

BAR/BAT MITZVAH





The family gathers for Jordana Fergang's bat mitzvah at Temple Beth Rishon in Wyckoff. From left: her mother, Cantor Barbra Lieberstein, brother Joshua Fergang, maternal grandmother Gloria Lieberstein, Jordana, sister Sara Fergang, and father, Scott Fergang.

JOANNE DISTASI OF STOLEN MOMENTS, INC.

The cantor's daughter

A mother beams from beyond the bima

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Poised, pretty and bedecked in a beautiful black and pink dress, Jordana Fergang performed with aplomb. Standing before family and friends at Temple Beth Rishon in Wyckoff, the seventh grader at Eric Smith Middle School presided over the Shabbat services. She led the prayer services, chanted from the Torah, and read the whole haftarah.

It was a moment of great pride for her tutor, Cantor Barbra Lieberstein.

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"She did phenomenal," said Ms. Lieberstein, a popular bar and bat mitzvah tutor, best known as "Cantor Barbra," who had the opportunity to teach her own daughter and prepare her for her recent bat mitzvah where she recited the Torah portion Lech Lecha.

"People were so impressed," said Ms.

Lieberstein, who had invited many of her cantor colleagues to the bat mitzvah. "She practically did the whole service. This was my last opportunity, my last child, and my baby. And, this is our last simcha for a while. I wanted her to be spectacular. And she was."

The day was a proud one for the whole family, father Scott Fergang, who runs the Paramus wealth management brokerage firm for Royal Bank of Canada, and 13-year-old Jordana's siblings, twins Sara and Joshua, nearly 16.

The service was presided over by Congregation Beth Rishon's interim Rabbi Stephen Wylen and Cantor Ilan Mamber.

Tutoring your own daughter is not exactly like tutoring other students, said Ms. Lieberstein.

"It's obviously different tutoring your own child," she said. "I think there are more expectations for her. I definitely think I was a little harder on her than my other students because I am a cantor and I knew I would have colleagues coming to

the service."

For her part, Jordana, who dances with a company when she's not in school, having her mother as tutor was great.

"I think it was a lot easier being taught by my mother than by someone else," Jordana said. "It wasn't as nerve-racking. My mother helped with highlighting and color-coding everything. It just made it easier.

"It was also laid-back and chill. I could be on my bed in my room and we could study. She's my mom and I wasn't nervous around her. And if I would forget something, she was right there to ask for help. A lot of kids don't have that advantage. She would be there and that made it easier."

Jordana acknowledged that it sometimes wasn't that easy.

"It is a challenge," she said. "You need to practice. It's not easy to make a 12- or 13-year-old practice so much, but I did."

Ms. Lieberstein remembered her own bat mitzvah, which was held at her family's synagogue, the Orthodox Congregation Beth Tefillah in Paramus. While the

family struck a more Conservative note in their Jewish practice, they joined Beth Tefillah during the 1970s, and Ms. Lieberstein described it as a very "heimish and warm" place that welcomed her family: her father the late Melvin Lieberstein, her mother, Gloria, and her sister Rochelle, who is five years older.

Her bat mitzvah took place when she was 12 years old. It was Sunday, Labor Day weekend, she recalled. She chanted the "Ve'ahavta" prayer, one of the great basic principles of the Torah "to love your fellow as yourself," spoke about the significance of a bat mitzvah and, following the service, joined the 75 people at her party, which took place at The Women's Club of Paramus for a luncheon with musical entertainment.

"It was really a no-frills affair," Ms. Lieberstein said.

Musical from a young age, Ms. Lieberstein played the piano, clarinet and flute, and she sang. In fact, her name Barbra - note the missing "a" - was for Barbra

Streisand.

“Yes, my mother and father named me for her,” said Ms. Lieberstein “I enjoyed performing,” and at her bat mitzvah, Ms. Lieberstein played the piano and sang Barry Manilow songs to entertain her guests.

The bat mitzvah was a Jewish girl’s rite of passage, but at that time she had no idea about what in fact would become her life’s work. “I didn’t know how women could become cantors. I grew up in an Orthodox synagogue where women were speaking, sometimes just chatting, behind the mechitza.”

After graduating Paramus High School, Ms. Lieberstein attended William Paterson College, where she studied music management. She thought that she might work in arts administration. It wasn’t until she attended a Passover Seder during her college years and someone at the table suggested that she consider becoming a cantor that the thought took hold. A trip to Israel with her parents soon thereafter deepened her connection to Judaism and her journey began. She joined the choral society at Temple Emanuel, which was in Paterson at the time, now Temple Emanuel of North Jersey in Franklin Lakes.

Singing on Friday nights in the beautiful sanctuary with its high ceilings and beautiful stained glass deepened her desire to pursue liturgical music and she sought out her training in earnest. She studied with the late Rabbi Joseph Rudavsky, who was the rabbi emeritus of Temple Avodot Shalom in River Edge. Cantor Barbra received her ordination in 1998 from The Academy for Jewish Religion, a pluralistic seminary for rabbis and cantors in New York City. She is also certified through the American Conference of Cantors (Reform) and the Cantors Assembly. (Conservative). She is a member of the Women’s Cantors Network and had sung with the NJ Cantors Concert Ensemble.

The work came. She served as a cantorial intern and became the cantor in several synagogues including Beth Haverim Shir Shalom, a Reform Congregation in Mahwah, where she served from 2002 to 2006. At that time she already had twins, Sara, and Joshua, nearly 16, and Jordana was just a toddler.

She left the pulpit “because I wanted to watch them grow up.”

From there, Ms. Lieberstein worked as preschool music teacher in a few religious schools. During that time she received a call from a former congregant who needed help in preparing her daughter for her bat mitzvah. So Ms. Lieberstein began to tutor her. She enjoyed it so much that she



Barbra Lieberstein, left, and Scott, Sara, and Joshua Fergang watch as Jordana blows out the bat mitzvah candles.



Barbra Lieberstein is flanked by her parents, Gloria and the late Melvin, at her bat mitzvah.

started advertising on craigslist and got a few students. She launched her website in 2009 and business picked up.

Today, Ms. Lieberstein is so busy that she has a staff of 10 tutors who help her prepare b’nei mitzvah students. But she still is very hands on. She meets with the family and the student and comes in during the last six weeks before the bar or bat mitzvah to make sure that everything is

just right for their big day.

“I am a perfectionist,” she said.

She tutors students in their homes in Bergen and Rockland counties, and has conducted lessons by Skype or Facetime. Typically, she uses the Reform liturgy for Shabbat morning or Havdalah services, but she has also performed in a Reconstructionist synagogue setting and has also done Conservative Havdalah services.



Barbra Lieberstein with her older sister, Rochelle Stern.

As for her own bat mitzvah, Jordana said that while she was “so nervous about the service and nervous about the party” she felt very good about what she accomplished in the synagogue that day.

“I don’t think that there was anything better that I could have done,” Jordana said about her bat mitzvah at Beth Rishon. “And I think that definitely it was all because of my mom.”