

San Diego Jewish World

'There's a Jewish story everywhere'

Vol, 1, No.151

Friday afternoon, September 28, 2007



The Jewish Citizen by Donald H. Harrison

Bar/ bat mitzvah receptions become increasingly high tech, high glitz

SAN DIEGO—Eric Sands, the self-styled “bar mitzvah king” disc jockey, says bar mitzvah celebrations are becoming increasingly higher tech productions, causing them to escalate in cost.

“Whereas in the 1970s, you could say that deejays were just there to play records; in the 1980s you would say ‘well it’s not enough to just play records anymore, now you’ve got to say something on the microphone.’ In the 1990s it wasn’t just play music, talk on the microphone and have some lights, but you

have to interact with the crowd, show them how to do the dances.”

And today, in the 2000’s?

“It is not even enough to dance with the crowd, interact with the crowd, and give out party props, hats, and silly glasses for everyone, even that is not enough now — now you have to have video screens. Everyone wants video. Everyone wants to see themselves on the projections. People not only want to hear the music and dance to the music, but they want to see Britney Spears on the screen, wild and dancing.”

As the technology level demands get higher, the attention spans of the young teenagers seem to get lower, Sands commented.

“I think kids today are more ADD and hyper-stimulated than they have ever been, from anything I remember, and it takes more and more to keep them interested today, more so than before....I remember attending bar mitzvahs in New York in the late 60s and 70s: there was a band, and it was the same routine, the band would play the hora and they would do their music, and people would dance and that would be the extent of it.

“Today the kids really want games and contests; they don’t want just to participate in the party; they want to be the party: they want to be the judges for the contests; they want to invent dances; they want to be spontaneous; they want to see themselves on the video screens.”

Sands, owner of Sundance Productions, can be found emceeing four-hour bar/bat mitzvah receptions almost every Saturday night, and sometimes on Saturday afternoons as well. He estimates he had been the deejay at over 500 bar mitzvahs in the last 15 years

His basic package, including his assistant, two dancers, various prizes, and special effects including a confetti canon, cost \$2,995 for a party of up to 150 guests, “if people reserve early,” he said. By his estimate, that is about 10 percent of the cost of an average bar mitzvah reception in San Diego, which he pegged at \$30,000.



DEEJAY—Eric Sands, left, with assistant and dancer emcees a bar mitzvah

Typically, bar/ bat mitzvah receptions have themes which influence table and room decorations, music choices, even the questions in trivia contests.

For example, “I was talking to a client a few weeks ago who decided on a comedy theme—his kid was really into comedy. I suggested that each of the tables could have the name of a different comedian, with that comedian’s picture as a center piece; that we could orient the games towards comedian trivia questions, and give out prizes that have to do with comedy.”

Typically in a candle lighting ceremony, relatives are called up to be honored by the bar/bat mitzvah and to have the honor of lighting one of 13 candles. But that ceremony, a staple of so many bar/ bat mitzvah receptions, also is undergoing changes.

“Now people will have a photographer take a picture of the bar/ bat mitzvah person before the party, blow it up into poster size, razor blade out 13 pieces, and turn it into a jumbo size 13 piece jigsaw puzzle that each person, when he or she is called up, will place piece of the puzzle on,” Sands said. “The crowds will see the full poster take shape, and by the end of the ceremony, there’s the picture....”

“I did a party a few weeks back where they were giving Oscar awards during the candle lighting, where they actually had prepared all these Oscar awards. Instead of doing 13 candles, they gave out Oscars for the best type of personalities. They did it in the style of an Academy Awards presentation. I had the kid come in with a Hollywood-themed entrance, where he came in with an attaché case just as if he had come from the Ernst and Young accounting firm, with the sealed

results in the case.”

Sands said there are some marked differences between what a 12- or 13-year-old bat mitzvah girl will want at her party versus what a 13-year-old bar mitzvah boy wants programmed.

“The guys want more games, more contests, more chaos, more destruction,” Sands said. “The girls want more dancing. The reality is that there has to be a delicate balance, a combination of both of these.”

By “chaos and destruction,” Sands said he meant that the boys “want contests that are more running around, more relay types, games like ‘Coke and Pepsi,’ ‘Survivor,’ musical chairs, scavenger hunts....” “On the other hand, the girls are more likely to choose contests that are “more thinking oriented... contests such as ‘Millionaire,’ a take off on the TV show, when we ask them trivia question for prizes.”

At bar/ bat mitzvah age, “it’s an awkward time, more so for the guys,” Sands says. “They are not quite sure where they are and how they fit and what they want and what they don’t want. Girls are more involved with their life direction.”

Many receptions incorporate some “Jewish” traditions such as saying ha motzi over the challah; having a Havdallah celebration; dancing the hora (including the hoisting of the bar/ bat mitzvah on a chair in the middle of the hora circle), and the candle lighting. Sometimes with all the focus on the bar/ bat mitzvah receiving presents and money, Sands said he is heartened when parents build tzedakah into these fests. Sometimes table decorations will be donated to senior homes, sometimes the honoree may announce a percentage of his or her haul may go to charity.

Recently, said Sands, he was touched when during a candle lighting ceremony, a relative who was in a wheel chair was called upfront and the bar mitzvah

boy explained how pleased he was that she was well enough to attend. As she was escorted to the front, it was to the melody of the emotional “Jerusalem of Gold.”

The deejay got into his business during the 1980s because he had one of the best record collections at his dormitory at State University of New York at Stony Brook. He started carting the records to dances, and picking up some pocket change for spinning them. Eventually he graduated to weddings, anniversaries, and in the 1990s decided that he would do bar mitzvahs.

Being Jewish, from New York, and having had his own bar mitzvah at the Kotel in Israel (but no reception), Sands thought he could relate particularly well to Jewish clientele in San Diego.

There were some early challenges. During the 1990s, kids seemed to be influenced by Seattle grunge rock, which featured dancers slamming into each other. Some of the violence spilled over with one rowdy grabbing one of Sands’ CDs and grinding it with his heel on the dance floor.

Sands said that since then he has learned how to establish control at parties. He counsels that the kid who is acting out the most, usually does so because he wants attention. Sands said the best thing to do is to channel that need into a positive direction. He likes to have the rowdiest kid serve as a contest judge—such recognition generally quelling the need to seek negative attention.

The future for bar mitzvahs? In Sands’ view, there probably will be bar mitzvah palaces built, with built in video screens, special effects, catering kitchen and the like, to make bar/ bat mitzvah receptions ever more high tech.