



FAMILY JES

How The Coming Of A
Bar/Bat Mitzvah Can
Be Used To Deepen A
Family's Connection To
The Jewish Experience
And To Each Other

Intergenerational Trip to Israel: Walking in Jaffa with the grandmothers

MAKING FAMILY CONNECTIONS DURING THE BAR/BAT MITZVAH YEAR

BY MELISSA STOLLER

The time leading up to your child's bar or bat mitzvah is a perfect time to connect with your family about the Jewish experience and to infuse your family with the values and character traits that are important to you. Yet, paradoxically, many people go through the bar/bat mitzvah process without really connecting to the deeper part of the experience.

When preparing for the religious service as well as planning for the celebration, it is easy to get lost in the details and forget that the event is not only a singular moment in your family's life but also an opportunity to connect with both your immediate and extended family in a profoundly meaningful way. Read on for ideas and practical tips for making connections, as well as for thoughts from families who have already been through this exciting time in their lives and made the most of it. Many of these ideas have animated and enriched my own family—and still do. My oldest daughter Zoe is 15, but we have two more bat mitzvahs to go for her sisters, Jessie, who is 12, and Maddie, who is 6.

There are many ways that you can connect with your family throughout this journey, some of the most enriching ways I have found include:

Starting a parent-child book club focusing on Jewish-themed books, so you can discuss Jewish values with your children and relate your own experiences about how you embraced your heritage.

Having your children interview relatives about their own bar/bat mitzvah experiences to create inter-generational connections. Likewise, speak to families members about what being Jewish means to them and key experiences in their lives when being Jewish was especially important.

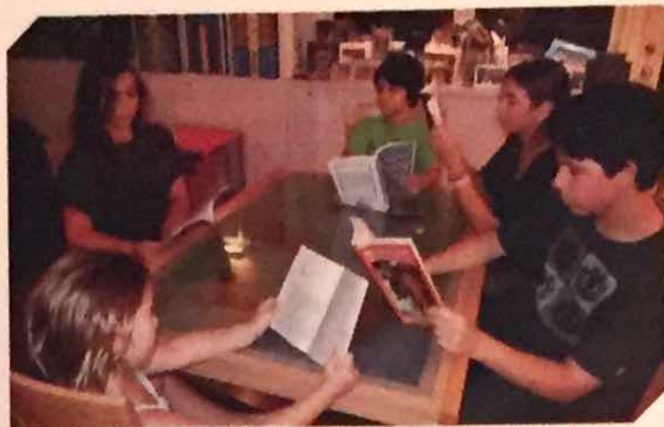
Planning volunteer opportunities that your family can participate in together. Becoming involved in community service as a family will help you stay connected as you spend time preparing for the bar/bat mitzvah. The connections you make during this intense time in your family's life will hopefully help anchor your children to a lifetime of Jewish rituals, traditions, and values.

JEWISH-THEMED BOOK CLUBS

Organizing and conducting a Jewish-themed book club with family and friends that relates to the bar/bat mitzvah year is an ideal way to connect. Anyone who ever read and discussed Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* knows that powerful connections can be made while discussing stories dealing with religion and adolescent issues.

To get started, find a few like-minded families who are going through the same experience. Pick stories related to Jewish themes that will generate thought-provoking discussions. Everyone, adults and children, reads the book, and then the group gathers to discuss it together. Choose books that will be interesting for the whole group and for the varied ages represented. You could choose novels, short stories, or Jewish folktales. You can also read a short folktale during a mealtime and start a spontaneous book club discussion within your own family, or with grandparents or other visiting relatives. (See sidebar with book suggestions for children and book resources for adults).

One of the main goals of the family book club is to engage the members in thought-provoking and meaningful discussions that will facilitate connections between the group members and the special time in their lives. The family book club should be structured to create an environment where each participant feels that his or her opinion matters and will be respected. Ask open-ended



The Stoller kids and some friends choosing Jewish-themed books for the Family Book Club, which included parents.

questions that do not have right or wrong answers, but rather will generate discussion and sharing among the book club members. (See sidebar for discussion ideas). Take turns sharing opinions and try to ensure that each participant has the opportunity to speak and engage. The adults should facilitate the discussion with the goals and guidelines of the book club in mind.

There are many ways to add enrichment to the book club meetings. For example, you can create theme-related projects. Younger siblings will particularly appreciate projects such as creating a bookmark illustrating a theme from the book, acting out and video-taping a play based on the story, learning to cook Jewish foods, baking Challah together, creating theme-related t-shirts using white t-shirts and fabric markers, decorating plain picture frames with collage materials, and using clay to create character or scene sculptures. You can play Jewish music in the background to further set the mood.

If you meet over a meal, try to tie the cuisine to the theme of the book. For example, meet at a Jewish deli, or a kosher or Israeli restaurant, or bring in bagels and lox. You can also meet to celebrate Shabbat and holidays together and choose books that reflect messages of those special days. Finally, take group field trips if time allows to experience a broader perspective. Read a book dealing with the Jewish immigration experience and visit the Lower East Side, for example. (See sidebar for field trip ideas). Adding enrichment will help the group further appreciate and internalize the connections you make together.

Your group discussions and related activities can reflect how the adults felt at the same moment in their lives, what the children are going through preparing for their day, what values the adults hope to instill in their children, and how the children anticipate living a Jewish life long after their bar and bat mitzvahs are over. Discussing books is a non-threatening way to share these thoughts and ideas and will greatly enhance the strong connections already present in your family.

MAKING CONNECTIONS BY INTERVIEWING RELATIVES

Another way for bar/bat mitzvah children to connect with their religion and family is by interviewing relatives about their own Jewish experiences. Children may not think about the fact that their older relatives have their own fascinating life stories. Sometimes all they have to do is ask to learn amazing facts about topics including bar and bat mitzvah memories, immigration journeys, any anti-semitic experiences, and maintaining Jewish values and a Jewish home. My children each interviewed relatives during the months leading up to their bat mitzvahs and it gave them tremendous insight into their Jewish heritage and why it is important to continue their Jewish education and traditions.

First, my daughters developed and typed up a list of in-

interview questions. (See sidebar about interview questions). I encouraged them to use open-ended questions that would lead to the gathering of free-flowing information from our relatives. My children used tape recorders and video cameras to capture the stories. They then transcribed the interviews and wrote up their findings in narrative story form. They included old photographs our relatives had provided, and bound the stories, giving a copy to each relative.

Some experiences may be too painful for relatives to share, so discuss with your children that they need to be sensitive to their relatives' boundaries. If the relative doesn't want to talk about a specific time period, the interviewer could ask about their views on more modern-day topics such as Israeli politics, Jewish culture, or observing Jewish traditions.

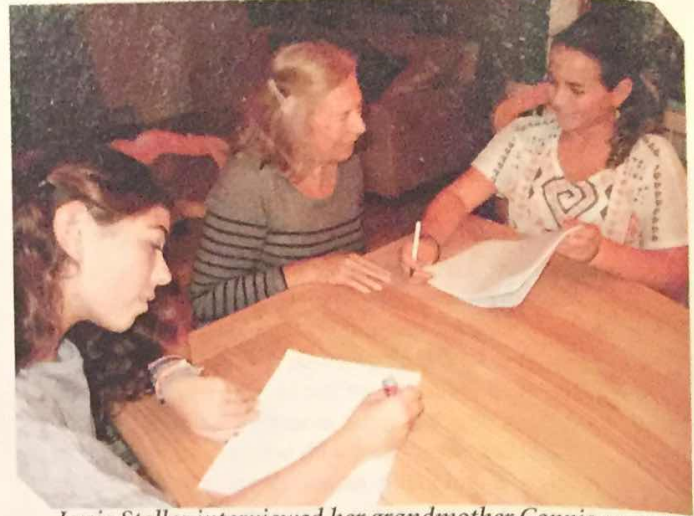
This exercise helped us all to catch glimpses of grandfathers and uncles as young bar mitzvah boys, or grandmothers as matriarchs keeping the Jewish traditions and customs alive. We also heard many stories about assimilation by great-grandparents who had emigrated to the United States, and also about anti-semitism that some ancestors faced overseas and here at home. We all felt that we grew closer to our relatives through sharing their stories, their hopes and dreams, and their lives.

PERFORMING MITZVAHS FAMILY-STYLE

Putting the mitzvah back into bar and bat mitzvahs is a common theme and discussion during the planning process. It is easy to get so immersed in the details of the celebration, such as the catering, DJ, favors, photography, and everything else that makes up the big day (or weekend!), that you lose track of what is most essential to the bar and bat mitzvah experience. However, the mitzvahs of tzedakah (giving to others) and tikkun olam (repairing the world) will hopefully be a top priority and focus for your child and family. This is the perfect time to work together as a family to help your community through acts of kindness and generosity large and small.

Many synagogues organize mitzvah days, where members of the congregation go out into the community to give back in hands-on ways. Participate with your synagogue, or encourage your synagogue to start such a program. We have been doing this for years, and it is a very easy way to teach your children the value of community service, which is certainly a core Jewish value. We have enjoyed singing and playing bingo at senior centers, taking meals to the homebound, and packing lunches for a food bank.

You also can perform mitzvot related to organizations that



Jessie Stoller interviewed her grandmother Connie as part of her bat mitzvah process.

have meaning to your family. For example, if your child is a dancer, you can work with a local dance organization to provide scholarships to dance students. Our middle daughter, who is gluten-free, is now preparing to work with an organization that does research about celiac disease, and our older daughter who is a voracious reader selected and donated books to the library of a local children's organization. Also, many organizations such as the UJA Federation of New York will work with families to create appropriate mitzvah projects related to the bar/bat mitzvah process. (Visit www.ujafedny.org/mitzvah-project/).

Additionally, you can weave elements of tzedakah and tikkun olam throughout your celebration, even suggesting on your invitation that your guests make donations to relevant charities in lieu of gifts. You can drop off floral arrangements at a local hospital at the end of the party, donate left over food or non-perishable items you ask your guests to bring to a local food bank, or have guests write postcards to American or Israeli soldiers that you mail after the celebration. Your favors could also include a note about a charity that is of special interest to your family, so guests are reminded about tzedakah on the way home.

Volunteering together and giving tzedakah as a family teaches our children that they must look for opportunities to heal and assist others in need. We try to lead by example, and hope that our children will want to engage in volunteer service throughout their lives. By thinking about the type of mitzvot in which to engage, and then by working together, we can make meaningful connections and aid our community while en-

Fiction for Children:

There are many excellent book choices. Here are a few to get you started:

All-of-a-Kind Family, by Sydney Taylor, Perfection Learning 3rd Ed., 1984; originally published in 1951. A story that still resonates about a family of Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side at the beginning of the 20th Century. There are several more in the series that could be used for a continuing book club.

Lily's Crossing, by Patricia Reilly Giff, Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1999; a Newbery Honor Book. A moving story set during WWII in Rockaway Beach about a young girl who meets a young refugee boy from war-torn Europe.

Meet Rebecca: An American Girl, by Jacqueline Dembar Greene, illustrated by Robert Hunt, American Girls Publishing, 2009. Set in 1914, Rebecca Rubin, who lives in New York with her parents who emigrated from Russia, as well as her brothers and sisters, navigates through life's

difficult choices.

Number the Stars, by Lois Lowry, Sandpiper Reissue Edition, 2011. In this 1990 Newbery Medal winner based on historical events, a young Danish girl works to save her best friend from the Nazis.

Pink Slippers, Bat Mitzvah Blues, by Ferida Wolff, Jewish Publication Society, 1989. A young girl faces challenging choices about continuing her Jewish studies after her bat mitzvah or pursuing her passion for ballet.

The Devil's Arithmetic, by Jane Yolen, Puffin Books, 1988. A poignant story about a girl who is tired of hearing her grandparents' stories of the Holocaust, until she is transported to that time period and comes to understand the significance of her families' experiences.

The Truth About My Bat Mitzvah, by Nora Raleigh Baskin, Alladin Mix, 2008. A touching coming-of-age story about a bat mitzvah age girl discovering her Jewish identity.



Zoe Stoller with her great-uncle Sam and her grandfather Irving. She interviewed great-uncle Sam during her bat mitzvah process. (Photo Credit: Funico Studios)

gaged in the bar or bat mitzvah process.

It is the connections bar/bat mitzvah children make to their family, synagogue, and religion through discussing Jewish values and ideas, learning about their relatives' experiences, and giving back to their community that will help them appreciate and maintain their connection to your family's beliefs and to Jewish life long after their own bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies.

OTHER CONNECTION IDEAS

Here are some other "connection" ideas we incorporated into our older daughter's bat mitzvah:

We showed our girls **our own bar and bat mitzvah albums**. While the clothes and hairstyles from the party were different, the girls could see that the traditions were the same and they could actually connect to their parents as teenagers who went through the same Jewish journey all those years ago. Although it was sad to see that many of the people in the albums were no longer with us, particularly my father and grandmother, and my husband's grandparents, it was joyous for us all to keep their memories and values alive by continuing the traditions they passed down through the generations.

We created a **scrapbook** throughout the process. We included the postcard announcing the bat mitzvah date, the first notes from our synagogue about bat mitzvah tutoring, any special progress reports we received from our cantor or rabbi, the invitation, and many emails we received the week after the ceremony complimenting our daughter on her special day. Many of our relatives and lifelong friends wrote notes saying that they remembered attending our bar and bat mitzvahs and they were so thrilled to be able to participate in our daughter's bat mitzvah. They strengthened connections between their own experiences and our daughter's experience and helped keep bonds strong. Now, I write notes to friends' or relatives' daughters purposely including that I remember their parents at their bar/bat mitzvahs or weddings and I try to comment on a Jewish ritual I remember being observed so that I can try to make a connection for the child to a Jewish experience in the parent's life.

Keep a **family journal** before, during, and after the bar or bat mitzvah year. Your family can have one journal where you

Jewish Folktale Compilations

Jewish Folktales, Selected and Retold by Pinhas Sadeh and translated from Hebrew by Hillel Halkin, Anchor, 1989. An excellent resource from Israeli poet Sadeh of over 200 Jewish legends and folktales from traditional Eastern European as well as Middle Eastern and North African sources.

The Classic Tales: 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore, by Ellen Frankel, Jason Aronson Inc., 1993. A comprehensive retelling of accessible stories for the whole family.

Books for Adults and Children Non-Fiction Resources:

Can I Have a Cell Phone for Hanukkah? The Essential Scoop on Raising Modern Jewish Kids, by Sharon Duke Estroff, (Broadway Books, 2007). A helpful resource with practical tips about the bar and bat mitzvah process, as well as other times in children's lives.

For Kids -- Putting God on Your Guest List: How to Claim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Bar or Bat Mitzvah, 2nd Ed. (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007). An excellent resource, with particularly helpful ideas about giving back to the community during this period.

How to Raise a Jewish Child: A Practical Handbook for Family Life, by Anita Diamant with Karen Kushner, (Schocken, 2008). The author of *The Red Tent* includes a chapter about the history of bar and bat mitzvahs, as well as making the process more meaningful. Also see *Living a Jewish Life: Jewish Traditions, Customs, and Values for Today's Families*, by Anita Diamant, (Harper Paperbacks, 2007).

Mitzvah Chic: How to Host a Meaningful, Fun, Drop-Dead Gorgeous Bar or Bat Mitzvah, by Gail Anthony Greenberg, (MitzvahChic LLC, 2003). Excellent ideas for adding meaning at all stages of the experience.

Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah, by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996). An invaluable resource.

The Blessing of a B Minus: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Resilient Teenagers, by Wendy Mogel, Ph.D., (Scriber, 2011). Best-selling author of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* returns with sound advice about helping teenagers through all the experiences in their lives.

The J Girl's Guide - The Young Jewish Woman's Handbook for Coming of Age, by Penina Adelman, Ali Feldman, and Shulamit Reinharz, (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007). A book aimed at teenage girls to help guide them through adolescence and life, with a section about bat mitzvahs.

each take turns writing about the most important moments during the year. Parents can also include their own memories that might be sparked by moments their children are experiencing as they travel through the process.

At dinnertime, we often **play a connection question game** that serves as a fun conversation starter and ice breaker. Create a list of questions that you can cut up and place in a box. At dinner, pick a question that the whole family can answer. For example, questions could include: What is your favorite Jewish holiday? What part of the bar or bat mitzvah service are you looking forward to most? What part of the celebration are you most excited about? What memory do you have



Intergenerational Trip to Israel: Planting trees with our guide in a Jewish National Fund (JNF) forest

about bar or bat mitzvah preparations? What is your favorite religious school memory? Several companies offer ready-made games that we enjoy such as Chat Pack and Chat Pack for Kids (www.TheQuestionGuys.com); and The Family Dinner Box of Questions, The Shabbat Box of Questions, The Hanukkah Box of Questions, and The Passover Box of Questions--all by The Box Girls (www.theboxgirls.com). You can get started with these sets, and add your own timely and relevant Jewish-themed questions.

Many people offer a sign-in book at the celebration where guests can write their good wishes to the bat mitzvah child. In addition, you can ask guests to write a **short memory** about their own bat mitzvah experiences if applicable, and about one way they now keep Jewish traditions alive in their own homes.

During the **candle-lighting ceremony**, we reserved the last candle for all our guests. My daughter asked everyone to stand, and she said the last candle was in honor of all our friends and relatives who were connected to our family in so many ways. The warmth, love and connection in the room was so evident at that special moment.

We have all had experiences where we hear a song and remember a significant event in our lives. **Music** has the power to evoke memories and moods. Your child may want to monopolize all the

Book Club Discussion Questions

The following are questions suitable for most parent-child book club discussion groups:

Compare an event in the book with an event in your own life. Are any of the characters in the book like you or any members of your family? Did you feel a connection to any characters in the book?

Compare and contrast the actions of several characters in the book. Choose a main theme in the book (such as friendship, helping others, bravery, loneliness, fitting in, redemption) and ask questions relating to that theme.

How did a character grow or change during the book?

What Jewish values were exemplified in the book?

Do the characters make efforts to incorporate Jewish Values into their lives?

Would you have made choices similar to those of the book's characters?

What might you have done differently if you were a character in the book?

What did you wonder as you read the book?

If you could ask the author any questions, what would you ask?

Were you satisfied with the ending the author chose?

How would you have ended the story?

What message did the author intend to leave with the reader?

What lessons can you learn from this book?

What do you think happens to the characters after the story ends?

Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not?

music at the celebration but try to include songs that you might remember from your own bar or bat mitzvah experience. For example, I clearly remembered that we used the song "Celebration" by Kool and the Gang when my family walked into the party. We used that same song at my daughter's celebration and several people somehow remembered the connection. I enjoyed reminiscing with my children about songs that were popular when I was thirteen and what my friends and I danced to at parties. These discussions brought back thoughts and memories I might not have called up otherwise.

Melissa Stoller is co-author of *The Parent-Child Book Club: Connecting With Your Kids Through Reading* (with Marcy Winkler), HorizonLine Publishing, 2009, www.parentchildbookclub.com

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS AND FIELD TRIPS

Visit Israel: A trip to Israel is one of the best ways to connect with your family during the bar/bat mitzvah process. We took an intergenerational trip to Israel after our oldest daughter's bat mitzvah. It was particularly special because we travelled with our family of five, plus my mother and my in-laws. It was the first trip to Israel for us all. We visited Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Masada, the Dead Sea, and the north including the Golan Heights, Tiberias, Akko, Caesarea, and Safed. We had an extremely knowledgeable tour guide and we learned so much about the history, culture, religion and politics of the entire region. We combined family-friendly activities such as an archaeological dig, planting trees in a Jewish National Fund Forest, a boat ride on Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee), a visit to a Kibbutz, beach time in Tel Aviv, a camel ride, floating in the Dead Sea, hiking in the Golan Heights, and walking through the marketplaces and Old City in Jerusalem, with educational and spiritual activities as well. We all kept journals throughout the trip, and we made copies of our pictures for three separate family photo albums. It was truly a remarkable trip and we still talk about our adventures and the shared experiences that made us all connect over the generations. For further information, see my article "For the Big Day, the Big Trip" in the Spring 2011 Issue of Mitzvah Magazine at <http://issuu.com/mitzvahmag/docs/spring2011>.

Trips closer to home: The Tenement Museum (tenement.org); Ellis Island (ellisland.org); Jewish Museum in New York (thejewishmuseum.org); The Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York (mjh-nyc.org); The newly-opened National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia (nmajh.org); The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (ushmm.org); Theme tours such as the "Jewish Lower East Side" tour with Big Onion Walking Tours (bigonion.com)

Family Interview Questions and Techniques

When interviewing family members, be sure to ask open-ended questions as well as specific, directed questions for the best results. Remember to be mindful about topics that might be difficult for the interviewee to discuss. Examples:

Tell me about your childhood and your Jewish education.
 Describe your bar/bat mitzvah ceremony.
 Do you remember the portion you chanted?
 What were the themes, and can you still chant any part of the portion today?
 Did you write a D'var Torah and if so do you remember any of your thoughts or speech?
 Did you have a celebration following the ceremony?
 What do you remember about the celebration?
 Do you have any special memories about any relatives or friends who attended your ceremony or celebration?
 Describe your synagogue.
 Do you have any special memories about your rabbi or cantor?
 Do you remember dancing the Hora at your celebration?
 Describe how you felt about becoming a bar/bat mitzvah.
 Did you feel connected to the Jewish religion or culture after your bar or bat mitzvah?
 How have you led a Jewish life since your bar/bat mitzvah?
 What important Jewish values have guided you throughout your life?
 What Jewish values and ideals have you tried to impart to your children or grandchildren?
 Are there other significant memories about Jewish life cycle events you would like to share with me?
 Are there any other stories about your life or your ancestors' lives that you would like to share with me, such as about immigration, assimilation, or anti-semitism?
 Is there anything else you can think of that you would like to share with me?

Connection Suggestions from Other Parents:

"For the past few years I have spoken at a program our Temple runs for families entering the b'nai mitzvah process. Part of what I talk about is how to find greater meaning in the process, including a deeper family connection. In my opinion, one of the most important things parents can do is to discuss why the tradition is important to them, and to put it in the context of a Jewish life filled with many significant milestones. Although children sometimes view their bar mitzvah as the end of something (studying, preparing, attending Religious School), it's really the beginning but sometimes we get so caught up in planning the event that we neglect to say that. Also, when our son shared his bar mitzvah date with two other students, we felt it was important to exemplify the Jewish value of kehillah (community) so we hosted a Shabbat dinner for all three families. The connection we made with those families made the service much more meaningful for us."

-- Barri Waltcher

"One tradition we carried through both of our celebrations was the distribution in synagogue of a handout we prepared to let our guests know about the people after whom our b'not mitzvah were named. The preparation of the piece was a family labor of love that taught our children about the wonderful people who came before them and by whom each of our girls has been touched and shaped. It was important to us that these beloved family members have a presence at our simcha."

-- Robin Adelson Shinder

"It was very meaningful at our son's bar mitzvah when he

wore the talit of his grandfather who had passed away several years prior. It helped him feel connected to his grandfather and prior family generations, and it was special to my husband and myself as well."

-- Marcy Winkler

"The time in our lives when our children reach this milestone approach quickly and are gone in a flash... the years that follow move on even faster. It is hard to believe we are already thinking about colleges for our oldest daughter. The bar and bat mitzvah time in our house brought us to talk about the mitzvahs one can do in life, such as our son made a donation to the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network as he has food allergies and felt a connection to this organization. Also, we talked about how once you become thirteen, you should continue to be involved and try to give back to those in need, and to become an active citizen within your community. This was also a time to talk about how important it is to keep your Jewish traditions alive come what may, or where life may take you, and to always make sure you keep your traditions strong somehow."

-- Debra Handelman

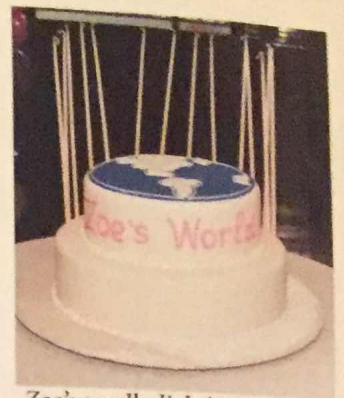
"We dedicated our daughter's bat mitzvah service to my dad since he couldn't be with us in person....but he was certainly there in spirit, especially since our daughter was named for him. Similarly, my husband's grandfather was not with us, so we used his Kiddish Cup during the service to feel closer to him and to make sure that the generations were connected spiritually if not physically on our special day.

In addition, we wanted our younger daughter to participate in a meaningful way in our oldest daughter's bat mitzvah service, so she sang a song that our rabbi had written. The song seemed to be an excellent connection to her sister and to the idea that she, in a few years, would join her sister in entering the realm of becoming a Jewish woman and adult."

-- Jill Lubin

"For our oldest daughter's bat mitzvah, we planted trees in Israel through the Jewish National Fund for each of our guest families attending. We presented the tree certificates at each family's place settings, and all our guests were thrilled and overjoyed to know a tree was planted in honor of their family in association with the bat mitzvah girl. Because we planted 100 trees in all, the JNF dedicated a "forest" to our daughter and presented her with a magnificent wooden framed plaque. She has kept it on her wall ever since, and still beams about this mitzvah with pride. She truly felt connected to all our family and friends and to the land of Israel through this special opportunity. (Author's note: I loved this idea when I attended Andrea's daughter's bat mitzvah several years ago, and used it very successfully at my own daughter's celebration.)"

-- Andrea Bittman



Zoe's candle-lighting ceremony reserved the last candle for their guests! (Photo Credit: Funico Studios)