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MAIN PHONE NUMBER: 215-832-0700

PUBLISHER'S REPRESENTATIVE
LAURA FRANK

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
LIZ SPIKOL

MANAGING EDITOR
ANDY GOTLIEB

STAFF WRITERS
JESSE BERNSTEIN
SOPHIE PANZER

PRODUCTION DIRECTOR
JENI MANN

ART DIRECTOR
STEVE BURKE

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
JUSTIN TICE

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Alexa Shurman (left) reads during her bat mitzvah. Courtesy of Julie Shurman

From Building an Ark to Vaccine Awareness: B'nai Mitzvah Plans Get Creative

SOPHIE PANZER | JE STAFF

Alexa Shurman realized in March 2020 that her bat mitzvah was not going to be the way she imagined.

The Main Line Reform Temple congregant had her date set for May 2, 2020, but the pandemic threw her family's plans into question. Would anyone still attend? Would the rabbi be able to help? How could the ceremony take place outside the synagogue?

After much discussion with vendors, family and clergy, Alexa held her ceremony under a balloon arch on her porch with a handful of close family members spread out on the lawn. The rabbi assisted her while adhering to mask and distance precautions, and the cantor sang on Zoom.

Although Alexa was disappointed that she wouldn't get to have a big celebration, she felt better

when she realized all her peers were having the same experience. She also felt happy to have one of the first pandemic bat mitzvahs among her friends so that she got the uncertainty over with.

Alexa is one of many Jewish teenagers whose b'nai mitzvah plans were radically altered by the pandemic. Even in the midst of uncertainty, they are finding ways to make months of studying and preparation pay off with small ceremonies, virtual interactions with friends and meaningful mitzvah projects.

By fall, people were more used to the idea of having smaller celebrations with family and friends Zoomed in.

Elliott Bronner and his family knew he wanted to stick to his original date of Nov. 28, 2020, even if the

celebration looked different.

"From the very beginning we felt very strongly that you turn 13, when you turn 13. So that's when your bar mitzvah is," mother Jill Bronner said.

The Bronners had the ceremony at their house with Elliott's paternal grandparents and aunt and uncle present after everyone tested negative for COVID-19. The rest of his family attended virtually.

Elliott built an ark in his dining room by removing the shelves from a cabinet and using a quilt for a curtain. The Torah was borrowed from his synagogue, Beth David Reform Congregation in Gladwyne, and the rabbi and cantor offered assistance via Zoom.

Elliott was excited to see his close family after months in isolation and enjoyed his ceremony.



▲ **Yosef Vessal at Congregation Mikveh Israel**
Photo by Jay Gorodetzer Photography

Attending virtual b'nai mitzvahs for his friends, however, just didn't feel the same.

"I feel like they're not as engaging, because you don't celebrate as much," he said. "People do still send cards or gifts in the mail or drop things off for each other."

Max Livingston, who also attends Beth David Reform, was so excited for his Feb. 6 bar mitzvah that he awoke at 4:30 a.m. to put on his suit.

His family opted to hold the bar mitzvah in the synagogue itself. When it was time to head over, he saw that his mother had arranged a surprise limousine. That, he said, felt special.

"It's only once in a blue moon you walk outside your house and your mom's like, 'Limo time!'" he said.

His two sets of grandparents, aunts and uncles were spread out in the sanctuary, with the rabbi and cantor attending on Zoom.

"At first, my husband and I were very disappointed about the clergy not being with us, but ultimately, it ended up really allowing our son to shine and really take over so many responsibilities," Deborah Livingston said. "Our son blew us away with his ability to really run his service."

Although Yosef Vessal attended many of his friends' Zoom ceremonies, he was not able to host his own. He attends Congregation Mikveh Israel, an Orthodox synagogue that does not use Zoom on Shabbat.

Instead, he opted to have 20 family members sit six feet apart with party favor masks throughout the large sanctuary on Oct. 29.

"We also had rules. So not as many people were standing up on the bimah at the same time, only the rabbi, the person reading and the person getting the aliyah," Yosef said.

He's the eldest of his generation in the family, and he and his parents always imagined having a huge party in honor of his bar mitzvah.

"We were planning, like, this giant thing,



▲ **Elliott Bronner in front of his homemade ark**
Courtesy of Jill Bronner

but I'm so grateful that I got to at least have something in person," he said.

For one teen whose celebration is coming up on May 22, the pandemic has provided the inspiration for a mitzvah project.

Jackson Calder of Huntingdon Valley started igotvax with his cousin to support two causes that have become urgent over the past year: vaccine awareness and food insecurity.

"I was struggling for a little bit on finding a project, because right now you're limited in terms of what you can do," Jackson said. "So I tried to come up with something that we could do virtually, and still help out people just as much as we would in person."

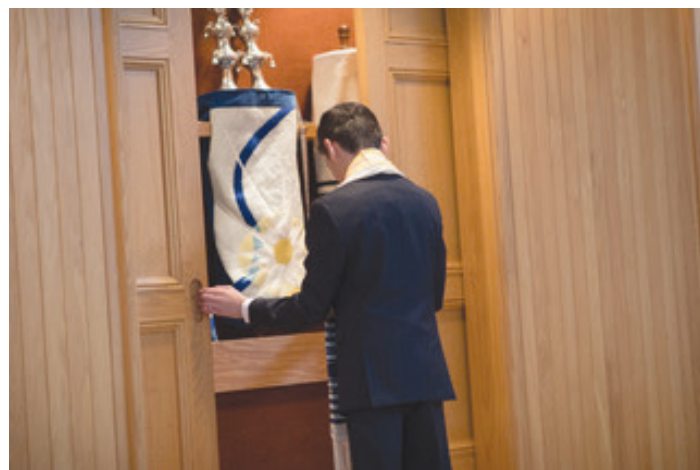
Jackson knew he wanted to do whatever he could to support the vaccine rollout. He has an immunocompromised grandmother he wants to hug in person again, and he said he knows many people who have contracted the virus and died.

He is selling wristbands that read #igotvax to those who have received doses of a COVID-19 vaccine and asking them to post about their experiences on social media to encourage others to get the shot. The bands cost \$5, and proceeds are donated to World Central Kitchen, which provides meals to people facing food insecurity due to the pandemic.

For the ceremony itself, Jackson is working with a traveling rabbi to study his Torah portion. He hopes to have a small gathering of friends and close family members in his backyard. Plans will depend on the progress of the pandemic and the vaccine rollout.

"We're doing whatever we can to really make it as fun as possible," he said. ❤️

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▲ **Max Livingston at Beth David Reform Congregation**
Courtesy of Deborah Livingston



▲ **Wristband from Jackson Calder's mitzvah project**
Courtesy of Stephen Calder

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Pandemic Seals the Deal for Newly Engaged Couples

SOPHIE PANZER | JE STAFF,



▲ Zach Wasserman and Anna Franzini

Courtesy of Zach Wasserman

For Zach Wasserman and Anna Franzini, 2020 was an opportunity to put their relationship into perspective.

“A pandemic will definitely help you make a decision one way or the other, whether you want to be together for the rest of your life,” Wasserman said.

The couple got engaged on July 11, as they were getting ready to leave New York City to be closer to family in Philadelphia. They had already designed a ring together, so he planned a ruse to maintain the element of surprise when he finally popped the question.

Wasserman convinced Franzini to accompany him on a hike in the Hudson Valley with some of their friends, who pretended to back out at the last minute so they could go alone. They hiked to the top of a mountain, and when Franzini asked Wasserman to get the snacks out of his backpack, he pulled out the ring.

In a year of seemingly endless cancellations, they’re one of many Jewish couples who have decided to commit to each other despite the uncertainties of a global pandemic.

Rebekah Thomas said yes to Devin Schecter on Dec. 22.

“It had been a horrible year for everybody. I only know a few examples of people who have thrived. But there was something about the year and having it all be so crappy from the end of March that I wanted to kind of go out with a bang, end the year on a good note,” Schecter said.

He took Thomas to Manayunk, where they went for their first date. He told her it was just dinner, but his friends and family members were there to put out flowers and take pictures. Thomas had hoped he would propose soon, and she got the confirmation she was waiting for before they left.

“This silly, silly guy here left his text message conversation open with his buddy from college, his old roommate, saying that he was going to ask my dad for permission to marry me,” she said.

Adam Stepansky proposed to Pamela Mahler on June 13 during a day trip to New Hope. Mahler sensed something was afoot when Stepansky, who is not particularly outdoorsy, suggested they take a hike

down a path by the river, where he recited a speech about their love and got down on one knee.

The couple had been dating long distance before February 2020, when Mahler moved from New York City to join Stepansky in Wayne. Six weeks after they moved in together, pandemic shutdowns began.

Stepansky knew there was no one else he would rather be stuck in quarantine with.

“I found the pandemic oddly comforting,” he said. “I kind of was starting to feel in my heart, but this helped make it really clear to me that Pam was the right person for me to spend my life with.”

Thomas, Schecter, Wasserman and Franzini agreed that the pandemic made them realize they had made the right choice.

Thomas said that even though there were points when she and Schecter wanted to strangle each other in the early days of the crisis, they ultimately grew closer.

“We’re still getting along and we just love each other’s company, and thankfully it did not tear us apart,” she said.

Franzini said the new normal has highlighted



▲ Adam Stepansky proposes to Pamela Mahler.
Courtesy of Pamela Mahler

◀ Rebekah Thomas and Devin Schecter
Courtesy of Rebekah Thomas

■ We continue to have fun with each other, even through the challenges of what’s going on in the outside world.”

ANNA FRANZINI

the importance of partners being a support system for each other and the value of giving each other space when they need it. Being able to make each other laugh has helped them through the difficulties of the past year.

“We continue to have fun with each other, even through the challenges of what’s going on in the outside world,” she said.

Even in the midst of overwhelming uncertainty, conversations about the future, including planning a Jewish life, are still taking place. Thomas and Schecter have decided to have a Jewish wedding, and they want their future children to attend synagogue and Hebrew school. They’re still thinking about whether they want to pursue Jewish day school.

When Mahler first moved to the area, she and Stepansky were excited to shop around for a synagogue that felt like a good fit. That didn’t pan out due to social distancing limiting services, but they explored how to create a Jewish life in other ways. Mahler made a full Rosh Hashanah dinner for the first time in the fall and started learning how to bake challah.

Stepansky said being with Mahler refreshed his connection to Judaism.

“She prioritizes some of the customs and rituals in a way that makes it feel very approachable and inviting and loving, and the idea of

sharing my Judaism with a partner is really appealing to me,” he said.

They originally scheduled their wedding for August 2021, but decided to push it back until May 2022.

“You know, we’re going to be together forever. What’s another however many months to have the celebration be what we want it to be?” Mahler said.

The other couples are also eyeing a wedding date in May 2022.

Wasserman and Franzini hope the pandemic will be over by then so they can have a dance party with their loved ones sans social distancing.

Schecter still feels hesitant about the date because he can’t be sure whether safety restrictions will remain, but wanted to commit to a time frame anyway.

“We’ve heard a lot of stories about people who are going through these events, you know, trying to plan a wedding during this pandemic, and it seems like it’s all turning into an issue,” he said. “But somebody told me, ‘You know what, we’re not getting any younger here.’ So, at a certain point, we have to be OK with some of these restrictions.” ♥

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▲ Lynda Simons (center) weds her daughter, Jocelyn, to her now-son-in-law, Ben Rodriguez.

Photo by Parr Photo Co.

Pandemic Produces New Wedding Officiants

JESSE BERNSTEIN | JE STAFF

For those who chose to marry amid the pandemic, their special days were often an exercise in miniaturized joy. Miniature parties, miniature ceremonies and miniature guest lists proliferated as the prospect of waiting out the pandemic for wedded bliss proved too much for many.

One upshot of a radically contracted wedding is that many chose to fill roles that would normally go to professionals with friends, family and others in the immediate circle of the betrothed. Consequently, people like Michelle Kagel, a professional officiant and coach for officiants, found themselves flooded with requests for advice during the pandemic. Kagel, a former Hebrew school principal based in Exton, is inundated with questions from people pressed into service as officiants since the pandemic began.

“[There have been] at least eight times where it’s been like, ‘Hey, look, we need to have more than a five-minute conversation,’ and then probably maybe five or six more where people have like, ‘Hey, I just have one question,’” Kagel recalled.

Lynda Simons of Manayunk had a lot of questions when her daughter Jocelyn put off her March 29, 2020 wedding. Would the couple be able to reschedule their beach wedding in Miami? Were the vendors going to give them a hard time? Would the rescheduled date of Feb. 20, 2022 be enough time for the pandemic to subside?

As the pandemic wore on, those questions were answered: yes, no, looking likely. But Jocelyn Simons and her fiancée were restless, quarantined in a remote Massachusetts forest and, eventually, they had a

question for her mother: Would she officiate a small wedding composed only of immediate family?

“I was very honored,” she said. “I’m used to some things. I used to do some acting. Speaking wasn’t what I was worried about. I was worried about saying the right thing.”

That’s probably the most commonly reported fear when it comes to officiating, according to Kagel, who both marries and counsels couples with the The Well-Tied Knot and the People’s Therapy Group. For those who aren’t particularly worried by the act of public speaking, true pressure comes from the content itself.

“They want their friends to have the very best,” Kagel said. “They’re so honored that they’ve been asked to do this really sacred, meaningful thing for friends who they deeply care about.”

After obtaining a single-day officiant license through Massachusetts — a “very surprisingly easy procedure,” according to Lynda Simons — the date was set: Feb. 20, 2021. As the day approached, she consulted officiant websites, rabbis and whoever and whatever material she could get her hands on. Three days before the wedding, she’d finally figured out what to say.

“I no longer had trepidation for it,” Lynda Simons said. But what does one say when, in the midst of the pandemic, as you wed your daughter to her new husband on a snowy trail in the forests of northwestern Massachusetts, the ceremony is interrupted by a group of snowmobile enthusiasts roaring by?

“We waved them away,” Lynda Simons laughed. In the winter of 2019, Jordan Bravato’s best friend gave him a ring. The friend planned to give his fiancée a different sort of ring in November 2020, and he wanted Bravato to officiate. Bravato, the director of Camp Kef at the Kaiserman JCC, was happy to oblige. “I was like, ‘I feel like this is this is a more important job than the best man,’” Bravato said.

Soon after, he began preparing for the big day, researching Pennsylvania’s “wacky” rules around officiants. What Bravato found was complicated, varied county to county, and seemed to be some sort of relic of the commonwealth’s Quaker roots. Bravato suggested to his friend that he and his fiancée get legally married elsewhere, and let Bravato’s role be purely ceremonial.

“He did not like that,” Bravato recalled. The friend insisted that Bravato be the one to marry them.

As soon as he and his now-wife started cracking jokes at me, I pretty much forgot everything I had prepared.”

JORDAN BRAVATO

After heroic levels of bureaucratic wrangling, Bravato became an ordained minister online. So, just as he was finishing up, his friend pushed the wedding until August 2021. It seemed that the ordination process for Bravato might be further complicated.

But Bravato’s friends decided it was time to stop shmying around and do the thing. At the beginning of December 2020, they told Bravato they’d like him to officiate a New Year’s Eve wedding.

“And I was like, ‘Excuse me?’” Bravato said. Getting the license was an adventure; writing the ceremony itself was another can of worms. Fusing together what could only be described as Matrimony Mad Libs, stories about the husband and stories about the couple, Bravato prepared for New Year’s Eve.

It was a rainy night on Bravato’s friend’s parents’ back porch, with the couple, the couple’s parents and Bravato shielded from the storm by white satin curtains.

“And I botched all of it,” Bravato said. “As soon as he and his now-wife started cracking jokes at me, I pretty much forgot everything I had prepared and just kept looking down at my script every minute or so to try to catch my place.”

Still, at the end of the ceremony, he had joined a couple together in the eyes of the law. All’s well that ends well.

Brett Goldman, a consultant and lobbyist in Center City, might want to ask Bravato for some advice. He’s preparing to wed one his best friends this summer, and he’s making the same rounds as Bravato and Simons: reading ceremonies online and calling up rabbi friends.

He’s excited just to be doing something in person, away from Zoom.

“It’s really cool, I’m happy to do it,” Goldman said. ♥

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▲ Jordan Bravato (center) joins his two friends together.

Courtesy of Jordan Bravato



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PANDEMIC DOESN'T STOP FAMILY REUNIONS

JESSE BERNSTEIN | JE STAFF

They came from Russia and the state of Georgia, New York and Israel. From France and New Jersey they arrived, ready to gab. And in Northeast Philadelphia, Jeanne Kolodner got to see all 100 or so of their faces: the extended Aronow/Patkin family, spread across the world, together again for a reunion.

This time, though, it was via Zoom.

Kolodner's family typically hosts an in-person reunion every four years, gathering near the ancestral homeland of Camden, New Jersey, for feasts, music and commemorative ceremonies. The 2012 reunion was able to proceed in spite of the aftereffects of Hurricane Sandy, and the 2016 iteration went well, too.

But 2020 was deemed too risky for an in-person reunion so, rather than wait for a safe time to meet in person again, the family decided to create a Zoom reunion, complete with breakout rooms for specific ages and interests, a slideshow memorializing lost family members, two sign language interpreters and a party DJ to keep things moving.

It was hard to replicate the feeling of an in-person reunion, and to have a conversation with just one person was impossible. But for Kolodner, the chance to hold *some* version of the reunion was well worth the headaches.



▲ Cheryl Friedenberg (highlighted in yellow) has held Zoom calls with her mother (top left) and siblings (top middle, top right and middle right) five nights per week since the pandemic began.

Photo by Cheryl Friedenberg



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“Altogether, it came out very good, I think,” she said.

Kolodner’s family is hardly the only one to make use of Zoom and other videoconferencing platforms in the last year for a family reunion. Though family reunions aren’t typically perceived as particularly “Jewish” — that’s what Passover and the High Holidays are for — many have taken the isolation of the pandemic as a chance to connect, or reconnect.

Some reunions, like Kolodner’s, are new twists on old traditions, but other families, like that of Chani Baram, took the chance to start new ones.

Baram, who lives with her family in South Philadelphia, said that her extended family hadn’t gotten together since the early ’80s, when earlier generations remained in a tight circle. Since then, as branches grew and new ones were added, such reunions became a distant memory. For a long time, the idea of another reunion wasn’t just geographically impractical, but emotionally fraught.

“People don’t feel as connected to each other,” Baram said. “That’s the truth.”

After the pandemic began, a couple of cousins decided to try and make something of everyone’s newfound downtime and computer literacy, collecting emails and gauging interest for a Zoom-based reunion. In the end, more than 200 people convened in several different time slots on a Sunday in December.



▲ A screenshot from a slideshow displayed during the Aronow and Patkin family reunion shows some Philadelphia ancestors.

Courtesy of Kerith Aronow

Though such conditions precluded intimate conversation — there was the size of the group, plus the fact that many were distant strangers to Baram and her family — Baram was pleased the event was organized. Only in the pandemic, she believes, would it have ever happened.

“It was really cool,” Baram said.

Betty-Ann Izenman of Wynnewood hasn’t been able to bring her family together for a reunion in more than a decade. That’ll happen when your family, once concentrated in Canada, is now spread between Australia, England, the U.S. and the Great White North.

And yet, in 2019, a reunion was planned, with a city (Boston) and a date (April 2020), ready to rock and roll. That original date became an early casualty of the pandemic, and so, too, did a hopefully conceived fall 2020 makeup. “And then it got canceled entirely,” Izenman recalled. “And I said, ‘Well, that’s ridiculous. Why don’t we just get together on Zoom?’”

That’s exactly what Izenman and 16 family member did last summer, with the Australians rising early, the Brits staying up late

See Reunions, Page 12

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Reunions

Continued from Page 11

and the North American contingent enjoying a daytime Zoom.

Though Izenman admitted that any Zoom call with more than eight or so participants gets dicey for conversation, she saw the reunion itself as a special time for her family.

“It is the one silver lining to the pandemic,” she said, “that people are getting so much more comfortable with technology, and remembering and thinking about getting together with faraway family.”

Cheryl Friedenberg and her mother, Naomi Block Rafaeli, don’t live too far from one another; Friedenberg is in Blue Bell, and Block Rafaeli is at Rydal Park, a senior living community in Jenkintown. But Friedenberg’s three other siblings, Toby, Gary and Deena, are spread across the country, and the onset of the pandemic made it clear that they wouldn’t be seeing each other any time soon, to say nothing of their mother.

That first week, Friedenberg and her siblings organized a Zoom call with their mother and her husband Peter Rafaeli.

“We thought it was a great way to connect with one another, and obviously, give something

for my mom to do every day,” Friedenberg said.

That first night was a simple chat. Since then, the family has hopped on nightly Zoom calls five times per week. Each of the siblings bring in surprise guests from childhood or other long-lost social circles as frequently as they can. One guest, the daughter of Block Rafaeli’s deceased friend, was a special treat.

They’ve played trivia games based on their lives together, talked about politics and then decided to no longer talk about politics — “it got a little out of hand,” Block Rafaeli said. They’ve brought their children onto the call, some of them college students who tell the rest of their family about their unique pandemic experiences. It’s been the site of holidays and birthdays.

Friedenberg and Block Rafaeli both said that they would have never gotten to know the rest of their family as well as they do now if not for their nightly Zoom calls.

“You get to know a little bit more about the people that you grew up with, which is really special to me,” Friedenberg said. ❤️

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