Making Bar and Bat Mitzvah More Joyful!

With Howard Blas
May 7, 2014
Our Guest:

Howard Blas, MSW, MA is the Director of the Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England, providing camping and vocational experiences for young adults with special needs. He is also a consultant on special needs camping programs for the National Ramah Commission and is a Jewish studies and bar/bat mitzvah teacher for students with special needs. He holds masters degrees in social work and special education. Howard is a contributor to the Connecticut Jewish Ledger, the Jerusalem Post, DASH, the Times of Israel and Babaganewz. His work has also appeared in The New York Times, Time Out New York and various parenting publications and professional journals. Howard received the S'fatai Tiftakh Award from Boston Hebrew College and the 2013 Covenant Foundation Award for Excellence in Jewish Education.
Overview of the Session

Making Bar and Bat Mitzvah More Joyful!

For twelve and thirteen year olds with learning differences and disabilities, the preparation for bar and bat mitzvah can be more stressful than joyous. For some, a learning process focused on Hebrew decoding, memorizing and speech writing can be an obstacle. For others, the celebration, often marked in the context of a “packed” synagogue on a Shabbat morning, can be terrifying. This webinar will help you prepare for this important life cycle event by tapping into your child’s interests and strengths, and introducing approaches such as adaptive technologies, music and art to help make the process more enjoyable for all.
Session Goals:

1. Evaluate “Legitimacy” of Several Bar and Bat Mitzvahs

2. Review History and Observance of Bar and Bat Mitzvah

3. Learn to Prepare for “In the Box” Bar and Bat Mitzvahs: Strategies and Nontraditional Approaches

4. Present Some Slightly “Out of the Box” Options

5. Learn What to Do When All Else Fails
Is This Bar/Bat Mitzvah “Legit?”

A Friendly Game of...

Bar Mitzvah True or False!
Shira’s bat mitzvah was a Friday night Shabbat dinner in a local NYC kosher restaurant with Shira narrating the various traditions including candle lighting, Kiddush, netilat yadim, and hamotzi. She also delivered a short d’var torah.
Lisa attended a Modern Orthodox day school. She has learning issues and social anxiety. She is also a talented artist. Her bat mitzvah was essentially a “gallery opening,” with her art work and descriptions mounted on easels. A celebratory dinner in her honor followed.
Max’s Blue Clues Bar Mitzvah

Max, a young man with autism, used a “Blues Clues” (“Jews Clues”) curriculum to prepare for bar mitzvah. He celebrated his bar mitzvah in a Conservative synagogue on a Sunday of Chol HaMoed Sukkot. Parents weren’t sure he would even stay in the building during the service! He carried the Torah, strummed the cantor’s guitar, wore a tallit and sang some of the prayers. A brunch was held in the family’s apartment and in their sukkah.
Sarah’s Bat Mitzvah

Sarah is nonverbal and has mobility issues. She loves davening and Hebrew songs. At Monday morning service, she carried the Torah and “led” service by activating Power Point slides.
Jake’s Bar Mitzvah Using a Dynavox

Bar Mitzvah took place at an Orthodox synagogue on Shabbat. He came to Torah for an aliyah, delivered a d’var torah, and led Ein Kelokeinu using father’s pre-recorded device which he activated on the Dynavox.
Adam’s Bar Mitzvah-In Transliteration (Carson too!)
....And the Answer is.....YES!

[The Question Was: Are these Bar Mitzvahs Legit?!]

WHY?
Bar/Bat Mitzvah marks a change of status

You don’t HAVE a bar/bat mitzvah, you don’t GET bar/bat mitzvahed—You BECOME bar/bat mitzvah.
What is a Bar Mitzvah?

• *Bar*=son; *Mitzvah*=commandment
• *Bar Mitzvah*= Age when Jewish adolescents are expected to fulfill Jewish Laws
• Not mentioned in the Bible
• Only historical source-c.200 C.E.

[Yehudah Ben Tema] used to say, “a 5 year old begins Torah study, a 10 year old begins Mishna, a 13 year old becomes obligated to observe the commandments, at 15, he begins Talmud study, at 18, the age of marriage, at 20 the pursuit of a livelihood; at 30, he attains full strength, at 40, he attains understanding, at 50, he can offer counsel, at 60 he attains seniority, at 70, he attains ripe old age, at 80 he shows strength, at 90 he becomes stooped over, at 100 year old is as if he was dead.”

-Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) Chapter 5, Mishna 25
Bat Mitzvah

- *Bat*=daughter
- Traditionally at age 12
- First bat mitzvah ceremony was in NYC in 1922—daughter of Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism
- Today, at age 12 or 13
How Does a Student Prepare for an “In the Box” Bar/Bat Mitzvah?

MAPACH PASHTA ZAKEF KATON

ma pa ach pash ta a za kef ka towown

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How Does A Student with Difficulties Learning EVER Learn to “Lein?”: Bringing BACK the Joy!

The teacher needs to begin a gentle, supportive process which involves finding another way in!
I. Demystify the Road Ahead

• Explain the Goals (show what you are setting out to accomplish)
• Explain your role as fellow traveler, working together
• Explain that you genuinely believe and accept that all students learn differently and that together you will find a way to learn the material.
II. Engage Your Student

• Ask questions which show your sincere, genuine interest in him/her (tune in to “clues”—singing group on T-shirt, keychains attached to knapsack, doodles on notebook, sports team hat)—ask about interests, hobbies (and remember them for future reference)

• Remember that self-disclosure is ok—this isn’t psychoanalysis! Tell about your sports teams, your musical interests, your bar/bat mitzvah learning, heroes, etc.
III. Assess Your Learner Through Gentle Questioning

- What music do you listen to? (do you listen on your IPod? The radio…?)
  (“Are you the kind of person who listens to Z100 (NY radio station) while getting dressed in the morning and you always seem to learn the songs, even without meaning to?”)
- Do you play an instrument? (if they play piano, you may be able to use reading of music as a tool; if they play drums, they may like tapping out rhythms)
- Do you enjoy art? What kind (drawing? painting?) if they are, then particular visual, color trope sequences may work well
- Do you like math/logic and puzzles? (they may find learning trope and applying it to the haftarah or Torah to be like “cracking a code.”)
- After you are done questioning, suggest some ways you might incorporate these strengths and talents to teach bar mitzvah material. (Ask if they have other suggestions—you may be surprised—students often have more ideas and insight about their learning than we give credit for.)
IV. Decide on Approach—and Don’t Rule out Transliteration and Invented Trope
Line 24:

Nyomar Chayel Sarah

I Kings 1:1-3

Vyomer Noton Adonee Hameleck Ata Amarta

Adoneahoo Yeemlock Ackarie Vihoo Yashave Al-

Ceecee.
4. Uvashanah hashvi'it Shabat Shabaton yihyeh

la'arets Shabat l'Adonay sadecha lo tizra

vecharmecha lo tizmor.
Color Coding Trope
Baruch ata Adonai
Thank you God

eloheinu melech ha olam
king of the world

asher bachar banu
who chose us

mi kol ha amim
from all the people

ve natan lanu
and gave us

et Torato
his Torah

http://jgateways.org/Resources/Bnei_Mitzvah
Frequently Used Siddur Sight Words

34 Sight Words
in Sara Rubinow Simon’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah Preparation for Children with Special Learning Needs: An Overview
V. Once the Work Starts...

- Continue monitoring the height of the bar (make sure it is set at the right height—not too high, but not too low)
- Give positive feedback
- Don’t be afraid to “stroke and kick” (sometimes they need more than positive feedback!)
- Continue to ask what the student needs
  - material presented differently—larger, better spaced, different font
  - additional phone time or meeting time
  - recording in new and different medium—perhaps faster or slower
- Use parents as allies and collaborators (as necessary). Caution: some kids hate this!
What Are Some Slightly “Out of the Box” Options?

• **Non-Shabbat Morning**
  Shabbat Mincha, Rosh Chodesh, Monday or Thursday, Chanukah, Purim, Chol HaMoed Sukkot

• **Different “Venue”**
  Not a large synagogue, beach, camp environment

• **Israel**
  Kotel
  Masada

• **Modified Service**
  Shorter, more English, musical instruments, more participation by others
1. Alexa’s Purim Bat Mitzvah
2. Camp Jake Bar Mitzvah-Mincha Service
3. Camp Setting
4. Israel
5. Modified Service
But Remember-Sometimes a Totally Different Approach Is Still Needed

Possible Reasons:

Cognitive Functioning/Learning
• Hebrew language
• Visual and auditory processing
• Memory

Attentional Issues

Physical Issues/Tactile
• Walking, standing, textures

Emotional/Behavioral Issues
• Anxiety/Public performance
• Oppositional defiant behaviors
• Mood disorders

Family Issues

Financial Issues
And What are the Options?

Remember…

• Shira’s Shabbat Dinner
• Lisa’s Art Gallery
• Max’s Blues Clues
• Sarah’s Power Point Bat Mitzvah
Conclusion

...The possibilities are endless! Showcase strengths (musical, art and more!)—Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrates BECOMING bar/bat mitzvah. It should be JOYFUL!
Useful Resources

http://jgateways.org/Resources/Bnei_Mitzvah (downloadable)


V’khol Banayikh: Jewish Education for All-A Jewish Special Education Resource Guide (Chapter 10-Bar/Bat Mitzvah Preparation, pages 397-415); edited by Sara Rubinow Simon, Torah Aura Productions

Make Your Own Bar/Bat Mitzvah: A Personal Approach to Creating a Meaningful Rite of Passage by Rabbi Goldie Milgram, Jossey-Bass

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook; edited by Helen Leneman; A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Basics: A Practical Family Guide to Coming of Age Together; Edited by Cantor Helen Leneman, Jewish Lights Publishing

Navigating the Bible: bible.ort.org
## Upcoming Hidden Sparks Without Walls Parent Connection Sessions

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For more information visit: www.hiddensparks.org
Hidden Sparks in schools

The Hidden Sparks coaching program is currently in 32 Jewish day schools/yeshivot in the New York tri-state area, Baltimore and Chicago.

Since inception, Hidden Sparks has provided school-based coaching to 16 schools through its External Coach Program and has provided training and mentoring to 95 Internal Coaches from 45 Internal Coach Program participating schools.

Over 3,700 teachers have participated in Hidden Sparks programs. Of that number, more than 1,200 teachers have benefitted from Hidden Sparks training, impacting an estimated 12,000 students.

If you are interested in bringing Hidden Sparks to your school or city, please contact us at: 212-767-7707 or news@hiddensparks.org
Hidden Sparks thanks our supporters and partners who have made our work possible.

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