



Pretty in pink?

I've just come back from my cousin's barmitzvah, and it's coming up to summer – *simcha* season – so I have been thinking about gift-giving. When you're Jewish there are plenty of Occasions, and Jewish Occasions are traditionally marked by over-consumption of food and over-spending on gifts.

(Two summers ago I attended two weddings, on consecutive weekends, one Jewish, one not. Both beautiful, thoughtful occasions with the standard summer menu – poached salmon, new potatoes, strawberries and cream. From a catering point of view the difference was that the Jewish event was catered on an if-everything-goes-there-wasn't-enough basis, and the church wedding had just the right amount of food.)

There's always the question of what gift to buy for the happy couple. Recently a friend of mine sent out her wedding list six months before the big day; I'm still in shock. As nowadays people get married older, they're not exactly setting up house from scratch. Anyway, who needs a lifetime's supply of dishtowels from day one? And what's the point in getting fancy matching luggage now that global warming means we're soon going to have to start drastically cutting back on air travel? Given that most of the people I know are lucky enough to have more than enough of what they need, why do they need more? I increasingly see couples having designated charities as well as or instead of a gift list, and I like it.

When it comes to bar- and batmitzvahs you see this less, although I thoroughly approve of the recent trend of Bnei Mitzvah twins; for example, the World Jewish Relief programme where, by twinning, the celebrant supports his or her twin's education for a year, as well as providing food and clothes, Jewish books and a bar-/batmitzvah party.

I know Jewish life reflects the world we live in, and a combination of the burgeoning 'tweenies' market and Claire's Accessories has made pink fluffy everything available to the pre-teen masses. Half the batmitzvahs I've been invited to lately have been themed around 'any colour you want as long as it's pink'; I've lost count of the number of times I've been asked for a pink hairdryer or cerise Converse All Stars.

Of course, there are those traditionalists whose gift-giving is established on the age-old formula: you calculate how much per head, how shprausny the venue and you give accordingly. And if you live in Hampstead or Hale, there's a 25 per cent uplift.

Personally, for bar- and batmitzvahs, I prefer to give books. We are, after all, the People of the Book. The message I'm giving is that this is not just a seasonal gift that will go out of fashion on receipt; you might think your present is a little dry or dull, and you'll be temporarily seduced by the purple iPod or those trainers with wheels in them. But long after the iPod battery has failed and the wheel's fallen out of the sole of your ridiculous shoes your books will be sitting on the bookshelf, patiently waiting till the day you decide to leaf through them. I've just bought J. T. Waldman's graphic novel *Megillat Esther* (a dramatic visual portrayal of the Purim story) for a Purim batmitzvah, but in my time I've bought Amazon vouchers, *machzorim* and encyclopedias, depending on the recipient.

It seems to me that joining the Jewish people is itself the gift that goes on giving – a lifetime membership whether you pay or not (in other words, you can check out, but you can't ever leave). I'm not saying we shouldn't celebrate young people's achievements – far from it – in *leyening* or giving a *dvar torah* or the whole gamut of creative Bnei Mitzvot that nowadays take place across our community. It's an occasion to rejoice in the individuals themselves, in the tradition that welcomes each and every young person into the fold, with a variety of rites ranging across the spectrum from Orthodox to secular.

But maybe the community focus needs to be on the lifecycle event itself, not the tinsel and serviettes, not the European gift mountain. Forget pink. Perhaps just being Jewish is enough. 🍷

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