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Split Decisions

*Divorced parents still have to share
 Big Day responsibilities.*

By Hillel Kuttler

A Bar Mitzvah that Mrs. G attended in early March serves as a primer, she believes, for how a divorced parent should *not* behave.

Mrs. G's best friend, who enjoys primary custody of the child, ran the show. She and her second husband, not the boy's father, stood beside the Bar Mitzvah boy during his speech. A video of the honoree included no images of his father.

"That Bar Mitzvah was sad. If you want your son to be a mensch, how can you have made it so obvious to him of your anger toward his dad?" said Mrs. G, who lives in a Philadelphia suburb and requested partial identification out of respect for her ex-husband.

Mrs. G endured a difficult marriage and divorce, but her relationship with her ex-husband is "in a good place now" as they plan their son's Bar Mitzvah, she said. Both mom and dad will

counsel is "handling it beautifully" by "really thinking of the child and making adult decisions between the two of them without bringing the child into it," she said.

"As a family therapist, I'm thinking that what would be detrimental to a child is fighting between the parents or having the child privy to discussions about the finances, which parents will participate in the Bar or Bat Mitzvah and who will be responsible [for what]," said Rosen, who works for Jewish Family and Children's Services of Greater Philadelphia.

"The child should be concentrating on becoming confident in what they're going to be doing that day, like preparing their Torah portion or their mitzvah project. Parents should be thinking of keeping the child in the moment and keeping them [focused] on what they'll be performing at the service."

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 or Bat Mitzvah.*

stand on the bimah when the boy reads the Torah. They and Mrs. G's ex-in-laws intend to sit together at the meal, and "when we do the slide show, you'd better believe that dad will be in there," she said.

Enlightened parents agree on the need to shield children from adults' tension after a divorce — all the more so for a Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah. The child's shining moment is no time for parents to evince mutual hostility; rather, interviewees stated, they must unite in celebration.

As in an intact marriage, divorced parents should jointly plan their B'nai Mitzvah celebrations, social workers and parents explained. They underscored a cardinal rule: It's not about you; it's about the child.

One family that Arlene Rosen

Fayanne Kuttler, a family therapist in Florida (and this writer's sister-in-law), advises clients who fare poorly with ex-spouses to take the high road. Marginalizing the other parent before and at the simcha — or, even worse, holding separate events for the son or daughter — means brainwashing the child against mom or dad, she said. That, she continued, is known as "parental alienation" and must be avoided.

"If parents are not getting along, it's hard to do anything. But if you maintain the perspective that it's not for you, it's for the child, anything can go smoothly. You've got to pull yourself out of the mix and do what's best for the child."

When Jeffrey Kapelus and his ex-wife Leslie planned their son



Max's 2004 Bar Mitzvah, their post-marriage relationship was at its harmonious peak. They sometimes drove together to visit synagogues and interview caterers, photographers and musicians. Not knowing any better, one rabbi referred to Leslie as Kapelus's wife.

"You could not tell that we were a divorced couple. We got along very, very nicely," said Kapelus, an executive recruiter in New York City. "We looked at 10 or 12 places. We walked in, and the way we talked, we were on the same page with everything, so every caterer thought we were a married couple."

Not that their messy divorce during Max's infancy was forgotten. But in preparing for the Bar Mitzvah of their only child, they agreed on the basics: their taste in synagogues, splitting the costs and covering overages.

The parents, who shared custody of Max and were remarried to other spouses, compromised and adapted when necessary. Because Kapelus lives in Westchester County and his ex-wife on Long Island, they decided on a neutral-site synagogue. When a photographer whom his ex-mother-in-law recommended appeared biased toward her family, Leslie was the one to suggest they dump him and interview someone else. Kapelus wanted an open bar and Leslie didn't, so he offered to pay for it and she agreed.

Driving back from meetings, "we talked about what we just saw, like a strategy session," Kapelus said. "It was almost too

good to be true, the way we did the arrangements."

Better still were the Bat Mitzvah events that Kuttler and her ex-husband Michael Schwarzberg hosted for their daughters, Rebecca and Danielle.

To be sure, Kuttler and Schwarzberg are models for divorced couples. They and their present spouses vacation together and host each other for Thanksgiving dinners and Passover sederim. The children of their subsequent marriages share overnights at both families' North Miami Beach homes.

Because they attended the same synagogue, the former couple knew where to hold the B'nai Mitzvah and that many common friends would attend. Kuttler described the experience of planning each simcha as "emotionally charged" not only because their marriage had ended — "You don't dream of having your child's big event without being together with the child's mother or father," she explained — but because their remarriages injected new spouses into the discussion.

"It was not stress-free, but no planning of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is stress-free — with or without a divorce," she said. The 2007 Bat Mitzvah of Talia, Kuttler's daughter by her second husband, David, "was less stressful because I had one person to argue with, not two."

That said, she continued, she and Schwarzberg "generally had a cooperative relationship" in planning their events. They compared guest lists, divided ex-

penses equitably and signed off on each other's preferences.

"I can't remember any major difficulties," Schwarzberg said. "As we got closer through the years, it got easier. The biggest concern was bringing everybody together in the same room and hoping that nobody said anything rude to each other."

"Everybody has their own version of who was the bad guy [in the marriage]. But everything went very smoothly and was beautiful. I don't think our kids felt any different than a child who had both parents together. If anything, they had more families, including step-families — a bigger party with even more presents!"

Indeed, this writer's enduring memory is of the confetti-sprinkled dad and stepdad settling the bills, writing checks and shaking hands in the emptying hall.

"I tried to make the party the same for the child as if we were together. You swallow your pride and do what you've got to do. In the speeches, you'd thank your wife, so now you thank your ex-wife," Schwarzberg said.

"When you split up, you say 'mazel tov' to each other because it's a new beginning, because you've made a decision to be happier than you were before. So, why would you want to harbor resentment and then take it out on the kid?"

Hillel Kuttler is a Baltimore-based freelance writer and a frequent contributor to Special Sections.

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