

BLESSED WITH OPTIONS: THE SPECIAL BAT MITZVAH

by Howard Blas

Becoming a Bat Mitzvah has the potential to be affirming, celebratory, and a wonderful welcome into the Jewish community as a whole and into the community of Jewish women in particular. Yet, planning a Bat Mitzvah can be confusing and stressful, given the various practices accepted and the options available today. This stress is compounded for parents of daughters with special needs, who face additional issues and potential limitations. What if the young woman cannot read Hebrew, cannot learn a complete book of the Bible or *massekhet* of the Talmud, has difficulties writing or speaking publicly, or is unable to stand, speak, focus for long periods of time, or see the words on the page? Intellectual, physical, and developmental disabilities come in so many shapes and sizes, making it impossible to suggest a “one-size-fits-all” template for special-needs celebrations. How can families of girls with special needs start the process of marking a Bat Mitzvah?

Families should begin with an honest look at what Bat Mitzvah means to them and to their child. They should ask themselves how they would feel if their daughter didn’t celebrate her Bat Mitzvah in a fashion similar to her siblings and other girls in the community. Would this different kind of celebration be stressful or even embarrassing, or might it be an opportunity to showcase their daughter’s unique strengths and talents? Families should continue with an assessment of their daughter’s strengths and weaknesses. Are teachers always praising her artistic ability? Her good ear for music? Her *neschama* and compassion for others? Does *leyning* (or *leyning* more than a few verses, which she can learn, thanks to her good ear) seem like a huge challenge? Does the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Gemara make learning Talmud difficult? Does she need adaptive technology like an augmented communication device? Would a PowerPoint presentation or microphone make delivering a *d’var Torah* easier?

As a teacher of Bar and Bat Mitzvah students with a range of special needs and circumstances, I like to remind parents of the minimum requirement for Bat Mitzvah— turning 12! I then take it to the extreme, telling them, “If your daughter stays in bed, in her pajamas, on her 12th birthday, she will still become Bat Mitzvah, automatically. Now, let’s look at what Bat Mitzvah means to you and your family and think of some wonderful options.” I always remind parents that the process is much more important than the product (“the day”) and that the child shouldn’t get a stomach ache when the teacher arrives for the lesson; rather, she should be excited about the discussion or project that awaits. And the bar should always be set at the right height—not too high and not too low. I have worked with students who spent eight months learning to read (through transliteration) three verses of Torah. I have also worked with children with severe learning issues who had such amazing “musical ears” that they picked up pages of Torah reading without a problem.

We are blessed with a range of meaningful options for marking a Bat Mitzvah, ranging from Shabbat morning or afternoon services in the shul to celebrations on Sundays, Rosh Hodesh, Purim, and government holidays, outside (or inside) the shul. A non-Shabbat Bat Mitzvah may be less stressful because fewer people will attend, and one can use sound systems and computers for PowerPoint presentations. It can be helpful to have a discussion and brainstorming session with your rabbinic leader or Bat Mitzvah teacher. Tell him or her about your daughter and about your vision. You may be pleasantly surprised to learn what is possible!

Let me share some stories of special-needs *B'not Mitzvah* and their creative practices.

Shira's family began the process of planning a Bat Mitzvah for their daughter with learning issues by having Shabbat dinner with the female assistant congregational leader of their synagogue. They discussed Shira's love of the family's weekly Shabbat dinner and its associated rituals of *kiddush*, washing, *hamotzi*, and *birkat hamazon*. They decided to celebrate Shira's Bat Mitzvah with close family and friends enjoying a Shabbat dinner "narrated" by the Bat Mitzvah girl. Shira spent several months learning the Torah's story of creation and various laws and customs of Shabbat. After Friday night services in her shul, she eloquently welcomed her Shabbat dinner guests by saying,

I would like to talk about Shabbat so you will have more information about Shabbat. I love Shabbat. I enjoy drinking grape juice and eating hallah. I like lighting Shabbat candles with my mom and Allie (my sister). We have Shabbat because God made things for six days and rested on the seventh day. On the seventh day, it is called "Shabbat." Shabbat starts on Friday evening when the sun goes down. Shabbat ends on Saturday night when the stars come out. Shabbat is fun. My favorite part of Shabbat is having Sharon's Sorbet for dessert! And being with my family.

Shira then led the guests in the lighting of the Shabbat candles, gave more detailed explanations of the *Kiddush* and *hamotzi*, and shared details about her Bat Mitzvah learning and her upcoming family Bat Mitzvah trip to Israel. Looking back, Shira's mother reflected, "The best part of it was that in addition to her true feeling of pride and accomplishment, the intimacy of the dinner captured Shira's true essence and that of our family."

Lindsay also celebrated her Bat Mitzvah with familiar Shabbat rituals playing a central role. Lindsay, who has cerebral palsy, had been participating twice a month in Chabad's Friendship Circle where she and her Friendship Circle Buddies socialized and learned about and took part in (mock and "real") Shabbat and holiday celebrations. Lindsay especially loved the matzah factory. In addition, her Friendship Circle Buddies regularly came over her house to play games, bake, and enjoy arts and crafts projects.

To mark Lindsay's Bat Mitzvah, the Chabad rabbi and rebbetzin hosted a Shabbat dinner and party for Lindsay and her Friendship Circle Buddies in their home. They gave her a special gift—Shabbat candle holders. Lindsay lit the candles and said the *berakha*. Lindsay's parents continue to be delighted when Lindsay lights candles each Friday night because "it reminds us of her special night—her Bat Mitzvah."

Ilana goes to a school for children with learning disabilities. Because their synagogue and community are so central to them and important to Ilana, her family chose to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah by having Ilana deliver a *d'var Torah* in their shul on a Sunday morning. While her two brothers attended day schools, Ilana spent years learning privately about the *parashah*, Hebrew, Jewish history, ethics, and holidays, in addition to doing *hesed* projects. At her Bat Mitzvah, Ilana spoke eloquently about her

parashah—Kedoshim—and what it means to be holy. She also spoke about counting the *omer*, a ritual observed nightly in her home. Her mother confessed that she, her husband, and most of their guests cried when they saw how confident Ilana was speaking from the *bimah* of their shul, saying, “We watched her assume the mantle of Bat Mitzvah before our eyes.” The rabbi’s wife spoke about Ilana’s Hebrew name, Esther, which means “hidden,” and observed, “Today is the time and place where Esther’s *neshama* has been revered publicly!”

Some families like the idea of marking a Bat Mitzvah within the context of a prayer service. Jessica, a young woman with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning issues, delivered a *d’var Torah* on social justice and led several prayers in a Shabbat afternoon service. She learned her prayers through transliteration, as decoding Hebrew was difficult for her. Synagogues can also create a service at a non-*minyan* time and offer the Bat Mitzvah girl the opportunity to chant biblical verses and lead such prayers/songs as *Ashrei* and *Ein Kelokeynu*.

Children with cerebral palsy, articulation issues, and other physical disabilities have participated in non-Shabbat prayer services using adaptive technology, including augmented communication devices, computers, and Power-Point presentations. Sarah, a young woman with cognitive and developmental disabilities, minimal verbal abilities, and some difficulty walking, participates in the *Jewish Gateways: Access to Jewish Education* program in Boston. Sarah helped lead services on Memorial Day in a very creative way: she sat next to her teacher and operated a large projector and speakers. As the teacher said, “Sarah will lead us in the *Shema*,” Sarah pushed the buttons, covered her eyes, and the *Shema* was sung! When it was time for the *Torah* service, Sarah slowly walked up to the ark where she held the *Torah* (Sarah loves her plush *Torah*, which she holds at home every day). Sarah delivered her *d’var Torah*—about how she loves *Shabbat*, and how that day she was becoming a Bat Mitzvah—through a PowerPoint presentation.

Many families of children with special needs have discovered the benefits of holding a service in Israel, arguably the best multisensory learning environment in the world! In general, families can gear an Israel trip to the specific interests and abilities of their children. Girls who love nature can celebrate a Bat Mitzvah at Ne’ot Kedumim, the biblical nature preserve; history lovers can experience an archaeological Dig for a Day; and there are numerous *hesed* opportunities, such as picking fruit and vegetables through *Leket: From Table to Table*.

Some families choose to highlight their daughter’s artistic strengths. Lisa displayed her artwork in her shul lobby, and guests were treated to an artist-led gallery tour and cocktails. Others highlight their daughter’s musical and theater talents through actual performances at her Bat Mitzvah.

Through my experience, I have been impressed with just how much children with special needs actually understand about what it means to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. They truly understand that something profound happens, that something important is changing in their lives. Bat Mitzvah can be a wonderful opportunity for families to celebrate their daughter, her strengths, and her interests. The challenge for parents, rabbis, teachers, and the Jewish community is to continue searching for creative, meaningful ways for all girls to celebrate this important life-cycle event.

Howard Blas is a social worker and teacher of Bar and Bat Mitzvah for children with special needs and serves as director of the Tikvah Program for campers with special needs at Camp Ramah in New England. He lives in New York and is currently working on a book on special-needs B’nei Mitzvah.

[To read the rest of the Fall 2010 JOFA Journal, please click here.](#)