

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black sequined dress with a geometric pattern, is smiling and looking down. She is surrounded by gold confetti and gold balloons. The background is dark grey.

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# A Tale of Two Bark Mitzvahs

SELAH MAYA ZIGHELBOIM | JE STAFF



Mindy Fingerman  
with Sade at the Bark  
Mitzvah photo booth  
Photos courtesy of  
Mindy Fingerman

The invitations were sent. The table was set with “beagles” and lox. The cake, frosted with words that read “Muzzle Tov Sade,” was ready for feasting.

It was Sade’s Bark Mitzvah.

Matthew and Mindy Fingerman, a young couple living in Queen Village, decided to throw a Bark Mitzvah for their dog, Sade, a 2-year-old terrier mix, in January. About 25 of their friends and family had gathered at their home for the simcha.

Bark Mitzvahs aren’t a new concept. The first recorded Bark Mitzvah took place in Beverly Hills, Calif., in 1958. More than 100 guests came to the Bark Mitzvah of a cocker spaniel named Windy, who belonged to a former mayor and his wife, according to JTA.

The celebration has been duplicated numerous times over the past six decades. Bark Mitzvahs have drawn their share of criticism, but for those that who organized the celebrations, it’s a fun party that brings friends and family together.

“When it started for us, it was just going to be a get-together under disguise,” Matthew Fingerman said. “We had so much fun creating activities for the kids and incorporating different foods and different puns that it was just a really fun way to celebrate purely tradition with friends and family and incorporating nontraditional family members in that.”

For the Fingermans, the Bark Mitzvah was a way to celebrate their housewarming, welcome their new dog into their family and raise money for MatchDog Rescue, the shelter from which they had adopted Sade. It was also a way to share their pride in some staples of Jewish culture — things like bagels and lox and *Fiddler on the Roof* — with

Party favors at Sade’s Bark Mitzvah Photos courtesy of Mindy Fingerman



their friends, many of whom aren’t Jewish.

In reality, the Bark Mitzvah didn’t resemble much of a B’nai Mitzvah at all. There was no service and no rabbi. It was really just a party.

“My wife and I are pretty involved in the Jewish community here,” Matthew Fingerman said. “We wanted to do something fun and lighthearted and also that would just give back and also incorporate [Sade] in the middle of our Jewish community.”

The couple had recently adopted the dog. (They named her after the singer — pronounced Sha-day — whose music they danced to at their wedding.) The vet told them she was about 2 years old, which the couple figured put her right around Bark Mitzvah age in dog years.

“We had a little bit of a creative license in

all of that,” Matt Fingerman joked.

For the celebration, the Fingermans sent out elegant invitations they had created through Vistaprint, and Matt Fingerman set up a Spotify playlist filled with B’nai Mitzvah favorites, including Israeli pop music and *Fiddler on the Roof*. They also created a quiz where people could test how well they knew Sade, with questions about her fears (the dark), her favorite toy (a stuffed turkey) and where she is from (Texas).

Then, at the end of it all, their guests could take home a party favor — a small bag filled with dog-themed cookies.

Their guests loved it, Matt Fingerman said.

“It’s hilarious,” he said. “We’re in a house filled with Judaica from my family and [Mindy’s] family, and they know how much we take Judaism seriously in our home and how important it is.”

See **Bark**, Page 8



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**JEWISH EXPONENT**



Sam Horowitz  
with Lizzie  
Photo courtesy  
of Judy Horowitz

## Bark

Continued from Page 7

Several years before, Judy Horowitz held a Bark Mitzvah celebration for her grandson's cavachon, Lizzie.

It was her grandson's idea, Horowitz said. The grandson, Sam Horowitz, lives in North Carolina with his parents and attends Jordan Lake School of the Arts, a school geared for students with special needs. After having his own Bar Mitzvah in May of 2015 at Main Line Reform Temple — where Horowitz is a member — he wanted to have one for Lizzie, too.

Sam Horowitz is on the autism spectrum, and attended Sunday school for years through Matan, which helps Jewish communities make accommodations for children with special needs.

"It was very meaningful for him, that he went through all of that and became a Bar Mitzvah and became a man," said Dan Horowitz, Sam's father. "The way he was thinking about it was that we had had Lizzie as a puppy for a while and felt very strongly that she was a Jewish dog and that she should have a Bark Mitzvah."

Sam wanted all the family — and the family pets — to attend.

The family had never heard of a Bark Mitzvah before. They thought it was a concept Sam had invented.

"He wanted Lizzie to have the same kind of experience that he had," Dan Horowitz said. "Religion can sometimes be an abstract concept for a typical kid, but for someone on the autism spectrum, it's a lot to work through. Going to Sunday school for all those years helped him, but he was exploring, 'If I'm Jewish, who else is Jewish?'"

A year after Sam Horowitz's Bar Mitzvah, around Thanksgiving of 2016, the family gathered at Dan Horowitz's aunt's house, where her dogs could attend as well.

Lizzie wore a kippah and an Eagles scarf instead of a tallit around her shoulders, Sam led a few blessings, and Judy Horowitz shared a few words and created a program for the Bark Mitzvah.

"Lizzie, may you be blessed in the name of God who created you and may you and Sam and Teresa enjoy your wonderful life together," the program read. "Take care of each other. Amen."

It was a happy familiar affair, Judy Horowitz said, a chance for the relatives to come together. Most importantly, she said, Sam was happy with how it turned out.

Back in North Carolina, he even put on another Bark Mitzvah for someone else's dog.

"It was meaningful for my son," Dan Horowitz said. "That's why everybody was excited about it."

"I don't think it was super meaningful to the dog," he added. ♥

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# Ketubah Artists Continue a Centuries-Old Craft

JESSE BERNSTEIN | JE STAFF

The ketubah, the marriage contract for Jewish weddings outlining the responsibilities of the groom to the bride, has long been an outlet for artists who sought to do something special with a simple legal document.

In its collection from the famed Cairo Geniza, the University of Cambridge Digital Library holds numerous centuries-old ketubot drawn up with an eye toward beauty and display. Though handmade ketubot are becoming increasingly rare as the digital technology is more widespread, there are still ketubah artists who shepherd soon-to-be-married couples from visual concept to putting pen to parchment on their wedding days. Below, several local artists speak about their work, why they make ketubot and more.

## 'Wow, I Could Do That!'

Betsy Teutsch has been at this for so long, she now finds herself creating ketubot for the children of marriages she once served.

For Teutsch, a Fargo, North Dakota, native who moved to Philadelphia when her husband joined the faculty of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, working on ketubot is part of her greater interest in Jewish art — her work has been featured in Reconstructionist prayer books, among other venues.

Teutsch married her husband during her senior year at Brandeis, and though she had no formal artistic training, she'd always been drawn to calligraphy. At the time, there was renewed interest in ethnically focused art, and she felt that there was more exploration to be done for Jews. When it came time to pick a ketubah for her own wedding, she took matters into her own hands. "I thought, 'Wow, I could do that!'" she said. Friends and family remarked on the beauty of her finished product and, with that, her career as a ketubah artist was launched.

For decades, she's created original ketubot, alongside fill-in-the-blank templates. She estimates that she's made thousands of originals, and can't even make a guess at how many templates have sold over the years — they've been in Judaica stores, online and bricks-and-mortar, all over the country.

She used to work with families on announcements, invitations and diplomas, among other milestone documents, but that business was wiped out by new digital capabilities, something she was never interested in pursuing.

"I really came into this field through the love of calligraphy and Hebrew letters and the beauty of hand-done letters," she said.

Though she no longer works on ketubot full-time — she's now a writer, with a second book forthcoming — she's still approached from time to time by old clients, thanking her for her work. She was recently thanked by a woman who told her that the ketubah Teutsch made years before, now kept in her bedroom, helped to "frame gratitude for my day."

"That was remarkable," Teutsch said. "How often do you find out that you are really part of somebody's daily rituals?"



## 'Tradition Meets Contemporary'

Nava Shoham, an artist based in Montclair, New Jersey, came to ketubah-making in a different way. After moving to America from Israel in 1993, the artist had her eyes opened to the wide variety of Jewish denominations in this country, something she was unaware of before the move. She had made a few ketubot for her family back in Israel, but found a huge new customer base, with different tastes to adapt to. If the endless scroll of happy couples with her ketubot on hand on her website, 1800ketubah.com, is to be trusted, she cracked that nut a long time ago.

▲ Betsy Teutsch, Ketubah

Photo courtesy of Betsy Teutsch

See **Ketubah**, Page 10

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## Ketubah

Continued from Page 9



▲ Rachel Marks, Ketubah

Photo courtesy of Rachel Marks



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"It brings me joy, it really brings me joy," she said.

Shoham, who has spent time in the fashion world and in graphic design, makes both originals and templates, wildly colorful across each and every one she produces. Her work is "tradition meets contemporary," in her words, and over the years she's kept her designs fresh by experimenting as much as she can.

Like Teutsch, she takes great pride in the relationships she develops with the couples she works for.

The ketubah, she says, is "an heirloom, it's something that they cherish for many years." At this point in her career, she's sometimes contracted to make baby-naming designs for couples she met before they were married.

"I'm part of people's lives, part of people's celebrations," she said.

### Tallulah Ketubah

Rachel Marks, a Philadelphia-area native now based in Mt. Airy, was finding it terribly difficult to pick a ketubah when she and her husband were married in 2009.

"I could really find anything at the time that I really liked," she recalled.

So what's an art school graduate to do? She made her own ketubah, and then continued to the same for others.

Marks has made a career of making her own meaning, in a way. Describing she and her husband as "lapsed" Conservative Jews, she said that one of the main drivers behind her desire to make her own ketubah was to find something specifically meaningful to them; now, she does the same for the couples that she works with.

The name of her store, Tallulah Ketubah, is a reference to both the Irish name "Tallulah" and the Native American word pronounced in the same way, meaning "leaping water." The name, Marks said, signals that her store is not just for traditionally

religious Jews, but for same-gender and intermarried couples as well. She enjoys the artistic challenge of joining different languages and cultural traditions.

After moving back to Philadelphia from Baltimore in 2013, Marks had her first daughter, and decided that while she was home, she'd begin to create ketubot, both individualized for couples and as templates.

"It's been great," she said. "I feel like it has enabled me to continue painting, to actually be a paid working artist, which is every artist's goal. And the custom work especially is very collaborative, and so I get to know the couples that I'm working with."

And like Shoham and Teutsch, she's beginning to see the ensuing life-cycle events that come after marriage for the couples she's worked with, and she treasures her role in that.

"It's so nice to see that I had some small part in the beginning of their married life together," she said. ♥

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► Nava Shoham, Ketubah  
Photo courtesy of Nava Shoham



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# Unaffiliated Jews Get Creative for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs

HILARY DANAILOVA | JE FEATURE

There was no question that the Danskys of Livingston, New Jersey, were going to have their children Bar and Bat Mitzvahed. There was also no question of joining a synagogue to do so. “We’re not that religious,” explained Tracy Dansky, a mother of three, but her husband, also Jewish, felt the rite of passage was important. So they did what a lot of their neighbors were doing: Hired a rabbi, had their daughters tutored in Hebrew, and booked a private room for a joint ceremony at Lucky Strike, the Times Square bowling alley and event venue.

A few years later, with her youngest, Max, approaching Bar Mitzvah age, Dansky took it up a notch. She hired Ellen Paderon, a Bourne, Massachusetts, specialist in destination events, to arrange a beachside Bar Mitzvah for Max at an all-inclusive resort near Cancún, Mexico.

“It was a really great time,” said Dansky of the March 2018 event. Thirty-five friends and relatives joined for a five-day getaway that included a golf outing, a sunset catamaran cruise and Max’s ceremony, officiated by a retired American rabbi.

Despite all this, “it cost less than doing a fancy party like people do here” in New Jersey, Dansky noted. “It was a more economical choice, and it lasted longer.”

The Danskys are part of a growing trend: B’nai Mitzvahs that take place outside the traditional framework of synagogue and Hebrew school. As the number of unaffiliated American Jews grows, more families are taking a DIY approach to the milestone that remains a touchstone of Jewish identity.

Rabbi Gidon Isaacs, the assistant rabbi at Temple Emanuel of Cherry Hill, New Jersey, calls the shift generational. More than their elders, younger Americans “are not joiners,” observed the rabbi, a former education director who has devoted his career to making religious school more engaging. “They weren’t raised with membership, generally speaking, as a value.”

The opt-out mitzvah can take many forms. Most families hire a rabbi or cantor for private or small-group tutoring, and to officiate. Six months to a year of weekly sessions is typical — though some children study for years, approximating the depth and breadth of Hebrew school. Venues are the same as for weddings: golf clubs, banquet halls, destination resorts and even private homes.

“People are getting more and more into doing it outside of a temple,” said Paderon, whose B’nai Mitzvah business has exploded in the past 15 years. Like others who cater to DIY families, Paderon handles everyone from nontraditional and interfaith families to special-needs children who aren’t comfortable in Hebrew school to “Jewish-Jewish” families like the Danskys, who just aren’t temple types.

All-inclusive Mexican resorts, cruises and Italy are the favored destinations; Paderon works with a network of local officiants, as well as a cantor who tutors via Skype and flies where needed. The average family spends \$3,000-5,000 on the event, with an

additional \$2,000-3,000 for the preparation and clergy.

That cost, even for a destination affair, is typically far less than families would pay for years of synagogue dues and Hebrew school. But money is hardly the prime motivator for most DIY families.

More commonly, it’s the collision of twice-a-week Hebrew or Sunday school with soccer practice, swim meets, youth orchestra, chess club and the myriad other obligations of today’s hyperscheduled tween. Boredom with Hebrew school, and lack of connection to synagogue or organized religion, are other commonly cited factors.

Missy Gerber, a stay-at-home mother of three boys in Morristown, New Jersey, sent her kids through temple preschool and several years of Sunday school. “They hated it,” she said. “It was four hours on a Sunday ... They only have two days off from school, and one of them, they’re back in the classroom. And it’s boring.”

Then there was the tug of sports and other extracurriculars which, besides being fun, was where all their friends were. The Gerber boys “kept missing things,” their mom recalled.

Yet once Danny, the oldest, hit middle school, “I thought:

I have to figure out what to do, because I still want him to have a Bar Mitzvah.” Gerber hired Cantor Scott Borsky, a Cherry Hill officiant, to tutor Danny weekly for a year before his 2016 Bar Mitzvah at the Laurel Creek Country Club; she did the same for her middle son, Jack, who had a backyard ceremony last year.

Many families, including the Gerbers, appreciate the smaller audience of a private event.

“If you have a normal synagogue Bar Mitzvah, there are hundreds of people in attendance, and that’s a lot of eyes on you, especially if you’re not super confident,” explained Missy Gerber. Her sons’ affairs were fairly typical of DIY mitzvahs, with around 35 guests.

“It was a great experience, having all my family there,” said Danny, who is turning 16. “And I felt I learned a lot.”

Learning is perhaps the most contentious variable of a DIY event; in the absence of a formal Hebrew school curriculum, it’s up to the family and the officiant to decide what Jewish education means. The private route is typically more abbreviated — but it’s also more personalized, potentially resulting in a more enduring personal connection to Judaism.

Many are troubled by a trend that chips away at the traditional fabric of Jewish communal life, removing families from the congregations where milestones have traditionally been celebrated.

But Rabbi Julie Greenberg, who has shepherded kids through an alternative B’nai Mitzvah program for 25 years, noted that today’s Jewish communities can simply look different.

“One goal I have is to help kids become part of a community, not just individual Jews going through an experience,” said Greenberg, the longtime rabbi at Congregation Levv Ha-Ir—Heart of the City in Philadelphia. “Americans are geared to find individual solutions.”



▲ Danny Gerber

Photo courtesy of Gerber family

Greenberg's solution is to create a cohort of independent learners. At any given time, five to 15 youngsters attend a Sunday afternoon school at her Mt. Airy home that accommodates varying interests and preferences. Hebrew is optional; a Bat Mitzvah could as easily be a traditional Shabbat meal as a religious ceremony.

"A Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a rite of passage that celebrates growing up in a Jewish idiom," Greenberg explained. Many of her families aren't interested in religious Judaism, "which is still the focus of most synagogues," she added. "But they want Jewish literature, Jewish values, Jewish ideas, Jewish culture. My goal is they can step into a Jewish experience anywhere and feel some familiarity."

Borsky makes an individualized prayer book for each student, incorporating chosen readings. He also guides each child through the personal mitzvah project that's become a Hebrew-school staple.

"It's not just about learning the Shema, the Mi Chamocha," he emphasized. "It's about becoming a son or daughter of the commandments."

This year, Borsky will officiate at his 2,100th DIY mitzvah. He left his temple job nearly a decade ago, following a crowd of overscheduled congregants out of the pews — and into the community, where he leads informal Shabbat and holiday gatherings with his organization, Synagogue Without Walls. Flexibility is his calling card: The cantor will tutor for an hour or half-hour, in person or over Skype, in between baby namings and hospital visits (he is also a chaplain).

Missy Gerber, for one, is a satisfied customer.

"Cantor Scott really taught about the religion, which is what I wanted," she said. "It wasn't just like, 'Here, memorize this thing that has no meaning to you.'" More than Hebrew school could have, Gerber added, the DIY approach "really helped my sons get in touch with their Judaism." ♥

Hilary Danailova is a freelance writer.

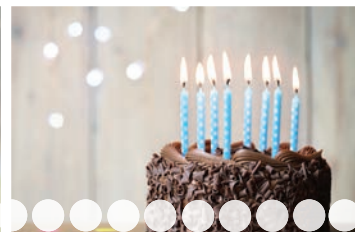
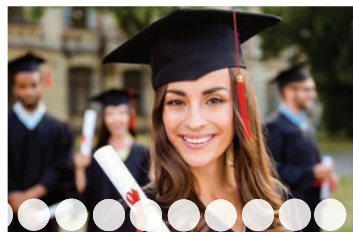
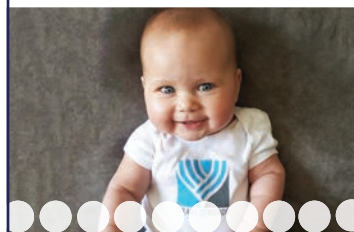


▲ Jack Gerber

Photo courtesy of Gerber family

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# Second (or Third) Time Around, the Wedding's Different

HILARY DANAILOVA | JE FEATURE

Cynthia Silber didn't marry Eric Key back in the 1970s — when they were college kids in love — because he wasn't Jewish and her father strongly objected.

So the Elkins Park couple has a good time imagining Silber's father's reaction to their 2018 Jewish wedding, which came after both were divorced from long marriages to other people — and followed Key's conversion to the faith (ironically, after a prior marriage to a non-religious Jewish woman).

"We joke frequently about my father spinning in his grave," laughed Silber, a physician.

Their May nuptials near Rittenhouse Square epitomized the particular joys of marriage later in life. Silber eschewed a gown in favor of a white linen Nicole Miller cocktail dress; the couple walked down the aisle to the Grateful Dead.

"At 60, I got married completely for myself," Silber reflected. "My parents are gone. There's no thought of having more children."

There's also no one way to remarry nowadays. In generations past, a white dress was taboo for a second-time bride, and the celebration was expected to be modest.

Now, "anything goes," observed Lynda Barness, who owns Philadelphia-based I DO wedding consulting and teaches in Temple University's wedding planning certificate program. From social arrangements to guest lists to attire, Barness added, "there really aren't any rules."

One element that does tend to distinguish later marriages: "It's more of a family focus," Barness said. Brides and grooms often come to the nuptials with children, even grandchildren. In place of fraternity brothers or college girlfriends, wedding parties are now more likely to feature daughters, nephews and cousins.

Such ceremonies honor the reality that relatives, rather than friends, play a more prominent role in middle-aged lives. Silber's maid of honor was her 25-year-old daughter, a niece served as bridesmaid and her 28-year-old son walked her down the aisle.

The latter is as close to a remarriage convention as anything, with grown children standing in, literally, for fathers and mothers who escorted the couple the first time around.

"Their own parents might not be with them, so they're flipping it a bit," said Susan Norcross, a veteran wedding planner who owns The Styled Bride in Philadelphia. She recently planned a third-time wedding for roughly 60 people at a family home, with an adult son walking the bride down the aisle. "It brought everyone together in a location that had nice memories for everyone," Norcross said.

Family may be more prominent — but for many second-time brides and grooms, the absence of parental involvement feels liberating.

"It was a lot less stressful than the first time," admitted Philadelphia attorney Sandy Mozes of his third marriage, in 2006, to Clare Kahn. Mozes recalled "a lot of tension between the two sets of parents" for the earlier occasion, along with a

guest list weighted heavily toward an older generation. "When you're a young bride and groom, you get a lot of parents' friends and extended family," said Mozes, who is now 67.

For the couple's more recent nuptials, "it was everyone we knew and loved," said Kahn, 64, a British-born biochemist. Only a few dozen people were present for the ceremony, in the chapel at Temple Beth Zion Beth Israel; afterward, the couple walked across Rittenhouse Square for a brunch with 130 friends.

"We didn't want a big display," explained Kahn, whose son and daughter from her first marriage gave her away. "This time around, we felt like we shouldn't make a fuss of ourselves so much as have an enjoyable time."

The late-in-life relationship felt comfortable, but traditional bridal gowns proved a less comfortable fit.

"I tried on various dresses and kept on saying, 'This is too wedding-y,'" Kahn recalled. She finally settled on a straight, tea-length dress in off-white silk.

Sleeker silhouettes and simpler designs remain more common for remarrying brides, said Ivy Solomon, who owns the Philadelphia boutique Lovely Bride. With looser social mores, however, older brides feel freer to opt for ballgowns, non-gowns or colors other than white.



► The Silber-Keys, then and now  
Photos courtesy of Silber-Key family

"You should wear what makes you happy," Solomon advised. "If that's the gown you never wore for your first marriage? Wear it now."

Second- or third-time brides are more likely to be able to afford the dress of their dreams — and this time around, they're freer to choose between a fairytale gown, a chic suit or a vividly hued cocktail dress.

"Maybe their tastes haven't changed," Solomon pointed out.

"Or sometimes they'll ask, 'Should I not be in something so white?' Quite frankly, many people don't look great in white. Color is often a better option."

Sunny Rosenstein, an Elkins Park Jewish educator, wore mauve to her third wedding — which, like her first two nuptials, was an Orthodox ceremony. The dress color wasn't the only difference.

"When you're 21, it really is about the wedding," said Rosenstein, 65, who made her own white dress for her first wedding in 1975. "When you're 40, it's definitely about the marriage. The wedding itself is so much less important."

About 75 people attended Rosenstein's 1994 wedding, which in Orthodox circles is considered tiny, she said. "For comparison, our daughter's wedding was over 400 people just for the ceremony," said Rosenstein, a member of Mekor Habracha in Center City, "and another 200 for the *sheva brachot* (seven traditional blessings) later that week."

Wedding planner Susan Norcross has noticed smaller guest lists for second or third weddings.

"They're not necessarily looking to have 300 people, all their business colleagues; they've done that already," she said. "They'll still have a cocktail hour and music, but not a 15-piece band. It's something with a dinner party feel, where they can spend

more time with the people who've come to be with them."

Degrees of pomp reflect circumstances that vary more than those of first weddings — even if the liturgy, and ritual, remain more or less the same.

"The stories are different, and the couples often have a beautifully refined knowledge of what marriage is and what they are looking for," reflected Rabbi Eric Yanoff of Adath Israel in Merion Station. He added that the joy of finding love after loss — whether owing to divorce or widowhood — lends "incredible nuance and beauty to that love, and how it is celebrated."

Loss isn't always a factor; sometimes, it's the same bride and groom under a new chuppah. At Temple Beth Zion Beth Israel, Rabbi Abe Friedman had several recent couples who wed civilly, then wanted a second, Jewish ceremony after one or both members had converted.

"As conversion has decoupled from marriage," Friedman said, "we're seeing whole families and couples coming through the conversion process." The ensuing Jewish weddings, he noted, "are something we're going to be seeing more and more of."

All of which casts a different light on the old-time fantasy of marrying once for life.

"People talk about, 'Finally, you married your bashert,'" said Cynthia Silber, who still has Keys' love letters from 1979. "But we had very full lives with other people before. It's just a different time." ♥

Hilary Danailova is a freelance writer.



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# Making a Market in Dvar Torah Ghostwriting

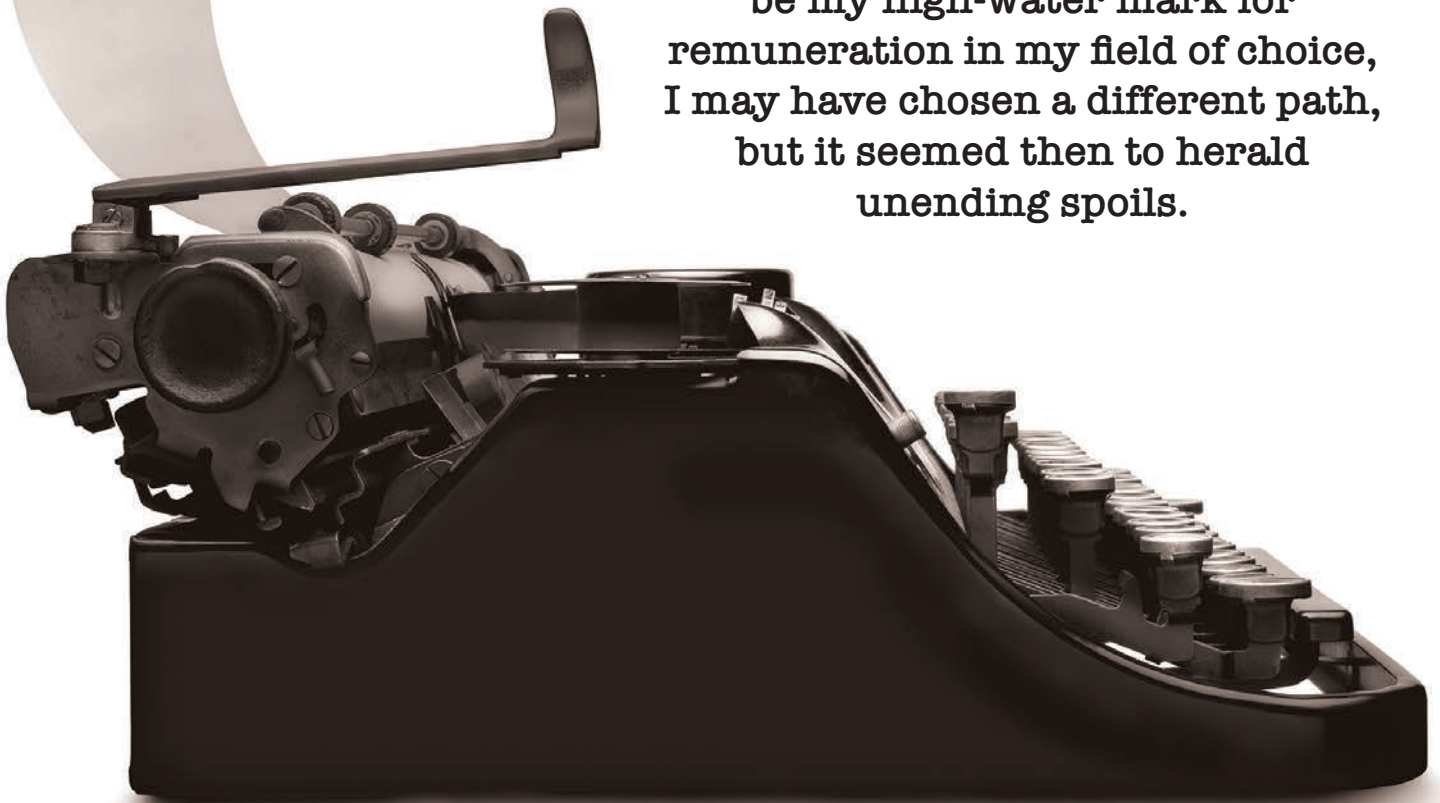
JESSE BERNSTEIN | JE STAFF

The first paid writing job I ever held was as a Bar Mitzvah speech ghostwriter. This was a few years after my own Bar Mitzvah — although, thinking back now, my own dvar Torah was nothing particularly special. What I remember about it more than anything was arguing back and forth with my father about how many jokes was too many. I certainly can't recall the delivery all that clearly, what with the speed and adrenaline of that day. I didn't even remember to wear a belt to the synagogue.

But I was an English major in the making, and I was already writing quite a bit. I edited a magazine at my school, and I was starting to write fiction on my own in earnest (emphasis on earnest). Most relevant to this particular job was when my classmates would ask me to punch up their student government stump speeches, which was terrifically fun. I'd acted quite a bit in student productions by then, and I'd written silly sketches for class assignments, but to actually see people using my words in a persuasive manner — and getting laughs for them! — was a singular experience.

I can't recall exactly how my first dvar Torah ghostwriting job came to be. It may have been that my mother, unbeknownst to me, offered my services to a friend concerned over her progeny's inability to produce a speech on his own. It's also possible that the friend mentioned her son's difficult experience, and I oh-so-graciously suggested that my services could be had. You do — well, I did — quite a lot of talking and not a lot of thinking at that age.

**If I had known that it would  
be my high-water mark for  
remuneration in my field of choice,  
I may have chosen a different path,  
but it seemed then to herald  
unending spoils.**



Either way, I was offered \$36 per hour to produce a dvar Torah with the family friend's son. Perhaps if I had known that would be my high-water mark for remuneration in my field of choice, I may have chosen a different path, but it seemed then to herald unending spoils just over the horizon. I accepted conditionally: The arrangement would be secret and I would be invited to the service (though not to the party).

As I recall, we had three sessions, totaling about four hours. His mother drank coffee in the other room while we talked through his parshah, which I had read and reread, collecting commentaries and pulling the best bits from to rip off (sorry, Rashi). I would try, to the best of my abilities, to draw thoughts out of my "client" as I typed, guiding him in this direction or that. It was slow work. I don't think we wrote more than a paragraph during the first session.

My confidence took a hit that day. At Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy, I was not even a particularly gifted Tanach student. I remember thinking, "What am I doing taking someone else's money to make pronouncements on the Torah?" But as the second session approached, something clicked.

I reread, for the umpteenth time, the same few verses we were tasked with wringing meaning from. This future Bar Mitzvah, as I recall, had one of the juicy parshot, one with a real story, some drama, and even a cliffhanger (a result of the storytelling arc of the triennial reading cycle). My own parshah was probably, pound for pound, one of the most boring in recorded liturgical history; truly, I defy you to come up with something relevant and exciting to say regarding the lengths of wood required for building the Mishkan.

But reading over the verses, for the first time in my life, I made the most obvious connection for a budding writer: Why don't I just read this as fiction? Not as false, but as I would read a work of

fiction, attending to the text with the same sort of lens. It was so gobsmackingly obvious as to embarrass me a little bit.

Our second session went much better than the first. It turned out that he had done a little more reading, too, and so we went into the text together, two more or less secular Jews doing primitive Torah study together. We wrote quite a bit more, and spent most of our final two sessions polishing what we'd written.

Unfortunately, this story does not do either of the fun things it could have.

I didn't start a dvar Torah ghostwriting empire, becoming the secret weapon of frustrated soon-to-be Jewish adults all over the Greater Philadelphia area. Nor was my mind enflamed by the possibility of Torah study as a significant part of my life, eventually leading to a heartwarming friendship with my Daf Yomi partner. I was paid, I was recommended to one more family friend, for which I was also paid, and I never did it again.

When I think back to those sessions, I try to figure out what I gained, beyond a great sum of money and a funny story. Certainly, there was value in trying to teach someone something, especially someone just a few years younger than I and something about which my knowledge was limited.

And that it served as writing practice is also footnote-worthy — I did my very best to work within the accepted Bar Mitzvah dvar template (Shabbat Shalom, "This week's parsha is," synopsis, short discussion of themes, relation to Bar Mitzvah project, conclusion, thank yous) without being lashed to it. I suppose I also learned what working parents could and couldn't find the time for.

I suppose I'll really find out what I learned when I sit down to do this with my own family one day. ♥

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# A Gift Guide for Every Life-Cycle Occasion

SELAH MAYA ZIGHELBOIM | JE STAFF

There's no shortage of B'nai Mitzvah gift guides out there in the world, but the average Jewish person will go through a whole spectrum of life-cycle events beyond the coming-of-age ceremony.

So you may one day find yourself wondering, "What kind of gift are you supposed to give for an *upsherin*?"

Here, the *Jewish Exponent* presents your one-stop shop for gifts for every life-cycle event (or at least, for a bunch of them).

## BRIT/SIMCHAT BAT

### "Laila Tov" Elephant Blanket

Amazon

\$22

A typical baby gift will work well for either a Brit — short for Brit Milah, an 8-day-old baby boy's ritual circumcision — or a Simchat Bat — a baby-naming ceremony held for a girl. This example is a baby blanket and a stuffed animal in one, plus it includes the Hebrew phrase, "*Laila tov*," — "Good night."



### Diaper Cake

Bed Bath & Beyond

Starts at \$39.99

Newborns go through an average of 10 diapers a day, so there's never too few diapers when it comes to an 8-day-old infant. Looking past the rather unappealing name, a diaper cake is basically just a nicely packaged gift of diapers. At Bed Bath & Beyond, they also come in different designs — rose blossom, teal tribal and panda pattern.



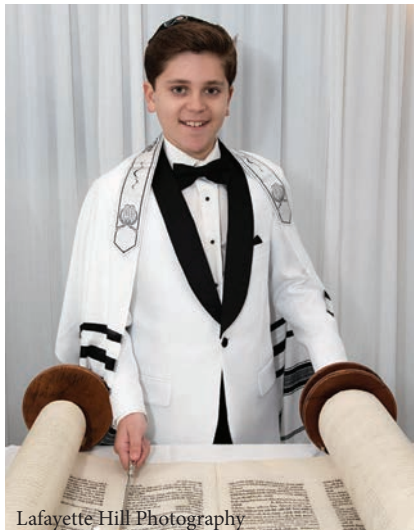
## UPSHERIN

### Aleph Bet Look & See Puzzle

Amazon

\$22.99

An *upsherin* is a ceremony in which a 3-year-old boy gets his first haircut. It also marks the time when a boy starts wearing a kippah and tzitzit. Any gift for a 3-year-old is an appropriate *upsherin* gift, which makes this aleph bet look-and-see puzzle



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## PJ Library Subscription

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An *upsherin* also celebrates a new stage in a toddler's education, in addition to his first haircut. What better way to acknowledge this than by giving a subscription to PJ Library? PJ Library sends age-appropriate Jewish children's books to families every month.

## B'NAI MITZVAH

### Fair Trade Wooden Tzedakah Box

The Aesthetic Sense

\$45

If you're looking for a gift that is both meaningful and unique, this tzedakah box should fit the bill. The box was hand-carved by fair-trade artisans in India from mango wood. On top of being aesthetically beautiful, it is a utilitarian gift that can start a young Jewish teenager on a path of good values.



### Pewter Tree of Life Tallis Clips

ModernTribe

\$36

In many communities, a B'nai Mitzvah receives a tallis for their big day. That tallis will probably be a gift from the B'nai Mitzvah's family, but you can complement it with this personal accessory. Tallis clips make a nice gift before the actual service, but can also be given afterward.



## GRADUATION

### Homesick Candles

homesick

\$29.95

For the graduate who's headed off away from home — for either college or that first full-time job — this scented candle might ward of homesickness. Homesick candles come in a variety of scents based on location. There are scents available for every state and some countries and cities. Philadelphia does not (yet?) have a scent, but the Pennsylvania candle smells like "caramel, maple, buttery rum and malty molasses," while the United States candle has the "taste of freedom and the smell of home. Warm baked American pie, wafting of tart Granny Smith apples, vanilla and cinnamon."



### Animal Card-Holder

Amazon

Ranges between \$15 and \$22.52, depending on color and animal

One thing a recent graduate might not know is how many business cards will soon inundate the next chapter of their life. You can prepare them in advance with a cute place to store those business cards. Gift the graduate in your life with an animal card-holder, available in green turtle, blue armadillo, yellow hedgehog and more.



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# Gifts

Continued from Page 19

## WEDDING

### "My Soul Loves" Laser-Cut Paper

JudaicaWebStore.com

\$129

If you're looking beyond the registry for a more personal wedding gift, check out this laser-cut paper from Israeli artist David Fisher. It includes an image of a pair of deer set among a pomegranate motif with a verse from *Song of Songs*: "*Matsati Et Sheahava Nafshi*" — "I have found the one whom my soul loves." It is available in blue, green or bordeaux and with the text in either English or Hebrew.



### Where It All Began Throw Pillow

Personal Creations

\$45.99

Everyone could use more pillows in their life, and this particular throw pillow can add a personal accent to any new married couple's home. Customize it with the couple's name, how they met and date of their wedding, and show how much you really know and appreciate them in your life.



## LATE-IN-LIFE B'NAI MITZVAH

### Yarmulkes for a Special Occasion

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These kippot were handmade by Mayan artisans in Guatemala. The gold threaded throughout the kippah or as a band around it give it an elegant look, but if these are not quite your friend's style, MayaWorks has a variety of other handmade kippot available in tuxedo black and white, psychedelic rainbow and floral patterns.



### A Tree in Israel

Jewish National Fund

\$18

You might be buying a gift for someone who missed out on a Bar or Bat Mitzvah when they were 12 or 13, but that doesn't mean they need to miss out on some of the gifts associated with a more traditional ritual. That includes planting a tree in Israel in their honor through the Jewish National Fund, which has been making the desert bloom for more than a century. Older B'nai Mitzvah would also certainly have a greater appreciation for this gift than a teenager. ❤️

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# Unexpected Moments From the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Chronicles

ANDY GOTLIEB | JE MANAGING EDITOR

Bar and Bat Mitzvahs often are positioned as a highlight of childhood (and a bridge to adulthood), but they just as often have some sort of traumatic element as well.

Whether it's severe stage fright, technical difficulties, a sudden family squabble, a drunk relative embarrassing everyone or a wardrobe malfunction, a picture-perfect event can be kind of rare.

Although nobody on the *Jewish Exponent* staff had a horrific experience, some less-than-positive memories do exist, even at events other than their own — although everything did tend to work out for the best. Here's a sampling, starting with my own day.

## HOPING FOR RAIN ON MY BIG DAY

As my Bar Mitzvah day (June 30, 1979) approached, I became an ardent follower of the late Action News weatherman Jim O'Brien.

Every day, I watched the news to catch the weather forecast, fervently hoping that something would change and the predicted sunny skies would give way to downpours of rain.

My Bar Mitzvah conflicted with the Newtown-Edgemont Little

League championships — and my team, the Indians, was playing for the championship. I was the left-handed starting second basemen on my team; I was a lousy hitter, but I could field and run.

Anyway, I was praying for rain, hoping the game would be postponed a day so I could play.

It turns out O'Brien's forecast was spot-on and the weather was beautiful. My Bar Mitzvah went off without a hitch — and my team lost 6-0.

But there were even ramifications at the luncheon following the service.

As this was my last year of Little League eligibility, I missed the ceremonies for the "graduating" players. One of the things the departing players got to do was stand on home plate and try to throw a baseball into a barrel angled where second base normally was placed.

While I couldn't leave, my friends did — "I've waited five years for this" one told me — so I had a depleted crowd at the luncheon. I can't say I wasn't a bit jealous that I didn't get a chance at the barrel.

See Unexpected, Page 22



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## Unexpected

Continued from Page 21

### LACK OF GIVEAWAYS A BUMMER

Jesse Bernstein, Staff Writer

At Saligman Middle School in the late aughts, to show up on Monday without wearing the give-away attire of the preceding weekend's Bar or Bat Mitzvah was to proclaim that you hadn't risked it all in a game of Coke and Pepsi; you hadn't slid the Cha-Cha slide; you hadn't snickered at the forced rhyme for candle number 7. You hadn't lived.

I don't remember a lot of party specifics, but I do remember my sweatpants emblazoned with, "I Had Eilat of Fun at Maya's Bat Mitzvah" (Israel-themed party) and "Orange You Glad You Came to Jon's Bar Mitzvah?"

So when my parents told me that, in lieu of a giveaway, we'd be making donations in the names of each party guest, I was aghast — my dreams of give-away immortality, lost in time like so many tears in the rain — but I had no choice but to assent.

Somehow, I survived.

When I think back to the ridiculousness of it all now, how much we were being taught to socially signify to one another at those parties (she had a band, he had a DJ; he had Betty the Caterer, she had snacks), I'm thankful to my parents for preserving little of that night but the photos and the memories.

Not because it wasn't terrifically fun — it was — but because the thought of someone walking around in a sweatshirt that says something like, I don't know, "Things Got Messy at Jesse's Bar Mitzvah" is a horrifying prospect.

### CELEBRATING SANS SYNAGOGUE

Selah Maya Zigelboim, Staff Writer

After lessons with my Bat Mitzvah tutor, we would sometimes go out to her backyard so she could feed the deer — much to the chagrin of her neighbors.

That tutor was a cantor who worked in the Austin, Texas, Jewish community and she, like everything else that was a part of my Bat Mitzvah, was chosen by me and my family. We picked the date (the day before my 13th birthday). We chose to have a mincha maariv service instead of the more common shacharit service. We even made our own siddur, and I chose what tune I wanted for each song.

My family had moved to Austin a little more than a year before my Bat Mitzvah, so we didn't belong to a synagogue. I didn't have a set way to go about the process or even a place to read from the Torah, but it wasn't a detriment.

Rather, it was an opportunity to make the entire celebration more personal.

In the end, my Bat Mitzvah was held in an upstairs library at Texas Hillel. I led most of the service myself, with support from my tutor/cantor and the Texas Hillel rabbi at the time. The service was immediately followed by a party downstairs in a multipurpose room.

As I danced in that multipurpose room with my out-of-town friends to the tunes of Austin's legendary DJ Simcha, I remember feeling like it was the best night of my life.

And when my brother's Bar Mitzvah came around two years later, my family chose once again to have the celebration sans synagogue. ♥



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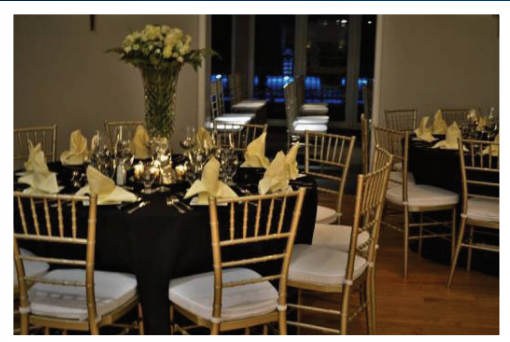
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