

Jewish Philanthropy

Taking the Torah Home at Kol Tikvah

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A case study in B'nai Mitzvah Revolution at Congregation Kol Tikvah, Woodland Hills, CA.



By Cheryl Katz Mandel

A year ago my family experienced an unforgettable event: our daughter Alyssa's *Bat Mitzvah*. We belong to a Reform congregation, [Temple Kol Tikvah](#) in Woodland Hills, California. My husband and I had each become *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* over 30 years ago, but this process felt brand new experiencing it as parents.

Our temple participates in the [B'nai Mitzvah Revolution](#) and our Rabbi, Jonathan Hanish, is trying to implement new ways to make the *b'nai mitzvah* experience more meaningful for the child and family. One such way begins on Friday night before the big day. At that time, Rabbi Hanish allows the child to take the Torah that he/she will be reading during the service to their home. Alyssa was one of the lucky individuals who experienced this honor. Following the *oneg* of the Friday Night service, Rabbi Hanish led Alyssa, my husband, and me into the dark and empty sanctuary. He turned on the *bima* lights and carried the Torah out from the ark. He handed the Torah to Alyssa, as he told her how the Torah represents the survival of the Jewish people, and that our foremost priority was to protect the Torah as we moved from home to home, from land to land. Rabbi Hanish explained to Alyssa that it was now her responsibility to protect the Torah, just as our ancestors have done for generations.

Alyssa was extremely excited about bringing the Torah home. It was a HUGE privilege and responsibility that she did not take lightly. She was told to always have the *talit* around her neck when holding it, and she sure did. Paying homage to the sanctity of the Torah, she would not allow any of us to hold the Torah unless we wore a *tallit*, too.

The weekend of Alyssa's bat *mitzvah*, we had ten out-of-town family members staying with us, and it was quite chaotic. Because it was such a special time for our family, and we knew we were bringing a Torah into the house, we asked the family members to stay at a hotel for the evening. Normally the evening before a huge event would be frantic with last minute details and butterflies for the next day; instead it was calm and peaceful. I don't know if it was just that we were well prepared for the following day, but having the Torah in my daughter's bedroom denoted a sense of peace, a rare feeling of tranquility the day before a life-changing event.

The morning of the *bat mitzvah*, my daughter rolled the Torah out on our dining room table and searched for her portion. It made an already exciting day even more special.

When Alyssa read from that Torah during the service, she felt a familiarity with the scroll that few people get to experience. Even now, when we attend services, we all look at that Torah in a different light. It has become a "friend" rather than an object that many see as untouchable. I think that loaning the *b'nai mitzvah* child and family the Torah is such a small yet meaningful act. We will remember that gesture long after the memories of the event fade. Every family who has participated in this new tradition has had a meaningful experience. I know my eleven-year-old daughter, Lindsey, is now looking forward to her turn to take the Torah home.

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[B'nai Mitzvah Revolution](#) (BMR) is a joint project of the Union for Reform Judaism's [Campaign for Youth Engagement](#) and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's Rhea Hirsch School of Education and its [Experiment in Congregational Education](#).

*You can learn about the ways congregations are transforming the *b'nai mitzvah* experience by visiting BMR's [Innovation Guide](#), an interactive tool that includes innovative programs, goals, venues, participants, and more.*