How Jews respond to Christmas: the research

We all "know" that Chanucah's importance is magnified for diaspora Jews because of its proximity to Christmas. But last year, some researchers set out to prove it.

In a paper published in The Economic Journal, economists Ran Abramitzky, Liran Einav and Oren Eigbi showed evidence that Jews with children under 18 are more likely to celebrate Chanucah than other holidays; that the correlation between having children and celebrating Chanucah is highest amongst Reform Jews (most likely to be exposed to Christmas), then Conservative Jews, and lowest amongst Orthodox ones; that these correlations are not present for other festivals such as Pesach; and that "Jewish products" have higher sales at Chanucah time in US counties with a lower share of Jews (ie amongst people likely to feel more pressure from Christmas). They concluded:

These patterns are consistent with the hypothesis that Jews increase religious activity during Hanukkah because of the presence of Christmas and this response is primarily driven by the presence of children. Jews with children at home may celebrate Hanukkah more intensively so their children do not feel left out and/or because they are concerned their children will convert or intermarry.

The other obvious explanation for their findings is that for parents who want to give their children some Jewish exposure, Chanucah is far "easier" to "do" than Pesach, to which the researchers were comparing. They say they took this into account but to be honest, I didn't understand the stats talk (I'm an English major, so sue me).

Either way, it would be interesting if they could track observance of Chanucah over several years, to show whether celebration of the Jewish festival increased the closer it was, in the calendar, to Christmas, or whether it decreased in years like this one, when there was a distance of some weeks between the two.

The researchers end by noting that Christmas does not just affect Jews; it has had an impact on Kwanzaa, for example.

One natural idea for further research is to investigate the behaviour of Jews who live in predominantly 'Muslim' countries and analyse whether Jews in such countries respond to 'attractive' Muslim...