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simchahs

# Green Bar Mitzvahs

How to plan a green celebration

By Gail Naron Chalew

Special to the Jewish Times

Choices, choices, choices. Decisions, decisions, decisions. Planning a b'nai mitzvah celebration (or any life-cycle event, for that matter) is all about making choices: where to hold it, what to eat, what kind of music to play, how to decorate the place, what to give away as party favors, what type of invitation, and, of course, how to fit all those choices into the budget.

Today, more and more families are making an additional choice that influences every subsequent planning decision: making theirs a "green" celebration.

You used to have to search out green resources, to find recyclable paper for invitations or biodegradable disposables or information about locally sourced food. Now there are a surfeit of Web sites that provide so much information at your fingertips, and two local organizations—the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network and the Pearlstone Conference and Retreat Center—are the resources for everything green. (See section on "Planning Tips and Resources.")

The challenge is how to manage all that information and how to decide which parts of the celebration to make green.

Rabbi Nina Cardin, director of the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network, suggests that planning choices be guided by these simple words: "Living well today while protecting tomorrow."

"Everything that we do should leave the lightest footprint on the

earth; we should use up as little as possible and throw out as little as possible," adds Rabbi Cardin.

So how to put that into action? Joelle Novey, who grew up at Chizuk Amuno and now directs the environmental nonprofit, Greater Washington Interfaith Power & Light, says, "The first step is to embrace the planning of the event as a real opportunity to go green. Because even for a small party you will be buying things in large quantities and will be doing it in a very public way.

"Your celebration will be a real chance to share what you chose and why—to share your values without being preachy.

"It can also be a teachable moment for teens, showing them how to put their values into action. They are much more tuned into the need for sustainability than their parents, and making the celebration green is a great way to get them excited about planning the party," notes Ms. Novey.

But just as every aspect of the celebration can be an opportunity to go green, so can every aspect involve compromise.

For instance, serving the meal on china uses fewer resources and produces less waste than disposables, but china can be very costly or impractical for outdoor celebrations. So if you decide to use disposables, then use sugar cane or corn-based ones that can then be composted. If you want fresh flowers as the centerpieces, make sure they are organic or from local nurseries. Go ahead and book the DJ and party

perkers but tell them to leave the mega-watt lighting systems behind.

Some choices have more impact than others. One of the biggest environmental impacts of any celebration are the greenhouse gas emissions generated by guests who fly in for the simchah or who drive to it. So keep in mind the distance between the service and the reception if you choose to have them in different places, and set up carpools. Encourage your out-of-town guests, in lieu of gifts, to donate carbon offsets for their flights.

"Putting on a b'nai mitzvah party can be very stressful, and none of us can do everything green," says Ms. Novey.

"But we should be inspired to make our choices as much as possible reflect our deepest values."

### Planning and Resources

This list, which includes just a few suggestions, was prepared with the help of Jessica Weinberg, Director of Programming & Promotion, at the Pearlstone Conference and Retreat Center. Pearlstone is planning to put on a green b'nai mitzvahs workshop that will highlight green resources; in the meantime, contact her at [jweinberg@pearlstonecenter.org](mailto:jweinberg@pearlstonecenter.org).

A very useful guide, "Green and Just Celebrations: A Purchasing Guide for Washington's Jewish Families," written



Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, director of the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network

by Rebecca Shaloff and Joelle Novey, can be downloaded from the Jews United for Justice Web site, [jufj.org](http://jufj.org).

### Invitations

Purchase invitations made from recycled paper. Use self-mailers to reduce the amount of paper.

Print the invitation on a JNF tree certificate: a tree is planted in Israel, and your guests receive a favor before they arrive at the party: [jnf.org/get-involved/celebrate](http://jnf.org/get-involved/celebrate).

Buy seeded invitations that you actually plant: [botanicalpaperworks.com](http://botanicalpaperworks.com).

### Centerpieces

Balloons are a no-no!

Use live plants that can be planted or given to nursing homes.

Tie them into the teen's mitzvah project; for instance, if your son is collecting books, then display them decoratively at the table (but without using cellophane).

Use Jewish Community Services' Centerpieces for Tzedakah: [jcsbaltimore.org](http://jcsbaltimore.org).

### Kippot

There is even a "waste-management kippah" that looks like suede but is made of recycled cardboard: [www.a-zara.com](http://www.a-zara.com).

### Mitzvah projects

Plan one that helps the environment. For instance, Naomi Roswell, who recently celebrated her bat mitzvah, planted 100 native edible fruit trees near a pond at Camp Milldale.

### Carbon offsets

Purchase carbon offsets that reduce the greenhouse gas emissions generated by your guests at [terrapass.com](http://terrapass.com).

Gail Chalew is a freelance writer living in New Orleans

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