

What We Learned from the 2008 Passover/Easter Survey

By Micah Sachs

Introduction

While the confluence of Passover and Easter is not as culturally prominent as the so-called "December dilemma," deciding how to celebrate these major religious holidays is one of the key potential conflicts in interfaith families. In February 2008, we conducted our fourth annual Passover/Easter Survey to determine the attitudes and behaviors of people in interfaith relationships during Passover and Easter.

The survey attracted 625 responses. Of those 625 respondents, 410 said they were in interfaith relationships. Of those 410, 278 have children. Of those 278, 196, or 70%, were raising their children solely in the Jewish religion. Nationally, 33 to 39 percent of interfaith couples are raising their children solely in the Jewish religion, according to the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Study.

This report focuses on the responses of the ***196 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. The goal of this report is to determine how interfaith families raising their children Jewish deal with the competing demands of the two holidays.

We chose to focus on this population for several reasons:

1. One of the goals of our organization is to promote interfaith couples raising their children Jewish. We therefore want to know more about the exact dynamics of how this works, especially during potential periods of conflict, such as when Passover and Easter overlap.
2. Jewish community policy-makers are focusing increasing attention on engaging interfaith families with the Jewish community with the end goal of the families deciding to raise their children Jewish. As a 2007 study on the American Jewish population noted, "There is increasing evidence... that more intermarried families are choosing to raise children Jewishly."¹
3. There is increasing interest in what intermarried families raising their children Jewish "look like." Until recently, almost all studies of intermarriage have at intermarried Jews as an undifferentiated group and failed to make the important distinction between those intermarried couples that have chosen to create a Jewish home and those who have not. Earlier this month, Combined Jewish Philanthropies (the Boston Jewish federation) released a report² that focused on the behaviors of intermarried couples raising their children Jewish. That paper's general conclusion was that intermarried families raising Jewish children behave remarkably like inmarried Reform Jewish families with children. This report, like our previous reports on the

¹ 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.

² Katherine N. Gan, Patty Jacobson, Gil Preuss and Barry Shrage. *The 2005 Greater Boston Community Study, Intermarried Families and Their Children: A Report from Combined Jewish Philanthropies* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies, 2008).



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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."



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.

The vast majority (98%) of the 196 respondents plan on participating in Passover activities. More than half plan to host a seder (54%) while nearly three-quarters plan to attend one (74%). Taken together, nearly all (97%) plan on hosting or attending a seder. Most plan on telling the Passover story (79%) or eating matzah (92%). Only an insignificant minority don't plan on participating in Passover celebrations at all. A majority even plan on following the dietary restrictions for most or all of the eight days of Passover.

Q2. What Passover activities, if any, do you plan to participate in this year?	Count	% (of 196)
Host seder	105	54%
Attend seder	146	74%
Tell the Passover story	155	79%
Eat matzah	181	92%
Follow dietary restrictions for most or all eight days of Passover	125	64%
Will not participate in Passover celebrations	4	2%

Table 1. Passover Activities of Respondents

Meanwhile, fewer than half plan on participating in Easter activities (45%). Few plan on participating in the more "religious" Easter activities like going to church (15%) or telling the Easter story (1%). Fewer than a third (30%) even plan on attending Easter dinner. In total only 36% plan on hosting or attending an Easter dinner--compare this with the 97% who plan on hosting or attending a seder.

Q6. What Easter activities, if any, do you plan on participating in this year?	Count	% (of 196)
Watch Easter-themed movie	5	3%
Attend religious services	29	15%
Decorate eggs	42	21%
Participate in an Easter egg hunt	39	20%
Host Easter dinner	13	7%
Attend Easter dinner	58	30%
Tell the Easter story	1	1%
Will not participate in Easter celebrations	107	55%

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 far more say their celebrations of Easter will be entirely secular (66%) than say their celebrations of Passover will be entirely secular (1%). And 37% saw their Passover celebrations as tending toward the religious side of the spectrum vs. only 8% who saw their Easter celebrations as deeply religious or religious.

Q3. Please rate the religious nature of your Passover celebrations, where 5 = deeply religious and 1 = entirely secular.	Count	% (of 192)	Q7. Please rate the religious nature of your Easter celebrations, where 5 = deeply religious and 1 = entirely secular.	Count	% (of 89)
5 – deeply religious	8	4%	5 – deeply religious	2	2%
4	63	33%	4	5	6%
3	87	45%	3	8	9%
2	31	16%	2	13	15%
1 – entirely secular	2	1%	1 – entirely secular	59	66%
Not applicable	1	1%	Not applicable	2	2%

Table 3. Religious Nature of Passover vs. Easter Celebrations

Overall, the great majority of respondents say they are "very comfortable" or comfortable (89%) with participating in Passover celebrations. Meanwhile, there is a far greater level of ambivalence over Easter's arrival, with 38% saying they're uncomfortable or very uncomfortable about participating in Easter celebrations.

Q8. How comfortable do you feel about participating in Passover celebrations?	Count	% (of 192)	Q4. How comfortable do you feel about participating in Easter celebrations?	Count	% (of 89)
5 – very comfortable	128	67%	5 – very comfortable	22	25%

4	42	22%	4	9	10%
3	15	8%	3	24	27%
2	6	3%	2	25	28%
1 – very uncomfortable	1	1%	1 – very uncomfortable	9	10%

Table 4. Respondents’ Comfort Level with Passover vs. Comfort Level with Easter

Numerous studies have shown that the mother’s religious background has a much greater influence over the children’s religious behavior than the father’s religious background. Although our cohort of respondents have all said they are raising their children exclusively Jewish, it is still particularly instructive to compare the Jewish behaviors of couples where the woman is Jewish vs. couples where the man is Jewish. One would expect that both kinds of couples would show a preponderance of Passover-related behaviors. Statistically, there are no meaningful differences between the two groups. This shows that even in interfaith households raising children Jewish where the mother isn’t Jewish, Jewish behaviors are highly prevalent.

Respondents in An Interfaith Couple Where the Woman Is Jewish			Respondents in an Interfaith Couple Where the Woman Is Not Jewish		
Q2. What Passover activities, if any, do you plan to participate in this year?	Count	% (of 128)	Q2. What Passover activities, if any, do you plan to participate in this year?	Count	% (of 64)
Host seder	67	52%	Host seder	35	55%
Attend seder	97	76%	Attend seder	46	72%
Tell the Passover story	99	77%	Tell the Passover story	52	81%
Eat matzah	119	93%	Eat matzah	58	91%
Follow dietary restrictions for most or all eight days of Passover	81	63%	Follow dietary restrictions for most or all eight days of Passover	40	63%
Will not participate in Passover celebrations	1	1%	Will not participate in Passover celebrations	3	5%

Table 5. Passover Activities of Respondents, Couples Where the Woman Is Jewish vs. Couples Where the Woman Is Not Jewish

It is particularly revealing to look at the Easter behaviors of couples where the woman is Jewish vs. where the woman is not Jewish. Even among our cohort of respondents--all of whom are raising their children exclusively Jewish--Easter behaviors are much more prevalent when the woman is not Jewish. This is especially the case for "secular" Easter activities like decorating eggs and participating in Easter egg hunts. Fewer couples where the woman is Jewish plan on decorating eggs (16%) than couples where the woman is not Jewish (33%); the same pattern holds for participating in an Easter egg hunt (15% when the woman is Jewish, 30% when she is not). Sixty percent of couples where the woman is Jewish plan on not participating in Easter celebrations at all vs. 44% of non-Jewish-woman couples.

"Religious" Easter behaviors are not very common among either kinds of couples, but they are slightly more common among non-Jewish woman couples. Twenty-two percent of non-Jewish woman couples

plan on going to church vs. 11% of Jewish-woman couples. Interestingly, almost no respondents in either cohort plan on telling the Easter story. But a higher percentage of non-Jewish woman couples (36%) plan on attending Easter dinner vs. their Jewish counterparts (25%), suggesting the typically stronger bonds heterosexual households have with the mother's family than the father's family. There are no significant differences in the religiosity of their celebrations of Easter--the great majority of both groups characterize their Easter celebrations as "secular" or "entirely secular."

Respondents in An Interfaith Couple Where the Woman Is Jewish			Respondents in an Interfaith Couple Where the Woman Is Not Jewish		
Q6. What Easter activities, if any, do you plan on participating in this year?	Count	% (of 128)	Q6. What Easter activities, if any, do you plan on participating in this year?	Count	% (of 64)
Watch Easter-themed movies or plays	3	2%	Watch Easter-themed movies or plays	2	3%
Attend religious services	14	11%	Attend religious services	14	22%
Decorate eggs	20	16%	Decorate eggs	21	33%
Participate in an Easter egg hunt	19	15%	Participate in an Easter egg hunt	19	30%
Host Easter dinner	9	7%	Host Easter dinner	4	6%
Attend Easter dinner	32	25%	Attend Easter dinner	23	36%
Tell the Easter story	1	1%	Tell the Easter story	0	0%
Will not participate in Easter celebrations	78	61%	Will not participate in Easter celebrations	28	44%

Table 6. Easter Activities of Respondents, Couples Where the Woman Is Jewish vs. Couples Where the Woman Is Not Jewish

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 (72%), respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent's extended family (68%) or open-mindedness/tolerance (64%). Few explained their participation in Easter celebrations as a way not to upset the non-Jewish parent (8%) or her extended family (15%), and few told their children participating in Easter was an opportunity for them to decide what religion to adopt (5%). However, more than a third (37%) 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.

Q24. How do you explain or talk about your participation in Easter celebrations to your children?	Count	% (of 109)
Respect for non-Jewish parent's traditions	78	72%
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	9	8%
Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent's extended family	74	68%
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent's extended family	16	15%
Open-mindedness/tolerance	70	64%
Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	40	37%

Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	5	5%
Other	15	14%

Table 7. How Respondents Explain Their Participation in Easter to Their Children

There were some differences between how Jewish respondents and non-Jewish respondents explained Easter participation to their children. More than three-quarters (76%) of non-Jewish respondents pointed to open-minded/tolerance, compared to 60% of Jewish respondents. And nearly half (48%) of non-Jewish respondents pointed to desire to expose their children to a different faith tradition vs. 33% of Jewish respondents. These differences suggest that Jewish and non-Jewish spouses might not be entirely on the same page when it comes to explaining Easter celebrations to their children.

Jewish Respondents			Christian Respondents		
Q24. If you are raising your children as Jews, how do you explain or talk about your participation in Easter celebrations to your children?	Count	% (of 80)	Q24. If you are raising your children as Jews, how do you explain or talk about your participation in Easter celebrations to your children?	Count	% (of 29)
Respect for non-Jewish parent's traditions	56	70%	Respect for non-Jewish parent's traditions	22	76%
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	7	9%	Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	2	7%
Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent's extended family	56	70%	Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent's extended family	18	62%
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent's extended family	12	15%	Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent's extended family	4	14%
Open-mindedness/tolerance	48	60%	Open-mindedness/tolerance	22	76%
Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	26	33%	Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	14	48%
Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	3	4%	Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	2	7%
Other	9	11%	Other	6	21%

Table 8. How Respondents Explain Their Participation in Easter to Their Children, Jewish Respondents vs. Christian Respondents

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 key Jewish behaviors (lighting Shabbat candles, attending weekly synagogue services, etc.), level of childhood Jewish education, number of Jewish friends and membership in religious organizations. Our respondents were very similar to the Jewish population in general as reported by the NJPS 2000-01. Our respondents are much more likely to light Shabbat candles "always" or "usually" than the general Jewish population (41% vs. 28%) and far more likely to be synagogue members than the general population (82% vs. 46%).

	Respondents to our survey	NJPS 2000-01
Half or more friends are Jewish*	60%	52%
Hold/attend Passover seder	84%	77%
Light Shabbat candles	41%	28%
Light Hanukkah candles	78%	72%
Attend Jewish religious services**	23%	27%
Belong to synagogue	82%	46%
Belong to JCC	22%	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 9. Jewish Connections of Respondents vs. American Jews (NJPS 2000-01)

Demographic Portrait of Our Respondents

Of the 625 people who responded to our Passover-Easter Survey, 196 said they were intermarried, had children and had raised or were raising their children exclusively Jewish. Of those 196 respondents, the majority (80%) are Jewish:

Q10. What is your religion? Please check all that apply.	Count	% (of 196)
Jewish	156	80%
Catholic	15	8%
Protestant	14	7%
Muslim	0	0%
Hindu	0	0%
Agnostic/Atheist	6	3%
None	4	2%
Other	8	4%

Table 10. Religion of Respondents

Their partners were a mix of Jewish (30%), Catholic (29%), Protestant (15%) 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.

Q16. What is your spouse's religion? Please check all that apply.	Count	% (of 196)
Jewish	58	30%
Catholic	56	29%
Protestant	29	15%
Muslim	22	11%
Hindu	0	0%
Agnostic/Atheist	0	0%
None	15	8%
Not applicable	13	7%
Other	19	10%

Table 11. Religion of Respondents' Spouses

The great majority of the respondents were female (81%).

Q9. What is your gender?	Count	% (of 196)
Female	159	81%
Male	37	19%

Table 12. Gender of Respondents

Two-thirds were between the ages of 30 and 49.

Q19. What is your age?	Count	% (of 196)
Under 20	0	0%
20-29	7	4%
30-39	67	34%
40-49	63	32%
50-59	48	24%
60-69	9	5%
70 and over	2	1%

Table 13. Age of Respondents

Thirty-nine percent have children 3 or younger. 59% have children 8 or younger.

Q21. What is the age of your children? Please check all that apply.	Count	% (of 196)
0-3	76	39%
4-5	42	21%
6-8	39	20%
9-12	42	21%
13-17	42	21%
18-30	39	20%
30 and over	14	7%

Table 14. Age of Respondents' Children

Along with Passover activities, we also asked about the frequency of Jewish behaviors, basing our questions on the survey instrument for the 2005 Great Boston Jewish Community Study. Large majorities say they always light Hanukkah candles (78%) and attend or hold a Passover seder (84%) and two-fifths (41%) say they light candles on Friday night "all of the time" or "usually." The great majority (81%) say that no one in their household ever attends weekly services at church or another non-Jewish house of worship.

Q25. How often does someone in your household:	All of the time	Usually	Some of the time	Never	Response total
Light candles on Friday nights?	27 (14%)	53 (27%)	72 (37%)	44 (22%)	196
Light Hanukkah candles?	152 (78%)	36 (18%)	5 (3%)	3 (2%)	196
Have a Christmas tree in your home?	58 (30%)	11 (6%)	32 (16%)	95 (48%)	196
Attend or hold a Passover seder?	164 (84%)	23 (12%)	5 (3%)	4 (2%)	196
Attend weekly services at a synagogue?	16 (8%)	29 (15%)	120 (61%)	31 (16%)	196

Attend weekly services at a church or other non-Jewish house of worship?	5 (3%)	3 (2%)	30 (15%)	158 (81%)	196
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Table 15. Frequency of Respondents' Religious Behaviors

As far as Jewish social connections, the majority say that "about half" or more of their friends are Jewish (60%).

Q27. How many of your friends are Jewish?	Count	% (of 196)
All	2	1%
Most	39	20%
About half	77	39%
Some	75	38%
None	3	2%

Table 16. Jewish Friendship Patterns of Respondents

As a group, our Jewish respondents had experienced a surprisingly high level of Jewish education as children. 76% indicated they received some kind of Jewish education from grades 1-8, and 42% indicated they received some kind of Jewish education from grades 9-12. However, in analyzing the data, we did not find any significant relationship between the level of Jewish education as a child and levels of Passover or Easter activities as an intermarried adult.

Q26. Which of the following types of Jewish education did you receive in:	One day a week	Part-time more than once a week	Full-time Jewish day school	Other Jewish schooling	None	Response total
Grades 1-8	44 (28%)	66 (42%)	8 (5%)	3 (2%)	37 (24%)	156
Grades 9-12	44 (28%)	17 (11%)	2 (1%)	2 (1%)	91 (58%)	156

Table 17. Jewish Education of Respondents

Conclusions

Overall, 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. Nearly all plan on hosting or attending a seder and nearly two-thirds plan on following dietary restrictions for most or all of the eight days of Passover.

Conversely, they are participating in far fewer Easter activities. More than half are not participating in Easter celebrations at all, while only 36% plan on hosting or attending an Easter dinner. Only very small minorities plan to engage in "religious" Easter activities like telling the Easter story or attending religious services--indeed, only one of 196 respondents plans to tell the Easter story.

For those that are participating in Easter, they overwhelmingly see their participation in Easter as secular. Conversely, while they don't see Passover as deeply religious, they see it as significantly more religious than Easter.

Having firmly 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.

It is the case, however, that Easter activities are more prevalent in Jewish homes where the mother is not Jewish. More households with a non-Jewish mother plan on decorating eggs and participating in an Easter egg hunt. But tellingly, only small percentages of even these non-Jewish-woman households plan on hosting Easter dinner or going to church--and none of them plan on telling the Easter story. While they are more likely to participate in "secular" Easter activities, they are still not particularly likely to participate in "religious" Easter activities. Most of them still characterize their Easter celebrations as secular, and few view their Easter celebrations as religious.