

AUSTRALIAN FRIENDS OF TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

Joy with impact

A simcha is a moment of joy – but it can also be a moment of impact.

More and more families are choosing to honour weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, milestone birthdays and anniversaries by making a donation in lieu of gifts.

Through the Australian Friends of Tel Aviv University (AFTAU), that generosity can help restore hope for young Israelis living with trauma.

Take Amit, for example. Amit is a 24-year-old Tel Aviv University student who returned to his studies after completing his army service. Though outwardly composed, he struggled with severe anxiety, flashbacks, failing relationships, trouble studying and sleepless nights. Thanks to TAU's trauma support initiatives which are part of the university's wider research into PTSD treatment, he received specialist counselling and access to breakthrough therapies developed on campus. With the right support, Amit regained his focus, continued his degree and is now working toward his promising career in medicine.

His story is not unique.

Many TAU students carry invisible wounds from conflict and service. The university's Optimism at Work campaign is dedicated to helping them heal, combining cutting-edge neuroscience research with practical



Students on campus at TAU. Photo: supplied

mental health services that foster resilience, hope and the ability to thrive.

A donation in lieu of a simcha gift can directly fund trauma treatment programs, counselling access and innovative research that creates real change. It transforms celebration into healing, and honours your milestone by giving students the strength to look forward with optimism.

At your next simcha, consider a gift that uplifts lives and supports the future of Israel, one student, one story, one moment of healing at a time.

To make a donation or dedicate your simcha to the Optimism at Work campaign, contact the Australian Friends of Tel Aviv University on (03) 9296 2065, office@aftau.asn.au or aftau.asn.au

JNF NSW

Milestones that matter

Birthdays, bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings and anniversaries – every milestone is an opportunity to celebrate, connect and give back.

This year, JNF Australia is encouraging families across the community to mark their special occasions in a meaningful way by inviting friends and family to donate to Israel in lieu of traditional gifts.

Through JNF's Celebrate with Israel initiative, your simcha can directly support vital projects that help rebuild and strengthen communities across Israel. Whether you're honouring a new baby, a milestone birthday, or a loved one's memory, every contribution creates lasting impact.

For example, the Munoz family recently invited guests celebrating their son Levi's upsherin to give towards a project close to their hearts, Replanting for Growth and Regaining Resilience at Kibbutz Misgav Am, on the Lebanon border.

After 17 months of conflict, the kibbutz community is finally returning home to rebuild. Their environment has been devastated, and JNF's project aims to restore it by replanting trees, revitalising gardens and creating playgrounds and healing spaces to support recovery and wellbeing.

"In lieu of traditional gifts, we wanted our celebration to do



Levi's upsherin. Photo: supplied

something meaningful," the family shared. "Supporting Israel's renewal through JNF felt like the perfect way to honour this milestone."

By registering your own milestone with JNF Australia, you can create a personalised giving page and choose a project that reflects your values – from reforestation and water innovation to supporting displaced families and youth programs.

Celebrate your simcha with purpose. Turn your joy into hope and healing for Israel. Learn more and register your milestone at jnf.org.au or call 1300 563 653



Photo: Joel Symonds



Photo: Vicki Lauren

THE LATEST BAR & BAT MITZVAH TRENDS

Stealing the show

If you thought bar and bat mitzvahs were all suits, speeches and the hora, think again.

Nowadays, many families are choosing to blend tradition with the contemporary, alongside a healthy splash of personality, tech and delectable food.

PERSONALISED EVERYTHING

For many bar and bat mitzvah kids, doing it their way is now the rule, not the exception.

Think custom monograms, tailored playlists, themed décor that matches a teen's TikTok-era obsessions, and bespoke party favours. Venues and planners in Sydney are offering packages that let kids co-design the vibe – from mood boards to menus. The result? A party that feels Instagram-ready without losing the heart of the milestone.

Trends include customised party favours designed by the kids themselves in photobooths, decoration stations or party activities. Whether it's bracelets, basketballs, baseball caps or bags, many bar and bat mitzvahs feature do-it-yourself stations where the guests can design their own gifts. Of course, all the options are on theme and definitely on trend.

TECH-FORWARD RECEPTIONS

LED video walls, interactive screens and slick AV setups are no longer just for concerts. Projections for montage videos, live social feeds, and interactive games are turning receptions into immersive experiences that keep kids (and adults) buzzing all night.

Many families are also putting a technological twist on more traditional elements. Rather than speeches by the friends of the bar or bat mitzvah child, kids are sending in videos that are edited together to form a montage, answering questions such as 'funniest thing about...' or 'best memory with...'. These then serve as a keepsake for the bar or bat mitzvah child.

There's also the option for digital guestbooks that the family can keep. For example, polaroid cameras on each table with markers for guests to sign the photo and collate in a book.

TRADITION WITH A CONTEMPORARY TWIST

Religious elements remain central

but families are finding fresh ways to honour the ceremony while tailoring the celebration.

One notable trend is scheduling synagogue services in the afternoon, followed by a meaningful – yet fresh – ceremony such as Havdalah to close the day and segue into the party. The Havdalah ceremony, traditionally marking the end of Shabbat, can beautifully symbolise the transition of the teen into new responsibilities.

Many families are also finding ways to personalise the tradition, integrating a family-blessing segment where the parents and siblings each say a few meaningful words before the aliyah itself. The effect? The ritual remains deeply meaningful, but the presentation feels exciting and relevant to the teen and their peer group.

The key is connecting the spiritual milestone to the celebration in a seamless way that honours the tradition and nods to the now.

ENTERTAINMENT THAT'S INTERACTIVE (AND SOMETIMES ECO-SAVVY)

DJs who double as MCs, live performers, LED dance floors, silent discos and activity zones (escape-room corners, custom gaming pods, and photobooths) are all hot ticket items.

The most popular activities? A DJ lesson, a dance lesson, interactive 360 degree photo booths that not only take a photo but film you too.

At the same time, a growing number of families are asking for greener options: less single-use plastic, local flowers and mindful waste management – a gentle trend that feels very on-brand for today's teens.

BOTTOM LINE: IT'S PERSONAL AND PLAYFUL

The 2025 bar and bat mitzvah scene is about storytelling – celebrating the child, the community and the values they're stepping into, all while throwing a party that feels modern and fun.

Whether you're planning a cosy shule-celebration or a full-on themed bash, what's certain is that it's all about the child of the hour.

The result? A celebration that keeps energy high, invites participation, and makes the guests feel part of the action rather than simply spectators.