

# My Jewish Sons Have a Christmas Tree, and I Need to Deal

I have always associated my identity with not having Yule decorations. Divorce has a way of changing everything.

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The first time I had a Christmas tree was 1987, the one year my father was married to Susan. I was 6 and remember my father having to climb a ladder to decorate it.

The second time was last year. This tree was much smaller and looked a bit sad. It tapered off at the end and didn't stand straight. My husband bought it, loaded it into our Honda CRV and put it in the corner of the dining room when I wasn't home because he knew I would object to it. I kept the room's pocket doors closed as much as possible all that December, but he would come downstairs and open them. The smell of the tree would linger outside the room. I won't lie — it was a really nice smell.

Growing up, I considered not having a Christmas tree (except in the Year of Susan), not wearing red and green in December, and not decorating our front lawn in lights as much a part of my Jewish identity as celebrating Passover and going to Hebrew school on Thursdays.

My husband and I began to fight regularly over having a tree after our children arrived. Though he was raised in California as a Hindu, he said that decorating a tree was among his happiest childhood memories, that it symbolized home and family. I countered that a tree in our living room felt so unsettling, so out of place, so unbearable.

Couldn't we just have a shrine to Krishna instead?

You would think that such a disagreement would have been settled before we chose each other as life partners. I'm not sure why it wasn't, or why we didn't each see it as a big red flag. Perhaps we both thought the other would give in. Clearly neither of us realized how important the presence, or lack, of a tree was to the other.

He claims I once agreed to get a tree. I had no recollection of that. So I suggested a compromise: We could celebrate Christmas each year in California with his family. He said that wasn't the same — he wanted the tree in our home.

By last December we had decided to divorce but were still living together (it wasn't just the tree, but more on that another time). Shortly after, my husband sneaked the tree in.

Our boys, ages 2 and 4, were thrilled. They were too young to see any contradiction with being raised by a Jewish mother and Hindu father — and celebrating the birth of Jesus.

They got more than just the tree. They consumed Christmas-themed cartoons on the PBS Kids app with joy. When they spotted a beautifully decorated tree cookie at the local bakery, they chose it without hesitation. I didn't even try suggesting, "How about that lovely silver star?" They had spent an evening decorating a tree at home. They might as well eat the cookie.

(I grumbled to the cashier, "My Jewish children are getting a Christmas tree cookie." She didn't share my unease.)

I moved out last February and now have a charming little home in the next town over. This year, my boys and I spent a weekend decorating it with menorahs and colorful dreidels. We even threw in a Hanukkah snow globe. We, too, can be festive.

I don't get a ton of information out of my kids, but I'm pretty sure that they helped their father decorate a Christmas tree in his home. I can no longer fight them having a tree; I can only hope they make fond memories with their father. They're so young that they're unlikely to remember a winter without a tree.

Sometimes I tell myself that this is all O.K., that maybe it's a blessing in disguise — my boys don't need to grow up with the December angst that my sister and I had. When they attend elementary school and the teachers instruct them to write letters to Santa, they won't feel left out. They won't feel the need to educate their middle-school teachers the way I did. (Mr. H., if you're reading, no, not everyone celebrates Christmas.)

My boys will have the dreidels and afikomen hunts and Purim carnivals, but not the December chip on their shoulder. That's a good thing, right?

Possibly.

To me, being Jewish, not just lox-and-bagels Jewish, is about being different. It's about being part of a tribe of people whose holidays include tales of ancient Egypt and Pharaoh. It's about surviving pogroms and cattle cars, and learning that when others are being persecuted we have a moral obligation to speak up and interfere.

Being Jewish is about holding on dearly to one's sense of self, even if it means secretly lighting Shabbat candles in the basement or having classmates throw pennies at your feet. Or just not getting to sit on Santa's lap.

I wish I could say that my children will grow up with a Christmas tree (every other weekend) but still identify with being Jewish in the same way I do.

Maybe they can, maybe they can't. Or maybe that's the wrong way to look at it.

When our older son, Isaac, was 2 or 3, I wanted him to have a clear understanding of his cultural background and heritage, and I wanted him to be proud of who he is. I remember sitting at the kitchen table and telling him, "Mommy is Jewish, Daddy is Indian, and you and Aarav are *both*." Isaac would light up.

And as he got a little older, he'd repeat it. He would stumble over the relatives and their correct identities. "Grandma B. is Indian," he'd say about my Jewish mother.

But he always got the last part right: "Me and Aarav are *both*."

When I chose to marry my husband, I saw bringing together two cultures as a positive. I knew challenges could show up, but I didn't dwell on them.

It has shaken me to my core to know my boys may not end up being Jewish the way I am. But I also know I have to move on. Frankly, I need to get over the damn tree.

My boys are different from me, and that has a special beauty to it. They are "both." And while I will do everything I can to instill in them the same love for Judaism that I have, who they are and what "both" looks like will ultimately be up to them.

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