

# What We Learned from the Sixth Annual December Holidays Survey

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## Abstract

In October 2009, InterfaithFamily.com conducted its sixth 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 610 respondents, we focused on the 179 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 plan on participating in Hanukkah celebrations at their own home, while less than half (48%) plan on celebrating Christmas at their own home. Their Hanukkah celebrations are much “denser,” in terms of rituals, than their Christmas celebrations. They report that they see Hanukkah as more religious than Christmas, and Christmas as a largely secular celebration. This year we observed a trend to more participation in secular Christmas activities, coupled with more keeping the two holidays’ celebrations separate, and more feelings that participating in Christmas celebrations did not compromise the children’s Jewish identity.

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

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## 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

October 2009, we conducted our sixth annual December Holidays Survey to determine how people in interfaith relationships deal with the competing demands of Hanukkah and Christmas.

The survey attracted 610 responses, about half as many as received in 2008. (We attribute the decline to the fact that this year, in order to be eligible for a prize drawing, a respondent was required to join InterfaithFamily.com's new Network.) Of all respondents, 386 reported being in interfaith relationships (as the Jewish partner or with a Jewish partner). Of those 386 respondents, 256 said they had raised or were raising children, and of those respondents, 179, or 70%, said they had raised or were raising their children exclusively as Jews. Our survey is not a representative sample of all interfaith families; nationally, 33 to 39% of interfaith couples are raising their children solely in the Jewish religion, according to the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Study.

As in past years, this report focuses on the responses of the *179 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. Many 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.

Because we collected a fair amount of data about Jewish people not in interfaith relationships, we were also able to make some fruitful comparisons between the intermarried raising Jewish children and the inmarried with children. We received responses from 275 people not in interfaith relationships, including 114 inmarried Jews with children.

## 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: 98% plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations while 82% plan to participate in Christmas celebrations. There are telling differences in where they plan to celebrate each holiday, however.

The overwhelming majority (99%) plan on celebrating Hanukkah at home while less than half (48%) plan on celebrating Christmas at home. Conversely, 79% plan on celebrating Christmas at the home of relatives, far more than the number that plan on celebrating Hanukkah at the home of relatives (44%). More than four times as many plan on participating in Hanukkah celebrations at synagogue (62%) as plan on going to church for Christmas (14%) (see Table 11. Public Christmas Behaviors, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 10).

**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 = 176)	Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 147)
Own home	99	Own home	48
Home of relatives	44	Home of relatives	79
Home of friends	36	Home of friends	18
Workplace/off-site work party	6	Workplace/off-site work party	25
Temple or synagogue	62	Public activity (such as tree lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	24
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 number of people that are planning to celebrate Hanukkah with friends or relatives plan on doing a similarly high level of Hanukkah activities.

<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 2. Hanukkah Behaviors in Various Locations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children (n = 176)**

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	43	31	5	48	8
Give gifts	93	45	23	3	4	1
Put up Hanukkah decorations	68	12	3	2	11	5
Sing/play Hanukkah music and songs	72	23	15	3	49	13
Eat/make Hanukkah foods	90	42	31	5	40	9
Watch Hanukkah movies	16	2	1	1	3	1
Tell the Hanukkah story	58	12	5	2	38	6
Play dreidel	76	23	17	2	22	5

The picture is somewhat reversed for Christmas activities. Eighty-two percent plan to give gifts at the home of relatives (vs. 60% giving gifts at their own home) and 62% plan on eating and/or preparing Christmas foods at the home of relatives (vs. 39% planning on eating/preparing Christmas foods at home). Overall, 61% plan on putting up or decorating a Christmas tree at their own home or the home of a relative. Thirty-seven percent said they would watch Christmas movies at home.

**Table 3. Christmas Behaviors at Various Locations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children (n = 147)**

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	44	27	5	2
Put up a Christmas tree	44	20	2	1
Hang stockings	35	26	1	0
Give gifts	60	82	23	12
Put up other Christmas decorations	32	16	2	1
Sing/play Christmas music and songs	30	33	12	5
Eat/prepare Christmas foods	39	62	25	19
Drink egg nog	22	18	4	3
Watch Christmas movie(s)	37	18	3	0
Tell the Christmas story	4	7	1	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 (14%), which was the same percentage reported last year (see Table 11. 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 4% will do so in their own home, 7% 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 5% of respondents participating in Christmas see their Christmas celebrations as religious, compared to 27% of respondents participating in Hanukkah who see their Hanukkah celebrations as religious. Eighty-seven percent of those participating in Christmas celebrations see their Christmas celebrations as secular in nature, whereas only 20% of those participating in Hanukkah celebrations see their Hanukkah celebrations as secular in nature. (See

Table 12. 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 (57%), while only 20% indicated they were offended (see Table 15. 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-nine percent say they will keep the holidays separate or mostly separate (up from 83% last year). (See Table 13. 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. Eighty-one percent of the respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations think it will not affect their children’s Jewish identity (up from 73% last year). (See Table 14. Perspective on Whether Participating in Christmas Celebrations Affects Children’s Identity, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children, p. 11)

This year, looking at data from our 2007 and 2008 surveys, we noticed three trends: an increase in participation in secular Christmas activities, coupled with an increase in keeping holiday celebrations separate, and an increase in feelings that participation in Christmas celebrations did not compromise children’s Jewish identity:

- More interfaith couples who are raising their children exclusively as Jews are participating in Christmas celebrations in their own homes (41% in 2007 45% in 2008, 48% in 2009).
- Significantly more are participating in Christmas celebrations in the homes of relatives (66% in 2007 64% in 2008, increasing to 79% in 2009).
- The extent of Christmas gift giving is significantly up: at their own homes, from 47% in 2007 to 50% in 2008 to 60% in 2009; at the homes of relatives, from 65% in 2007, to 64% in 2008, to 82% in 2009.
- There are also increases in Christmas foods at home (28% to 25% to 39%) and in watching Christmas movies (29% to 27% to 37%).

At the same time, the degree to which interfaith couples who participate in Christmas celebrations keep them separate from their Hanukkah celebrations has edged up, from 85% in 2007, dipping to 83% in 2008, then increasing to 89% in 2009; and the percentage who think that their Christmas celebrations do not affect their children’s Jewish identity has also edged up, from 78% in 2007, dipping to 73% in 2008, then increasing to 81% in 2009.

Those respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations explain their participation in Christmas celebrations to their children in a variety of ways. Three-quarters cite respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family, 67% cite respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions and 58% cite open-mindedness/tolerance. Very few (4%) 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	67
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	8
Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	76
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	16
Open-mindedness/tolerance	58
Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	35
Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	4

These respondents cite a variety of reasons why they are not concerned that celebrating Christmas will affect their children’s identity:

We tell our children that it’s Grammy and Papa’s holiday and we celebrate with them. We have a tree to be respectful of their traditions. A tree is not religious.  
-Comment #115

I tried to teach my children that we celebrate with family because we love them, even though it is not our holiday. Like celebrating somebody’s else’s birthday, but you know that it is not your birthday.  
-Comment #21

I am a child of an interfaith relationship where both holidays were celebrated. I have a strong Jewish identity. I tell my children the same thing that I was told. Santa comes because my spouse is Christian.  
-Comment #18

Any celebration is so secular and is more part of the experience of living in the USA than of them being the product of an interfaith relationship.  
-Comment #48

Because we do not celebrate Christmas religiously. My older children know the Christmas story and have said that their Christian friends “believe that Jesus is the son of God, but we are Jews, and Jews don’t believe that.”  
-Comment #4

However, a small minority reported concerns over the impact on their child’s identity of participating in Christmas celebrations:

It is a bit confusing but a matter of fact. The children recognize Mom’s religion is Catholic yet they are being raised as Jews.

-Comment #98

Christmas Behaviors of Inmarried Jewish Couples

Like last year, we continue to be surprised by the prevalence of Christmas behaviors among inmarried Jews. Even those not in interfaith relationships participated in Christmas celebrations to a surprisingly high extent. Looking at inmarried Jewish respondents with children (a cohort of 114 respondents), we find that 42% plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, which includes workplace parties and public events. Almost none plan to participate in Christmas celebrations in their own home, but almost a quarter (23%) of these respondents plan on celebrating at the home of relatives while 18% plan on celebrating at the workplace or at a work party.

**Table 5. Location of Christmas Celebrations, Inmarried Jewish Families Raising Children**

Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 114)
Own home	1
Home of relatives	23
Home of friends	7
Workplace/off-site work party	18
Public activity (such as tree lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	8

Some of this can be explained by the fact that 30% of the inmarried respondents are converts or in a relationship with a convert. Sixty-three percent of conversionary inmarried families with children plan to participate in Christmas celebrations, compared to 33% of non-conversionary inmarried families with children. Conversionary families tend to participate in Christmas at the home of relatives (46%). This suggests that conversionary families don’t abandon the Christian side of their families, while rarely celebrating Christmas (3%) in their own home. Among non-conversionary inmarried families, the Christmas celebrations that do take place happen most often at work functions (18%), the home of relatives (13%) and the home of friends (5%).

**Table 6. Location of Christmas Behaviors, Conversionary Inmarried Families with Children vs. Non-conversionary Inmarried Families with Children**

Respondents in a Conversionary Inmarried Couple		Respondents in a Non-conversionary Inmarried Couple	
Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 35)	Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 79)
Own home	3	Own home	0

Home of relatives	46	Home of relatives	13
Home of friends	11	Home of friends	5
Workplace/off-site work party	20	Workplace/off-site work party	18
Public activity (such as tree-lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	11	Public activity (such as tree-lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	6

## Conclusions

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

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 celebrate Hanukkah at home, while less than half celebrate Christmas at home. Three-quarters do celebrate Christmas at the home of relatives, suggesting that Christmas is largely centered around the extended family rather than the immediate family.

These families do not see Hanukkah as a deeply religious holiday, but a majority plan on celebrating the holiday in a Jewish house of worship. Meanwhile, their participation in Christmas celebrations is almost entirely secular. Very few of these families expect to tell the Christmas story or attend Christmas services at church.

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.

Forty-four percent have Christmas trees in their own home, 60% plan to give Christmas gifts at home, and 79% plan to give Christmas gifts at the home of relatives. Despite the high level of participation in secular Christmas activities, which we observed this year to have increased over the past three years, these families increasingly keep their holiday celebrations separate, and feel comfortable that celebrating Christmas won't negatively impact their children's Jewish identity. For most of them, 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.

While some observers of intermarriage argue that exposure to Christmas sends a confusing message to children of intermarriage, many inmarried Jews participate in Christmas celebrations, whether at the home of non-Jewish relatives, at the home of non-

Jewish friends or at workplace Christmas parties. Even separating out conversionary couples – where one partner's extended family is not Jewish – a third of "born Jewish" inmarried couples plan on participating in Christmas celebrations. Just because a Jewish person is inmarried doesn't mean he or she is insulated from participating in Christmas.

### Appendix I: Demographic Information

Of the 610 respondents to our survey, 179 said they are in an interfaith relationship and raising their children Jewish and no other religion. More than three-quarters (77%) identify themselves as Jewish:

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

What is your religion? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 179)
Jewish	77%
Catholic	10%
Protestant	11%
Agnostic/Atheist	3%
None	4%
Other	3%

Because respondents were able to check multiple religions, some respondents identified themselves as Jewish and something else. Excluding those who identified themselves as Jewish and something else, 70% of the respondents consider themselves exclusively Jewish.

Their partners were a mix of Jewish (35%), Catholic (25%), Protestant (16%) and other religions.

**Table 8. Religion of Spouses of Respondents in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

What is your spouse's religion? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 179)
Jewish	36%
Catholic	18%
Protestant	15%
Agnostic/Atheist	12%
None	10%
Other	11%

The majority of respondents were female (87%) and 70% were between the ages of 30 and 49.

**Table 9. Age of Respondents in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

What is your age?	% (n = 179)
20-29	6%
30-39	35%

40-49	35%
50-59	16%
60-69	6%
70 and over	2%

Eighty-six percent of the respondents have one (37%) or two (50%) children, and 59% of the families have children 5 or younger.

**Table 10. Age of Children in Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children**

What is the age of your children? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 179)
0-3	37%
4-5	21%
6-8	26%
9-12	22%
13-17	16%
18-30	13%
30 and over	8%

## Appendix II: Additional Charts

**Table 11. 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 = 147)
Attend Christmas religious services	14
Attend a tree-lighting	12
Watch a Christmas parade	13
Attend a Christmas-themed concert, play or performance	17
Go to movie theater to see a Christmas movie	11
Bring kids to Santa at the mall	17

**Table 12. 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 = 176)	If you plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations.	% (n = 147)
5 – deeply religious	1	5 – deeply religious	1
4 – fairly religious	26	4 – fairly religious	4
3 – half secular, half religious	53	3 – half secular, half religious	8
2 – mostly secular	17	2 – mostly secular	17
1 – entirely secular	3	1 – entirely secular	70

**Table 13. 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 = 147)
5 – keep separate	65
4 – keep mostly separate	25
3 – blend moderately	8
2 – blend significantly	1
1 – blend completely	1
Not applicable	2

**Table 14. 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 = 158)
Yes	19
No	81

**Table 15. 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 = 147)
Appreciative of the holiday cheer	57
Indifferent	23
Somewhat offended	18
Very offended	2
N/A	0