

## January 2017 Message from President Howie Hirsch

I rarely write about a specific congregant in my messages to you, but I feel this month I must make an exception. As you all are aware, my friend Maxwell Gross passed away in December. His passing is hitting me very hard and I wish to use my forum here to get some of my feelings out.

I first met Max as a baby. I do not know what it was about him that made me feel instantly connected to him, but the connection was there from the first time I met him. At that time, we did not know about Pelizaeus-Merzbacher Disease. He was a bright-eyed boy who Marsha would often bring to temple. As the years passed and his cousin Jack and Max were both diagnosed with PMD, it became apparent that Max was not going to be like other children. Having lost a daughter to a genetic disorder, I connected with Max even more closely. Marsha brought him to temple enough that we were able to spend quality time with him. Heather was always helpful to me whenever Marsha would take a few minutes to chat at the Oneg.

One of the pleasures that Max enjoyed was ramming people with his wheelchair. For those of you who had the pleasure of either Mike Fesinstine or me running into you with Max, you knew the ear-to-ear grin that it brought to him when you would feint a scream of pain. Max also loved playing hide and seek, and when he would hear Marsha calling for him, he would laugh so loud that it would have been impossible for her not to know where he was.

However, my most poignant moment with Max was at his Bar Mitzvah. Up until that time, I was never sure how much Max understood about what was going on around him, but after that day, there was no doubt in my mind that he understood a great deal. After Marsha chanted Max's Torah portion, Mike Weiner gave a d'var Torah regarding Max's portion. After explaining the portion, Mike began to talk about Max and it was very emotional for all of us there.

Just at that moment Max began to cry. He had not cried at all during the ceremony up until that point. Marsha calmed him down and then I was asked to present the Bar Mitzvah presents to Max from the congregation. As I spoke, I got to an emotional point in my speech as well and again Max began to cry at an appropriate time. This really got to me. I was ready to stop speaking when Marsha asked me to continue. So with Max crying, I continued the presentation. Two lines later in the speech, I had written that over the years, I had often been able to make Max laugh. When I read those words, someone from the congregation shouted out "use one now!!!" Reaching into my bag of "Max" tricks, I counted "Uno, dos, tres, quattro". Upon reaching quattro, Max burst into his ear-to-ear grin again. The reaction from the congregation was priceless.

Max, I am going to miss singing to you, reading to you, and simply being near you. I miss you terribly already and may you Rest In Peace.

Love, Howie

**Copyright © 2017 Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey**