

A coming of age, finally
Disabled adults receive missed Jewish rites

Story by Kelly Ettenborough
Photography by Christine Keith
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Jason Levy will be called to the Torah at the synagogue today, like his brother, father and grandfather before him. Levy and five other developmentally disabled adults will celebrate their bar and bat mitzvahs, traditional Jewish coming-of-age rites, at Temple Chai in Phoenix in a joyous and first-of-its-kind religious ceremony in Arizona.

"I never thought I would see this day," said Jason's mother, Marian Levy of Scottsdale. "This is an amazing feat for Jason's group. This is something that they never thought they could accomplish."

Traditionally, at 13 a Jewish boy has a bar mitzvah and a Jewish girl has a bat mitzvah after a few years of religious study. The milestone ceremony symbolizes the acceptance of the obligations and honors of the adult Jewish community.

But religious education tailored for children with special needs wasn't available for these adults, who range in age from 20 to 41. Though they were embraced as part of the synagogue, they were not expected to learn the prayers in Hebrew and study the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament.

"Now I feel like a grownup Jewish man," said Jason Levy, 33, who cannot read or write but navigates two city buses to his job of nine years.

Levy's father died six years ago, but his mother knows how thrilled his father would be.

The group's parents raised their children in an era of fewer resources, and less acceptance and knowledge.

Public education for special-needs children was not mandated by law until 1978, when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act went into effect. Synagogues and churches slowly began adding programs as parents, encouraged by their children's accomplishments in public schools, pushed for more inclusion in religious classes.

Two years ago, a class was formed through the Phoenix-based Council for Jews with Special Needs to prepare for this day.

Jesse Shnier, 20, who is autistic, beamed at the Sunday practice for the ceremony.

"Wow," said Shnier. "I'm proud with happiness like I've never been before."

His dad was a little misty-eyed as he watched. Sixty people will be there today

to celebrate with the Shnier family in Scottsdale.

"We're going to be bursting," Cliff Shnier said. "With all that it's taken raising him, events like this make it so worthwhile."

Today many disabled teenagers celebrate their bar or bat mitzvahs at 13. The ceremonies have been modified to meet various needs, said Becca Hornstein, co-founder in 1987 of the special-needs council.

Hornstein said this official inclusion means more than most people can imagine, making the extra educational effort worth it.

"They have just been told 'You are now a Jewish man. You are now a Jewish woman. We welcome you. You are our peer.'" Hornstein said. "How often does a person with a disability hear that?"

Today's early morning Sabbath service may not be as polished as most.

The six adults will chant and sing songs in Hebrew with loud exuberance, slightly off-key in counterpoint to the cantor's perfect pitch. They will say memorized prayers in English and Hebrew, skipping a word or two. They might need a reminder of the program order.

They will not read from the Torah but will be called to the Torah, and someone they have chosen will read their portion of the Scripture from Exodus.

What matters is their hearts, parents said. They are more serious about this commitment than their younger siblings were at 13.

"Jason, he really understands what it's all about," Marian Levy said. "He's got the concept... They all have really gotten it. They have earned it."

Watch video of the students:

(requires RealPlayer)

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