



## **Let Me Think For Myself** **Alternative ways to celebrate bar or bat mitzvah**

**Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer / October 2006**

Last spring, The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City celebrated three very different bar or bat mitzvahs— the coming of age ritual for Jewish teens entering young adulthood. Anshel, whose roots were from Eastern Europe, learned Yiddish, immersed himself in Yiddish culture and gave a sophisticated presentation about Yiddish and English speaking patterns. Ben, who is adopted, went on his own journey of discovery. He made a movie, interviewing people about their perspective on Jewish identity and how one becomes a Jew. And Alexandra (aka Alex) followed her love of art by presenting a slide show that examined how Jewish artists have used their art to make political statements.

If these projects were different from one another, consider how different they were from traditional bar/bat mitzvahs. Unlike their peers in other temples or synagogues, none of our students read from the Torah, the scroll that contains the Five Books of Moses. Nor did they recite traditional Hebrew blessings or prayers. That's because Humanistic Jews regard all sources of our heritage with equal importance, and don't put the Torah in a special place above the rest.

Judaism is ever-evolving. In fact, we as Humanistic Jews believe that Judaism has thrived because of change and innovation. One way we have put this lesson into practice is to create this alternative form of bar/bat mitzvah that roots congregants in tradition yet is also very modern. It has great appeal particularly to secular and cultural Jews. It connects them in a loving and uplifting way to their heritage. And, most importantly, it gives them an opportunity to engage their growing children in a meaningful study program and ritual that is consistent with their secular point of view.

Here's how Howard, a member of The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, summed it up to his daughter Liana, who had an alternative bat mitzvah this year. "What this congregation asks of its bar and bat mitzvah kids is radical: self discovery, values clarification, engagement with texts and the world in a deep analytical way at a moment in their lives when cleaning their room is an impossible task. And yet you did it— not clean your room— the other more impressive stuff."

Howard was right. The program is very demanding and rigorous, but mostly in an intellectual way. It challenges students to think abstractly. "The creation [of papers for my bar mitzvah project] helped me understand how to put beliefs and ideas together in a meaningful way," reflected Jake, another student in the bar/bat mitzvah program. "It also helped establish what I value and helped me to realize how I fit into Jewish culture and religion." And bat mitzvah Micah concluded: "I've figured out a lot about myself. When studying my values, I really discovered what I care about and, more importantly, why I care. Before this, I just listened to my parents. Now I think for myself and I argue with people."

*(over)*

For centuries, Jewish culture has said that children become fully accountable for their own deeds when they reach age 13 and assume religious and legal obligations according to ancient law. Humanistic Jews part with this view and think of the transition to adulthood as a “work in progress.” As teenagers mature into young adults, their parents entrust them with greater responsibilities of adulthood. “For me,” said student Irene, “becoming a bat mitzvah is all about learning to make choices. Making choices means taking more responsibility and the more responsible I act, the more choices I will be able to make in the future.”

And so City Congregation students make lots of choices in the alternative bar/bat mitzvah program, particularly when choosing their own topics for papers and projects— something that individualizes this experience and makes it personally significant. The journey starts as students explore their family history and values. Micah discovered that while her Mom’s Jewish ancestors came from Eastern Europe and her Dad’s Christian ancestors came from Denmark, they had many common principles: their commitment to volunteerism, hard work, self-sacrifice, care for the earth and basic family loyalty.

Other students learned of personal family struggles. Sam found out about a grandfather who had to go to work to support the family, but didn’t give up on his dream to go to law school, which he finally did when he was nearly 60 years old. Emily heard the details about her mother’s escape from Persia. More than a few kids learned about relatives who had perished in the Holocaust.

These and other stories help define us. Out of this investigation, the students figure out their own beliefs and values. This process helps them think about criteria for choosing a hero or role model, and what the difference is between these two figures.

Molly showed her commitment to feminism by studying Israeli feminists. Anshel, our young Yiddish expert and budding linguist, wrote all about Lazarus Zamenhof, the founder of Esperanto. And Alex followed her interest in art by writing about Friedl Brandeis Dicker, a heroic Viennese artist who taught hundreds of children art in the Terezin concentration camp.

Meanwhile, the students learn that it is one thing to talk about values and role models and it is another thing to actually do something to make the world a better place. So all students determine ways that they might tackle a significant community service project. Danny ran a bingo game at an adult home, Jason collected videotapes for a teen program and another student named Ben conducted a tennis clinic in Spanish for disadvantaged kids in his area.

Finally, each student leads a joyful Shabbat service that is filled with readings, songs and presentations of the essays and projects that he or she has produced throughout the program. It’s always a remarkable and awesome event. Our entire community is constantly enriched when we witness our children taking these amazing steps toward adulthood.

*Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer is the leader of The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City. Information about this bar/bat mitzvah program can be found at [www.citycongregation.org](http://www.citycongregation.org) or by calling (212)213-1002. Rabbi Schweitzer is the author of the *The Liberated Haggadah* (Center for Cultural Judaism) and contributes the Humanistic perspective to the “Ask the Rabbi” column in *Moment Magazine*. He is also the president of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis.*