

'Twice Exceptional' Yishai Barth Celebrates His Bar Mitzvah

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Rabbi Samuel and Karen Barth say their son Yishai is “twice exceptional” — gifted and disabled. He is remarkably bright with an inquisitive mind that is continually challenging and questioning. He grasps complicated concepts, is philosophical and shows interest in international politics.



Photos by Leonard Yakir

Above, Yishai Barth rehearses at the bimah.

And yet, Yishai doesn't read, can barely write and has difficulty walking.

Yishai has cerebral palsy. From all accounts he has made great progress in both his physical and intellectual development in the 2½ years since the Barths moved to Gloucester when Samuel Barth became rabbi of Temple Ahavat Achim. With the help of his parents, a “visionary” educator at Stoneridge Children's Montessori School, and high-tech computer programs, nothing seems to get in the way of this 13-year-old's inquisitive, creative mind.



Preparing for Yishai Barth's recitation, from left are Rabbi Samuel Barth, Yishai, Rabbi Wayne Dosick and Karen Barth.

Cerebral palsy simply means brain damage, said Samuel Barth. “The way it manifests can be very different depending on which part of the brain is affected.”

There's nothing wrong with the muscles in Yishai's legs, arms and hands. The disability is concentrated in the part of the brain that controls those activities.

Yishai has low muscle tone, resulting in his difficulty with both gross and fine motor abilities. So it is laborious for him to perform everyday functions such as walking, lifting, going upstairs, picking up books, writing, keyboarding, drawing, buttoning a shirt and brushing his teeth.

“Many of these things require enormous focus and concentration,” Rabbi Barth said. “He can walk and go upstairs. He can walk about his school and around home or on level space pretty much unaided. Beyond 50 yards, it becomes enormously tiring.

“He’s extraordinarily fortunate that his speech is untouched. Often, it’s the most tragic thing in the world. You can have a person with a genius IQ who can’t speak with any clarity,” Barth explained.

People whose oratory ability is affected cannot get the words out. Thankfully, Yishai — who has so much to say, so much wisdom to impart — retains the gift of speech.

He overcomes his inability to read by being an acute listener. He uses computer software that reads to him and he listens to books on tape.

Since he cannot write, he is learning to use speech-to-text software called Dragon Naturally Speaking that is almost 100 percent accurate. He dictates his schoolwork, and the computer writes what he says.

“He talks to the computer, and words appear,” said his mother, Karen Barth. “He wrote a poem that way. He says, ‘open email,’ and the computer will open his email. It has taken him a lot of practice to use it, but he’s getting good at it,” Karen said. “He can very, very slowly use the computer keys, but he doesn’t do it much.”

Yishai likes to create pieces of art. He works with either an aide or computer software to depict the scenes he visualizes. The tallis he wore at his bar mitzvah, with flames and a panther, was his vision.

For his bar mitzvah, Yishai studied extensively with his mother, receiving additional assistance from family friends Rabbi Liebe Hoffman and Rabbi Wayne Dosick, PhD, author of “20 Minute Kabbalah.”

Yishai bonded especially with a friend from Austin, Texas, David Goldblatt, who also has challenges with disability. Goldblatt traveled to be with the Barths for the bar mitzvah.

Asked to describe his coming of age ceremony on January 17, Yishai quipped that what he loved was that all the attention was focused “on me and nothing but me.”

The difficulty of the day was not his Hebrew and English recitations, which he had memorized with ease, nor his speech to the large crowd of family, friends and temple members who filled the seats and stood lining the walls of Cruiseport Gloucester where his bar mitzvah was held. What was challenging was staying focused, standing and walking around “especially with heavy clothing and shoes that don’t give me arch support.” It was physically strenuous.

Did the bar mitzvah experience alter him in some way?

“Many people ask me that. What I say often perplexes them,” Yishai said. “I don’t remember much of it, just my friends’ faces and hugging them and being so happy I couldn’t think.”

Looking back, by far the best part was partying with his school and camp buddies in the evening. Despite all that is unusual about Yishai’s life, he is the first to say he’s just a typical teenager who loves video games where he shoots things down, hangs out with friends, and likes girls. He’d much rather play

than study, said his mother.

"I'm a thinker, observer, actor, a control freak. I like puzzles — cracking them, slipping my brain into them and then watching them pop from the outside," Yishai said. "I enjoy art, philosophy, science. I like Halo and Call of Duty video games."

The Stoneridge Children's Montessori School in Beverly is the best school he has ever attended.

"It's good enough as schools go," Yishai said. "I have had much more of a good experience at this school than schools in the past, largely due to the efforts of Alan Feldman. He has been there for me, like a second father. Alan always has a hug for me in the morning."

Head of School Dr. Alan Feldman, who is also a past president of Temple Ahavat Achim, said Yishai is a determined child. His parents have given him every possible avenue to allow his growth, maturity and independence to flourish. Montessori, a private K-8 school with 170 students (including Yishai's 10-year-old sister, Miriam), has proved to be productive for him and other students as well who benefit from getting to know Yishai.

Rabbi Barth asked Feldman to help Yishai deliver his D'var Torah. Had Yishai prepared for a traditional speech it would have been arduous for him to read "and it wouldn't showcase his extraordinary oratorical talents," Feldman said.

So the Barths asked Feldman as a friend of the family to assist Yishai in developing a conversational style of delivery (hevrutta), a Socratic style that would be typical of those used in yeshivot.

"I sat with Yishai. We developed five questions that would prompt him on segments of the Torah portion, and he responded," Feldman said. "He did a wonderful interpretation of the portion, but his style of delivery, his ability to think as he speaks, that was showcased."

Feldman calls Yishai a "phenomenal listener." Once given information orally, he internalizes it.

Montessori has been a godsend, according to Karen Barth. Since Yishai doesn't have tolerance for sitting in a chair and listening to a teacher lecture, the school is perfect for him. At Montessori he is able to move around and can learn at his own pace.

"They put emphasis on inter-personal relationships between kids," Karen said. Social life hasn't always come easy to Yishai because he is not typical.

"Just being a rabbi's son, a serious, committed Jew on the North Shore, is different," Karen said. "He's the only kid who takes Jewish holidays off, who keeps the Sabbath and has a physical disability. His vocabulary is on a totally different level. He's philosophical, interested in deep things."

She recalled taking him on a business trip to Israel when he was 18 months old. They were sitting in a café when he asked, "Who is God? What's the sky made of?"

She marveled at having such a conversation with an 18-month old. And that was just the beginning. He's been asking tough questions ever since.

In June, Yishai will attend a program for talented youth at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore where he will take a three-week class in international

relations.

But after that, he will return for the third summer to the place which he said propelled him from childhood to adolescence — Camp Ramah New England.

“Ramah was like boot camp,” Yishai said. “When my parents dropped me off, I cried like a baby. But I wasn’t cut very much slack.” The beginning of camp was “like hell.”

But as the days wore on, he began to adapt.

“I was in a bunk with kids who swore, and I thought they were idiots. By the end of camp, they were like brothers to me. We formed great friendships. They were at my bar mitzvah. I don’t know why it happened. It just did,” Yishai said.

Camp Ramah is committed to the inclusion of campers with special needs at many levels. Yishai has been integrated into the regular camp program, with additional resources deployed as needed.

He was considered “the cool kid,” said his father, for riding around camp in a motorized wheelchair.