

Not Forgotten

Flint b'nai mitzvah honor memory of children slain in Holocaust.

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Staff Writer

When Alex Kovalsky speaks from the bimah during his bar mitzvah service this Shabbat, he will talk about Shimon Kheifetz, a young boy who died in the Holocaust before he was able to become a bar mitzvah.

Alex and five classmates at the Ivriah religious school in Flint are the first Michigan students to participate in the Remember Us: The Holocaust B'nai Mitzvah Project, a program that introduces b'nai mitzvah students to the memory of a child who perished at a young age, like Shimon, who died at age 3.

The project provides brief biographies of children lost in the Holocaust and encourages b'nai mitzvah candidates to find ways to honor their memory.

"Kids are doing everything from introducing the name of a child at a bar or bat mitzvah and asking for a moment of silence, to finding a connection to their Torah portion — all the way to families putting up memorial plaques and taking on the mitzvah of *Kaddish* [the prayer for the dead]," said Geshar Calmenson, director of Remember Us.

"What's particularly interesting is that every kid seems to understand the *kavanah* (intention) as soon as they hear the invitation. They make a solemn and spontaneous connection."

And that's what happened at the Ivriah. "We introduced Remember Us to past and future b'nai mitzvah students and their parents during our bar and bat mitzvah family education program a few months ago," said Emily Alter, director of the Ivriah, a combined religious school of the Conservative Congregation Beth Israel and the Reform Temple Beth El, both in Flint.

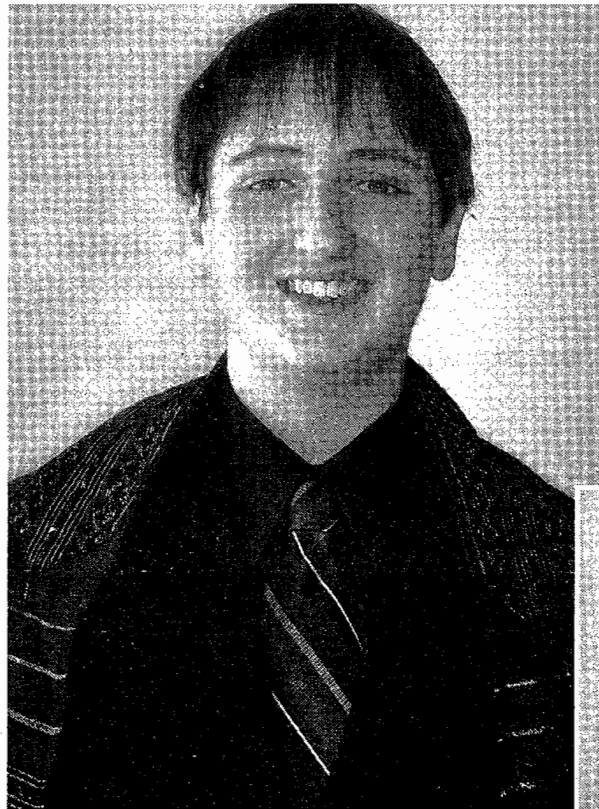
Not only did each of the five students with upcoming b'nai mitzvah services sign on, but Alter said, "The one person there who had already become a bat mitzvah a couple of months earlier asked if it was too late for her to get in on this, too."

Another Child Remembered

That student was 13-year-old Adria Palinsky of Grand Blanc, whose reason for participating was simple but insightful.

"So many children died in the Holocaust and have no one around to remember them," she said. "I thought if I was in the same position I would want someone to remember me."

Since Adria had become a bat mitzvah in December 2004 at Temple Beth El in Flint, she chose that day for her future yahrtzeit remembrances of Marianne Adler who died at age 10 at



Alex Kovalsky

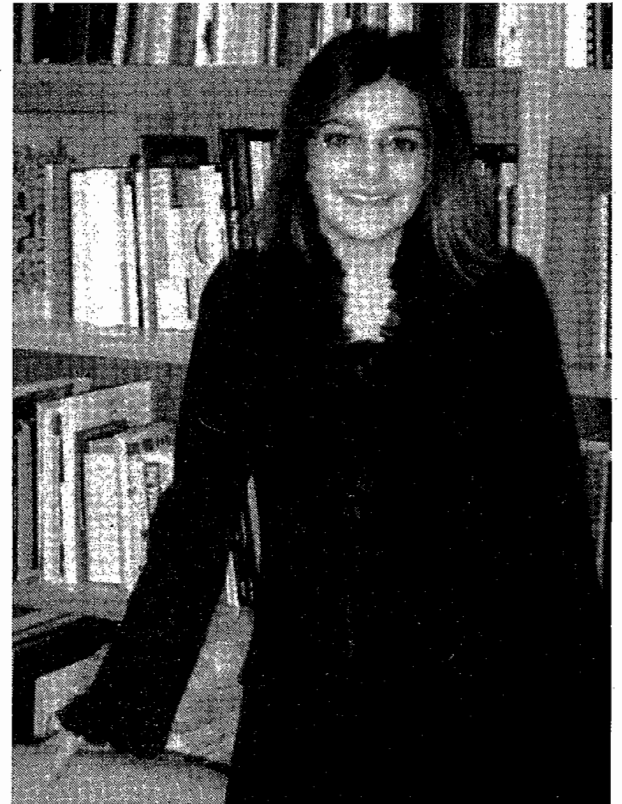
Auschwitz. As one would do for a family member, Adria's mom Cyndi Mott said, "Adria wanted to make sure the child was remembered and came up with the idea of purchasing a plaque with her bat mitzvah money to hang in the wall of our temple."

Adria said, "I decided to buy a plaque because I thought it would be the best way for Marianne to be remembered publicly."

"The yahrtzeit wall is a permanent fixture in our temple, and I know that it will be in our congregation forever," she said. "I want future generations to be able to remember her so that no one will ever forget the atrocities of the Holocaust. On the Shabbat evening that her name will be read to the congregation for her yahrtzeit, the plaque with her name engraved on it will be unveiled; and I will give a *dvar Torah* [Bible lesson]."

The California-based nonprofit Remember Us program was developed in 2003 by Calmenson and project coordinator Barbara Tobin. It is now implemented by more than 700 children and their families in 40 Jewish supplemental schools and day schools in seven states and Australia.

The project was formed from Calmenson's experiences as a school director. "My whole life, I carried around an emotional wound from the Holocaust that I didn't even know was there until I visited Yad



Adria Palinsky



Educator
Emily Alter

Vashem, where it was exposed," he said.

"When I came back and looked at the children in my own school, I finally felt the enormity and the tragedy. I was already 66 years old, so the question was what could I do to bring healing to this place in myself and in other adults, and how could I offer the kids something to do so that it wouldn't be a hidden hurt place in them as they grew up. This program is my answer. The truth is, I think about it as my legacy."

Calmenson said he saw how remote the history of the Holocaust was to the children and how "real" it became when survivors came to speak to them. "I wanted to give them something positive that they could do, so that they were not simply confronted with the inexplicable horror without a way to make a meaningful connection."

Eternal Mitzvah

Students who participate in Remember Us are provided with the name and basic history of a child.

"Usually, all that is available is three or four sentences with their name, the city they lived in, the camp where they died, maybe their parents' names,

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maybe the year they died," Ivriah director Alter said. "The kids know that they are the only one given the name of that child; and they know however they choose to remember that person, they will be the only one. That's a powerful responsibility that they grabbed onto."

For Ivriah student Alex Kovalsky, 13, of Goodrich, that responsibility is awesome. "As far as I know, I am the only person who can keep Shimon's memory alive. It is a scary thought that there is no one left to remember him since probably no one in his family survived."

Alter said, "We stress to the kids how wonderful this program is and how if nobody on earth remembers these children it is almost as if they never were here. They are bringing a memory to life to make sure these children don't just disappear."

After sharing the memory of Shimon with all who attend his bar mitzvah service at Temple Beth El in Flint, Alex plans to make his remembrance of Shimon ongoing. "Since no one knows exactly when Shimon died, I chose a date for his yahrtzeit," Alex said. "I chose the date of my bar mitzvah to light a yahrtzeit candle and say Kaddish for him — every year."

In addition to the students' involvement in the project, their families are encouraged to participate. "Parents themselves seem to be healed by seeing their kids come to terms with the Holocaust in this healing way," Calmenson said. "Seeing a child model this kind of redemptive action seems to have an uplifting effect on everyone."

For Adria, being a part of Remember Us "makes me feel like an adult in the worldwide Jewish community because I am taking part in such a huge mitzvah." Her hope is that "all the children that Remember Us is aware of are remembered in the same way." □

Remember Us: The Holocaust Bnai Mitzvah Project is supported by a grant from the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund of San Francisco and individual contributors, so there is no charge to the schools or the students for participatory materials. To contribute to the project online, access the Web site at: www.remember-us.org or send a donation to: Remember Us: The Holocaust Bnai Mitzvah Project, 708 Gravenstein Highway North #39, Sebastopol, CA, 95472.

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