

## holiday traditions

# Latkes & St. Nick

By Liz Holzemer

**D**uring this time of year I'm reminded of the sounds and smells of Hanukkah emanating from my mother's kitchen: hot oil crackling in the frying pan for latkes; the chop-chopping of sweet yellow onions creating a river of tears streaming down my mother's face as she prepares dinner. My father's voice leading the blessings for lighting the candles, "Barach atah adonoi. Blessed our Lord."

I also remember rolling out thin layers of dough to make sugar Christmas cookies and visiting St. Nick at the local mall.

I celebrate Hanukkah and Christmas. My father is Jewish and although my mother was raised Methodist, she converted to Judaism after I was born. Even so, in honor of my mother's religious roots, my parents raised my brothers and me to celebrate both holidays. We had a menorah and presents wrapped in festive Christmas paper.

Being raised in an interfaith family was no easy feat and now, with a family of my own, I find myself traveling the same path my parents did. My husband, Mark is Catholic so I feel like we have the best of both worlds because we can share and pass along the traditions we grew up with and adore.

So how does one celebrate interfaith holidays in this day and age of political correctness when events are referred to as holiday parties, to wish someone a Merry Christmas is taboo, and Seasons Greetings is now de rigueur? It can be even more confusing and overwhelming for young children who ask why some

families leave out a plate of cookies and a tall glass of cold milk for St. Nick and others light menorahs for eight evenings.

My mother always went to great lengths to make a traditional Hanukkah dinner after which we played dreidel games and ate Hanukkah gelt—chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil. I took turns with my brothers lighting the multi-colored candles and betting gelt on which one would burn the longest. Traditionally, a small gift is opened every night after lighting the menorah, but my parents also reserved a few presents for Christmas morning. Depending when Hanukkah fell sometimes we had to wait weeks before we opened the gifts. We didn't have a Christmas tree, but there were my grandmother's handmade stockings stuffed with Valencia oranges, candy kisses and a new book to enjoy on Christmas morning.

For my parents, Christmas was about my father gathering us around the fire and reading 'Twas the Night before Christmas before ushering us off to sleep and spending the following day together as a family, rather than focusing on how many gifts one could open.

Even though Hanukkah is a relatively minor Jewish holiday, it too has become a victim of the rampant commercial blitz at this time of the year. But as long as you're embracing the true spirit of the season, it doesn't matter if you stuff a stocking or spin a dreidel because you can do both!



## Celebrating the Holidays Interfaith Style

Here are some helpful suggestions to navigate through the interfaith conundrum:

- \* Remember there isn't a single right way to celebrate the holidays.
- \* Share a few of your favorite traditions with your spouse and children. Trim the Christmas tree together. Make your great grandmother's famous latkes.
- \* Your local library is a great resource for finding books about diverse holiday customs and traditions.
- \* Host an interfaith potluck with friends, co-workers and neighbors sharing your favorite dishes and celebrating meaningful traditions with each other.
- \* Give to those less fortunate. Volunteer at a soup kitchen; gather clothing and toys for single moms, young children and the homeless. After all, the true spirit of the season is all about giving and to instill that lesson in your children is the greatest gift of all.