

signing a prayer or carrying the Torah at Or Ami's special needs services.

Jason, 7, who has autism, found a welcoming congregational community at Temple Kol Ami Emanu-El in Plantation, Florida (<http://www.tkae.org/>). Last year, he and three other students with special needs joined eighteen other classmates in arts and crafts, worship, singing songs, and learning the Hebrew alphabet, assisted by the classroom teacher, a high school aide, and a second, special needs teacher—whose salary was paid for by several

b'nai mitzvah students as part of their *mitzvah* projects. The second grader now recites the Shabbat blessings over the wine and challah, and last spring he asked the Four Questions at the family's seder. "There's no reason he can't have a bar mitzvah," his mother Laura says.

Steven*, who has a learning disability, experienced stumbling blocks on the way to bar mitzvah—his parents were originally told that he wouldn't be able to learn Hebrew for the occasion. That's when they enrolled him in "Alternative Hebrew," the multi-grade, self-contained Sunday class at Temple Beth-El in Hillsborough, New Jersey (<http://www.bethel.urj.net/>), which gives some twenty children with learning disabilities in grades 4–7 the opportunity to study Hebrew amongst themselves as well as Jewish studies with their peers who are not learning disabled. (For students whose learning disabilities make religious school integration impractical, Temple Beth-El offers "Jacob's Ladder," a self-contained Hebrew/Jewish learning program for

grades K–3 and for grades 4–7. These children do participate in the school's music, family, and schoolwide programs.)

About five years ago, Steven proved the naysayers wrong—he read Hebrew on the occasion of his bar mitzvah. He's continued with his Jewish journey, education co-director Lisa Friedman (**photo #3**) says, becoming confirmed and participating in his temple's North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) program. Now he's a college freshman at the University of Hartford



BRANDON BECAME A BAR MITZVAH AT CONGREGATION OR AMI, CALABASAS, CALIFORNIA, MAY 26, 2007. USING A MODIFIED VERSION OF AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE, HE SIGNED THE *SH'MA*, THE *VE'AHAVTA*, AND MORE.

in Connecticut.

Congregational programs for children with special needs abound. At Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, MA (<http://www.bethelohim-wellesley.org/>), for example, special needs coordinators observe students in the classroom, meet individually with parents, and train teachers and high school aides to engage the children; in addition, the religious school offers small-group Hebrew instruction for students with dyslexia and others whose disabilities affect language learning skills. As part of *B'Yachad*, a joint initiative of Temple Isaiah (<http://www.templeisayah.net/>) and Temple Emunah (Conservative), both in Lexington, Massachusetts, experienced teaching aides support students with special needs one-on-one in the classroom, and the staff is encouraged to be open to new pedagogic approaches which Rebecca

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WHAT WORKS Ideas

Saving the Environment through Song Thanks to 12-year-old Aitan Grossman of



Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, California, kids from around the world are joined through song in the fight against global warming.

What began as an act of *tikkun olam* for his bar mitzvah project has blossomed into a global environmental project called KidEarth (www.kidearth.us), combining Aitan's greatest passions: the environment and music. Last year Aitan wrote, composed, and recorded—along with kids from France, Venezuela, Ethiopia, Botswana, and the U.S.—the ballad "100 Generations" about "the integrity of nature we are taking for granted." Students from Botswana, Taiwan, and Venezuela even created chorus accompaniments for the recording in their own languages with their own lyrics. Since the song's April 2009 release, Guatemalan students have added their voices, too; you can add yours with a digital video camera and the music from the KidEarth website.

"100 Generations" is also available for purchase on iTunes and **Amazon.com**. Aitan plans to donate the profits to his favorite environmental organizations.

"Kids really care about the environment," Aitan says, "and they usually don't have as much power as grown-ups, so I'm helping kids to help the earth...We can save the earth if people of all ages around the world work together."

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* Name changed to protect privacy.