



## Merged Traditions: Two Religions, One Happy Holiday Season

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Alyssa and Scott Greiner have found ways to celebrate Hanukkah and Christmas with daughter Emma.

The holidays are about hope, peace, and celebration. But when you're married to someone of a different faith, whose traditions should you observe? It's a question a growing number of couples wrestle with each year, as more than [15 percent of weddings in America](#) now involve people of different religions.

We spoke to three Jewish/Christian couples about how they acknowledge their different backgrounds while honoring the love they share.

### "You Never Have to Choose"

Jill Valeri, of Howard County, MD, started dating her husband Joseph, a Roman Catholic, when she was just 16 — which gave the Jewish teen plenty of time to learn about his religion. "Christmas at his home was always vibrant, warm and welcoming," she says, remembering the many times she was a guest on that

special morning.

Now married 22 years, Jill and Joseph celebrate both Hanukkah and Christmas, doing up both holidays to the hilt. “For Hanukkah, we observe all eight nights, and if it falls during Christmas we’ll first light the menorah, then get our Christmas celebration going,” Jill says. “On Christmas Eve, we have a huge Italian ‘Feast of the Seven Fishes’ [a dinner incorporating seven fish dishes] and invite the entire neighborhood. We probably have 150 people pass through the house that evening!” The guests are a mix of religions, “just as we are,” Jill says.

The best part of their dual-religion identity, says Jill, is that her three children enjoy two time-honored holidays — and are able to forge their own identities. “We explained that they never have to choose between Mom and Dad’s religions, and they can even pick another faith altogether,” she says. “Faith is, to us, a very important and personal choice.”

### “It’s Comfortable and Accepting”

Jenna Barnett is a newlywed: She and her husband, Tyler, tied the knot in April. But when it comes to blending holiday traditions, the Los Angeles couple — she’s a born-again Christian; he’s Jewish — have plenty of experience. “On our first date, nearly five years ago, I told him I was Christian and wasn’t ever going to be Jewish, and he said he was Jewish and wasn’t ever going to be Christian. We thought, ‘Should we just have this one date and that’s that?’ but we really liked each other, so we found ways to compromise.”

Tyler  
had



Jenna Barnett and her husband Tyler just

married, but have already begun incorporating both Christian and Jewish traditions in their holiday festivities.

previously dated a girl whose Christian family had made him feel unwelcome at Christmas, so “as soon as we started celebrating with my family, I made sure he felt included and that there were lots of gifts for him to open,” Jenna says. Now, she adds, “Tyler is now in charge of frying the bacon on Christmas morning!”

For her part, Jenna made every effort to be an enthusiastic guest at her future-in-laws’ Hanukkah celebrations: “I learned as much of the Hebrew blessings as I could and would hum the rest,” she says.

The newlyweds still plan to celebrate Christmas with Jenna’s family and the first night of Hanukkah with Tyler’s. “In the future, if the first night of Hanukkah is ever on Christmas Day or Eve, Tyler’s mom is flexible and says we can come another night, since Hanukkah lasts for eight days,” Jenna says.

Meanwhile, in their own home, the wide assortment of holiday decorations makes it clear they’ve enlarged each other’s worlds. “We put blue and silver balls on the Christmas tree, since they’re the traditional Hanukkah colors,” Jenna says, adding, “My stocking is red and Tyler’s is blue.” They hang right by the couple’s brand-new menorah.

### “I See It as a Benefit”

For Alyssa and Scott Greiner, of Merrick, NY, the holidays feel like a nonstop party. “I’m Jewish and he’s Catholic, but neither of us was terribly religious growing up,” Alyssa says. Still, when their daughter Emma was younger, Jill admits to worrying that Hanukkah would be overshadowed by Christmas. “I hadn’t grown up with Hanukkah Harry” — modern Judaism’s answer to Santa — “but I began that tradition for my daughter,” she says. “Each night of Hanukkah, Harry would leave her a gift when she least expected it.” And Alyssa has always made sure they celebrate at

least one night of Hanukkah with her family, “to reinforce it.” Her Catholic in-laws, she says, send her daughter Hanukkah presents.

Those gifts often share space with a Christmas tree. “We have one, and I love it,” Alyssa says. “I see it as a benefit of marrying someone who is Catholic.” Another bonus: Christmas at Scott’s parents’ home. “It’s putting out cookies and carrots for Santa and his reindeer on Christmas Eve and waking up to presents,” she says.

Emma is now 12 and still believes in Santa and Hanukkah Harry (“or claims to,” Alyssa laughs). As for Alyssa, she no longer believes Christmas puts Hanukkah in the shade. “This year, the last night of Hanukkah is on Christmas eve. For a little while I wondered if we should bring a menorah to my in-laws’ house. But I decided I’ll let it go.

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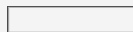
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