

### A son fulfills his mitzvah project



Two and a half years ago, I filled this space with what I'd learned as a mom in the process of my daughter becoming a Bat Mitzvah. One kid later, I've been through it again, this time with my son, Izzi.

Again, I've had a giant "ah-ha" moment that definitely propels me forward in my parenting and my personhood.

While I was busy accounting for everything practical, fiscal, and logistical, and managing mostly dysfunctional relationships, Izzi studied and worked hard. One thing he didn't seem to be working on was his "mitzvah project."

The mitzvah project is a relatively new phenomenon of aligning the life cycle with a cause, experientially teaching the value of civic engagement and social action. I believe it came into popularity as a means of redirecting over-the-top parties back toward a more substantive meaning of the threshold. It also creates access and relevance for families for whom Hebrew text and tradition are alien.

When friends asked me about his mitzvah project, interested in supporting whatever cause he'd selected, I responded by joking that it had been "eighth-assed, like not even half-assed."

Somewhere along the way, he'd switched it from raising money for sports balls for underprivileged kids to taking a stand against gun violence. Whatever it was, it seemed completely inauthentic, making the mitzvah project requirement seem so tangential to the process that it was basically irrelevant. It was rote, a step that must be completed for the sake of product versus process, rather than an integral part of embracing communal responsibility.

I was surprised and, I have to admit, disappointed. Based on what I learned from my experience of my daughter's process, I didn't dwell on that disappointment or force it to change. It was his process, and he was surrounded by educators who had more important roles in that than I. Whatever he did or didn't do was part of *their* conversation, not mine. I trusted the process and accepted that every kid -- every person -- is unique. I also trusted that the idea of community service was not a foreign idea to my kid, based on the adventure that is our family's life.

Ultimately, he managed to weave a mention of the anti-gun activist group Moms Demand Action into his *Dvar Torah* ("words of Torah," or sermon), soliciting donations for that, somehow in relation to what he'd chanted and interpreted about Joseph and his brothers and his coat of many colors.

A savvy wordsmith and deep thinker, he met the mitzvah mark, covering the requirement. Everything else he said and did that day filled me with a warm glow as I witnessed his poise, growth, and success in accomplishing all that had brought him to his moment of Bar Mitzvah.

As part of his weekend of festivities, Izzi invited camp friends and teammates from outside Miami (much in demand last year, he'd played basketball on three or so other travel teams from across South Florida) to spend the night after his Bar Mitzvah party. It just so happened that our Jewish Community Center was hosting its annual fundraising three-on-three basketball tournament the next day. Izzi was excited to enter the tournament and get to play on his beloved home turf with these out-of-town friends.

I'd seen Izzi work these tournaments before, taking on the role of captain and coach skillfully, balancing strategy, personalities, and skills with the grace and wisdom of a seasoned leader.

## Mama's Mensch

Written by Jenni Person, BT Contributor  
January 2019

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But nothing could prepare me for what I was about to witness.

Among Izzi's camp friends was a young man with special needs. I had asked Izzi about him previously, and several times had specifically asked about his behavior in the context of their sleepaway sports camp, where most of the campers were top athletes. I thought this fellow camper must be equally skilled, just not behaviorally normative.

But I was wrong -- he was not a skilled athlete, and his behavior absolutely got in his way. I watched as Izzi assisted, smiled, and high-fived with equal enthusiasm both the special needs kid causing travel violation after travel violation and the star player who, like himself, flew exquisitely around the court, effortlessly sinking shots. Yet Izzi cheered and hugged both teammates with identical glory. In the stands, his friend's parents beamed with pride for their child, and for the friendship and inclusion on display.

I couldn't believe I'd missed what was right in front of me: Izzy was *living* his mitzvah project.

Maybe he didn't have space for the prescribed assignment because he was busy walking the walk, authentically living the mitzvah with every connection he makes in his life. Being a mensch, living in a position of mitzvah preparedness, isn't something you turn on and off for an assignment. It's the air you breathe with every inhalation, every step you take.

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