

RITUAL

# Mazel tov!



# Oraynu B'nai Mitzvah Helps Students Discover their Jewish Identity

BY RISA MORRIS





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Like in most other B'nai Mitzvah programs, our students study about Jewish history and culture, as well as participate in and initiate tzedakah projects, but also study humanistic ethics and values. Our students do this so that they can find their place within the Humanistic movement and find meaning in what their Judaism means to them.

What may be different about our program is how the B'nai Mitzvah students share their journey in our ceremony, which is as a group and presented as a live theater production. Initially conceived by Rabbi Karen Levy and enriched by others, especially Oraynu's long-time school principal Steve Shabes, of blessed memory, the play serves as the culmination of Oraynu's grade 7 year. The learning leading up to it emerges from the values and history-based curriculum for Secular Humanistic Jewish Supplementary Schools, JK-7, by Rabbis Eva Goldfinger and Karen Levy. Sandi Horowitz provided the music.

Our beautiful script includes poetry, song, and dramatic narratives that reflect the experiences and humanistic values of

the Jewish people. Through this script, the children teach their guests highlights of their lessons learned. Each student is responsible for learning their lines and songs for the program, but most importantly the students each research, write, and deliver a speech about a strong Jewish role model, living or historic, who embodies the humanistic values that they would like to imbue. The students also reflect upon and prepare a speech about what it means to become a B'nai Mitzvah. These research projects and speeches are at the heart of our ceremony.

In choosing their role model, they send in their top three choices to the B'nai Mitzvah coordinator, so that we can help balance the ceremony with the role models chosen. This process ensures that the requirements are met, but also that no two students are choosing and discussing the same role model. Students typically get their first choice.

Our ceremony is amended each year to smoothly incorporate the role model speeches into the narrative of the script. We also revise the script to balance the information that

our guests learn, particularly to ensure that influential people of all genders, different time periods, and different segments of the population are included. The basic tenets of Secular Humanistic Judaism are included in the script, as well as their origins in modern and secularizing Jewish life, such as Yiddish culture, Jewish socialism and activism, and Zionism. This means that the experiences of Doña Gracia Nasi, Alfred Dreyfus, and Jews from around the world, along with the story "Kaporos" by Sholem Aleichem, are acted out.

Through the script, a student asks questions that some of their guests might be wondering that then get answered by another student. Each interaction takes the guests through the thought process that our students used in their studies. The students tell the journey of Humanistic Judaism and sing the songs that naturally meld into the narrative such as "Im Ayn Ani Li Me Li," "Die Gedanken Zind Frei," "Im Tirtzu," and of course, "Ayfo Ori." The messages of Rabbi Sherwin Wine are spoken with meaning and conviction.



lasting friendships.

The program is designed to be flexible, which was a major bonus when the pandemic struck. Because of COVID, we needed to create a way to continue our B'nai Mitzvah ceremony while distancing. As principal of Oraynu Children's school, I rearranged the script and identified portions that could be filmed outside. Each portion had different combinations of students so that they all got to collaborate safely with one another. Each student filmed their individual speeches and uploaded clips of themselves singing the songs. And then the magic happened. David Morris created a Brady Bunch-style music video for each song balancing the voices of each student. Welcome speeches and congratulatory speeches were pre-recorded in a studio setting, and then all of these parts were combined into the final form. On the day of the ceremony, all the B'nai Mitzvah students were in their homes, but they were able to watch the program on a live platform that allowed their family and friends to watch and comment as the program progressed. Then in the middle of the ceremony, a live candlelight ceremony took place. It was beautiful.

"My B'nai Mitzvah experience changed me into who I am today. Fighting for justice and Tikkun Olam is essential in how I live my life." – JM

"My B'nai Mitzvah has given me some of my closest friends. We still keep in touch and it's been years." – JB

"Going to my B'nai Mitzvah made my judgy "religious" relatives respect and understand Humanistic Judaism. That has made celebrating other holidays so much easier – and way more enjoyable!" – KB

"It was so much work – but I'm so glad I did it. If I can stand up in front of that many people without a script – I can do anything!" – LR

After their B'nai Mitzvah experience, many of these students come back and volunteer at our school on Sunday mornings. They get to see each other and those who graduated in other years. They also get to work on tzedakah projects and help continue to teach others how much Humanistic Judaism is a part of who they are, and whom they will continue to become.

Oraynu's B'nai Mitzvah ceremony is moving, educational, and can be life-

**"A B'nai Mitzvah ceremony is the celebration by a group of children of their passage from childhood to adolescence. This means accepting increased responsibility for oneself and for the world. Becoming B'nai Mitzvah is a first step in meeting these ethical obligations."**

*– From the invitation to our very special B'nai Mitzvah ceremony*

On the day of our ceremony, the students arrive at the theatre (a necessary venue to hold between 800 – 1000 people who be attending). The students take their places on stage when the opening notes of Hiney Ma Tov are played on the piano. For the next hour and a half, these 12- and 13-year-olds mesmerize their guests with their poise, knowledge, comfortable mistakes, and simple staging. Each student has his/her/their time to shine through their moments in the script, their speech, and their personal statement of growth and gratitude. They bond as a group. The time that they spend together in study and rehearsals and the trust they develop in each other create

Our B'nai Mitzvah program is strong and empowering. Year after year, guests are impressed by the work that the students have done and the things that they themselves learned by being at the ceremony. People who have come into the ceremony with skepticism about whether this is a "real" B'nai Mitzvah remark about what a beautiful and meaningful ceremony it was. More than one family has joined our school because of their experience attending our B'nai Mitzvah ceremony. But most importantly, our students love it. Here are some of their reflections on the experience:

changing. Our students feel comfortable enough through the process to question, and through those questions learn about themselves and how they can live Humanistic Jewish values. These values allow our students to be who they want to be, without judgment, and with compassion. Often the parents will thank us for the safe space that Oraynu has created for their child to become whom he/she/they want to be. Years later, we are lucky enough to teach and work with the children of our B'nai Mitzvah kids – and they reminisce with us about their speeches, role models, and friends.

May the cycle continue. 🕯️

