

The Christmas Compromise

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Holidays combine religion and family at the gut level. Because they are filled with concrete symbols and rituals, holidays, more than any other aspects of family life, have shaped the religious identities of my husband and me.

For interfaith families like ours, holidays can be the most difficult test. Because holidays are so enriching to our families--an opportunity to rise out of our workday routines and celebrate together, reaffirm connections with extended family, and get a sense of tradition and continuity--it was worth working through the heavy emotional issues to arrive at a holiday pattern that we can really enjoy.

In deciding how we wanted to handle the holidays in our home, we chose to celebrate the Jewish holidays in a full-bodied way. Devin and I enjoy the folk customs of Judaism such as baking hamentashen for Purim and hosting a Passover seder, and also attend temple monthly and enjoy discussing the ethical teachings and religious concepts associated with holidays. Since we decided to raise our children Jewish, it seemed natural then for us to celebrate the Jewish holidays. However, we came upon a stumbling block when addressing Christian holidays and whether or not we were going to get a tree to celebrate Christmas, as Devin is accustomed to doing.

The Christmas tree triggered the first holiday crisis in our interfaith marriage. The problem began with the fact that the tree is as laden with emotional meanings as it is with decorations--and it meant very different things to me than it did to my husband. For Devin, the tree symbolized the best of family times: special sweets, warm family gatherings, carols, the excitement of giving and receiving gifts. For me, the tree carried an opposite set of feelings. Christmas in my childhood was a time of feeling left out, self-conscious, defensive and different. The tree, more than any other object, symbolized those sentiments. When we shared our feelings, I realized that if we chose not to celebrate Christmas, Devin would have feelings of loss, of being cut off from family, and of losing the right to engage in one of the most precious parts of his religious experience.

After much discussion, we eventually agreed to get a small tree and put it in the corner of the room. I thought that I would be comfortable with it--after all, it is just a big houseplant, right? Unfortunately, the night after we got the tree Devin came home to find me standing and looking at the tree, while crying. I think it was instilled in me at a young age that having a tree is not something you do as a Jew. I have done a lot of things in my life that aren't Jewish, but having a tree seemed somehow worse--a betrayal of sorts to my family and my religion. Since then, we've discussed the issue of our "first tree" many times, and Devin has been very clear that if I am disturbed by having a tree, we won't have one.

However, this past year was a turning point for me. I put myself in his shoes and realized that Devin felt about the Christmas tree the same way I felt about the menorah. Both are symbols of very important holidays, and as such take on meaning that may not be felt by our partners. How would I have felt if he told me he was not comfortable with a menorah in the house? It would be unfair of me to deprive him of a significant part of his holiday joy, and in response I went into action. One day while Devin was at work, I decided to give him a gift. I went to the store and picked out a tree, crammed it in the car, hauled it upstairs, and set it up the best I could. When he came home and saw what I had done, he didn't know what to say. He just walked over and hugged me. That was the beginning of our decision to find the commonalities in the Jewish and Christian celebrations instead of focusing on the differences.

Devin and I have recognized that many of the traditions that we grew up with are now foreign experiences to our partner. For example, when Devin and I go to temple, he asks questions, such as what the spiritual meaning is behind the weekly Sabbath. As a result, I am challenged to either answer or to research the answer so that he doesn't feel like an outsider looking in. I've found that when you are challenged to be an expert of your religion, you find out how much you don't know. Consequently, and more than a little ironically, we are both more knowledgeable about our differing religions than we were before we met.

As an interfaith couple, we each feel a constant challenge to remain connected to our religions. Therefore, even though we have chosen to keep a Jewish household, we have done many things to keep us tied to both the Jewish and the Catholic communities. We belong to a temple in which we participate in a variety of interfaith activities such as an outreach committee focusing on interfaith families, and purposefully introduce ourselves to other interfaith families in the congregation. It is very important for us to search out those who accept our relationship and will help and support us along our journey.

The most important thing that we have done to remain connected to our religions is to build relationships with clergy by meeting individually with them after participating in services. Additionally, we participate in planning events for young adult groups and offer support to other interfaith families in our situation. This gives us an opportunity to ask questions in a constant effort to learn more about our religions. Thus, we are always discovering new and interesting similarities instead of focusing on our differences. Obviously, along the way we have discovered differences as well, the main one being Christianity's understanding of God as a unity of three persons--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--distinguished in their relations to one another and yet equally God.

It was not easy to struggle through the tension and occasional misunderstandings, to ultimately create a religious home style that is right for us, but it was definitely worth it for the future of our family. Instead of taking the easy road and looking at the ways in which we differ, we have chosen to focus on the countless beliefs we share. We are choosing to create our own traditions for our family--such as making a year-round family volunteer service schedule based on both the Jewish and Christian calendars. We discuss the values symbolized by each holiday and try to plan volunteer work to fulfill those values. Our efforts to seek the universal themes which underlie the holidays make us stronger and more respectful of each other as individuals and of the relationship that we share.