

God Squad Article for Boca Delray Life Magazine
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Pastor Andy Hagen Advent Lutheran Church Boca Raton

Chismukah?

Many families today are inter-faith. And the traditions, true meaning and joy in the holidays are things all of us want to embrace. What is the best way to go about raising children who grow up in an inter-faith household, especially around the holidays?

I'll never forget living in Hyde Park, a historic neighborhood on the south side of Chicago (it's the baddest part of town, Leroy). There were so many incredible ethnic restaurants to enjoy on a student's budget: from Thai to Soul Food to Cajun to Indian. One that I never ventured in, however, was *Nicky's Chinese Restaurant and Pizza*. Apparently "Nicky" was looking to start a Chinese food joint when he rented a space that also included several working pizza ovens. Sensing providence (or profit?) he decided to double up. I loved the sign, but I had no desire to go to a restaurant that tried to handle both oriental and Mediterranean cuisines. I know "fusion" cooking is popular now, but this was kind of stretching it for me.

That is how I feel about "Chismuka" or any other stabs at blending religions traditions as we approach this holiday season. It just feels like Nicky's attempt to bring east and west together in some awkward alliance. There is just something right about a good chianti with pasta, cornbread stuffing with turkey, and green tea with sushi. Just imagine switching those around and you will see what I mean. There is something so perfect for me about singing "Joy to the World," at the stroke of Christmas Eve or reading the nativity story Christmas Day before the presents are opened that I can't imagine throwing in another equally beautiful but very different tradition in its midst. Dreidels by the Christmas tree sounds forced to me. I'm sure that devout Jewish families would shudder at the idea of adding 3 more candles to the menorah so that it matched the "Twelve Days of Christmas." Buddhists recalling the anniversary of the enlightenment of their leader have no need for potato latkes and pagans celebrating the winter solstice may have given us all the yule log but there is no manger scene nearby.

For families that bring together various religious traditions this does pose somewhat of a dilemma. The Roman Catholic father may feel that biannual tug to mass and his Jewish wife will likely be shopping for candles and saving up her "gelt" (coins to give the children) for weeks before. Is the best solution to this really a Hannukkah bush? Or should they simply join the rest of the neighborhood and get ready for good old, All-American, safe and jolly Santa Claus? My recommendation is simple. Commemorate each sacred season in its completeness and purity. Father should not only swing the kids over to Mass, mom may join them to honor her souse. Explain to the children that this is the "reason for the season" as their Father understands it. Mom should prepare for her turn with all its elegance and grace, perhaps teaching her hubby how to spin that top for the kiddies too.

But let's not try to pull this off on the same day. Make clear delineations between and take the time to make equally clear explanations of each tradition. This requires the parents to truly take responsibility for passing on the richness of their faith without watering it down like the punch at the office party. While the children are sure to confuse things early on, as the years pass they will appreciate that each faith has its own "cuisine" that suits it perfectly. This is less about deciding which one is right than sharing the right way to celebrate each one! They will come to appreciate that the divisions between faiths do not have to be a source of conflict as so often seen in the world. Rather, those lines between serve to preserve the unique and majestic value of each tradition. The greatest gift they may receive this season is a family that doesn't blend traditions but rather lifts up, respects, and celebrates each one fully. And please, do not serve Chinese food with your pizza!