

'She knows she belongs'

Sophie Goldstein's bat mitzvah gathers community, illustrates spirit of inclusion

By **Tonyia Cone**

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A bar or bat mitzvah, the event that marks a child's entrance into Jewish adulthood, usually brings together family and close friends. Sophie Goldstein's bat mitzvah was so powerful, however, that it brought together a wider community.

Goldstein family friend Susan Broockman said, "I believe that all of us need to exercise opening our hearts and broadening our vision to include everyone and realizing the ways it strengthens all of us. Sophie's bat mitzvah was the living of that."

Ivy Goldstein, Sophie's mother, explained that because Sophie has multiple disability labels, no one would have questioned the family if Sophie did not become a bat mitzvah. Sophie initiated her participation in her community and feels a deep connection to her faith, however; so becoming a bat mitzvah was the natural next step for her to take.

"This started as an idea and evolved into something more clear," Ivy Goldstein said. "It was meaningful to Sophie and was worthwhile."

Sophie's training for her bat mitzvah, held March 17 at Congregation Agudas Achim, began when the family started attending services regularly five years ago. Sophie first attended junior congregation, then started going to Saturday morning Shabbat services in the sanctuary and eventually enrolled in religious school. Sophie, who has always loved music, began singing with a bensching group after Saturday morning services.

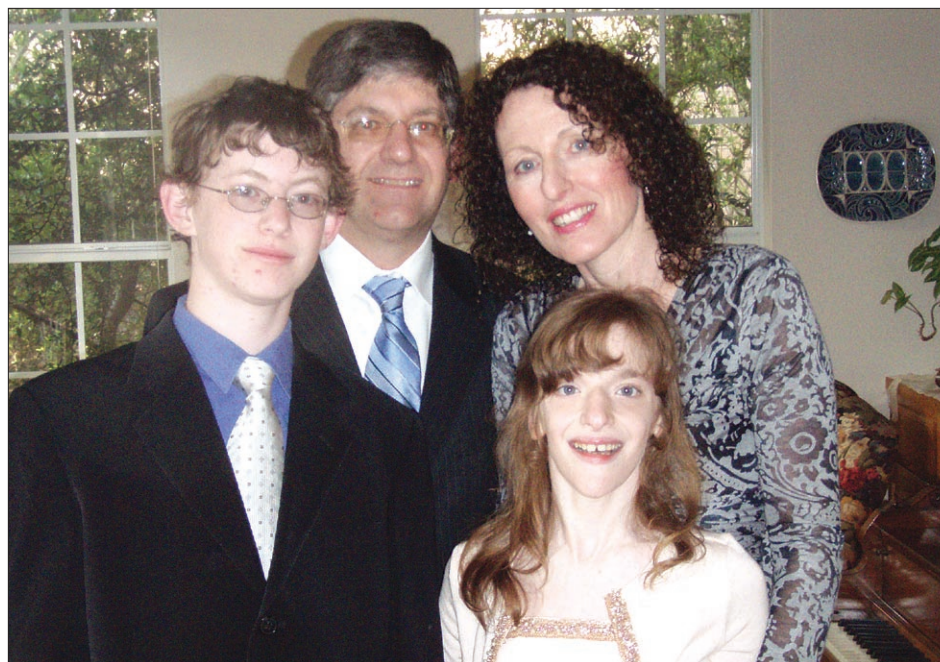
While Sophie bonded with congregants at services and in the congregation community as a whole, Cathy Schechter, one of Sophie's sponsors, said the youth really found her place at the bensching table.

BUCKET OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Schechter noticed that Sophie often carried a bucket filled with pictures. Trained as a special education teacher, Schechter knew Sophie connected with people through photographs and suggested that those who regularly sang with the group give Sophie a photograph of themselves. They did and, shortly thereafter, Sophie began to really bond with the group.

"She became responsible to the community because people expected her to show up and sing each week," Schechter said. "Part of what she worked on in becoming a Jewish adult was educating the community about what it means to be a benscher, to come together in song."

Hazzan Neil Blumofe, who worked with



Sophie Goldstein on the day of her bat mitzvah, with her mother and father, Ivy and David, and brother, Jeremy, at their home.

Sophie in preparation for her bat mitzvah, also found that knowing the best way to communicate with and respond to Sophie was important. Since he knew the family from seeing them at services each week, he knew music was an effective way to relate to Sophie. So he used the melodies from services as a keystone in working toward her bat mitzvah.

"It's important to recognize that every child is coming at it from their own family history, expectations and circumstances," Blumofe said. "Judaism can be open and flexible enough to bring people into its lessons and beauty. Specifically for a community, it's knowing that there are ways to work together to maintain integrity and to honor our children from generation to generation."

Ivy Goldstein explained that her daughter met with Blumofe each week and that Sophie loved working with the Hazzan.

"He would serenade her and she would just beam," she said.

Many people came together to support Sophie's path to becoming a bat mitzvah. Family friends, including Sophie's sponsors, Schechter and Terry Milman, and Rabbi Lynn Liberman attended some of Sophie's last few sessions with Blumofe. During the year before Sophie's bat mitzvah, her sponsors and some of her religious-school classmates also accompanied Sophie to the bimah at the end of services to help her get used to walking up to and standing on it for her bat mitzvah ceremony.

Schechter and Broockman combined Sophie's love of photographs and music to create a siddur, with members of the ben-

sching group signing the Shema prayer.

Broockman said, "Sophie allows the best in people to emerge with each other. It changes the entire tone of a community to make a shared experience beautifully together."

Leading up to the bat mitzvah, a group got together to bake challah with Sophie's name in English and Hebrew, and some of Sophie's classmates came together to throw her a preview party, where they presented her with a digital camera.

Ivy Goldstein said, "The was the sweetest and most beautiful thing ever. It was just loving by these kids that still may have questions and are trying to understand Sophie. I could never have anticipated it; Sophie was overjoyed by the whole thing."

EMBODIMENT OF INCLUSION

Goldstein explained that her daughter's classmates embracing Sophie and the Agudas community's involvement in the bat mitzvah embody the spirit of inclusion.

Susan Sager, the 2007 Ayshet Chayil Woman of Valor who spoke on inclusion at the recent Mosaic luncheon and is a member of Agudas Achim who attended Sophie's bat mitzvah, said, "It was something for me sitting in the congregation that day. We were bigger that day; we were fulfilling what it meant to be Agudas Achim, brethren. It was soul-stirring to sit there."

Milman explained that, because the family attends services regularly, Sophie's bat mitzvah included members of the congregation who are not usually included in b'nei mitzvah, such as those who are older and may not know very well those who are



Sophie Goldstein and her mother designed and made the bat mitzvah invitations, whose cover featured Sophie's handprint. Taking part enriched the experience for Sophie.

becoming b'nei mitzvah.

"Everyone was excited this was happening," Milman said. "If you ever question how one person could change the world or a community, look back at today at how everyone is here and has the same agenda to be part of this community-wide celebration. This was truly something Ivy and Sophie did."

Milman said that people returned to Agudas Achim from other congregations for the event, and that sitting with Sophie is one of the things that bring her to shul every week.

"It just makes me feel good being with her. She's very pleasant and always has a smile on her face. Many times I'm not engaged in service, I'm engaged with her. Shabbat is always fulfilled with service or with her," Milman said, explaining that one of Sophie's gifts is that she is accepting of everyone.

"Sophie doesn't judge people," she said. "Maybe the rest of us have disabilities because we're so judgmental. I think that's a gift that she accepts everyone, so it feels good to be with her. You can be who you are, no matter who you are, and she accepts that."

While the community gained a lot from attending Sophie Goldstein's bat mitzvah, Schechter said, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the event was for Sophie.

"She has a lot of the same emotions any child that age has. She's a teen-age girl and went through what most bat mitzvahs go through. She just went through it in her own way," Schechter said. "To me this was about Sophie becoming a bat mitzvah. This was about one particular child who came of age in her own particular way."

Ivy Goldstein said that preparing for the event also gave her daughter a way to relate to her classmates. When Sophie received invitations to her classmates' b'nei mitzvah, her mother explained to her that they were like the invitations they were making for her own bat mitzvah.

"The day meant so much to Sophie. She woke up that morning and smiled at me. When I told her, 'It's today, it's your turn,' she beamed," Goldstein said. "Really, she understood the significance in a deep way and felt the outpouring of love from everyone. We are grateful that she feels she is part of the Agudas community and that she knows she belongs."

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