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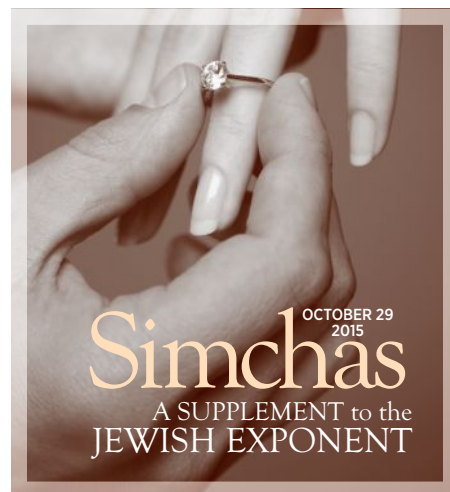
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# Make Mitzvah Projects

## More Meaningful by Selecting Jewish Recipients

BY RABBI JEFFREY K. SALKIN

“HEY, RABBI,” THE BAT MITZVAH candidate said, “can I tell you about my mitzvah project? I’m raising money to help people join our synagogue if they can’t afford it.”

I was impressed. And moved. And shocked.

Why shocked?

Many religious schools require that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates do a mitzvah project. Once upon a time, those projects were all Jewish in nature. Families would plant trees in Israel in honor of their guests or display material from local Jewish organizations on the tables at the celebration. Kids would donate some of their gift money to local Jewish federations.

For a while, Bar and Bat Mitzvah candidates would symbolically share their ceremonies with Soviet Jewish refuseniks who were forbidden from studying Judaism.

But such specifically Jewish projects have gone the way of the VHS tape and the pet rock — hopelessly passé.

Over the last decade, mitzvah projects have become decreasingly Jewish in their focus and intent. Mitzvah projects are far more likely to be focused on healing disease, or addressing environmental concerns, or raising money for disadvantaged kids.

In fact, my young friend’s idea to help subsidize synagogue dues for the less fortunate was the only specifically Jewish mitzvah project I had seen in years.

I am all in favor of kids wanting to give to the wider community. Most adults and teachers would probably agree with me: Any kind of altruism — anything that carries kids out of their iPhone, selfie-addled worlds — is good. But the flight from specifically Jewish concerns has its own set of worrisome implications.

First, it accompanies a gradual diminishment in Jewish ethnic feeling and connection — a diminishment that is part of larger trends within the American Jewish community.

When I have mentioned the importance of particularistic Jewish giving to parents, I get deer-in-headlights stares, as if parents find the very idea of giving to Jewish causes to be an embarrassment — too Jewish, too tribal. It is as if I am speaking a foreign language, which, in fact, I am: a language of Jewish peoplehood.

Second, I find myself reminding Jewish parents of the deeper ramifications of their kids’ choices. Here is what I say:

I know that your kids are going to want to give to various universal, communal and non-Jewish charities. We want to be helpful and to make a difference. That is what being Jewish is all about.

But here’s the deal. If your child doesn’t give to the United Way, some-



One way to make sure your mitzvah project is *en pointe*: Have it benefit the Israel Ballet.

one else will step up to that worthy plate. The same is true with the local museum and symphony orchestra.

But if we don’t teach our kids how to give Jewishly, they will never learn. No one else will step up for them and those Jewish causes will go unsupported. Eventually, they will die.

If even one generation of Jewish kids fails to learn how to support the Jewish community, the Jewish people and Israel, Jewish giving will be over. Because Jewish giving, like any kind of moral engagement, is a muscle. If you don’t develop the muscle, it atrophies.

So what can Jewish parents do to make sure they are keeping the chain of Jewish giving intact?

First, teach your kids about local Jewish needs, causes and organizations. Talk to them about the work of federations, community centers, Jewish family and career services. Take them to see what those organizations are really doing. Talk to them

about projects in Israel. Teach them about what Jewish organizations are doing all over the world. Make it real for them.

Second, link your child’s interests to Jewish causes.

Your kid likes baseball? There’s **JChoice.org**, a group that provides baseball equipment and supplies to kids in low-income areas.

Dance? Give to The Israel Ballet.

Horses? Try the Israel National Therapeutic Riding Association, which uses horseback riding to help people coping with disability or injury.

There are other opportunities like these, many of them contained in *The Mitzvah Project Book*, by Liz Suneby and Diane Heiman. (Full disclosure: I wrote the foreword.)

Third, if you cannot find anything Jewish that interests your child, convert your child’s interest to a Jewish value. Give that value a Hebrew name.

Your child wants to raise money for a specific disease? Fine. Welcome to the world of *refuah* — “healing.”

Your child wants people to donate to help flood victims? Great. It’s called *tikkun olam* — “repairing the world.”

Your kid cares about animal welfare? Fantastic. Thanks for supporting *tzaar baalei chayim* — avoiding cruelty to animals.”

Sure, *tikkun olam* is great. But *tikkun ha’am* — “repairing the Jewish people” — is just as important. We do that when we connect our values to our people and to our sense of what we believe. ●

---

Jeffrey K. Salkin is the rabbi of Temple Solel in Hollywood, Fla., and the author of *Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah*. This article first appeared on JTA.org.



# Putting the Mitzvah in Bar Mitzvah

BY JUDY LASH BALINT  
JNS.ORG



Rabbi Chanoch Yeres, director of the Deaf Programming Division of International Young Israel Movement (IYIM), leads a 2013 Bar Mitzvah for 63 deaf and hard of hearing children.

Judy Lash Balint

IT'S 9:30 A.M. ON A SUNNY MONDAY morning in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. Two large groups of revelers almost collide in the alley leading to the main square.

Both groups are accompanied by a clarinetist and a drummer belting out traditional "simcha" tunes. In the middle of each gathering is a 13-year-old boy dancing with beaming grandmas and uncles under small chupot as they make their way under the stone arches from the Western Wall.

It's the Israeli version of the Bar Mitzvah extravaganza, and it's repeated every Monday and Thursday (days when the Torah is read) throughout the year. Boys from all over the country get called up to the Torah for the first time at the Kotel, and then get danced up the steps to the Jewish Quarter and on to a lavish breakfast spread at one of the many restaurants or halls dotting the area.

But not every Bar or Bat Mitzvah-age teen in Israel is fortunate enough to have that kind of experience. For the tens of thousands of youths from dysfunctional families who are cared for in residential facilities all over the Jewish state, it's often Diaspora Jews who make the difference between having no Bar/Bat Mitzvah at all, or having a meaningful transition into Jewish responsibility.

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Zemira Ozarowski, coordinator of donor relations for AMIT, a network of educational programs that serves 28,000 Israeli children, is responsible for the twinning program that encourages American Bar and Bat Mitzvah kids to share their celebration with needy Israeli kids.

Some of the Americans come over with their families to take part in the simcha they have sponsored, Ozarowski explains, while others conduct fundraising projects at home and send over funds to help support AMIT's efforts to inject joy into the lives of Israeli kids from difficult backgrounds. Part of the donation is designated for the Israeli "twin" to receive a traditional gift of a siddur or tefillin.

Some lasting relationships have been forged, Ozarowski notes, and the program was recently expanded to include twinning between Israeli pre-teens from established Jerusalem neighborhoods and kids in AMIT's Beit Haeled facility in Gilo.

In Netanya, the Beit Elazraki Children's Home run by Emunah, a prominent religious Israeli women's movement with worldwide supporters, hosts many Bar and Bat Mitzvah twinning events. American B'nai Mitzvot and their families have sponsored several major projects at the home, which houses almost 300 children whose families cannot care for them.

Back in 2011, a group of budding musicians from Teaneck, N.J., raised more than \$20,000 as their communal mitzvah project, which funded new equipment for the music therapy program at Beit Elazraki. Several times a year, American and British B'nai Mitzvot join their peers at Beit Elazraki for a lively party that always features loud music and a festive meal.

A popular B'nai Mitzvah activity for institutional groups as well as individual families is a visit to the Yad Lashiron Latrun Tank Museum a few miles west of Jerusalem. Elisha Kramer, a U.S.-born graduate student, spent part of his army service as a tour guide at the museum.

"Some weeks there would be two or three Bar Mitzvah groups every day," Kramer recalls.

"It's a great place for kids to learn about the need for a strong Israel and the legitimacy of fighting for Israel," Kramer says of the outdoor museum where more than 150 armored vehicles are on display, along with a moving memorial complex dedicated to fallen Israeli soldiers.

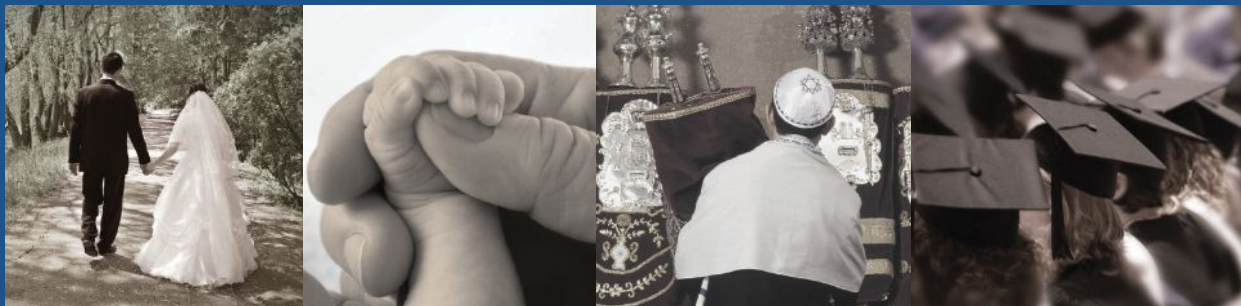
Many B'nai Mitzvot want to take an active role in their celebration, and Jerusalem Scavenger Hunts provides creative opportunities for learning and fun in and around Jerusalem. Founder and director Tali Tarlow explains that Israeli kids can train to guide their friends and family on a fun-filled, educational, thematic navigation through the city as they engage with its history and figure out their place in its future. The program is tailored to the interests of each child, who works with one of the Scavenger Hunt professional guides and educators to develop a presentation at one of the stations used in the Hunt. "We believe a Bar or Bat Mitzvah should be a special occasion and an opportunity for a meaningful experience," says Tarlow, a longtime informal educator who made aliyah from South Africa.

Any family that's been part of the Package from Home Bar and Bat Mitzvah Project would agree with that sentiment. Started by American immigrant Barbara Silverman at the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000, the volunteer-run program prepares and sends tens of thousands of care packages to Israeli soldiers, focusing particularly on Lone Soldiers (soldiers without family in Israel) and wounded soldiers. Bar and Bat Mitzvah students in the U.S. can raise money for the project, and those visiting can take part in the packaging and distribution of everything from warm clothing to toiletries to snacks. Each package includes letters of appreciation for the soldiers, which kids are encouraged to write.

See Mitzvah, Page 8

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# Mitzvah

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A father helps his hard-of-hearing son put on tefillin for the first time at a Bar Mitzvah organized by the International Young Israel Movement and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Judy Lash Balint

For children with physical as well as emotional challenges, it takes a special effort to create a Bar or Bat Mitzvah program they can relate to. At a recent ceremony in a Jerusalem synagogue, 63 deaf and hard of hearing children were called to the Torah in front of parents who were visibly moved by the moment, which was sponsored by the International Young Israel Movement (IYIM) and its Deaf Programming Division in cooperation with the Jewish Agency. Boys with cochlear implants opened up the brand-new prayer shawls provided by the IYIM with a flourish, while groups of girls chattered in sign language and waited for their turn to recite a special blessing for becoming a Bat Mitzvah. Ben Zion Chen, the head of the Association for the Deaf in Israel, told the kids, "I grew up with hearing parents and didn't know what Torah was. You are all very fortunate."

"It's important that you know your rights and how to deal with your deafness as you grow up," Chen added, while a sign language interpreter translated his words to the attentive students.

"He didn't sleep all last night," said Orna regarding her son Shai, a profoundly deaf 13-year-old from Ramle. "He's gone through so many operations, and had so many difficulties in his short life — it's a joy to be here with him and see how happy he is," she exclaimed as Shai took his place under the prayer shawl spread over his group, while Rabbi Chanoch Yeres, director of the IYIM Deaf Programming Division, read the Torah portion. In true Israeli B'nai Mitzvah style, the kids and their families, who had come from all over Israel, were treated to a celebratory lunch and a tour of the Old City to mark the day. •

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# To DIY For:

## The Two Sides of Planning a Bar/Bat Mitzvah

MARISSA STERN  
JE STAFF



**THE AVERAGE BAR OR BAT MITZVAH** takes months to plan and can cost anywhere from \$15,000 to \$30,000 and, in many cases, even higher.

That cost covers everything from the DJ to the caterer to even the baskets filled with goodies in the ladies' bathroom (sorry, men).

And with the ubiquity of social media, the pressure to make an unforgettable party — at least by today's digital standards — can be intense.

Look up the hashtag #barmitzvah or #batmitzvah on Instagram and prepare to be astonished. Kids make separate accounts for their big bash, and Pinterest boards —

a space where users “pin” ideas under a specific category from other websites — abound with ideas to make the party pop that you can do yourself.

With all of those planning options available online, just how does social media affect the fairy godmothers of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah party: the planners?

New York-based company mazelmoments.com, whose website features ideas for planning Jewish events including Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, has 6,200 followers on Pinterest and more than 40 boards with ideas ranging

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Pamela Rosenthal created the centerpieces for the B'not Mitzvah of her twin girls, Remi and Julia.  
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# DIY

Continued from Page 9

from invitation ideas to decor and centerpieces. The Mitzvah Market, another New York company, offers a website chock-full of ideas from which you can draw inspiration for your own party.

With all these ideas floating in the virtual database, is the professional sphere of Bar/Bat Mitzvah planners being threatened?

Cigall Goldman, founder of mazelmoments.com, believes social media, the DIY enthusiasts and event planners can go hand-in-hand.

"It's funny because on the one hand, I think people like to do things themselves," she said. "But on the other hand, I think the popularity of Pinterest and social media is creating a lot of ideas for people and they're finding it might be a little much for them because there's so many ideas going around."

The plus side to these sites and the ability to easily find inspiration online is that they provide more ideas that people can relate to the event planners as they start the planning process.

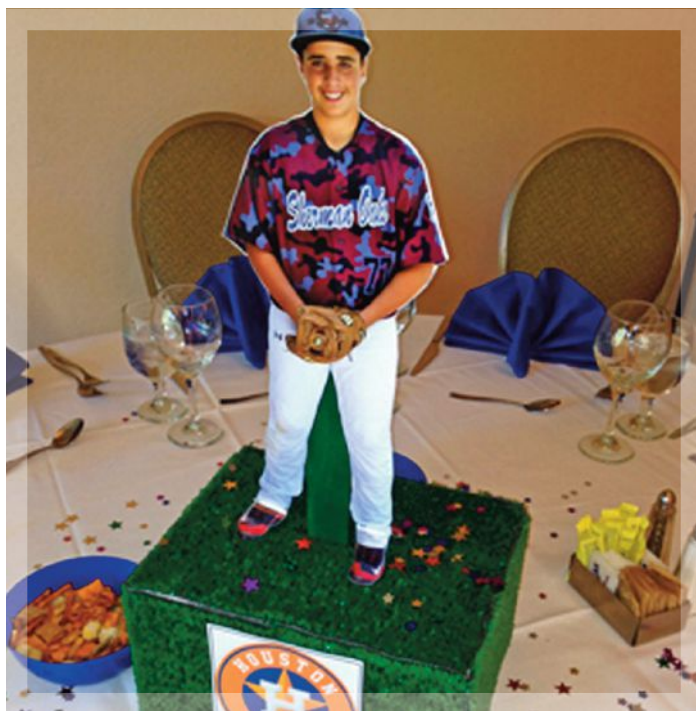
"For image-based industries like event planning, Pinterest is huge," Goldman said. "I think people turn to Pinterest because it's an easy way to get a lot of ideas really quickly. It's a great destination for getting a lot of ideas in a quick manner."

Stacey Kesselman is not a Pinterest user herself, but she does visit the site to promote the work of her company, Exceptional Events.

The idea of Pinterest is good, she said, but oftentimes, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah will come in with ideas they've seen on the site but she can't accommodate it, usually because of the venue size.

"It's challenging — and helpful," she said of the role social media has played in recent years.

"The helpful part is they bring colors and pictures of things they



A baseball-themed Bar Mitzvah centerpiece.  
Pinterest

like and don't like. The challenging part is that sometimes the venue doesn't have what the picture shows. They want what's in the picture. It can all be modified. It's not our goal to mimic Pinterest."

Kesselman has been in the event planning business for over 10 years.

Born and raised in Newtown Square, Kesselman first started in corporate event planning. When that market went south, she turned instead to party planning and reinvented herself in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service planning area.

Exceptional Events does everything from logos to favors with the help of Kesselman's "amazing" team.

For her, the business has remained something she truly enjoys doing despite changing times and tastes. She follows trends of her own, as well as whatever trends crop up as specific themes like "luau" or "beach" themes become less popular.

Right now, the more popular themes aren't themes at all but, rather, "feels."

A color might be a theme, or a certain feel might be the theme, like a modern feel, she said.

She meets with families about six months prior to the big day and follows up with meetings intermittently leading up to it to make sure everything is still what the family wants.

"I love seeing everything we've worked on come together. The months of planning and prep and meetings — on that day, when everything gets put together, it's awesome," she said.

The work she does is the reason she believes the do-it-yourself movement won't get too far in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah realm.

"I don't see it as a trend," she said. "People have high hopes to do it but as they get into the thick of it, there's so much involved with it — that's why they need a planner."

While she uses social media to promote her business and show pictures from parties her company has done, she doesn't see it as the main competition but rather as an extra bit of help.

"I feel like it's very helpful to prospective clients because I feel like social media is a showcase for your work and for busy people



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they can look on Facebook and see recent posts and recent parties and see if that's the feel they want for their party," she said.

On the other side of the decorating spectrum, Pamela Rosenthal used social media to look for ideas for her twin daughters Remi and Julia's B'not Mitzvah on Oct. 17. (*For more about the twins, see p. 16.*)

However, Rosenthal decided to do everything herself as far as decor, just as she had with her older daughter, Abby, two years ago.

When she and her husband, Steve, picked the date, the coordinator at their synagogue, Tiferet Bet Israel in Blue Bell, asked who their decorator would be. Rosenthal answered, "That would be me," she recalled with a laugh.

Rosenthal decided on thematic decorations for both the service — and the following luncheon — and the party.

As they are twins, Rosenthal specifically wanted Julia and Remi's parshah to be from the story of Noah, to go with the "two by two" motif. For the service, mitzvah baskets with doves will be set up on the bimah and during a luncheon following the service, there will be balloons of all colors of the rainbow as well as more doves.

The decision to do the centerpieces and decor for the party Saturday night following the rest of the big day was in large part a financial reason, but it also gave Rosenthal the chance to contribute more directly to her daughters' day.

"It's definitely easier to hire people, no question. But it has to be the right decision for each person," she said. "My husband says, 'Why put yourself through this?' If I can save the money, I will."

Doing this part of the planning became a way for her to "mirror all the effort they put into it," she said, citing all the work the girls have put in studying their Torah portions and preparing for their

big day. "I thought I should do that as well."

Julia and Remi have both offered to help, however, which Rosenthal appreciated, as it served as a lesson for them.

"It feels good, too, to see that I've contributed the time, not just the dollars," she said. "It's a lesson I want my girls to learn."

Rosenthal looked online and did simple Google searches to get ideas to go along with the girls' music theme. While she didn't specifically focus on sites geared for DIY projects such as Pinterest, she did find ideas for cardholders online. Otherwise, she had her own ideas to make the party unique — and these ideas required hot glue guns.

She found time whenever she could to work on the centerpieces and boxes that fit the theme and also featured the girls' names as a keepsake for after the party is over.

"It does bring some pressure because I'm not counting on anybody else to get it done," she said, "I have to divide my time very carefully."

She bought everything from local stores, like A.C. Moore and Michael's craft stores, and the flowers were from a local florist.

In the end, choosing to decorate is a personal decision. Rosenthal has always loved crafting and finds it relaxing. That may not be the case for everyone.

"When they're all finished, I will be feeling on top of the world," she said, laughing. "I really enjoy the process and sitting there and tinkering with them."

DIY parties are successful depending on the person, said Sheri Lapidus, founder of the Mitzvah Market, an online resource for anyone planning a Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

"Either you're a DIY person or you're not," she said.

She wouldn't call "DIY" a trend because it really isn't, she said.

See DIY, Page 14



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## DIY

Continued from Page 11

Party planners still have their benefits.

"I think there's definitely a place for party planners — they're a huge help because it's a very overwhelming task," she said.

Lapidus said a big attribute of her website is the chance for moms to connect while they are planning their children's Bar or Bat Mitzvahs. She has heard stories, or "mom's finds," of smaller DIY projects for the parties that people have done.

For instance, one Bat Mitzvah was fashion-themed. The mother of the Bat Mitzvah bought a chair from Ikea that was then decorated with the Bat Mitzvah's name and date of the affair and used as the sign-in chair at the party as well as the "Hora Chair." Today — in its fully decorated state — it serves as the desk chair for her daughter.

Pamela Rosenthal, however, maintains that no matter how the Bar/Bat Mitzvah gets done whether through a planner or on your own, the day should be more than the party, which is where most of the focus lies.

She hopes that the work Julia and Remi have put into preparing for their big day remains in their heads, not just the celebration.

"I want them to remember not so much the party," she said, "but the whole experience." •

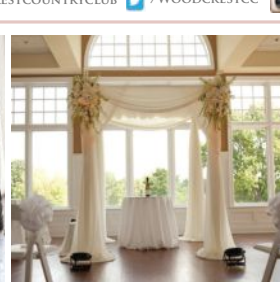


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# For These Twin Sisters, Making a Difference Through Mitzvah Projects Is in Their Blood

RACHEL KURLAND  
JE STAFF



Remi (left) and Julia Rosenthal  
recently celebrated their B'not Mitzvah.  
Rachel Kurland

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**FROM THE OUTSIDE, TWIN SISTERS REMI AND JULIA Rosenthal are just like any other 12-year-old girls.**

They like to play piano. They read Harry Potter, Percy Jackson and John Green novels. They vent to each other. They like riding bikes, but not since Remi accidentally fell off one and broke her arm.

From the outside, you would never know that Julia is a cancer survivor.

Julia was diagnosed with Wilms' tumor at about 20 months old. She received five blood transfusions in four days, among a long list of other treatments. The diagnosis and medical care was swift but successful.

Now cancer-free, Julia, along with Remi, decided to give back to those who saved her life.

For their B'not Mitzvah project, the twins hosted a blood drive at their congregation, Tiferet Bet Israel, in Blue Bell.

After five hours, 45 pints of blood were collected, according to Beth Toll, external communications manager for the American Red Cross Penn-Jersey Blood Service Region.

In just one pint of donated blood are four types of transfusable products: red cells, platelets, plasma and cryoprecipitate. Usually two or three of these are produced from that single pint, so each donation can help save up to three lives, according to the American Red Cross.

Their parshah is the story of Noah and the animals that marched two by two. Likewise, the sisters have spent their lives side-by-side.

The 12-year-olds celebrated their B'not Mitzvah on Oct. 17. They said they were looking forward to becoming Jewish adults so they can make their own decisions, connect more to Judaism and do more for the community.

They were also looking forward to their music-themed post-Haftarah-reading party. Rather than the traditional giveaway gift



of a sweatshirt, they upgraded to a long-sleeve T-shirt, which was a pretty big deal.

But their B'nai Mitzvah is more than just a party, and they recognize that, especially through their mitzvah project.

While planning the blood drive, Julia thought of the kids and adults out there like her and how the blood donations saved her life.

"We thought it was a really nice way to give back to the people that helped by helping other people who needed those transfusions," Remi said. "Julia's my twin sister and she means so much to me since I've been with her my entire life. It's really nice that I'm potentially helping other people who were in the same situation I was in, to have a family member survive bad diseases and not have to face tragedy."

"It's really sweet that I don't know who these people are but I'm still saving their life with the blood."

Julia remembers the physical therapy, but not much else. Remi recalls three stuffed animals their grandmother gave them: a whale, dolphin and seal. It might not seem like much, but she said it represented something that could have been very bad but turned out very good.



She still has the dolphin.

The twins don't remember much about Julia's illness, but their parents, Pamela and Steve, certainly do.

Pamela recalled how quickly things turned.

During the summer, Julia was experiencing fevers, loss of appetite and lack of sleep. They brought her to doctors, but one night while the family was staying at Steve's parents' house down the shore, they took the 18-month-old to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

"We went to CHOP one night — and never went home for 10 days," Pamela said.

After X-rays, a lot of questions and spending the night in triage, an oncologist told them the news at 3:30 a.m.

"You never see yourself in that position," she said. "It hit fast and heavy; you regroup because you have to."

Julia started chemotherapy the next day and received those five blood transfusions over the course of four days. It was an immediate, heavy-duty medical intervention for stage three Wilms' tumor.

The tumor essentially destroyed her right kidney. Wilms' tumor

See Twins, Page 18



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## Twins

Continued from Page 17

is very rare — there are only about 500 cases of it in the United States each year — but it is a highly curable form of the disease.

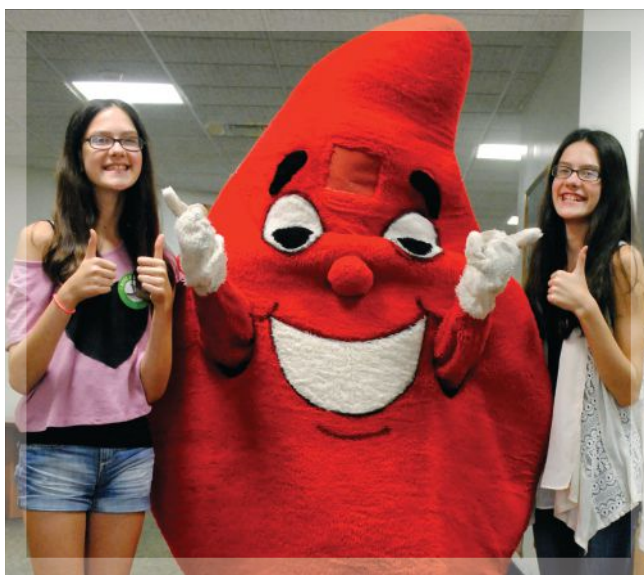
Julia's tumor was removed two months later. She remained on a feeding tube for eight months. She received chemotherapy for a total of six months, followed by occupational and physical therapy.

"They're identical twins, but for a long time you could tell who was who because of the illness and the lack of hair. Then one day somebody said to me, 'Which one's which?' and it was like this monumental realization that it didn't show anymore," Pamela said.

Fortunately, neither Julia nor Remi have had any serious medical issues since, though Remi's broken arm from a biking accident is debatable, in her opinion. Aside from annual checkups, Julia just has to drink more water and wear a kidney guard when she plays sports.

Pamela suggested a blood drive to the twins, and they were instantly excited with the idea because they know what it did for Julia.

She said she's proud of her daughters, as any mother would be.



Remi (left) and Julia are all smiles after their successful blood drive at Tiferet Bet Israel.

Rachel Kurland

"They took a unique mitzvah project on, and they were very receptive to it — I don't think I could have done this at that age."

Pamela said she never wanted the cancer to define Julia, but rather have her be able to look back and see how she endured something major.

"It's nice to know that you can overcome very challenging situations," she said. "She's a survivor."

Julia wasn't the only one affected by the cancer.

Her oncologist, Dr. Julie Stern, treated her right after she was diagnosed and has worked with her ever since. She will also be attending their B'not Mitzvah.

When Julia was doing therapy, Stern would see her and the family every week for several months. But now, only yearly check-ups are required.

Stern developed a bond with the Rosenthal family, as did many other staff members. She said they were easy to get to know and take care of, and a very warm and open family.

"There's certain kids you just really make a connection with, and the Rosentals are like that for me," she said. "I'm excited when I see her name on the patient roster for the day."

Because the twins were so young when Julia was sick, Stern said,

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“that’s sort of the blessing of treating kids that age. While it’s part of them, it doesn’t define them.”

Stern added that Wilms’ tumor is the most common type of kidney or renal tumor in children, even though there are only 500 cases of it in the United States each year, as compared to an estimated 2,670 children and 410 adolescents diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia last year, the most common type of childhood cancers, according to the American Cancer Society.

“We work so hard to get kids to this point, and it’s just nice to be able to be a part of that,” Stern said, choking up a little. “I just think it’s amazing to be invited and to be included in their celebration.”

She’s been to some patients’ weddings or been called when babies were born, but nothing compares to celebrating the twins’ B’not Mitzvah.

“For me, being Jewish and having a bond with them and knowing just how important B’not Mitzvot is, it’s just really, really touching for me to be involved with the family,” she said.

Strangers were just as impressed with the twins.

“We’re not those kind of twins who can’t stand each other, we’re basically best friends.”

REMI ROSENTHAL

Bernice Steinberg did not hesitate to donate blood when she heard about the drive. The 85-year-old is a seasoned donor, and has been giving blood for most of her life.

“I have it, I’m healthy and it’s going to help somebody,” she said.

She usually gives at the biannual blood drives at Tiferet Bet Israel, where she is a member, and was blown away when she heard about the sisters’ story.

“For two young kids to take that on and work hard, it means something to them and it’s their way of giving back too for what was down for them,” she said. “If you can help somebody, you help them.”

And helping others through their mitzvah project is certainly helping full circle.

The sisters grew up at Tiferet Bet Israel, attending pre-school and beyond.

“I’ve been here my whole life, so it’s really special that I’m becoming an adult finally after such a long time being here in this community, that’s what’s really important to me,” Remi said.

“I think TBI has a lot of meaning to us because so many special things have happened here for us,” Julia added.

The girls are more than twins; they are best friends. The two seventh-graders do just about everything together.

They watch *Once Upon a Time* and *America’s Next Top Model* with all the ladies in their family: their mother, older sister Abby and cats Bella and Tali. They share the same circle of friends. They have the same teachers at Wissahickon Middle School, though Remi prefers language arts and Julia likes math. They also share a bedroom.

“It’s nice that I don’t have to wait for school to see her,” Julia said.

“We’re not those kind of twins who can’t stand each other, we’re basically best friends,” Remi said. “I think it would be really hard if I didn’t have a twin sister because I’ve grown up my whole life with a twin, and I can’t imagine what it’s like not to have one.” •

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# 'Modest Mom' Makes Frum Au Courant

RACHEL KURLAND  
JE STAFF

**SOME THINGS NEVER GO OUT OF STYLE — THAT LITTLE black dress, leather jackets, Tiffany and Co. — and even modesty.**

Modesty has been around since the beginning of Jewish law. It may be difficult to adhere to in an era where the Kardashians reign, but one Philadelphia mom's style is becoming noteworthy.

Emunah Wirberg has developed a following for her fashion-forward posts as "modest mom" on Instagram. As the multitude of positive comments on her page indicate, her taste in covered-up garments show that it is possible to be both modest and fashionable.

Although it may be hard to believe based on her outfits, the 23-year-old mother of two wasn't always à la mode. She developed her sense of style after spending a year studying in Israel. Her parents weren't so strict when it came to a dress code, but her school and seminary were. At the seminary, the dress code mandated a button-down shirt of any kind and a pleated skirt.

She felt that the restrictions were somewhat forced upon her and had a negative connotation, but instead of being upset about the rules, she decided to stay positive and make her attire fashionable.

"We brought out our own sense of fashion with our accessories, like headbands, jewelry, bags, shoes," she said.

After Israel, Wirberg lived in Brooklyn for four years — a time



Emunah Wirberg's children frequently appear with her on her Instagram account, [the\\_modestmom](#).

Emunah's Instagram

and a place that had the most influence on her style.

Aside from a passion for fashion, Wirberg said having good style also makes a difference in how you present yourself. As a Jewish woman, she added, following the observant guidelines of modesty while also being fashionable is a beautiful form of expression.

"As an observant woman, all mitzvahs that we do are a way of connecting to God, so following the guidelines of modesty is one of them," she said.

Wirberg currently has more than 4,400 followers on her Instagram account [the\\_modestmom](#), which she started in March. She tags designers and stores in her pictures so her followers can see where she bought her clothes.

She eventually hopes to write more about her outfits and blog about where her inspiration comes from.

But for now, she does her best to be responsive to her followers, answer their questions and inspire them to see the beauty in modesty.

"For me, I just want to show people that you can be a mother and running around chasing two children and working and dress modestly but be fashionable," she said.

"I have Jewish followers, I have Christian followers, I have a lot of Muslim followers as well, or just people who appreciate dressing modestly," she added. "Every religion has their own certain set of guidelines of what they wear, but in general, if they are

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dressing modestly or into modesty, then I have a lot of followers of all different religions.”

At first, she was surprised to see that she had so many followers from different backgrounds.

“Why would they be interested in me?” she chuckled.

But she said you could use modesty to enhance your life rather than see it as a setback, from any point of view.

In the fashion world, she explained, designers like Dolce and Gabbana, Valentino and Christian Dior create outfits that happen to be modest as a way to be noticed.

“A lot of people do see the beauty in covering up a little. You don’t have to flaunt everything to get attention. You can have gorgeous designs that are just modest.”

In addition to those designer brands, Wirchberg gets a lot of her favorite pieces from H&M and Zara. She also shops at Jewish stores that feature Jewish designers who create chic, modest outfits for observant women, such as Mimu Maxi, Linear Collection and Project 6 NY.

Sometimes she has to add fabric to the skirts she buys from stores like H&M to make sure they cover her knees, or she wears a tank top under a shirt so it covers her collarbone, but these Jewish designers reduce the need for that. It’s easier and more worth her time to buy a dress that fulfills her modesty requirements.

She also follows other modest fashion bloggers for inspiration and admiration, like Fabologie or two of her friends, Aliza Scharf, who has almost 4,000 followers on Instagram, and Eliana Ladenheim from Eishes Styles.

“Being a modest fashion blogger, you have this little group of other modest fashion bloggers and modest designers who create these outfits, and it’s just very cool,” she said.

Wirchberg described her personal style as not necessarily all over the place, but “big.”

“I don’t really have a certain style. I like to have different looks,” she said, whether wearing a high-waisted flowy long skirt or rocking a leather jacket.



The streets — and bricks — of Philadelphia provide the backdrop for Wirchberg’s fashion chronicle.

Eemunah’s Instagram



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On top of being a mother, Wirchberg is the co-director of the Old City Jewish Art Center with her husband, Zalman. She also went to culinary school.

“All of the arts — in terms of the art gallery and being a chef and also being into fashion — for me, it’s all forms of expression. They all relate to each other tremendously,” she said.

When it comes to her fashion, Wirchberg does her best to be comfortable and stylish.

“I’m not the type of mom who walks around in heels. I understand the role as a mother and the fact that I’m running around doing things,” she said.

And even as a busy mother, Wirchberg said, putting together an outfit is usually not a big deal.

“Sometimes I think about what I’m going to wear, and other times I just throw something on,” she said. “I don’t think about it that much. I just take whatever’s in my closet.”

One of her favorite go-to pieces is a black frock from Mimu Maxi, a simple jersey-knit loose dress. She said she could dress it up or down, making it an easy and comfortable outfit. Matched with her favorite accessory, a chic hat, and she’s ready to go.

And 4-year-old Lezi and 1-year-old Roza aren’t left out when it comes to their mother’s fashions either.

“I actually enjoy shopping for my kids more than myself,” Wirchberg said. She likes having both a boy and girl to dress, and prefers dressing her daughter like a “little lady” instead of a baby.

Being the modest mom is definitely a family affair — the photographer behind her flawless photos is her husband, Zalman. But she emphasized that even though modest mom is a big part of her life, it usually only takes up about 15 minutes of her day as she passes by any interesting Philadelphia backdrop.

“I don’t just walk around with a photographer all day long. Usually, my pictures are taken as I’m putting my kids in the car before school,” she said.

Her son has gotten used to the routine, too. “A lot of times, if we’re not taking a picture and we’re going somewhere, he’ll be like, ‘Mom, let’s take a picture.’

“They’re my kids, I’m with them every day, so they’re such a big part of my life. I try to incorporate them into ‘modest mom’ also because it shows that you can be a mother of two and still walk around modest and dress with style.” ●

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# How a Wedding Is Just Like Yom Kippur, and Other Unexpected Rabbinical Views of Marriage

JASON COHEN  
JE STAFF

ONE OF THE MOST JOYOUS OCCASIONS IN A PERSON'S life is their wedding. While the extravagant ceremony with food, drinks and dancing is fun, it is really about the journey to marriage and starting a Jewish life as a married couple.

Rabbi Yochanon Goldman of Historic Congregation B'nai Abraham in Center City, Rabbi Eric Yanoff of Temple Adath Israel in Merion Station and Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, the executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association spoke to the *Jewish Exponent* about how marriage is similar to the High Holidays, what different customs there are at weddings and what it's like to get to know the bride and groom.

They all agreed: Getting ready for marriage is as important as the wedding. "The wedding gets a lot of attention," Goldman said. "Part of the reason why preparing for the wedding is so important is because

you want to start things on the right foot. Leading up to the wedding is the foundation for which we enable them to have solid beginning."

He explained that a wedding is linked to the High Holidays season. God is considered the groom, the Jewish people the bride and people are courting God throughout the month of Elul. Then on Rosh Hashanah, God proposes and the sounding of the shofar is the acceptance.

The wedding itself is the equivalent to Yom Kippur because it says in the Talmud that all sins are forgiven on the day of the wedding and the bride and groom fast on the day of the wedding as well.

"The wedding day is like a couple's personal Yom Kippur," Goldman said.

There are several customs at a wedding. In addition to being required to have the chupah outside, it also represents a Jewish home.

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“By standing under a Jewish home, we elicit God’s blessings for a new couple and life together,” Goldman said.

There are the legal obligations of writing and signing the ketubah, reading the *sheva b’rachot* — the seven blessings — and exchanging the rings, but there is also the tradition of friends and families hosting parties for the bride and groom seven days after the wedding. This is similar to the holiday of Sukkot.

Many people believe the rings are a formality, but the groom must give a gift to the bride to show her his love — and it is crucial the correct rings are used, Goldman said. There is the tradition of breaking the glass, which signifies a bittersweet start to a new life. Some people even use the shattered glass to create a mezuzah case.

“Even at the height of our joy, we break the glass to remember that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and there’s still pain and suffering in the world,” Goldman said. “Every time you walk



into your home, you have a memory from your wedding.”

Yanoff, who is a Conservative rabbi, said he always tries to personalize each wedding and cater the customs to what the bride and groom want.

“There’s not one way of doing it [the wedding],” Yanoff said. As an example, he cited how, in an Orthodox wedding, the bride will circle the groom seven times, but now in a more egalitarian society, bride and the groom will often circle each other three times, concluding with one circle together.

“I do think the liturgy and traditions of the wedding are so beautiful,” Yanoff said.

All of the rabbis said getting to know the bride and the groom is a special experience. They learn about their history, how they met

See Wedding, Page 24

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## Wedding

Continued from Page 23

and what they want out of life. If they are Orthodox, the bride will also meet with a rebbetzin to help her prepare for the mikvah, which she goes to the night before the wedding for purification purposes.

Yanoff said he explains traditions to the couple and no matter how religious they are, “they should have ownership” of the customs they want to perform at the wedding. One he often suggests is having the parents wrap the bride and groom in a tallit, which represents unity.

Some unique customs that brides and grooms have explored include pouring sand into a container, which symbolizes their lives coming together. Another bride and groom made a wax drawing of each other and a third wedding involved a couple using spray paint.

“Each couple is unique and each couple can draw on the rituals that exist,” Yanoff said.

Wechterman, who also performs same-sex and interfaith marriages, said a wedding is a wedding regardless of the people involved. Like her fellow rabbis, she meets with couples several times and assists them on their journey to marriage.

“Practicing and preparing for a wedding are both helpful in guiding the conversation with what they want their marriage to look like,” she said. “Throughout the process, we design a ceremony that makes sense for that couple.”

She said in an interfaith marriage, she will use more English and the non-Jewish person might say a vow to the other person. Unlike Orthodox weddings, Wechterman said many couples have chosen to have seven friends or family members write the *sheva b'rachot*.

In addition to the bride and groom circling each other three times and once together, Wechterman often asks children related to the couple to participate.

“I find the circling tradition is a great way to include children,” she said.

Wechterman said she is always open to rituals from other cultures. When she did a wedding between a woman and an African-American man, they jumped over a broom because that was part of his family's heritage. Another wedding involved a person of Chinese descent, so they read Chinese blessings.

“In participating,” she explained, “I get invited into their intimate lives and their true feelings and help them articulate often what they feel and can't always articulate.” •

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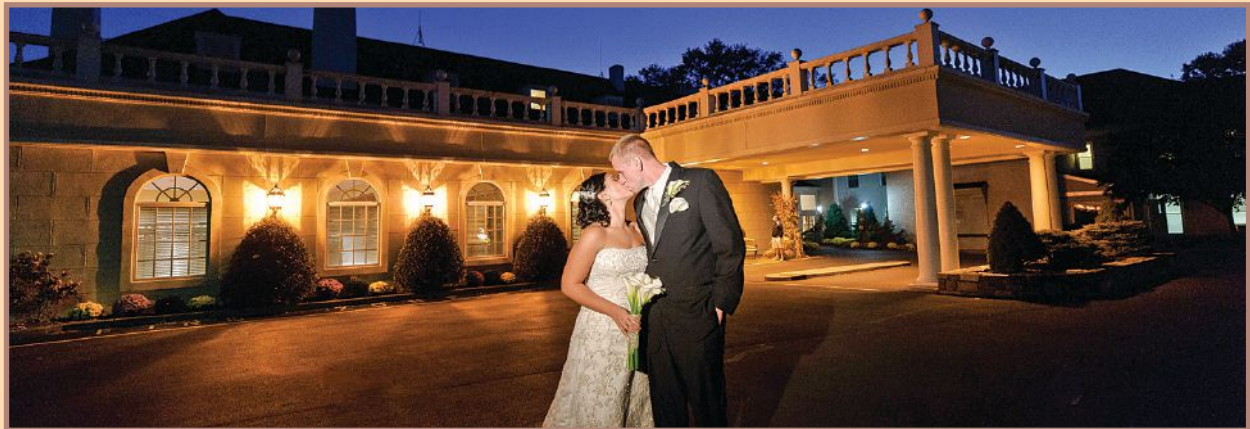
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