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The Stollers with the bat mitzvah girl, Jessica, in the middle

BETWEEN SECULAR & SACRED

For Many Parents, The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Years Pose The Challenge Of Helping Their Child Embrace The Spiritual Journey While They Plan A Festive Celebration. The Good News Is That Families Make It Work All The Time—And So Will You

By Melissa Stoller

Having your child's bar/bat mitzvah date can be exciting but overwhelming. Aside from all the work your child must do to prepare the Torah portion, Haftarah portion, blessings, d'var Torah speech, and mitzvah project, you must begin to give some thought to a celebration. Where do you start? What should you be doing now to ensure that your child is invested in the spiritual aspects of the bar/bat mitzvah process and views the experience as part of a lifelong connection to Judaism (and not just an excuse for a fun party)?

I myself have seen two daughters through their bat mitzvahs, and my youngest daughter will have hers in six years. Sharing my passion for Judaism with my children has been deeply rewarding for me, and I think they share the sentiment. There's just nothing like connecting to the religion in an active way, so you can see how its culture and values challenge you to be a better person, being engaged in your own pursuits but also mindful of your community.

Here are some suggestions for helping you and your family engage this special period in your child's life to accomplish the most important goals: fostering your child's overall relationship to Judaism; preparing for the service; undertaking the mitzvah project; and planning the celebration.

ENSURING THAT YOUR CHILD FINDS MEANING IN THE PROCESS

It's essential that your child connect to Judaism for the right reasons. While the wonderful celebration is off in the distance, you want to make sure that the party is not seen as the main goal in the process. It's so important to remind your child that the service is the main event and the celebration is a gathering of family and friends to help mark that special event.

Make Synagogue Connections:

By participating as a family in synagogue activities and learning about the rituals associated with the synagogue, your child can develop a deeper appreciation for his or her Jewish identity. When your children see you and other family members enjoying synagogue services, holiday worship, adult education,

volunteering, and temple social opportunities, they will be more likely to model your behavior and be a part of the synagogue as well. Synagogues often offer special programming for families getting ready to celebrate this simcha. Try to attend as many family worship services and programs as possible. Connecting with other families who are also preparing for this special time can be the start of new friendships and new family memories. Set up Shabbat or holiday dinners with other families. Volunteer with other families at your temple's programs. Take field trips with friends to Jewish cultural organizations such as Jewish museums to make connections to Jewish history. Encourage your children to become active in synagogue youth events and initiatives. Joining the synagogue youth choir is also another way to meet friends and participate in programming specifically geared toward children and families. Engaging in the life of the synagogue will show that participation is a lifelong goal.

My big advice here is this: make it manageable, because what you don't want is for the party planning to overtake every other aspect of your family life, especially the spiritual aspects of the journey.

Make Family Connections to Judaism:

As you are starting this process, speak with your children about the importance of this moment and try to connect with them about their upcoming experience. If you had a bar or bat mitzvah, show your child the photo album and reminisce about the relatives and friends who attended your service, any party details such as clothing styles and music trends, and anything else you can remember.

Ask grandparents or other family members to speak with your child about their own experiences and about the importance of continuing the line of family members celebrating this special Jewish journey. Read about the history of the bar/bat mitzvah for boys and girls and talk about how celebrations might have been similar or different for the grandparents, the parents, and the children.

Think about ways that you can maintain spirituality in your everyday life during this busy time. Talk about Jewish values with your children and share your views about important moral issues. By modeling your interest in Jewish rituals, books, culture, history, and even food, you can show your child that the bar/bat mitzvah is not an end point but rather the beginning of a life lived within a Jewish framework. An excellent resource during this process is *For Kids—Putting God on Your Guest List: How to Claim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Bar or Bat Mitzvah*, by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin.

Maintaining rituals sends an especially powerful

message to your kid—and it doesn't hurt that they are often fun to share with children. For example, build a sukkah and invite friends for dinner, host celebrations each night of Chanukah, or bake your own challah. Our family has made a tradition of dining at a kosher restaurant in the city that builds a sukkah for their patrons to dine in during Sukkot.

Promote Jewish Pride:

There are lots of great ways to share with your child positive associations with Judaism. Some of my favorites include cooking Jewish family recipes and learning about the Jewish foods your relatives loved; attending a concert of Jewish music or listening to Jewish songs at home; and watching age-appropriate movies made in Israel or with Jewish themes. It's also enlightening to follow the careers of Jewish writers, musicians, actors, artists, politicians, scientists, and others (especially baseball players). Discuss their achievements and their contributions. When you travel, make a point to visit Jewish communities and synagogues in other cities to explore your heritage together. Of course, for a truly connecting experience, visit Israel. Our intergenerational trip to Israel, with our family and the grandparents, was absolutely transformative in deepening our sense of Jewish identity.

PREPARING FOR THE SERVICE

Your synagogue likely has a very well-prepared and comprehensive guideline to the bar/bat mitzvah process. Most synagogues offer meetings for families entering this milestone. Start a folder with all the information you gather, taking special note of all the important dates and requirements. Speak with other members of the community about the process. In addition, try to attend some bar/bat mitzvah services at your synagogue to get an early understanding of how the service proceeds. Most synagogues require that students and families attend a certain number of Friday night and Saturday morning Shabbat services before the bar/bat mitzvah. If you can start this early, it will help to demystify the process. Also, although you won't be assigned your Torah portion until a date much closer to your child's big day, you can think about the Torah portions that fall around that date and you can attend services around that time to become familiar with the Torah stories. For extra guidance regarding Torah portions, review *Text Messages: A Torah Commentary for Teens*, edited by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin.

UNDERTAKING THE MITZVAH PROJECT

Many synagogues encourage or require students to plan a mitzvah project as part of their bar/bat mitzvah preparation. Spend time with your child discussing ideas that have a connection to your child's life. Kids like to transform one of their passions (be it sports, arts, or just about anything) into a project that benefits an organization in that area. Another popular concept is to raise money and awareness for a hospital or research foundation focusing on a disease



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Hora! Hora! Hora!

that has affected family or friends.

To reinforce the value of a big mitzvah project, a parent can also become active in other tikkun olam mitzvah projects during the time that you are planning for the bar/bat mitzvah. Get involved in synagogue-wide mitzvah days to help your local community. Research online the ways your family can volunteer in your community for an organization that your child might be passionate about. Set up a tzedakah fund in your home that all family members contribute to and vote each month on recipient organizations. For information about planning and executing your mitzvah project, and performing mitzvahs throughout your life, read *The Mitzvah Project Book: Making Mitzvah Part of Your Bar/Bat Mitzvah...and Your Life*, by Liz Suneby and Diane Heiman.

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PLANNING THE CELEBRATION

My big advice here is this: make it manageable, because what you don't want is for it to overtake every other aspect of your family life, especially the spiritual aspects of the journey. Like any massive project, you will need good information, good organization, and a well thought out plan.

The Family Discussion:

Once you are ready to think about the celebration, sit down with your family members to determine what type of party best suits your family, especially the bar or bat mitzvah child. Here are some questions to consider: What are your budgetary constraints? Are you interested in a day party or a night party? Are you interested in a party that includes adults and children or would you like to have a party primarily for the kids? Will you have many friends from out of town, and, if so, do you want the celebration to extend to the whole weekend, with an after-party or brunch? Are you going to include a theme? Which of the key party rituals—from the hora to the candle-lighting ceremony—are important to you?

Vendors:

Talk to friends (whose taste you generally like) about their choices for the venue, entertainment, photography, decorator/florist, invitations, etc. After hearing for a while about how good he was, my family found our MC/DJ at a friend's simcha. Friends in my apartment building recommended their photographer, whom we ultimately booked as well. Friends' opinions aren't the last word—yours is—but they can help. Likewise, take notes after affairs you attend—and debrief with your child on what they liked and disliked at parties they attended. I kept a detailed list of dress styles, food choices, music styles, party enrichments, favors, sign-in boards, and other party-related choices. However, at the start of this process, we discussed very clearly that we would not be implementing very great idea that we heard about or experienced. We

discussed the type of celebration that would best suit our family's style and we generally stuck to that idea throughout our planning.

Set Up An Organized Filing System:

It is easy to get inundated with papers during the process, so try to stay organized right from the beginning. Buy a filing system with lots of folders you can label for each aspect of the celebration. Keep a master list of all the key vendors' contact numbers (and ultimately store them in your phone). I also maintained a running to-do list on my computer. (I always enjoyed crossing off items!) Lastly, I had a separate to-do list for the day of the event, so that I would remember the items I needed at the synagogue and the party, as well as other important details.

Research:

Visit locations that are of interest and try to sample the food, if possible. Observe DJs in action. Visit bar/bat mitzvah showcases that highlight many vendors. Search online for lists of songs to use for the candle-lighting ceremony. Also, search online for ideas about party enhancers, enrichment, and giveaways. The following books are really helpful: *Surviving Your Bar/Bat Mitzvah: The Ultimate Insider's Guide*, by Cantor Matt Axelrod and *Mitzvah Chic: How to Host a Meaningful, Fun, Drop-Dead Gorgeous Bar or Bat Mitzvah*, by Gail Anthony Greenberg. All your research about the many moving pieces of the celebration will be helpful as you put all those pieces together for the big event.

Next Steps:

Once you secure the top vendors—location, photographer, florist/decorator, and invitations—you can relax. But only relax for a bit, because all the other details tend to creep up quickly. Try to stay organized and attend to some aspect of the service, party, or other weekend details periodically. As the date draws near, you will shift to planning and doing something every week or even every day.

FINAL THOUGHT

The family connections to the Jewish community and Jewish rituals that you foster during the years leading up to the bar/bat mitzvah, and the meaning and spirituality you inject into that simcha, will help strengthen your child's ties to Judaism and form the basis for your child's own level of commitment to the religion over time. As you are planning for the ceremony, the mitzvah project, and the celebration, always keep the big picture in mind and make sure your family is enjoying this special experience.

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