

Some Jews can't get jazzed over Hanukkah

by [Beth Kissileff](#)

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Ayelet Waldman isn't shy about sharing her true feelings about the upcoming Jewish festival of lights.

"I loathe Hanukkah," said Waldman, a mother of four and author of a book of essays entitled "Bad Mother."

Hanukkah, she says, has become a kind of faux Christmas, "a sad imitation complete with six-starred stringed lights, sugar cookies, and themed wrapping paper. I celebrate it only because my children would be crushed, and because I don't want them to be so envious that they convert. "

She's not alone: Some Jews, tired of the "December Dilemma" and competing with Christmas, would prefer to avoid all the fuss.

That pervasive anxiety has a hold on parents of all religious denominations and levels of Jewish observance. Even if they know they "have" to celebrate Hanukkah, many Jews - especially parents - struggle with how to create something that's meaningful but not over the top.

At one end of the spectrum, hipster Jews have embraced Hanukkah as a chance to revel in Jewish kitsch, complete with Hanukkah versions of ugly Christmas sweaters that feature dreidels and bearded rabbis.

At the other end, observant Orthodox have taken sparkling lights to a whole new level - Baltimore's Hanukkah House, a suburban-style split-level, is draped with blinking lights with inflatable dreidels and menorahs.

"Our sages emphasize the importance of publicizing the Hanukkah miracle through lighting the menorah where all can see," says the house's website. "We hope that our decorations help fulfill this mitzvah (commandment)."

Overdoing the otherwise minor holiday of Hanukkah comes from "a cruise-control ignorance of Judaism," said Jordana Horn, a contributing editor at Jewish parenting site Kveller.com. Especially since "Hanukkah is a historic commemoration of Jews refusing to assimilate," she finds it wholly "ironic to celebrate that by trying to be more like Christians!"

But it's not a new dilemma. As an often persecuted minority, Jews have always wrestled with how to coexist in the larger culture. In fact, that's where Hanukkah got its start.

The story goes that around 175 B.C., Judea was occupied by the Greco-minded King Antiochus IV, who wanted to Hellenize the local Jews. He seized the Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it to Greek gods, even ordering the sacrifice of decidedly nonkosher pigs.

The local Jews, led by the Maccabees, revolted and reclaimed the Temple. They found only enough oil to light the lamps for one day, but it miraculously lasted for eight. Modern-day Hanukkah celebrates the recapture and restoration of the Temple, but also Jewish refusal to yield to the larger hostile culture.

"I think the current commercialization of Hanukkah reveals the degree to which Jewish culture has always been embedded in, and influenced by, the surrounding culture," said Nathaniel Deutsch, co-director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, of the New York-based Jewish Outreach Institute, said Jews taking elements from foreign cultures and either rejecting them or making them Jewish is part of the Jewish DNA. Attempts to "take pop culture and make it Jewish" are neither new nor negative, he said. It's a sign, he said, of "American Jews being fully American."

Rabbi David Kalb, director of Jewish education at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Life at the 92nd Street Y in New York, said Hanukkah actually shows much has changed for American Jews.

Several years ago, he was shopping in a suburban Connecticut town that once had a "gentlemen's agreement" not to sell houses to Jews. But when the store clerk asked whether he wanted his gift wrapped, he was offered a choice of either Christmas or Hanukkah paper. He was amazed, he said, that a town that once wouldn't sell

houses to Jews was now offering Hanukkah gift-wrap.

Yet even rabbis aren't immune from the Hanukkah hype. Rabba Sara Hurwitz, who was ordained by Yeshivat Maharat in the Orthodox movement that traditionally doesn't ordain women, grew up in South Africa and was "sheltered from the Christmas hype" with relatively simple celebrations. She'd love to be "counter culture" and offer the same traditions to her own children.

"But now, in school, all the kids talk about is how many presents they get and how expensive it is," said Hurwitz, who works at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in the Bronx, in an email. "It is hard to compete. My older ones are in 2nd grade, and this year, for the first time, we are giving in and buying them each a present."

Others say surrender isn't the only option. Reform Rabbi Zoe Klein of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles has published a detailed pamphlet to guide her congregants on a meaningful Hanukkah. One suggestion: increasing monetary gifts based on the amount the recipient gives to charity; packaging edible gifts and canned goods for the homeless; or a gift of self with coupons to be redeemed later.

Linda Cohen, author of "1,000 Mitzvahs," which encourages people to do acts of kindness to others, suggests giving charity gift cards from such organizations as Tisbest Philanthropy or Jchoice that allow the recipient to choose the charity as a way to make gift-giving something beyond consumerism.

Waldman admitted she doesn't loathe every aspect of Hanukkah. The traditional fried foods - to commemorate the miracle of the eight-day supply of oil - is enough to keep her coming back. "On the other hand," she said, "I love a good donut."

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