Imagine a bat mitzvah that takes place under an old tree overlooking Lake Tahoe’s Emerald Bay, following a wilderness hike that combines breathtaking vistas with moments of reflection. Every guest is a participant, either performing a ritual or helping to unfurl and hold the mini-Torah that’s otherwise housed in the rabbi’s backpack.

The alpine setting in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, 2,300 miles from home and 6,200 feet above sea level served as the bimah for Jordan Berkovitz of Solon when she became a bat mitzvah on Aug. 2. Joining her were 13 family members and friends, as well as Rabbi Jamie Korngold, who started the Adventure Rabbi program in Boulder, Colo. in 2001.

“It felt surreal,” said Jordan, an eighth-grader at Solon Middle School, adding, “The overall experience was just right for me.”

Once the decision was made, the family chose Lake Tahoe for the bat mitzvah. “Looking at the photos of the mountains and lakes, we saw what we like to do as a family,” Joanne Berkovitz said. “We like to do hikes, and David was a mountain climber.”

“Rabbi Evon said, ‘I’ll get the challah and the wine,’” Joanne Berkovitz recalled, with a chuckle.

“The overall experience was just right for me.”

The experience capped off Jordan’s 10 months of preparation, including monthly Skyping sessions from her dining room table with “Rabbi Evon,” Yakar, who manages Adventure Rabbi’s branch in South Lake Tahoe, Calif., in partnership with Temple Bat Yam. Jordan also studied with Hebrew tutor Shosh Ault.

**DOING IT DIFFERENTLY**

“I knew I wanted to do something different for my bat mitzvah,” Jordan said. Originally, she considered the possibility of having the ceremony in Israel. Then the family discovered the Adventure Rabbi program. Jordan’s mother Joanne Berkovitz read Korngold’s book “God in the Wilderness: Rediscovering the Spirituality of the Great Outdoors with the Adventure Rabbi” (Doubleday, 2008). The book inspires people to reconnect with God through the natural world.

The idea also appealed to Jordan’s father David Berkovitz. “There used to be a real connection between Jewish people and the outdoors,” he said. “Moses received the Ten Commandments outside. At one point, rabbis moved us away from being in the wilderness. It’s appropriate to get back to our roots.”

Once the decision was made, the family chose Lake Tahoe for the bat mitzvah. “One of the strangest things is you’re planning a celebration and you’ve never been there,” David Berkovitz said. “There were challenges, although small.”

“Rabbi Evon said, ‘I’ll get the challah and the wine,’” Joanne Berkovitz recalled, with a chuckle.

The family arrived at Lake Tahoe a week prior to the ceremony, met with Yakar and settled into their townhouse by the lake. The day after they arrived, they hiked with him in the mountains.

While Jordan studied with Yakar, his wife was having a...
baby, and Korngold flew in to officiate.

“That was part of our plan,” said Joanne Berkovitz.

BEFORE THE BAT MITZVAH

In the days before the bat mitzvah, the family enjoyed white-water rafting, horseback riding and hiking.

A continued enjoyment of nature surrounded the bat mitzvah ceremony for the 14 participants, including Jordan.

“Part of the adventure was to start with a hike,” Joanne Berkovitz said. “Rabbi Korngold said we were taking the final steps to Jordan’s becoming a bat mitzvah as a community.”

Every few minutes of the hike, Jordan stopped to read an excerpt of a reflective piece she had written for that day. She talked about the surprised reaction of friends when she told them where she was having her bat mitzvah, and reminisced about her increased comfort level and fulfillment with her Skyping sessions.

“Over the past 10 months, we have discussed obviously Torah, but not just my portion (V’etchanan in Deuteronomy) … We went through the history of our past and talked about our future … and other things most people wouldn’t expect a 13-year-old to know.

“My favorite part of the Adventure Rabbi program would be the one-on-one time I have gotten to spend with Rabbi Evon,” Jordan said. “The experience of being in the Adventure Rabbi program is one I would never trade. It has made me think about Judaism in a new way.

Continued on page 6
What is Adventure Rabbi?

The Adventure Rabbi program, a new type of Jewish congregation, strives to make Judaism relevant, meaningful, and accessible for the 21st century.

“Our mission is to demonstrate to people that Judaism can make their lives more meaningful,” said founder Rabbi Jamie Korngold.

Combining religion and nature, Shabbat services are held on hiking trails and ski slopes. People of all ages come from Colorado and across the country for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover retreats to learn, celebrate and create a new kind of Jewish community.

When she was ordained in 1999, Korngold said she could count on seeing Jewish people three times a year. The rabbi, author, athlete and nature lover founded Adventure Rabbi in Boulder, Colo., in 2001. She is author of “God in the Wilderness: Rediscovering the Spirituality of the Great Outdoors with the Adventure Rabbi” (Doubleday, 2008) and “The God Upgrade: Finding Your 21st Century Spirituality in Judaism’s 5,000-Year-Old Tradition” (Jamie Korngold, 2011), as well as several children’s books.

“The last thing Jewish people are holding onto is the bar or bat mitzvah,” Korngold said. “People who do nothing else Jewishly . . . are willing to do it.”

Adventure Rabbi offers an innovative bar and bat mitzvah program under the direction of Korngold in Boulder and Rabbi Evon Yakar in Lake Tahoe, Calif. The b’nai mitzvah enjoy ceremonies in mountains and on trails, or anywhere of their choosing. Adventure Rabbi officiates at about 50 b’nai mitzvah annually, with about half involving local students and the other half, students from across the country and around the world. For nonlocal students, the program involves an intense, yearlong distance-learning study through Skype sessions with Yakar.

Korngold, who has been interviewed on national television for her innovations and led retreats in Ohio and elsewhere, said b’nai mitzvah students “are generally not the kids whose parents are making them do it. It’s too hard.”

“Most of the kids have this bee in their bonnet and want to do it,” she said.

Source: Rabbi Jamie Korngold and www.adventurerabbi.org

“And as my Uncle Dennis had once said to me, “I’d rather be in the mountains thinking about God than be at temple thinking about the mountains.”
– Jordan Berkovitz

Continued from page 7

“And as my Uncle Dennis had once said to me, “I’d rather be in the mountains thinking about God than be at temple thinking about the mountains.””

Her uncle, Dennis Wasserman is originally from Beachwood and now living in California.

“It was so exquisite and inclusive,” Korngold said about Jordan’s bat mitzvah. “It was transformative for Jordan, but it was also transformative for the entire community and family who came. They had an intense experience together. For Jordan to stand up in front of her people and connect with them was so beautiful to witness.”

“With Adventure Rabbi we emphasize a Shabbat experience that is innovative, unique and meaningful for our students,” Yakar said. In her reflection piece, Jordan commented that she would continue her “Shabbat Project” after her bat mitzvah.

“This is every rabbi’s dream: to inspire Jewish living in our students,” Yakar said. “The Adventure Rabbi b’nai mitzvah program certainly did that for Jordan. Much of the foundational Jewish identity was already present and provided by her parents and family, and we were blessed to help strengthen that sense of Jewishness.”

Sue Hoffman is a staff reporter for the Cleveland Jewish News.

The Berkovitz family and blue-capped Adventure Rabbi Jamie Korngold take a pre-ceremony hike in the mountains overlooking Lake Tahoe’s Emerald Bay.