



# Torah at the Center

## Bike-Riding B'nei Mitzvah

By Nancy Lipsey, Ride Director, Hazon

Most congregations prepare teenagers for their new status in the community by having them learn to read from the Torah, lead the congregation in prayer and share inspiring words with the congregation. The Reform Movement's steadfast commitment to social justice has led to attaching some kind of community service to the *b'nei mitzvah* rite of passage, adding a *tikkun olam* component to the existing intellectual challenge of the ceremony. Mitzvah projects send the message that the process of becoming an adult is both an increase of Jewish ritual commitments and an increased commitment of one's money and time to social justice.

Some teens are taking this commitment to the next level, combining a physical activity that they enjoy with a cause to which they feel connected. This physical challenge is an especially important addition at a time of physical changes in a teen, creating an opportunity to develop a healthy body image. At Hazon, a Jewish environmental organization, we are helping young teens who love cycling to connect to Jewish environmental causes. We also are involving teens who enjoy the outdoors and are committed to helping the environment to connect to cycling as a tool for supporting both. Nigel Savage, Hazon's founder and executive director explains, "Many parents have the intuition that bar/bat mitzvah should be more than just what happens in synagogue and

[at] the party. Coming up with something that embodies Jewish values, that will interest a teenager and his [or her] friends and the family is a struggle."

Hazon organizes two bike rides each year that raise money for Jewish environmental projects in Israel and the United States. Hazon's bike rides aren't a few miles around the neighborhood; they are long-distance rides that require physical training.

In addition to the training, participants must reach a minimum fundraising level in order to support Hazon's year-round work and the other projects Hazon supports.

The Israel Ride is a 300-mile journey from Jerusalem to Eliat, conducted over a week's time (scheduled in 2007 for May 1 through May 8). The Israel Ride supports the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, a graduate program that brings together students from

North America and Israel, as well as other areas of the Middle East, to work together on environmental issues in the Middle East. In addition to attending to regional challenges on water and air quality, the Arava Institute attempts to bring together students from different backgrounds who can build bridges for peace and future partnership. Alumni of the Arava programs participate in the Israel Ride, as crew and educational presenters.



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Riders under age 30 raise \$3,000 for the ride; those older than 30 raise \$3,600.

In 2006, four teens and a parent participated in the Israel Ride. Ben Drill from West Caldwell, N.J., was the top fundraiser for the year, bringing in \$22,000 to support Hazon and the Arava Institute. Ben explains, “I lucked out because my bar mitzvah happened to be on Earth Day. I focused on the connection. My *parashah* was about keeping kosher. My favorite reason for keeping kosher is that it teaches us compassion for animals, respect for the land and protection of the earth. This led me to my mitzvah project, participating in the 2006 Israel Ride. My personal responsibility to the land and protection of the earth is through participating in this bike ride. I am proud to be fundraising for the Arava Institute and Hazon because I care about the environment and peace for Israel... and because I love to ride my bike!”

Hazon’s Jewish Environmental Bike Ride in the United States takes place over Labor Day weekend (this year: August 31-September 3, 2007). The weekend includes a Shabbat retreat at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center (located in The Berkshires, near Falls Village, Conn.) and a two-day, 135-mile bike ride into Manhattan. As on the Israel ride, teens who participate in this program have the opportunity to interact with people who benefit from the money they raise. The Adamah Jewish Environmental Fellowship, which focuses on organic farming and sustainable living, is a lead beneficiary of the New York ride. Adamah fellows, mostly recent college graduates, lead tours of their farm (located onsite at the retreat center), work with riders in the field, lead alternative Shabbat services, and participate as riders and crew. The Shabbat experience provides an open and inclusive community that offers a variety of prayer options and other activities. The bike ride is supported fully by crew, bike mechanics and a medical team. Teen riders must be accompanied by an adult rider, giving parents and teens an opportunity to bond through the challenges of training and raising money. Adult riders

raise \$1,200; full-time students raise \$800.

At Hazon, we believe that the bike rides fulfill another meaningful aspect of the coming-of-age ritual of bar/bat mitzvah. The religious preparation and ceremony push teens through a rigorous intellectual challenge that welcomes them into their community. A Hazon bike ride in Israel or New York challenges teens to think, act and discuss topics about which they care; to ask others to support a cause toward which they are working; and to push themselves physically to reach a goal. The bike rides involve the whole family in the training, the riding and the cheering. Teens are drawn to the rides because they are inspired by Hazon’s work. As we cross the finish line, all of Hazon’s participants end up being inspired by the teens.

*It is not too late to sign up for the Israel Ride, [www.israelride.org](http://www.israelride.org). For more information or to register for the New York ride, visit [www.hazon.org](http://www.hazon.org).*

