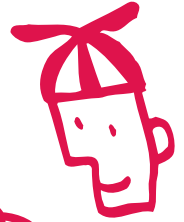
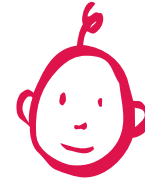




CBTF's

# Kidz Korner



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274 Madison Avenue, Suite 1301, NYC 10016

212.448.9494 t info@cbtf.org t www.cbtf.org

Toll Free Patient Line: 866.228.HOPE (4673)

## Rite of Triumph

Spenser Scharfman: Inspiring 13 year-old with a brain tumor beats long odds.

Adapted from an article by Steve Lipman, Staff Writer for *The Jewish Week*

Reprinted by courtesy of *The Jewish Week*

Photographs by Kym Newborn

"I want to have a fun day," Spenser Scharfman told his parents Stewart and Joy on the way to his bar mitzvah, "No crying."

Dressed in a formal black suit with a loosely fitted gray tie, he slowly read his *D'var Torah* speech, in which he stated "This is my 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary since my parents found out I had a brain tumor." And, held up by his relatives, he danced with his mother at the reception after services.

"I've never seen anything like this," Rabbi Mordecai Waxman,



**Brothers in faith:** Spenser Scharfman (left) received inspiration and support from his brother Adam when preparing for his bar mitzvah.

spiritual leader of Temple Israel, told Spenser and the congregation. "I think it's one of the greatest Jewish statements I've ever seen – a great statement of triumph over adversity."

For the synagogue, Spenser's bar mitzvah will serve as an example of perseverance, of the importance of Jewish education, said Rabbi Marim Charry, who led the abbreviated service.

For Spenser, who has undergone a decade of chemotherapy, radiation treatments and surgeries, having a bar mitzvah was simply the latest milestone. Spenser's older brother, Adam, became bar mitzvah three years ago. "He inspired me," Spenser says.

Spenser "was born healthy," Stewart, a physical therapist, says. "We didn't have any idea" something was wrong with him "until he was two." Then a head tilt and other clues indicated a problem. Eventually, a brain tumor was discovered; it was a largely inoperable tumor, which spread like tentacles.

The prognosis, says Joy, a nurse, was "one year."

"And not a good year," Stewart adds. "It would be a terrible year."

But Spenser fooled the doctors. "They say they're learning from him," Joy says. The doctors have stopped making longevity predictions – and the Scharfmans have stopped asking.

Though physically limited through the years, Spenser went to school, learned to play the drums, and became an animal lover, informally apprenticing with a local veterinarian.

At home, his dogs, Jessie and Mocha, guard him protectively, crouching next to his wheelchair. "He always makes

### Hey Kidz!

We want your poems, drawings, stories, word games, recipes, etc.! Anything that other kids will be interested in! Send your stuff to: CBTF, 274 Madison Avenue, Suite 1301, NYC 10016.

# Rite of Triumph (continued)

sure we feed the dogs," Stewart says. On the streets, dogs come up and lick Spenser's face. "It's uncanny. They sense something," Stewart says.

"Spenser is one of the purest souls I've ever met," says Ronit Arieh, a religious school teacher at Temple Israel and Spenser's personal tutor for three years. "He's very spiritual. He has such faith in God."

Twice a week Arieh would come to the Scharfmans' home even when Spenser was feeling weak. "He always wanted me to come. He took it so seriously." Spenser's medical treatments affected his ability to concentrate. Arieh would repeat the lessons over and over. "We would talk about God," she says. "We would talk about all the Jewish concepts."

As Spenser learned, he brought the lessons into the Scharfmans' kosher home. For example, they made more blessings over the food they ate. "He educated us," Stewart says. "He brought us around. We became more observant because of him."

Last year the METNY Region of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism established an Akiba Award, recognizing a student who is "exceptional in any area of achievement, service or attitude," and made Spenser its first recipient "because of his great love of Torah."

In recent years, Spenser used a walker to get around. Surgery last September, which removed 40 percent of his remaining tumor as well as part of his upper spine, took away most of the strength in his limbs. He has occasional spasms; a feeding tube was inserted in his stomach. "His swallowing is affected, his breathing is affected," Joy says. "It's painful for him to speak loudly," says Arieh.

Thoughts come slowly, as Spenser – in a tilt-in, manual wheelchair with neck support, safety belt and acrylic arm platform – enunciates each word in a soft gurgle.

Why a bar mitzvah? "I always wanted to have it," Spenser says. It means, "becoming a man."

No thoughts about giving up? "No."

A weekday service was arranged instead of the traditional Shabbat bar mitzvah, Stewart says, because "We thought it would be easier for Spenser to have a service that could be tailor made." Many prayers in the preliminary service were omitted.

Stewart wheeled Spenser onto the podium, up a six-foot aluminum ramp kept in the family van. With a small microphone clipped at his neck, surrounded by family, he read from a small Torah scroll supported by two uncles.

Spenser's brother Adam pointed to each word.

The racially mixed congregation, which included several children and adults in wheelchairs, nearly filled the first floor of the sanctuary with more than 300 people. Many came without official invitations.

"It became an event for the congregation," Rabbi Charry says.

The pews were silent as Spenser read, strongly and clearly. Many worshippers wiped away tears.

Then Spenser read his speech, which he had written with his parents' and Rabbi Charry's help. The Rosh Chodesh parsha, he said, was about biblical animal sacrifices.

"Today," Spenser said, "we no longer bring sacrifices of this sort; however, my family and I do make a handful of sacrifices."

He continued slowly. "I make sacrifices every day by waiting and being patient for people to help me since I have many disabilities. I do, however, have

many abilities, and working hard to prepare for my bar mitzvah is one of them."

He thanked his "family, doctors, nurses, and friends who have helped me reach this important day."

"A bar mitzvah," he said, "is important to me because it is another step to becoming a teenager and continuing to meet the challenges and overcome the obstacles in life."

Rabbi Waxman walked over and hugged Spenser.

"He's a champion," the rabbi told the congregation. "He is a champion in spirit."

"Spenser," Rabbi Waxman said, "we love you, we appreciate and we applaud you. So let's applaud him."

The whole congregation rose as one.

From Temple President Steven Markowitz came gifts on behalf of the congregation.

Spenser returned home, one goal accomplished. Some goals remain.

Spenser had a doctor's appointment that week. He hoped the doctor would remove his breathing tube and feeding tube. "I want to be able to eat again."

High school was going to start in a few weeks. Spenser keeps praying to God, "to get better."

And he has one long-term goal.

"I want to become a veterinarian."



**Strength in numbers:** Spenser (front) with, from left, Stewart, Joy and Adam Scharfman.

# No Right Way to Learn

By Zach Steinhorn



As the start of senior year of high school drew near, a major question mark facing me was whether to take Advanced Placement Statistics or Advanced Placement Calculus. Unfamiliar with both subjects, I was presented with the uncomfortable task of choosing the path that would lead to the most success in light of my visual deficits.

Instinct favored statistics, but I became uneasy when informed that the class was taught in a very visual manner. It was known that the teacher relied heavily on the use of an overhead projector to display the steps for each student to follow on their own graphing calculators.

If I had gained nothing else in my four years of high school, I learned that I am not a visual learner due to visual impairments that resulted from a childhood brain tumor. Vector diagrams in 9th grade physics were definitely not my forte, and I would certainly rather write an articulate paragraph describing an experience than paint it. Anticipating the frustrations of visual tracking and the difficulties of keeping up with the pace of the class, I decided to consult the teacher of the course. His encouraging response to my dilemma still echoes within me. Hearing a teacher acknowledge that perhaps he could “learn to be a better teacher” if I were in his class, now had me doubting my ability to hear correctly! He firmly believed that my presence in his class would motivate him to present information in a more verbal context. A few hours later, I stood at the cashier in Barnes and Noble, optimistically clutching 890 pages of *The Practice of Statistics*.

Recently, as part of a celebration of Black History Month, my school devoted an entire day to the concept of diversity, a word that transcends race or color. It was impressive to learn that along with workshops pertaining to being black, white, female, Jewish, or Muslim, a discussion group addressing diversity in learning styles was also offered. Constantly uncovering new

clues about how I learn, and curious to hear about learning strategies of others, the decision as to which workshop to choose was much clearer than the previous one that pitted calculus against statistics.

After hearing about the many different methods by which people learn the same information, it became clear that there is no way that is “better” or “worse” than any other. While a haptic, or hands-on learner, may learn best by doing, another person will be more successful getting information from a textbook, and yet another from a lecture.

As I sat in the student center the following day, “senioritis” was engulfing the room. A group of my classmates were attempting to explain the card game of cribbage to all who would listen. The game was intriguing, and I was anxious to learn to play. The concept of learning differences again entered my thoughts as I realized that mastering this game by watching others play would not work for me. In my characteristically persistent style, I set out to

learn the game in the way I knew I could: by buying a book clearly stating the rules of cribbage. Although I am not quite ready for a cribbage tournament, the book

is proving to be an effective tool, whereas a friend of mine confessed that she could never learn the game that way.

My experience as a brain tumor survivor has undoubtedly educated me as to the ways I learn best. However, this self-education is an ongoing process that will continue throughout my years in college and beyond. More often than not, the answers are not that clear-cut, and require trial and error.

There are limitless strategies to try, and the more you learn about yourself, the more you can advocate for yourself. This philosophy played an important role in my choice of a yearbook page quote that states: “The most damaging phrase in the language is ‘it’s always been done that way.’”

*Halfway into the second semester, both student and teacher are accomplishing their mission. Teacher is receiving an A, and Zach is looking forward to taking the AP exam in May!*

My experience as a brain tumor survivor has undoubtedly educated me as to the ways I learn best.

How do you learn?



Kids Helping Kids is a non-profit, volunteer organization run by teens to benefit children and teens. Besides raising awareness, Kids Helping Kids raises funds to provide mobility equipment (e.g.

scooters, ramps, lifts, etc.) and peer interaction for kids who have been affected by catastrophic illness or injury.

Kids Helping Kids fulfills its mission by holding concerts, sporting and other special events, and by making regular hospital visits.

If you know of a child, a teen, or a family

that is in need of a mobility device or has a special wish, please contact Kids Helping Kids.

Henia Drucker, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.  
Kids Helping Kids  
229 Midland Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07042  
973.783.0697 [www.kidshelping.org](http://www.kidshelping.org)

# Isabella's Ideas by Isabella Durando

When my mom and I had to go to the hospital a lot so the doctors could take care of my brain tumor, these are some things that we came up with that made it much more fun. Also, when my mom was calm I felt safe even when I was afraid.

**P** Have your mom or dad bring some of your favorite stuff. For example:

- Two or three fun flat sheets and pillowcases and a cozy blanket or throw.
- A couple of special stuffed animals, and the best books, videos and music.
- Toys and games that can be played in bed, like card games and puzzles. No matter how much I loved the games, my mom kept them packed so I would have something to look forward to in the hospital.
- Favorite comfy clothes, pajamas, and slippers, sneakers, or sandals (to walk around in).
- Toiletries: familiar soap, lotion, toothpaste, etc. I had a silly toothbrush just for the hospital and always looked forward to using it. Disposable facial cloths are great for sponge baths if you can't have a bath.

**P** Have projects that you only do in the hospital. Some ideas would be:

- Made-up stories, which continue during each hospital visit.
- Crafts: one idea is to take a hospital pillowcase and dec-

orate it anyway you choose.

- Make drawings, paintings and collages to decorate your hospital space.



**P** It's really important that some things stay the same in the hospital as they are at home.

**P** Find ways to make things less scary:

- Before something scary happens, have your mom or dad act it out so you know what to expect.
- Make a safe zone in the hospital, a place where almost nothing bad, like IV placement, happened. We chose my bed.
- Have your mom or dad sing a favorite song or tell a story for each procedure. My mom would tell a silly story for an MRI and sing a favorite song for a CAT scan.
- Play games on the way to something scary. We would play scavenger hunt or I Spy. For example: find three doctors with white coats and glasses, find two people with funny hats, find a girl in a pink dress and so on.

**P** Some helpful resources:

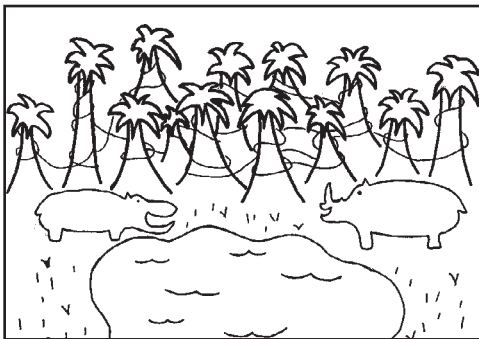
- Ask the child life staff at your hospital for projects and art supplies.
- Good hospital books for younger children: Franklin Goes To The Hospital, Curious George Goes To The Hospital, and Madeleine.

*What are your ideas?*

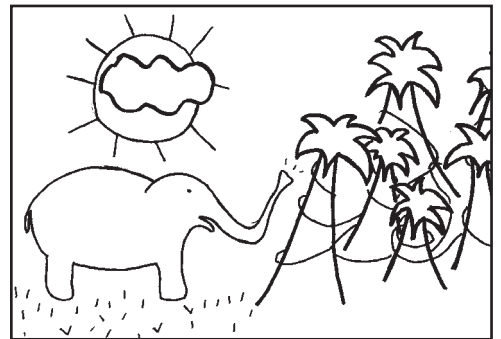
## Three Friends and The Special Place by Jeremy Shatan

color us in!

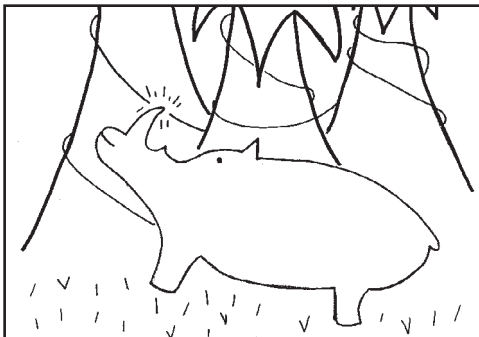
DEEP IN THE JUNGLE WAS A SPECIAL PLACE WHERE HIPPO AND RHINO LIKED TO PLAY.



ELEPHANT WAS TOO TALL TO GET THROUGH THE PATH. HE TRUMPETED LOUDLY - HE WAS MAD!



RHINO HEARD ELEPHANT AND USED HIS HORN TO CUT A PATH THROUGH THE PLANTS.



AND THEY ALL PLAYED AT THE SPECIAL PLACE TOGETHER!

