



Gesher Calmenson, left, talks with a pre-bar mitzvah family.

Add memory to a mitzvah

'Remember Us' comes to Boston area

By Molly Ritvo

Gesher Calmenson, founder of "Remember Us: The Holocaust Bnai Mitzvah Project," traveled to Boston from his native California earlier this month to promote the work of his organization. Founded four years ago, "Remember Us" pairs Jewish teens as they prepare for their b'nai mitzvah with children who were lost in the Holocaust before being called to the Torah.

According to Calmenson, the idea for "Remember Us" originated while he was traveling in Israel and realized he was still grieving over the Holocaust.

"I realized there was a wound in my heart and in the identity of the Jewish people," said Calmenson. "These are our mispacha [family] who died. We lost all of these souls, and we are all a family, regardless of genealogy. We all need to mourn the victims."

Calmenson decided to focus his efforts toward younger generations because of the growing disconnect from Jewish youth and the Holocaust.

"With the passing of the last generation of Holocaust survivors, children are having a harder time relating to that painful part of Jewish history," Calmenson said. "I wanted to give kids something meaningful to do that allowed them to connect to the Holocaust in a significant way."

With a grant from friend and fellow Jewish educator Debbie Findling, a program officer at the San Francisco-based Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund, Calmenson began pitching his idea to area synagogues. And many synagogues were very receptive to his project.

Calmenson and his staff suggest several ways for b'nai mitzvah students to honor the memory of children of the Holocaust: The Jewish teens can speak the name of the remembered child

from the bimah, recite Kaddish annually, or perform mitzvot b'shem – good deeds in the name of the child whose memory he or she is carrying.

"Our goal is to try to establish an enduring ritual in Judaism, like breaking a glass under the chuppah," said Calmenson. "In a moment of great joy, you remember the past, but we're doing it in a redemptive way. As you celebrate, you honor the past."

Calmenson and his wife, Cynthia, outreach coordinator for "Remember Us," met with Jewish leaders at various Boston area synagogues as part of their promotional tour. Calmenson also approached the Bureau of Jewish Education and the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts.

"I was very impressed by Calmenson's selfless devotion to the project and the innovative way that he has brought it to fruition," said Alan Teperow, executive director of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts. "It is inspiring to see individuals who volunteer countless hours to such an important cause, aided by a modest budget and infrastructure, and who are able to achieve so much."

Teperow added that the Synagogue Council plans to add "Remember Us" information to its 120 area congregations.

To date, "Remember Us" has worked with 4,800 b'nai mitzvah students in 168 congregations, both nationally and internationally.

"Our project gives children the possibility of responding to something," said Calmenson. "We can't change history, but we can do one thing to help cherish those who perished."

For more information on "Remember Us: The Holocaust Bnai Mitzvah project," visit www.remember-us.org.