

# They push so each child can relax, enjoy their day on the bima

By ROBERT GREEN  
Jewish Press

As students near their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, their rabbis and cantors are trying — each in their own way — to help them both prepare for the service and to realize the significance of the memorable day.

In *Jewish Press* interviews with representative rabbis and cantors from Tampa Bay area congregations who were available, they say their goal is for each child to excel to the best of his or her ability.

“Each Bar or Bat Mitzvah is unique. We challenge every child to do their best. It shouldn’t be easy for them,” said Rabbi Daniel Treiser of Temple B’nai Israel (Reform) in Clearwater.

Rabbi Treiser said that he urges students not to worry so much about their performance and to focus on the meaning of the day.

“I form a very personal relationship with all the kids. I push them,” said Rabbi Marc Sack of Congregation Rodeph Sholom (Conservative) in Tampa.

Hazzan Paul Goldstein of Congregation B’nai Israel (Conservative) in St. Petersburg says he goes over each student’s Torah portion with the boy or girl to see if they understand it. “I ask, ‘What are you saying? What does it mean?’”

He said if students study regularly and know they are prepared, they can relax and enjoy the day.

“You want your child to be comfortable on the bima,” Hazzan Goldstein said. He encourages students to attend Shabbat services regularly so they will know what happens during the service. He said he tells his students, “Have fun. Be prepared and relax.”

Hazzan Goldstein said he recalled one girl who stayed on the bima after it was over and everyone else had left. When he asked her why, she said, “It was over so fast.”

That goes to enforce a maxim for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. “Slow down and make it last,” he said.

Rabbi Joel Simon of Congregation Schaarai Zedek (Reform) in Tampa said he asks students, “What does it mean to say you are becoming an adult when you’re 13?”

Rabbi Simon said he tells them they now have a new level of responsibility to do things without being told to because they are the right things to do.

Rabbi Sack asks students to discuss topics for their speech with their families and then narrow the choices down to two before choosing one.

“They come up with some deeply personal things, some very profound statements for 13-year-olds,” Rabbi Sack said.

“I just worked with a girl who’s going to talk about feeling God’s presence in her life,” he said. “What’s most important to me is that I help them do it through the language of Torah. It’s how Torah applies in their own lives.”

“Giving a speech is very hard for many 13-year-olds. They grow up a lot and they know it. There are multiple layers to the experience,” Rabbi Sack said.

“I think for all the kids and families, it’s a deeply powerful moment. I think they all know this.”

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