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Week 92

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**I'm excited that it's Hanukkah! But how do I balance my own celebration when Christmas spirit affects so many other people?**

By Ray Velez

During what has been come to be known as the "holiday season," it is pretty obvious that Christmas takes center stage, and is the most media hyped holiday in North America. Some consider Hanukkah to be the Jewish equivalent to Christmas, but it's not. It is important that we continue to feel strong connections to Judaism during December. Though we are by no means the religious majority, we should never cease to be excited for this time of year. In addition to focusing on Judaism, we also can take this opportunity to share our Jewish heritage with our non-Jewish friends and take advantage of the chance to learn about other religions and traditions. For example, hosting your own celebration amidst the many Christmas parties can be fulfilling and may prove to be valuable to friends, family, and neighbors.

As Jews, we choose to embrace the meaning and traditions in our own lives and celebrations. In my household, we include a wonderfully prepared dinner, family time (essential to any holiday), and we make sure to read the story of Hanukkah and share some of our traditions with others whom we invite into our home. My family ritually lights the candles and we share what we are thankful for in the closing year. After reflecting on all that the Jewish people have gone through, we realize how fortunate we all are in our own lives.

This year, as the first and last night of Hanukkah fall on Shabbat (the most important holiday in Judaism), we have the chance to have a double celebration. If you have never celebrated Shabbat in your home, now may be the perfect time to start a new tradition, or at least try something new. Bake a challah, light the Hanukkah *and* Shabbat candles (traditionally, Hanukkah candles are lit first, followed by the Shabbat candles), make kiddush and celebrate 3000 years of tradition.

Because of the media's attempt to be politically correct, most Christians know that Hanukkah falls around Christmas. This knowledge gives Jews a golden opportunity to educate others about Judaism. You may find that many of your non-Jewish friends ask you questions about Hanukkah and other Jewish traditions. Explaining the story of the holiday to non-Jewish friends and family is always important. Delving into the origin of the holiday and different traditions currently observed, including latkes, dreidel and the order of lighting candles can be a lot of fun.

**Related Questions:**

**I can't host a gathering at my house, what can I do?**

Talk to someone at your synagogue, whether it is a youth group board member, your rabbi, your cantor or your educator. You may be surprised at how open your synagogue is to a youth Hanukkah celebration. Suggesting a family program or even asking to help plan one yourself is a great way to share the traditions with others.

**Is it possible to share religious traditions with people from other religions?**

Definitely! My family is religiously diverse and last year we had the chance to celebrate both holidays at the same time. Though Christmas and Hanukkah do not overlap this year, and Ramadan is long over, participating in a multi-religious celebration of life and spirituality can be fun, educational and a great



way to increase tolerance in our diverse society. Celebrations with friends can create a great opportunity to learn and to teach each other about the religion and beliefs of each individual. Judaism is rooted in the pursuit of knowledge, so, when questions arise, who better to answer them but Jews excited to continue tradition! One night spent celebrating different holidays among close friends can be an enlightening and enjoyable experience.

**Taking Action:**

**Keep the Connection**

Use this opportunity to learn about the meaning of Hanukkah for Judaism and your family. Talk to your parents and grandparents about what Hanukkah meant to them when they were young. The anticipation created by a family tradition may be the motivator behind the continuation of Judaism/*dor vador*, from generation to generation. Find opportunities for social justice

**This time of year offers tons of opportunities to make the world a better place.**

Here are a few ideas:

- Soup kitchens never have enough volunteers, especially around holiday time. Whether they say so or not, there is always a way to help.
- Participate in clothing drives at your local synagogue! If there is none set in place, don't be afraid to begin your own! Talk to your clergy and temple board, and ask them for assistance in creating or operating a charity drive.
- Check in your area for Jewish residents at hospitals and nursing homes! No one should be neglected and excluded from the holiday cheer!

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