

# Jews With Special Needs Prepare for a Rite of Passage

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Jordan Levy, 24, helped make sandwiches last month while preparing for his bar mitzvah along with other students in Hauppauge, N.Y. Drumming helped him memorize lines of the Torah, he said. Alex Wroblewski/The New York Times



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**HAUPPAUGE, N.Y.** — The students and tutors gathered around the table ready for the task at hand: 40 cheese and 40 bologna sandwiches, the meat and cheese separated to follow kosher rules.

The lesson, late last month, was on acts of loving kindness, or gemilut hasadim in Hebrew. Donating sandwiches to a local soup kitchen is a way to demonstrate kindness, a tutor, Lisa Mintz, told the young adults who were there as part of their preparation to become bar or bat mitzvah.

In Conservative Judaism, a boy becomes a bar mitzvah at 13 and a girl a bat mitzvah at 12. But for four people with special needs in a residential program called Giant Step, here in this Long Island suburb, the rite of passage that includes reciting Hebrew and learning Jewish traditions did not seem possible when they were teenagers.

Now in their 20s and 30s, the four young adults, who all have cognitive disabilities, will become b'nai mitzvah — the plural term — on Saturday. Dr. Mark Sandberg, a psychologist at Giant Step who is also on the board at [Dix Hills Jewish Center](#), a Conservative synagogue, proposed the belated b'nai mitzvah after hearing the residents' sadness at missing a ritual they saw their cousins, brothers and sisters go through.

“This bar mitzvah in my head kind of got to me,” said Jordan Levy, 24, one of the four students. “And it actually made me become a better person.”

In Mr. Levy's first lesson with Ms. Mintz, he learned about charity. He made a tzedakah box, a can decorated with colored paper to collect spare change.

The first time he filled the can, he donated the money to a foundation for pancreatic cancer. His father, Joel Levy, died from the disease in 2010.

“He was like my best friend and my soul mate,” he said. “We did everything together. We spoke about Diet Coke. He gave me strength.”

His father wore a suit and a tie to work every day, Mr. Levy remembered, and for the b'nai mitzvah he will wear his father's wedding tie.

Unrolling the Torah at Dix Hills Jewish Center. Alex Wroblewski/The New York Times



Unrolling the Torah at Dix Hills Jewish Center. Alex Wroblewski/The New York Times

Jokes abounded as the group worked. “It’s a good thing I ate lunch,” David Finkelstein, the director and founder of Giant Step, said. Mr. Finkelstein, who went by Mr. Levy’s apartment to help with the lesson, was immediately supportive when Dr. Sandberg proposed the b’nai mitzvah.

“Dave,” the students admonished him, drawing out the syllable.

“You’re full of baloney,” another student, Jamie Metzger, 30, said, eliciting giggles. She donated money from her own tzedakah box to breast cancer research in honor of her aunt, a cancer survivor.

After they finished with the sandwiches, each student took turns chanting from the Torah. The clear voice of Ariel Goller, 27, quieted the room as she chanted in Hebrew.

Mr. Levy donned his skullcap to chant, but took it off to play the drums for

the audience gathered in his living room.

Drumming to a beat has helped him to memorize the lines of the Torah he will be reading Saturday.

“You have to somehow get melodies in your head, to get it in your mind,” he said.

The team of tutors, two for each student, includes a doctor, a lawyer, a cookie baker and a pottery maker. One tutor teaches each student Hebrew, the other Jewish tradition. Each has found creative ways to help their students learn.

Dori Kirshner is the executive director of [Matan](#), an organization that trains leaders in the Jewish community to expand education for Jews with special needs.

She said historically a bar or bat mitzvah was not an option for a person with a disability.

“Judaism takes scholarship and mastery of material and intellectual pursuit of knowledge very seriously,” Ms. Kirshner said. “What that meant was that people who learn differently or had different abilities were not necessarily included.”

Mr. Levy’s Hebrew teacher, Sharon Gabay, said the synagogue gave her a copy of the Torah reading in small print. But her student is legally blind in one eye and could not see the text.

“I had to print everything very, very large,” Ms. Gabay said. She taught word by word. “He gets distracted if there is too much.”

The week before their b’nai mitzvah, the four students joined their Giant Step peers for a dance class held at Dix Hills Jewish Center. The synagogue’s rabbi, Howard Buechler, high-fived the young adults as they flooded in.

Rabbi Buechler at Dix Hills Jewish Center. “Their bar and bat mitzvah is showing that God’s love and the portals of our synagogue and every synagogue are open to everyone,” he said. Alex Wroblewski/The New York Times

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They danced to popular contemporary songs — “Watch Me (Whip/Nae Nae)” was a crowd-pleaser — before switching to traditional Jewish dances like the hora. The class was a chance to feel comfortable at the synagogue before the big day and share their Jewish culture with their friends, Dr. Sandberg said.

“We are all amazed at how it is transforming them,” Lori Levy, Mr. Levy’s mother, said. “We never dreamed they would ever be able to comprehend any of this. It just gave them an amazing sense of identity and accomplishment.”

Mr. Levy said he now considers, “What would God think?” before he makes a choice.

“When I was 13 I wanted to just have a party,” Mr. Levy said. “And that was it.”

Ben Kaplan, 24, studied topics like the Holocaust with his tutor. He had already learned about it in high school, but it was still awful to talk about, he said.

Becoming a bar mitzvah means to “become a man in Jewish culture and society and to take that next step,” Mr. Kaplan explained.

“It takes time to learn things,” he said of the preparation for his bar mitzvah. “You have to be patient. And have a high tolerance and stuff like that. It’s hard.”

Karen Metzger, Ms. Metzger’s mother, said: “Honestly, we really didn’t think she was going to do it. When we first spoke to her about it she seemed

reluctant. We weren't sure if she would go through with it, but she absolutely loved it.”

Mastering English reading was not easy for her daughter to begin with, so reading transliterated Hebrew created more of a challenge.

Down the hallway from the dance floor, the tutors met to plan for the coming celebration. They coordinated who would recite which reading or blessing and how to mitigate nerves and fear. They relayed the progress of each student.

“Ariel knows her Hebrew,” her tutor said proudly.

The synagogue will be filled with nearly 200 people for the service.

“Their bar and bat mitzvah is showing that God's love and the portals of our synagogue and every synagogue are open to everyone,” Rabbi Buechler said. “When the bar and bat mitzvah ends, their Jewish life is just beginning.”

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