

Make Your Presents Felt

Gifts that will have impact long after the Big Day.

By Hillel Kuttler

Seemingly every Shabbat, Saturday night and Sunday from early 2008 to early 2009, a Baltimore boy attended classmates' B'nai Mitzvah services and parties. His father happily escorted him to and from each simcha.

Overwhelmed by the sheer number of celebrations, though, the dad made an executive decision: gifts to all honorees henceforth would be charitable contributions in their names. He selected a small non-profit organization in Jerusalem that assists "lone soldiers," the young people from around the world who enlist in the Israel Defense Forces but whose family support networks lie continents away.

The dad (who requested anonymity for this article) contributed to the organization — the Michael Levin Memorial Fund for Israel, established in 2006 after the Philadelphia native was killed in battle during Israel's war with Hezbollah — whenever his son attended a simcha. He repeated the routine when his younger son entered the B'nai Mitzvah circuit in 2010, and continues to contribute when relatives' and friends' children celebrate a milestone. Honorees receive cards that explain the fund's mission without revealing the amount given.

Extending a heartfelt "Mazel Tov" while simultaneously doing good is a notion some parents and children embrace. The hope, parents explained, is that their example will rub off on the youthful honorees, and the latter will adopt as their own a cause that holds personal meaning.

One good place to begin the process is Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Philadelphia. JFCS oversees several volunteer opportunities geared to B'nai Mitzvah celebrants, such as walk-a-thons that raise funds for JFCS, teaching senior citizens how to surf the Web and play Wii and bak-

ing challah for nursing home residents.

The activities are contained in JFCS's Mitzvah Project Toolbox (www.jfcsphilly.org/jewish-communityservices/mitzvah-project-tool-box), which promotes each B'nai Mitzvah celebrant's "opportunity to make a real difference in someone's life."

Lisa Tischler, JFCS's supervisor of volunteer services, called them "maturing experiences" for teenagers, specifically for B'nai Mitzvah.

"If they're going to be setting aside time they could have been playing with their friends or watching TV, and giving of themselves to people in the community, they are taking on some of the responsibilities of being a Jewish adult," Tischler said. "If you volunteer as a young person, you're more likely to volunteer in the future. It's a way of starting people off volunteering."

Several parents whose children attend Baltimore's Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community Day School launched an initiative in the mid-2000s that families could opt into for \$100 each. Every child in the circle received a \$100 Israel Bond upon reaching B'nai Mitzvah, along with a card acknowledging the contributing families. More than 75 percent of the class's approximately 80 B'nai Mitzvah families participated.

The effort received the blessing of the school's administration and accomplished several things, said David Pierce, who in 2007 picked up a fellow parent's idea and managed the campaign when his son Chandler approached Bar Mitzvah.

"It helped a Jewish cause, in this case Israel Bonds. We raised \$6,000 for Israel that wouldn't have been raised otherwise," he explained. "Also, I heard from a few of the less affluent parents that instead of their child choos-

ing not to go to an event because the parent had to pony up money for a gift each time, they could go without having to worry about purchasing a gift."

Pierce said he had no qualms with parents who elected not to participate in the program. He was perplexed, though, by several parents' active opposition, which included lobbying others by telephone and mail.

Some creative gift giving includes equal parts "gift" to the honoree and enabling the honoree's "giving" to others.

When Yael Smolar of Man-

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hattan celebrated her Bat Mitzvah in January 2008, she received a card containing two checks: one, for \$18, made out to herself; another, also for \$18, with the recipient's name left blank. The family friend who sent the card asked her to fill in the name of any charity she desired, then mail the check there.

"I loved the idea," said Betsy Smolar, who was interviewed because her daughter was away at summer camp. Betsy and her husband Neal have since appropriated the dual-check approach for some of their own gifts.

"It empowered Yael to do a mitzvah, because the child will consider which tzedakah to give it to. Most important, she is getting into the notion of giving."

Parents and child worked to inject Yael's Bat Mitzvah with a strong dose of tzedakah. On

each guest's synagogue seat at the morning service lay a card and a pen. Attendees were asked to write and sign a short note to Israel Defense Forces soldiers. The family forwarded the cards to an Israeli organization called A Package from Home (www.apackage-fromhome.org), which provides clothing and toiletries destined for lone soldiers.

The Smolars had discussed possible tzedakah recipients in the months preceding the Bat Mitzvah. Yael had favored organizations assisting Darfur refugees before opting for a Jewish cause.

Her daughter was put "in a position to choose" among worthy recipients, Betsy Smolar explained. "Yael is a very magnanimous kid," she said. "During Hurricane Katrina, she donated her American Girl dolls to her school to be sent to New Orleans. During the Gaza war, she and her friends baked blue-and-white cookies and sold them on the street. The money went to an Israeli tzedakah."

Some of Yael's friends mailed B'nai Mitzvah invitations that asked guests to forego gifts and instead contribute to an Israeli orphanage and an organization that helps rehabilitate wounded IDF soldiers.

"Discussing alternative tzedakah options creates a nice message for the child: we get, we give and we do for others," Betsy Smolar said. "Very often, the kids investigate various tzedakah opportunities and decide what's meaningful to them. It's a great way to start developing in your child the pattern of

giving tzedakah."

The Baltimore father explained that he shifted to charitable contributions for several reasons.

"I felt that most B'nai Mitzvah kids just don't notice or appreciate yet another check or chanukiah they receive. Even my own sons didn't. The gifts all run together and become so ubiquitous that they're often tuned out," he said. "But doing tzedakah, even in our small way, honors the child's landmark events meaningfully. Also, frankly, the cost of buying gifts and writing checks every week was becoming prohibitively expensive."

He said that he grasped the gifts' impact while reading some thank-you notes his son received.

"I really appreciate the generous donation to the Michael Levin Fund," one girl wrote. "The gift is very personal to me because of my trip to Israel last summer. I'm proud to have an Israeli donation made in my honor."

A boy wrote, "Thank you so much for the generous donation in my honor. I am glad that I could help other people on my special day."

Pierce said that he was proud of his role in the Israel Bonds project, mostly for the message it conveyed to the B'nai Mitzvah and their parents.

The event "shouldn't be about the gift; it should be about celebrating the kid's milestone," he said.

Hillel Kuttler is a Baltimore-based freelance writer who has contributed to Special Sections and Inside.

