Navigating the December Holidays as an Interfaith Family
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When I began my rabbinate in the early 2000s, workshops on the “December Dilemma” were often held this time of year. This term was coined by the late Rabbi Rachel Cowan and her husband Paul Cowan back in the late 1980s. When they married in 1965, they were an interfaith couple. At the time, the intermarriage rate was small, less than 17%. Paul was a deeply assimilated Jew who grew to embrace his Jewish roots. Rachel, a Unitarian, would convert to Judaism and become a prominent rabbi and author. In 1987 they co-authored *Mixed Blessings: Overcoming the Stumbling Blocks in an Interfaith Marriage*.

By 1990, the intermarriage rate was over 50%, and this much-needed book came at a time when many of these interfaith couples began to navigate their religious differences, including the December holidays. It was a time when Jewish identity was tied to not celebrating Christmas. Suddenly, many Jews had to contemplate a Christmas tree in their home, and the even more fraught question like, “How should we raise our children?”

At the same time, the issue of the public display of Christmas trees, nativity scenes, and the emerging practice of lighting giant Chanukah menorahs grew in prominence. The results of the Supreme Court decisions in 1984 and 1989 were that the menorah, Christmas tree, and nativity scenes could be displayed, provided they were adjacent to secular symbols and that the funding for such displays derived from private sources. I used to be against such displays of religious symbols as syncretism – the merging of two distinct religious traditions that end up denigrating both. Think about the “Christmukah” cards that say “Oy, to the World!” Recently I saw a small, blue porcelain tree with lights that had “Happy Hanukah” written on it.

More recently, I have embraced public menorah lighting as a way to educate the larger community about Chanukah, a unique Jewish holiday that is not the “Jewish Christmas.” It is also a way to show strength and pride in the face of growing antisemitism. I am also delighted that the small White House Menorah lighting started by President Clinton has become an annual White House Chanukah party.

A particularly poignant moment came during Obama’s second term, when Rabbi Angela Buchdahl observed, “I would say that our founding fathers...inspired to build a country that was truly a place of religious freedom and equal opportunity for all.... But I have to predict that they could not imagine that in 2014 that there would be a female Asian-American rabbi lighting the menorah at the White House for an African-American president.” Another moment of pride came when my colleague Rabbi Laurence Bazer, then a lieutenant colonel in the Massachusetts National Guard who served in Afghanistan, lit the menorah at the White House.

The story of Chanukah is about how to maintain our Jewish identity with integrity in a time of change. According to a 2015 CJP community study, 47% of Jewish families in the Greater Boston...
area included an adult family member who isn’t Jewish. At least a third of us at CBE are in interfaith relationships, and almost all of us have beloved extended family members who are not Jewish, many of whom celebrate Christmas.

Today, some interfaith families are striving to find ways of honoring their Jewish and Christian traditions. Some celebrate only Hanukkah at home while going to their grandparents to help them celebrate Christmas. Others make different decisions. A child can be raised in the religion of one parent while learning and celebrating their other parents’ religion and traditions. Christmas need not be a threat to Jewish identity.

Instead of conflict, today the emphasis comes from celebrating our different traditions in authentic ways that honor both.

My colleague and noted author on interfaith families Dr. Keren McGinity said it best, “Even when holidays literally overlap on the calendar, by recognizing the distinctiveness about holidays and traditions, interfaith couples can create authentic celebrations, converting a “December Dilemma” into “December Delights” in their own unique ways.”

So, I wish all of you a delightful December, one where you find joy and light, and meaning!

*Chag Urim Sameach!* Happy Chanukah!

Rabbi David

For more resources, see [https://18doors.org/tag/hanukkah/](https://18doors.org/tag/hanukkah/)

For an article written by Rabbi David on interfaith couples and Christmas Trees, see [https://www.jewishboston.com/read/ask-a-rabbi-my-husband-wants-a-christmas-tree-but-i-dont/](https://www.jewishboston.com/read/ask-a-rabbi-my-husband-wants-a-christmas-tree-but-i-dont/)