The December Dilemma

Proximity of Hanukkah and Christmas means hybrid holidays like Chrismukkah for some; soul searching for others

By Jeff May

Credit: www.mixedblessing.com
This hybrid holiday card marks the two holidays.

Riding out the December holidays can be tough for couples who come from different religions.

Ron Gompertz, Rutgers ’75, is the Jewish son of Holocaust survivors. His wife, Michelle, is a minister’s daughter. Their solution for celebrating each other’s traditions: place a menorah on one side of the family room, a Christmas tree on the other.

“It’s the American story – we are the melting pot,” said Gompertz, author of *Chrismukkah: Everything You Need to Know to Celebrate the Hybrid Holiday* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, an imprint of Abrams). The book, published three years ago in hardcover, came out in paperback in October 2009.

The concept of Chrismukkah, a whimsical, hybrid celebration of Christmas and Hanukkah, first surfaced in 2003, on the television show *The O.C.*

Gompertz jumped on the idea, first sending out satirical cards to friends, then setting up www.chrismukkah.com, and finally penning a book celebrating the “mish-mash holiday.” The book did well, but Gompertz said he caught flak from conservative Christian commentators and Orthodox rabbis.

“We took a lot of blame for taking the Christ out of Christmas, making fun of the holidays,” Gompertz said, adding that interest in the pseudo-holiday just reflects changes in Jewish life.

Meet the Christmukkah entrepreneur Ron Gompertz

Not everyone resolves tensions so neatly, however, when it comes to the calendar crunch of Hanukkah and Christmas. The "December Dilemma" is a phenomenon that reaches beyond interfaith families, posing questions for many Jews about what it means to embrace the culture-at-large and still retain their identity. And it's hardly new: Jews in America have grappled with similar issues – in public and private life

Credit: Courtesy of Jeffrey Shandler
Above: A poster for a 1913 Universal film, and an early example of using new media to explore the relationship between Jews and Christmas in America.
– for more than a century.

"There's an ongoing relationship that Jews who live among Christians have had not just with Christmas but with Christianity," said Jeffrey Shandler, a professor in the Department of Jewish Studies at Rutgers.

Shandler's latest book, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (NYU Press, 2009), explores Jewish cultural perceptions through the rise of new communication modes in the 20th century, from sound recordings and the ethnic press to television and the internet. The response to Christmas offers a prime reference point for those cultural soundings.

"The spirit of Christmas is 'goodwill for everyone,' " Shandler said. "It's hard to argue with that. Who wouldn't want goodwill for everybody? "But how can you engage with that spirit on your own terms when there are theological and cultural complications?"

Jews in Eastern Europe often addressed their differences with Christians through folklore and sharp-edged humor. For example, Shandler explains, some Yiddish-speaking Jews referred to Christmas as "veynakht"—literally, "woe-night," punning on the German word for Christmas Eve, Weihnachten.

But as Jews began migrating in greater numbers to the United States in the late 19th century, they were confronted with more commercialized and institutionalized celebrations of Christmas.

A 1916 ad for Greenhut's retail shop in New York showed the odd ways those strands could be incorporated: next to an image of Santa Claus, the slogan "A Christmas Store for Everyone" appeared in Yiddish. In 1924, a Yiddish newspaper mentioned Manhattan school kids singing "Deck the halls with boughs of challah" as the holidays approached.

Then, as now, critics wondered if Jewish culture was at risk of being overshadowed and obliterated.

New challenges were posed in the 1950s and 1960s, as assimilation became more attainable to the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Shandler explains that the term "December Dilemma" dates to this period, as does the elevation of Hanukkah from a traditionally minor holiday to one that is as prominent as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover.

By the 1980s, interfaith marriages had become much more prevalent, prompting a rise in demand for holiday cards that blended religious icons or expressed sentiments such as "Oy to the World." In 1989, the American Jewish Committee and the National Conference of Christians and Jews took card makers to task for "diminish[ing] the sacred symbols of each faith," but it didn't stanch the flow.

"These cards have become an established genre of holiday greeting cards," Shandler said.

The "December Dilemma" also began showing up as a theme on television shows, from *Thirtysomething* to *Northern Exposure,* a trend that initially puzzled Shandler because Jews make up only a small percentage of the population.

"A colleague finally told me, 'If you were married, you would know that every marriage is an intermarriage,' " he said. "Every marriage has to negotiate some differences. Jewish-Christian marriages are emblematic of this much larger issue."

Only 17 percent of Jews intermarried before 1970, according to the United Jewish Communities' National Jewish Population Survey from earlier this decade. By 2001, that number had risen to 47 percent.

Shandler said that much of the public discussion about interfaith marriage centers on dealing with Christmas and Hanukkah.

"People are working out larger issues in the decisions they make about how to deal with these holidays," he said. "To me, that makes the December Dilemma a very rich topic of research."

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