

DONOR Spotlight

A PJ Library grandmother and granddaughter shared a special moment in Israel: becoming bat mitzvah together.

BY RACHEL WETTER

ADVANCEMENT COORDINATOR

Suniva Achuthan celebrated her bat mitzvah in the summer of 2023 in a unique location. In the courtyard of the Israel Antiquities Authority — a timeless oasis in the bustling city of Jerusalem — she read from the ancient text of the Torah surrounded by precious artifacts from the land where many of the Torah’s stories are set.

But for Suniva, now 16, it was less about the locale. “Honestly, for me, it was just special to do it with my grandma,” she says. Suniva wasn’t the only one celebrating her bat mitzvah that day; Shelby White, her grandmother, read Torah for the first time right alongside her.

B’nai mitzvah (“children of the commandment”) ceremonies mark a Jewish young adult’s coming-of-age. Usually celebrated around age 13, the ritual often involves chanting from the Torah. But in previous generations, the practice was less common for girls.

“When I grew up, in a Conservative Jewish family, girls were pretty much marginalized,” recalls Shelby. “There was a huge deal made over my brother’s bar mitzvah but nothing when it came to me. So that’s why, as an octogenarian, the idea came into my head. And I was thrilled when Suniva said, ‘I’ll do it with you, Grandma.’ I called Rabbi David Levy Reiner at Congregation Shir Shalom in Ridgefield, Connecticut, where I’ve belonged for over 30 years. He agreed to help. Suniva and I began an intense course of study with Cantor Hayley in Scarsdale, New York. We had weekly sessions, using flash cards to learn Hebrew for the big day.”

Before Shelby asked her, Suniva hadn’t been certain she wanted a bat mitzvah ceremony. Turning 13 during the pandemic meant extra precautions, and as the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Hindu father, she wasn’t yet sure what Judaism meant to her. But Shelby’s



Shelby White and her granddaughter, Suniva Achuthan, in Israel for their double bat mitzvah last summer.

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invitation gave her a reason: She wanted to experience this occasion with her grandmother and support Shelby as she celebrated her own Jewish milestone.

Shelby has always loved Judaism and Jewish culture. Sharing that love with her grandchildren, she felt, was an important part of her role as a grandmother. That’s why she had PJ Library books come to her house — so she could help pass Judaism *l’dor vador* (from generation to generation).

“When I was younger, every single time Grandma came over, she would bring a new PJ Library book and we would read them together,” Suniva recalls. Besides providing moments of connection for the family, the

books helped Suniva learn more about the Jewish rituals her family practiced.

Shelby has taken her appreciation for PJ Library a step further: She has chosen to give financial support through her late husband’s foundation. “Our foundation does a lot to support Jewish culture, and this is a great program,” she says. “My grandchildren loved the books when they were little. PJ Library gave me books about the holidays that I could give to them so they would feel they were learning on their own.”

Although Suniva and her siblings have graduated from PJ Library, the Leon Levy Foundation continues to help PJ Library share Jewish culture, history, and values with the next generation.

“It’s the way I was brought up,” Shelby says, “and I want them to have the same experience of this wonderful tradition that we have.”

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