

In tight economy, b'nai mitzvah get back to basics

Party planners offering budget-friendly options

By Vladimir Shvorin
Advocate Staff

A lavish bar or bat mitzvah was commonplace before the economic crisis. But as Jewish families tighten their budgets, over-the-top celebrations are being scaled back.

"The parties aren't as extravagant as they were years ago," said Amy Zediana, director of operations for Perfect Parties USA, a Peabody-based company that coordinates b'nai mitzvah. "People are sticking to one piece of entertainment and not going as overboard with their choices at each party. I used to see \$100,000-[b'nai] mitzvah every week, but now it's once a month or every other month."

Beyond the necessities, no part of the b'nai mitzvah is safe from cutbacks. Event entertainment, showy decorations, dining options and even venues have been adjusted to fit slimmer times. Cost-friendly synagogues are still performing a steady number of b'nai mitzvah rituals, but event halls, restaurants and other more expensive venues are feeling the crunch.

"The religious end, where we are, is not where all the cost is," said Alan Bell, executive director of Temple Emunah in Lexington.

Most b'nai mitzvah planning is carried out up to a year in advance, so many companies that plan the events are only now beginning to feel an impact.

Russ Burman and Robert Weiner are the cofounders of R&R Productions in Canton. The



Families are scaling back on lavish b'nai mitzvah parties.

majority of the events the company currently plans are b'nai mitzvah. But Burman has had to adjust to make the company's services accessible to those with smaller party planning budgets.

"Customers aren't necessarily going with as many of the frills," Burman said. "If they are going with the frills, they're spending more money on entertainment and less money elsewhere. I think we're seeing a trend where customers are being more selective and more specific."

For Joey Baron, a member of Temple Aliyah in Needham, his children's b'nai mitzvah could not have come any sooner. Baron held a bar mitzvah for his son two years ago, and recently had a bat mitzvah for his daughter in June. With his wife Debi, the two planned their past events without any overt cutbacks. But Baron said that were they to plan the events in today's economy, their

budget would be reduced by as much as 30 percent.

"For my daughter, if it were to happen now, we probably would do it at our temple versus renting a facility," he said. "And in talking to people at my temple, it's clear that lots of people are doing more kid-focused parties and less family celebrations."

But the return to more traditional b'nai mitzvah is not necessarily a bad thing, according to Burman. By reducing the frivolity, families are redirecting the focus to the religious elements of this ancient rite of passage.

"With the economic downturn, customers are looking at what a [b'nai] mitzvah is really about," Burman said. "Now, it's not about outdoing the next person. It's a religious celebration and there should be some level of wraparound of the religious components of the bar and bat mitzvah."

Ross to become City Council president

By Lorne Bell
Special to The Advocate

Boston City Councilor Mike Ross of Mission Hill has been tapped to take over for Maureen Feeney as council president in January. The decision was reached after discussions between Ross, Feeney and Ways and Means Committee Chairman Stephen Murphy, who was also vying for the spot.

"It's an honor to have the support of my colleagues and to do this in a way where the majority of the [council] body is all working together," said Ross.

Ross represents the eighth district, which includes Mission Hill, Back Bay, Beacon Hill, Fenway, Kenmore Square, Audubon Circle and the West End. His father, Stephen Ross, is a Holocaust survivor and founded the New England Holocaust Memorial.

A graduate of Newton North High School and Clark University,



Boston City Councilor Mike Ross

Ross went on to earn his MBA from Boston University. He graduated from Suffolk Law in 2006.

Ross was first elected to the city council in 1999 at the age of 27, making him the youngest council member ever and the

first Jewish member in more than five decades.

When it comes to his role as a leader of the Boston Jewish community, he would rather defer the spotlight to organizational leaders like CJP President Barry Shrage and JCRC Director Nancy Kaufman. Still, Ross is keenly aware of the historical significance of his eventual appointment.

"It was not always deemed appropriate for Jewish people to play active roles in government," Ross said. "But that has changed. The Jewish perspective is very contemplative of not just its own people, but of the rights of all minorities. As a result, we've seen many Jewish people enter the public square."

Ross is slated to take over as president after Feeney's two-year term expires at the end of the year. A council vote on his appointment will officially take place on Jan. 5 and is expected to pass.



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