

B'nai mitzvah gives 'new outlook on life'

By Len Gutman
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Thirty-nine year old Abbie Heller says she's proud to be a Jew and live a Jewish lifestyle. She attends synagogue and is an active member of Yad B'Yad, a Jewish adult social club where she takes part in a variety of religious, social, educational and recreational activities.

But for Heller, the shining moment of her Jewish life came last Saturday at Temple Chai when she completed her bat mitzvah – a difficult undertaking for anyone, but a particularly hard task for Heller considering she has a rare developmental disorder called Prader-Willi Syndrome.

Heller was one of six men and women who participated in Arizona's first b'nai mitzvah class for developmentally disabled adults. The class was a result of the efforts of the Council for Jews with Special Needs, Shalom House and Temple Chai.

"I always wanted to have a bat mitzvah, but I just knew that I wouldn't really have the time and the opportunity to get the special attention since I am a handicapped person," says Heller. "But the Council for Jews with Special Needs and Becca Hornstein had this idea and brought it up to us at (CJSN's) Yad B'Yad and naturally we said, 'yes.' "

Heller's mother, Jean, says her daughter's accomplishment is something she never dreamed she'd be doing.

"She studied very hard, the teachers who taught the class were excellent, and her sister tutored her here at home," says Jean Heller. "We're very proud of her."

Abbie Heller has three sisters, yet she's the first to have a bat mitzvah. Her mother says she loves to go to temple and that now she feels like she's really a part of the Jewish community.

"To me it means a brand new outlook on life. It means that I am of age to become involved in the Jewish community," says Abbie Heller. "And now God will mean more in our lives too."

Joining Abbie Heller on the bimah for the b'nai mitzvah were five other developmentally disabled adults: Jaime Feibusch; Stuart Grossman; Jason Levy; Jesse Shnier; and Ronald Zimbaum. Two other disabled adults participated in the class and service, Kevin Cramin and Joel Hornstein, though both already had a bar mitzvah. Hornstein is the son of Becca Hornstein, executive director of CJSN.

Hornstein and her husband raised two children with special needs, son Joel, 28, who is autistic, and daughter Shana, 25, who was born with physical deformities. After moving to Arizona from St. Louis 18 years ago, Hornstein was confounded by the lack of religious-based education and services for disabled children and

adults.

"We realized that one of the gaping holes in our lives was that our son with developmental disabilities could not attend a Jewish summer camp, could not get into a religious school, and was not always welcomed at Shabbat and holiday services," she says.

Then she found Temple Chai and approached Rabbi William Berk and asked him why there seemed to be a double standard that allowed her disabled daughter to begin training for her bat mitzvah at Temple Chai while her son was considered "too disabled" to study for his bar mitzvah.

"The rabbi and the congregation welcomed us and said, 'Let's do it,' so we created the first special education class in Arizona in a Jewish setting, and my son was the first student," she explains.

This idea led to the creation of CJSN in 1985. Today Temple Chai has more than 100 students who have special needs.

"I can't tell you about the incredible outpouring of warmth and financial support and emotional support that the Jewish community has given once they were made aware of the fact that there were all sorts of children, teens and adults with disabilities who didn't have a chance to go to religious school or have a bar mitzvah or attend summer camp," Hornstein says.

Once these programs were in place, many young disabled children have had a bar or bat mitzvah, but there were still plenty of disabled adults who never had the chance. Six men and women finally got that opportunity on Jan. 19.

"We're really happy that this is happening," says Cliff Shnier, whose son Jesse, 20, is autistic. "It's really wonderful that CJSN was able to make an event like this happen. It's doing something wonderful for Jesse."

Cliff Shnier says Jesse is really into the fact that he's Jewish, and he was on board with the bar mitzvah right from the word go.

"Even though we're not regular temple-goers, he's always been aware of Jewish traditions, and this is one that has been sticking out in his mind," says Shnier.

More than 50 friends and family members, "people who had a role in making Jesse who he is today," according to Shnier, joined them in the synagogue for the service.

The class members had a wide range of disabilities, from autism to mental retardation and Down Syndrome. This made things especially challenging for the teachers who worked with the students for nearly two years, meeting twice per month.

Gila Brook, a special education teacher, and Robin Eichner, who specializes in teaching deaf people, brought the students along at their own pace, teaching them prayers and songs in Hebrew and English.

"Gila and I didn't know what to expect at the beginning, but when we started out, we were both pleasantly surprised by their motivational level," says Eichner.

They all really wanted to be there, and they were thrilled with every bit of information that we gave them."

The students learned the prayers and songs and were able to recite them back to the teachers, which meant the students definitely retained the information.

"We started out just learning about Jewish holidays and Judaism and the people in a synagogue like a rabbi and a cantor," says Brook, "Then after about six months we started on the prayers."

Both teachers said they were honored to be a part of such a unique experience and that they had fun over the past two years. Brook had an especially gratifying experience since she had never worked with special needs adults before.

"It was tremendous," Brook said "They are so loving and much more involved than the kids. It was a lot of fun."

Hornstein said the students came into the class with enthusiasm, commitment and a serious notion that they were going to have to study.

"They wanted to have a bar or bat mitzvah and they wanted to be a Jewish adult," she said. "They did it for the best of all possible reasons, to enhance their Judaism and their sense of belonging to the Jewish community."

Sam Zimtbaum said his son Ronald, the eldest of the class members at 41, was hesitant at first because he thought the work would be too hard for him. Ronald Zimtbaum is disabled and has learning disabilities, but that didn't slow him down.

"He wasn't that thrilled at first, but he went to a few classes to see what it was like, and the teachers were very good," says Zimtbaum. "As he got into it little by little, he got more and more interested, plus both his brothers had their bar mitvahs years ago."

Zimtbaum said the entire event turned into a wonderful experience for their whole family.

"When they first started, I really didn't think they'd be as advanced as they are," he says. "I was really pleasantly surprised at how well they have done."

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