FXDEY1ENCE THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

Michael's Perfect Bar Mitzvah: One Parent's Survival Tips for Any Successful Lifecycle Celebration

By Beverly C. Weaver

REMEMBER BEFORE YOU HAD CHILDREN? If you were anything

like me, you had these dreams of what life would be like with your wonderful child... idyllic Thanksgiving dinners with smiling family around a beautifully set table... quiet times of sharing your favorite literature with an appreciative son or daughter... lifecycle events filled with relaxed joy. Well, in our family not everything turned out as originally pictured.



Don't get me wrong, the great kid part turned out just as planned, it's just that the tableaus changed. Instead of those Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving table settings, we bolted the china closet to the wall to keep our son safe because he had a habit of charging around the house and impulsively leaping onto things. Since he could not sit for even the shortest story, we found ourselves renting movies and watching them in short chunks. As for the lifecycle events—well—we are a Jewish family, and I am going to share my story of Michael's perfect Bar Mitzvah. If you are not Jewish, just erase Bar Mitzvah and fill in the lifecycle event of your choice. The attributes can be universally applied.

Empowering decisions

When Michael was in the fifth grade, school was a daily struggle, coping with homework was worse, and coping with Hebrew school was beyond worse. When we got a letter from our synagogue about his Bar Mitzvah date (one and a half years in the future), it dawned on my husband and me that this neat kid was going to face the pressures of Bar Mitzvah study before we knew it, and we needed to plan for it. I don't mean we started to call caterers, but that we made a conscious decision that we wanted our son's Bar Mitzvah to be a pleasant family event; and we felt that, with his attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) and learning disabilities that would not happen unless we planned for it to happen.

Each synagogue has its own protocol for Bar Mitzvah ceremonies, and some synagogues have more requirements than others (how much in English, how much in Hebrew, how much study involved, etc.). There is also the option of having a group or in-

dividual ceremony in Israel with fewer requirements involved. The next decision my husband and I made was that this was Michael's lifecycle event, not ours. Michael deserved to choose the Bar Mitzvah option comfortable for him.

When Michael was younger, he came home from school one day in tears. It had been "one of those days," and I remember him saying, "I'm so tired of being different. Just once I wish I could be like everyone else." Remembering that, another decision my husband and I made was that if our son's Bar Mitzvah ceremony was held in our synagogue, it would be like everyone else's. Michael would not be noticeably different from any other Bar Mitzvah boy.

Our final resolution occurred as a result of contact with a long-lost cousin who shared a poignant story about his younger brother. It seems the brother had unidentified attention issues as a child which, of course, interfered with Bar Mitzvah training. The family still had a practice tape that had been made for Bar Mitzvah study, a tape in which the teacher was screaming in the background. Even with all the studying (and screaming), the Bar Mitzvah boy could not learn everything he was supposed to do. To this day, he cringes at the memory of the whole experience. The final decision we made was that our son's Bar Mitzvah experience would be something positive he could store in his heart and carry into his memories.

So a year and a half ahead of the event, we made the case to Michael that the decision was entirely his, and we would not be disappointed even if he chose not to have the traditional ceremony at thirteen. This was not something he had to do for us; however, if he chose to have a Bar Mitzvah, my husband and I were resolute: he had to agree to work hard and see it through. Those were tough con-

SOME HELPFUL HINTS FOR PARENTS

- **Empower your child.** Sometimes it is hard for parents to remember that the lifecycle event is your child's, not yours. Your child deserves a major say in how the event goes but must also take major responsibility for the success of the event.
- **There is a difference between planning and obsessing.** Time can be one of your biggest allies. But keep in mind that too much pressure for too long will do in any child—special needs or not. Especially in the last week before the lifecycle event, it is important that the household is calm. Don't leave too many last minute errands and jobs and don't plan on any last minute new learning. Repetition and relaxation are the keys.
- > Selectively share the situation. It is important that you share your child's special needs information with the key players in your child's lifecycle event. However, adolescent years can be especially difficult for kids with special needs who desperately want to fit in. If your child does not want to share his/her information, respect that. When my son was writing his Bar Mitzvah speech, I encouraged him to talk about how hard he had worked to achieve his goal. He adamantly refused—he wanted everyone to think he had breezed through! (So many years have now passed that he is no longer embarrassed to have his story told.)
- > **Enjoy!** Too many times we parents get so wrapped up in worry over the details of a lifecycle celebration that we really don't enjoy it. That goes double when a child has concentration or learning issues. Keep in mind the audience at a lifecycle ceremony is the least critical audience in the world. They are already sure the child will be wonderful—and somehow, he or she always is.

SOME HELPFUL HINTS FOR STUDENTS

Believe in yourself. You are not stupid—your attention and learning problems are the direct result of identified neurological issues not low intelligence or low will power.



You can have the lifecycle celebration you want if the correct educational approach is used. Also, keep in mind no lifecycle event is a contest. Do not compare yours to your friend's or sibling's. Instead, measure success by the level of effort you expend and your commitment.

> Be your own advocate. No matter what you are studying it can be taught in a manner appropriate for you to learn.

However, not all teachers (or parents) will immediately be aware when something is being taught in a manner that doesn't make good sense to you. Don't hesitate to speak up when something does not make sense. People do not look down on you for advocating for yourself—they respect you for it.

Enjoy! A lifecycle event happens only one time in your whole life. It is natural to be nervous, but don't let worry get out of hand and ruin your time. Especially keep in mind that on the day of your ceremony those in the audience already know you are wonderful.

ditions for a preteen boy to accept, but we would accept no less.

Michael chose to have a Bar Mitzvah in our synagogue. Michael had always shown a strong work ethic, and he agreed to work on learning as much of the curriculum as possible. We sweetened the pot with the promise of a party.

Speed bumps

For practical reasons, we decided that I would manage the Bar Mitzvah study plan. My livelihood was earned tutoring students with all types of special needs, and I already helped with our son's regular school education. So it made sense to do the same for his Bar Mitzvah education. Michael had always said that his AD/HD and learning issues were like speed bumps—they slowed him down but never stopped him cold. My first job was to figure out how many of those speed bumps currently stood before him and a successful Bar Mitzvah.

I analyzed the curriculum from our synagogue and concluded the study was all-inclusive, but there was some variability in what each child actually did at his or her ceremony. I further

concluded Michael could concentrate his efforts on the items most children did and still have a Bar Mitzvah he would find acceptable. I made a list of each of those requirements, and I had Michael try to read or chant each one. I carefully noted which he could do well, somewhat, or not at all. This list gave me a concrete understanding of how much had to be accomplished. Speed bump number one was cleared.

Unfortunately, speed bump number two popped up fast and was more of a hurdle. Most of the requirements had to be read or chanted in Hebrew—a formidable problem for Michael. With his combination of AD/HD and learning disabilities, Michael had never mastered reading Hebrew. But time and knowledge were on my side. First, I knew I had a year and a half for focused study; and second, I knew that Michael was a better auditory learner than visual learner.

I made what I called a "rigidly flexible" schedule. Michael and I worked together five out of almost every seven days for all those months. That was the rigid part—making sure we kept to a schedule. The flexible part was that we varied the days and amount of

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time we spent each day according to my son's wishes and needs: his mood, his school workload, vacations (we never worked on vacations). On the best days we worked as long as 30-45 minutes. On not so good days, we worked 5-10 minutes. On days when Michael felt more relaxed and focused, we worked on something new. On less relaxed days we reviewed work already learned.

At first I set the days and the time of day to make it convenient for me. But Michael grumbled if he had to be interrupted from something he was doing. So we compromised. As long as he chose five out of every seven, he could select the day and the time and even change it daily, just as long as he did not pick an entirely inappropriate time (dinner, late at night, etc.).

Making good use of my knowledge of learning strategies was tougher than scheduling. By definition, an auditory learner usually "gets" more information when it is presented orally that when it is written. As an auditory learner, I initially assumed Michael could learn everything by listening to a tape. But I quickly found that he needed more input than just his ears. The material was simply too unfamiliar for him to master using only one sense. By trial and error, I found a successful teaching method: I listened to the tape and mastered each section. Then I taught it to Michael—in very slow, small doses—using a multisensory approach. Michael listened to me slowly sing/chant (auditory input) while he looked at the written page (visual input) and followed along with his finger touching each word (tactile input). He still never really learned to read Hebrew, but he recognized and memorized the prayers by practicing this way.

Personal success

For the most part, this plan worked because it set realistic goals and gave Michael a say in its operation. However, I won't lie and say it all went smoothly. Each time we started something new, Michael would be sulky and demanding (you're going too fast, you're too loud, too slow; I'm hungry, I'm bored, I'm thirsty, etc.). Once I recognized the pattern, I explained it to him, and he really did try not to let it happen. But I think he truly dreaded beginning each new section.

Once when tensions were heating up, I slammed shut the book and made Michael leave the house with me. I told him we were going for a walk to clear the air. We started out with me in the lead, furiously walking and pumping my arms as fast as I could. Michael was doing the same but making sure not to give me the satisfaction of walking with me—he was about half a block behind. As I cooled down and slowed down, he must have cooled down too, because the next thing I knew he was walking with me. After a while we actually talked to each other, and by the time we got home we were both feeling okay. I never kept track of how many times we had to resort to walking, but I know I lost five pounds without dieting!

Most people were surprised that I would take on the responsibility of being my own son's Bar Mitzvah teacher. But I saw myself as his tutor, not his teacher. My job was not to bypass the

religious school program but to prepare Michael well enough so that he could participate in the program. Sometimes this method is called "pre-teaching." It involves giving a student material at a slower speed and with a methodology more appropriate for him to learn, so that he becomes familiar enough with the material to "get" it when it is taught in class. Michael's classmates were unaware of his pre-teaching and his many hours of work at home. They only saw this kid who seemed to learn the material rather quickly in class. Michael loved feeling "smart" in Hebrew school for the first time!

And then it happened. Our son walked into the synagogue one Saturday morning a boy. He put on the *tallit* (prayer shawl) of a man and flawlessly led the congregation in prayer as though it were the easiest and most natural task in the world. And nothing was ever quite the same again. That day really did mark the first step toward Michael's adult life and his independence from his dad and me. Michael had a personally successful Bar Mitzvah—and that made it a perfect Bar Mitzvah. **②**

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