

Bill Gordon

Let's be honest, having children can be both the most rewarding and the most challenging experience of our lives. Adding the additional complexity of having a child with Special Needs completely changes the way you look at raising a child and life itself. Our family is blessed to have three amazing boys, Spencer 13 and Noah and Parker who are 11-year-old twins. Parker has Down Syndrome which is also called Trisomy 21 meaning he has an extra chromosome on the 21st pair. As with many other special needs diagnoses, Down Syndrome presents itself in different ways across the population of those who have it. Parker is very much a typical child. He loves to play and dance. He has friends in his community and enjoys the same things other preteens do such as sports and watching YouTube. Where Parker differs is that he has intellectual and physical challenges which place him behind his age group peers. This presents educational and social obstacles that we work to address daily at home, in school, and at therapy sessions.

When it came time to consider pre-school options for Parker there was only one choice that felt right. Parker's mother's family were long standing members of Temple Emanu-El and Schiff Preschool was where we knew he belonged. Our oldest Spencer was already there, and we wanted Noah and Parker to go there as well. We were worried that the leadership and faculty at the school were not going to be open and receptive to having Parker because of the challenges and the extra attention he would need. After meeting with everyone, they assured us that not only was he welcome but that the adjustments needed would be made to accommodate his needs. This was a huge relief for us as he would be able to go to school and be with his brothers and peers in a typical child setting and begin his Jewish education. This could have absolutely gone a different way and unfortunately in the Special Needs community that happens far too often.

When the preschool years ended, it was very important to us for Parker to continue with his Jewish education which led us to the Diamond Family Religious School. This is quite a different experience than Schiff Preschool. It's a bit more open and requires a higher level of discipline and ability than Parker can typically handle on his own. Plus, was he going to be able to learn Hebrew, say prayers and generally gain the valuable enrichment DFRS offers? Once again, the Temple Emanu-El family did not disappoint. We jointly developed a plan to ensure that Parker would be able to participate and learn at his own pace with the level of assistance needed. Since Parker started as a student at DFRS he has had some amazing Madrichim assigned to be his shadow and teachers. I would be remiss if I did not mention Leah, Becca and Ethan who over the past few years have ensured that he has had the most positive experience possible. From learning Hebrew letters with Leah virtually during Covid to navigating various new tasks with Becca to Ethan embracing Parker's personality and helping him learn the Shema, the experience has been considerate and inclusive.

As we begin our Bar Mitzvah journey with Noah and Parker we have a very high level of confidence that both of them will have an amazing Mitzvah experience in which they will take an active role in becoming Jewish men. None of this would be possible without the continued participation, engagement and support from the Temple Emanu-El leadership, clergy and community. From day one there has never been a question as to whether or not Parker would be part of his peer community, only what would be needed to make it happen.