

# Creating tefillin ties

Unique tefillin project engages young teens with Judaism

JUNE GLAZER

**L**ong before the hall is booked and the invitations mailed, many families planning a bar or bat mitzvah celebration often take on a special project as a way to deepen their connection to Judaism and imbue the upcoming occasion with added meaning. The project they choose usually culminates with a moving speech or video that will be presented at the party.

While any project that strengthens ties to Judaism is meaningful and

important, Rabbi Noah Greenberg has a unique idea that culminates with something much more tangible, and one that experience shows is deeply inspirational. An artist and educator living in Israel, he has figured out a way to craft kosher tefillin (phylacteries) out of parchment through a process similar to origami, and has created a program in which participants make their own pair.

Tefillin is the first mitzvah assumed by a Jewish male upon becoming a bar mitzvah.

"I don't think I have run across a



project in my whole life that would be more appropriate and more directly applicable for any student as a pre-bar mitzvah project," said Simon Jacob of West Orange. Past president of the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy/Rae

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**SIMON JACOB**

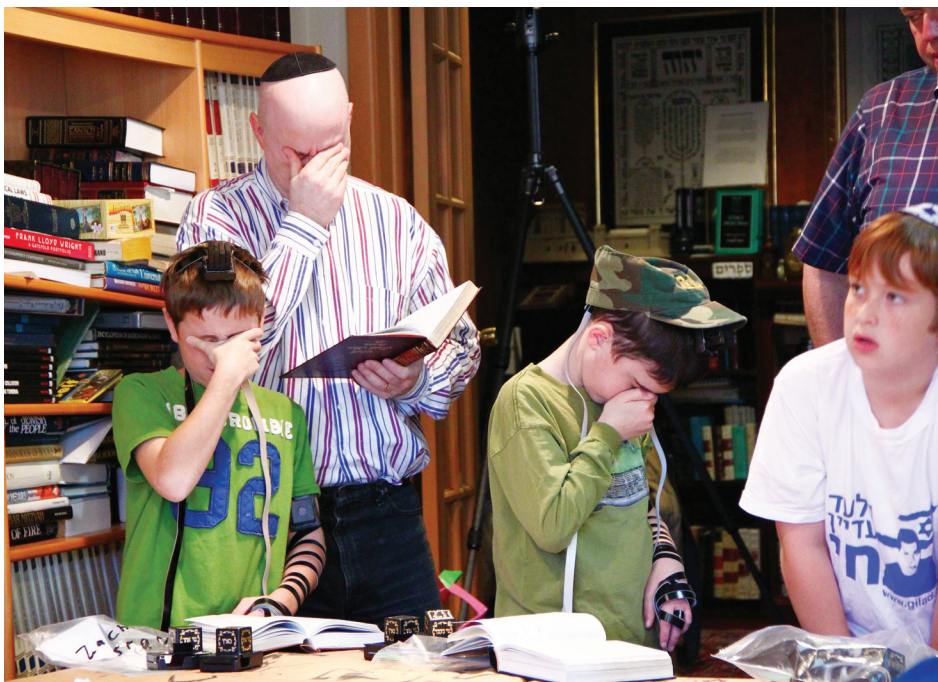
Kushner Yeshiva High School in Livingston, he and his wife, Barrie, brought Rabbi Greenberg and his program to their home three years ago in advance of their son Levi Yehezkel's bar mitzvah, and over the course of a Thanksgiving weekend (not including Shabbat) 14 boys and three adults immersed themselves in the world of tefillin-making.

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tic and the kids became so engaged. The program is called Keshet Tefillin, and 'keshet' means connection. The project creates a connection between the child and the tefillin. You've never seen a bunch of young teenagers so focused," Mr. Jacob said of the group he gathered.

Tefillin are biblical in origin, and are commanded within the context of several laws outlining a Jew's relationship with God. Comprising two small black boxes and leather straps, they are worn one on the head and one on the arm and donned each morning of the week with the exception of Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Usually, boys are trained to start wearing them one or two months before they turn 13 according to the Hebrew calendar.

"Many years ago, I was learning with my son for his bar mitzvah and we had just bought him a pair of beautiful and expensive tefillin," said Rabbi Greenberg, a native of Oakland, Calif., who moved to Safed in 1978 where he maintains an artist workshop in his home. "As we were learning, I thought to myself that Moshe Rabbeinu also wore tefillin, and I started to think



about how he might have made them. Obviously, he didn't have computers and hydraulic presses in the desert."

The thought prompted Rabbi Greenberg to experiment and he came up with a way to fold goat-skin parchment—the same material a kosher Torah scroll is written on—to create the batim, or boxes, that hold the four sets of biblical verses, hand-written by a scribe, in which tefillin are commanded.

The first person to see the prototype that Rabbi Greenberg made was Rabbi Loren Sykes, CEO and executive director of the Shirley and Jacob Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. "I was in Noah's workshop about another matter when I saw the tefillin sitting on his desk and asked him about them. He explained and I told him that this is something we should figure out how to do with kids. The rest of the story is Noah making this mitzvah possible for them." Rabbi Sykes, who is founding director of Camp Ramah Darom in northeast Georgia, brought a pilot program to the camp that summer and campers there have been making tefillin ever since. "We've exponentially increased the number of kids who are actively involved in this mitzvah," he said.

Since that summer six years ago, some 2,000 kids in camps, schools, and private gatherings in the US and Israel have participated in Keshar Tefillin, including Rabbi Sykes' son Elan, who was part of the pilot.

"The focus was not so much on how to fold it as it was on the intention—learning the laws related to tefillin and doing everything I'shem kidushat tefillin [for the sake of the sanctity of the tefillin]. Having the experience of folding and coloring, sewing and tying, and putting the scrolls into the compartments really gave me a sense of ownership over the mitzvah. I put on tefillin for the first time with that pair and the experience was much more meaningful," the younger Sykes said.

"When I started this, I thought the project was about the tefillin themselves," Rabbi Greenberg noted. "As I've done it more and more, I've realized that it's really about the wealth and organic wholeness of our Jewish life and heritage. The foundation of this program is kidusha [holiness], which we study in-depth. And, the kids really get it. They truly integrate the concepts."

Rabbi Greenberg added that the project, which takes 15 hours over several days to complete, is complex, challenging, fast-moving, and hands-on. "In the process, the kids are learning the Rambam, Shulchan Aruch, Mishnah Brurah, and even the Gemara. If I were a rabbi coming in with a bunch of books and trying to teach them the same stuff, they'd be asleep in two minutes. This way, the kids don't even realize that they're learning," he said. Greenberg's tefillin have the *haskama* [approbation] of prominent rabbis in Israel and the U.S., including Rav Nissim Karelitz of B'nei Brak, Rav Yisroel Belsky of the Orthodox Union (OU), and Rabbi Saul Berman of Yeshiva University, who has been a driving force behind the project from the outset and answers the ongoing halachic questions as they develop. In the Conservative Movement, Rabbi Joel Roth, who serves as the halachic authority for all the Conservative Movement's Ramah summer camps, also supports the project.

"People say this is a transformational experience in these kids' lives. Recently at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires, a mother told me that her son, a public school student, did the program three years ago and since then gets up 15 minutes early every day to put on his tefillin. And now, his father does, too. If this story were an isolated incident, the program would still be worth it, but I hear anecdotes like this all the time. It's incredible," Greenberg said.

For the past three years, the artist and educator has presented Keshar Tefillin in the Ethiopian community in Israel, as well. "One of the exciting things we're doing is working with groups of Ethiopian olim—fathers and sons—as part of their aliyah-conversion-bar mitzvah process. In Ethiopia, many Jews were forced to convert to Christianity and have crosses tattooed onto their foreheads right at the spot where the men wear the tefillin *shel rosh* [the box that is placed on the head]. When you see the fathers putting on their tefillin on that spot. . . ." Rabbi Greenberg trailed off with emotion. "We're being given this opportunity to negate the travesty that was done to these people."

Ever the craftsman, Rabbi Greenberg brings all his own tools and materials along when he presents his program, including kosher scrolls to insert into the boxes. Under his direction, participants tie them with calf hair, put them in each box, sew the boxes with sinews, and tie *ritzuot*—special knots—in the straps, all in accordance with Jewish law. The cap-off moment is when the boys don their tefillin for the first time and say the Shema. It is a moment like no other, Mr. Jacob attested.

"When our group did the project, that moment was so intense. There were very few dry eyes. To put on these tefillin the kids made themselves and to say the Shema—it was an incredibly beautiful, wonderful experience, and the kids were so excited. They were so into it."

"This is really an inspirational process," Rabbi Greenberg said. "What these kids come away with is ownership not only of this one mitzvah, but of Jewish existence in general. It is changing people's lives."

For more information about the Keshar Tefillin program, visit the Web site at <http://www.keshar-tefillin.com/>.