

Raising a Jewish Child in Cambodia

"I want to do *Shaw-bat!* I want to do *Shaw-bat!*" yells Shai, my two-and-a-half year old son. It's Friday night, we're just returning from work, and it's already past his 8:30pm bedtime. His mom and I are exhausted from a long week at work, and all we really want to do is put him down, curl up on the couch and pop in a DVD. But tradition is tradition, so we carefully get out my great grandparent's Shabbat candlestick holders, wrap some bread in the challah cover and pop open a bottle of wine.

This scene could take place anywhere in the world, but in Cambodia, we try extra hard to bring Judaism into our home at least once a week. By bringing little pieces of Judaism into our home, our son experiences part of the childhood my wife and I grew up with in the United States. These are the challenges that all expat families face; namely instilling your own culture in your children while they witness a very different culture each day. For Jews living in a predominately Buddhist country, our own culture can be a mystery to our children.

In Phnom Penh, a small and informal Jewish community exists. Gathering for the holidays is one way our children learn about Judaism. But with no synagogue, no Sunday school, and no formal Jewish education system, the burden falls squarely on the shoulders of the parents to pass along our religious torch to our offspring.

Lighting the Shabbat candles on Friday night is a simple way our family stays rooted in our Judaism. Of course life tends to get in the way. Work functions, socializing, or just plain forgetfulness, and even the best-intentioned Jew will have much to repent for come Yom Kippur. By giving ourselves little reminders throughout the week, we are much more likely to celebrate Shabbat,



especially if the reminder is coming from our two-year old son. We also sing *Hashkiveinu* to Shai as a bedtime song every night, except on Saturday nights, when we sing the *Havdallah* blessings. He, of course, has no idea what the words mean, but one day, in the distant future at summer camp, he will realize, "Hey, I know these songs."

Just as our parents had to march into the superintendent's office in elementary school in the 1980s to demand that Rosh Hashanah not coincide with the first day of the school year, so too have we found ourselves doing a bit of advocacy in Shai's preschool. The curriculum for December was to learn about Christmas, despite the fact that half the students are Buddhist. I'm fine with the children learning about different religions, and even fine with Shai's rendition of *Jingle Bells*, but I also want Judaism to get its fair shake at Gecko & Garden Preschool. Which is how I found myself recounting

the Maccabee's story and singing Channukah songs with a class full of 3 year-olds in mid-December.

We talk to Shai about what a magic of Israel. We try to give him treats that correspond with the holiday, like *hamintashin* on Purim. We'll even give him a snip of wine on Shabbat, to which he exclaims, "I like wine!" Every holiday, every lifecycle event and every time we play his *Oy Baby!* CD we have a chance to share our culture with him.

I often wonder if Shai perceives the differences between our family and that of our neighbors. Certainly he understands there is a language barrier, which he is breaking down faster than we are. And he understands that we look different. But being different is all that he knows in his short life. To him, being different is completely normal, but I struggle with how to explain this. Things that are normal for Cambodians like visiting the pagoda, saffron-robed monks, the Buddha statues and spirit houses, those don't belong to us. But how can he understand these are not his, when really it is all he has ever known?

I am thankful we can give Shai the experience of living overseas, especially while he is still young. He has plenty of time to explore religion and find his spiritual place in the world. And I'm very thankful that we aren't even close to preparing for his Bar Mitzvah. Yet I wonder what he is missing by not having a Jewish daycare option or a synagogue nearby to incorporate into our weekly traditions. Is he slowly assimilating just to fulfill our selfish wanderlust? Or can we raise the Jewish child we always hoped for, despite our location. I suppose with all questions relating to raising a child, only time will tell. For now, we'll just take it one *Shaw-bat* at a time. ✡