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America's Oldest Living Fly Girl Tells All

My brief, booty-shaking gig as a bar mitzvah motivational dancer.

By Emily Yoffe

Posted Tuesday, March 23, 2010, at 7:59 AM ET



I was getting ready for my gig as a "motivational dancer" at a bar mitzvah party when my daughter, who at age 14 has just completed her year on the bar and bat mitzvah circuit, decided to give me some advice. "Don't do this," she said, as she shook her torso in a shimmy. "And don't do this," she said, bouncing to the pony. "And don't do this," she said, passing her first two fingers in a V across her eyes (think [John Travolta's](#) dance scene in *Pulp Fiction*). Banning my entire repertoire was necessary, she explained, "because your old-people moves are going to make everyone uncomfortable." My dances were of such antiquity that to a group of 13-year-olds it might appear I was re-enacting

rites of the [Hasmoneans](#). They would be right that I had perfected them in ancient times—during my own bat mitzvah season 40 years ago.

But my daughter wasn't done with me. I had been told to dress all in black, so I had on black silk pants, a black cashmere beaded top, and pearl earrings. "Mom, you *cannot* wear that," she said. "Everyone's going to think you're the aunt. At these parties the dancers are in spandex and sneakers." I argued that if I wore spandex and sneakers, everyone would think I was the crazy aunt who'd just gotten a day pass to attend the party. She went through my closet and found a black tank top she said was acceptable. I also prepared myself with three essentials for an evening of motivating: a dose of an anti-inflammatory, flat shoes, and earplugs. I ascribe much of my midlife hearing loss to the sonic boom bar mitzvah music of my youth.

Readers have suggested the ideas for several Human Guinea Pig columns, in which I try jobs or hobbies that often require an ability [to make a fool of oneself](#). This idea came from a friend. I admit I bring an irrational exuberance to the dance floor, which wearies my husband and embarrasses my daughter. So it seemed natural when *Washington Post* columnist Ruth Marcus, at the bat mitzvah of her eldest daughter (read about it [here](#)), dragged me over to her MC, Doug Sandler, aka D.J. Doug, and told him he had to let me join his crew.

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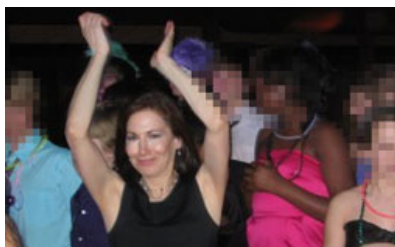
The bar mitzvah (for boys) or bat mitzvah (for girls) is the ceremony that marks a Jewish child becoming a member of the adult community. The 13-year-old stands in the synagogue and reads Hebrew from the Torah, chanting words his or her forebears have spoken for thousands of years. And that evening another event takes place just as steeped in ritual: the bar mitzvah party.

When I was 13, there were no professionals to motivate us. The adults were fueled onto the dance floor by booze, cigarettes, and mountains of cleavage. We kids eagerly rubbed against one another, creating a funk of hormones and hairspray. While bar mitzvahs can be notorious for their [extravagance](#), the ones I've been to in recent years have been well-behaved affairs, featuring a band or DJ. The major addition since my time is an array of carnival-like activities, from photo booths, to wax hands, to caricaturists. D.J. Doug says parents started requesting dancers a few years ago after seeing them at parties in New York, and they are now standard at a top-flight bar mitzvah.

D.J. Doug, 45, has presided over about 1,900 bar and bat mitzvah parties in the Washington, D.C., area over the past 20 years. He is tall and rangy, looks years younger than he is, and has endless, infectious enthusiasm. He has 12,000 songs loaded on two laptops, and his assistants will play 60 in the course of a four-hour party. Doug's out front, working the room, leading dances, overseeing games and contests, building the evening to a strobe-lit frenzy, then gradually easing off with slow-dancing so that everyone is spent and sated by the end.

Doug's starting fee is \$3,000—and if you want him, he's got some dates available in 2013. The costs go up with à la carte additions such as dancers, who make, depending on experience, \$75 to \$300 a night. Our job was to get people out of their seats, lead the line dances, and hand out novelties. But it was more than that. Doug explained the dancers are supposed to "create an instant party" and be "that spot of excitement that people just gravitate to."

This would be trickier for me than his other dancers, who range in age from the late teens through the 20s, making them like older siblings to the kids. I was like someone who could have given birth to the kids. I planned to stay far enough away from the teenage boys that I didn't stymie their normal sexual development. But I also had to be careful not to get any grandfathers boogying so hard that they collapsed with angina. (One of the worst experiences of D.J. Doug's career was when the bar mitzvah boy's uncle was felled on the dance floor by a heart attack.)



For an apprenticeship, Doug invited me to a bar mitzvah party held in a downtown Washington building. I was appalled to discover it was a children's-only affair—this meant no Motown, no Aretha, no music I knew how to dance to. Even worse was the fact that about a dozen of the celebrants were children of friends; a few did double takes and asked what I was doing there. I ended up slinking around the DJ stand studying

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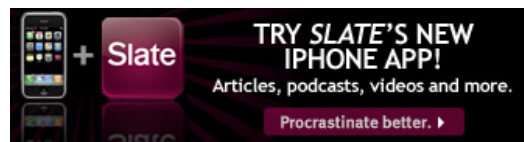
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21st-century music and moves. I needed to clap my hands over my head, bend my elbows and circle my fists in the air, and thrust my hips sharply as if signaling the directions on a

compass.

There were three dancers that evening, a break-dancing guy and two young women whose advice I solicited. An adorable, petite 20-year-old said an occupational hazard is being air humped by pubescent boys—think of a Labrador retriever attaching itself to your leg—whom she good-naturedly shakes off. I was certain I wouldn't have to deal with this problem.

I was amazed how, upon hearing the first notes of a song, the kids instantaneously formed lines and perfectly executed complicated steps in unison, like a scene out of *Glee*. They all knew every shake of Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)." At one point the daughter of a friend took pity on me and invited me to join the line dance to Miley Cyrus' catchy "Party in the USA." It was a sweet gesture, but it turned out she had an ulterior motive. I'm friends with her parents, her bat mitzvah was the following Saturday, and she begged me not to ruin it by showing up as a fly girl.

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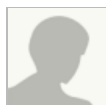
Emily Yoffe is the author of What the Dog Did: Tales From a Formerly Reluctant Dog Owner. You can send your Human Guinea Pig suggestions or comments to emilyyoffe@hotmail.com.

Illustration by Nina Frenkel.

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Molly Cook

OMG! I so remember the first time I slow danced to "Cherish"! I was in 8th grade. :) Your article made me smile. Thank you.

April 30, 2010, 10:04:29 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Molly Cook

Forgot to add that was back in the mid-60's. But the memory is crystal clear. It was my first slow dance ever with a boy! :)

April 30, 2010, 10:07:50 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Missy Hedberg

hahaha! I am a pro Mitzvah dancer!!!! Been doing it for 5 yrs!!!! I LOVE IT! I was shy but this job helped me over come that and now I am a pro at public speaking etc! A great job to get a good workout and learn how to interact well with adults and kids!

March 31, 2010, 12:46:10 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Alfonso Todd III

I was a motivational and club dancer for years in Miami. I actually had 3 different agents. Go figure. You described the atmosphere perfectly, though, and brought back some great memories. I still hit the dance floor every weekend, but now I do it for free. (smile)

March 31, 2010, 12:37:17 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Inna

This is so funny!:) Thank you for posting the story.

March 30, 2010, 10:46:17 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Mark Cherney

I actually am a Mobile DJ company owner here in Orange COunty Ca (<http://www.musicmanevents.com>), working numerous Bar/Bat mitzvahs a year (after all I am jewish). I do not employ motivational dancer anymore and instead we looked to create something different. Instead we use guests at the event to be our motivational dancers. We recruit them during dinner. So we actually have had parent, grand parents, crazy uncles and even kid guests be our motivational dancers in exchange for gift cards, prizes and other fun things. Talk about creating some great memories for our clients!

So I know what you went through.. we put some of our guests through it every weekend :)

Thanks for the very entertaining article!

Mark Cherney
Owner
Music Man Event Professionals
Orange County, CA

March 30, 2010, 7:16:51 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



A'Isha Torrence

This article was hilarious. I've been to several Bar & Bat Mizvas. Emily described the atmpohe perfectly. Often I am the only, or one of two Gentiles in attendance. I can always be found starting a Soul Train line for older folks. I now feel that I was cheated out of my tips. I didn't realize I was providing an a la carte service.

March 30, 2010, 6:15:17 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Emily Yoffe

A'Isha, think of the Hora as a Soul Train line for Jews!

March 30, 2010, 6:22:50 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Kristen

So. I really enjoyed...BECAUSE I was actually a Bar Mitzva party starter for 6 years in college (and a little bit after). It was a wonderful job, really fun, well paying and a GREAT work out. Yes...all spandex and air humping 12 year olds were part of the gig but you learn quickly

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how to handle them and where to get slightly baggy spandex pants (yes, they're real!). You also become quite the expert on energy drinks. Besides being a great way to teach confidence, it really helped me develop some real skills I've been using in the workforce lately.

Now...I'm a Community Manager! I write a mean blog (<http://blog.fuzemeeting.com>) and manage the social media – using the honed powers of contagious enthusiasm to inspire community involvement! So...if you know any professional party starters out there...give them a high five and tell them that there are careers waiting for them!

March 30, 2010, 5:55:38 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Michelle Hawk Taylor

Great article! Should do these more often. Thanks for the chuckles.

March 30, 2010, 5:46:53 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Christina Caballero Aguilar

This article is classic! Being hispanic and growing up going to Quinceneras often, i can totally relate! Booze, cigarettes and cleavage----lol----LOVE IT!!!

March 30, 2010, 4:59:21 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Lars Cromander

The mere thought of being told by a 14-year old about the dos and dont's on the dance floor is simply hilarious. An altogether very amusing article, well done Yoffe!

March 28, 2010, 2:14:06 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Armando Stiletto

Emily, I don't often agree with "Prudence" but your Guinea Pig seduces me every time. You rock!!

March 25, 2010, 12:45:53 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Mike Walker Thorsvedt

I've not liked or enjoyed all of Ms. Yoffe's writing but she more than makes up for it with this article: it's a great piece and a really unique, cute, and touching one. I will share it with all my Jewish friends.

March 25, 2010, 3:49:50 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Brendan Murphy

Excellent article. Your self-deprecation is misplaced; you're still quite the babe.

March 25, 2010, 3:15:35 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Chris Blake

I love the Human Guinea Pig articles Emily, please keep them rolling. The only real flaw in them is they don't happen enough. Maybe you ought to consider doing a few big experiments and then putting them all out in a book. Maybe you consider something like Flight Attendant, or TSA screener, or some job on a Cruise Ship for future pieces.

March 24, 2010, 2:11:43 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Benjamin

Emily,

Thanks for the great piece. I was born in '82 and for me – "Cherish" by The Association beats "You're Beautiful" by a mile. Strangely enough both of those songs are about unrequited/unrealized love. Given its theme of requited/lasting love, I would think Kool and the Gang's "Cherish" would be pretty popular as a slow dance song. However, maybe people are turned off by the poor grammar. Also, I second the feelings of Jason who wants to see videos in the HGP columns.

March 24, 2010, 2:08:08 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Jason

I love these articles– you are very brave, not a hint of wallflower remains after this one, I am sure. A question, though– would you be so brave if this occasional series were on film, as it so clearly begs to be? Maybe not the nude art posing, but motivational dancing certainly would make for a fantastic media–jump to film. Just curious! Jason

March 24, 2010, 2:01:21 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)



Emily Yoffe

Thanks! Slate V has recorded a few adventures. But I just couldn't bring myself to ask any bar/bat mitzvah parents, "Is it okay if we make a video of an ancient fly girl at your child's party?"

March 24, 2010, 2:54:40 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

**Kim**

I shake it shamelessly at any wedding or party, no matter my daughter's humiliation. I recently got down in Old Navy when "Safety Dance" started up. Elaine Benes would be embarrassed. I can't believe I could have been getting paid all this time! DJ Doug, call me!
March 24, 2010, 1:49:19 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

**Jason Docheff**

I wish I could've had you as a dancer at my Bar Mitzvah! Jason Docheff
March 24, 2010, 10:28:27 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

**Jason**

I wish I could've had you as a dancer at my Bar Mitzvah! Jason Docheff
March 24, 2010, 9:18:57 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

**Honey Wheeler**

As always, fantastically written, heart warmingly funny and the reason I come back again agin to what you write.
March 23, 2010, 7:31:59 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)
Liked by Mujokan

**hubergal**

Emily, this piece confirms it—you are just adorable! You seem to be such a fun, good-natured and down-to-earth person. Good luck getting your daughter out on the dance floor with you.
Cheers!
March 23, 2010, 1:17:35 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)
Liked by Honey Wheeler

**R SUE**

The world's a little less lonely now for me now that I know i'm not the only one on the dance floor who knows who to pony like Boni-Maroni.

Which, by the way, is also why my husband refuses to dance with me.
March 23, 2010, 1:07:24 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

**John**

You must have been something before electricity.

(stolen from R. Dangerfield, *Caddyshack*)
March 23, 2010, 12:18:35 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

**Emily Yoffe**

Thanks! I'll never forget my excitement when they introduced the horseless carriage.
March 23, 2010, 12:27:05 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)
Liked by Demosthenes2

**David Plotz**

Emily--A question I forgot to ask you when I was editing this piece. Are the motivational dancers at Bar Mitzvahs usually Jewish? Is that a job requirement? Or is Jewishness irrelevant? Or somewhere in between?
March 23, 2010, 11:20:04 AM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

**Emily Yoffe**

Just as you the old advertisement said that you don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's, you don't have to be Jewish to be a motivational dancer at a bar mitzvah. It turns out the ones I danced with in the story were, but most of the dancers I've met are not. About the only advantage I can see from being Jewish is that you grew up knowing the Hora, but that's a dance that's easy to learn!
March 23, 2010, 12:13:03 PM EDT – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)

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