

Datestamp: 12/22/2008

Interfaith families handle 'Dec. dilemma'

More couples celebrating cross-religious holidays

RENÉE SCHAFFER HORTON

rshorton@tucsoncitizen.com

Rachael and Alyssa Montgomery are pretty particular when they make their lists for Santa Claus. Two years ago, they asked for reindeer bells. Christmas morning, the bells were under the tree.

Last year, 9-year-old Rachael and her 12-year-old sister requested elf shoes. Sure enough, red felt slippers with curled pointy toes and scalloped green trim were delivered Dec. 25, the perfect gift for a pair of nice Jewish girls.

Rachael and Alyssa are products of an interfaith marriage and their parents, Brian and Jodie, have spent years navigating the "December dilemma" that faces an increasing number of families during a month that holds both Christmas and Hanukkah.

"It's been an evolution and at some points, quite difficult," Jodie Montgomery said of the couple's 17-year interfaith holiday journey. "It took us a while to find out what works for us as opposed to what we thought our parents or others wanted."

What works for the Montgomerys is a religiously steeped Hanukkah and a "cultural" Christmas celebration. Their Catalina foothills home features menorahs, dreidels and stories of the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple in 165 B.C.

It also features Santa figurines, stockings by the fireplace and a Christmas tree with presents - but no manger scene or Nativity readings from the Gospel of St. Luke.

Some might think children would get confused in such an arrangement, but the Montgomery girls are not.

"Hanukkah is remembering the Jews during the war and they found a small amount of oil and it lasted eight days," Alyssa explained. "Christmas is more just a celebration of the holiday and Santa. We don't go into Jesus and stuff."

Marriage numbers unclear

Estimates of the number of interfaith marriages vary, but what is universally agreed upon is that people are falling in love across religious boundaries that are becoming more porous with each passing of the mistletoe.

According to a 1990 Jewish Population Survey, the most recent numbers available, 28 percent of the 2.6 million married Jews in the U.S. were in an interfaith marriage.

In Tucson, the numbers are even higher, with 46 percent of the 7,211 married Jewish couples involved in intermarriages, according to the 2002 Tucson Jewish Community Population Study.

"You don't always choose who you fall in love with," said Frank Williams, an ordained Methodist minister and director of social services at Casa De La Luz Hospice. "Interfaith marriages are rising across all faiths because we are less dogmatic within our faith traditions these days and society is more pluralistic."

Arnold and Poornima Friedman, radiologists at University Medical Center, are the picture of pluralism. Arnold is Jewish and Poornima, Hindu.

Although Hindus do not normally celebrate Christmas, when Poornima Friedman moved from her native India at 26, "I just fell in love with the festivity of the celebration."

Arnold Friedman said he didn't think Christmas would be an issue in marrying a Hindu, but learned differently early on.

"I had gone to the farmers' market in New York and bought a fresh wreath," Poornima Friedman recalled. "I hung it on our door and when he came home, he got very upset."

Friedman's visceral reaction arose out of a childhood when he felt forced to participate in Christmas rituals in public school. After explaining that to his wife, she said she understood that "we absolutely do not do Christmas inside the house."

The Friedmans have menorahs set out in the house for Hanukkah, including one that is made from small oil-lamp clay pots normally used for the Hindu festival of Diwali.

"Because our (Hindu) festival is in the early fall, there's really a vacuum in my life in December," said Poornima Friedman. "I really like the festivity of Christmas. If my husband didn't object, I would have a Christmas tree; I would celebrate it in a cultural way."

Instead, there have been small compromises. She said she has been able to talk her husband into outside "holiday lights," and a snowy, glittered "winter wreath" hangs over their fireplace.

"As long as they aren't Christmas lights," Friedman said. "And wreaths are actually pagan, so I rationalize it that way. But I'll draw the line at having a Christmas tree."

Compromise and respect are keys in interfaith families, according to Brian Montgomery.

"It was more important to Jodie to have a Jewish household, but she respects that there are a couple of (Christian) holidays that are important to me," he said. "It took Jodie awhile to understand that Christmas for me was about family and culture, not religion."

This compromise has worked for them, Montgomery said, and they are confident their children get the best of both holidays without religious confusion.

Some oppose joint holidays

Not everyone agrees that combining the two holidays is the way to go.

"The strongest advice I give couples is they make choices that work for their individual families and then no matter what other people say to them, they can say, this is how they practice," said Stephanie Aaron, rabbi of Congregation Chaverim, a reform Jewish congregation.

"However, I also think it can be very confusing to kids if both religions are practiced, but some people feel they just can't choose one religion over the other."

Williams said the holiday conflicts with interfaith couples depend greatly on the involvement of each person in their particular religion.

"If the couple is not deeply involved in one religion or the other, they can kind of move back and forth very easily as a cultural practice," said Williams, who is trained as a marriage and family counselor. "The difficulties come when one or both of the partners are really very strong in their religion."

Other couples he has counseled alternate years between Hanukkah and Christmas, and some celebrate both each year, normally one as a cultural celebration and one religious.

Once children come along, the difficulties increase.

"Many interfaith couples think they are fine and then they have children and the difficulty becomes, 'What do we do with the children?'" Williams said. "In general, I think children need consistency in religious upbringing to avoid confusion."

Dennis Rivera, who was raised Pentecostal Christian but no longer practices, agreed.

"Part of getting married by a rabbi was that I agree to raise any children Jewish," said Rivera, who married Rachel, a practicing Jew, 11 years ago. "So Christmas really hasn't been a big issue. We adhere to the Jewish holidays 100 percent."

Rivera said his sons Sam, 9 and Benjamin, 8, are not sheltered from Christian traditions, "but they are comfortable with their Judaism."

"They know Christians do what they do and we do what we do," he said. "But being a mixed couple is very interesting. For a lot of our Christian-Jewish friends Christmas becomes a big conflict, but for us, we've been very clear so we can enjoy the holidays."

"We have a nice Hanukkah and it works fine for us," he continued. "I don't screw it up by throwing Christmas into it. Although I do miss Christmas morning; that's never changed."

What is an interfaith marriage?

The Web site religioustolerance.org defines an interfaith marriage as a union in which two spouses follow different religious traditions.

It can take many forms, including:

- * A Western and Eastern tradition, such as Christianity and Taoism.
- * Two religions from the "Abrahamic faiths," Christian, Jewish or Muslim
- * Divisions within the same faith, such as Catholic and Protestant from the Christian faith
- * Divisions within a branch of the same faith, such as conservative and reform Judaism.

How do you spell that?

More couples celebrating cross-religious holidays

If you'd like to know why Hanukkah is spelled many different ways, check out:

<http://www.holidays.net/chanukah/spelling.htm>

Religious background of Christmas and Hanukkah

Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem in 165 B.C. after the Temple had been profaned by the Hellenistic Emperor Antiochus IV, as retold in the book of Maccabees in the Bible. At the time of the rededication, there was just one day's worth of pure oil left that was needed to keep the Temple menorah burning. But tradition says it lasted for eight days.

Each year, Jews light candles in their hanukkiot (Hanukkah menorahs) to symbolize the miracle. On the first night of Hanukkah, one candle is placed in the menorah. On each successive night, another candle is added. By the last night of Hanukkah, eight candles are glowing brightly in celebration of this beautiful festival.

Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ as told in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Christians mark the event by lighting candles, symbolizing their belief that Jesus is the "light of the world," setting out manger scenes depicting the Nativity narrative and attending various religious services.

Gifts are exchanged in remembrance of gifts given the infant Jesus by the Three Wise Men. In many cultures, the gifts are given on the Feast of Epiphany, Jan. 6, or St. Nicholas Day, Dec. 6, to have the focus of Christmas be on Christ.

Caption: Arnold Friedman holds his daughter Leela, 6, as she hangs a dreidel - a small top - on their mantel Thursday night. Watching is Leela's mother, Poornima, who is Hindu and likes to celebrate Christmas. Arnold Friedman is Jewish.

Publication: Tucson Citizen

Section: Local

Source: Citizen Staff Writer

Edition:

Page: 1A

Book: A

Byline: RENÉE SCHAFER HORTON

From: