their children’s Jewish identity.

21. If you are raising your children as Jews and you participate in Christmas celebrations, do you think that your participation in Christmas celebrations affects your child’s Jewish identity?	Count	% (of 276)
Yes	67	25
No	209	75

Many of the respondents said they’re comfortable with the distinctions they’ve made between the holidays:

...to our children, Christmas is just a fun day that has nothing to do with Jesus. We celebrate Shabbat once a week, so I don't think one evening of opening Christmas gifts will undermine all of the other Jewish celebrations we have throughout the year.

Our children know they are Jews - you can participate in another culture’s celebrations without becoming their religion or taking their identity.

We approach Christmas as a secular tradition, not a religious observance. Christmas is like Halloween and Thanksgiving.

We don't think that participating in Christmas celebrations affects our children's Jewish identity because our kids celebrate being Jewish virtually every day.

However, some reported concerns over the impact of participating in Christmas celebrations on their children's Jewish identity:

This is the major issue I am struggling over. [My children] are too young right now to ask questions.

My kids (9 & 6) are curious about Christmas religious celebrations. They usually ask to be able to go church on Christmas. I think the fact that they know their friends go to church on Christmas also plays a role in that.

It gives them a sort of dual consciousness, which I find a useful perspective in adulthood but may be difficult for a child to negotiate. My children attend a Jewish Day School where Christmas is never mentioned, so they catch on early that it's not the best place to talk about their Christmas tree or stocking stuffers. Ironically, there are quite a few families at our school who celebrate both holidays to some extent. Unfortunately, when parents talk about it together we do so in whispers rather than in open dialogue.

...it raises the question of why we celebrate a holiday that is not "ours," and in this way drives home the sense of being "other." At very young ages, as children are learning what is "Jewish" and "Christian," the sharing of traditions requires parent to educate our children, and to define our identity as Jews over and against Christian practices again and again.

A handful of respondents said that celebrating both holidays actually strengthens their children's Jewish identity.

I think frankly it strengthens the Jewish identity ... We teach our kids to honor and respect other people, which includes being interested in or at least supportive of other others' differences. ... In fact, they love showing their Christian cousins how to light a menorah, and what it means and commemorates.

The clarity with which you express your own feelings and the openness of the atmosphere that you create in your household is what really teaches. Allowing others to express their feelings and ideas/not preaching is what made her comfortable with Judaism.

If anything, our participation in Christian holidays has made our Jewish identity stronger. With two Christians and two Jews in our household, our celebrations make for perfect settings for discussion about Jewish vs. Christian traditions, etc.

Of the 155 Jews in interfaith families who report having a Christmas tree in the home, slightly less than half of the Jews in interfaith families feel comfortable with having a Christmas tree in their home (48 percent) while slightly more than a quarter (28 percent) feel uncomfortable with having a Christmas tree in their home:

17. If you are Jewish and you will have a Christmas tree in your home, please rank how you expect to feel about the tree, where 5 = very comfortable, and 1 = very uncomfortable.	Count	% (of 155)
1	13	12
2	18	16
3	27	24
4	18	16
5	36	32

Conclusions

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

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

According to our survey, interfaith families raising Jewish children who participate in Christmas celebrations are doing a very good job of distinguishing between the holidays and are giving clear priority to Hanukkah over Christmas, as both a family celebration and a religious holiday.

While these families do not observe Hanukkah in a deeply religious way, their participation in Christmas celebrations is almost entirely secular. Very few of these families expect to tell the Christmas story or attend Christmas services at church.

In contrast, the vast majority of these families plan on celebrating Hanukkah by lighting the menorah, giving gifts and eating Hanukkah foods. There is also a surprisingly low level of participation in even non-religious Christmas activities at home like listening to Christmas music, eating Christmas food or hanging stockings. Barely one-half even plan on giving Christmas gifts at home. Less than half plan on having a Christmas tree.

Many of these families plan on participating in Christmas celebrations at the homes of friends and relatives and plan on giving and receiving gifts, but it should be noted that many single Jews and in-married Jews also participate in Christmas celebrations at the homes of friends.

Despite the high level of participation in some kind of Christmas activities at homes of friends or relatives, these families feel comfortable that celebrating Christmas won't negatively impact their children's Jewish identity. For most of them, participating in Christmas at the home of extended family is simply a matter of respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish family. This emphasis on respect is also indicated by the very small number of families who will tell their non-Jewish relatives not to give Christmas gifts to their children.

Among Jewish partners in interfaith relationships, there is a significant level of ambivalence over Christmas, which could be expected from people who are trying to reinforce their children's Jewish identity. The children in these relationships, however, look forward to both Christmas and Hanukkah.

Appendix: Demographic information

Seventy-five percent of the respondents in interfaith relationships said they were raising their children as Jews:

Analysis of answers about religion in which children are/were being raised	Count	% (of 455 who answered questions about children)
Jewish	342	75
The non-Jewish partner's religion	18	4
Both	57	13
Some in one, some in other	33	7
None	6	1
Other (Not Jewish, not the partner's Religion)	25	5

There was not a significant difference between the percentage of Jews in interfaith relationships raising their children Jewish and the percentage of non-Jews in interfaith relationships raising their children Jewish:

Respondents identifying as Jews in interfaith relationships addressing what religion they will raise their children in:	Count	% (of 278)	Respondents identifying as non-Jews in interfaith relationships addressing what religion they will raise their children in:	Count	% (of 177)
My religion (Jewish)	204	73	My religion	8	5
Partner's religion	10	4	Partner's religion (Jewish)	138	78
Both	36	13	Both	21	12
Some in one, some in other	23	8	Some in one, some in other	10	6
None	6	2	None	0	0
Other (Not Jewish, not the partner's religion)	15	5	Other (Not own religion, not Jewish)	10	6

Sixty-one percent of the respondents in interfaith relationships who are raising their children Jewish who responded to a question about their religion identified as Jewish, 16% as Catholic, and 13% as Protestant:

26. What is your religion (check all that apply):	Count	% (of 342 answers)
Jewish	208	61
Catholic	54	16
Protestant	45	13
Muslim	0	0
Hindu	0	0
Agnostic	7	2
Atheist	5	2
None	12	4
Other	35	10

Eighty-five percent of respondents in interfaith relationships who were raising their children Jewish were female:

29. What is your gender:	Count	% (of 342)
Male	51	15
Female	291	85

Seventy-four percent of respondents in interfaith relationships who were raising their children Jewish were between 30 and 49:

30. What is your age:	Count	% (of 342)
20-29	36	11
30-39	154	45
40-49	100	29
50-59	40	12
60-69	10	3
70 and over	2	1

Age of children:

31. What is the age of your children (check all that apply):	Count	% (of 297)
10 and under	224	75
11-19	83	28
20-29	30	10
30 and over	11	4