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## A high-tech pen rescues the bar mitzvah challenged

By Elise Kigner Advocate Staff



**Alan and Claudia Greenfield demonstrate the Magic Yad, a smartpen adapted to help bar mitzvah students learn to chant their Torah and haftorah portions.**

Lee Biederman was frustrated. He fought with his mom and couldn't sit still long enough to focus.

The source of his troubles: the haftorah portion he would need to read for his bar mitzvah. Like many 13-year-olds, Lee found that listening to the Torah portion all the way through was too tedious.

With about five months to go before his bar mitzvah, his mom and tutor had just about given up on him, said Alan Greenfield. As Lee's "big brother," through the Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters program, Greenfield wanted to find a way to help Lee, but he didn't think he could do it through traditional methods.

So Greenfield, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and 30-year veteran of the high-tech business, set to work. The final product: a pen, with a few special ingredients.

The 62-year-old Needham resident developed an application for the Livescribe smartpen, dubbing it the Magic Yad. The smartpen contains a microcomputer, camera, speaker, microphone and enough memory to hold several hundred hours of recordings. By touching the pen to portions of the Torah and Haftorah printed on special dot paper, it will play a phrase or verse sung by a professional cantor. Students can also record themselves for playback.



When Lee became a bar mitzvah in September, he made his mother proud.

"I didn't know my son could read Hebrew so well," said Bonnie Biederman of Stoughton.

From vinyl records to CDs to iPod downloads, technological advances have helped students better prepare for their b'nai mitzvah services. Computer tutorials like Trope Trainer show the text on screen while it is being chanted. But Greenfield said no other programs allow you to practice individual phrases or verses at a time, as well as get the tactile experience of touching a yad to paper.

"It most closely simulates the actual experience you will have," he said, comparing the smartpen to the silver yad used to keep place in the Torah.

Greenfield and his wife and business partner, Carol, hired Zoomii Learning, Inc. in California to write the software.

The Magic Yad comes with customized booklets that include the various blessings for Torah and Haftorah; Torah and Haftorah trope exercises; and designated Torah and Haftorah portions.

Depending on where you put the pen, you can hear a phrase, verse, or whole aliyah at a time. The right side of the booklet has the vowels and trope marks and the left side has no marks, as the text appears in the Torah.

The camera on the end of the pen can read the dot patterns on the special paper, telling the computer inside the pen where on the page and audio stream it is as well as when to start and stop audio playback.

Greenfield hired cantor Gastón Bogomolni of Temple Aliyah in Needham to record the entire Torah and Haftorah. So far they have a good chunk of the first year of the Torah readings recorded, Greenfield said. Greenfield listens to the recording and makes marks at the start of phrases and verses as part of the process to synchronize the audio and text.

The Livescribe smartpen was initially developed for note-taking. When you go back and touch a word, you will hear what was recorded at the moment you wrote that word. The Magic Yad can also be used for note taking when paired with a dot paper notebook.

When he pitched the device to cantors, Greenfield said many loved the technology but wanted customized tropes, which vary depending on the denomination and sometimes the cantor. The solution: Students can upload a recording of their cantor's chanting onto the Magic Yad Web site, which Greenfield will then load into the pen.

Greenfield has sold a handful of Magic Yads so far, including one to Gateways, which has a program that prepares students with special needs for their b'nai mitzvah, and one to a man in his 80s who had always wanted to chant a Torah portion. A synagogue in Newton, he said, is considering purchasing Magic Yads for all of its b'nai mitzvah students.

Magic Yad operations are being run on the West Coast by Alan Warshaw, a former coworker of Greenfield who is now a technology consultant in Palo Alto, Calif.

For Greenfield, the Magic Yad is a marriage of two parts of his career: the 30 years he spent working at high-tech companies and the past eight years he has spent volunteering and running a dog walking business.

Greenfield left high tech in 2002, when he was vice president of marketing for Brooktrout in Needham. "I decided I was living a one-dimensional life," he said.

Since then, Greenfield has run a dog-walking business, which he quit last spring, and volunteered for various groups.

Besides Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters, Greenfield visits the elderly through Jewish Family & Children's Service and mentors a prisoner at MCI-Framingham through the Partakers program.

*Smartpens start at \$170 at [Livescribe.com](http://Livescribe.com); a complete Torah portion begins at \$100; and a complete Haftorah portion begins at \$120. Subsets are available at reduced prices. Magic Yad's Web site is [www. magicyad.com](http://www.magicyad.com).*