

Bat Mitzvah Spans the Generations

A parent in Portland, Oregon sent us this amazing story of connection, redemption, and community building arising from a simple commitment to the legacy of memory.

Our daughter Emma's Bat Mitzvah was approaching, and we wanted to go beyond the immensely meaningful act of leading the service and reading from the Torah, so that Emma could connect community and ancestors to her Bat Mitzvah. (Her Hebrew name is Keshira, a blend of Keshet [connection] and Shira [song].)

We had heard from past B'nai Mitzvah about the Remember Us Project, and every time we had encountered it we had been moved by the way it resonated through the decades, a linking of the dark past with the reasonably light present. Emma was enthusiastic about having that as a mitzvah project. She had already read some about the individuals who had survived and perished in the Holocaust. Emma wanted to create a hand-painted silk tallit (I am an artist who hand-paints silk), make it a part of the ceremony, and then bury it to honor the life of the young girl.

Soon after, I went to a birthday celebration with six women at a Cirque du Soleil performance. A daughter of the woman whose birthday we were celebrating was due to have her Bat Mitzvah the week before Emma's. We talked about the Remember Us Project and the mother was interested. The woman next to me, Terre Gordon, whom I had just met, asked more about the project. The conversation led to a discovery: Terre was married to a man whose father was a survivor. His father's sister Sonia and mother had died in the Vilna Ghetto when his sister was 12 years old. Terre was pretty sure that her husband Noah and his father, Isaac, would be willing to answer a few questions and help Emma make a direct connection with her own personal remembrance project.

Things moved quickly from that point. Noah was going to visit his parents for Passover in New York that week. On the same day we got confirmation that Isaac had agreed to this idea, we received the name of the girl for Emma from Remember Us. We asked the bat mitzvah scheduled for the week before ours to honor Ellen Rosenberg, the name we had received from Remember Us, and Emma chose to remember Sonia Gordon.

The Gordon family came to lunch, and shared pictures of their family and a trip they had taken to see the Vilna Ghetto. Emma presented the questions she had created for Noah to interview his father, who generally did not like to talk much about those awful times. The 12-year-old's questions ranged from what Sonia's favorite color was, to if she liked to read, to if the family was religious. Noah went to New York and came back with some great information about Sonia Gordon, the aunt he never got to meet. He brought back a beautiful photo of Sonia, and Emma was most struck that she and Sonia were not that different.

But it goes further. It happened that our family already planned a trip to New York in the summer, and we arranged to meet Isaac and Rivka ourselves. In a great trip, this was the highlight. The Gordons welcomed us into their home—sweet, warm people—and were most generous in their sharing of food, chocolate, and best of all, stories. They both had fought in the Resistance, stepping up to heroism when they should have just had to worry about dating. They accepted us so fully it felt like we were family.

But talking was not all that occurred. Back in Portland, Emma had designed a tallit which we both would paint and then which would be presented to Sonia's nephew, Noah, and her great nephew, Gabe (Noah and Terre's son) at Emma's Bat Mitzvah. The tallit featured a dancing Sonia (a favorite activity of hers), and a weeping willow whose falling leaves, representing the souls of those who perished in the Holocaust, floated down a river peacefully until they soared up to meet God. We brought Sonia's tallit with us for Isaac to tie the tzitzit. To say that he was moved would not begin to capture the welling up of emotion he

felt for his sister whom he had not seen in 64 years, and for our family, whom he had met an hour before. Amazing moments.

The Bat Mitzvah itself was two months later. Emma did great. Noah and his family were there. After we showed the tallit to the congregation and told a bit of our story, the tallit was used to cover the Torah between readings. To an already emotional day, it added a whole other dimension. It was like Emma was sharing her Bat Mitzvah with Sonia. In the lobby was an enlarged photograph of Sonia, with some paragraphs about her life. After the service Noah received the tallit, and weeks later, during High Holy Days, he delivered it to his parents in New York.

We feel so fortunate to have been able to meet the Gordons and to involve Sonia and Emma in the same great event. The confluence that led to this was beshert. We were hoping for meaning, we got meaning and so much more. Thank you to the Remember Us Project for being the open doorway for depth and healing and remembering. n

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“The story of Emma Fredgant’s bat mitzvah is a stirring example of the potential healing power of the simple spiritual practice that is Remember Us. As the bat mitzvah service unfolded we witnessed its palpable effect on Sonia Gordon’s family members. For me, it was as if painful, scattered, unspeakable memories were being knit together, as if something lost was being reclaimed. In this particular situation, which all along the way involved a number of synchronicities, it felt to me that important tikkuneem (sacred fixings) were being made from a very deep—and to us, incomprehensible—level of soul.”

Rabbi Aryeh Hirschfield
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