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The Bar/Bat Mitzvahs That Almost Weren't

Preteens who might never have had the chance to have a bar or bat mitzvah are finally able to. JOSH EAGLE

Who knows better than you all the effort that goes into prepping for your bar or bat mitzvah? The hours spent memorizing prayers, slaving over your D'var Torah, and writing your thank-you speech? Now, imagine if you had to experience the whole process with a neurological disorder that caused serious difficulties in your verbal and nonverbal communication and social interactions.

Meet Ben. He's a 13-year-old living with autism, the neurological disorder mentioned above. He's also a bar mitzvah. This is thanks, in large part, to Julia Budnick, a volunteer at Etgar L'Noar, a nonprofit organization based out of Newton, MA that helps all children have the opportunity, regardless of their abilities and disabilities, to be included in Jewish learning and Jewish life. Through the work of volunteers and educators trained to work with children with special needs, Etgar recently graduated its first bar mitzvah class of seven students, including Ben.

"I chanted a lot," says Ben. "And I studied very hard with Julia, she helped me learn to read (Hebrew)."

Like millions of other children affected with autism, Ben has difficulty initiating and maintaining a conversation. A "regular" Hebrew school education would have proven difficult, if not impossible, for him. But when his mom discovered Etgar L'Noar, the family was thrilled to learn

that a Jewish education was not out of Ben's reach.

One of those volunteers, 17-year-old Julia, was not so sure Etgar was the right place for her initially. "When I first started working with Ben, he was very aggressive, and he wouldn't listen to me," she says. "But together, we learned how to work with each other, and I'm so glad I stuck with it."

Over the course of a year and a half, Julia worked with Ben and his family to help him learn Hebrew, and how to chant his Torah portion. Julia also teamed with Ben to prepare the D'var Torah that Ben recited with his Rabbi.

"I wouldn't ever have expected before I'd worked with them that a boy with autism could have a bar mitzvah, but I didn't even know what autism was," says Julia. "It taught me a lot about all the different spectrums (of autism) and what kids are capable of doing, no matter their limitations."

During the time Ben prepared for his bar mitzvah, he discovered what becoming a man and a Jew is all about. He took part in a number of projects with his class that helped him understand the meaning of tzedakah and tikkun olam. But that was not the only positive that developed from Ben's Sunday school efforts.

"An extraordinary bond developed between all the children in the class," Ben's mom says. "They really got to be like a havurah (a small community). They studied together, they



learned together, and it was really important to Ben that they attended his bar mitzvah."

On the day of his bar mitzvah, Ben was nervous. But when he looked out to the synagogue and saw his Hebrew school friends in the crowd, he was reassured.

"My friends came. Susan and Anna came, too," says Ben. "It was great."

"It was amazing," says Julia. "He read all the prayers and read from the Torah. He had a party after, and there were Thomas the Tank engines around on all the tables, and it was just like a normal bar mitzvah. I was really proud for him." ★

For more information on Etgar L'Noar, check out their website: www.etgarlnoar.org.

Content is provided by **THE HAROLD GRINSPOON FOUNDATION**, which runs the B'nai Tzedek Teen Philanthropy Program in Western Massachusetts and assists other communities nationally in the field of Youth Philanthropy. For more information, call K'vod Wieder at 413-736-2552 ext. 14 or visit us at www.hgf.org.

JOSHUA EAGLE is the Senior Editor of JVibe.

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