



# L'Dor v'Dor

Multigenerational Bar and Bat Mitzvah Celebrations in Israel

By Tova Gilead

Photos: Moshe Barazani

The first Bat Mitzvah celebration in the U.S. was held on March 18, 1922, when Judith Kaplan, the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement, turned 12.

Sixty-eight years later, in August 1990, Judith Kaplan and her husband Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, along with their daughter Ann, celebrated the Bar Mitzvah of their grandson Aaron on Masada. They were one of many three-generational families who have travelled to Israel on my tours for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration. Since becoming a tour operator in 1982, my slogan has been: "Three generations are my specialty, and

I try to make the rite of passage an event that involves the child, the parents and the grandparents."

Our family trip to Israel turned out to include not three, but four generations, as my mother-in-law, Ruth Weiss, 93, decided to come along for her great granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah. Ruth was born in New Haven, CT in 1915 to immigrant parents who escaped the pogroms in Lithuania and came to the US at the turn of the century. In those days, it was not customary for girls to read from the Torah, and so Ruth never had a Bat Mitzvah.

Ever since my granddaughter Katie was little, I used to tell her about "Jerusalem of Gold" and play her the song of that name by Naomi

Rabbi Michael Boyden blessing the Bat Mitzvah Katie



< Shemer, performed for the first time by a young Israeli soldier, Shuli Natan. I promised Katie that when she turned twelve, I would take her to Israel to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah in Jerusalem of Gold. The image captivated her, and she counted the years until she turned 12 in 2008.

Katie's Bat Mitzvah took place at Robinson's Arch, in the Archeological Garden of Jerusalem, amidst the stones of the second temple. The service was moving in both its depth and simplicity. At the end, Rabbi Boyden handed the Torah to great grandma Ruth, who transferred it to us, the grandparents, then to the parents, and finally to the Bat Mitzvah girl, Katie. Rabbi Boyden then said, "A multi-generational Bat Mitzvah ceremony provides a moving opportunity for grandparents, parents and children to join together to mark a unique milestone in the life of the family. Passing the Torah down from generation to generation symbolizes the link between the past, present and future and the site of the Bat or Bar Mitzvah as the next link in the chain of our Jewish heritage that reaches back thousands of years."

That evening we had a celebration banquet at the King David Hotel and were thrilled to have Shuli Natan sing Yerushalayim Shel Zahav: "Jerusalem of gold, of copper and light, I am a violin for all your songs"...

One of the highlights of the trip was the visit to Kfar Kedem in the Galilee. It took us back to biblical times, and we loved riding the donkeys. It was a lot of fun, even for great grandma Ruth.

On my family tours, the guide keeps all the generations engaged throughout the trip, and the children come away with a deeper sense of Jewish history and a more profound appreciation for their family. After visiting the Western Wall on Friday night and touching the ancient stones, Alyssa, a Bat Mitzvah girl, said, "I feel so Jewish." Benji, who had his Bar Mitzvah on Masada, said, "I feel different now about being Jewish." Heidi, after her Bat Mitzvah on Masada with her parents and grandma said, "Now I know what it really means to be a Jew." Katie, my granddaughter, still reminisces about her Bat Mitzvah, and how she gained an appreciation for the history of Judaism and how to apply Jewish values to her daily life.



*Dressing up "Biblical Style".  
Katie with Great Grandmother  
Ruth and brother Brandon*



*Fun riding the donkeys  
at K'far Kedem. Katie  
with her father Sean,  
sister Emma and  
grandfather Michael*

Over the past 30 years, Rabbi Jay Karzen, author of *Off The Wall*, has seen many multi-generational Bar and Bat Mitzvah events. He told me about one memorable tearful episode of a Russian family who had come from the States to celebrate the first Bar Mitzvah in their family in many decades. "In meeting them, I discovered that both the father and grandfather had never had a Bar Mitzvah or Aliyah L'Torah. I suggested that we have a 'triple' service, with each celebrant having a ceremony to mark their belated Bar Mitzvah. The 13-year-old celebrant agreed, and it was a most emotional and inspirational ceremony."

Susan Cutler is a Jewish educator from Wilton, Connecticut, who officiates at Bar and Bat Mitzvahs at Robinson's Arch. She says, in her experience, "The Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremony is always a poignant event that is especially magical when taking place in Israel. At Robinson's Arch, among the ancient stones, you feel that you are indeed a living part of Jewish history."

Susan's families consistently report that the experience is life changing, with many of her students eager to return to participate in an Israel trip with peers, such as a teen tour or Birthright. The experience often serves as



*Celebrating at the King David Hotel: Katie  
with her sister Emma and Savta Tova.*

a beautiful reunion between American and Israeli cousins, together after many years, or perhaps meeting for the first time.

Grandparents dream of taking their grandchildren to Israel for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Those who do, feel fortunate to be able to travel with the entire family for the trip of a lifetime. Traveling with the extended family is always a fun and bonding experience, but it is most meaningful in Israel, where history and family come together. ○