

Present sense: Rabbis on Chanukah

Are we just competing with Christmas when we shower our children with goodies on the eight nights of Chanukah? In recent interviews with writer Linda K. Wertheimer, four Boston area rabbis – from Reform, Conservative and Orthodox congregations – discussed their views on how to handle gifts with children during Chanukah. All but one has children. None suggests outlawing gifts. All promote keeping the holiday as the central focus. A few talked, too, about the difficulties the winter holidays can cause for interfaith families.

Here are excerpts from the interviews:



Rabbi Braham David of Temple Shalom in Medford, who is also director of Jewish Discovery Institute, a Conservative movement organization that works with couples and individuals interested in exploring Judaism:

“You can’t really match what is going on in Christmas gift-wise, even with the gift-a-night thing. It’d be much better for people to give gifts of tzedakah and of other things and maybe one major gift to the child. ...”

We do not, he said, want a child to “feel completely left out because we do live in a society where the winter holidays come with the gifts. That said, that has nothing to do with Chanukah per se. It’s not the values we want to give to our children. We don’t want to give into all of that materialism.

“The religious Christian community is very concerned about that with Christmas. A religious holiday has become this shopping season. I don’t think we should try to keep up with that. It’s not a Jewish value to give children eight elaborate gifts for a holiday, any holiday.”

For interfaith families, the winter holiday season is even more complicated. “There are people who are interfaith and haven’t given that up, but they’re raising Jewish children and trying to maintain their religion and maintain a Jewish identity in their own children.”



Rabbi Howard Jaffe, Temple Isaiah of Lexington (where the writer belongs), father of 14-year-old twins:

“I have no problem with the idea of gifts at Chanukah. I have issues about materialism overall. Especially with kids like mine who have birthdays in the spring, Chanukah became another time to designate something special that they wanted. ... [They] have always gotten one big gift plus little things throughout, such as tokens, like dreidels, chocolate.

“It’s important to acknowledge Chanukah for two reasons. Obviously one reason is we live in a society where other kids are celebrating a meaningful holiday. It’s important that our kids have something.”

His congregation has many interfaith families, including a number who put up Christmas trees. He encourages them to distinguish

the holidays so it’s not a “family celebration of Christmas” if the children are being raised Jewish. “I stress as much as possible to give presents on Chanukah.”

“There’s nothing wrong with presents, but don’t try and compete, and make Chanukah into Christmas.”

The Maccabees, he noted, rejected efforts to get them to assimilate completely into the Greek culture. “The irony is this holiday that celebrates resistance to assimilation has become a vehicle of assimilation. ... I see Christmas stockings of blue and white with a Jewish Star of David. The Chanukah bush. That’s a serious problem. I see people who don’t even light Chanukah candles.”



Rabbi Benjamin Samuels, Congregation Shaarei Tefillah in Newton, father of children ages 3, 8, 12 and 16:

“I’m not against parents giving a gift to their child. I don’t think it should be done in competition with a non-Jewish holiday. It’s a way you enhance the festival. There is an idea in the Talmud that on the Pilgrim festivals – Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot – you make new clothes, give toys, candies to kids. There is an idea that one of the ways we create simchah is through giving things.”

His family tradition? One of the children may express interest in a particular gift as a Jewish holiday approaches. So they may get the gift at Sukkot if that’s the next holiday. At Chanukah, the children get one gift for the holiday.

“Though the kids definitely want the gift, that’s not the focus of the Chanukah celebration. The focus is we light candles together; we sing songs together; we eat dinner together as a family. We attend other things that go on in the community.

“The issues are different in different congregations. We’re a congregation of modern Orthodox Jews. I don’t have interfaith families. I don’t have families with different faith pressures and obligations.

“What I would emphasize is, ‘how do you get your children to live within the Jewish calendar?’ If they know they get toys for Sukkot, Pesach, Shavuot, Chanukah and Rosh Hashanah, their markers are the Jewish calendar as a whole, and it’s not a winter solstice festival.

“How do we move from materialism to spirituality and into meaning? That’s what we all struggle with as parents.”



Rabbi Elaine Zecher, Temple Israel of Boston, mother of children ages 14, 15, and 18:

“Chanukah is a malleable kind of holiday. We are commemorating something that happened in the past. ... Most of all, we’re taking note of something that happened to the Jewish people and the way Jewish people interpreted it. How it becomes celebrated and marked is a reflection of the world we live in and the influences.

“What’s really important is for families to develop some of their own customs. One bit of the story of the Maccabees is they were hiding from their pursuers. In my house, we used to not wrap the presents, but we would hide the presents. We gave presents every night – little presents, a book, a piece of candy.”

Her family still has that tradition as well as others. One night is for opening presents from other relatives. Another is for making latkes, while another is for playing dreidel with M&Ms. And then there’s the night set aside to buy a present for a child who cannot afford to have Chanukah.

Families who make Chanukah mostly about the presents can change if they want, Rabbi Zecher said. “It is never too late to alter what people’s expectations and behaviors are in the family if you set it down, and you’re consistent. You can say, ‘We’ve been doing this, but I don’t feel comfortable any more. We’re going to make it a new kind of Chanukah.’”

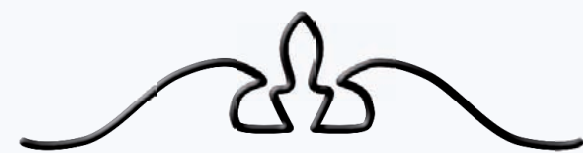
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