

‘A kind of glue that helps hold us together’



With the start of Hanukkah and Christmas just around the corner, interfaith families are sharing how they celebrate.

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF



Cantor Shoshana Brown and Rabbi Mark Elber, of Temple Beth-El in Fall River, are seen with their son, Lev Elber. Brown says she is not disappointed by Christmas often dominating Hanukkah. She believes it is a good thing to have spirituality, songs of hope and opportunities for warm get-togethers. AUDREY COONEY/THE HERALD NEWS

How SouthCoast interfaith families celebrate Hanukkah and Christmas

Seth Chitwood The Standard-Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

NEW BEDFORD – With the start of Hanukkah and Christmas just around the corner, the long-time debate continues about how families experience the holiday season depending on their religion. For interfaith families, Hanukkah merges with Christmas – but has Hanukkah become a version of Christmas anyway?

“I don’t believe Hanukkah should be a watered down version of Christmas,” said Rabbi Raphael Kanter, who has been the rabbi at Tifereth Israel Synagogue in New Bedford for 25 years..

“I think you do both faiths disservice by taking complex spiritual traditions and distilling them down into almost nothing that really resembles the power of what they’re meant to evoke.”

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Holidays

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As the son of a Rabbi, Kanter said Hanukkah was never an important holiday. For his kids, it was more about only lighting the menorah and making potato latkes. However, he says he has lately noticed how Hanukkah has begun to equal Christmas in some ways.



Kanter

"I think it started 'cause kids come home and they say look what they get that we don't get," he said. "We live in an age where many factors go into the the manifestations that we see in our day. It's proximity... and Jews have assimilated into American society."

The rise of 'Chrismukkah'

According to a USA Today article, over at least the last two decades, Hanukkah and Christmas have continued to grow with similar traditions such as gift giving. In the last few years, interfaith stories have taken a front row seat in entertainment.

In December 2003, The TV series "The O.C.," popularized the term "Chrismukkah" when the main character creates the holiday to celebrate both Christmas and Hanukkah with her Jewish father and Protestant mother.

The Christmas-movie "Elf," starring Will Ferrell was written by David Berenbaum, who was raised Jewish, but said his family always celebrated Christmas.

"I was raised in a Jewish family and we celebrated Hanukkah, but also had a Christmas tree every now and again. I got to do a little bit of both," Berenbaum said in an interview with MYCityPaper.com.

"Hanukkah is great, and my kids celebrate Hanukkah, but there's kind of nothing like rushing down on Christmas morning and opening up presents. It's the best of the best when you're a kid."

In 2013, Boston native Neal Hoffman created "Mensch on a Bench" as the Hanukkah counterpart to the "Elf on the Shelf." Hoffman created the product after his son asked to participate in the Elf-experience.

In 2019, the Hallmark channel pre-

miered two interfaith holiday movies – "Double Holiday" and "Holiday Date" – during its "Countdown to Christmas" daily marathon.

"Double Holiday" takes place over the eight days of Hanukkah leading up to Christmas and involves rival coworkers falling in love when experiencing both holidays.

"Holiday Date" is about a woman who hires an actor to show off to her family during Christmas – except the hired actor is Jewish.

"I do feel inundated at Christmas-time with Christmas," Kanter admitted. "But I have watched Christmas movies. Do I make a habit of it? No. Do I prefer not to? Yes."

However, the main reason for more interfaith stories are because of the increase in interfaith families across America.

A spike in interfaith families

According to a 2016 Pew Research Center study, roughly one-in-five U.S. adults were raised with a mixed religious background. One-in-10 say they were raised by two people, both of whom were religiously affiliated but with different religions.

The number of Americans raised in interfaith homes appears to be growing. According to the study, 27% of millennials say they were raised in a religiously mixed family.

44% of married Jews in the U.S. have a non-Jewish spouse -- smaller within Conservative Judaism, which accounts for roughly a fifth of American Jews.

"I do believe in interfaith families as a way to negotiate," Kanter said. "How they navigate you know, the merging of those traditions is something that's a very personal process."

Cantor Shoshana Brown's experience

"Yes, there are many families/couples these days who come from different religious backgrounds – whether they consider themselves traditionally "religious" in their faiths of origin or not," said Cantor Shoshana Brown, a member of Temple Beth-El in Fall River.

Wife of the temple's Rabbi Mark Elber, Brown said she converted to Judaism out of her own authentic emotional and theological convictions, not just be-

cause of marriage.

"I would say that Christmas rather overwhelms Hanukkah," Brown admitted, adding that it's less this year because Hanukkah starts on Nov. 27 as opposed to years when Hanukkah is in late December.

Why Hanukkah is different every year

The reason Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah, Passover or Rosh Hashanna are different every year is because the Hebrew calendar, which differs from the secular calendar, follows the moon and the sun.

"One of the ways to assert your identity is through controlling your calendar," Kanter said. "Jews never allowed their calendar to merge with the secular calendar because it was a way of expressing identity."

There are 12 months in the Hebrew calendar: Nissan, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Menachem Av, Elul, Tishrei, Marcheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat and Adar.

In 2016, Hanukkah started on Dec. 25 and in 2019, on Dec. 23. Next year, in 2022, Hanukkah will start on Dec. 19 and the day after Christmas in 2024.

"The real victor in this rivalry is not Christianity over Judaism, but a rather free-floating, spiritually-tinged secularism over traditional religiosity," Brown added.

Brown says she not at all disappointed by Christmas dominating Hanukkah, most of the time. She believes it is a good thing to have "spirituality" that expressed light and darkness, songs of hope or inspiration and opportunities for warm get-togethers.

"This is a kind of glue that helps hold us together," Brown said. "I don't want my child in public school to be forced to sing songs about the birth of Jesus, but I don't mind hearing renditions of "Silent Night" on the radio, or drinking eggnog or mulled cider."

Combining both traditions

"This is a time when both cultures and religions can be celebrated," Marion Usher, a Washington, D.C.-based family therapist said in a USA Today article.

For example, one interfaith couple in Madison, Wisconsin make for a holiday celebration a Hanukkah-inspired traditional brisket and potato pancakes

and for Christmas a pork sauerkraut dish.

According to an article in the Democrat and Chronicle, an interfaith Rochester, New York family decorates its Christmas tree "like a Hanukkah tree," with blue and silver balls. They also light the menorah and say a prayer all eight days.

Brown's brother, Rob, who was also raised in the Episcopal church, married a Jewish woman. "She is a painter, and he is a "free-jazz" saxophonist, so their "spiritual community" is a community of artists and musicians," Brown said.

"Rob and Jo enjoy the winter solstice/Xmas/Hanukah season in a mostly secular spirit, melding different practices, depending on what makes them feel good that year."

Brown says her brother and his wife will have a small tree and light Hanukkah candles, host or attend holiday parties both with family and with friends as well as taking advantage of New York City's holiday traditions.

"I think that 'blended' families that are not seriously religious in their own traditions probably experience the least friction when these two holidays come to call," Brown said.

"In those rare circumstances where there are members of family/couples who are each seriously religious in their own way, these individuals may be able to appreciate the more faith-centered message."

Kanter echoes Brown's comments. "This is where living in a democracy has helped people to know the story," he said. "The message [of Hanukkah] is the mightier gets the few and what you say is. It's about people being persecuted."

"There's something there, that attaches itself to the American psyche automatically."

If all fails, Kanter says that as long as the message is being entertained, anything else that happens during Hanukkah is up to that specific family.

As for saying, "Merry Christmas" to someone who celebrates Hanukkah, Brown says she doesn't get angry. "I take it as a wish for happiness, health and hope in this darkest time of the year."

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