

A mitzvah project is officially cool

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The new trend in bar and bat mitzvahs might be a reaction to the over-the-top secular celebrations of pre-austerity times, and parents are helping their kids realize there's more to this lifecycle event than memorizing speeches, fulfilling their reading obligations, and having a blast. Even when there is a generous budget, parents are concentrating on infusing their children's coming of age in Judaism with a sense of responsibility and commitment to those less fortunate than they are. Parents who come from several streams of Judaism and economic strata spoke about how they made sure each child fulfilled a commitment to make the world a better place.

The projects varied in scope and impact. There are families who realize that the elderly in local assisted living and nursing homes don't always have access to services on Shabbat. To do something special, b'nai mitzvah and their guests can celebrate the service at homes like CareOne in Teaneck so that lonely residents can pray with a minyan and participate in the simcha. To find out more about the CareOne program, call Rabbi Joseph Siev (201) 862-3300.

Some families twin their events with victims of terror in Israel, via The One Family Fund (<http://onefamilyfund.org/>), or participate in other charitable works.

Teaneck, N.J., triplets Noah, Julia, and Anna Greenblatt began to think about their mitzvah projects when



From left, Anna, Noah, and Julia Greenblatt hold special packages for campers that they sold to raise money for a special bicycle they gave to a child with multiple sclerosis. COURTESY GREENBLATT FAMILY

sions and the ideas and projects they generate — and right now we are on the hunt for our next project.”

Ellen Stone, of Keter Torah in Teaneck, has triplets, too: Eliana, Ezra, and Yoni. In this family of six children, Eliana is the only girl. To make her bat mitzvah special, the family took a tri-generational trip to Israel with her grandmother. Every morning began with a women's learning group and every day Eliana and her brothers participated in different chessed visits — bringing goodies to kids in women's shelters, helping out at a soup kitchen, having a party at a facility for the disabled, and volunteering to feed Israeli soldiers on their rest and recreation breaks. When the boys came back to Teaneck they focused on perfecting their readings and speeches, their d'verei Torah, and finished the study of a tractate of the Talmud so that they could celebrate with a siyum, a feast to celebrate its completion.

Our cover kids, Hannah and Jesse Markowitz, chose projects related to their favorite things. Hannah loves animals, and so brought her pets to visit the residents of a local nursing home, who cheered up and loved the afternoons she spent with them. Her brother, Jesse, who loves tennis, collected 120 tennis balls to donate to a brand-new school. Desks and chairs were marking up the new floors, and by recycling used tennis balls as protective covers, he prevented the floors from being ruined.

Leor and Ayal Goldberg went to Israel before their event, visited an organization for disabled children, and came back determined to raise money for a specially designed wheelchair that would allow those children to be hoisted into a swimming pool. Their brothers Noam and Allon learned that homeless people lose their coats in spring and summer because there is no place to store them, so as their mitzvah project, they collected 75 winter coats and 100 fleece hoodies for Jersey Cares (<http://www.jerseycares.org/>).

In Passaic, Rabbi Micah and Siggy Berger's triplets, Shifra, Eli, and Zack,

they were just 11 years old. They built a website called Triplets for a Cause (<http://www.triplets4acause.com>) and used the famous powerful Holocaust-era quote from Pastor Martin Niemöller about standing up for others as their inspiration. Their site lists a number of mitzvah projects visitors can choose to support, and those with ideas to add to the list can e-mail them at t4c@triplets4acau.

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The children have sent Rosh HaShanah cards to Gilad Shalit, raised money for teenage refugees from Darfur, and, like many other b'nai mitzvahs, have served lunch in a soup kitchen.

Their dad, Jason Greenblatt, says, “We read articles and stories to our kids at Shabbat meals and get inspired by the articles. The triplets, as well as our younger ones, are enthusiastic about these discus-

sions and the ideas and projects they generate — and right now we are on the hunt for our next project.”

worked on different projects. Shifra's mitzvah project consisted of babysitting for autistic children so their parents could attend services on Shabbat. Eli and Zack raised \$15,000 to build a playground at Camp Simcha, which is for seriously ill children, in memory of Erica Levitt, a young friend who died. The family also went to Israel and visited an orphanage in Pardes Chana, where they shared their bar mitzvah party with Moshe, an Ethiopian whose bar mitzvah was celebrated that same week. Siggy Berger said it was remarkable how the kids were aware of their differences and yet understood that we are all the same.

In addition to www.triplets4acause.org, Areyvut (<http://www.areyvut.org/>) and Repair the World (<http://wererepair.org>) are mitzvah sites worth visiting when looking for a meaningful mitzvah project. Areyvut offers families help in finding projects that meet their interests. It also organizes b'nai mitzvah fairs at community centers, synagogues, and schools that often include hands-on chessed experiences. It sponsors an essay contest, offers teens the ability to post their ideas, and includes an international social-action Make a Difference Day and a Teen Philanthropy Institute that teaches kids leadership by having them decide how collected funds should be allocated. It also has a downloadable Kindness-A-Day Desk Calendar. For more information, call Daniel Rothner, (201) 244-6702, or e-mail daniel@areyvut.org. (See page 22.)

Werepair.org, a site for volunteers and volunteer organizations, has a search engine and knowledge base that can be used to find projects suitable for bar/bats mitzvahs. The knowledge base provides information about social justice issues and explains what Jewish tradition has to add. It also offers a bibliography and list of websites for further exploration and publishes a blog featuring young Jewish people who are leaders in service. By subscribing to its newsletter and Twitter feeds, seekers of projects can learn about the latest ideas and projects to come online.