

Robby: A triumph over illness

By BARBARA ARNOLDUSSEN
Saturday was a special day for Robby Werney. His Bar Mitzvah was celebrated at the morning services of Temple Beth El in Bloomfield Township.

Every Bar Mitzvah is a special event. But this one was particularly significant because Robby has Down's Syndrome and is the first student of Temple Beth El's special education program to graduate to manhood status.

Robby, a Southfield resident, read a passage from the Torah in the original Hebrew, read the English translation, and then conducted the Torah services. He recited the appropriate blessings, read prayers, dressed and undressed the scrolls of the Torah and then received the Bar Mitzvah blessing from Dr. Richard Hertz, the senior rabbi of Temple Beth El.

Rabbi Hertz spoke of "the tremendous achievement Robby made to overcome obstacles. He proved that even a child with a handicap can fully participate in the community."

"We are proud and so pleased to have him as an inspiration and example for the community," said Rabbi Hertz.

RABBI JEFFREY LAZAR, director of the Temple Beth El religious school and Elena Glasier worked as a team to prepare Robby for the momentous occasion.

In addition to his regular special

education classes, Robby worked with Elena an hour a week for eight months to prepare for his part in the service.

"Working with Robby was a great challenge," Elena said, "but he picked up the lessons quickly."

When asked why no previous special education students have made their Bar Mitzvah, Rabbi Lazar replied, "It takes a special child and a special teacher to train him. There must be the right kind of chemistry."

He added, "Also previously parents might have thought this would be impossible to hope for their handicapped children. But Robby's success means that it is possible for some."

Elena recalled the nervousness she felt at her Bath Mitzvah. "The most amazing thing was that Robby approached his participation with such a sense of confidence," she said. "He was so composed in front of all those people."

"We can't hope to know what is in Robby's mind as he went through the ceremony," Rabbi Lazar said. "But there was an awareness of the occasion to the point that at the end of the service, Robby wept with emotion."

SEVERAL MEMBERS of the congregation mentioned that they, too, were moved to tears. "Robby's Bar Mitzvah is one of the most memorable religious events in my life," one member said at the conclusion.

Afterward Robby hugged those responsible for helping and supporting

him. His mother, Rose, was not only a source of encouragement to Robby, but his birth prompted her to continue her education at the graduate level, specializing in meeting the needs of handicapped children.

Rabbi Lazar credited her with "being among those directly instrumental in setting up the special education program at Temple Beth El." She now does double duty for the school, teaching special education classes on Saturday and regular religious classes on Sunday.

The special education program at Temple Beth El has existed for two years, after two years of work to establish it. Separate classes are held for the retarded and for the emotionally disturbed children. They are further divided into age categories from six to nine and from 10 to 14 years of age.

Members of both Reform and Conservative congregations send their children to the Saturday morning classes. Temple Beth El shares with Temple Israel in Detroit the distinction of providing the only opportunity for such religious education in the metropolitan area.

RABBI LAZAR sees a necessary and natural expansion of Temple Beth El's program as its present students become older. Robby was a pioneer because he was the oldest in his class. But Rabbi Lazar spoke of his hope that

"his entire experience will be the start of future opportunities for others."

Rabbi Lazar emphasized, too, that Robby's Bar Mitzvah "is not an end, but only a beginning for Robby as well. We expect him to continue his religious education."

Speaking of the adult responsibility that Robby must now assume in the Jewish community, Rabbi Lazar feels "Robby's special gift will be to cultivate positive Jewish feelings. He can share them on a simple basis with others both emotionally and factually."

Rabbi Lazar summarized the significance of Robby Werney's Bar Mitzvah.

"The entire congregation was rooting for him. He could be said to be the underdog, because there were very real stumbling blocks he had to overcome."

"Too many times people hold certain attitudes, or retain derogatory stereotypes about handicapped people. But Robby showed us the triumph of evaluating someone as a person, and not concentrating on their disability."

Several people who attended the ceremony mentioned that they knew Robby as "a warm, kind, loving human being." Saturday, the Jewish community celebrated the entrance of Robby Werney into manhood, as a sign of those qualities to the entire community.

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