

ON SHABBAT, SCREENS NEED RESTS TOO

BY SARAH LEFTON
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WHAT DO MY KIDS, AGES FOUR AND SEVEN, KNOW ABOUT SHABBAT?

- We get to have grape juice with dinner! Sometimes grape juice spritzers!
- Challah for dinner, and challah french toast for breakfast!
- We get to put coins in our cute tzedakah box!
- Family time all day Saturday—at fun places like tot Shabbat, a nature hike, or at friends' houses.

There is one thing they know about Shabbat that they are less rah-rah about. We have a no screen time rule.

NO SCREEN TIME? ARE WE CRAZY?

It might surprise you to hear that choosing not to watch TV one day a week isn't about observing *halacha*, or Jewish law. We started doing it haphazardly, when our first child was 2 years old. With great ceremony on his birthday, we released ourselves from the American Psychological Association-approved “no screens for under-two-year-olds” guidelines. (By the way, these guidelines change from time to time and as of 2017 are less rigid than they were “back in my day.”)

For us, no screen time is about being present and together as a family, and making the day different. Shabbat is a time to rest and appreciate the special and wonderful things about the world and each other. It's a day apart: a holy time. The Hebrew word for holy, *kadosh*, actually means set apart.

At BimBam, I produce a show for preschoolers called Shaboom! It is chock full of Hebrew vocabulary and teaches everyday Jewish values like visiting the sick (*bikkur cholim*) and welcoming guests (*hachnasat orchim*). My kids love the shows

and watch them during the week along with other great, kid-friendly content. Sesame Street has fantastic literacy segments. Peg + Cat makes math approachable and cool. Daniel Tiger is teaching my daughter about washing her hands and trying new foods.

But we leave one day a week available not to cram ourselves full of new ideas, but rather to enjoy life and each other for who we already are, no improvements necessary. Less watching, more being.

Shabbat is our time to practice our skills—to welcome our friends for lunch, to bring dinner to a new parent, to sing Hebrew songs, and to celebrate together. The learning can start again on Sunday.

No screen time on Shabbat means that we really are together all day as a family. We try to do something that is fun for us all to do together. We've been to a family yoga class. We love taking hikes, and sometimes we go to family swim at the gym. We camp with other families and try to show up together at important social justice events. I'm hoping that as my kids grow older, we will take on some meaningful world improvement projects together.

No screen time on Shabbat also means that at nightfall, after we do a short Havdallah ceremony, the kids run, like Pavlov's dogs, to the couch and whip

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out the remote for one 22-minute show before bedtime. They aren't cured of their love for vegging out, but they associate it with “common time” rather than special time.

Screen time: It's all about choice.

Running BimBam, the largest Jewish video production company, and its two YouTube channels (BimBam and Shaboom!) means that I watch a lot of online video. I got into this business because I'm passionate about it, and I'm super discriminating. I've been following and doing original research on learning and digital media since I was in college, and I'm up on the best practices of my heroes at Sesame Workshop, PBS, the Fred Rogers Center and the newer online players like Khan Academy. I know that kids can learn not just facts and figures but also

real social and emotional skills from watching well-designed programming.

The truth is, I don't actually worry that much about screen time, A.) because I am thriving in this world after growing up watching more TV in a weekend than my kid probably watches in a month, and B.) because we're pretty involved in making choices together.

While our 7-year-old doesn't let us tell him what he can watch anymore, we have limited his screen time choices to certain channels. We steer clear of shows that push values (and toys) we don't like, and we stay away from live TV with ads. We co-view as much as possible and try to limit the amounts either child watches at one time. Finally, we've taught the older child the value of picking shows that his little sister can watch as well. We are committed to not letting her grow up too fast, a phenomenon that is so real that the children's TV industry actually talks about it in industry panels.

So while we don't worry about screen time as much as others, our Shabbat practice of turning the TV and the tablets off has stuck. Even though we do lots of things that more observant Jews wouldn't do on Shabbat, like driving and cooking, we have stuck to the habit of shutting down for the day.

That certainly doesn't mean that we don't question it every now and then. Is using my phone different than watching Netflix? What about a family outing to the movies? Just recently we joined another Jewish family with young kids at a Friday evening screening of Singalong *Moana*. We definitely checked in about the Shabbat timeline, and we made it feel like an awesome choice by bringing a challah into the theater and singing our hearts out together! It was really fun and a great start to the weekend with friends.

For us, these are not questions about technology and religion and legalities, but of family time. Are we whiling away the time in our separate silos, or are we interacting, and experiencing the world together according to our values?

My hope for families is that they enjoy the wonders that glowing screens have to offer together, don't worry too much, and make great choices as a family that support their shared values.

SARAH LEFTON is the founding director of BimBam. Before creating the organization as a response to her own mediocre Jewish education, Sarah produced early online experiments for the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and others. She graduated from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program, where her master's work looked at the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), augmented reality, and virtual reality for film and TV applications. She lives in Oakland with her family and dabbles in ceramics and urban sketching.

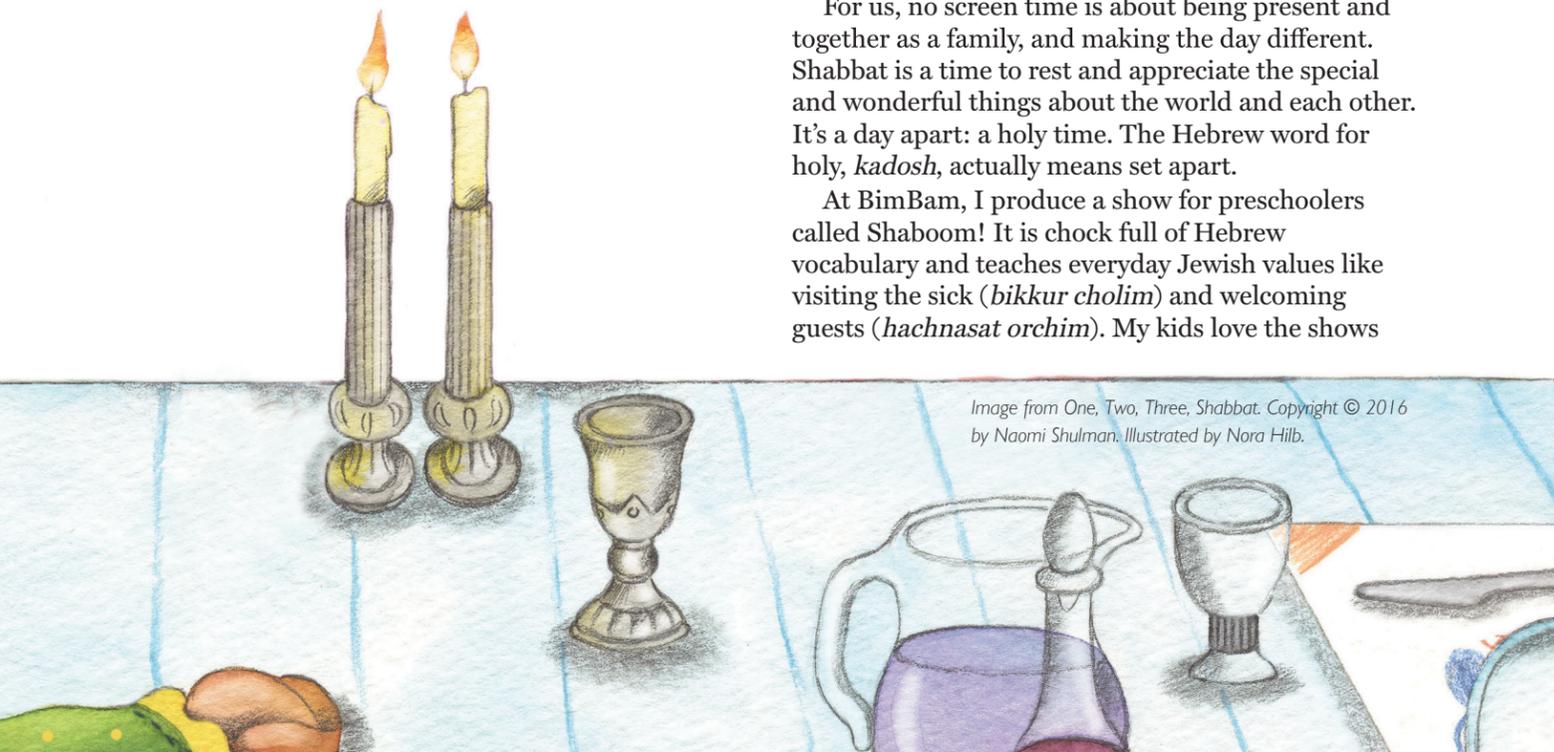


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