

## What We Learned from the Eighth Annual December Holidays Survey

By Edmund Case

### Abstract

In November-December 2011, InterfaithFamily.com conducted its eighth annual December Holidays Survey to determine how people in interfaith relationships deal with the competing demands of Hanukkah and Christmas. The confluence of those holidays, the so-called “December dilemma,” has been considered one of the most significant potential flashpoints in intermarriages between Jews and Christians.

Of the 484 respondents, we focused on the 144 who were in interfaith relationships and raising children exclusively Jewish. The overwhelming majority of these respondents participate in both Hanukkah and Christmas celebrations. The vast majority plans on participating in Hanukkah celebrations at their own home, while less than half (48%) plan on celebrating Christmas at their own home. They report that they see Hanukkah as more religious than Christmas, and Christmas as a largely secular celebration. This year as compared to last year, we observed more participation in secular Christmas activities, somewhat less keeping the two holidays’ celebrations separate, and stable feelings that participating in Christmas celebrations did not compromise the children’s Jewish identity.

These results suggest that interfaith families raising Jewish children still make clear distinctions between the holidays and are giving clear priority to Hanukkah over Christmas, as both a family celebration and a religious holiday.

### Introduction

One of the most significant flashpoints in intermarriages between Jews and Christians has been the so-called “December dilemma,” the confluence of Hanukkah and Christmas. In November-December 2011, we conducted our eighth annual December Holidays Survey to determine how people in interfaith relationships deal with the competing demands of Hanukkah and Christmas.

The survey attracted 484 responses, compared to 586 in 2010. Of all respondents, 318 reported being in interfaith relationships (as the Jewish partner or with a Jewish partner). Of those 318 respondents, 221 said they had raised or were raising children, and of those respondents, 144, or 65%, said they had raised or were raising their children exclusively as Jews, compared to 70% in 2010. Our survey is not a representative sample of all interfaith families.

As in past years, this report focuses on the responses of the *144 survey participants who are in interfaith relationships and raising their children exclusively 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 for several reasons:

1. One of the goals of our organization is to empower interfaith families to make Jewish choices. We therefore want to know more about the exact dynamics of how the process of raising children as Jewish in interfaith families works, especially during potential periods of conflict, such as the December holiday season.
2. Studies of intermarriage have looked 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. Our holiday surveys are some of the few to date that have looked at the behaviors of those interfaith families who are raising their children Jewish.
3. We hope that Jewish community policy-makers will focus increasing attention on engaging interfaith families with the Jewish community with the end goal of the families deciding to raise their children Jewish.

## The Report

**Please note:** Unless otherwise noted, any use of the term "cohort" or "respondents" refers to interfaith families raising Jewish children. This is not a report on all interfaith couples, or all interfaith couples with children.

Almost all of the intermarried respondents who are raising Jewish children<sup>1</sup> expect to participate in Hanukkah celebrations and Christmas celebrations this year: 97% plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations. But more plan to participate in Christmas celebrations – 83%, up from 76% last year.

There still are telling differences in where they plan to celebrate each holiday, however. The overwhelming majority (97%) plans on celebrating Hanukkah at home, while less than half (48%) plan on celebrating Christmas at home. Seventy-one percent plan on celebrating Christmas at the home of relatives, far more than the number that plan on celebrating Hanukkah at the home of relatives (42%). We observed a large increase in those reporting that they would celebrate Christmas at the home of friends (from 16% last year, to 34% this year) and in public activities like tree lightings or going to a movie (from 19% last year to 30% this year). Almost four times as many plan on participating in Hanukkah celebrations at synagogue (51%) as plan on going to church for Christmas (13%) (see Table 9. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 10).

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents were only considered Jewish if they reported that they were Jewish and no other religion, and respondents' children were only considered as being raised Jewish if they were reported as being raised Jewish and no other religion.

**Table 1. Location of Hanukkah and Christmas Celebrations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

Where will you be participating in Hanukkah celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 140)	Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 119)
Own home	97	Own home	48
Home of relatives	42	Home of relatives	71
Home of friends	30	Home of friends	34
Workplace/off-site work party	6	Workplace/off-site work party	25
Temple or synagogue	51	Public activity (such as tree lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	30
Jewish Community Center	14		

The majority of these respondents plan on doing multiple activities relating to the celebration of Hanukkah in their own home. Ninety-nine percent plan on lighting the menorah, 93% plan on giving gifts and 90% plan on making or eating Hanukkah foods. The smaller numbers of people that are planning to celebrate Hanukkah with friends or relatives also plan on doing a high level of Hanukkah activities.

**Table 2. Hanukkah Behaviors in Various Locations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children (n = 140)**

Which of the following are you planning on doing in the following places:	Own home (%)	Home of relatives (%)	Home of friends (%)	Workplace/off-site work party (%)	Temple or synagogue (%)	Jewish Community Center (%)
Light menorah	99	41	27	4	39	9
Give gifts	93	43	16	2	4	3
Put up Hanukkah decorations	75	7	4	4	11	5
Sing/play Hanukkah music and songs	66	18	16	4	42	14
Eat/make Hanukkah foods	90	32	29	6	34	10
Watch Hanukkah movies	14	0	1	1	1	1
Tell the Hanukkah story	48	5	6	3	31	8
Play dreidel	77	24	18	4	21	6

The picture is somewhat reversed for Christmas activities, but not as much as last year. While seventy-four percent plan to give gifts at the home of relatives, 60% will give gifts at their own home, up from 53% last year. Still, 61% plan on eating and/or preparing Christmas foods at the home of relatives (vs. 33% planning on eating/preparing Christmas foods at home). Overall, 46% plan on putting up or decorating a Christmas tree at their own home (compared to 48% last year), and another 10% plan on putting up a Christmas tree at the home of a relative or friend. Forty-six percent said they would watch Christmas movies at home, up from 32% last year.

**Table 3. Christmas Behaviors at Various Locations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children (n = 119)**

Which of the following are you planning on doing in the following places:	Own home (%)	Home of relatives (%)	Home of friends (%)	Workplace/off-site work party (%)
Decorate a Christmas tree	46	24	4	2
Put up a Christmas tree	46	17	2	0
Hang stockings	37	24	1	1
Give gifts	60	74	25	15
Put up other Christmas decorations	40	13	2	4
Sing/play Christmas music and songs	40	29	16	8
Eat/prepare Christmas foods	33	61	28	14
Drink egg nog	22	17	8	3
Watch Christmas movie(s)	47	20	2	0
Tell the Christmas story	3	3	0	0

In contrast to these more secular activities, the lack of religious content in the respondents' celebration of Christmas can be seen by their low level of attendance of Christmas religious services (13%), consistent with 12% last year and 14% in 2009 (see Table 9. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 10). In addition, few participate in the more religious behavior of telling the Christmas story – only 3% will do so in their own home, 3% at the home of relatives, compared to 1% and 2% last year.

This lack of religious Christmas activity aligns with the respondents' views of the religious nature of their holiday celebrations. Only 4% of respondents participating in Christmas see their Christmas celebrations as religious, compared to 20% of respondents participating in Hanukkah who see their Hanukkah celebrations as religious. Eighty-eight percent of those participating in Christmas celebrations see their Christmas celebrations as secular in nature, whereas 26% of those participating in Hanukkah celebrations see their Hanukkah celebrations as secular in nature. These figures are all consistent with those reported last year. (See Table 10. Level of Religiosity of Hanukkah vs. Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 10)

This year, Christmas falls on the fifth day of Hanukkah. We asked whether that overlap would change how people observed the holidays. Thirty-nine percent said it would (5% Hanukkah, 16% Christmas, 18% both); 62% said it would not. Respondents were asked to explain their answers; of 38 comments, the most prevalent (14) was that the respondents would like the menorah at their Christian relative's house. One person said she would ask her sister's permission to do that; two said they would delay their Hanukkah observance; three said their children would not get Hanukkah gifts on December 25 because they would be getting Christmas gifts that morning.

We also investigated how our respondents who celebrate both holidays felt about being wished "Merry Christmas" by strangers. Overall, a majority said they were appreciative of the holiday cheer (50%), while only 19% indicated they were offended (see Table 13. Feelings About "Merry Christmas," Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11).

While some in the Jewish community are concerned about religious syncretism—the blending of two religious traditions—these respondents are not blending Hanukkah and Christmas. Eighty percent say they will keep the holidays separate or mostly separate (down from 87% last year and 89% in 2009). (See Table 11. Level of “Blending” of Hanukkah and Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11)

The survey respondents are not particularly concerned that participation in Christmas celebrations affects their children’s Jewish identity. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations think it will not affect their children’s Jewish identity. (See Table 12. Perspective on Whether Participating in Christmas Celebrations Affects Children’s Identity, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11)

Those respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations explain their participation in Christmas celebrations to their children in a variety of ways. Sixty-eight percent cite respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family, 54% cite respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions and 44% cite open-mindedness/tolerance. Very few (5%) say participating in Christmas celebrations is an opportunity for their children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt.

**Table 4. Explaining Participation in Christmas Celebrations to Children, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

<b>If you participate in Christmas celebrations, how do you explain or talk about your participation in Christmas celebrations to your children? Please check all that apply.</b>	<b>% (n = 144)</b>
Respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions	54
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	6
Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	68
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	15
Open-mindedness/tolerance	44
Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	21
Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	5

These respondents cite a variety of reasons why they are not concerned that celebrating Christmas will affect their children’s identity. Although one respondent said “to me it’s always going to be a celebration of Christ’s birthday which I just don’t feel comfortable having my kids celebrate,” many respondents said their Christmas celebrations were not at all religious:

We don’t celebrate any of the religious aspects of Christmas. My husband is not

Jewish but is very active at our Temple and the only thing he wanted when we had children was to include the family fun part of Christmas. In fact, my oldest daughter commented that Christmas "is family".

-Comment #5

They view Christmas as a time of gifts and parties. There is no religion involved at all. Chanukah is the celebration we use to appreciate our culture.

-Comment #41

My children identify as Jewish. We keep a Jewish home. We are active members of our Synagogue where the children attended preschool and now attend Hebrew School. We celebrate and observe Jewish holidays. Celebrating Christmas does not change the Jewish identity and education that we provide to our children the other 364 days of the year. I compare it to celebrating Cinco de Mayo. That does not make us Mexican or change our American identity. It's just a fun celebration.

-Comment #68

Some respondents say their Christmas celebrations are to honor the traditions of the parent who is not Jewish:

Our daughter understands that Mommy and Daddy made the decision together to raise her Jewish and that we celebrate Christmas to keep Daddy's traditions alive.

-Comment #2

The kids know they are Jewish, mom is Catholic. We chose Judaism before they were born for our family. The tree and Christmas celebrations are respecting mom's traditions.

-Comment #54

Many commented that they describe Christmas as not "their" holiday to their children:

We have always been very clear about the lines. That Christmas (and Easter) are her father's (and his family's) holidays. We celebrate them with him because it makes him happy, and it makes us happy to do so.

-Comment #20

The children understand that we celebrate Christmas with their grandmother and other relatives because we love them and it is a holiday that is important to them.

-Comment #99

Our children help their Christmas-celebrating relatives celebrate their holiday. It is clearly explained that OUR holiday is Chanukah. But just as we give gifts and eat cake on someone else's birthday, we give gifts and have dinner at Nana's house because SHE celebrates Christmas.

-Comment #110

We are not celebrating Christmas in our home, we are "visiting" and helping her grandparents celebrate Christmas. We consider it like going to a wedding celebration; we aren't getting married, but we are helping celebrate the occasion.  
-Comment #55

Other interesting comments include:

We have raised them with a Jewish education and Jewish identity, with an appreciation for their father's and grandmother's Catholic traditions and culture. Their "outsider" status, more than anything, prepares them to approach religious holiday traditions with a critical mind.  
-Comment #49

Our children's identity is Jewish. They have never considered themselves "half." Santa makes a special visit to our house, because he always visited Mommy's house.  
-Comment #66

If you ask my children what religion they are, they will tell you "Jewish" without hesitation. My girls also say that Hanukkah is their favorite holiday... even better than Christmas! And our kids only get one gift for Hanukkah, not eight. We do special family traditions together each night of Hanukkah and I think that actually means more to them.  
-Comment #100

We celebrate a secular Christmas with my family, and hope to instill in our kids a respect for others' traditions in doing so. My husband and son attend a Christmas church service to hear me sing with my church choir, but that is similar to how I attend High Holiday services at synagogue with them.

A small minority reported concerns over the impact on their child's identity of participating in Christmas celebrations:

It's confusing. Hard to compete with the commercialism of Christmas.  
-Comment #36

Our 3 year old seems a bit confused about the fact that he is Jewish but has a X-mas tree. He told me (the Jewish parent) that I shouldn't celebrate X-mas (because he heard a Jewish character on a show say she didn't celebrate it).  
-Comment #43

## Conclusions

The great majority of interfaith couples raising their children as Jews plan on participating in celebrations of both Christmas and Hanukkah. More reported plans to participate in Christmas celebrations this year (83%) than last year (76%).

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 are doing so.

We found that interfaith families raising Jewish children who participate in Christmas celebrations make clear distinctions between the holidays and are giving clear priority to Hanukkah over Christmas, as both a family celebration and a religious holiday. The overwhelming majority celebrates Hanukkah at home, while less than half celebrate Christmas at home. Seventy-one percent celebrate Christmas at the home of relatives, suggesting that Christmas is largely centered around the extended family rather than the immediate family. Increasing numbers reported celebrating Christmas at the homes of friends and in public activities, as well.

These families do not see Hanukkah as a deeply religious holiday, but 51% plan on celebrating the holiday in a Jewish house of worship. Meanwhile, their participation in Christmas celebrations is almost entirely secular. Only 3% of these families expect to tell the Christmas story; only 13% expect to attend Christmas services at church. Moreover, 90% view their participation in Christmas celebrations as secular.

The vast majority of these families plan on celebrating Hanukkah by lighting the menorah, giving gifts and eating Hanukkah foods, and most plan on singing or playing Hanukkah music, putting up Hanukkah decorations and playing dreidel.

We observed more giving of Christmas gifts at home – 60% this year, compared to 53% last year – but a slight decline in having Christmas trees at home, from 48% last year to 46% this year. Fewer respondents reported keeping their holiday celebrations separate – 80%, down from 87% last year. But it remains the case that while these respondents report a high level of participation in secular Christmas activities, they still largely keep their holiday celebrations separate, and they feel comfortable that celebrating Christmas won't negatively impact their children's Jewish identity.

For most of the respondents, participating in Christmas is simply a matter of respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish family. Very few see participation in Christmas as an opportunity for their children to make up their own mind what religion to adopt. This suggests that these families are serious about their commitment to raise their children in one faith.

This year Christmas falls on the fifth day of Hanukkah. Most respondents said that their celebrations would not change as a result. Interestingly, of 38 comments explaining the responses, 14 said that they would light their Hanukkah menorahs at their Christian relatives' homes.

## Appendix I: Demographic Information

Of the 484 respondents to our survey, 144 said they are in an interfaith relationship and raising their children Jewish and no other religion. Three-quarters (74%) identify themselves as Jewish:

**Table 5. Religion of Respondents in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

What is your religion? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 144)
Jewish	74
Catholic	11
Protestant	6
Agnostic/Atheist	2
None	4
Other	6

Their partners were a mix of Jewish (28%), Catholic (30%), Protestant (15%) and other religions.

**Table 6. Religion of Spouses of Respondents in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

What is your spouse's religion? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 144)
Jewish	31
Catholic	22
Protestant	16
Agnostic/Atheist	17
None	7
Other	9

The great majority of respondents were female (90%) and 70% were between the ages of 30 and 49.

**Table 7. Age of Respondents in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

What is your age?	% (n = 144)
20-29	1
30-39	31
40-49	39
50-59	17
60-69	10
70 and over	1

Eighty-eight percent of the respondents have one (33%) or two (55%) children, and 47% of the families have children 5 or younger.

**Table 8. Age of Children in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

What is the age of your children? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 144)
0-3	28
4-5	19
6-8	30
9-12	26
13-17	18
18-30	15
30 and over	13

## Appendix II: Additional Charts

**Table 9. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

Which of the following public Christmas-related activities do you plan on doing? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 119)
Attend Christmas religious services	13
Attend a tree-lighting	13
Watch a Christmas parade	9
Attend a Christmas-themed concert, play or performance	20
Go to movie theater to see a Christmas movie	13
Bring kids to Santa at the mall	20

**Table 10. Level of Religiosity of Hanukkah vs. Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

If you plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations.	% (n = 140)	If you plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations.	% (n = 119)
5 – deeply religious	0	5 – deeply religious	0
4 – fairly religious	20	4 – fairly religious	4
3 – half secular, half religious	54	3 – half secular, half religious	8
2 – mostly secular	26	2 – mostly secular	19
1 – entirely secular	1	1 – entirely secular	69

**Table 11. Level of “Blending” of Hanukkah and Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

<b>If you plan to participate in both Hanukkah and Christmas celebrations this year, will you blend your holiday celebrations, or keep them separate?</b>	<b>% (n = 119)</b>
5 – keep separate	44
4 – keep mostly separate	36
3 – blend moderately	15
2 – blend significantly	3
1 – blend completely	0

**Table 12. Perspective on Whether Participating in Christmas Celebrations Affects Children’s Identity, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

<b>If you are participating in Christmas celebrations, do you think that your participation in Christmas celebrations affects your children’s Jewish identity?</b>	<b>% (n = 125)</b>
Yes	23
No	77

**Table 13. Feelings About “Merry Christmas,” Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

<b>How do you feel when someone you do not know wishes you a “Merry Christmas”?</b> <b>I am:</b>	<b>% (n = 119)</b>
Appreciative of the holiday cheer	50
Indifferent	31
Somewhat offended	19
Very offended	1