

What We Learned from the Tenth Annual December Holidays Survey

By Jodi Bromberg, President

Introduction

In September and October 2013, we conducted our tenth annual December Holidays Survey to determine how people in interfaith relationships deal with the competing demands of Hanukkah and Christmas.

The survey attracted 757 responses, down slightly from 773 in 2012. Of all respondents, 503 reported being in interfaith relationships (as the Jewish partner or with a Jewish partner). Of those 503 respondents, 262 said they had raised or were raising children, and of those respondents, 224, or 85.5%, said they had raised or were raising their children exclusively as Jews, compared to 67% in 2012.

As in past years, this report focuses on the responses of the 224 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 InterfaithFamily is to empower interfaith families to make Jewish choices. We want to know more about the dynamics of raising children as Jews in interfaith families, especially during potential periods of conflict, such as the December holiday season.
2. Studies of intermarriage have tended to look 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 that 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. The authors of recent Jewish community studies appear to be mystified about the significance of interfaith families' participation in Christmas celebrations for their Jewish involvement. Our holiday surveys are the only ones of which we are aware that shed light on this question.

The Report

Almost all of the intermarried respondents who are raising Jewish children¹ expect to participate in Hanukkah celebrations and Christmas celebrations this year. Over ninety-eight percent (98.7%) plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations, while 86.2% plan to participate in Christmas celebrations.

¹ 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.

There are differences in where they plan to celebrate each holiday, however. The overwhelming majority (99.1%) plans on celebrating Hanukkah at home, while 59.1% (up from 56% last year) plan on celebrating Christmas at home. Seventy-three percent (73.1%) plan on celebrating Christmas at the home of relatives, far more than the number that plan on celebrating Hanukkah at the home of relatives (50.7%, up from 42% last year). More than four times as many plan on participating in Hanukkah celebrations at synagogue (53.8%, down from 60% last year) as plan on going to church for Christmas (13%) (see Table 9. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11).

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 = 221)	Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 193)
Own home	99.1	Own home	59.1
Home of relatives	50.7	Home of relatives	73.1
Home of friends	27.6	Home of friends	25.9
Workplace/off-site work party	8.1	Workplace/off-site work party	32.6
Temple or synagogue	53.8	Public activity (such as tree lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	22.3
Jewish Community Center	10.4		

The majority of these respondents plan on doing multiple activities relating to the celebration of Hanukkah in their own home. Almost ninety-nine percent (98.6%) plan on lighting the menorah, 92.8% plan on giving gifts, and 91% 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 = 221)

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	98.6	48.9	27.6	6.3	47.5	7.2
Give gifts	92.8	49.3	13.6	2.7	3.2	.5
Put up Hanukkah decorations	69.2	10	2.7	3.2	15.8	3.2
Sing/play Hanukkah music and songs	62.4	19	15.4	3.2	44.8	10
Eat/make Hanukkah foods	91	44.3	25.8	5.9	34.8	7.7
Watch Hanukkah movies	17.2	2.7	.5	.5	2.3	0
Tell the Hanukkah story	52	14.9	5	2.7	33.9	5
Play dreidel	64.7	24.9	12.2	2.7	20.8	5.9

The picture is somewhat reversed for Christmas activities. While 74.1% plan to give gifts at the home of relatives, 67.4% will give gifts at their own home. Still, 60.1% plan on eating and/or preparing Christmas foods at the home of relatives (vs. 36.8% planning on eating/preparing Christmas foods at home). Overall, 56.5% plan on putting up a Christmas tree at their own home (compared to 49% last year). Thirty-one (31.6%) percent said they would watch Christmas movies at home.

Table 3. Christmas Behaviors at Various Locations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children (n = 193)

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	53.9	26.9	5.2	.5
Put up a Christmas tree	56.5	17.6	1	0
Hang stockings	43	16.6	1	0
Give gifts	67.4	74.1	25.9	16.1
Put up other Christmas decorations	36.3	13.5	1.6	1.6
Sing/play Christmas music and songs	39.9	27.5	9.8	8.8
Eat/prepare Christmas foods	36.8	60.1	26.9	26.9
Watch Christmas movie(s)	31.6	16.1	3.6	.5
Tell the Christmas story	4.7	6.2	1.6	1

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%), up from 10% last year but the same as the 13% reported in 2011 (see Table 9. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11). In addition, few participate in the more religious behavior of telling the Christmas story – only 4.7% will do so in their own home, and 6.2% at the home of relatives.

This lack of religious Christmas activity aligns with the respondents’ views of the religious nature of their holiday celebrations. Only 9.9% of respondents participating in Christmas see their Christmas celebrations as religious, compared to 24.5% of respondents participating in Hanukkah who see their Hanukkah celebrations as “deeply” or “fairly” religious. Eighty-eight percent (88.1%) of those participating in Christmas celebrations see their Christmas celebrations as “entirely” or “mostly” secular in nature, whereas 26.7% of those participating in Hanukkah celebrations see their Hanukkah celebrations as “mostly” or “entirely” 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. 11).



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 (50.8%), while only 24.9% indicated they were "somewhat" or "very" offended, up from 19% last year (see Table 13. Feelings About "Merry Christmas," Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 12).

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-three (83.4%) percent say they will keep the holidays separate or mostly separate, about the same as last year (see Table 11. Level of "Blending" of Hanukkah and Christmas, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 12).

The great majority of survey respondents are not concerned that participation in Christmas celebrations affects their children’s Jewish identity. Seventy-three (73.1%) percent of the respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations think it will not affect their children’s Jewish identity, down from 78.5% last year (see Table 12. Perspective on Whether Participating in Christmas Celebrations Affects Children’s Identity, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 12).

Those respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations explain their participation in Christmas celebrations to their children in a variety of ways. Sixty-nine (69.9%) percent cite respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family, 63.2% cite respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions, and 50.8% cite open-mindedness/tolerance. Very few (6.7%) 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

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.	% (n = 193)
Respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions	63.2
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	7.8
Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	69.9
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	13.5
Open-mindedness/tolerance	50.8
Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	29
Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	6.7

The Pew study released this year, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, reported that 71% of interfaith families (where one partner was Jewish and one was not) had a Christmas tree in their home in the prior year.



Likewise, in past years, some local Jewish community studies inquired about and reported on interfaith families having Christmas trees or attending Christian worship. The authors of the New York Jewish Community Study of 2011, released in December 2011, suggest (at 144) that celebrating Christmas runs counter to Jewish involvement. The 2005 Greater Boston Community Study, Intermarried Families and Their Children, reported that 27% of intermarried households with Jewish children had a Christmas tree all of the time, and another 43% usually, with this comment: "It should be noted that there is no way of determining from this data how Christmas is being celebrated or interpreted in these households. Likewise, we do not know from this data what the presence of Christmas trees means to intermarried or inmarried families."

The respondents to our surveys made hundreds of comments to open-ended questions that shed light on what Christmas trees mean to interfaith families. Many respondents said that their Christmas celebrations are not at all religious:

This is a tradition that my husband brought to our home. The tree signifies many ideas, including the tree of life, the importance of family ties, the beauty of nature, the happiness of holiday and home.
-Comment #7, Q11

My children were raised to understand that the tree has nothing to do with the Christian religion.
-Comment #13, Q11

It is not done in any religious manner. It's more of a seasonal item.
-Comment #15, Q11

We do not observe, teach, or study the Christmas story in our home. For our family, the Christmas tree is simply a fun activity. The Christmas tree to us represents spending time with family.
-Comment #19, Q11

We don't have a tree, but we do not feel that a tree is a religious symbol, so it does not matter to us if another Jewish family has a tree.
-Comment #24, Q11

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

It is out of respect to my husband's traditions and doesn't mean we are raising our daughter anything other than Jewish.
-Comment #27, Q11

Christmas is my husband's holiday and we celebrate it with him like we do his birthday.

-Comment #29, Q11

To me, a Christmas tree is a secular item. My non-Jewish spouse appreciates having it in the home. The rest of the year, my spouse is very supportive going to temple, lighting shabbat candles, and celebrating Jewish holidays. A tree is a perfectly acceptable compromise to me.

-Comment #37, Q11

Some respondents commented that they describe Christmas as not “their” holiday to their children:

My spouse Christian (though not practicing) and he has maintained his childhood Christmas tree and gift-giving traditions, which I have honored (sic). We have raised our children as Jews and they accept the Christmas tree as honoring my spouse's traditions.

-Comment #40, Q11

I'm Catholic, my husband and kids are Jewish, but my husband had Christian relatives and celebrated with them growing up. My kids are clear that they are Jewish, and celebrating Christmas is a way of acknowledging my family history and traditions, without bringing into question their's.

-Comment #84, Q11

My kids know they are Jewish; since my husband is Christian, we are happy to have a tree and feel that this secular celebration is not in conflict with our Jewish ideology

-Comment #97, Q11

Kids know mom is Catholic and we have always called it "mom's tree" but the entire family is involved.

-Comment #110, Q11

It means we love and respect my children's father/my husband and respect [what] he believes [sic] but my children are Jewish and understand it is in that show of love that we celebrate Christmas.

-Comment #112, Q11

Our kids know they are being brought up Jewish but they know that mom is not Jewish and her tradition includes having a Christmas tree and giving gifts over Christmas.

-Comment #124, Q11

Many noted that children can understand clear explanations and differentiation from their parents:

The Christmas tree and secular celebration is part of my husband's heritage. He sees it as a solstice celebration, not as a religious or worship event. He enjoys the season. We made the choice to raise our son Jewish. I think because my husband and I are not conflicted

(and have never been about celebrating Christmas) that our son has no conflict about being Jewish or Christian. Our son had a Bar Mitzvah and continued through high school in his Jewish education. Even as a preschooler our son had no doubt about his Jewish Identity.

-Comment #20, Q11

We do both. My husband, who is Jewish, "invites" me to help him celebrate Hanukkah. I "invite" my husband and daughter to help me celebrate Christmas. This allowed us to raise her as Jew who understood that Christmas is not part of her belief system, but because it is mine, she could join with her father and help me enjoy my tradition. As a family we respect our different traditions and see it as a source of strength. We help each other to celebrate traditions not originally ours as a sign of love, respect and family supremacy. No one is required to believe in something, only to join in a time of joy.

-Comment #51, Q11

Having a Christmas tree in our home is a reflection of our Jewish values which include that everyone in our family matters. While our son and I are Jewish, just because my husband is not, doesn't mean his holiday doesn't count. We have always celebrated both and our son has no question of what is because of it.

-Comment #63, Q11

For our family, Christmas is not a religious holiday. My children are being raised Jewish and for them Christmas is a fun holiday as it always has been for my husband, who is not religious at all. It took me a while to realize that my kids could feel a strong Jewish identity, but have a Christmas tree and enjoy their Dad's holiday/tradition and it was OK and fun too!

-Comment #91, Q11

I have come to terms with this being "Daddy's" tree. Our kids (now grown) were taught that we celebrate with family because we love them, but it's not "our" holiday. This seemed to work well- they are secure in their Judaism.

-Comment #101, Q11

Some spoke of the challenges of being Jewish in an interfaith family around Christmas, and how they handled or grappled with the conflict or discomfort they felt:

We put up a tree one year and I found myself feeling very uncomfortable! I have no problem putting up a tree at my in-laws' house.

-Comment #1, Q11

Christmas is inconsistent with a Jewish home. But my husband is not Jewish and it is important to him. And mutual love and respect trumps my heebie jeebies about Xmas in my house.

-Comment #23, Q11

We do have a tree but I do feel it conflicts with being Jewish.

-Comment #25, Q11

Before we had children, we had a tree in our home. When our son was 4 years old he asked, "If we're Jewish, why do we have a Christmas tree?" We didn't have a good answer for him and decided to celebrate Christmas only in my husband's parents' home, not in our own home.

-Comment #28, Q11

We are mixed backgrounds. The kids attend Hebrew school and we are active in Jewish community but we also celebrate Christmas most years with my husband's family. I am the Jewish mom and do enjoy decorating a tree, but not every year!

-Comment #31, Q11

I feel that in the importance of showing the children their Jewish religion it may confuse them to also have a Christmas tree as well.... We are a newly blended family and this is our first holiday season together and we want to bring more knowledge of their Jewish background into our family.

-Comment #35, Q11

I didn't have a problem when it was just me and my husband but we had a baby this year and we plan on raising the child Jewish. While he won't remember it this year, I am worried about future confusion.

-Comment #42, Q11

When our children were very young we had a tree so they could share their Dad's holiday memories. Once they began to attend Jewish religious school we discontinued the tree because we thought it was confusing to them. But, we continue to celebrate Christmas at their grandmother's home.

-Comment #45, Q11

I am the Christian in our family; my Jewish partner has expressed no concerns with us having a Christmas tree, as it is a tradition that I grew up with and is important to me. We do have a young child (under 2), whom we are raising Jewish, and I have expressed to my partner that if at any time he feels (or we feel) that the Christmas decorations within our home are confusing to our child, we will stop putting them up. I will say that I am also the partner who is pressing for more Jewishness (for lack of a better term) within our home and I think my partner sees and appreciates my efforts. I think he is willing to accept more overt Christian things during Christmas because of my sincere efforts throughout the rest of the year to build a Jewish home and family life.

-Comment #53, Q11

I was raised Christian, but not very religious. My wife is Jewish and I agreed to allow her to raise our children as Jews. I told her I'm okay with that as long as we don't give up the Christmas holiday. I understand the holiday wasn't originally Christian anyway, so I don't see it as a conflict.

-Comment #58, Q11

I am the Catholic mother of Jewish children (with a Jewish husband) and in recent years have started to feel awkward about the fact that we have a tree. I do feel that it is a contradiction of our practices during the rest of the year.

-Comment #108, Q11

Some respondents commented unfavorably on Jewish attitudes towards their Christmas celebrations:

For me it is a pretty decoration, but I always feel a little like my Jewish family does not approve. For the kids it is fun and it represents the Christian side of the family.

-Comment #44, Q11

I feel like it is awkward to explain to our Jewish friends, but it is not odd at all within our family.

-Comment #74, Q11

Conclusions

The great majority of interfaith couples raising their children as Jews plan on participating in celebrations of both Christmas (86.2%) and Hanukkah (98.7%).

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 (99.1%) celebrates Hanukkah at home, while a little more than half (59.1%) celebrate Christmas at home. Seventy-three (73.1%) percent celebrate Christmas at the home of relatives, suggesting that Christmas is largely centered on the extended family rather than the immediate family.

These families do not see Hanukkah as a deeply religious holiday, but 53.8% plan on celebrating the holiday in a Jewish house of worship. Meanwhile, their participation in Christmas celebrations is almost entirely secular. Only 4.7% of these families expect to tell the Christmas story in their own home; only

13% expect to attend Christmas services at church. Moreover, 88% 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.

The percentages who give Christmas gifts (67.4%) and have Christmas trees (53.9%) at home were very close to last year (63% and 49%), though for the second year in a row show a year-over-year increase. The overall percentage who celebrate Christmas in some fashion at home increased from 56% last year to 59.1%. 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 (83.4%, the same as last year), and they feel largely comfortable that celebrating Christmas won't negatively impact their children's Jewish identity, though less respondents reported so this year (73.1%, down from 78.5% last year).

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.

Responses to open-ended questions shed light on what Christmas trees and Christmas celebrations mean to this population:

- Christmas does not have religious significance for many interfaith families who are raising their children as Jews.
- They are primarily honoring the traditions of their parent and relatives who are not Jewish.
- Children can understand clear explanations from their parents, such as that Christmas is not their holiday.
- Interfaith families continue to grapple with the challenges of celebrating the holidays of two faiths in their families, and what it means for their, and their children's, Jewish identities.
- Interfaith families raising Jewish children still experience other Jews being uncomfortable with their celebrating Christmas and do not appreciate being questioned, censured or shamed.

Appendix I: Demographic Information

Of the 757 respondents to our survey, 224 said they are in an interfaith relationship and raising their children Jewish and no other religion. Eighty-one percent 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 = 224)
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Jewish	80.8
Catholic	5.8
Protestant	6.7
Agnostic/Atheist	4.9
Other Christian	1.8
None	1.3
Other	3.6

Their partners were a mix of Jewish (29%), Catholic (25.9%), Protestant (15.6%), 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 = 224)
Jewish	29
Catholic	25.9
Protestant	15.6
Agnostic/Atheist	15.2
Other Christian	9.4
None	6.3
Other	7.6
Muslim	.4

The great majority of respondents were female (86.2%) and 63% were between the ages of 30 and 49.

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

What is your age?	% (n = 224)
20-29	1.8
30-39	32.6
40-49	30.8
50-59	24.1
60-69	8.5
70 and over	2.2



Eighty-six percent of the respondents have one (36%) or two (50%) children, and 52% of the families have children age 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 = 224)
0-3	29
4-5	17
6-8	23.7
9-12	28.1
13-17	17
18-30	26.8
30 and over	8.5

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 = 193)
Attend Christmas religious services	13
Attend a tree-lighting	11.4
Watch a Christmas parade	11.9
Attend a Christmas-themed concert, play or performance	19.2
Go to movie theater to see a Christmas movie	5.7
Bring kids to Santa at the mall	11.4

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 = 221)	If you plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations.	% (n = 193)
5 – deeply religious	1.4	5 – deeply religious	0
4 – fairly religious	23.1	4 – fairly religious	2.6
3 – half secular, half religious	48.9	3 – half secular, half religious	9.3
2 – mostly secular	24.4	2 – mostly secular	22.8
1 – entirely secular	2.3	1 – entirely secular	65.3

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

If you plan to participate in both Hanukkah and Christmas celebrations this year, will you blend your holiday celebrations, or keep them separate?	% (n = 193)
5 – keep separate	60.6
4 – keep mostly separate	22.8
3 – blend moderately	9.8
2 – blend significantly	1.6
1 – blend completely	.5

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

If you are participating in Christmas celebrations, do you think that your participation in Christmas celebrations affects your children’s Jewish identity?	% (n = 193)
Yes	24.4
No	73.1

Table 13. Feelings About "Merry Christmas," Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children

How do you feel when someone you do not know wishes you a "Merry Christmas"? I am:	% (n = 193)
Appreciative of the holiday cheer	50.8
Indifferent	24.4
Somewhat offended	22.3
Very offended	2.6