

Oh Christmas Tree

**Three Essays from InterfaithFamily.com
with Discussion Questions
By InterfaithFamily.com**

Introduction

How *do* people in interfaith families decide whether to have a Christmas tree? Does it depend on whether you are religiously observant of Judaism? Of Christianity? Does it bother the Jewish partner to have one, or the non-Jewish partner not to have one?

One thing we don't know for sure is what having a Christmas tree means for the children of interfaith families. Jewish social scientists assume that it's an indicator of lack of commitment to Jewish life. Interfaith families, on the other hand, disagree. According to InterfaithFamily.com's survey data, most interfaith families raising Jewish children who have Christmas trees at home view them as secular symbols.

The whole question may turn out to be a big evergreen red herring. Since the Jewish community has been more welcoming of children of interfaith families, other factors than pine needles in the carpeting may be more important. For children who go to Hebrew school, have bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, light Shabbat candles and go to Jewish camp, a Christmas tree may not have any religious significance or confuse them as to their Jewish identity.

In the meantime, the choice about whether to have a Christmas tree at home and how to think about it is an important relationship question for interfaith couples. We've assembled some articles from our website, and a set of values-clarifying questions to facilitate discussion.

The Christmas Compromise

By Sarah Callahan

Holidays combine religion and family at the gut level. Because they are filled with concrete symbols and rituals, holidays, more than any other aspects of family life, have shaped the religious identities of my husband and me.

For interfaith families like ours, holidays can be the most difficult test. Because holidays are so enriching to our families--an opportunity to rise out of our workday routines and celebrate together, reaffirm connections with extended family, and get a sense of tradition and continuity--it was worth working through the heavy emotional issues to arrive at a holiday pattern that we can really enjoy.



In deciding how we wanted to handle the holidays in our home, we chose to celebrate the Jewish holidays in a full-bodied way. Devin and I enjoy the folk customs of Judaism such as baking hamentashen for Purim and hosting a Passover seder, and also attend temple monthly and enjoy discussing the ethical teachings and religious concepts associated with holidays. Since we decided to raise our children Jewish, it seemed natural then for us to celebrate the Jewish holidays. However, we came upon a stumbling block when addressing Christian holidays and whether or not we were going to get a tree to celebrate Christmas, as Devin is accustomed to doing.

The Christmas tree triggered the first holiday crisis in our interfaith marriage. The problem began with the fact that the tree is as laden with emotional meanings as it is with decorations--and it meant very different things to me than it did to my husband. For Devin, the tree symbolized the best of family times: special sweets, warm family gatherings, carols, the excitement of giving and receiving gifts. For me, the tree carried an opposite set of feelings. Christmas in my childhood was a time of feeling left out, self-conscious, defensive and different. The tree, more than any other object, symbolized those sentiments. When we shared our feelings, I realized that if we chose not to celebrate Christmas, Devin would have feelings of loss, of being cut off from family, and of losing the right to engage in one of the most precious parts of his religious experience.

After much discussion, we eventually agreed to get a small tree and put it in the corner of the room. I thought that I would be comfortable with it--after all, it is just a big houseplant, right? Unfortunately, the night after we got the tree Devin came home to find me standing and looking at the tree, while crying. I think it was instilled in me at a young age that having a tree is not something you do as a Jew. I have done a lot of things in my life that aren't Jewish, but having a tree seemed somehow worse--a betrayal of sorts to my family and my religion. Since then,

we've discussed the issue of our "first tree" many times, and Devin has been very clear that if I am disturbed by having a tree, we won't have one.

However, this past year was a turning point for me. I put myself in his shoes and realized that Devin felt about the Christmas tree the same way I felt about the menorah. Both are symbols of very important holidays, and as such take on meaning that may not be felt by our partners. How would I have felt if he told me he was not comfortable with a menorah in the house? It would be unfair of me to deprive him of a significant part of his holiday joy, and in response I went into action. One day while Devin was at work, I decided to give him a gift. I went to the store and picked out a tree, crammed it in the car, hauled it upstairs, and set it up the best I could. When he came home and saw what I had done, he didn't know what to say. He just walked over and hugged me. That was the beginning of our decision to find the commonalities in the Jewish and Christian celebrations instead of focusing on the differences.

Devin and I have recognized that many of the traditions that we grew up with are now foreign experiences to our partner. For example, when Devin and I go to temple, he asks questions, such as what the spiritual meaning is behind the weekly Sabbath. As a result, I am challenged to either answer or to research the answer so that he doesn't feel like an outsider looking in. I've found that when you are challenged to be an expert of your religion, you find out how much you don't know. Consequently, and more than a little ironically, we are both more knowledgeable about our differing religions than we were before we met.

As an interfaith couple, we each feel a constant challenge to remain connected to our religions. Therefore, even though we have chosen to keep a Jewish household, we have done many things to keep us tied to both the Jewish and the Catholic communities. We belong to a temple in which we participate in a variety of interfaith activities such as an outreach committee focusing on interfaith families, and purposefully introduce ourselves to other interfaith families in the congregation. It is very important for us to search out those who accept our relationship and will help and support us along our journey.

The most important thing that we have done to remain connected to our religions is to build relationships with clergy by meeting individually with them after participating in services. Additionally, we participate in planning events for young adult groups and offer support to other interfaith families in our situation. This gives us an opportunity to ask questions in a constant effort to learn more about our religions. Thus, we are always discovering new and interesting similarities instead of focusing on our differences. Obviously, along the way we have discovered differences as well, the main one being Christianity's understanding of God as a unity of three persons--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--distinguished in their relations to one another and yet equally God.

It was not easy to struggle through the tension and occasional misunderstandings, to ultimately create a religious home style that is right for us, but it was definitely worth it for the future of our family. Instead of taking the easy road and looking at the ways in which we differ, we have chosen to focus on the countless beliefs we share. We are choosing to create our own traditions for our family--such as making a year-round family volunteer service schedule based on both the Jewish and Christian calendars. We discuss the values symbolized by each

holiday and try to plan volunteer work to fulfill those values. Our efforts to seek the universal themes which underlie the holidays make us stronger and more respectful of each other as individuals and of the relationship that we share.



Sarah Callahan works as a financial analyst and Devin Callahan is a clinical psychologist. They live with their twin daughters in San Diego, Calif., where they have been happily married for four years.



The Only Year We Had a Christmas Tree

By Debbie Burton

Even though I was not Jewish when I married my Jewish husband, the only religious holidays our household has observed have been Jewish, with one exception: There was one time in the early years of our marriage when I bought and decorated a small Christmas tree.



For the second Christmas of her marriage, Debbie Burton bought a small potted fir tree and decorated it.

I'm embarrassed about the tree now, although there is really no reason I should feel that way. And yet it is one personal story from my long spiritual journey that I did not share with the rabbi who I studied with for conversion, despite the fact

that I shared many other stories with him and he, in turn, shared relevant personal stories of his own. I developed a great trust in my rabbi and I know with certainty that he would not have expressed disapproval of my having put up my own tree so many years ago. After all, I wasn't Jewish then and we didn't yet have any Jewish children for whom having Christian symbols in their own house might be seen as problematic.

I realize now that I bought that tree as a "test" of Josh's assurances that I did not have to become Jewish for him and that my religious identity was mine alone to choose. Ironically, it was the fact that I was so drawn to Judaism that I wondered whether he actually did have expectations of my religious expression. He knew that I might have chosen to convert to Judaism before we got married if I had not been afraid of my parents' reactions. Indeed, there had been one uncomfortable situation regarding religion when we were planning our wedding ceremony, and that experience was a major reason that I did not convert until more than two decades later.

For three years while we were graduate students and before we married, I had attended services with Josh at the university Hillel almost every Shabbat and holiday. But I also remembered that when we were only sophomores in college, he had once mentioned that he would not marry a non-Jew. So although he had evidently changed his mind about that, perhaps I felt that he might only be able to accept me as a non-Jew because I would have converted if I had not felt the need to respect my parents' wishes.

It was actually for the second Christmas of our marriage that I bought a small potted fir tree. We had just bought a townhouse a few months before, and suddenly had a home twice as large as the small apartment we had lived in as newlyweds. I put the tree up in the loft room, so it wasn't particularly conspicuous in our home. I draped a string of miniature lights around it and made some origami ornaments from the book of Christmas origami that my Jewish sister-in-law had given me as a gift. The star I made for the top of the tree was a Mogen David ("Jewish star"), of course.

I told Josh about my plans before I bought the tree and he did not object. I seem to remember that he almost encouraged me to get a tree. Maybe he wanted to show that he was indeed accepting of my not being Jewish. But I realized that year that I wasn't really comfortable with having my own tree. I enjoyed visiting my parents (who lived less than an hour away) and seeing their tree, but Christmas was their holiday; it didn't feel like my holiday anymore. I never had any desire to have my own tree again. In a way, I think it is good that I did it once, just to know I didn't have a tree because I didn't want one, not because Josh didn't want one.

True to his word, Josh never even suggested that I should convert. As the years went by, our household became progressively more "Jewishly observant," until it was much more observant than that of any of our Reform Jewish friends, including those with two Jewish spouses. Surprisingly, it was often me rather than Josh who pushed for stricter kashrut or Shabbat observance. Nevertheless, because I was not Jewish when either of our children was born, they were not "Jews by birth" by Conservative standards, so we had to go through a process to formally "convert" them.

When I finally converted to Judaism, it was truly "of my own free will," as I attested in reading out loud and signing the "Declaration of Faith" as part of the conversion ritual. Although that action would seem at first to be completely the opposite of my having a Christmas tree 20 years earlier, they both demonstrated my freedom to express myself in a religious sense. The difference between the two events reflected the change in my religious identity that had occurred in that time span.

I wonder sometimes if my future descendants will think it strange if they come across the photo of that tree. It is one of many digitized photos that my descendants will probably have on their computer. They will find that the photo of the tree is dated just a few months after the photos of our first sukkah.

I think I was uncomfortable with the memories of that tree because it reminded me of the psychological impediments I had to work through during my long journey to Judaism. But now that I have finally converted, I can look back at that tree in a more positive light as an indicator that my choice to start on the path that would eventually lead to my conversion to Judaism was truly my own.



Debbie Burton was concurrently active in three Conservative synagogues before her conversion made her eligible for "official" membership: the Ner Tamid Ezra Habonim Egalitarian Minyan (a lay-led congregation in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago), the Skokie Egalitarian Minyan (the lay-led "library minyan" of Ezra Habonim, the Niles Township Jewish Congregation, which is within walking distance of her home) and Beth Hillel Congregation Bnai Emunah (the synagogue where her children attended Hebrew school).



Baby's First Christmas

By Jennifer Morris

I woke up shivering in the pitch dark. As I gathered the blankets more tightly around me, I saw that the clock read 5:45. I was so excited, I wasn't sure how I would manage to stay in bed until it was a decent waking hour. I knew I'd never be able to fall back asleep, but I wasn't sure what to do with myself. You see, it was my first time celebrating Christmas, with the man I'm now married to. Despite being 20 years old, quite happy in my Jewish upbringing and identification and fully confident that Santa is a fictional character, I couldn't wait to get up and be a part of my boyfriend's family celebration.

On December 25 my family could usually be found at the movie theater, followed by Chinese takeout for dinner. There was that one time that I was admitted to the hospital for a tonsillectomy the next morning, but that's a story for another time. Growing up in New York I was surrounded by other Jews, and children of varied religions and ethnicities. Sometimes I was resentful of Christmas being the dominant cultural theme in December, but mostly I was secure in my identity. I don't recall ever pining for a Christmas tree, or wishing for Santa.



A Fraser fir.

Photo: [Wikimedia/Theresa Sikora](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theresa_Sikora).

December of 1990 was my first chance to see Christmas from the inside. I'd been at Erik's home the weekend or two prior, when his family decorated the tree. I loved their handmade ornaments, personalized felt stockings and the collection of wooden Norwegian Santas and elves. I learned how delicious a real Fraser fir smells. I picked my gifts carefully, a watch for Erik, some nice candles and candlesticks for his parents, some bath products for his sisters. I packed my bags for the trip from Staten Island to Stamford, Conn., and said goodbye to my sister and mother. They too would be sharing in someone's Christmas for the first time, and we looked forward to comparing notes at the end of the holiday.

I accompanied Erik and his family to Christmas Eve services at their church. Afterwards, family friends came over for a gift exchange. As a very welcome fire burned, beautifully wrapped gifts were loaded under the tree. The gifts made a big impression on me, because I can remember exactly one wrapped Hanukkah present in my childhood. (The wrapped gift? A much anticipated and played with Barbie styling head.) Most of my Hanukkah memories include the image of my parents re-entering a room after the candle lighting, hiding gifts behind their backs. Sometimes the gifts were given to us in paper grocery bags or even a black plastic trash bag. My sister and I never questioned this tradition, we were perfectly excited to receive gifts, and I don't think we ever really worried about the lack of wrapping paper. Yet my Christian friends' eyes would go wide upon hearing this. They couldn't imagine receiving unwrapped gifts! So the bounty of ornate packages was definitely a

sight to see. I went to bed happy to be with Erik and his family, and eager for the next day's festivities.

So there I lay, before dawn on the morning of December 25. I may have gotten a few more winks of sleep, but mostly I tossed and turned. I laughed at myself, feeling like a 5-year-old who couldn't wait to tear into the presents. Finally I heard someone walk down the hall, and I knew I could get out of bed. As per family tradition, we opened stockings first, took a break for breakfast and then moved on to opening the other gifts. I was nervous and excited. I can still picture myself sitting in their living room, waiting to give out my gifts. As much as I enjoy receiving presents, I love giving gifts even more. What could be more fun than watching someone open a gift that you specially chose for them? I remember all eyes being on me as I opened my gift from Erik, a beautiful Roman intaglio pendant. I exhaled in relief when Erik opened my gift and I could see that he liked it. One of the last gifts I opened was a family tradition any chocoholic could get behind: Erik's father buys a box of Godiva chocolate for each woman in the family.

I have continued to enjoy celebrating Christmas with Erik's family. We've been married for 14 years, and have been parents for the last nine. Our children are Jewish and understand that we participate in Christmas, and other Christian holidays, along with their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins not as believers but as guests. My son, who is 9, enjoys helping to keep the magic of Santa alive for his cousins. He reminds the grownups to cut a piece out of the gingerbread house on Christmas Eve and to leave a note so that the other kids believe Santa took a bite. The wooden Santas are out on display, the hand-sewn stockings have been joined by new ones for the grandkids. Ornaments made by my in-laws' mothers are joined by ornaments made by the grandchildren. And I'm still one of the first ones awake on Christmas morning.

Jennifer Morris lives with her husband and two children in rural central Florida. Raising two children who are the only Jews in their school has been quite an adjustment from her New York City upbringing.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you grow up with a Christmas tree in your house? Was it important to you--do you have special memories about it? Was your family Christian, Jewish or both?
2. When you see a Christmas tree, what's your first thought?
3. A Christmas tree and a Hanukkah menorah in the same room looks _____.
4. If you do (or don't) have a Christmas tree in your house, are there family members who will have feelings about it?
5. What's one thing you would like your partner to know about your feelings on the Christmas tree?
6. How do you think having, or not having, a tree in your house will affect your children?
7. This isn't difficult for us to decide, because _____
8. The Christmas tree is a big issue for me, because _____

InterfaithFamily.com empowers people in interfaith relationships--individuals, couples, families and their children--to engage in Jewish life and make Jewish choices, and encourages Jewish communities to welcome them.

Through our website and other programs, we provide useful educational information, connect interfaith families to each other and to local Jewish communities, and advocate for inclusive attitudes, policies and practices.