



# Masada: A Different Celebration

Foregoing banquet halls, glamorous evening dresses and a DJ - more and more Israeli youth are opting to celebrate their bar/bat mitzvah atop Masada, (a UNESCO World Heritage Site and site of ancient desert cliff-top palaces and fortifications built by King Herod more than 2000 years ago at the eastern edge of the Judean Desert and the scene of the last stance by Jewish zealots, who committed collective suicide rather than falling into the hands of Roman Legion centurions that had besieged the hilltop fortress and were attacking it.



The Bachar family – January 2011

▶ Masada, the hill that has become a symbol for modern-day Israel, is a pinnacle of primordial loveliness and ancient majesty, the height of determination and, faith and sticking to principles. Standing atop an isolated cliff 400 meters high, it overlooks the stunning Dead Sea landscape, the Ein Gedi springs and the Moab Mountains. Accessible in three different ways - via cable car, via the Snake Path and via the western battery path - it has also become a favorite venue for holding a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony marking a young boy or girl's passage from childhood to adulthood and a meeting of present with past.

Despite the site's tragic aspect - the events that brought about an end to the last struggle against the

Roman conquest of the Kingdom of Judea - Masada, which has come to represent the ongoing human struggle against oppression and for freedom and the Jewish people's national heritage, has become a symbol of hope and a site worthy of being part of such an important milestone in the life of Jewish adolescents on their special bar/bat mitzvah day.

"Whatever people may think about holding a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah ceremony here," explains Rabbi Shimon Elharar, rabbi of the Jewish Orthodox "habad" movement for the Dead Sea region and the person that formulated and organizes these ceremonies, "they have been designed to meet the needs and inclinations of every Jewish family, religious or secular - and especially those of the latter. We transform reading the portion of the week in the Torah (the "Five Books of Moses") into an experience, and our emphasis is on a ceremony that is intimate and family oriented, while still being full of surprises."

### Bar Mitzvah

Early one Thursday morning a bus stopped at the foot of Masada and exuberant family members alighted from it to accompany a young boy 13 years old to his bar mitzvah ceremony. Dancing and singing, they took the cable car to the remains of the ancient synagogue at top of the hill, where the boy attached ceremonial phylacteries to his forehead and arm for the first time in his life. Excited, he recited the morning prayer service texts together with the other

male family members. Wrapped in warmth and love, he lead the Torah scroll from the ark and then made a speech. The boy's mother also played a role in the ceremony. She was called upon to bless her son and in turn she was blessed.

Later, when all the tears had been wiped away, all the participants were treated to an emotion-filled play that depicted life at Masada, as well as the residents' dedication.

One of the more emotionally satisfying parts of the ceremony takes place next. The family gathers in the room where the ark is kept, where a religious scribe is writing a Torah scroll for the Masada synagogue. Together with him, the bar mitzvah boy adds a calligraphic letter to the parchment scroll as a sign of blessing and success. "It's like a dream," a family member exclaims. "We didn't expect such an intense experience."

"Habad believes that every Jew is connected to God on one level or another," Rabbi Elharar says. "We empower the positive that is embodied in each Jewish person. That's the reason the ceremonies that we hold are adapted to the ethnic religious customs of the individual families. Some families are exposed to a Torah portion reading for the first time, when their son becomes bar mitzvah, and we try to make everything more accessible for them by explaining the laws and commandments, briefly and without being condescending."

The entire ceremony takes about 90 minutes, after which a local guide takes participants on a tour of

the remains of the ancient fortress. Then it's a short ride from Masada to any one of the Fattal chain's Dead Sea hotels, to continue to celebrate.

### Bat Mitzvah Too

Another family coming for a bat mitzvah ceremony early one morning, preferred to climb up the Snake Path. "The concept of a bat mitzvah does not appear in Jewish tradition," relates Rabbi Elharar, "but we have acquiesced to public demand and have created a ceremony based on the laws incumbent upon a Jewish woman, and which also empowers the young girl." This unique ceremony starts in the ark room with the reading of a chapter from the Book of Psalms, followed by a prayer. Next, the bat mitzvah girl blesses her guests and in turn, her father blesses her. Visitors then watch the Masada play and this activity is followed by a short hands-on workshop in baking "challah," the traditional Jewish Sabbath and holiday bread, lead by an actress dressed up as a Masada resident. Ninety minutes of laughter mixed with emotional tears and here too participants finish up with a tour of the site.

The Fattal Hotel Chain offers a choice of five different hotels for families celebrating a Masada bar/bat mitzvah: the Le Méridien Dead Sea; Leonardo Club; Leonardo; Leonardo Inn, and Leonardo Plaza.

For additional details on Masada bar/bat mitzvah celebrations - Tel: 054-7770695

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