

City Congregation Bar Mitzvah Student Featured

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A Boy's Bar Mitzvah Lessons Bridge a Cultural Chasm

by Samuel G. Freedman, September 9, 2011

Right on time for his 3 p.m. appointment, Sam Botwin climbed the stairs of Dave Hall's row house in Brooklyn, making his way to the rehearsal room on the second floor. There he stood at a makeshift lectern in his baggy shorts and floppy shirt and mop-top hair, a boy of 13, and began to read from a speech about the Jewish martyrs of Masada.

Sam was practicing for his bar mitzvah on Oct. 15, the ritual that elevates him to Jewish manhood. Over a period of three months, it has been and will be Dave Hall's job to train him to speak with the best possible cadence, projection and pronunciation. Just now, Mr. Hall sat on a piano bench following the text and reminding Sam, not for the first time or the last, to slow down.

Mr. Hall was working with Sam Botwin in part because, as a musician and composer, he had developed a sideline over the years of helping Jewish children chant the Torah portion and haftara passage for their bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies. He was working with Sam because he was a friend of his parents and had instructed Sam's younger brother, Sasha, on the piano for several years.

One floor beneath the rehearsal room, a family photograph rested atop the living-room piano. It showed a middle-aged man with the same black hair and olive skin of Mr. Hall. The man was his grandfather and immigrant ancestor, Yusef Lahoud, an Arab Christian from Lebanon.

Ten years after the Al Qaeda attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, amid a climate of suspicion of Arab and Muslim Americans, the partnership between Mr. Hall and Sam Botwin serves as a gleaming, redemptive example — an anomaly, to be sure, but one that shows that ethnic and religious chasms can be breached.

"I personally refuse to be the Other to anyone else, and I refuse to see anyone else as the Other," Mr. Hall, 50, said after a recent session. "We're all in the same path. As proud as I am of my heritage, I never want us to think of ourselves as so different that we can't all appreciate the bounty and sacredness of the earth."

Peter H. Schweitzer, Sam's rabbi at the City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, has noted the process with particular satisfaction. Several weeks before Sam's ceremony, in fact, the congregation will mark the bat mitzvah of a girl with a Jewish mother and Muslim father.

“There’s so much rancor and mistrust and anxiety out there, and I’m sure it goes in both directions,” Rabbi Schweitzer said of the national mood. “Fanatical voices tend to get heard the most, and they squelch or silence those that are looking for a way to come together. But peace work is done at a micro level, one to one. When a boy like Sam can meet a man like Dave, it goes a long way.”

For much of his life, Mr. Hall had not identified so deeply with the Arab side of his ancestry. Growing up in vanilla Vermont, carrying the surname and lineage of English forebears who reached America in 1630, he put no special energy into either affirming or denying his maternal roots. Only once during college in Burlington did two graduate students from Kuwait ask, “Are you Lebanese?”

Moving to New York as a young musician, curiosity began to displace indifference. Mr. Hall picked up Arabic working in a Middle Eastern restaurant in Greenwich Village. He sought out a Lebanese Maronite church in Brooklyn Heights. He traveled several times to the Levant.

Meanwhile, he built a freelancer’s life — writing music for cabaret shows and children’s theater, developing a choir in a public-housing project, teaching voice in an after-school program at a private school in Park Slope. In the late 1990s, two of the girls he instructed there became his first bat mitzvah students.

While Mr. Hall knew no Hebrew, he readily grasped the similarities between the liturgical music of the synagogue and of Arab Christian churches, most of which use a cantor as a remnant of Jewish tradition. In the Torah and haftara portions, he could hear the musical foundations of the Gregorian chants he knew from a part-time job with a Roman Catholic congregation in Westchester.

His quirky little sideline remained his quirky little sideline until a Tuesday morning 10 years ago. He walked out the door of his home in Boerum Hill to vote in the primary election but couldn’t get down the block through all the dust. Driven back indoors, he turned on the television and saw why. Later that day, borne on the wind from ground zero, a page from a legal pad, charred at its edges, landed in his front yard.

When Mr. Hall ventured out, he noticed that the Arab-American stores along Atlantic Avenue were deserted. Police officers were standing guard outside a nearby Arab-American social-service center. Mr. Hall went inside to volunteer on the phones, continuing for several days, each evening jotting down the most vivid comments.

One caller told him, “Death to all Arabs now.” Another caller asked him, “Do you love America?” A third caller offered to help frightened Arab-Americans shop for groceries, promising, “I’ve got a car, I’ll drive you, no matter how far.”

The supportive words heartened him, and the rest made him yearn for Sept. 10, when he was still an unhyphenated American. “People who look like me, or who had visa stamps like mine, were liable to be profiled,” Mr. Hall said. “It was unsettling to hear people questioning the loyalty of people like me.”

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Sam Botwin was 3 years old and enjoying Grandparents' Day at his preschool. Only in third or fourth grade, upon seeing a photograph of the Twin Towers aflame, did he ask his parents what happened. At some point, he learned that his father, Neil, had lost a friend in the attack.

Then, about the time of the Sept. 11 commemorations last year, Sam began paying attention to all the outrage about the "ground zero mosque." When he recalls the rallies against it, he uses the word "riot," which is accurate in describing the opponents' rhetoric if not their physical acts.

Against such hate, he and Mr. Hall hold their weekly lessons, and Sam tries to slow down, and to not stumble on tricky words like "Pharisees," and to nearly shout out the passage he's quoting from the Jewish leader at Masada, saying death as free people is better than life as slaves.

"This is why your parents engaged me," Mr. Hall told him. "You're delivering important stories — not only historically but in a spiritual way. These are stories that bind people together. And it's your honored role to be the one who expresses them. Your bar mitzvah should be a holy thing."

**Find out more about the City Congregation's
Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah Program.**

Call 212-213-1002 or email info@citycongregation.org

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