

Finding meaning

Areyvut helps determine the perfect mitzvah project

By HILARY J. LARSON

Years ago, the main anxieties associated with a bar or bat mitzvah consisted of memorizing all the prayers, keeping the melodies straight and maintaining poise in front of hundreds of friends and relatives.

But with the growth of mitzvah projects — charitable and community service activities often required by temples as part of the coming-of-age ritual — pre-teens and their families have another source of anxiety, said Pamela Barkley, religious education director at Temple Beth Abraham in Tarrytown.

"In many conversations with parents, what I hear is that it's a very daunting thing because they've never done anything like that before and have no idea where to start," she said.

And then there are the children who dutifully pick a charity off a list, without truly

engaging or investing in the cause at hand.

Enter Areyvut, a non-denominational, Manhattan-based organization founded in 2002 to address precisely this situation.

The core program of Areyvut, whose official mission is to help students and Jewish school teachers "maximize the Jewish values of tzedakah, tikkun olam and chesed," is a resource center and consulting service for students who want guidance in shaping an individualized mitzvah project.

Areyvut was founded by Daniel Rothner, a Chicago-bred, Yeshiva University-trained Judaic studies teacher who works with each client on a one-to-one basis.

Once on the faculty of the Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway on Long Island, Rothner, 34, decided he could have a greater impact outside the classroom by addressing what he saw as a growing need.

"I didn't want to duplicate efforts of any existing group," said Rothner. "But nobody

was really meeting with these kids one on one" regarding the mitzvah projects, he said.

With mitzvah projects fast becoming a standard requirement, Rothner began to see it as either an opportunity lost, or a chance for Jewish teens to engage deeply and personally with a cause that means something to them.

"For us, the idea is, the more ownership and involvement a student has, the more effective it's going to be," explained Rothner, who devotes himself to Areyvut full-time.

Areyvut will offer two events in Westchester this month: the second annual b'nai mitzvah fair at Temple Beth Abraham, 25 Leroy Ave., Tarrytown, on Sunday, March 5, and a chesed boutique, a resource center of charitable opportunities, at the Young Israel of Scarsdale, 1313 Weaver St., on Sunday, March 26.

Last year's fair at Beth Abraham "was a very big hit," Barkley noted, "because parents said, even if they didn't choose one of the actual projects at the fair, it helped them with their child to hone in on what kind of project they wanted to do, what population they wanted to work with."

That event featured booths representing charities that ranged from the Gift of Life Bone Marrow Foundation to East Coast Assistance Dogs to the Hiddur Mitzvah Project from the Gary Rosenthal Collection, which helps children produce their own custom Judaica crafts.

Helen Berman, an 11-year-old from New Rochelle, is exactly the kind of Jewish child Rothner is trying to reach and inspire.

A student at SAR Academy in Riverdale, Helen lives an observant Jewish lifestyle and is looking forward to her bat mitzvah this September at the Young Israel of New Rochelle.

But when it came time to start thinking about a project, Helen's parents decided



Daniel Rothner, left, seen here with Yeshiva University president Richard Joel, founded Areyvut to help students and teachers "maximize the Jewish values of tzedakah, tikkun olam and chesed."

their first-born could use some guidance and got in touch with Areyvut.

Rothner met with Helen to brainstorm her interests and talk about projects that might excite her:

"I found it helpful because I really didn't know anything about it, and he gave me a lot of choices," said Helen, who is passionate about soccer, baseball, tennis and basketball. "We talked about sports, maybe doing something nice for children who can't play sports or don't have the money to play sports. The one thing I'm definitely going to do so far is organize a bike-a-thon, and anyone who wants to participate can participate."

Helen is also interested in organizing visits to disadvantaged children in hospitals.

"I like helping people," she explained.

"She doesn't just want to give money. She wants to hang out with people who are lower income and develop relationships with them," said Rothner. "The bike-a-thon, now that's cool. There's no one else doing something comparable. She could just choose something off a list, but this is something that's really meaningful for her."

For information on Areyvut, call (212) 813-2950.

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