

# Christmas, Hanukkah and the Interfaith Family

By [Ruth Abrams](#) Reprinted with permission from [Interfaithfamily.com](#)

Every Jewish person in North America, whether or not they are married to someone who celebrates Christmas, faces a dilemma about Christmas. How much can Jews throw themselves into Christmas without losing a sense of Jewish identity? Every Jew has made a different decision about this, and this decision doesn't necessarily depend on how religiously observant they are. Some look forward with glee to enjoying their neighbor's customs vicariously, touring neighborhoods to enjoy the pretty lights. Some feel encroached upon and grumpy. Some celebrate Christmas along with everyone else who is doing it in a secular way.

Once you have children, Christmas is really a big deal. The whole world around American children is going mad for Santa Claus, Christmas trees and presents. Strangers may approach your child on the street and sweetly wish them a nice visit from Santa, or ask what they want Santa to bring them. Public schools aren't supposed to put on Christmas-themed concerts, but they do.

Though the character of Christmas has changed significantly in modern times, Christmas has never been, forgive the expression, a small potatoes holiday like Hanukkah. As Jews are increasingly accepted into the mainstream of majority-Christian cultures, and marry into Christian families, there is no avoiding the primacy of Christmas.

The families who use [InterfaithFamily.com](#) take a variety of approaches to Christmas. Some of the Jewish partners on the site like Christmas just fine and don't feel the slightest awkwardness at participating in celebrating it. Others feel very uncomfortable about having Christmas in their homes, even though they are crazy in love with their spouses who grew up with Christmas. This is another one of those issues that require good communication, since there's such a wide variety of possible reactions that an individual might have.

Some ways interfaith families cope:

## 1. Celebrate Both Holidays In Your House

In some interfaith households, there are decorations up for Christmas and Hanukkah. The family lights Hanukkah candles and spins the dreidel and also has a tree and stockings. For a lot of families, this works well. Doing both is a way to show that they value both parents' traditions. Some families have a Christmas area and a Hanukkah area, while other families just divide the time, not the space.

Some in the organized Jewish community do not like this solution and say that interfaith families aren't successful in passing on Jewish identity to children specifically because they have Christmas trees. But we at [InterfaithFamily.com](#) have done many annual December holiday surveys that very consistently report that many interfaith families who are raising their children Jewish participate in Christmas celebrations in

a non-religious, secular way and have Christmas trees in their own homes that do not confuse their children about their Jewish identity. There is not any conclusive research to tell us what effect Christmas trees in the home have on Jewish identity, especially in homes where people also light [Shabbat](#) candles every week.

Perhaps a bigger challenge for interfaith families is that some Jewish partners may not feel comfortable having a Christmas tree in their homes. Also, some members of your extended family may feel uncomfortable celebrating Hanukkah in the presence of Christmas decorations, and some might feel weird about Hanukkah. This is the kind of compromise that calls for checking in and communicating your feelings.

## 2. Celebrate Hanukkah at Home and Visit Christmas

For families raising Jewish children, having Hanukkah at home and visiting relatives for Christmas can be a good way to cope. Just as one would be happy with someone else on his birthday, a Jewish family can visit their friends or relatives who are celebrating their holiday and be happy with them. Christmas is a time of intense cultural creativity: special foods and customs, songs and decorations.

## 3. Do Christmas-Flavored Hanukkah or Hanukkah-Flavored Christmas

Some Christian families want to include and integrate Hanukkah into their Christmas celebrations, just like they want to include and integrate their Jewish relatives and friends. Some Jewish families want their children to have all the goodies of Christmas, without Christmas. You can already see some of this in any store that sells holiday or party decorations, in the form of large paper Hanukkah-themed ornaments and decorations for your house.

Sometimes these generous impulses lead to some weird syncretism, like the Hanukkah bush and Hanukkah Harry as substitutions for the Christmas tree and Santa Claus. (Hanukkah Harry was the joking creation of comedian Jon Lovitz on Saturday Night Live, and it's quite strange to see signs up advertising opportunities for children to have their photos taken with him.)

Christian relatives may acquire Jewish-themed Christmas ornaments or Hanukkah decorations to add to the festive feeling in their houses, or they may want to serve [latkes](#) with their Christmas goose.

If everyone in the family is comfortable playing dreidel for candy canes under the Christmas tree, then this approach will work. Check in with everyone to make sure that they feel respected by attempts to blend holiday customs. In InterfaithFamily.com's annual surveys, the great majority of respondents who are raising their children as Jews report that they strive to keep their holiday celebrations separate and avoid blending them. This has been consistent even in years when Christmas falls during Hanukkah, and in the face of new phenomena like "Chrismukkah." Don't make any assumptions about what will make your relatives more comfortable--ask.

## 4. Traditional American Jewish Christmas: Chinese Food, Movies and Volunteering

A lot of American Jews joke about spending Christmas eating Chinese food and going to the movies. If you are an interfaith family that has decided not to celebrate Christmas at all, that's always an option. It's a lot of fun to hang out with people who aren't celebrating the holiday, either out in public at a movie theater or restaurant, or at home in front of the DVD player.

In some Jewish families, Christmas is a time to volunteer. Jewish healthcare providers have a long history of taking the shifts of Christian coworkers in order to give them time off with their families. It's also a good time to volunteer on the crisis hotline if you are trained to do that. Christmas is also a time when people who are ill or disabled need extra help, since their usual helpers may be taking the day off to be with their families, so even if you don't have special training, you can help.

You may be able to find volunteering opportunities at homeless shelters and soup kitchens. This has become a popular Christmas activity among Christians and non-religious people as well as Jews, so it may take some effort to find a place that actually needs volunteers if you live in a major city.

Whatever you decide to do on these holidays, we hope you have a lovely time.