

Dressed in white, she stood in front of the bimah. Her parents, coupling her on either side, together presented her with the ritual prayer shawl, her own tallit. With the rabbi's blessing, she carefully gathered the shawl's four corners, kissing the four tassels, comprised of 613 strings and knots representing all the mitzvah (good deeds) cited in the Torah. She carefully placed the shawl around her slender shoulders, silently reciting the prayer. She was on her way to becoming a bat mitzvah, ready to join the Jewish community as an adult member, legally and morally responsible for her own actions and religious observances in the eyes of God. She could now chant Torah, chant her haftorah as well, and formally be presented to the community, an honor she had diligently prepared for over several months.

My oldest granddaughter Meredith, her Jewish name, Miriam, was born in February 2007. She was named for her athletic, socially vibrant paternal great-grandmother, Miriam, who died in 1988. Mer turned 13 on February 24, but opted to have her bat mitzvah in early spring on April 4, 2020. This would give family and friends more opportunity to join in the celebration as the likelihood of snow in April in Boston was quite rare.

Elaborate plans were made almost a year prior. As Meredith started preparing with the cantor, learning her Torah portion and the ancient melodies to recite, other preparations for the big day were being made. As part of becoming a bat mitzvah, Meredith had to design a mitzvah (good deeds) project. She decided to do something related to her primary love, soccer, and looked for a way that she could give back to the community and share her joy with other kids her age. It took a while to find the right fit, initially she wanted to highlight women's fight for equal pay, but finally with a little help from her nana, Mer decided for her Bat Mitzvah project, she would collect donations for Boston Scores, a non-profit organization that helps kids from the Boston area who want to play soccer but can't afford to join a team or purchase the necessary equipment to play. From December through March, she contacted her teammates and friends in school asking for donations of any type of soccer equipment, especially goalie gloves and cleats. She wrote emails to family and friends informing them that monetary donations would also be appreciated. Her efforts, she hoped, would help "Change the Game" for inner city youth in Boston.

Meanwhile, her mother, Robin, was deep into planning the celebration. Putting together a Bat Mitzvah is not that different than organizing a wedding and often not much cheaper. Robin reserved a venue but needed to decide how many to invite. Virtual invitations were designed and save the date invites were sent out. Rooms at a hotel were arranged for out of town guests. Now the real heavy

planning needed to happen. Would there be a kiddush following the ceremony, a way to thank the congregation with a nice buffet after services? Would Nana and G'pa take the honor of hosting this part of the celebration, i.e., pay for the luncheon for the congregation? Should there be lox, white fish and capers for the bagels or would it be best to keep everything simple? How many salads and what kinds of desserts should be ordered? Discussing these decisions with parents via phone, email and texts took up several weekends.

But more importantly the main event needed addressing. Who to invite? How much to spend? How about a cool DJ who could engage the young teens, providing the right kind of music to keep the party hopping? What about other entertainment? Sit down or buffet meal for the guests? Should there be a special theme and color scheme? What about centerpieces? What would the dress be – business casual or semiformal? Where to go to find the right outfits to wear? The plans were all-encompassing and time consuming.

Each weekend leading up to the event was taken by attendance at a friend's bar or bat mitzvah, with continual comparisons being made (not unlike TLC's 4 weddings, where every bride hopes her big day is spectacular and the best). A DJ was engaged and a photo booth arranged for. Robin, sensitive to the effect of all this might have on older guests, sent out a warning with the invitations:

Warning: There will likely be a loud DJ, a photo montage set to corny pop music, a photo booth with weird masks, and the obligatory game of Coke/Pepsi. Also, many many 13-year olds. Come at your own risk.

Now the focus was on The Dress. Would Mer find one to say "Yes" to. Nana offered to go shopping with Mer and so the family came to visit over Christmas holidays. We stopped at a number of stores, but finally hit pay dirt at Ecco's, finding two possible options. Nana was generous and purchased both figuring that since Mer was going to a number of events, she could use an extra dress just in case. Strapped black sandal style heels were also added to the booty. Robin, on the other hand, was not happy with the dress choices for herself at the local Vermont stores. but was reassured her that she definitely would be able to find something in the Boston area, especially if she went shopping with a supportive friend instead of family to critique her dress choice.

But then came the gathering dark cloud. A growing pandemic suddenly appeared from the east. By Mid-February, Robin, the scientist that she is, kept calling me, fretting that all her planning would go to naught. Though she had finally found her dress, would the Bat Mitzvah take place at all? The vendors

reassured her that there would be Lysol wipes for each guest and hygiene would be rigorously addressed, but each week the forecast grew darker. By early March suddenly Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations across the northeast were being reconsidered. Schools were being closed. Shops were being shuttered. People were being told to maintain social distancing and that no more than 10 should gather together. Word got out that many who had attended a Bar Mitzvah in late February in New Rochelle, NY had gotten sick with Covid-19. By now, even synagogues and churches were thinking of closing their doors. An updated warning came from a friend whose son was scheduled to have his bar mitzvah in mid-March.

Given global concerns about Coronavirus (COVID-19) we would like to let you know that both our Temple and our venue are taking measures to keep everyone safe.

Our temple has updated cleaning materials and procedures and you will notice hand-sanitizer placed throughout the building. All staff have been advised to not report to work should they feel unwell. The biggest change you will notice is that there will be no handshaking, hugging, or kissing. This change includes the traditional kissing of the Torah as it is brought around the congregation.

At our venue we will have hand-sanitizers placed throughout the function room. We are still determining what the hora will look like and if we will lock elbows or circle without the hand holding. Either way there will be sanitizers available before you eat.

The CDC guidance this week has reinforced the idea that while risks to healthy young people are generally low, people with chronic medical conditions, immunosuppression, or older age, may wish to avoid large crowds. If you are not feeling well, please take care of yourself and minimize the spread to others by staying home. (Likewise, if you or someone you live with has travelled recently to a place with an [active Coronavirus outbreak](#))

We want you to be with us celebrating but we also understand that you may be experiencing anxiety about being there. If your plans have changed and you can no longer join us please let us know as soon as possible so that we can notify the venues.

A few days later, Robin attended a board meeting of her synagogue. The board decided for the safety of the community that they would no longer host ceremonies at the Temple. The ceremony and celebration planned for April 4, a 13-year old's dream Bat Mitzvah, months into planning, would need to be altered. The big catered party that was booked at an actual castle (for the Jewish princess) with macaroni balls, a candle lighting, a video montage and mugs for party favors would now need to be rethought. And all of Mer's practiced TikTok dance moves would have to be delayed for another time.

By March 13, it was obvious that there couldn't be a large party or even a small one. Tears were shed, but both Robin and Mer handled their disappointment with grace and dignity. Luckily the venue was willing to reschedule the party for September and options were discussed with the rabbis. Hope was still held out that a small group composed of family and friends could still attend a service in the synagogue and that there would still be enough for a minyan (10 or more people) so the service could begin. Then in September, Mer would

lead a Friday night service before her rescheduled party. But less than a week later it became apparent that it would not be safe for grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins from out of town to come, especially as hotels were shutting down and stay-at-home recommendations were being made. By the next week it was obvious that even a minyan of neighborhood friends coming to the synagogue would prove impossible.

By March 25, Governor Baker informally suggested all families stay-at home and only venture out for essential services. He requested all non-essential businesses be closed through April 7. So even before any of the planned precautions could be put in place, bookings were cancelled. Robin was in tears but she knew that she could not risk putting her parents in danger. After all her dad just recovered from bypass surgery and her mom had been a cancer survivor. Meredith, too, was distraught – this was to be the highlight of her seventh grade year - a way to make her parents proud and share her joy with family and friends. She had worked hard all year and did not want to cancel her bat mitzvah, nor certainly the celebration to follow. She wanted to be in the synagogue, read from the Torah as did her friends and have everyone shout at the end, Mazel Tov, while they threw sweets when the service concluded. But she knew in her heart that she couldn't be selfish and like her mom, her vision of the big day needed to be altered.

The rabbis proposed doing a video Zoom bat mitzvah and having Meredith read her Torah portion from her home, using a virtual Torah. Her parents and grandparents could do the same, reading their Aliyahs (prayers said before and after each Torah reading) from their homes. But Mer, who had dreamed of coming to the bimah from the time she entered Hebrew school at age 5, wondered if she could still do her service at the Temple. The head rabbi felt it would be unsafe to even open the synagogue and have anyone be physically present. But the junior rabbi said he would be happy to let the family enter the synagogue and take the Torah out of the ark and read from it, providing they followed the necessary hygienic precautions and religious practices. Both rabbis said they would conduct the Shabbat service from their homes, but would allow Zoom to be set up at the temple and have the Torah scroll opened to the portion Mer was reading, so the service could proceed seamlessly.

The big day arrived. Mer donned her white dress, did up her hair with some help from her mom and the family, wipes in hand, entered the synagogue, carefully disinfecting anything they might contaminate. With the video turned on, one by one families began to join in the ceremony. Mer's excitement could not be contained. Though physically separated from extended family and friends, she smiled and waved at each family as they joined the congregation via Zoom. By the time the service began over 70 families – about 150 people – were in attendance. Both rabbis led an abbreviated service and said the prayers before the Torah was removed from the holy ark. When the time came, Mer and her parents carefully cradled the Torah and gently placed it on the stand and Mer began chanting the holy scripture, showing how wonderfully her hard work paid off.

As is the custom, after Mer chanted, each parent blessed Meredith with some words of wisdom referring to the Torah portion being read. Robin noted that Mer's portion addressed the proper killing of a cow in order to keep it kosher. She recalled when Mer first encountered the translation of her Torah portion, she wondered

aloud why there would need to be rules for killing a cow. But as she discussed this further with her parents, they helped her realize that rules are necessary for a society to function and for the greater good. Robin pointed out these rules were written in order to keep a community safe. Kosher practices were one of the earliest examples of societal rules addressing community health. Then Robin went on, “In the last month, community health has taken on a whole new meaning. Rules have been implemented to protect our community. These rules have affected your bat mitzvah and celebration, and you are experiencing first-hand the need for and effect of community health measures.”

While certainly the event was not what had been planned, surprisingly it turned out to be even more meaningful and embracing. As each family clicked in, each realized that together we were sharing a life event under the most difficult of circumstances, showing the resiliency and continuity of life. Mer’s willingness to accept the change of plans and disappointment with grace and maturity (albeit with a few tears) showed she really was ready to join the Jewish community as an adult and accept the responsibilities of her actions. All the concern everyone felt for this amazing young woman somehow flowed through the cameras, wrapping the newest member of the congregation in love. And Mer felt it as she chanted the ancient prayers and received their shouts of Mazel Tov. She smiled when she finished and then readied herself to leave the Temple – but not before she showed off her practiced TikTok moves to the delight of the audience.