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# Claiming Responsibilities

*Finding the best ways to continue your child's  
post-simcha journey toward independence.*

By Hillel Kuttler



According to Jewish tradition, a child who becomes Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah assumes the full responsibilities of all other members of the Jewish community, including counting toward a minyan (quorum of 10) for prayer services, reciting Kiddush and fasting on Yom Kippur.

With the milestone, the children/adults begin to undertake more roles and activities generally, push the limits of their capabilities and assert a “can do” attitude that augurs their burgeoning independence.

The trying-new-things range may be marked by performing additional household tasks, going away with friends for the weekend, visiting Israel with teen groups rather than with family members, volunteering in the community and taking on summer jobs.

As they begin to assess the

world and ponder their place in it, the new B’nai Mitzvah consider such crucial questions as, “‘How do we take our Judaism into our own hands?’ and ‘How do we act as ritual Jews and as ethical Jews?’” said Larry Ser-novitz, associate rabbi at Abington’s Old York Road Temple — Beth Am.

“This is part of the challenge of how Judaism extends its sense of relevance after Bar and Bat Mitzvah. It’s the sense of responsibility to engage in Torah and engage in the greater world.”

While a necessary stage for a child, the maturation process that the simcha launches can be bittersweet for parents unwilling or unready to let go. Those more inclined to extend the leash see the child’s spreading his or her wings as healthy, so they encourage new endeavors.

As much as I missed my son

Gil, 14, who attended Massachusetts’s Camp Ramah in July, I smiled with pride when he wrote to ask to extend his stay through August. Gil’s request was the best indication that he was having a wonderful time — all the more so when he told me (in a follow-up conversation he initiated from his contraband cell phone, the little devil!) that his bunkmates had lobbied him to stay. Needless to say, he remained the extra four weeks.

At the same time, my elder son Yossi, now 16, asserted himself by undertaking two huge responsibilities this past summer: earning his learner’s permit to drive, and working a full-time job as a tennis instructor-counselor at a Jewish Community Center day camp. The two are linked because Yossi is applying the earnings toward his goal of purchasing either a laptop computer or, down the road, his own car.

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Both boys, meanwhile, continue to embrace their new Jewish communal roles by signing up for weekly Torah-reading assignments in our synagogue's teen services.

Ronit Brookman experienced parental ambivalence earlier in the summer. She urged her son Joseph, who had just completed ninth grade, to participate in a Baltimore Zionist District-sponsored Israel trip because she knew he'd have a formative experience by spending a month there with 30 peers. But Brookman also witnessed Joseph's classmate weeping when her parents denied the girl's requests to participate. The parents told Brookman that they were not ready to let their daughter go off on the trip; perhaps next summer or the one after, they said.

Brookman confessed to experiencing emotional difficulty of her own — "It was challenging and a bit nerve-racking" — to send Joseph away for all of July. He had been to sleepaway camps, but Israel was different due to the great distance and because he'd be inaccessible by telephone except in emergencies.

Pushing him to participate, though, was a no-brainer from the perspectives of both his personal and Jewish development, Brookman said. The payoff came when Joseph returned from Israel, proclaiming that he'd enjoyed his best summer ever.

"I wanted him to go for the same reason we moved to Baltimore from San Antonio and why he attends a Jewish school: the strengthening of his Jewish identity, becoming part of our people, becoming a mensch and knowing who he is. Judaism is more than a religion. It's a gift that parents give their kids. The focus on Jewish education, Israel, the life of a Jew — all of it is weaved together," she explained.

"Letting him go and be on his own for a month was, in some sense, letting him train to be a grown-up. It's a preliminary [step] for him to be on his own, anyway."

For Neil Weiss of New York, the Bat Mitzvah last winter of his youngest daughter Kira signaled several developmental steps. For one, she was old enough to accept neighbors' requests to babysit.

"It's a coming-of-age thing. Right now, she's babysitting for a friend's youngest son for three

Parents' serving as strong role models through their actions are important, especially with the child on the cusp of adolescence.



hours," he said. "The first time she did that was last week. There's the sense I have, and that she has, that she's old enough to babysit. The benefits are that she learns responsibility and how to take care of other kids, she earns money and learns time management: She has to be there at a certain time, know when the kids go to bed and to arrange a ride home."

Weiss interrupted the conversation for a moment. He returned to say that Kira reported feeding her charge lunch and playing basketball with him.

When Kira and sisters Eliza and Danielle became Bat Mitzvah, Weiss provided each girl with a cell telephone, figuring that "it was a good thing to reward them with, that we're handing you this expensive de-

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## Claiming Responsibilities

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vice, and you have to be responsible enough to use it, not abuse it, not lose it."

Weiss recalled his own Bar Mitzvah in Cleveland as an empowering Jewish experience.

"To me, 13 was the age I'd

start to lein and lead davening in shul," he said, referring to chanting the Torah and leading prayer services. "Those were my milestones. Better than that, I got paid for it. Soon, I started doing the entire Torah reading. I alternated weeks with my friend Jeff; we'd get \$25 or \$50 each week, which was great money back in the '70s. They were paying me for something I'd have done for free! It was great that the shul would trust me enough to show up and to read Torah, which was something very important to them."

All B'nai Mitzvah kids are extolled for their accomplishments. It is the wise congrega-

tion that alerts them to the crux of the matter: that reaching the milestone is not the culmination of their Jewish learning and involvement, but the beginning. Often, though, such words come across as empty rhetoric.

Rabbi Sernovitz called the period a "huge age vacuum," in which children turning Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah begin to steer their own ship. At this point, parents, if they have not yet done so, must engage children in opportunities "to make a difference" in their Jewish surroundings, he said.

"We have to encourage our kids, to say, 'You have as much role in this world as anyone, whether it's going to a shiva minyan, attending services or making a meal upon the birth of a friend's child.' There are lots of ways to be out there and make a difference," he said.

Having parents serve as strong role models through their actions is important, especially with the child on the cusp of adolescence, he added.

"[Kids] need to know that we're not just looking out for ourselves, but being part of the community. If we're not doing it, why would a child do it?"

The ultimate parental and communal message to B'nai Mitzvah, he said, is that "the future of the Jewish community sits on your shoulders as you accept the Torah."

*Hillel Kuttler is a frequent contributor to Special Sections.*

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