

# Mitzvah Monday Goodness: Sundara, Erin Zaikis & curry pizza



Have you ever been so proud of someone and so in awe that it literally takes your breath away? That's how I feel about Erin Zaikis, founder of Sundara, a non-profit organization that works to ensure holistic public health solutions by combining hygiene initiatives with community education, environmental preservation and female empowerment whenever possible for communities in need. How did I become so blessed to know someone so inspiring?



The year was 2007. I had just sold everything I owned, packed what little I had left (and my dog) into my Honda CRV and moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan to work and save money before my big year-long sojourn in Jerusalem. My beloved friend, Joel, had gotten me a part-time job at the University of Michigan's Hillel as a Jewish Student Life Program Director. I was 27 and a little lost but felt like things were about to change . . . dramatically.

I started in October, after school had already begun and relationships already solidified. I was a little nervous the students would be all, "Who's this chick and why is she late to the party?" Of course, they weren't. We're talking about Michigan students here! The best of the best (go Blue)! One of the first students I met was one Miss Erin Zaikis. Erin was (and remains) incredibly hilarious, incredibly grounded and

incredibly real; some of my favorite qualities in a woman. We connected instantly—bonding over such deep subjects as hip hop music, our love of diverse cultures and no one believing that we're actually Jewish. After about 7 months and a dramatic burn injury, I ended up leaving Ann Arbor earlier than expected and moving in with my mom in Asheville, NC. I went about my life and so did Erin. Thanks to Facebook, I was able to keep up a bit on what this woman was getting up to. I knew she was traveling and exploring and I was happy that she was able to do all those things. What I didn't realize (but should have) was that she was hatching a plan.



While working in rural northern Thailand, Erin visited a local school. When she arrived, she used the bathroom, but when looking for the soap, there was none to be found. She asked the students if they had any soap at the school but just saw blank stares. So she asked if they washed their hands after going to the bathroom, or before eating. They all shook their heads no.

Stunned by this, Erin went to the nearest town and bought out



their supply of soap to bring back to the school. She proceeded to conduct an impromptu hand-washing workshop. However, many of these children had never washed their hands before: they were fumbling the bars of soap in their hands and smacking it against their faces, unsure of what to do with it that was her light bulb moment!

Upon Erin's return to the US, she found that the leading causes of death in children worldwide are illnesses that could be prevented with a bar of soap. This problem she saw in Thailand actually existed all around the developing countries. In fact, according to a recent Unilever study, there are 70 million people in India alone that don't know what soap is!



Sundara India Photo Soap Recycling

Approximately 3.5 million die of diarrhea and respiratory diseases each year according to the Centers of Disease Control. Hand washing is the best way to prevent the spread of infection and illness, and is more effective, yet cheaper, than any vaccine on the market. With this in mind, Sundara was born.

Erin took a few minutes out of her world-saving schedule to answer a few questions for me. I hope you are as inspired by her work as I am. And even if you can't go to India/Ghana/Haiti to physically join Erin in her efforts, you can help by donating to Sundara. To read more about Erin, check out this profile of her in The Huffington Post. Also, after this interview is a recipe for curry pizza with roasted cauliflower and eggplant.



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**Me:** How did you start Sundara?

**Erin:** Last year, while working in a small village in Thailand I went to visit a school and met children who didn't know what soap was. I went to the bathroom – these students had sinks and running water – but no soap. So I drove to the neighboring town, bought out their supply of soap and brought it back with me. I watched as the children opened the packages of soap and clawed at the bars, some smacking it against their heads, having absolutely no idea what to do with it. Then I realized,

so many organizations focus on clean water but who is working on providing soap and hygiene education to these communities? Upon my return to the US I quit my job and decided I had to do something about this. I founded a soap company which later rebranded as a nonprofit that designs and funds sustainable hygiene programs for underserved communities in Haiti, Ghana and India.

**Me:** Who/what inspires you?

**Erin:** I have so many heros who provide constant inspiration to me when I'm feeling down and frustrated. I'm inspired by all mothers – I believe that is truly the hardest job in the world. I'm inspired by people who fail and get up time after time to try again. I'm inspired by people with disabilities who don't see themselves as being anything less. I'm inspired by the taxi cab driver I just met from Nepal tonight who came here by himself to earn enough money to send his only daughter to college. I'm inspired by everyone who follows their passion. The world needs more people who feel alive!

**Me:** Does your Judaism play a role in your goals, both personally and professionally? If so, how?

**Erin:** I think one of the biggest parts of living 'Jewishly' for me means remembering where you came from and using that as motivation to lend a hand to others. Being Jewish for me meant a childhood full of eating heavy Ashkenazi foods and hearing countless stories of thousands of years of suffering (am I right?). But how great is it that we are finally in a position to help others? I'm so proud to be a Jew running an organization that helps people who aren't Jewish – (and let's be honest, might not ever meet a Jew in their lives). That to me is such a huge success story of how far we have come as a people – and now we can give back to others who aren't as fortunate.

**Me:** What are your long-term goals?

**Erin:** I take so much joy out of being able to have my own nonprofit, but I know that in the end this will work better if we hand over the real ownership to the locals and have the support and trust of every community that we work in. On a domestic level, I hope that we can increase awareness of the

real hygiene and sanitation issues around the world. I believe that acknowledgment is the first step in fixing any issue, so if we can draw more interest in this issue, one day in the not so distant future no child will be asking what soap is. That would be a real dream come true!

**Me:** What's your earliest food memory?

**Erin:** I remember my dad always making my older sister and I Annie's Mac n Cheese from the purple box when we came back from school. Remember that stuff? We used to mix in frozen peas and call it a "healthy snack"...oh how times have changed! That white cheddar powder was just the bomb. I could eat that straight up with my fingers.

**Me:** Favorite comfort dish to make?

**Erin:** Moroccan chicken! The best for a cold wintery day like the one's we've been having over in NYC lately. Enjoy with some red night and trashy TV and you've got yourself a killer night. Take a whole chicken, trim off all the fat, wash and let dry. Place in a slow cooker with chopped onions, garlic, turnips, carrots, raisins, dried apricots, prunes and russet potatoes (or sweet potatoes). Add Ras-el-hanout (Moroccan spice that tastes amazing with just about everything) and a corn starch and let cook for 4-8 hours. Enjoy!





## **Curry Pizza with Roasted Cauliflower and Eggplant**

### **Ingredients:**

1 large lavash  
1 medium eggplant, sliced to 1 inch thickness  
1 medium cauliflower, sliced length-wise so that you have nice, wide, flat florets  
1 cup curry sauce (I used prepared curry sauce, it's just easier)  
1/2 Haloumi cheese, cubed  
1 – 2 cups shredded mozzarella cheese  
1 tbsp T  
meric1/2 tbsp Kosher salt  
1/2 tbsp Garlic powder

### **Directions for roasting cauliflower and eggplant:**

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Place sliced eggplant on paper towel and cover with kosher salt. Let sit for roughly 20 minutes (or more!) so that the kosher salt can draw out excess moisture. After 20 minutes or so, pat dry with paper towel. Place eggplant slices and cauliflower slices on baking sheets. Drizzle with olive oil. Sprinkle with tumeric and garlic powder and roast for 30 minutes or until nicely browned.

### **Directions for pizza:**

Cover lavash with curry sauce (I like mine sauce-y but you should put the amount on your lavash that fits your taste preferences). Sprinkle with half of your mozzarella cheese. Cover the cheese with your roasted eggplant and cauliflower as well as your cubed Haloumi. Cover that with more mozzarella. Sprinkle with kosher salt.

Place pizza on round pizza baking sheet and cook for 15 minutes. If you notice that your mozzarella is starting to brown but your Haloumi isn't, change your oven setting to a low broil and let brown for 2 minutes. Once done, top with chopped cilantro and serve hot.