

Sean Averbach's bar

Sean Averbach is being called up to the Torah as a bar mitzva. It's Friday morning of Succot. Behind the tall, dark-haired, good looking teenager, through the panoramic windows of Jerusalem's Shimshon Center, thousands of modern-day pilgrims are streaming into Jaffa Gate as in days of yore.

It has been a morning of high emotion. "Blessed art Thou... who provides for all my needs. Blessed art Thou... who gives strength to the weary." "Blessed is He who redeems and rescues." Even the most familiar morning blessings feel weighted and emotional in this holiday morning service.

In the front row, wearing a suit and tie, sits Sean's father, Steve Averbach, 40. In his wheelchair.

SEAN WAS eight years old last time he rough-housed with his six-foot, brawny dad. That was May 17, 2003, a sunny day, when Steve, his wife Julie and their boys spent a glorious Shabbat at home in northern Jerusalem, playing Frisbee on the lawn. The following morning, Steve rose at 4:30 a.m. He put a few utility bills in his briefcase, and waited for the first morning No. 6 bus to go downtown. He had a busy day ahead and worried that he might forget to pay the bills.

Steve Averbach moved here as a teen, sowed some wild oats and then turned his restless energy into an asset as a fighter in the Golani Brigade. When he finished his army service, he became a firearms expert in the police, and opened a private academy for weapons training, teaching security guards and jittery citizens. In a November 2000 article in the on-line magazine Salon.com, a reporter quoted him as saying, "We're all moving targets."

Five other early-risers were also waiting at the bus stop by the time the number six pulled up. Steve let them get on first. The bus pulled away, but then the driver stopped suddenly for a late-comer running after them from the bushes. The young man was wearing black pants, a white shirt, and a black kippa. As he boarded, Steve noticed the man's unshaven cheeks and the bulges in his jacket. Steve knew instantly that this was not a religious Jew but a terrorist in disguise. He drew and cocked his gun, but the terrorist's finger was already on the bomb trigger.

Explosives packed with metal shrapnel tore through the bus. Seven people were murdered.

Later, it would be learned that Steve had caused the terrorist to explode prematurely. His goal was to wait until the morning bus was full to capacity and kill even more.

THE CONCUSSIVE wave of the blast savaged Steve's lungs. A single ball bearing lodged between T3 and T4 in his back, the critical vertebrae that control upper and lower body mobility.

The staff of the intensive care unit of Hadassah-University Medical Center, Ein Kerem - a mix of Jewish and Arab physicians and nurses - saved his life. Later he went to breathing school at Sheba Hospital in Tel Hashomer, to learn to breathe on his own and swallow. Despite constant care, there have been innumerable health crises to overcome

in the last five years Steve is a quadriplegic, only able to move his head and neck. At the beginning, when Steve learned he was paralyzed, he wanted to die.

Rabbi Adi Cohen from Brit Olam Congregation in Kiryat Ono helps Sean wrap himself in his prayer shawl. Sean says the blessing on the tallit, and recites the *shehecheyanu*, thanking God who "has kept us alive, sustained us and brought us to this season." Steve's wife Julie, petite and gorgeous, in a blue party dress, gets teary-eyed. It's impossible to imagine how tough these years have been for her. But when it's her turn to speak, she doesn't mention hardships, only the supreme pleasure of bringing up Sean. He's an exceptional teenager who has a sensitive heart to the suffering of others.

The bar mitzva boy was eight the last time he roughoused with his dad, Steve, who was left a quadriplegic after a suicide bombing in Jerusalem

She's flanked by Sean's brothers, her parents and Steve's family who have flown in from the US. Steve's parents, Dr. David and Maida Averbach - he a surgeon, she a surgical nurse. Julie called them on the day of the bombing from the intensive care unit with the terrible news together with social worker Barbara Chanoch. Chanoch has become part of this unusual family. She's at the bar mitzva service, too, her eyes wet, dabbing tears of joy as Sean reads from the Torah.

Both of Steve's parents have faced serious health problems over the last half decade. Nonetheless, Maida, walking now with two canes, has come to Israel nearly every month to help and to visit Steve's four sons. You have to

mitzva

wonder how a family can survive all this.

Steve's parents didn't like the intensive care beds and raised money for upgraded ones, not only for Steve, but for all the other patients.

THE GUESTS are an eclectic mix, every level of religious observance and from different stages of the family's life. Guest Rocky Muravitz – a middle-aged South African-born Israeli – talks about Tikvot, a non-profit organization he heads that provides rehabilitation for terror survivors through sports. Although he can't play sports himself, Steve has become the organization's spokesman, an articulate advocate for physically and emotionally challenged children and adults who can benefit from horseback riding lessons, sailing and even water skiing, activities where they can feel like winners. To raise funds and awareness of the challenges of those with disabilities, Steve speaks in Hebrew and English, in schools and to youth groups as well as making arduous trips abroad. Muravitz describes a particularly complicated journey to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Sean completes his reading, and covers himself as a barrage of toffees fly toward him.

Before the service moves to a close, Steve personally reads the prayer for the welfare of the Jewish state. "Bless Thou the State of Israel which marks the dawn of our deliverance. Shield it beneath the wings of Thy love. Spread over it Thy canopy of peace... O God, strengthen the defenders of our Holy Land"

The Brit Olam service has added the words of Isaiah to its version of Shai Agnon's prayer: "May nation not lift up sword against nation, and may we know war no more." Time for music and food.

And Steve – how's he feeling? "Relieved," he says. "I'm just glad everything went so smoothly." He's talked openly about his often-felt ambivalence about being alive. But today he feels none of it. "I'm happy to be here. Totally."

Sean glances outside at the Jerusalem walls. He has an unexpected request. On this special day, he feels the need to go to the Kotei with his special dad.