

What We Learned from the Ninth Annual December Holidays Survey

By Edmund Case, CEO

Introduction

In September-October 2011, we conducted our ninth annual December Holidays Survey to determine how people in interfaith relationships deal with the competing demands of Hanukkah and Christmas.

The survey attracted 773 responses, up from 484 in 2011. Of all respondents, 512 reported being in interfaith relationships (as the Jewish partner or with a Jewish partner). Of those 512 respondents, 336 said they had raised or were raising children, and of those respondents, 224, or 67%, said they had raised or were raising their children exclusively as Jews, compared to 65% in 2011.

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. Ninety-eight percent plan to participate in Hanukkah celebrations, while 83% plan to participate in Christmas celebrations, the same as last year.

There are differences in where they plan to celebrate each holiday, however. The overwhelming majority (98%) plans on celebrating Hanukkah at home, while a little more than half (56%, up from 48% last year) plan on celebrating Christmas at home. Seventy-three percent plan on celebrating Christmas

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.

at the home of relatives, far more than the number that plan on celebrating Hanukkah at the home of relatives (42%). Almost six times as many plan on participating in Hanukkah celebrations at synagogue (60%, up from 51% last year) as plan on going to church for Christmas (10%) (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 = 220)	Where will you be participating in Christmas celebrations? Please check all that apply.	% (n = 187)
Own home	98	Own home	56
Home of relatives	42	Home of relatives	73
Home of friends	37	Home of friends	27
Workplace/off-site work party	6	Workplace/off-site work party	24
Temple or synagogue	60	Public activity (such as tree lighting or going to see a Christmas movie)	20
Jewish Community Center	12		

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, 91% plan on giving gifts, and 88% 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 = 220)

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	42	32	4	50	7
Give gifts	91	44	19	2	3	1
Put up Hanukkah decorations	74	9	2	5	11	3
Sing/play Hanukkah music and songs	61	16	13	5	51	7
Eat/make Hanukkah foods	88	37	29	5	41	6
Watch Hanukkah movies	12	1	1	0	1	1
Tell the Hanukkah story	49	7	5	2	40	5
Play dreidel	70	18	18	2	18	5

The picture is somewhat reversed for Christmas activities. While 72% plan to give gifts at the home of relatives, 63% will give gifts at their own home. Still, 57% plan on eating and/or preparing Christmas foods at the home of relatives (vs. 39% planning on eating/preparing Christmas foods at home). Overall, 49% plan on putting up a Christmas tree at their own home (compared to 46% last year). Thirty-three percent said they would watch Christmas movies at home, down from 46% last year.



Table 3. Christmas Behaviors at Various Locations, Interfaith Families Raising Jewish Children (n = 187)

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	48	24	7	2
Put up a Christmas tree	49	15	4	1
Hang stockings	36	19	1	0
Give gifts	63	72	24	14
Put up other Christmas decorations	32	11	2	41
Sing/play Christmas music and songs	34	26	10	84
Eat/prepare Christmas foods	39	57	28	15
Drink eggnog	23	13	9	4
Watch Christmas movie(s)	33	13	2	0
Tell the Christmas story	3	3	1	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 (10%), slightly lower than 13% last year and 12% in 2010 (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 3% will do so in their own home, and 3% at the home of relatives, the same as last year.

This lack of religious Christmas activity aligns with the respondents’ views of the religious nature of their holiday celebrations. Only 9% of respondents participating in Christmas see their Christmas celebrations as religious, compared to 24% 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 24% 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. 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%), while only 19% indicated they were offended (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 percent say they will keep the holidays separate or mostly separate, up from 80% 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. Eighty 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. 12).

Those respondents who are participating in Christmas celebrations explain their participation in Christmas celebrations to their children in a variety of ways. Sixty-five percent cite respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family, 61% cite respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions, and 47% 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

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 = 223)
Respect for the non-Jewish parent’s traditions	61
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent	10
Respect for the traditions of the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	65
Desire not to upset the non-Jewish parent’s extended family	12
Open-mindedness/tolerance	47
Desire to expose your children to different faith traditions than your own	30
Opportunity for your children to make up their own mind about what religion to adopt	5

Some local Jewish community studies are beginning to inquire about and report 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:

A Christmas tree is a secular symbol and has nothing to do with the birth of Jesus. And, my children know they are Jewish and identify as Jews. I also grew up with a Christmas tree and consider myself a practicing Jew.

-Comment #27, Q17

The Christmas tree is in our home to respect the traditions of my husband, our children's father, and his family; it does not represent a religious symbol in our home. It is a more of a tree of life, as



it reflects the joy of the season and our family. We decorate it with photos of all members of our family.

-Comment #28, Q17

Most of our family observances are Jewish. My husband is not Jewish. Celebrating Christmas and having a tree and decorations are the only non-Jewish celebrations in our home all year. It seems only fair. Our 31 year old daughter, who had her bat mitzvah and self-identifies as Jewish, loves the celebrations of Christmas on a secular level. Why not?

-Comment #33, Q17

We do not celebrate Christmas as a celebration of Jesus's birth, but we celebrate my family's traditions and the spirit of giving.

-Comment #48, Q18

We don't celebrate Christmas as having any religious significance at all. It is a seasonal holiday, like Thanksgiving and Halloween.

-Comment #60, Q43

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

We are a Jewish family and my Catholic husband participates in our events. We respect and honor his background and beliefs with the tree... just as we would honor and include the beliefs of anyone in our home.

-Comment #90, Q17

My children know they are Jewish. My older daughter is in bet class in Hebrew school, we attend Shabbat services every Friday night, we just attended services for Yom Kippur yesterday, and attended last week for Rosh Hashanah. Their father/my husband is Catholic. We love him (and his family) and respect his religion and traditions which is why we celebrate with him.

-Comment #100, Q17

I don't think it restricts our Jewish involvement. It's really as a matter of honoring one side of our family's tradition in a non-religious way.

-Comment #107, Q17

Our child will understand that the Christmas celebration is a way to show respect for his Christian family members, just as they respect the fact that we had a bris and will be raising our son to identify as a Jew.

-Comment #150, Q43

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

We have always had a Christmas tree because my husband is not Jewish. We have explained to the

children that we are celebrating with dad and his family. They attend Hebrew and religious school and therefore know that they are Jewish. I don't feel that having the Christmas tree makes them feel any differently or confused.

-Comment #5, Q17

Basically, celebrating Christian holidays with their dad is akin to celebrating his birthday with him. It's his celebration and we enjoy helping him observe it... but it's not a Jewish celebration... just like it's not their birthday when it is his birthday.

-Comment #106, Q43

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

We explain clearly that Christmas is a tradition from the non-Jewish parent's family. We talk openly about different religions and different people and we explain our feelings to our kids. I find that if the parents are not confused about why they celebrate the way they do, neither are the kids.

-Comment #87, Q43

The Jewish identity of my children has nothing to do with my religious affiliation. They are being raised, and see themselves, as Jewish. They are not prejudiced against me, or feel threatened, that I identify as Protestant. They know that I, and my extended family, celebrate Christmas, and don't link it to their own religious identity.

-Comment #84, Q43

My children identify 100% as Jewish. We attend services and they attend services and Hebrew school regularly. We keep a Jewish home. We are active members of our congregation year round. However, they know that mom was not raised in a Jewish home and Christmas is a holiday that is important to her. A symbolic decoration like a tree cannot take away the importance that we place on Jewish identity all year long.

-Comment #108, Q17

The kids understand that when their non-Jewish friends or relatives help us celebrate Jewish holidays it does not make them Jewish – so us helping their relatives or friends celebrate their holidays does not make us less Jewish.

-Comment #148, Q43

Some felt that participating in Christmas celebrations can strengthen children's Jewish identity:

It increases their awareness that both of their parents are not Jewish, and that they have competing religions in their heritage. It makes them realize that they don't necessarily have to identify as Jewish if they choose not to.... I don't think it's bad to have your own Jewish identity challenged – it makes you stronger. And I feel that it is my duty to teach them everything, including why I identify as Jewish, but I recognize that in the end it is up to them to decide, and I will respect their decisions. I think that ignoring part of a child's heritage is more dangerous to the identity. I

grew up feeling that I was half dirty because my mother acted like anything not Jewish was dirty.
-Comment #17, Q43

I think [it will affect their Jewish identify in] a positive way. As a Jewish communal professional, I have met many young adults who are from interfaith families and they have (in my opinion) a stronger Jewish identity than those who are just taking it for granted.
-Comment #134, Q43

Two respondents made the point that they want their children to identify as Jews for positive reasons, not by what they avoid or do not do:

[Our celebration] doesn't impact Jewish involvement of the family. We all view the tree/decorations as meaningful to the non-Jewish parent, and we teach our children to honor and respect everyone's beliefs and traditions. They have a strong positive Jewish identity that is based on choosing to be Jewish, not based on avoiding religious symbols of another faith.
-Comment #59, Q17

My son is too young to really understand, but we plan on his Jewish identity not being based in what he does NOT do.
-Comment #103, Q43

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

I grew up in an interfaith family, had a Christmas tree, and still turned out to be a bat mitzvah/confirmed/graduate of Hebrew school who worked in the Jewish communal world and is raising a Jewish child who goes to a Jewish preschool... But I still do feel I have to explain that the tree to my family is just seasonal, and to celebrate my husband's heritage, and I know it could make others uncomfortable.
-Comment #19, Q17

As someone who has become more deeply engaged in my own Jewish life and who has raised children that were Jewishly educated beyond confirmation, I do not see the tree as a threat to my faith or identity. I am only slightly uncomfortable with it when it makes other people feel uncomfortable.
-Comment #36, Q17

Having a Christmas tree is simply part of the non-Jewish parent's cultural and family traditions. It is not a referendum in support of Christianity or against Judaism.
-Comment #62, Q17

It is a lovely childhood family tradition that should be celebrated, not shamed. I want my children to understand that anyone can truly celebrate another's holiday traditions, even if they are of a different religion. It is also why we host an annual Hanukkah party for all our (mostly Christian) friends and neighbors in our southern town.

-Comment #65, Q17

As the non-Jewish partner in the relationship, I feel that having a Christmas tree in my own home is not infringing on my children's or husband's religion. Instead, it is reaffirming that we can all be a family, while still honoring each other's beliefs. As a Christian, raising my child Jewish, I feel that I have made a large commitment to learning and practicing the Jewish religion. However, as I am not planning on converting, I feel that I also have the right to have a Christmas tree in my own home. I do not appreciate Jewish people that feel that this is too confusing or not acceptable behavior and question this decision.

-Comment #70, Q17

If one spouse is Christian, then their beliefs need to be respected as well. Since the child is being raised Jewish, the Christian parent is sacrificing a bit more than the Jewish parent. In addition, it takes more effort for the Christian parent to raise their child Jewish as they also have to learn what to do and what each holiday means, in order to teach it to their child. Obviously, since the Christian parent has committed to raising a Jewish child, they are not going to focus on the Christian religion; however, the Christian parent should feel able and supported that they can actually celebrate their own holiday without censure from family.

-Comment #23, Q20

Conclusions

The great majority of interfaith couples raising their children as Jews plan on participating in celebrations of both Christmas (83%) and Hanukkah (98%).

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 (98%) celebrates Hanukkah at home, while a little more than half (56%) celebrate Christmas at home. Seventy-three 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 60% plan on celebrating the holiday in a Jewish house of worship, up from 51% last year. Meanwhile, their participation in Christmas celebrations is almost entirely secular. Only 3% of these families expect to tell the Christmas story; only 10% 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 (63%) and have Christmas trees (49%) at home were very close to last year (60% and 46%), and the overall percentage who celebrate Christmas in some fashion at home increased from 48% last year to 56%. 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%, up slightly from 80% last year), and they feel comfortable that celebrating Christmas won't negatively impact their children's Jewish identity (80%, up slightly from 77% 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.
- Participating in Christmas celebrations can strengthen children's Jewish identity by not letting them take it for granted.
- Jewish identity should be based on positive reasons, not on what people avoid or do not do.
- 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 773 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)
Jewish	81
Catholic	5
Protestant	5
Agnostic/Atheist	3
None	4
Other	6

Their partners were a mix of Jewish (26%), Catholic (29%), Protestant (13%), 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	26
Catholic	29
Protestant	13
Agnostic/Atheist	13
None	5
Other	10

The great majority of respondents were female (85%) and 62% 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	2
30-39	34
40-49	28
50-59	22
60-69	13
70 and over	1

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	33
4-5	19
6-8	23
9-12	21
13-17	15
18-30	20
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 = 186)
Attend Christmas religious services	10
Attend a tree-lighting	11
Watch a Christmas parade	11
Attend a Christmas-themed concert, play or performance	16
Go to movie theater to see a Christmas movie	8
Bring kids to Santa at the mall	13

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 = 220)	If you plan to participate in Christmas celebrations this year, please rate the religious nature of your celebrations.	% (n = 186)
5 – deeply religious	2	5 – deeply religious	1
4 – fairly religious	22	4 – fairly religious	3
3 – half secular, half religious	53	3 – half secular, half religious	8
2 – mostly secular	21	2 – mostly secular	18
1 – entirely secular	3	1 – entirely secular	70

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 = 186)
5 – keep separate	57
4 – keep mostly separate	26
3 – blend moderately	11
2 – blend significantly	2
1 – blend completely	2

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 = 195)
Yes	19
No	81

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 = 186)
Appreciative of the holiday cheer	50
Indifferent	31
Somewhat offended	17
Very offended	2