



{ The Chudnow, Bergman, and Farber/Donohue Families celebrating in Jerusalem }

Planning A Bar/Bat Mitzvah *In Israel* 101

BY MELISSA STOLLER

“Welcome Home.” That’s the message we got throughout our two trips to Israel to celebrate our two daughters’ Bat Mitzvahs. It’s a poignant message that resonated strongly with us as we were being welcomed to our Jewish homeland and land of our ancestors.

The Israel Ministry of Tourism welcomes visitors on its website and encourages Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations there. “No one belongs here more than you,” it states. And that is just how we felt when we decided to travel to Israel in honor of our daughters’ accomplishments and to forge deeper connections to Israel, our religion, our family and our Jewish community.

Many families decide to make this trip before or after their child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah service at their home synagogue to make the mitzvah year more meaningful. Others travel there to actually conduct the service in Israel and there are many ways to accomplish this long-distance event by participating in a specialized Bar/Bat Mitzvah tour, working with a private guide or even planning it yourself.

However you do it, the welcoming spirit of the country makes it a special place to celebrate. Here are some tips on how to have a great trip:

THE CEREMONY, CELEBRATION AND TOUR WITH A GROUP, A PRIVATE TOUR, OR DO IT YOURSELF

When you are traveling to Israel for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony or just to celebrate your child’s milestone, you can choose to take a group tour, use a private guide or plan it yourself. There are pros and cons for each choice. Here’s what you need to know to make the decision.

With a group tour and Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, everything is taken care of for you from the travel arrangements, touring options and enrichment, many meals and the actual service and festivities. Such groups usually consist of families with children the same ages so there will be much bonding over shared experiences. These trips can also be intergenerational, so parents, grandparents, and even siblings can potentially meet peers with whom they can form friendships. The tour company will take care of all logistics and will arrange for the rabbi, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service and the celebration afterwards. Usually with a group, all your airfare and hotels will be included in the price, and many tour companies offer a fully complimentary tour for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child.

On a private tour a qualified Israeli tour guide will handle all the logistics and can customize the tour to your exact specifications. A private guide can also handle all the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service and party details. You have maximum input on the type and location of the ceremony as well as the sites you will explore, and complete flexibility on travel dates. Also, the tour guide will accommodate all reasonable requests about touring options, hotels, restaurants, and timing of each day. (If you are late risers this might be very helpful and if you'd rather have a less regimented schedule, this allows you to dictate the pace of the day.) Also, if you are traveling with elderly grandparents who might need extra assistance, or with very young children, a private tour might allow you to best accommodate their needs. Further, on a private tour, you can really maintain an in-depth dialogue with your tour guide about your personal interests including historical, biblical, political and current events. If you have a large family group, this is a wonderful option, but with a smaller group, your child might prefer being with other same-aged children on the journey. On a private tour, you will likely plan your own flight and hotel arrangements, although many tour companies do offer these services.

For a Do-It-Yourself Tour you need to do thorough research yourself regarding the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, celebration, plus all your day trips. This is the ultimate in flexibility and it works very well if you have family in Israel that you are visiting or if you have been to Israel before and know exactly what you want to see and do.

The Israel Ministry of Tourism can help with logistical details including providing names of rabbis and suggestions about where to hold the service, party locations and accommodations. Go to: www.goisrael.com and search "Jewish themes" under "tourist information."

Your hometown rabbi and/or a Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor may also be able to assist you in gathering the appropriate materials, Torah portion and prayers to include in your own special service.

BAR/BAT MITZVAH CEREMONY SITES

The Israel Ministry of Tourism offers a comprehensive website of ideas and resources to plan Bar/Bat Mitzvah services and celebrations in many locations. Go to: www.bar-and-bat-mitzvah-in-israel.com. The most popular locations include The Kotel (Western Wall), Masada, Neot Kedumim (a nature preserve between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem), Safed, and the Jerusalem Archaeological Park/Davidson Center. The most popular days for services are Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays (although the Davidson Center is closed on Saturdays).

For specific information about having a Bar Mitzvah at the Kotel, visit www.barmitzva.thekotel.org/en. Bar Mitzvah services are held on Monday and Thursday mornings when the Torah portions are read. Note that services are held in the Orthodox tradition, so if you choose a Bar Mitzvah at The Kotel, men and women will have separate prayer areas and female relatives will not be able to stand with the Bar Mitzvah boy. It is recommended to coordinate the details at least a month in advance, and six months in advance if you are interested in also touring the Western Wall Tunnels or other areas of interest. Note that Orthodox ceremonies are also conducted in the Western Wall Tunnels. At this point, girls are not permitted to have a Bat Mitzvah at The Kotel, although the Israeli Government is studying the issue. For further information about Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies at The Kotel and the Jerusalem Archaeological Park, see http://www.jewishjournal.com/bar_and_bat_mitzvahs/article/bat_mitzvah_at_the_kotel_is_it_possible.

The Jerusalem Archaeological Park is also a good choice for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Families may celebrate together as the service is conducted according to the family's religious affiliation. The ceremony may take place at Robinson's Arch adjacent to the Western Wall prayer area. During ceremonies at the Southern Wall, the guests and congregation sit on the Hulda Steps, which are the ancient stone steps that led up to the Second Temple.

There are also many other sites throughout Israel that are conducive to ceremonies such as the Tower of David Museum, the Hurva Synagogue and other synagogues throughout the country (several are listed on the Israel Ministry of Tourism site).



{ Bria Donohue and Dani Chudnow posing with their torahs }

Photo credit: Loryn Bergman

OTHER OVERSEAS LOCATIONS FOR A BAR OR BAT MITZVAH

On our trip to St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, this past December, we toured The Hebrew Congregation of Saint Thomas Synagogue, and happened to witness two girls from the United States preparing for their B'nai Mitzvah ceremony. To find out more go to: www.synagogue.vi. Also, Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, which is American's oldest synagogue, is available for Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. Go to: www.tourosynagogue.org. Totally Jewish Travel offers Bar/Bat Mitzvah trips to Israel, Hungary and London. www.totallyjewishtravel.com/bar_bat_mitzvah/.

PLANNING FOR AN ISRAELI BAR/BAT MITZVAH SERVICE

AGE OF THE CELEBRANT

According to the Israel Ministry of Tourism, it is customary for a Bar Mitzvah boy to be at least 13 years and a day old, according to the Hebrew calendar. For a girl, it is customary to be at least 12.

BAR/BAT MITZVAH CERTIFICATE

The Israel Ministry of Tourism will provide a beautiful Bar/Bat Mitzvah certificate. Contact them at least 21 days in advance of the ceremony and fill out the online form on their website. If you are participating in a group or private tour, the tour operator will arrange for a certificate.

LEARNING A TORAH PORTION

Once you finalize your travel dates, the rabbi you work with in Israel, either through your tour or privately, will coordinate your Torah portion and study materials based on the date of the service. You will have time before the ceremony to become familiar with the materials and to be fully prepared for the special day.

TRAVEL TIPS

WHEN TO GO

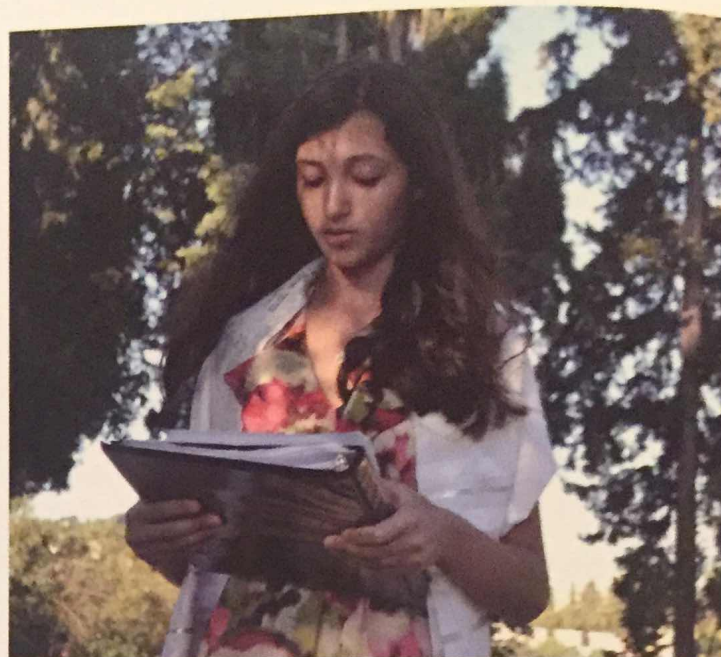
If you are working with a tour group, the most popular times to go are summer vacation or in December during winter break. If you are doing a private tour or DIY, you have more flexibility in timing.

Also, consider the weather when planning the service. Most tour companies recommend that if the service is in December, plan for Masada or another southern location rather than Jerusalem as it can get too cold there for an outdoor service. Conversely, the summer heat can be very intense, so if you plan to hold the service in Masada or another outdoor destination especially in the southern parts of the country, secure a shady spot in advance.

ESSENTIALS TO PACK

If you are traveling in the spring or summer, pack lots of sunblock, hats and long skirts and shawls for girls and women to preserve modesty when going to The Kotel. Also, make sure you carry lots of water. In winter, a light jacket and sweaters are recommended. An adapter is essential for plugging in American appliances.

You can bring your own tallit, but if you wish to buy one when you are in Israel you'll find many specialized shops such as the famous Gabrieli Talit Shop located in Old Jaffa in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem. www.gabrielirubin.co.il.



{ Tori Lubin during her service in Israel }

Photo credit: Mitch Lubin

FLIGHTS

Flight time is approximately 11 hours with many different carriers available. We have flown El Al, where you feel an immediate connection with Israel as you start eating hummus en route. Take advantage of the long flight by reading about the history of Israel and sharing Jewish-themed children's books with any younger family members.

LENGTH OF TRIP AND DESTINATIONS

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah trip can be any length that suits your family's timeframe and budget. If you plan to tour Israel along with conducting a ceremony, stay at least 8 nights if possible, although 10-12 nights, or even 15 nights, is really ideal. A longer trip will allow for more in depth travel throughout the country.

On our first trip, we stayed 10 nights; two nights in Tel Aviv, three in Tiberias/Golan Heights, and five in Jerusalem (with a day trip to Masada and the Dead Sea). With eight nights on our second trip, we stayed two in Tel Aviv; then we went south with our guide and stopped for lunch and a camel ride at a Bedouin tent and for a drive through the Makhtesh Ramon; then three nights in Eilat (with a day in Petra, Jordan), and three nights in Jerusalem, stopping for a swim at the Dead Sea and hiking at Ein Gedi along the drive north. On both trips, we enjoyed Shabbat dinners in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, truly highlights of our experiences.

I am already planning another trip to celebrate my third daughter's simcha in 2018!

Melissa Stoller is the co-author of *The Parent-Child Book Club: Connecting With Your Kids Through Reading* (HorizonLine Publishing, 2009), and the author of numerous articles about family-related topics.

MAKING IT FUN FOR SIBLINGS AND FAMILY

★ Make sure you include activities and sights that the whole family will enjoy. Of course the focus is on the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child but also consider the interests of older or younger siblings, as well as any grandparents. Either before or after the ceremony, add activities such as river rafting, camel riding, participating in an archaeological dig, doing a scavenger hunt or other wonderful enrichment opportunities.

ACTIVITIES TO CONSIDER

IN AND AROUND JERUSALEM:

- The Israel Museum and the Scroll of the Book
- The Tower of David Museum
- Walking the Old City Ramparts in Jerusalem
- Jerusalem Scavenger Hunt with Ross Culiner in Jerusalem (they are working on a Bar/Bat Mitzvah scavenger hunt)
- Western Wall Tunnels
- Hezekiah's Water Tunnels in Jerusalem
- Machane Yehuda market in Jerusalem
- Yad Vashem
- Chagall Windows at the Hadassah Medical Center
- Archaeological Dig at Beit Guvrin Caves at Tel Maresha with "Dig for a Day Archaeological Seminars"

IN AND AROUND TEL AVIV:

- Independence Hall
- The Ayalon Institute
- The Palmach Museum (for ages 6 and over)
- Nachalat Binyamin Arts and Crafts Market
- Carmel Market (Shuk Ha'Carmel)
- The Tel Aviv Museum of Art
- Tel Aviv Port
- Swimming in the Mediterranean Sea

IN THE NORTH:

- Jeep Ride in the Golan Heights
- Rafting on the Jordan River
- Lunch or overnight at a Kibbutz
- Boat ride and dinner at Decks on Lake Kinneret
- Tree planting at a Jewish National Fund site

IN THE SOUTH:

- Bedouin Tent experience
- Touring The Makhtesh Ramon in the Negev Desert
- Touring Masada
- Swimming in the Dead Sea
- Hiking and swimming in a waterfall at Ein Gedi
- Coral World Underwater Observatory and Marine Park in Eilat
- Boat ride on the Red Sea

