

# From the “December Dilemma” To the “December Delights”

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**T**his article will provide a brief historical overview of what is commonly referred to as the “December Dilemma” and explain how it has been represented in American culture and Interfaith life. It will trace how the meaning has changed over time, from the first Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center to the invention of the faux “*Chismukkah*” holiday.

What is the “December Dilemma” and where did it come from? Is syncretism, or blending, a solution or a concern? How can couples turn the dilemma into delights? How can Jewish educators teach the Interfaith families in their schools and congregations how to turn the dilemma into delights?

One interpretation of the “December Dilemma” is how it plays out in the public arena. There has long been a debate about whether holiday displays on public property blur the separation of Church and State alluded to in the First Amendment of the Constitution. I say “alluded to” because the First Amendment doesn’t actually include that wording. It states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” It was actually President Thomas Jefferson who interpreted the First Amendment and coined the phrase “a wall of separation between Church and State” in a letter he wrote in 1802. This “December Dilemma” has been acted out in towns and cities across the country over the years, making its way all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1984 and 1989. The results of the Supreme Court decisions were that the *menorah* and the crèche or nativity scene could be displayed, provided that they were adjacent to secular symbols, and that the funding for such displays derived from private sources. However, the controversy continued because both Jewish and Christian Americans believed that the court’s ruling minimized the importance of what for many are actually religious symbols during the holidays by rendering them secular.

The co-existence of Christmas and *Hanukah* displays, such as the national *menorah* and national Christmas tree in front of the White House, are a relatively recent phenomenon by historical standards. The first tree at Rockefeller Center in New York City was placed only in 1931; it was a small, unadorned tree, put there by construction workers. Forty-two years later, in 1974 in Philadelphia, a Chabad rabbi initiated the lighting of a *menorah* in public, rather than in the privacy of a family home, synagogue or community center. Today, the tree at Rockefeller Center stands nearly 80 feet tall and is adorned by some 30,000 lights. Likewise, there are *menorahs* in many public spaces, from town squares and State Houses to shopping malls.

The White House has had Christmas trees in it since the 19th century — and when the Obamas lived in it, there were more than 50 Christmas trees — whereas the recognition of *Hanukah* by American presidents is a more recent occurrence. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter was the first to publicly light a *menorah* outside in Lafayette Park. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan referred to the *menorah* lit in Lafayette Park as the “National *Menorah*” — thereby putting it on equal standing with the lighting of the national Christmas tree. In 1989, George H. W. Bush received a *menorah* from the Synagogue Council of America, and

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it was the first one to be displayed at the White House. Bill Clinton held a small *menorah*-lighting ceremony in the Oval Office in 1993 with Jewish students. And, in 2001, George W. Bush was the first president to host a *Hanukah* party in the White House at which he lit the *menorah*. President Obama continued the new tradition of hosting a *Hanukah* party. During President Obama's second term, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl made an observation: "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."

However, public holiday displays are still a contentious issue, with one in five Americans saying that there should be no religious displays on government property at all (Pew Research Center, December 2014). The ongoing debate about whether store staff should wish customers "Merry Christmas"

marriage rates skyrocketed to 58 percent among Jews who married in 2000 or later.

The "December Dilemma" phrase signifies the manifold tensions and decision-making that intermarried couples face regarding reconciling different faiths at a particular time of the year and the related negotiations. Everything from how to decorate the house, whether to celebrate both *Hanukah* and Christmas, one or neither, is subject to discussion. How strongly one partner feels about his or her own faith often determines whether the couple celebrates in a way that honors both religious traditions or focuses primarily on one of them. Also, it's very important to realize that "interfaith" can be a misnomer. In some cases, faith/faithless is more accurate, such as in Jewish families in which one partner or parent is not Jewish, but does not actively practice another religion.

Strife over *Hanukah* and Christmas had caught public attention even before it had a name. The December 1982

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or "Happy Holidays" is another manifestation of the public "December Dilemma."

#### TENSION AND DECISION-MAKING

The "December Dilemma" also has a personal side — which you probably know or perhaps you wouldn't be here! It, too, has a history. The 1980s and 1990s represented a period of unprecedented media coverage about a phenomenon that came to be commonly referred to as the "December Dilemma." The term itself seems to have been first conceived by Rachel and the late Paul Cowan, a Jewish man and a Unitarian-turned-Jew-by-choice woman, who, in 1987, co-authored the advice book *Mixed Blessings: Overcoming the Stumbling Blocks in an Interfaith Marriage*. The popularization of the phrase coincided with, or perhaps was the product of, the increase of interfaith marriages over time in the United States, first among Christians of different denominations and then between Christians and Jews. Between 1930 and 1960, marriages between Catholics and Protestants became more widespread, while marriage between Jews and Christians remained less common. Before 1970, only 17 percent of Jews intermarried. Over the past nearly fifty years, interfaith

issue of "Ladies' Home Journal," for example, had a feature-length article about the "common clashes and strengths" of interfaith couples that began and concluded with how Jewish-Christian couples navigated the winter holidays. But once the phrase was coined, press coverage increased with annual December headlines such as: "Whose Holiday Is It, Anyway?" (*Glamour*, 1988), "Of Latkes and Lights" (*Newton Graphic*, 1992), "Interfaith Families Face 'December Dilemma'" (*USA Today*, 1996), and "Living on a Prayer" (*Boston Magazine*, 2000). By the dawn of the millennium, one could anticipate seeing as many articles in December about how Jewish-Gentile couples negotiated holidays as one might see *menorahs* in the windows and wreaths on the doors.

#### THE REASONS BEHIND THE CATCHPHRASE

There are, I believe, at least two primary reasons that the "December Dilemma" is such an enduring catchphrase. The first has to do with Jews' ongoing insecurity as a minority population in a predominantly Christian country. Christmas is an annual reminder to intermarried Jews, indeed to all Jews, that American culture is overwhelmingly Christian, with 9 out of 10 Americans celebrating Christmas. "On no

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other day during the year,” as one historian wrote, did they “so deeply feel the clash between the country they love and the faith they cherish.” For most intermarried Jews, the clash is threefold: between them and the people they love, the country they called home, and the faith they cherish or the culture they feel compelled to preserve.

For Christian partners, even those who express a lack of affinity for their religions, the cultural divide between spouses grows wider during this time of year. While their Jewish spouses may more acutely feel their minority status, Christian spouses sometimes struggle to retain what, for them, is sometimes the one remaining connection to childhood memories connecting them with their family of origin: namely Christmas.

In my research on Jews, gender, and intermarriage, I found that the issue of whether or not couples have a Christmas tree was an integral part of their “December Dilemma” experience. In one case, having a Christmas tree was the only thing a husband wanted that had remotely religious connotations, but his wife refused to have a tree in their home. Aware that her refusal caused him sadness, she explained why she could not bear the thought of having a tree: “[B]ecause I think there is nothing that so much identifies a Jew as one’s feelings about Christmas.” Boiling just beneath the surface was her rejection of the view that Christmas was an “American holiday,” an intense sentiment many Jews express. A *Newsweek* author once opined: “When is a tree not a tree? When you’re Jewish and your [spouse] wants a Christmas tree in your living room.” Although arguably a secular symbol for many Christians, psychologically, the Christmas tree was not a benign presence when it brought to mind two thousand years of persecution and stirred fears of annihilation. The annual proliferation of advertising and material consumption proclaiming Christmas “America’s Greatest Holiday” also made it impossible to ignore. That said, many interfaith couples have Christmas trees.

The second reason for the saliency of the “December Dilemma” catchphrase is the question of how children will be raised. *Newsweek’s* cover in 1997 paid the “December Dilemma” close attention, asking “Whose Faith for the Kids?” On a side note, how children will be raised is extremely significant demographically speaking for the American Jewish community because intermarriage outpaces Jewish fertility and child rearing. Depending on the decision couples make about their child’s religious upbringing and identity influences how they will navigate the holidays, whether they will purchase an “elf on a shelf” or a “*mensch* on a bench,” and whose faith will be the primary one for the family. For

interfaith parents raising a child in their partner’s religion but not their own, December can be a stressful, sad, even painful time as it involves personal sacrifices. It can also be a joyous time of learning, sharing, and honoring.

Fueling the personal dilemma, American consumerism has generated a venerable bonanza for marketing professionals and savvy entrepreneurs, creating product and program competition. As interfaith marriages have increased, *Hanukah’s* significance has sometimes been over-emphasized to counterbalance the commercialization of Christmas. A new pop-up bar in Washington, D.C., that claims not to be competing with the decadent Christmas-themed pop-up bar a few blocks away advertises: “From December 1st through New Year’s Eve of the year 5778 (that’s now, for all of you gentiles out there), the Manischewitz shall flow, the *dreidels* shall spin, *latkes* shall be eaten. Guests can expect a winter wonderland of awe-inspiring decorations created for the 132nd most important holiday of the Jewish calendar, *Hanukah*.” (*Forward*, 12/7/17). The growth in *Hanukah* merchandising and Jewish events in public spaces has meant that interfaith families have even more decisions to make about how to handle the holidays, including who will bring what, where. It has also created a whole new interfaith card industry. “Oy to the World!”

Part of what is inherently difficult about the dilemma is that it implies that both Jewish and Christian holidays must be celebrated simultaneously, that is to be combined. This faulty premise is fodder for all kinds of syncretistic ideas. From “*Blintzes for Blitzen*” and “*Chrismukkah*” to all kinds of other mash-ups including the somewhat notorious *Hanukah* Bush. Aside from combining theologically different celebrations, syncretism diminishes what is special about each of them.

## CELEBRATING THE DIFFERENCES

As interfaith marriages have become more common, interfaith families strive to make compromises in order to keep the peace in their homes, and with extended family members. It has become increasingly important for couples and families to figure out how to honor both Jewish and Christian traditions in their own right rather than blend them. In other words: to celebrate rather than diminish differences. Does, for example, celebrating *Hanukah* at home and Christmas at the grandparents’ house make the most sense and will it satisfy everyone’s holiday wishes?

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. Acknowledging the sanctity of

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Christmas and the historical reality and meaning of *Hanukah* about a military victory in defense of religious freedom fosters a family culture of mutual respect, enabling interfaith families to alleviate the pressure of trying to create a nonsensical holiday that encompasses both. By preserving what is uniquely Jewish or uniquely Christian about holidays, interfaith marriages are opportunities for partners to learn about their own and each other's traditions, and to teach their children about them. Children of interfaith marriages can celebrate a parent's holiday as a way of honoring that parent, yet identify with and be educated about the other parent's religion and culture.

To conclude, there is no one cookie-cutter correct way for interfaith couples to navigate holidays, other than to do so respectfully and with lots of love.