



Temple Youth Group students at the 2011 Celebrate Israel Parade.

Photo courtesy of Melissa Stoller

# IT'S ONLY JUST BEGUN

A Bar/Bat Mitzvah Can Be A Momentous Kick-Off To A Lifelong Commitment To Judaism. Here's What A Parent Can Do To Lead The Way.

BY MELISSA STOLLER

The big day is finally here. You've kvelled throughout the Torah portion, Haftarah, D'var Torah speech, Hora, candle-lighting ceremony and picture montage. All of your child's studying and your hours of planning resulted in proud relatives and happy friends. But what comes next?

Hopefully, your child has been making some special connections to the Jewish religion and his or her Jewish community. As a parent, there is now a lot you can do to help your child understand that this time in their life is only the beginning of the path to becoming a connected Jewish adult. You can facilitate this continuing connection by getting your family more involved in the synagogue, as well as with informal Jewish education, encouraging Jewish learning and engagement in everyday life, and by keeping traditions alive.

## Involvement In Synagogue Life And Informal Jewish Education

According to the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), "if current trends continue in our congregations, approximately 80% of the children who become [b'nai] mitzvah

will have no connection of any kind to their Jewish community by the time they reach 12th grade." To counter that, synagogues, religious institutions and parents can partner to keep teens engaged and enthusiastic about participating in Jewish life.

Rabbi Jonathan Stein, Senior Rabbi at Temple Shaaray Tefila in New York City (my synagogue), and President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, recently spoke at the URJ Biennial about the issues that face the Reform Movement. He asserted that leaders need to re-define what constitutes successful teen involvement.

When discussing this issue with me, Rabbi Stein stated that "the measure of success for post-b'nai mitzvah has to change from confirmation to connection." In our synagogue, Rabbi Stein plans some bold moves: he will propose that confirmation occur in the 12th grade when students are going off to college and finishing their first "Chai" (their first 18 years). He suggests that the usual connection of confirmation, teaching assistant programs and youth group should be broadened to include other activities like social action, music, drama, worship, camping, sports, technology and Israel. The goal is to capture the students through their own interests with an individualized education plan.

## How To Help Your Child Stay Connected

Parents can model behavior that demonstrates Jewish values and encourages connection. Staying involved in synagogue worship and synagogue life in general can help post-b'nai mitzvah students maintain their connection to Judaism.

- Join synagogue committees and participate in activities and community service programs. Make a point of going to the services for special festivals. Invite grandparents and other relatives to worship with you and your family to make it a family affair. Enjoy the Oneg Shabbat afterward to be part of the larger synagogue community.

- Encourage your children to study for confirmation at your synagogue. If possible, talk to the parents of your children's friends; a group continuing together definitely has a stronger chance of staying involved.

- Informal Jewish education, such as temple youth group, teen choirs, teaching assistant programs, NFTY trips to Israel and other activities are excellent ways for students to stay involved and have exciting, engaging experiences at the same time.



## Jewish Learning And Engagement In Every Day Life

Jewish learning and the ability to connect to the Jewish community shouldn't end when you exit the synagogue doors. Here are some ideas for bringing Judaism into your everyday life.

• **Jewish-themed travel:** Whenever we travel, we try to visit a Jewish-themed cultural site, such as a synagogue, Jewish museum or historical building. As a family, we have visited Jewish sights in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Boston, Newport, London, Rome, Paris, Barcelona and many other destinations. Interestingly, after four days of touring Iceland, which did not have any Jewish sites, our girls asked, "Where are the temples and Jewish museums?" We were happy to hear that visiting Jewish-themed places was on their radar.

Of course, a family trip to Israel will help build solid memories and connections to your children's heritage. When we took an intergenerational trip to Israel after my oldest daughter's bat mitzvah, we all experienced an immediate and very emotional connection to the land. We also felt that it was important to return so that we could all re-connect and strengthen our commitment to Israel and our Jewish heritage.

Spending time on a teen program in Israel is very significant in creating and strengthening Jewish bonds. Likewise, there are many organizations that offer volunteer, travel, study, and gap year programs in Israel including NFTY in Israel Programs ([nftyisrael.org](http://nftyisrael.org)), the March of the Living International Program to highlight the lessons of the Holocaust ([motl.org](http://motl.org)), and the Taglit Birthright Tours to Israel ([birthrightisrael.com](http://birthrightisrael.com)). Many synagogues also organize Civil Rights Journeys to experience the intersection of Jews and the Civil Rights era. Visit [jnf.org](http://jnf.org) for lists of organizations that offer teen opportunities.

Jewish camping is another way to offer an experience that could change your child's life. Campers can attend day camps at the 92Y (92Y.org), and the Jewish Community Center (JCC) ([jccmanhattan.org](http://jccmanhattan.org)). Well-respected Jewish sleepaway camps

include Eisner, Crane Lake and Camp Coleman. I experienced Jewish camping at Camp Lewis Village, now known as Camp Poyntelle Lewis Village. I fondly remember Jewish camp songs and traditions such as the Maccabiah color war games.

• **Discuss current events with a Jewish emphasis:** Start a Jewish-themed current events club. Subscribe to *Jewish Week* and choose an age-appropriate article to discuss each week; for extra connection, discuss over dinner or brunch at a local Jewish restaurant or deli. Join Hadassah, the women's Zionist Organization of America and discuss articles from their magazine with your family.

• **Jewish-themed family meeting:** I recently heard a lecture by Julie Ross, the Executive Director of Parenting Horizons, about initiating a family meeting time to set the tone for harmonious family life. I thought that was a good idea, and decided to frame it as a family meeting with a

Jewish theme. Our family now will hold regular meetings to discuss how we as a family can celebrate our Jewish heritage.

• **Create friendships and activities outside of synagogue:** Invite friends for Shabbat dinner and discuss why Shabbat is meaningful in your lives. Start a Jewish food club. Try Jewish restaurants in your neighbor-

hood. Start a Jewish-themed movie club, and discuss how the movies portray Jewish life and culture. Research Jewish artists and view their works in museums and galleries, or online. Visit the Jewish Museum, the Tenement Museum, Ellis Island, or other New York Jewish cultural sites with friends.

• **Jewish-themed parent-child book club:** A book club is always a meaningful way to share values, discuss Jewish themes and choices, and solidify connection to the Jewish community. Share the experience with another family with similarly-situated children. In your Jewish-themed book club, talk about how teens are portrayed in Jewish stories and about the choices the characters made. If the novel is based on a historical event, share your perspective and do some research together to amplify the topic.

"The measure of success for post-b'nai mitzvah has to change from confirmation to connection. We need to open more avenues of connection," says Rabbi Jonathan Stein of Temple Shaaray Tefila in New York City.

## The Jewish Connection: Books And Online Resources

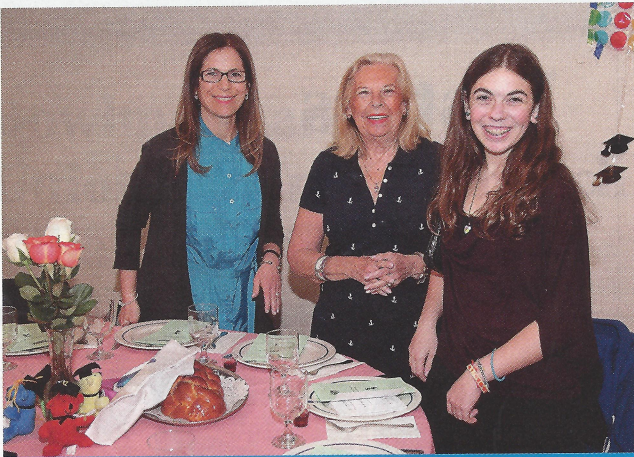
- » [Thewholemegillah.wordpress.com](http://Thewholemegillah.wordpress.com): This blog calls itself, "The Writer's Resource for Jewish-themed children's books."
- » For Jewish recipes online, visit [jewishrecipes.org](http://jewishrecipes.org).
- » The New York Times Jewish Cookbook: More than 825 Traditional & Contemporary Recipes from Around the World (St. Martins)
- » A Travel Guide to Jewish Europe by Ben G. Frank (Pelican Publishing Company)
- » The Mitzvah Project Book: Making Mitzvah Part of Your Bar/Bat Mitzvah...and Your Life by Liz Suneby & Diane Heiman (Jewish Lights Publishing)
- » A Short History of the Jews by Michael Brenner (Princeton University Press)
- » When Children Ask About God: A Guide for Parents Who Don't Always Have All the Answers by Harold S. Kushner (Schocken Books)

• **Family-style mitzvah projects:** Volunteering together should not end just because the mitzvah project for the bar/bat mitzvah is concluded. Sit down with your family to research and then vote on a Jewish charity to support. Volunteer together on a Mitzvah Day with members of the synagogue. Create your own mitzvah project that you can work on as a family. Join forces with other families so all the teens can work together to accomplish a larger community-oriented goal.

• **Maintaining Jewish traditions:** "Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years . . . Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do." —Tevye, from "Fiddler on the Roof."

These iconic lyrics from "Fiddler on the Roof" still resonate because, in many ways, tradition binds us to previous





Three generations (the author, Connie Berger, Zoe Stoller) at a Temple Youth Group installation dinner.

generations, and links us to future generations. When you offer traditions to children, they will have a comfortable lifeline to hold onto throughout their lives. When they go off to college, we as parents want to be able to say that we provided the traditions that our children can reflect on and build upon to create bridges to their own adult family lives.

Traditions can include Shabbat dinners at home, celebrating Jewish holidays with family and friends and observing the holiday traditions, planting trees in Israel through the Jewish National Fund (JNF) to commemorate holidays or special family celebrations, collecting tzedakah in your home and making donations in honor of a simcha, interviewing elderly relatives about their Jewish experiences and the traditions they carried with them throughout their lives, and any other meaningful moments where you bond over a Jewish ritual. It is important to be intentional about how you live a Jewish life.

Food has always been a big part of Jewish celebrations and traditions. In fact, the mere mention of a particular holiday can conjure up the taste of chicken soup, brisket, latkes, kugel or other family favorites. Cooking Jewish foods with grandparents or parents can be a bonding experience, and is a tradition that you can turn into a family project. Set up cooking sessions with grandparents or other relatives to learn how to cook traditional Jewish foods.

The strong feelings of connection your family made during the bar/bat mitzvah process should not end when the celebration is over. By becoming more active in synagogue life and informal Jewish education, as well as engaging your family in enjoyable Jewish-themed activities and traditions throughout your daily life, you can help your children maintain strong connections to Jewish values, ideals, rituals and community. As Hope Chernak, Director of Youth and Informal Education at Temple Shaaray Tefila notes, it is crucial for parents to “re-think b’nai mitzvah as the end or pivotal moment in their child’s life and instead to try to make it only just the beginning of their child’s and their family’s lifelong journey as committed and active Jews.” As Jews, we are carrying on traditions and connections formed over thousands of years. As Jewish parents, we are obligated to instill in our children the foundation for passing these traditions and connections on to future generations.

**MELISSA STOLLER IS THE CO-AUTHOR (WITH MARCY WINKLER) OF THE PARENT-CHILD BOOK CLUB: CONNECTING WITH YOUR KIDS THROUGH READING (HORIZONLINE PUBLISHING), WHICH YOU CAN READ MORE ABOUT AT PARENTCHILDBOOKCLUB.COM, AND THE AUTHOR OF NUMEROUS ARTICLES ABOUT FAMILY LIFE.**

## INVITATIONS

# Jewish National Fund


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