



What We Learned from the 2006 Passover/Easter Survey
By Edmund Case

InterfaithFamily.com’s second annual Passover/Easter Survey, which fielded responses from 270 people nationwide in February-March 2006, was designed to understand how people in interfaith families celebrate their own and their partners’ holidays and to gain insight into those celebrations. Similar surveys, concerning Hanukkah and Christmas, were conducted in December 2004 and 2005.

The survey respondents were self-selected, and 75 percent of the respondents who said they had children raised them as Jews, in comparison to the 33 percent reported in the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001 (see Appendix for demographic information). While the survey thus is not representative of all interfaith families, it provides important new information about interfaith families who are raising their children as Jews--a very important demographic for Jewish continuity.

The survey found that Passover is a very important holiday for the respondents, and that Easter is important but less so: 99 percent plan to participate in Passover celebrations this year, while 64 percent plan to participated in Easter celebrations, compared to 85 percent of the respondents to the 2005 December Dilemma Survey who planned to participate in Christmas celebrations.

The seder is a very popular Passover observance: 76 percent plan to attend a seder, with 42 percent planning to host one. Eighty-three percent plan to eat matzah and 56 percent to follow Passover’s dietary restrictions:

| 1. How do you plan to participate in Passover celebrations this year? (check all that apply): | Count | % (of 266) |
|--|--------------|-------------------|
| Host seder | 111 | 42 |
| Attend seder | 202 | 76 |
| Eat matzah | 220 | 83 |
| Follow dietary restrictions | 150 | 56 |
| Tell the Passover story | 184 | 69 |
| Other | 15 | 6 |

The most popular planned Easter observance is attending an Easter dinner (54 percent); 39 percent plan to decorate Easter eggs and 25 percent participate in an egg hunt.

| 4. How do you plan to participate in Easter celebrations this year (check all that apply): | Count | % (of 264) |
|---|--------------|-------------------|
| Attend religious services | 49 | 28 |
| Decorate eggs | 69 | 39 |
| Egg hunt | 43 | 25 |
| Attend Easter dinner | 94 | 54 |
| Host Easter dinner | 23 | 13 |
| Tell the Easter story | 16 | 9 |
| Other | 39 | 22 |

Many respondents commented on having Easter dinner during Passover. For some, this was a problem:

Since we keep Passover, it means we cannot eat an Easter dinner with our non-Jewish family.

Because of the dietary restrictions during Passover I sometimes feel awkward when there is food at Easter dinner that I can't eat.

All my mother-in-law served was ham and rolls!

However, most of the respondents who commented were able to observe Passover and join in Easter dinner:

My in-laws usually buy a box of matzah for me to have at the Easter dinner when it falls during Passover.

My mother-in-law once made matza lasagna for Easter dinner.

There are always Passover favorites served during the Easter Sunday meal.

His family at Easter dinner makes certain there is food for me without pork and bread products to eat!

A common perception about interfaith families is that the Jewish and Christian holiday times can be challenging and unpleasant as family members struggle with identity crises, conflicting emotions and family guilt. Forty-seven percent of the respondents reported that neither set of holidays (Passover/Easter or Hanukkah/Christmas) were a source of conflict. As between the two holiday seasons, 37 percent said that Hanukkah/Christmas are a source of more conflict, 4 percent said that Passover/Easter are a source of more conflict, and 10 percent said that the level of conflict is the same:

| 8. How would you compare the levels of conflict in your family about the Passover/Easter and Hanukkah/Christmas holidays? | Count | % (of 184) |
|--|--------------|-------------------|
| Passover/Easter is a source of much more conflict | 7 | 3 |
| Passover/Easter is a source of a little more conflict | 16 | 6 |
| Hanukkah/Christmas is a source of much more conflict | 52 | 20 |
| Hanukkah/Christmas is a source of a little more conflict | 45 | 17 |
| Both sets of holidays are the source of the same amount of conflict | 11 | 4 |
| Neither set of holidays is a source of conflict | 124 | 47 |
| Other (please specify) | 11 | 4 |

Several respondents said that Christmas is a source of much more conflict than Easter:

Christmas trees have more negative connotations for Jews than any of the symbols surrounding Easter. I'm not sure why that is, but it seems to add to the conflict.

Christmas is a bigger holiday both to my husband's family and in the larger culture, whereas it's easy to forget about Easter.

Easter doesn't receive as much attention as Christmas does, so it's a quieter holiday for us.

The survey responses are particularly interesting given that the original meaning of Easter--what it celebrates--not only is deeply religious in nature, but implicates the precise boundary line between Jews and Christians--belief in the divinity of Jesus. Even if one thinks of Christmas as commemorating the birth of Jesus, one can think of Jesus as a great historical figure whose birth is worthy of recognition. But it is difficult for a non-believing Christian, let alone a non-Christian, to recognize the resurrection of Jesus that Easter commemorates for believing Christians.

Some respondents commented that Easter in its original meaning is a very religious holiday: "While Christmas has an additional secular 'family/togetherness' theme, Easter is a truly religious holiday celebrating the core difference between the faiths. As a result, my wife, who happily celebrates Christmas with my family, typically forgoes Easter." Some mentioned "anti-Semitic baggage" associated with Easter, when acts of persecution against Jews historically occurred:

As I Jew, Easter is my very least favorite Christian holiday. There tends to be more anti-Jew sentiment.

My wife used to feel uncomfortable with Easter due to its anti-Semitic baggage, but came to realize that the way my family celebrated it had nothing to do with this.

Despite Easter's more religious nature than Christmas', about the same percentage of survey respondents planned to attend religious services as part of their Easter celebrations (25 percent) as did respondents in the December Dilemma Survey who attended Christmas religious services (22 percent).

In fact, the Passover/Easter Survey shows, as did the December Dilemma Survey, that for interfaith families raising Jewish children, a primary way to resolve potential conflict is to treat the Jewish holiday, but not the Christian holiday, as religious in nature--even where the Christian holiday involved is Easter with its strongly religious original meaning. Thirty-seven percent of respondents reported that their Passover celebrations were more religious than secular, while 73 percent said their Easter celebrations were more secular than religious:

| 2. If you plan to participate in Passover celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations, where 5 = deeply religious, and 1 = entirely secular. | Count | % (of 258) | 4. If you plan to participate in Easter celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations, where 5 = deeply religious, and 1 = entirely secular. | Count | % (of 113) |
|---|--------------|-----------------------|---|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 13 | 5 | 1 | 95 | 54 |
| 2 | 40 | 16 | 2 | 34 | 19 |
| 3 | 108 | 42 | 3 | 22 | 12 |
| 4 | 76 | 29 | 4 | 17 | 10 |
| 5 | 21 | 8 | 5 | 9 | 5 |

In comparison, in the December Dilemma Survey, 28 percent of respondents reported that their Hanukkah celebrations were more religious than secular, while 78 percent said their Christmas celebrations were more secular than religious. It is striking that given Easter's original deeply religious meaning, almost as many respondents treat Easter as secular, as treat Christmas as secular.

Many of the respondents commented on the non-religious nature of their Easter participation:

We just color eggs and hide them the next morning. It's like playing a game. We have no religious Easter observance whatsoever.

The Easter bunny brought candy the same way Santa brought toys.

Searching for eggs is just a fun spring activity with no religious meaning.

We really keep Easter completely secular.

We don't make a big deal about Easter. I think my kids see it as yet another gift getting, candy-eating opportunity.

Easter dinner is just a meal, no religious messages, at their grandparents' house.

A key indication of the non-religious treatment of Easter by the respondents is the fact that 69 percent plan to tell the Passover story, but only 9% plan to tell the Easter story:

Passover is important to my family: we have a full seder with singing and prayers and telling the story, whereas Easter for my husband's family is just an excuse to get together for a big meal and the kids have fun searching for the eggs.

We don't allow participation in celebrations involving the resurrection story.

One mother who does “tell the Easter story” tells her children that “We are helping daddy to celebrate his holiday. I explain the story in a way that they can understand, saying also this is what some people are raised to believe.”

Some in the Jewish community are concerned with religious “syncretism,” or blending of religious traditions. An important finding of the December Dilemma Survey was that 66 percent of the respondents kept their celebrations of Hanukkah and Christmas separate. The Passover/Easter Survey shows that despite the fact that Passover and Easter will overlap in 2006 (with the eight-day holiday of Passover starting April 12, 2006 and Easter falling on April 16), an even higher percentage--85 percent--of the respondents said they will keep their celebrations separate, as opposed to blending them:

| 5. If you plan to participate in both Passover and Easter celebrations this year, will you blend your holiday celebrations, or keep them separate, where 5 = kept separate, and 1 = blended. | Count | % (of 191) |
|---|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 9 | 5 |
| 2 | 4 | 2 |
| 3 | 16 | 8 |
| 4 | 25 | 13 |
| 5 | 137 | 72 |

The survey respondents readily explained that they participate in both holiday celebrations as a way of sharing in, honoring and respecting the traditions of both sides of their family. Several parents explain to their children that they are helping the non-Jewish relatives celebrate their holiday, like going to someone else's birthday party:

We are helping her non-Jewish parent to celebrate her holiday--just like going to someone else's birthday party.

This is Daddy's holiday, and we go to Grandma and Grandpa's to help them celebrate it.

We are going to Easter dinner and the egg hunt, etc. at your grandparents' home because they are Christian and celebrate Easter.

We explain to our children that mom is not Jewish and that we celebrate Easter as a non-religious holiday.

This is what daddy's family does; these are their family traditions that are meaningful to them; these traditions are meaningful to us because they are part of our family, but they are not meaningful in a religious way--we don't believe in the Easter story.

My son commented last year that he liked Easter better than Passover. We talked about why--he said he liked the Easter eggs. I told him that even if we weren't Christian and that Easter wasn't our holiday, we could always color eggs.

We host the Easter meal, as my grandmother is too old to do so any longer. We explain to the kids that they are Jewish, mommy is not, and participating in Easter is not the same as honoring Jesus.

A major concern in the Jewish community over intermarriage is whether the children of interfaith parents develop Jewish identities. Several parents commented that participating in Easter celebrations did not negatively impact their children's Jewish identity. Some said it strengthened their children's Jewish identity:

We have many open and honest discussions about the significance and it helps them understand what they believe.

If anything it makes their Jewish identity stronger, as they become aware that there are different approaches to religion/belief in God, and they are able to see themselves as something unique and special.

Others commented that it helped their children learn tolerance and respect of others' beliefs:

I think it helps them live in a world with other religions. They learn that there are other traditions, which we can learn about and enjoy. But they are Jewish, and "own" their Jewish traditions.

It is important for her to know about religions other than her own. It teaches tolerance.

One non-Jewish mother made an interesting comment about giving her children permission to be different:

When they were young, I explained to them why I celebrated Easter, but let them know they were Jews, unlike me, and so had no reason to participate in my celebration. They never did, except for coloring Easter eggs, a rather secular thing.

Several children of intermarried parents commented on their identity:

I was allowed to paint Easter eggs but this has no religious significance.

I understood Easter to be a fun time for parents to play Easter Bunny.

My parents made it clear what was acceptable in a Jewish home and what was just having a good time with others--like going to someone else's birthday party.

Paining Easter eggs did not have any affect on my Jewish identity.

It was just a chance to see my family.

Any time that I celebrate holidays from other faiths, I find that it typically strengthens my own identity because it helps me feel the uniqueness and specialness of my background.

I was able to separate participating as an outsider from participating as a believer.

These celebrations were a part of my treasured family memories and helped me to think more on how I would make Passover a treasured family memory.

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 179 who answered questions about children) |
|--|-------|---|
| Jewish | 135 | 75 |
| Both religions | 23 | 13 |
| Some in one, some in other | 13 | 7 |
| One religion other than Jewish | 6 | 3 |
| No religion | 2 | 1 |

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents identified as Jewish, 10 percent as Catholic, and 10 percent as Protestant:

| 13. What is your religion (check all that apply): | Count | % (of 278 answers) |
|---|-------|-----------------------|
| Jewish | 176 | 63 |
| Catholic | 43 | 15 |
| Protestant | 28 | 10 |
| Muslim | 1 | 0 |
| Hindu | 0 | 0 |
| Agnostic | 4 | 1 |
| Atheist | 3 | 1 |
| None | 4 | 1 |
| Other (specify) | 19 | 7 |