

Yonatan's Bar Mitzva

Michael Levitt, Father

As the sun set on 6 November, and 14 Cheshvan began, Yonatan, our dear son, reached his thirteenth birthday, and the next day, Shabbat Vayeira, he was Bar Mitzva in Eshchar surrounded by friends, community and family as he read from the Torah and Haftara for the first time. A milestone for all the family, but especially for Yonatan!

After a lifetime of wanting to express my Jewish self and not knowing how to, I have spent the last twenty years or so coming closer to achieving that, and we have all found in Eshchar a place where we can live and express ourselves as Jews in a fertile Jewish and Zionist environment where we are accepted wherever we are in our Jewish journeys, loved and encouraged. I did not think it got better than this, but how wrong I was! With Yonatan's Bar Mitzva the pinnacle of my desires, which over the years has become one shared by Riva more and more, has arrived. We have done everything that we can to bring Yonatan meaningfully to this day, and before him, Amber to her Bat Mitzva, and they have done us proud indeed.

Yonatan began learning how to leyn a year ago, but has achieved so much more than a mere parroting of his parasha. He has learned how to leyn, both torah and haftara. He has become more familiar with the synagogue service, learning the patience and peace of heart required to daven, understanding his role as a Levi. He has thoroughly learned about his parasha, one of the most difficult and misunderstood, dealing as it does with the akeida – the binding of Isaac. Through his studies he has come to understand why, as Jews, we honour guests, value our children so highly, and must always try to do the right thing (when we finally can identify it). In respect of the first, he took special inspiration from the nation's honoring, as guests, our soldiers during operation Tsuk Eitan (though on their territory rather than in our homes). In respect of the value we place on children, he saw this in action too, in stark contrast with the lack of value the Muslims place on their children, as evidenced in several ways, including a comparison he made of the story of the akeida in the Torah and the koran which is most illuminating. He has written and spoken about all this and more in his Bar Mitzva project, in his Dvar Torah which he said in shul before the entire community of Eshchar and gathered guests, and in his luncheon speech. He has with pride learned how to lay tefillin during the two months prior to his Bar Mitzva and now he carries out that mitzva in earnest.

We had envisioned Yonatan's Bar Mitzva not as a single event for guests followed by a meal, but as both those things encased in a spiritual and enjoyable weekend experience here in Eshchar. A number of our out-of-town guests took us up on the programme.

So the first guests to arrive, even before the advertised programme, were Moshe and Bella, who stayed with us, and Noa and her boyfriend – they all arrived Thursday night so that on Friday morning it was our pleasure to take them to Eti and Na'ama's. Eti and Na'ama (<http://www.etinaama.com/>) is the catering firm, based in the nearby yishuv of Shechanya, which also runs a small brunch restaurant on site on a Friday morning. So in addition to picking up the food for the weekend from them, we all sat down to a magnificent brunch of salads and shakshuka.

Taking the food back to the moadon, we found our friend Meirav Levy, and her sons – who helped us organise the event – already having set up the hall for Friday night dinner, the tables in a horseshoe shape, with royal blue table cloths and silver throws and napkins. It was then that we took some photographs since we were unable to take "live" ones with all the events occurring on Shabbat. Unlike in the UK, we couldn't have a Motzei Shabbat event to allow for photos, since Sunday is a working day.

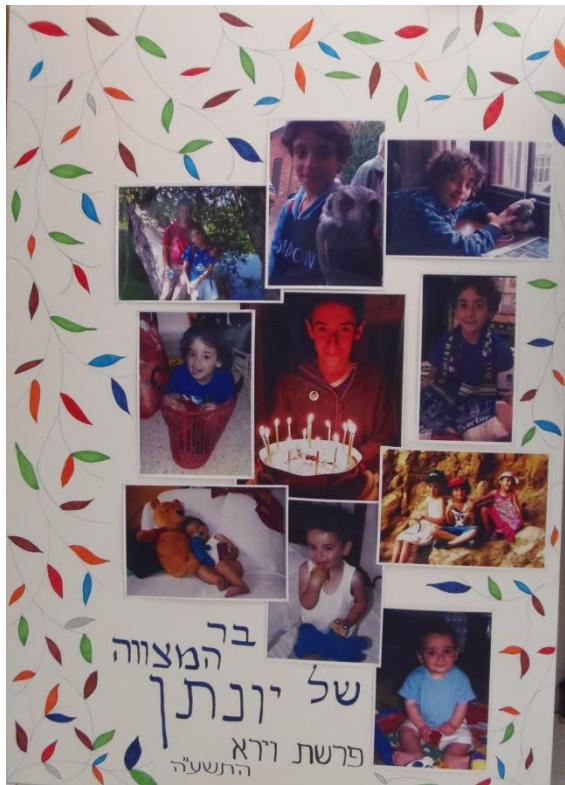


Photo montage

latter proved a winner throughout the weekend, prompting much interest and emotion, especially from family members who saw themselves or their parents and relatives pictured.

Once the guests arrived (those visiting supplemented by close friends from Eshchar) I made Kiddush for Erev Shabbat, and after netilat yadayim I made Hamotzi, and we sat down to enjoy the challa with so many salads, followed by soup, and then a choice of fish, meat or chicken. At that stage I started moving around and talking to guests so I



Yonatan's Benschers

nearly missed the sweets! The menu is overleaf. Oh, and Riva had made amounts of matbucha and potato salad which we added to the salads.

We asked Yael's husband to lead the bensching, the pattern of which Riva copied on his photo montage.

The next morning we were up early and got to shul before 8 o'clock, where guests were provided with breakfast in the moadon, in the form of sweet pastries of various types; croissants, white cheese pastries, rogelach, apple turnovers and

Riva made up a photo montage of pictures of Yonatan at various ages, centred around one we took on his "civil" birthday, blowing out candles on his birthday cake. She made a design of leaves around the whole, mirroring the design on his benschers.

During the afternoon the rest of our guests who had chosen to take us up on the full programme started to arrive, and everyone came round and sat with us outside the house, talking and getting on fine.

Soon enough it was an hour until Shabbat, which was to come in at 4.10 pm, so everyone scuttled off to get ready and at 4 o'clock we met up at the moadon where a "pinat neirot" had been arranged for people to light candles. After that we went into shul for Kabbalat Shabbat, with Yonatan, Amber and Riva dressed very smartly, and me in my pinstripe suit and polished black shoes – quite a shock for Eshchar so I eased them in gently by omitting a tie!

After Kabbalat Shabbat we had an hour's wait until dinner, but people congregated in the spacious moadon and sat chatting, and looking at Yonatan's project as well as my family photo album. This



Pinat Neirot Shabbat



Orange Vegetable Soup

Main dishes

Chicken marinated in sweet chili and date syrup

Amnon (St Peter's fish) fillet, seared on the grill, with a green lemon sauce served with sliced lemon and mustard sauce

Roast veal shoulder slices served with chimichurri sauce

Hot side

Hot side dishes

Basmati rice served with wild rice

Tiny baked potatoes with thyme, garlic and onion sauce

Pasta with tomato sauce on the side

Salads

Green salad – leaves of lettuce, baby greens, rocket leaves and a mixture of toasted seeds served with a vinaigrette

Grilled aubergine with roasted radishes, raw tahini and date syrup

Red rice with green beans and soya beans, seasoned with sesame seeds, mint and parsley

Taobouleh - bulgur with finely-chopped parsley

Cherry tomato halves colored with fresh basil, roasted pine nuts and balsamic vinegar

Sprouted beans with herb seasoning

Tahini

Desserts

Fresh Fruit Tart (with seasonal fruit)

Pear Pie with Almond Cream

Dark Chocolate Truffle Cubes

Bitter praline - bitter chocolate mousse cake

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vanilla pastries, together with coffee and teas. This remained available of course during Shacharit, which commenced at 8 o'clock. Yonatan and I took up a front-row seat behind the bimah, next to the ladies' section – we normally sit in the “naughty boys' seats” as I call them, along the wall at the side! Yonatan was smart “Eshchar-style” in new white collared shirt, new blue jeans and new sneakers. This time I was in a cream suit with red handkerchief, white double-cuffed shirt (a £300 pound shirt from Jermyn Street, picked up good as new, second hand, on eBay, for £20 including postage to Israel!), black and white tie, and ox-blood shoes. Riva and Amber wore new frocks. Everyone wished us mazal tov, asked if such attire was normal in England, etc.

The gabai soon approached us and, after wishing us mazal tov, asked who we would wish to honour. We gave him a list of Hebrew names and informed him Yonatan would make a Dvar Torah after the Mussaf Amidah – everything is very informal and last minute here – in Liverpool you must let them know these things weeks ahead (as we know to our cost!).

So approached the time of reading the Torah, parashat Vayeira. Moshe Goren took it out and was to read the first five aliyot, peppering them – so he said afterwards – with mistakes so that Yonatan would glow. The warm-up act, as he said! I was called up to the Levi's aliyia, the second call-up. Yonatan's Saba Moshe was called up to the fourth aliya. And so the sixth aliya approached, which speaks about Avimelech and the well which Avraham Avinu had dug. For this Yoel Ben Natan, our Scouse friend who lives here, was called up for several reasons: firstly it is his birthday parasha too; secondly he sadly lost his brother, Mark Rosenblatt, and was sitting shiva in Liverpool and then back here last week. Yonatan read like a professional, ably assisted at his side with very occasional prompts by Dudu Rosenblum. His teacher, our friend Rivkah Hanssen, was of course unable to be at his side, but beamed nevertheless from behind the mechitza.

The seventh aliya tells the story of the akeida, and Yonatan told it fluently, with no-one needing to correct him from the congregation. I was fascinated to watch him. He had only one time practiced with the Torah scroll, so had no experience of using the *yad*, yet I saw, as he held it, that it moved in circles and spirals in time and in pitch with the tropes of each word, absolutely leading Yonatan rather than being pushed by him. My belief in such mystical matters is very thinly spread, yet I know what I observed, and it was remarkable. Either the *yad* truly lead him with a life of its own, or he instinctively felt the tradition of generations which – never having been called up to the bimah before, he cannot have witnessed. Not being so mystical as his old dad, he claims the latter more likely!



From top left, clockwise: Erev Shabbat table; the coffee/breakfast corner; photo montage; Erev Shabbat table setting.

Since he was also to read Haftara, Yonatan received the aliya of the Maftir, which he sailed through, followed by my reciting the father's blessing ("Blessed is He who has now freed me from the responsibility of this one!"). Afterwards he read his Haftara, from the second book of Kings. I remained with him at the bimah throughout. He was then showered with sweets, which all the children "hoovered" up. After the Mussaf prayers, Yonatan made his Dvar Torah, in Hebrew. Our friend and neighbour, Effie Tkacz, then presented him with a beautiful boxed siddur set (one for the home and one for Shabbat) on behalf of "Beit Eshchar."

Following this the congregation filed out into the moadon for Kiddush, to which the whole community was invited (and it had been advertised in the newsletter, enclosed). We had planned this outside,

but though the weather held the whole weekend marvellously with nice temperatures and no rain, it was extremely windy, hence the inside venue. Visitors asked who were the caterers, but as is usual here, the community brings cakes and sweets, as well as our friend, Reuvain's famous sweet-spicy kugel. People who have been in Eshchar for years commented that they had never seen such abundance, reflecting, they said, our popularity – but as much as that, I think, is the fact that Riva knows so many people through gan whose children must have instructed their parents to bake!

Once everyone was finished and “pushed” out, Meirav's sons literally hosed down the floor, which was covered with mess, using the fire hose! But Riva's stroke of genius, which avoided the usual excess of floor-mess, had been not to provide plates, which the naughtier children use to pile with vast amounts of food which is then left lying about, trodden and wasted.

I had envisaged a walk, perhaps, with out-of-town guests, but they preferred to rest or come to the house for a chat, and after that we returned to the moadon for lunch at 2 o'clock. This time the tables were separate – for eight or twelve – with royal blue cloths, and orange napkins. The tables were numbered and we sat people together who had common interests.

So after I made hamotzi (kiddush already having been said earlier of course), we sat down to challa and the leftover salads (unplanned, but there was plenty!) and then in came three types of chamin (cholent): from meat, from turkey neck, and “blind” for the veggies (of whom there were quite a number), together with some leftover veal from the night before. Quite a feast! The cholent was not catered, but made by our friend Dina Resiner here on the yishuv, in vast quantities.

Once people were finishing, Yonatan stood up to make his speech, in Hebrew, to much applause. Then Amber stood up and made an impromptu speech, in Hebrew, which she had written out before Shabbat, after having previously insisted she did not want to! Finally it was my turn. My speech I began in Hebrew, then turning to English, and I imagine that the majority understood most of it. I knew it was a moving speech, written from my heart, but I had wondered how it would be received, since I have a certain formal (even pompous?) style. But I need not have feared. Many remarked that you could hear a pin drop – no mean feat with dozens of Jewish kids and babies present! People had tears in their eyes, and applauded. Friends in the community came up to me with tears and hugged me. I suddenly realised that, until then, I must have been seen by many of our friends with less propensity to speaking English as “that pleasant smiling fellow of few words, Riva's husband.” Now, suddenly, I had introduced myself, in a very deep way, opening my heart for all present to see. It was very warming.

After my speech I started mingling and again nearly missed the sweets, and then I asked our friend, Ma'or Ben Shimol, to lead the bensching.

After the guests helped stack chairs etc, a small cadre returned with us to the house, with others going to rest. Soon enough though, it was time for Havdala. As it had become clear how few guests would be staying until after Shabbat, we had announced we would make Havdala at home, and were joined by a few guests.

Most of the remaining guests left motzei Shabbta, and the next morning there remained only six relatives. Yonatan and Amber left for school about 7.15 – having overslept and missed the bus they got a tremp! The rest of us enjoyed breakfast of smoked salmon, scrambled egg and leftover pastries, at home. Riva and I had to return all the tablecloths and the catering containers, so we shoved everyone out.

My mother, Valerie, was missed, and many asked after her, both family and our friends who did not know you. Everyone wished her a *refuah shleima* and that she may visit us soon! Even today, Riva tells me, parents picking up their children from gan are talking about the Bar Mitzva – even the ones who weren't there!