

# Guide to Hanukkah

*for Interfaith Families*



**18 DOORS**  
Unlocking Jewish



## **Guide to Hanukkah for Interfaith Families**

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## What do we mean by “interfaith”?

Before we explore Hanukkah and Christmas and some of the issues the December Holidays often raise for interfaith families, we’d like to explain what we mean when we use the term “interfaith.”

At 18Doors, we recognize that there are many different varieties of households in which one partner is Jewish and the other partner identifies with a different religious tradition. There are couples in which a deeply religious Jew marries a deeply

the role of faith/religion in the lives of many of the people involved in these inter-religious or inter-cultural unions, it continues to be the most widely used shorthand term for all the different varieties of households that combine someone Jewish with someone who is something else.

When we use the term “interfaith” or “interfaith family,” we are referring to the whole range of possibilities discussed above. We would also include couples that are divorced but are still co-parenting, or couples in which both partners may be

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religious Christian, just as there are couples in which an atheistic and purely cultural Jew marries an agnostic or atheistic Christian (who may even refer to him/herself as an ‘ex-Christian’). And there are literally dozens of other configurations.

It’s hard to find a term that quickly captures all the permutations of households in which there is a Jewish partner and a partner of a different background or identity. While the term “interfaith” may not accurately describe

the same religion but may have kids of a different religion (this sometimes happens when there’s a second marriage after a divorce and children from an earlier union are being raised according to one religion, while the two adults who are marrying and blending their families happen now to be of the same religion).

***And now, on to the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah!***



## What is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is an 8-day long festive holiday that commemorates an improbable victory, some 22 centuries ago, by the Maccabees, a band of Jewish guerilla fighters seeking to reclaim their land, their Temple, and their sovereignty from the oppressive rule of the [Syrian Greek Empire](#) (also sometimes called the Seleucid Empire).



*Some accounts describe the Syrian Greek warriors fighting the Maccabees from atop elephants.*

The word “Hanukkah” means “dedication,” and it refers to the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem which took place after the Maccabees’ victory in 164 BCE. Once the Maccabees had restored the Temple and re-purified it, the traditional story says that they sought to relight a lamp known as the “eternal flame.” But only one day’s worth of consecrated olive oil could be found, and it would be awhile before more could be produced. No

one wanted to light the eternal flame only to see it sputter out after a day, but there was also a deep spiritual desire to rekindle

the sacred lamp immediately. The priests decided to light it and hope for the best. Miraculously, it burned for eight days until fresh jars of olive oil were finally brought to keep the flame alive. Hence, the eight nights of candle lighting for Hanukkah.

Like winter holidays of many other religions, Hanukkah emphasizes light during the darkest part of the year. The main observances are lighting a menorah (a ceremonial candelabra), spinning a top called a dreidel in a game of chance, and eating fried foods (to symbolize the oil in the story). It’s a holiday in which you get to set things on fire, gamble and eat junk food!

Though it’s a minor religious holiday, Hanukkah among American Jews has become enormously popular. It’s a festival of light in the winter, it celebrates victorious underdogs, and it fits the “they tried to kill us / we won / let’s eat” rubric that animates Jewish holidays like Passover and Purim.

**Complexity in the Hanukkah Story:** More seriously, however, the military victory that Hanukkah commemorates also involved civil warfare between different Jewish factions. The Maccabees represented a priestly family that had for some time been in conflict with some of the elites in Jewish society who had chosen to assimilate into Syrian Greek religious and cultural life. The initial fighting

began between Jewish factions, but quickly grew into a full-fledged war with the Syrian Greeks, who had imposed many aspects of their polytheistic religion on the Jews. For a kid-friendly account of the Hanukkah story that includes the complexities of the civil war as well as the better known battle against the Syrian Greeks, see Joel Lurie Grishaver's [The True Story of Hanukkah](#). For an overview of the ancient texts that form the basis of the Hanukkah story, this page at [MyJewishLearning.com](#) is very helpful.

After the Maccabees won and came to power (about 2150 years ago), they instituted Hanukkah as a new major holiday in ancient Israel. Several centuries later, after a new empire – Rome – had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple and exiled most Jews from Israel, the rabbis who came to lead the surviving Jews downplayed the importance of Hanukkah. For multiple reasons, they chose to emphasize the miracle of the sacred light that burned for eight days despite there only being one day's worth of oil, and to downplay the importance of the military victory. For many centuries, Hanukkah quietly appeared every winter as a minor yet festive occasion.

**In modern American Jewish life**, however, Hanukkah has made a major comeback. Always arriving roughly around the same

time as Christmas, Hanukkah has absorbed some of the universal elements animating the Christmas season (including some of the materialistic and commercial excesses that many Christians and Jews have come to dislike). Before modern times, there was no



adaptive pattern of “absorbing and Jewishly-customizing” other cultures’ practices isn’t a bad thing – rather, it’s an important part of how Judaism has evolved and stayed relevant across so many places and historical times.



## Hanukkah now takes its place alongside Christmas as part of a religiously pluralistic holiday season.

Jewish tradition of exchanging gifts during Hanukkah; no big drama over kids getting presents. But in every place Jews have lived they have adapted their holidays and customs, often absorbing elements from the majority culture and reframing them in a Jewish context. American Hanukkah is a prime example of this. This Jewish

One important aspect of Hanukkah that’s become amplified in modern American society is the story of ancient Jews fighting for their right to worship freely against an empire that sought to impose its own religious beliefs upon them. American Jewish culture has cultivated that storyline into a celebration of religious freedom and

We have a lot to be thankful for, given the difficult histories Jews and Christians have had for many centuries before this time of unprecedented pluralism and acceptance.

freedom from persecution for religious minorities in American society.

Hanukkah now takes its place alongside Christmas as part of a religiously pluralistic holiday season. Kwanzaa and Winter Solstice chime in as well to round out a shared civic sense of winter celebration. At this time more Americans than ever before have Christmas and Hanukkah in their lives in some way, either due to their own interfaith families or via relatives or friends. Many regard this current moment as a golden era of pluralism and mutual religious appreciation. This is not to deny that sometimes the December holidays involve negotiation or even conflict within some families. But we should keep in mind the historical significance that we live in a time in which Americans celebrating either or both holidays have come to find it so normal to participate in aspects of both. We have a lot



to be thankful for, given the difficult histories Jews and Christians have had for many centuries before this time of unprecedented pluralism and acceptance.

### When is Hanukkah?

In the Jewish calendar, Hanukkah begins at sundown on the 25th of a month called Kisleev, and it continues for 8 days. The Jewish calendar is partly lunar and partly

solar, whereas the Gregorian (Western secular) calendar is purely solar. The Jewish calendar and the Gregorian calendar do not overlap precisely, and that's why Hanukkah keeps "moving around" the secular calendar, sometimes starting as early as the tail end of November, and sometimes not starting until after Christmas Day. If you're interested in learning more about these calendars, [this](#) online article is helpful.



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Hanukkah falls in any given year, just look it up [here](#).

### Symbols and Observances of Hanukkah

Hanukkah, unlike the major Jewish holidays, does not require any

days off from work, any major preparation or any long worship services. It's an eight-day holiday that consists mainly of lighting candles, singing songs, eating traditional foods and playing dreidel.

### The Hanukkah Menorah

Hanukkah's sole mandatory religious observance is lighting the Hanukkah menorah or lamp, also called the *Hanukkiah*. The menorah has receptacles for nine candles, one for each of the eight nights of the holiday, and one "helper candle," the *shamash*, to light the others.

Each night of Hanukkah, there's a protocol for lighting the candles. Gather everyone around, and start by lighting the *shamash*. Then, holding the *shamash*, begin reciting the blessings. On the first night, there are three blessings to recite: a blessing announcing the commandment to light the Hanukkah candles [[listen here](#)], another on the miracles God did for the Maccabees [[listen here](#)], and a blessing of appreciation for reaching a happy occasion, called *Shehecheyanu* [[listen here](#)]. Then use the *shamash* to light the first candle on the far right of the menorah. You can see a short 18Doors video demonstration of the whole procedure [here](#). Some families light the candles while they sing the blessings.

On the 2nd – 8th nights of Hanukkah the routine is similar, except that one only recites the first two blessings – the *Shehecheyanu* is just for the first time one celebrates a holiday in a year. On the 2nd night, there are two candles in addition to the *shamash*: one on the farthest right position, and one more to the left of that.

Perhaps to the delight of retail stores who want as long a winter holiday shopping season as possible, Hanukkah and Christmas often don't overlap. Although Jews make up less than 2% of the U.S. population, in the last few decades Hanukkah has taken a prominent place in mainstream American culture. The increase over the last two generations in the number of interfaith families in America is one of the reasons for the "mainstreaming" of Hanukkah in American culture, as the percentage of Americans who have a relative who celebrates Hanukkah has grown steadily during this era. If you aren't sure when

Each night, add another candle to the left, and light the candle in the new position first, followed by the candles that represent the previous nights. By the 8th night, the lamp is blazing away with nine candles. In a family where each member has his or her own menorah, or at a Hanukkah party where a group lights theirs together, this can be a fun, if slightly pyromaniacal, religious practice. (Seriously, fire safety is important. There have been so many Hanukkah-related fires in Israel that the government has put forward [these safety tips](#). Apartments pose their own fire risks – [here are some tips](#).)

Children love to be involved in the candle lighting even before they are old enough to safely light candles on their own. If you have a set of Hanukkah candles that include different colors, you can have kids take turns getting to pick the colors each night. Kids can also make their own Hanukkah menorah; there are many versions of this craft project. If you are using a craft project menorah, just be certain that the candles won't fall out of it, and never leave a lit menorah to burn unattended. Most Hanukkah candles are designed to burn all the way down within 20 minutes.

Many families sing Hanukkah songs after the candles are lit. The traditional custom is not to make use of the candles for anything work-related, just to appreciate them. It's

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also traditional to place the menorah in a window in order to publicize the miracle to passersby – again, be careful of fire hazards like curtains. [Electric menorahs](#) can be fun to place in your window sill if you're concerned about fire safety.

### Playing Dreidel

The dreidel is a four-sided top with the Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *hey* and *shin* on it, one letter to a side. Though there is folklore about how the Maccabees played dreidel, the custom probably stems from a medieval German and Irish gambling game popular in parts of Europe. Dreidel is one



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of many historical examples of a different culture's customs getting integrated and modified to fit Jewish beliefs and practices.

**So how do you play dreidel?** Well, it's a simple gambling game. Everyone starts with a bunch of coins (often chocolate in gold foil). Then, the first player spins the dreidel, just like one would spin a top. The Hebrew letter that the dreidel lands on determines what happens next. If the player gets a *gimmel*, she gets all the coins in the pot; if it lands on *hey*, he gets half the pot; if it's *shin*, she has to put one coin in to the pot; and if it's *nun*, he gets nothing and gives nothing.

The four Hebrew letters form an acronym of a Hebrew sentence that translates to "A great miracle happened there." In Hebrew that sentence goes like this: *nes gadol hayah sham*. This encoded message serves as a teaching tool for kids to learn about the story of the Hanukkah miracle.

People who grew up Jewish have sometimes had lots of experience spinning a dreidel, and others do not, but no matter your history with the game, it's not hard to learn. If you haven't already mastered the skill, it only takes a little practice and

soon you too can be a dreidel expert. If you want to amaze your Jewish relatives with an obscure practice, learn how to spin the dreidel on its stem, upside down. The wooden dreidels work the best for this. Just have fun and try not to eat all the chocolate before the end of the game.

### Traditional Foods of Hanukkah

Because of the miracle of the oil, it's traditional to eat fried foods during Hanukkah. The most loved of these is the potato pancake, called a *latke* (pronounced "lot-kuh").

Your basic *latke* is made of grated potatoes, eggs and onions and fried in lots of oil. But variations are fun too – you can bake them on a non-stick pan, make them out of zucchini and sweet potatoes, or go vegan and add grated beets. You can find [many variations](#) and there is no reason not to enjoy them all. 18Doors has recipes for [classic versions](#) of the traditional [latke recipe](#) on our website. You can also buy a mix to make latkes or get frozen pre-made latkes. Nothing bad will happen [if you don't make them from scratch](#).



Photo: Flickr user Young Sok Yun 윤영석

Instructions for making delicious potato latkes with applesauce are [here on Leah Singer's blog](#). Singer, who is part of an interfaith family, writes on many topics. You can read one of her pieces about [her interfaith family experiences here](#).

If your relatives [keep kosher](#), you shouldn't serve the latkes with sour cream at a meat meal, because people who keep kosher don't mix dairy ingredients and meat ingredients in the same meal. You can serve



them with applesauce at a kosher meat meal; that's a traditional topping. They're also tasty with cranberry sauce or salsa. Enjoy and make it your own!

*Latkes* are an Ashkenazi (central and eastern European-Jewish) custom. Jews whose families come from other parts of the world eat other fried goodies on

Hanukkah. According to Claudia Roden, author of [The Book of Jewish Food](#), among Sephardim (Jews with Spanish roots) it was the custom to have fritters in syrup called [bimuelos](#) or *zalabia*. In Israel, Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions blended to form the custom of eating jelly doughnuts, [sufganiyot](#), on Hanukkah. Kurdish Jews make Carrot Fritters – you can find [a recipe here](#). Moroccan Jews make a dish called *sfenj* – doughnuts with orange flavored dough ([see here for recipe](#)). Some Columbian Jews deep fry plantains to create *patacones* ([recipe here](#)).

Another thing that North American Jews eat at Hanukkah is chocolate Hanukkah gelt. These are the chocolate coins wrapped in gold or silver foil that you can use for gambling when you play your *dreidel* game. If your family likes to support Fair Trade chocolate, [get your gelt here](#).

## Hanukkah Songs

While there aren't as many classic Hanukkah songs as there are Christmas songs, there are a few. Some of the classics include (each of the entries below is hot-linked to a video online):

- ["I Have a Little Dreidel"](#)  
(traditional version for small children)

- ["I Have a Little Dreidel"](#)  
(fun performance by members of Seattle's gay men's chorus)
- ["Hanukkah, O Hanukkah"](#)  
(this version sung by the Barenaked Ladies)
- ["Ma'oz Tzur / Rock of Ages"](#)  
(traditional version sung Hebrew first, English second)
- ["Sevivan Sov Sov Sov"](#)  
(translation: dreidel, spin spin spin!)

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- ["Ocho Kandelikas"](#)  
(in Ladino, a language of Hebrew/Spanish/Portuguese elements)
- ["Light One Candle"](#)  
(Peter, Paul, and Mary)
- [Cha Cha Chanukah](#) is a fun CD for families with young children

Of course, there are lots of fun riffs on Hanukkah songs too:

- Adam Sandler's ["Hanukkah Song"](#)  
(an instant classic)
- The Maccabeats' ["Candlelight"](#)  
(fun parody)

The independent music website [Cdbaby.com](http://Cdbaby.com) has a big set of Hanukkah themed albums and singles that can be downloaded.

## Hanukkah, Christmas, and Your Interfaith Family: Various Approaches

This subject is sometimes termed “The December Dilemma,” but we’re not crazy about that term at 18Doors. Do some interfaith couples struggle negotiating over their family’s holiday celebration options? Sure. But let’s remember some broader context: The holiday season, from Thanksgiving on, can be an emotionally overloaded time for many families in all kinds of ways that have nothing to do with interfaith issues. Complicated family dynamics of many kinds can cause predicaments for parents. For some families, navigating interfaith questions may be a breeze compared to other family complexities that arise when relatives gather for these special occasions.

In other words, most American families have issues that present emotional challenges that they need to navigate skillfully during the holiday season – that’s just part of the package that comes with being a family. We think a good starting point for interfaith families is not to begin their December

holiday discussions with the assumption that they’re mired in a dilemma. Remember, a true dilemma is a deeply vexing, intractable problem for which there is no good solution. But many interfaith families do find good solutions that make sense for their families and create beautiful enduring memories for their kids. Our aims at 18Doors are to support your interfaith family as you discuss your December options, and to help synagogues and other Jewish organizations develop a culture of welcoming so that your family finds warmth and inclusive community there.

### “Pre-existing Conditions”

No, we’re not talking about health insurance – rather, we mean the pre-existing cultural conditions that many Jews and Christians bring to the discussion of the December holidays. These are cultural trends that tend to have affected most Jewish or Christian partners in an interfaith marriage whether they realize it or not.



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For Jewish-Americans, there's the shared experience of being part of an historically vulnerable minority group. Some Jews find Christmas celebrations fun and choose to

up in devout families may have their own distress over the crass commercializing of Christmas, even if they are no longer deeply religious themselves.

## Some Jews find Christmas celebrations fun and choose to join in – others feel encroached upon and grumpy over the ubiquitous presence of Santa and Joy to the World

join in – others feel encroached upon and grumpy over the ubiquitous presence of Santa and Joy to the World. Also, some Jews with a strong knowledge of Jewish history associate Christmas with earlier, darker eras when Jewish communities sometimes faced hostility or worse around Christmas or Easter time. Different Jews have different reactions to the widespread presence of Christmas decor, music, religious imagery, etc.

Christians who've partnered romantically with Jews also bring their own set of circumstances and experiences to these holidays. Some Christians have always had thoroughly secular family celebrations of Christmas and may not understand why their Jewish partners – especially if they are not traditionally observant Jews – are so easily triggered. Christians who grew

The bottom line is everyone who lives in America brings some pre-existing experiences and patterns of thought to the winter holiday season. Whether people find themselves struggling over questions that need exploring, and maybe even negotiating, varies from person to person. At 18Doors, we hope to support couples to cultivate trust and goodwill within their family unit as they explore what they're bringing to these questions. We're your allies as you discuss your hopes and wishes for how your interfaith family approaches this confluence of two of the most popular holidays in our society.

### Children

For children of all backgrounds in America, Christmas is really a big deal, whether they celebrate it or not. The whole world



around American children is going mad for Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and presents. Strangers approach on the street and sweetly wish us "Merry Christmas," and kids who don't celebrate Christmas don't always know how to respond. Sometimes interfaith parents have to deal with sensitive issues of church/state separation. In some communities, public schools may appear to cross inappropriate lines in Christmas-



And yet, these bumps in the road aren't all bad. They present interfaith families with important opportunities to embrace the best ideals that form the foundation of our free, open, pluralistic society. Pre-teaching your kids about these kinds of situations gives you a chance to explain what your family values most and how it looks at the December holidays. It also gives you a chance to encourage your kids to learn how to be both compassionate and assertive – how to stand up for themselves if they aren't being treated with respect, but also how to give others the benefit of the doubt and refrain from pouncing on people too easily.

themed concerts that may relegate Hanukkah to “token song” status or insist on kids of different faiths singing very religious Christmas songs.

The healthiest thing parents in interfaith families can do is [talk to each other in advance](#) and figure out what your shared, core values are. Preparing your kids beforehand for situations that may come up will help them know who they are – they are the children of your loving, thoughtful, interfaith family. They need to know from their parents that that's completely OK and they can be proud of it. These tricky situations – the Hebrew school teacher

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who scolds a child in front of his classmates when the child innocently mentions that his home has a Christmas tree next to the menorah; the Christian teacher who starts talking about her passionate religious belief in Jesus in the public school – these aren't easy scenes to navigate for grown-ups or children.

### Telling Your Kids Your Family's “Founding Story”

The unfortunate attitude that assumes that all interfaith families create problems for their kids and their faith communities is thankfully receding somewhat, but it's still out there and your kids may encounter it in a number of different settings during

## Focal Point: Religious School Programs and Your Kids

If your family belongs to a synagogue or church, you may want to speak with the clergy or religious school principal to seek assurances that your child won't be chastised if s/he shares details about your family's mixed practices. Even if the clergy are wonderfully sensitive with their words to interfaith families, congregations often rely on volunteers or very part-time teachers to work with kids in religious school programs, youth groups, etc. Sometimes those well-meaning adults are the people who react unskillfully when a child innocently says something that stems from their interfaith family background. By bringing up this possibility with clergy and religious school principals well in advance of the December holidays, interfaith parents can give these professionals the opportunity to talk with, or even train up, their volunteers and part-time staff so that they better understand the importance of maintaining a welcoming space, and the potentially damaging impact of saying something that might shame a child in front of peers. If you belong to a synagogue and decide to be pro-active on this issue there, feel free to let them know that 18Doors offers trainings and online resource materials for synagogue and religious school staffs on these issues.

the holiday season. This is part of the "dilemma" mindset. One way to counteract those messages is for parents of interfaith families to tell your children your family's "founding story" in positive terms, including the interfaith aspects, and to reassure them that who they are is a blessing just as they are. If others are telling your kids that there's something wrong with their family make-up, you can empower your kids by teaching them that the world needs many different kinds of people and different kinds of families.

We encourage interfaith families to talk about your winter holiday choices and your values, make the decisions you need to make, communicate the info in age-appropriate ways to your kids and your close friends and family, and then – when unexpected challenges happen – back each other up as parents. In two parent households, if one partner realizes that s/he would like to modify the family's December holiday game plan, it will probably be easier to have



Photo: Flickr user Sandoz Weisz

that conversation privately after this year's holidays are over.

## Some Specific Approaches Interfaith Families Use

The families who use 18Doors as a resource take a variety of approaches to home observances of Hanukkah and/or Christmas. Some Jewish partners like Christmas just fine and don't feel the slightest awkwardness participating in celebrating it. Others feel very uncomfortable about having Christmas



symbols or celebrations in their homes. This is another one of those issues that requires good communication, since there's such a wide variety of possible reactions that an individual might have.

So what are some of the more common decisions interfaith families make in their approach to the December holidays? Here are three possibilities, presented in no particular order:

#### ***A. Celebrate Hanukkah at Home and Visit Christmas (or Vice-Versa)***

For families raising Jewish children, having Hanukkah at home and visiting relatives for Christmas can be a good option. For interfaith parents who have decided that they are raising their kids as Jews, this option creates the opportunity to model what it means to have a positive attitude toward being part of a multi-faith extended family, including participating in the different

holidays that different relatives celebrate. This model works for parents who are comfortable saying to kids something like, "Daddy and I decided that what we both want is to celebrate the Jewish holidays in our home, and when we visit Grandpa and Grandma, to share in their Christmas celebration." As with any other approach

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to the winter holidays, communicating well between parents and asking extended family members to honor and support how you're framing things are ingredients for success.

Of course, this model can be reversed. Some interfaith families are raising Christian children, and they may want to flip this model and celebrate Christmas at home and visit Hanukkah.



### ***B. Celebrating 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 some families, this works. Doing both is a way to show that they value both parents' traditions.

## **Some Jewish families want their children to have all the goodies of Christmas, without Christmas.**

Some families have a Christmas area and a Hanukkah area, while other families just divide the time, not the space.

If your family decides to take the approach of having both Hanukkah and Christmas at home, communicate with each other well, show unity of purpose to your kids, and let friends and family know beforehand. Some of them may have judgments – but if the both of you are united in your pre-planned decisions, then you can set your boundaries with those people and, if appropriate, prepare your kids in advance for comments or attitudes they may encounter among relatives or family friends. You can be transparent with your kids about what you're doing and why, and tell them to take pride in who they are and who you are as a family regardless of whether or not others fully understand. This is an important life skill that will come up for kids, as they grow up, in many different areas of life, not just questions of interfaith issues.

If these issues are difficult for your family, talk them through with an extra measure of patience and a desire to understand

what these different symbolic choices mean to each of you. If you're an interfaith couple hoping to have kids but don't have any yet, talk these things through now. If you're an interfaith couple bringing kids from a previous union into your marriage, talk through your options in light of the decisions you're making as a couple about how to honor the religious identities of the kids who came along before you were a couple, as well as any additional kids you may be planning to have together.

### ***C. 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 [creative syncretism](#) (blending of different religions), like “the Hanukkah bush” and Hanukkah Harry as substitutions for the Christmas tree and Santa Claus. 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 roast.

If your family decides to embrace some of these blended-symbols, be aware that this is another one of those areas that can trigger discomfort for some in the Jewish community. There is an emotional trigger point in parts of the Jewish community around even playful syncretism with Christianity. For families that decide on mixing or blending elements of both holidays, communicating openly and compassionately with in-laws or other loved ones well in advance can help reduce potential tensions, misunderstandings, or misinterpretations of the parents’ intentions.

### **To Tree or Not to Tree? That Is (Sometimes) the Question**

For interfaith families who have decided to raise their children with Judaism as their full or partial religious identity, one of the most commonly occurring questions that comes up is whether or not to have a Christmas



tree at home. Some in the organized Jewish community will claim that interfaith families that have Christmas trees aren’t generally successful in passing on Jewish identity to children. For what it’s worth, there’s no research that shows that having a tree in the home means that kids won’t end up identifying as Jewish, especially in homes where people also engage in regular Jewish ritual practices, like lighting Shabbat candles every week. At 18Doors we’ve done surveys on December holiday practices over the last several years, and you can see our findings on [this and other questions here](#).

Still, sometimes discussing having a Christmas tree at home can be an emotional

trigger for Jewish partners. It’s also not uncommon for Jewish relatives to feel uncomfortable celebrating Hanukkah in the presence of Christmas decorations. To add to the complexity, sometimes Christian partners – especially those who have agreed to raise Jewish children – can’t fathom why having a Christmas tree, just as a gesture of respect to the Christian partner’s heritage and family, is so threatening to their Jewish mate. There have been countless couples’ arguments over whether or not a Christmas tree is a “religious” Christian symbol. If you find yourselves having some version of this debate, it’s helpful to remember that what actually matters is how both partners in a relationship are feeling about the tree and

how well they are able to communicate and, if necessary, compromise.

It can be helpful for Christian partners to bear in mind that what may be scary for Jewish partners about having a tree is the deeply ingrained Jewish fear of disappearing. As members of a very small minority group immersed in the ubiquitous American Christmas scene, the prospect of having a Christmas tree in the home may arouse feelings of being subsumed by the dominant culture and feelings of guilt over a perceived failure to carry on Judaism.

Likewise, it can be helpful for Jewish partners to bear in mind that many Christian partners – including those who are not at all religious – have precious associations with the Christmas trees of their childhood. They may feel like their Jewish partners are being unreasonably inflexible and insensitive to their cherished memories of Christmases shared with parents, grandparents, deceased loved ones, etc. Christian partners who've agreed to raise Jewish children may feel that

they've already agreed to prioritize Judaism on the biggest issues, and they may feel hurt or resentful that their Jewish partner isn't willing to accommodate what feels to them like a small but important request.

### **Adoptive Families & Blended Families**

For adoptive interfaith parents, there can be additional factors in play when thinking through the December holidays. Some adoptive parents have an "open adoption," which means that there's some degree of contact with birth family members (even if the agreement is that this contact is limited to something like an annual exchange of holiday cards and photos, the adoption is considered "open"). If the child's birth family heritage is different than one or both parents', then there's an opportunity to find creative ways to honor the child's

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birth heritage within the framework of whatever celebrations your family has decided to have.

It's also important to remember that not all adoptions are infant adoptions. Some interfaith parents adopt kids who have been in foster care and already have developed some form of religious or cultural identity prior to being adopted. Or, sometimes a relative dies and an interfaith couple adopts their children. In these cases, there can be many considerations to weigh regarding the children's previous upbringing, the importance of December holiday symbols as a remembrance of their birth family, or the wishes of deceased parent(s).

And of course, there are many "blended families" in our communities – parents who've had kids in previous marriages or partnerships and who have chosen to marry and merge households. Parents of blended families often work together to navigate new family dynamics, including step-parenting, sharing custody with ex-partners, moving to a new home, and changing routines. The challenges that blended families take on in building a new family unit out of what were previously two separate families can also add layers of complexity to religious identity issues.

Life is going to bring all of our kids many situations that are emotionally or interpersonally complex. What's toxic for kids is witnessing their parents treat each other with disrespect, or fail to communicate honestly, or fail to honor agreements.

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In all of these diverse family configurations, the same core relationship skills are the tools that can help interfaith parents make thoughtful decisions about the December holidays together. In the organized Jewish community we sometimes hear the claim made that raising kids in a home that has parents of different religions is hard on the kids because it's more complicated than everyone in the family having the same religion, and because kids will feel torn in their loyalties to each parent. What this line of thinking fails to take into account is that most nuclear families are complicated in a variety of ways, and that raising psychologically and spiritually healthy kids is more about thoughtful parenting and communication than it is about avoiding complexity.

## Divorced Interfaith Parents Co-Parenting the Winter Holidays

Divorced interfaith parents face the challenge of negotiating many parenting and family issues with their exes. Chances are that if they do a good job overall as divorced co-parents, they'll do a good job handling the issues around the December holidays. The same basic rules that lead to success for divorced parents apply here:

- Honest, respectful communication
- Reasonableness
- Non-vindictiveness
- Honoring agreements
- Seeking mediation or counseling when needed
- Refraining from denigrating your ex to your kids

Again, complexity isn't the enemy – life is going to bring all of our kids many situations that are emotionally or interpersonally complex. What's toxic for kids is witnessing

their parents treat each other with disrespect, or fail to communicate honestly, or fail to honor agreements.

In cases of divorce resulting from severe harm of some sort having been inflicted by a parent on their partner or the kids, the boundaries that are needed for safety and healing may dramatically change the picture. For custodial parents whose prime focus is sheltering their children from an abusive ex, working with a trusted counselor to explore interfaith identity questions regarding the kids may be the best way to go. Obviously, safety, dignity and respect are the top priorities under these circumstances.

### **What if We Make Mistakes as Parents in Handling Hanukkah / Christmas?**

All parents make mistakes about all sorts of things. When it comes to emotionally loaded issues like religion and the December holidays, you may receive unasked for opinions on your decisions from relatives, friends, co-workers, clergy or even total strangers. It's helpful to cultivate a bit of a thick skin and to think ahead of time about how you might respond in these situations. What someone else considers a parenting mistake may in reality be parenting wisdom.

However, we all do make mistakes sometimes, and if you really think you made an error in judgment about some aspect of how you handled December holiday issues, then what matters is what we want to model for our kids regarding how we handle our mistakes, right?

The Christmas tree decision, or the choice whether or not to mix Hanukkah and Christmas decorations are not matters of life and death. These holidays are opportunities to model thoughtful, caring family communication, and they are opportunities for trial and error.

### **We have questions. Who can we talk to?**

In addition to your local clergy, friends or other nearby trusted resources, we have staff here at 18Doors who are more than happy to take a little time to hear your specific questions or challenges. We're not counselors and we can't offer intensive problem-solving services, but we can listen



well and share a few thoughts or ideas that might prove helpful. If you'd like to email or talk with someone at 18Doors, send an email to [educator@18Doors.com](mailto:educator@18Doors.com).

### **Feedback on this Guide**

18Doors is very interested in hearing from real interfaith families about whether these guides are helpful. Please feel free to share your comments, praises, critiques or suggestions for additional topics to be covered in this guide by writing to [educator@18doors.org](mailto:educator@18doors.org)

*Thank you!*