

HA TOV VEHAMETIV: GOOD FOR ONESELF AND GOOD FOR OTHERS

by Daniel Rothner

A *mitzvah* or *hesed* project can provide young people celebrating their Bar or Bat Mitzvah with the perfect opportunity to reflect on who they are, who they want to be, and how they can best have an impact on the world. The self-reflective process of choosing, designing, and implementing a *mitzvah* project can serve to establish personal development goals and should be driven by the celebrants' individualized interests and the needs of the community that they are looking to enrich.

Areyvut, a nonprofit organization founded in 2002, offers Jewish day schools, congregational schools, synagogues, community centers, and families a variety of opportunities to empower their youth by creating programs that make core Jewish values real and meaningful to them. As the director of Areyvut, I work with *B'nei Mitzvah* celebrants and families to help them develop innovative and challenging projects that enhance their celebrations and ignite a lifelong commitment to the core Jewish values of *tzedakah*, *hesed*, and *tikkun olam*.

The idea that *hesed* projects are important for girls and not for boys is clearly misguided. *Mitzvah* projects are vitally important for both young men and women. Nevertheless in this article I focus on Bat Mitzvah projects with which Areyvut has been involved.

To be personally meaningful, a Bat Mitzvah *hesed* project should be driven by a hobby, concern, or passion that inspires the celebrant. While parents, families, and teachers can and should play a role in supporting the project, the Bat Mitzvah girl should begin the planning process with a brainstorming activity that identifies several activities that are important in her life, such as acting, art, cooking, movies, music, reading, shopping, or sports. She should then identify several causes that she feels passionate about; for example, animals, the environment, literacy, poverty, Israel, education, or children with special needs. Finally, she should consider how her interests, knowledge, and skills can be used to support one or more of the causes. In doing so, she will be able to elevate her everyday activities by employing them to help others.

Abby spent a long time deciding how to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah. She wanted to incorporate meaningful acts of *hesed* into the experience, to involve friends and family, to make other people happy, and to learn a skill that she would be able to use again in the future to help those in need. After researching many possibilities, Abby chose to help organize a Mitzvah Clown training at her synagogue at which the participants—mainly her friends—learned how to apply clown make-up, make balloon animals, and bring joy to local seniors. For her first performance, she brought her parents and siblings to

a senior center where her grandmother was a resident. While all the residents were excited by the performance, Abby's grandmother was overwhelmed with joy and pride.

In lieu of a Bat Mitzvah party, Abby planned to take her family and friends on a bus trip to perform at local community agencies. She looked forward to "clowning around" on an ongoing basis after the celebration. By using her dramatic talents, Abby was able to bring an additional level of meaning to her coming-of-age experience. By sharing her project with her family, friends, and neighbors, she was able to elevate her entire community through these acts of kindness.

While planning her Bat Mitzvah, Victoria realized that she had a strong interest in family, history, and community. She decided to use her family's roots in Jewish Harlem as an inspiration for her *mitzvah* project. She sponsored a guided Jewish Tour of Harlem and used the proceeds to donate a Talmud to the Old Broadway Synagogue, which has served the Jews of Harlem since 1911. This project enabled participants—many friends and families from her school—to learn a different perspective on modern Jewish history and to see a community they may never have encountered. Most of them did not know about the role that Jews had played in the history of Harlem. Through her project, she educated those around her and increased the potential for tolerance and partnership between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors.

Another student, Ayelet, decided to use her interest in baking to educate others about hunger and poverty in Israel and to raise money to support Israel's national food bank. She organized a cake-decorating class attended by more than 65 people, despite the snowy weather, and which raised more than \$6,000. At the class, Ayelet explained the importance of doing something concrete to address hunger and poverty and shared literature about Israel's national food bank, as well as several other related agencies. Ayelet used her thank-you notes to reinforce the ideas that she discussed in the cake-decorating class, and is still actively involved in raising awareness about hunger and poverty in Israel.

We have found that partnering with an organization, as Ayelet did, often has the benefit of working with a representative who can provide education about the specific cause, and describe which related community needs remain unfulfilled and which volunteer opportunities are available. Additionally, the organization can offer the celebrant important information that can be shared with family and friends through invitations, speeches, thank-you notes, information videos, or handouts.

It is important to select a project that the Bat Mitzvah girl will continue to be involved with and to advocate for after the celebration. For example, Cheli raised money for Yad Sarah, the volunteer organization in Israel that facilitates home care for the disabled and elderly in Israel, by selling bracelets that said "*Ten Yad L'Yad Sarah*" (literally 'Give a hand to Yad Sarah') on them; she also volunteered with her family to build walkers at the Yad Sarah facility in Jerusalem. She then decided to create another fundraiser to help those affected by Israel's war with Lebanon. Cheli organized a play and all the proceeds were donated to Yad Sarah. Overall, Cheli raised about \$2,300. After her Bat Mitzvah, she has continued to stay in contact with the staff and volunteers at Yad Sarah and even volunteered at the facility again this past summer.

Finding opportunities for ongoing involvement in a chosen organization greatly enriches the Bat Mitzvah experience. We therefore encourage young people, before they have chosen a *mitzvah* project, to speak to representatives from a variety of organizations and learn more about the agencies that are of particular interest to them. *Areyvut* creates *hesed* and volunteering fairs for this purpose, and they can be replicated in many communities.

At Areyvut, we have found that there are limitless ways to enhance a Bar or Bat Mitzvah through a *mitzvah* project that may be integrated into every aspect of the celebration: information can be included in invitations and thank-you notes; the theme can be reflected in centerpieces and party favors; and it can also be the topic of a speech at the party. In some cases, a fundraiser or volunteer opportunity can take the place of a formal party.

Bat Mitzvah girls who carry out a *mitzvah* project and share their experience with others create a celebration that continues well beyond the event itself. By involving others in acts of kindness, educating them about needs in the world, and setting an example for others to follow, they are able to have an impact that will not be forgotten.

At Areyvut we have a variety of programs and resources and would be more than happy to help celebrants and families with projects. We are also happy to provide schools, synagogues, and youth groups with information and assistance. Visit our website at www.areyvut.org or send us an email (info@areyvut.org).

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