

Take the Chai Road

The most meaningful Judaica for the Big Day.

By Hillel Kuttler

For his mid-1960s Bar Mitzvah in Los Angeles, Dov Brisman received many books as gifts. They included commentaries on the Bible and on Jewish law, as well as *Sefer HaChinuch* (Feldheim), which explains each of the 613 mitzvot and cites their placement in the Torah.

As spiritual leader of Young Israel of Elkins Park, Rabbi Brisman presents *Sefer HaChinuch* (by an unknown medieval commentator, perhaps Rabbi Aharon Halevi) to Bar Mitzvah

boys following the synagogue service. Girls receive Rabbi Efrayim Eliyahu Kitov's *Sefer HaToda'ah*, dealing with Jewish laws and customs pegged to months of the year.

The point of giving such books "is that Bar and Bat Mitzvah are not the end of things. They are just the beginning," Brisman explained. "It means, if I can turn around the phrase, that there's more Mitzvah than Bar, that we have not arrived as adults; we are beginning as adults. The message is that what-

ever we do has to be done with the guidance of the Torah."

The selection of Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah gifts is as diverse as gifts given at other ages and stages children reach. Relatives and friends, of course, might opt for more generic gifts that account for recipients' tastes in music, jewelry, hobbies, travel and recreation.

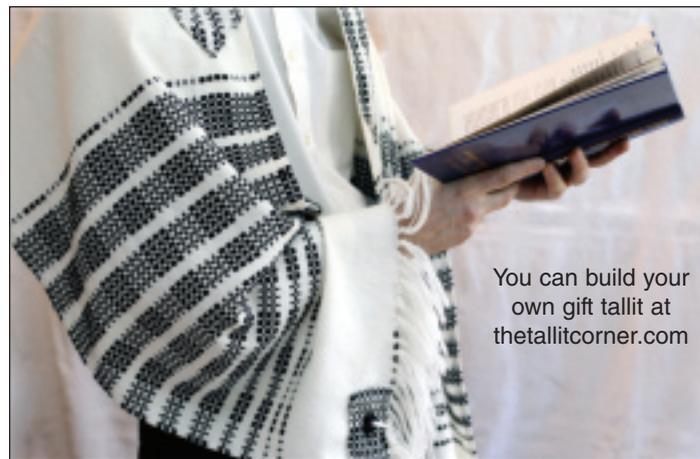
Parents traditionally provide the Bar Mitzvah boy the one item that he begins using just then: tefillin. For girls, parents and grandparents might opt for jewelry or candlesticks.

For some parents, bringing their children to Israel following their big day — or even forsaking the event at home and celebrating it solely in Israel — is a wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime gift.

Trends and tastes in purchases are duly noted by store owners. Amiram Gabay, proprietor of Jerusalem Israeli Gift Shop in the Northeast, finds that unique tallitot with pink and lavender embroidery are popular now among girls preparing for their big day. Some Bar Mitzvah boys, he said, are picking a tallit known as Joseph's Coat, which features 13 colors.

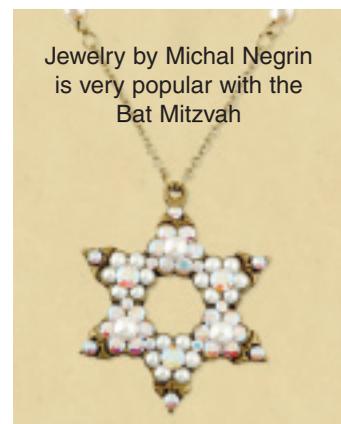
Bat Mitzvah girls shopping these days in Madelyn Heyman's Bala Judaica, in Bala Cynwyd, love the crystal necklaces and earrings by Israeli artist Michal Negrin, she said. Other popular B'nai Mitzvah gifts are kiddush cups, candlesticks, personal seder plates and the handmade chamsa charms crafted by Yemenite artists.

Like Rabbi Brisman, leaders of other area synagogues like to present their B'nai Mitzvah with Torah commentaries by authors popular within the movement. Congregation Keneseth Israel's Rabbi Lance Sussman provides the Reform synagogue's B'nai Mitzvah with *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (Union for Reform Judaism) by Rabbi Gunther Plaut, which Sussman called "a wonderful book that's both modern and traditional." The sisterhood of Beth Shalom Congrega-



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Jewelry by Michal Negrin is very popular with the Bat Mitzvah

say that now that you're a Bat Mitzvah, you light your own candles and your mother lights hers. That way we are training the family for Shabbat and yom tov."

In households with a limited religious background, the ritual items serve the same function, but in reverse. They "teach the parents to practice Judaism through the child," he said. "I used the children, effectively, to teach the parents Jewish religious practices in the home."

Whatever the item bestowed upon the child-now-adult, it should be useful and meaningful, while also underscoring the positive, uplifting nature of the day.

Rabbi Chaim Landau, who presides over Baltimore's Ner Tamid Greenspring Valley Synagogue (which this writer and his sons attend) has a fun way of drilling that point home.

After presenting the kiddush cup or candlesticks, the British-born Orthodox rabbi dispatches the new Jewish adult with an additional item.

"So that you leave here today with a sweet taste in your mouth," he likes to say, "I also am presenting you with this bar of Cadbury's chocolate."

Hillel Kuttler is a Baltimore-based freelance writer and a frequent contributor to Special Sections.

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