

Eco-Friendly Parties Mix Mitzvah, Simcha

By Pearl Salkin

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Three days after my son, Will, ascended the bimah as a bar mitzvah, I stopped by our shul to drop off some books and thank the principal of the Hebrew school and others who made his big day such a wonderful experience.

When I got back in my car and drove past the piles of huge trash bags outside the shul's kitchen door, I got a jarring jolt of reality: white plastic fork tines poked through the black bags and the remnant of a Mylar balloon was blowing in the breeze, caught on a nearby treetop.

While I wouldn't classify myself as a tree hugger, I felt guilty that my hasty decision-making was impacting the environment. Had I invested a little more time and effort beforehand, I would have made more eco-friendly choices.

April 22 is Earth Day, and this year it lands on Shabbat. What better way to demonstrate our commitment to conserving our world's precious resources than with b'nai mitzvah planning?

Selecting an environmental mitzvah project is a good starting point. But consider adding eco-friendly substitutes for white plastic tableware, Styrofoam centerpieces, Mylar balloons and elaborate banners. Are your invitations printed on recycled paper with soy-based inks?

If you need some tips, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) can help. The nonprofit publishes "Caring for the Cycle of Life: Creating Environmentally Sound Life-Cycle Celebrations," which can be purchased online for \$4.50. The booklet addresses brit milah, naming ceremony and weddings, and devotes three pages in the b'nai mitzvah section covering such issues as the ecology of the student's Torah portion, what it means to fulfill the commandment of "to till and to tend" and environmental aspects of holidays, in case your child's portion involves one. The booklet also covers Shabbat and "how solving environmental problems is an important part of tikkun olam, and then mitzvah project ideas," said Barbara Lerman-Golomb, associate executive director of COEJL.

The booklet also offers lots of green mitzvah project possibilities that would appeal to kids.

Since many people have books, CDs and videos that they no longer want, you could keep those things out of the wastestream by organizing a drive and donating the items to a hospital, shelter or senior center.

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eBay's Giving Works program offers a high-tech answer. Your child can gather unneeded merchandise in good condition -- sports equipment, toys, musical instruments your child had to have but then decided he hated, etc. -- and sell it through this online yard sale, transferring the money raised electronically to the charity of his or her choice.

Since kids wear out or outgrow sneakers fairly quickly, why not consider adopting Nike's Reuse-A-Shoe program as a mitzvah project? Nike grinds the rubber, foam and upper fabric of any brand of athletic footwear and recycles those components into new material that is used for running tracks, tennis courts, soccer fields and playground surfacing. The program features drop-off locations throughout the L.A. area.

Selecting the right invitation can set the scene for a green b'nai mitzvah day. Handmade, recycled-material paper invitations are obtainable (but not inexpensive) through Indiana-based Twisted Limb Paperworks. For those with a smaller budget, machine-made recycled paper is now available through most regular invitation purveyors. And soy-based inks are starting to gain ground, too.

Whether your family decides to celebrate the simcha quietly with an intimate gathering after services or loudly on a grand scale, food will be served. Even if it's just challah, cake, coffee and soda, you'll need cups, plates and utensils. Tables will have to be covered. A few balloons strategically placed outside the sanctuary will add a festive touch.

With more and more consumers clamoring for earth-friendlier options, companies are now producing products that are strong, serviceable, cost-effective and conservational.

If you're having a colossal Kiddush, consider covering the tables with white butcher paper and using Chinet plates or platters instead of plastic. Made from recycled material, this tableware will stand up to a most generous serving of chopped herring, cheese, egg salad, gefilte fish and all the horseradish you want.

Plastic can take almost forever to break down at the city dump, so if you're unable to use metal utensils, consider this alternative: biodegradable cutlery. Made of cornstarch, potato or tapioca starch, these utensils look great and work almost as well as plastic. However, potato-starch-based products will hold up better to heat than cornstarch ones. If you don't find these items at your favorite party store, check with Palo Alto-based nonprofit World Centric, which sells the items online.

When you're considering balloons, think latex. While it won't hold helium as long as Mylar, it is made from rubber, a renewable resource that is biodegradable. Color selection is extensive, and size and shape options are pretty good, too. Specialty balloons are available through party planners and retail outlets, like 1-800-Dreidel.

Centerpieces and banners are often quite flashy and extravagant -- lots of glitter, Styrofoam, plastic and all sorts of environmental unmentionables. If you choose to take the eco-track, consider using recycled paper banners and decorating tables with pi?atas or live plants, or creating something out of natural materials, like seashells and bamboo. With a little thought, it's easy to come up with something attractive that won't condemn the next generation to energy starvation and toxic terror.

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