

LOOKING BACK

Some comments about Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah Projects One of the Great Inventions of the North American Jewish Community

[BBMMP=bar/bat Mitzvah Mitzvah project]

DISCLAIMER

I did not “invent” the BBMMP. I might take credit for spreading the idea around North America through my lectures and multitude of contacts with Rabbis, cantors, and Jewish educators. I would not necessarily say that I am the one but I am one of them.

THE IMPACT OF THIS GREAT “INVENTION”

In 2004, I published my book *Danny Siegel’s Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah Book*. In the introduction I wrote the following:

The simple fact is that hundreds of thousands of lives have been touched because of Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah projects and Tzedakah money. I personally believe that the more accurate figure is millions of lives, but I wouldn’t want my readers to doubt the credibility of this book because they think that I am exaggerating.

Now, more than a decade later, I still believe it is true, with more and more evidence appearing with each bar and bat Mitzvah.

A BRIEF BUT CRUCIAL GRAMMATICAL NOTE

The terms “Bar Mitzvah” and “Bat Mitzvah” do *not* mean “son of a Mitzvah” and “daughter of a Mitzvah”. Those are bad grammatical translations and cumbersome, if not bad, English. The more accurate translation is “Mitzvah person” (masculine and feminine), and the meaning is, the child’s status is now permanently changed. From now on, he or she is supposed to spend his or her life engaged in Mitzvahs. Technically, this applies to when they have reached a certain age (Talmudically, 13 for a male and 12 for a female, though nowadays most equalize at 13) — whether or not there is a ceremony.

THE EARLY DAYS TO NOW: A HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

In the early days of BBMMP, we often heard, “It’s the parents’ suggestions.” My own experience tracking the history indicates that that may have been the case for some of the projects, but not as many as the critics said or wrote. Even if there were some “way back when”, the percentage of parent-generated projects has diminished significantly. However, there are noticeable numbers nowadays where the “kid” has incorporated the parent into the project, and, originating with the bar or bat Mitzvah child, it has become, in a sense, a joint project.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

I'm not really certain, but Soviet Refuseniks began their protests sometime in the late 1960's. Many B'nai and B'not Mitzvah wore bracelets with their names, "twinned" with them, and spoke about them in their invitations and speeches, and in many cases wrote to them, some even receiving letters in return. My records only go back to the early 1980's for this method of elevating the event to something beyond the general practice back then, but some must have already been doing this in the '70's.

My first real contact with the expanded reach of the BBMMP's – the whole world of opportunity for Tikkun Olam is out there – was through the late Rabbi Bernard King of Shir HaMa'a lot Harbor Reform Temple in Newport Beach, California. I don't know who informed me about what was happening there, but I was in touch with him, and after a couple of years I went to see his students myself. It was very moving, and, of course, eye opening. In retrospect it seems like a real "duh!" nowadays.

While all his bar and bat Mitzvah students had projects, I want to mention those of his own sons to give you an idea of how Rabbi King was really on to something:

His son Neil Michael's Simcha was in 1983, and he sponsored a concert by the Hi Hopes, a band composed of mentally-challenged but musically-talented individuals for the community.

His brother Stephen's (*not* the scary author Stephen King) was in 1987. Stephen (1) twinned with a Refusenik, (2) in lieu of gifts, asked people to bring non-perishable foods to be donated, (3) in place of a reception, took the families from a local shelter for homeless people to a baseball game.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT HAS HAPPENED AND IS HAPPENING:

I know about hundreds of BBMMPs, having collected invitations, read about them, heard about them from people in my lectures on the road, and from people who have sent me from their families, seen stories on TV and the internet. Below are only a sample of what I have and what I had before I sent collections off to educators. They are broken down into two categories – project projects, and Tikkun Olam made possible by donating to Tzedakah from the money they received. I am sure you will agree that the creativity of many of them is simply dazzling:

Projects:

- Bringing her horse to a hospital so that children who are well enough could ride,
- collecting de-activated cellphones to be donated to women suffering from domestic abuse (they still dial 911 for free),
- having laundry detergent centerpieces on the tables and explaining that she was paying to fix industrial-strength washing machine at a shelter,
- bringing Legos – including a hundred boxes with complete kits to a shelter, playing with the children, and then leaving them there,
- acting as an assistant coach for a cheerleading team of intellectually-limited girls,
- creating a website about what it is to be a sibling of someone with autism,

- “Dress It Up” - collecting party dresses for inner-city young women (who kept the dresses) and throwing a grand party (the boys being kept occupied before the party with games, the location, hairdressers, food, DJ, etc. – all donated),
- Amy’s Holiday Party for inner-city children every December – now in its 21st year (this year, 800 guests from financially homes, 350 volunteers),
- as mentioned above, symbolically sharing with a Refusenik,
- sharing symbolically with someone his or her age who died in the Shoah,
- twinning with a survivor of the Shoah,
- paying for waterproof iPads for special needs children at Jerusalem’s Shalva for special needs children (usable during hydrotherapy lessons),
- purchasing a pedigreed dog to be used as a co-therapist by Avshalom Beni for his miracle-working animal-assisted therapy program in Israel (HAMA),
- collecting stuffed animals and having them taken to Israel to be distributed to children in need of them,
- collecting books for children going through chemotherapy,
- photographing and posting on the synagogue website all the graves in its cemetery so that people who are unable to visit the graves can have some contact,
- organizing and supervising the Geniza ceremony for the synagogue,
- making blankets for Elders with Alzheimers living in a group home,
- donating wigs to patients with cancer,
- donating stuffed animals and books to an agency serving people affected by AIDS.
- ...And at least two young people I know of designed their own invitations.

Money:

There are a number of bar and bat Mitzvah people who donate some or all of their bar or bat Mitzvah money to worthy Tzedakah projects. Others have asked people in lieu of presents to donate to a specific Tzedakah the Mitzvah person likes or to any Tzedakah of their choice. Clearly, project projects outnumber projects involving money, but I see the latter category growing over the years. The “money Mitzvah people” know that the gifts are not “their hard-earned money”. Money examples include:

- Purchasing DVD players for every child in the chemotherapy room, and a wide selection of DVD’s so children going through treatment can have their *individualized* entertainment (and distraction),
- buying infant car seats with bat Mitzvah money to be given to families that cannot afford them,
- donating \$1,000 to the local animal shelter to buy dog food for homeless persons’ dogs,
- purchasing teddy bears to be distributed through the local community’s social service agency to kids who *really* need them,
- using BBM money to establish a chess program for young people and Elders, including buying the chess sets,
- from an invitation in 1982-“*Due to the crisis facing our brethren in Israel, [not the Stephen King mentioned above] has asked that we cancel his Bar Mitzvah reception and make a donation in place of the reception to the Israel*

Emergency Fund”; “According to David’s wishes, we ask that in lieu of a gift you bring non-perishable groceries which we will distribute to help settle a Soviet family. In addition, we will forego a reception and donate these funds to help Soviet Jews in need.”

- ...And several families decided that instead of holding the BBM locally, they used the money to take the family to Israel and celebrate there.

A VARIATION:

Several synagogues require their bnei and bnot Mitzvah *Kinderlach* to do 13 Mitzvahs, some small- or medium-size ones, and at least one big one. I have not received any feedback from the Rabbis that families raised objections to this program.

THE OBJECTION

There *is* some opposition to the idea of *forcing* these projects on the children. Even if the Rabbi explains that “Mitzvah” means “commandment, obligation” and is not the same as “voluntary”, some parents still express this dissatisfaction. There are even cases relating to the high school requirement of a certain number of hours of volunteer work to graduate when the families took the issue to court...and lost.

POSSIBLE EDUCATION FOR LIFE THE PROJECTS AND THEIR LIVES LATER ON

I believe BBMMPs reinforce my late friend Arleen Sternfeld’s statement “You don’t have to be who you thought you wanted to be when you were 18”. Through the BBMMP, children at this early stage in life may have a sense that there is an alternative to good grades, Ivy League college, and a good job. Some of them understand that their families have made excellence, achievement, and competitiveness into a fetish, with no real life-context, no reference to a goal of Tikkun Olam. (a shocking statistic that I heard recently was that , of 359 Brandeis students who were tested for bone marrow, 300 of them were on anti-depressants.) As Maurice Sendak, the famous author of *Where the Wild Things Are*, stated it, they “get” it, “There must be more to life than having everything.” And Winston Churchill, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” And the brilliant Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, “Tzedakah is not about giving; Tzedakah is about being.” This brings us back to our definition of bar and bat Mitzvah as “Mitzvah person”.

Besides, they will have learned early on that they have more power than they ever thought, power to have an impact on the lives of others. After all, there they are, a “kid” standing in front of so many people from so many places, many of whom have joined them or will join them in their Mitzvah project. (I think of a teen-ager I met who told me that she had asked for donations, and an aunt gave her \$10,000. And I think of a grandfather who purchased and donated a Sefer Torah in his grandson’s honor.) I do not recall a single teen-ager I have spoken with who, looking back, felt that his or her Mitzvah project was just “kid’s stuff”. It is hoped that when they are 28 or 33 or 55 and “out there in the ‘real’ world”, they will understand how really real their BBMMP was.

(I suspect that one explanation for so many Rabbinical students being second- and 3rd-career people is akin to this phenomenon.)

And we are fortunate nowadays that there is continuity offered to them as they grow up such as: youth group Tikkun Olam projects, high school requirements, offices on campuses devoted to facilitating student's volunteering, alternative Winter and Spring breaks. This, in addition to many who continue their specific projects for a year or two or 10 or 20 afterwards.

A FINAL NOTE – TO PARENTS

Have I ever asked myself, “Is my child gifted in Tikkun Olam-type Mitzvahs?”

And

Have I discussed my own Mitzvah work with my child?

And

Have I spoken to my child about where I give my Tzedakah money, and how I decide where and how much to give?

Indeed, a recent study as shown, that it is not enough to model by your actions the kind of Mitzvah-person you are. You have to also *talk to them* about it.

One of my favorite stories of a child “getting” it I first read in *People* magazine, and then went to meet the man featured in the story. It's about a man named Tuck Donnelly, a fisherman. While working as a manager on a commercial fishing vessel, one of Tuck Donnelly's crew members told him how distressed he was about how much fish they had to throw back — dead or alive — because of government regulations...good protein that could feed hungry Americans. They were allowed to keep only pollock and cod. After many meetings and long negotiations, Donnelly succeeded in having the government change the regulations and now his Mitzvah project, SeaShare, has become a supplier of millions of pounds of fish to food banks, soup kitchens, and shelters around the country. Commercial vessels and processors have come “on board,” and many thousands of Americans are eating more healthy food due to SeaShare's efforts. It's a wonderful Mitzvah story, to be sure. But do Mr. Donnelly's children “get it”? Do they know what Daddy is “all about”? The answer is a most definite Yes, and the proof is that one day, Mr. Donnelly's wife, Jax, overheard a conversation between their daughter, Rachel and two friends. The first one said, “My Dad's a lawyer, and he makes a lot of money.” The second one said, “My Dad's a doctor, and he makes a lot of money.” Rachel's words say it all — “My Dad feeds hungry people.”