STANDING AT THE ALTAR:
RE-IMAGINING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAR/BAT MITZVAH

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Summary

This thesis consists of four chapters and studies lifecycle ritual and education where, perhaps, they intersect most – at Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Its goal is to re-conceptualize the transition that takes place at Bar/Bat Mitzvah, both for teenagers and their parents, and suggest a new educational context to capture the true significance of this lifecycle event.

The first chapter examines the historical development of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual, which, despite its deep entrenchment in modern Jewish practice, only dates back to the fourteenth-century. The second chapter considers Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the specific setting of Reform Judaism. This chapter examines the disparity between the movement's rabbinic leadership, who wished to eliminate Bar/Bat Mitzvah in favor of Confirmation, and it's laity, who continued to practice the ritual. The third chapter continues the theme of the second with a study of the meaning and significance modern Reform Jews associate with Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Significant attention is given to the transitions teenagers and families experience around Bar/Bat Mitzvah, including relevant issues of human development and family dynamics. Finally, the fourth chapter considers the implications this research holds for educational programs before, during, and after Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

The research for this thesis utilized ancient and modern Hebrew sources, Reform Responsa, surveys, and curricula. Secondary sources included studies in sociology, ritual, rites of passage, education, developmental theory, and family dynamics.

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Chapter One: The Development of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ritual

Arnold van Gennep wrote, "With as much attention as modern psychology gives to learning theory, it is surprising to find no evidence that careful examination has been made of the relation between critical periods in the life history and the learning process."[1] Among the rites of passage that give shape to the life of a Jew, Bar/Bat Mitzvah stands out as an exceptional ritual in which lifecycle and education converge. In the course of this study, we will examine the significance of this ritual and its transition, both for young adults and their families. Jews of all denominations have demonstrated a profound commitment to the ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, belying its relatively late origins. Analyzing this commitment and recognizing the meaning today's families find in the ritual can have a great impact on our educational programs before, during, and after Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

In the vernacular of most Jews (and even non-Jews) today, the term Bar Mitzvah has become synonymous with the public ceremony that occurs on a synagogue's bimah and the elaborate party that usually ensues. For example, one commonly hears statements such as, "I had my Bar Mitzvah last winter" or "We're off to my granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah next week." Those who are perhaps a bit more sensitive to a cultural or religious significance underlying the occasion have taken to pointing out that one *becomes* a Bar Mitzvah regardless of any ceremony or festive celebration. A boy becomes Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen and a girl at age twelve, these individuals point out, by virtue of their new statuses as adults within the Jewish community. While holding a

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[1] Van Gennep, Arnold. The Rites of Passage. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago (1960), p. xiv.

ceremony and celebration have become traditional means for commemorating the occasion, the term Bar Mitzvah refers to the individual and his new status, and the ritual is optional.

However, the meaning of the term is far more nuanced than even this more sophisticated understanding suggests and continues to change along with the evolution of the ritual itself. Even a simple translation of the term is difficult to achieve. Though only two words, the term combines two languages: Hebrew and Aramaic. Bar, the Aramaic equivalent of ben in Hebrew, is typically used to denote (a) son or (b) one who is included in a certain category. In this case, the category in which the boy is included is Mitzvah, Hebrew for commandment. Therefore, a Bar Mitzvah would be one who is obligated to perform mitzvot, the ritual obligations commanded of capable adult Jews. It logically follows, then, that a child who has not yet become Bar Mitzvah is not commanded to perform a certain set of rituals and, perhaps, may not even be allowed to do so. However, as we will see in a later discussion, this conclusion does not necessarily hold true.

Authors Yaakov Salomon and Yonah Weinrib suggest an alternative and notable interpretation of Bar Mitzvah by reading bar as a Hebrew word, rather than the Aramaic "son." In Genesis 42:45, we read:

ויצו וימלאו את-כליהם בר

"Then Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with *grain.*"

Just as seeds of grain require watering, weeding, and great care to grow, so too, a Bar Mitzvah needs instruction and guidance in the mitzvot in order to blossom into an adult in his community. "He is a product of his parents, his surroundings, his education, his

upbringing. He is literally bar mitzvah, 'the product of the commandments,' as the commandments have been practiced by those who nurtured him and as he has been raised to love and perform them."[2] As we will see throughout this paper, the discussion that connects Bar Mitzvah to education, whether as the beginning or culmination of instruction, continues to this day.

The first occurrence of the term Bar Mitzvah appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 96a.

> ר' יוחנן אומר מצינו בכל מקום ששלוחו של אדם כמותו. ...
> הני מילי שליח דבר מצוה הוא אבל עבד דלאן בר מצוה לא.
>
> R. Yochanan said: We find in every case that a man's messenger [is considered] like [the man] himself. [However,] this statement applies only to a messenger who is bar mitzvah, a servant who is not bar mitzvah is not [considered like the man himself].

Here, Bar Mitzvah simply refers to any grown Israelite; a man responsible for the commandments. Neither the Talmud nor the Geonim knew of the term Bar Mitzvah in connection with any institution, ceremony, or ritual, whether formal or informal. Similarly, R. Isaac Alfasi and Maimonides appear ignorant of such an association with Bar Mitzvah.[3]

Sanhedrin 84b explains Bar Mitzvah as we did earlier: one who is obligated to perform mitzvot. This status is contrasted with that of a minor, one who is not obligated to do so. In the absence of other distinguishing factors, it would seem that the distinction

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[2] Salomon, Yaakov and Yonah Weinrib. Bar Mitzvah: Its observance and significance. Mesorah Publications, Ltd.: Brooklyn, NY (1991), p. 23.

[3] Wice, David H. Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation in the Light of History and Religious Practice. Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: Cincinnati (1933), p. 27. For instance, while Maimonides goes in depth in Mishnah Torah, Ishut as to the necessary signs for maturity at age thirteen (see page 7), he never uses the term Bar Mitzvah.

between minors and those who are Bar Mitzvah is somehow a function of maturity. Whether maturity is determined simply by age, or by some physical or intellectual demonstration, remains unclear at this point. Indeed, several other terms used to distinguish minors from those who have reached the age of majority employ a variety of criteria:[4]

- Katan/Gadol — Yoma 43a, for example, tells us that a gadol has da'at ("wisdom"), whereas a Katan does not.
- Bar or Ben Da'at — A similar distinction in title based on one's level of wisdom.
- Bar Onshin — One who is now liable to receive punishment on account of his actions.
- Min Ha-Minyan — A term, used in Italian communities, meaning one who has reached the age of being counted in a minyan.[5]
- Ha-Bakhur Ha-Bar Mitzvah — A title bestowed upon a boy when he is called to the Torah for the first time, coming from the liturgical phrase: ha-Bokheir b'amo Yisrael ("The One who chooses His people Israel").[6]
- Chatan Ha-Bar Mitzvah — A term which draws a similarity between a Bar Mitzvah and a groom on his wedding day.

Bar Mitzvah as an institution associated with a communal ritual and celebration really dates back only to the fourteenth-century, though some of its roots can be traced earlier.[7] By this point, Bar Mitzvah means a boy who has come of the age where he is permitted to perform the rituals incumbent upon an adult Jewish male, age thirteen. However, prior to the thirteenth-century, we find abundant textual evidence that there was no minimum prerequisite age required for performing a wide variety of mitzvot. Indeed, age thirteen had very little bearing upon when a boy might begin to wear a tallit

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[4] Salomon and Winrib, pp. 37-9.
[5] Rivkind, Isaac. לאות ולזכרון: תולדות בר מצוה. Shulsinger Bros. Linotyping & Publishing Co.: New York (1942), p. 26.
[6] Magen Avraham, 225:4.
[7] Rivkind, pp. 13-4.

or wrap tefillin. "[This] permissive view was an extension of the general practice that fathers should accustom their sons to behave like adult Jews as soon as they were ready and not at a specific age."[8] Therefore, any ages specified by the texts should be read merely as guidelines rather than hard and fast rules.[9]

Sukkah 42a-b demonstrates very clearly that a minor, in theory, could perform nearly any ritual. (Given that there are such lengthy theoretical discussions regarding what a minor could and could not do, we can reasonably conclude that minors were in fact performing these rituals in practice, as well.) According to these passages, a minor may wave the lulav, wear tzitzit, wrap tefillin, learn Torah, and recite the Shema, provided he proves intellectually capable of knowing how to do so properly. For instance, the text tells us, there are very specific rules regarding the types of activities in which one may not engage while wearing tefillin. Negatively speaking, going to the bathroom and passing gas, it seems, were of primary concern to the Rabbis. A boy who may inadvertently leave his tefillin on while going to bathroom or, worse yet, not be able to control his need to relieve himself, would be deemed too young to engage in the practice of wearing tefillin. Arnold Van Gennep writes that in North America, as in other cultures, "the sacra are unveiled to the novices.... Furthermore, it is the privilege of the initiated to manipulate the sacra according to precise rules without danger from the

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[8] Marcus, Ivan G. Rituals of Childhood: Jewish acculturation in medieval Europe. Yale University Press: New Haven and London (1996), p. 119.

[9] Training one's child to perform mitzvot "in the manner he will have to fulfill [them] as an adult" was considered one of the obligations incumbent upon a father. (B. Sukkah 42a-b. Artscroll, Vol. 7:2 [1990], footnotes #27, 31.) This responsibility vis-à-vis one's son is among those enumerated at the child's bris:

כשם שנכנס לברית, כן יכנס לתורה, לחפה, ולמעשים טובים.

"As [this boy] has been entered into the covenant, so too shall he be entered into Torah [i.e., educated in the mitzvot], the wedding canopy, and good deeds." Only later did it become customary for a father to fulfill this mitzvah by sending his son to a school for instruction.

supernatural."[10] Consider the comparison to be made to reserving tallit, tefillin, and other sacra for mature Jews. Reserving such rituals could serve to protect against a superstitious belief that if one uses or "manipulates" these ritual objects improperly, such as wearing tefillin while going to the bathroom, one risks danger from the supernatural. At the very least, the child would risk such danger, at the most, the entire community would.

Presumably, according to this same passage in Tractate Sukkah, a minor may also perform "priestly rituals" for the community, such as slaughtering an animal or reciting Birkat Kohanim. These activities are particularly notable as, through them, a minor is responsible for mitzvot incumbent upon others—the adults of the community. For this reason, responsibility for others as well as oneself, there is some dispute as to whether or not an adult needs to supervise. However, the concern does not hinge upon intellectual maturity, but physical ability—i.e., is the child physically capable of performing the act? As Rashi explains, does the child have enough dexterity and skill, with regard to precision, to be able to execute the slaughter properly? Rav Huna is among those who require adult supervision so as to be safe.

Yet despite these many discussions of the rituals a minor can perform, even those on behalf of the community, the most telling reflection of the inclusive rabbinic position regarding the involvement of children pertains to the paschal lamb. Pesachim 61a tells us: "Only those who are registered in advance on a particular pesach offering may partake of its meat,"[11] and our same text in tractate Sukkah makes it clear that minors may be included in this pre-registered group. A child must pass a test of discernment,

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[10] Van Gennep, p. 79.
[11] Artscroll note to Sukkah 42b, #9.

thus proving his intellectual ability to his elders, before he is eligible for registration on a particular paschal lamb. However, once the community is satisfied regarding his intelligence, he may partake of the paschal lamb right alongside the others. With respect to the paschal lamb, the rabbis counted a minor as a member in a group of adults.

Of course, there are several difficulties with a societal structure based solely on intellectual maturation. What types of tests will be used to judge intellectual maturity? Who will administer them? What if a minor knows enough about the laws of birkat kohanim or tallit, but not enough about lulav or tefillin? May he perform all of the rituals or only those for which he has proven a sufficient mastery? Is he *required* to perform any of them? An additional difficulty arises when a minor performs rituals publicly as opposed to privately. How is everyone in the community to know that he is indeed intellectually capable of that which he is observed doing? Or perhaps the community will mistakenly conclude that the individual has reached puberty and is in fact no longer a minor.

Yet, systems based on physiological maturation are equally problematic, if not more so. In his Mishneh Torah, Ishut 2:10, Maimonides delineates the following parameters:

> הבן משיולד עד שיהיה בן שלש עשרה שנה -- נקרא קטן, ונקרא תינוק. ואפלו הביא כמה שערות בתוך הזמן הזה -- אינו סימן, אלא שומא. הביא שתי שערות למטה במקומות הידועות לשער, והוא מבן שלש עשרה שנה ויום אחד ומעלה -- נקרא גדול, ונקרא איש.
>
> A male, from the time he is born until he is thirteen years old, is called a katan ("minor") or a tinok ("baby"). Even if several [pubic] hairs appear during this time, they do not mean anything, but are [considered as if they were hairs growing from] a mole. If, however, two hairs appear down in the pubic area, and he is at

> least thirteen years and one day old, then he is called a gadol ("adult") or an ish ("man").

Preceding paragraphs in the Mishneh Torah outline similar demonstrations of physical maturity for a girl at the age of twelve years and one day.[12] Subsequent paragraphs discuss what happens if a male never does grow two pubic (or beard) hairs: If he shows demonstrations of impotency (and these signs are also painstakingly outlined), then we declare him a gadol or ish at thirty days shy of age twenty.[13] If he does not show signs of impotency, then at age thirty-five and one day we nevertheless declare him impotent and therefore a gadol or ish.

As Maimonides realized, a system of advancement based on puberty, or physiological changes, must contend with the fact that everyone's body changes differently. The ways in which one's physiology can develop, and the rate and time at which it will do so, are infinite. As Arnold Van Gennep states, "Variations are so great that one cannot conceive of any institution being founded on an element as undeterminable and as irregular as puberty."[14] Maimonides' processes of examination are undeniably invasive, as well as overly complicated. They do not allow for a quick assessment of one's status in the case where one needs a messenger or to count a minyan. Puberty is simply untenable as the sole factor in determining adulthood.

Furthermore, a societal system of maturation based on puberty also contradicts the gendered-hierarchical structure of that society. Prior to the twentieth-century, *boys* were

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[12] Ishut, 2:1.
[13] Maimonides enumerates the sings of impotency, including: lacking a beard or adequate hair growth; urine which does not produce a vapor, flow in an ark, or ferment; off-color semen; skin which does not produce steam when washed in the winter; and a high-pitched voice, indistinguishable from that of a woman. (Mishneh Torah, Ishut 2:13)
[14] Van Gennep, p. 66.

the only ones who stood to gain through their initiation rite. Increased formal responsibility and stature awaited only the males when they were determined to be adults. Yet, if initiation rites were based on physical puberty, a ceremony for girls should be at least as prominent, if not more so, than one for boys. Ruth Benedict observed this contradiction across cultures: "If cultural emphasis followed the physiological emphasis, girls' ceremonies would be more marked than boys; but it is not so." Therefore, she concludes, ceremonies of initiation into the adult community emphasize a social fact rather than a physical one: "The adult prerogatives of men are more far-reaching in every culture than women's" and consequently it is far more common for societies to take note of a boy's maturation than a girl's.[15]

Yet, even if puberty does not determine one's elevation to adulthood within society, neither is it irrelevant. The changes that happen to one's body in the vicinity of an initiation rite are substantial and traumatic. "Rites and ceremonies help to 'cushion' the trauma of profound change ... through social regularization of individual changes."[16] When rituals take place at "social puberty," we de-emphasize the variety in personal growth and focus instead upon the common elements of maturity. Everyone is eligible to attain social puberty at a certain arbitrary age, established and set by society.

If one were to determine this age of maturity based upon the Hebrew Bible, then it would seem the appropriate age is twenty:[17]

> "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record

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[15] Spiro, Jack D. "The Educational Significance of the Bar Mitzvah Initiation," Religious Education, July-August 1997 (located on the third floor of the HUC-JIR library, NY – Lifecycle: Bar Mitzvah #10), pp. 386-7.
[16] Ibid, p. 386.
[17] JPS translations.

> them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms." (Numbers 1:2-3)
>
> "Of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have muttered against Me, not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you—save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun." (Numbers 14:29-30)
>
> "When anyone explicitly vows to the Lord the equivalent for a human being, the following scale shall apply: If it is a male from twenty to sixty years of age, the equivalent is fifty shekels of silver by the sanctuary weight; if it is a female, the equivalent is thirty shekels. If the age is from five years to twenty years, the equivalent is twenty shekels for a male and ten shekels for a female." (Leviticus 27:2-5)

Clearly the Bible makes a distinction between those who are at least twenty years of age and those who are not. However, as we know, the rabbis fail to designate twenty as the age of Bar Mitzvah, preferring thirteen. Isolated texts make rudimentary attempts to harmonize the discrepancy between these two ages. Tanhuma, Korakh 3, for instance, states: "The beit din above punishes only from twenty years and upward, while the beit din on earth punishes from thirteen years."[18] Yet it is clear that twenty and thirteen represent two systems of recognizing a social attainment of adulthood.

Several factors may explain the eventual determination of age thirteen for a rite of initiation. First, in the Bible, as we see in the passages from Numbers, maturity was a function of one's ability to bear arms. One needed physical prowess to perform this function and, therefore, an older age would be preferable. However, as society shifted from a militaristic to theocratic state, so too did its definition of maturity and perhaps one need not wait so long to achieve the status of adulthood. Second, as we discussed earlier, if not solely determined by physical maturity, initiation rites do maintain a strong connection to physiological changes. Despite the great variety in personal changes, age

[18] Wice, p. 16. Rashi seconds this explanation in his commentary to Numbers 16:27.

thirteen remains a closer approximation of puberty than twenty. Third, other groups and cultures emphasized the notion of "pubertas" and specifically the age thirteen. Later we will see that the importance of this age in the Catholic Church, for example, had great influence upon the Jewish ritual of Bar Mitzvah.

However, one can also find strong support for the importance of age thirteen, and indeed the number itself, in our texts. The most common example is drawn from Mishnah Avot 5:1:

> [Judah ben Tema] used to say:
> At five years—the age is reached for the study of Bible,
> At ten—for the study of Mishnah,
> At thirteen—for the fulfillment of the commandments,
> At fifteen—for the study of Talmud,
> At eighteen—for marriage,
> At twenty—for seeking a livelihood,
> At thirty—for strength,
> At forty—for understanding,
> At fifty—for giving counsel;
> At sixty—a man attains old age,
> At seventy—fulfillment/satisfaction,
> At eighty—might;
> At ninety—he is bending over the grave;
> At one hundred—he is as if he were already dead and had passed away from the world.[19]

Following the example of this text, Samuel ha-Katan states that a boy is responsible at age thirteen because he has reached puberty and is therefore called ish.[20] The scriptural proof for this statement comes from Genesis 34:25, where Simeon and Levi avenge

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[19] Marcus claims that this text is a pseudo-mishnaic passage appended to Mishnah Avot some time in the Middle Ages and was not yet part of the Mishnah when the Babylonian Talmud was redacted (c. 500 CE). B. Baba Batra does not mention this text in its discussion regarding the age when a boy should begin his studies, nor does Avot de-Rabbi Natan, the first commentary on Mishnah Avot. Marcus concludes only that the passage was added by the 12th-century.

[20] Quoted in Machzor Vitry to Mishnah Avot 5:24, p. 549ff. (Wice, p. 15)

Dinah's rape and the Torah calls them each ish. Commentators explain[21] that Levi, the younger brother, had just turned thirteen. The Rabbis identify thirteen as the age of other biblical characters at critical stages of their lives, as well. Isaac, some explain, was thirteen when Abraham held a feast on the day he was weaned.[22] (Genesis 21:8) Others say thirteen was Isaac's age at the time of the Akeidah. (Genesis 22) Sanhedrin 69b claims Bezalel was thirteen at the time of the construction of the Tabernacle. (Exodus 31:3 and 36:4)

Judaism is filled with significant numbers, such as seven and ten, and the number thirteen, independent of age, occurs with great frequency, as well. Salomon and Weinrib note the following occurrences, among others:[23]

- Thirteen attributes of God's mercy (Rosh Hashanah 17b)
- Thirteen hermeneutic principles for elucidating the Torah (formulated by R. Yishmael)[24]
- Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith
- Nedarim 31b lists thirteen covenants based upon thirteen occurrences of the word b'rit when circumcision is introduced in Genesis 17
- Thirteen knots and strings in tzitzit (Rashi, Numbers 15:3)
- Jacob's thirteen children
- God's name is mentioned thirteen times in Deuteronomy 26:1-10 describing the offerings of first fruits
- The omer had to be sifted thirteen times

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[21] Midrash Shmuel and Rashi (in Nazir 29a and Avot).
[22] Bereishit Rabbah 53:10.
[23] Salomon and Weinrib, pp. 47-50.
[24] Listed at the end of Shacharit services.

- Thirteen utensils in beit ha-mikdash (M. Shekalim 6:3)

Certainly it is no coincidence that age thirteen appears, and gains significance, throughout the texts—later to be established as the age of Bar Mitzvah.

Numerous texts explain the new responsibilities which accompany an elevation of status for a boy at age thirteen. For instance, a previously unredeemed firstborn boy—whether an orphan or a child whose father had simply neglected to perform pidyon ha-ben ("redemption of the firstborn")—is obligated to perform his own pidyon ha-ben at age thirteen. We will discuss other rituals connected with the rite of Bar Mitzvah later. Ibn Ezra, however, makes perhaps the greatest admission of a boy's new level of responsibility when he states that one becomes subject to the death penalty at age thirteen.[25] For, at this age, a child should have sufficient wisdom and discernment to know the difference between right and wrong and is therefore responsible for his actions. Rabbi Natan uses yetzer ha-ra ("the evil inclination") and yetzer ha-tov ("the good inclination") to explain a child's capacity for moral decision-making. A child, he explains, is born with yetzer ha-ra—it develops with him in the womb and continues to grow throughout his childhood. Yetzer ha-tov only joins him and begins to grow when the child reaches thirteen. Therefore, at thirteen, we now hold a child responsible for his actions, as yetzer ha-tov should guide him along the right path and sinful actions represent an error in judgment.[26]

This association of maturity with wisdom and judgment (which we see here in the discussion of yetzer ha-tov/yetzer ha-ra and we saw earlier in the terms used to distinguish minors from adults) separates boys and girls, as well as minors and adults.

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[25] Comment on Leviticus 20:7.
[26] Avot d'Rabbi Natan, 16:2-3.

Niddah 45b explains that we consider girls adults at age twelve and one day and cites the following proof text:

> וַיִּבֶן יהוה אלהים את-הצלע אשר-לקח מן-האדם לאשה ויבאה אל-האדם.
>
> And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. (Genesis 2:22)

The Talmud interprets this verse to mean that women have more understanding and wisdom (binah) than men, and therefore mature earlier. And indeed the Rabbis establish an earlier age of maturity for girls than boys. Teshuvot Ha-Rosh 16:1 specifies that a girl becomes an adult at age twelve, while a boy only becomes an adult at age thirteen.

The point is, however, that despite the preoccupation with maturity in the texts, and despite extensive efforts to differentiate the responsibilities incumbent upon adults from those available to minors, no actual ritual existed in late antiquity to mark this transition into religious majority. As we saw, the first initiation ceremonies as such emerged in the fourteenth-century. Moreover, these took place publicly in the synagogue. During the span of time between late antiquity and the Middle Ages, several rituals were shifting away from the private to the public domain. Ceremonies, which had at one time been performed privately in the home, were now expanding to become "shared public celebrations."[27] For example, rabbinic sources describe circumcision as taking place in the home during late antiquity. However, during the Middle Ages, Jews most commonly observed the ritual of circumcision in the synagogue. Similarly, Jews came to share the joys of wedding celebrations and the grief of mourning with the community, as these observances also made their way from the home to public spaces.[28]

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[27] Marcus, p. 13.
[28] Ibid, p. 106.

In Talmudic times, as we saw, there was no need for a public ceremony to mark the beginning of a child's education or his attainment of the age of religious majority. A father simply began to instruct his son in the laws of ritual practice when he was intellectually capable of learning them. However, following this "shift from domestic to more formal public events" in the Middle Ages, the informal beginning of a child's education evolves into a full-fledged public initiation ceremony. A school initiation rite, developed in medieval Ashkenaz, occurred at an age much younger than thirteen, typically age five or six.[29] However, according to Ivan Marcus, this highly formalized ritual produced the seeds for the later Bar Mitzvah rite, which would eventually commemorate a child's transition into responsibility at age thirteen.

The school initiation rite took place in a public ceremony on the festival of Shavuot and involved several symbols to mark a child's transition into formal schooling. A child received edible incentives, in the form of nuts, figs, and candy, along with his first primer. Maimonides articulated the rationale for these sweet treats: "Then he will study hard, not for the sake of studying, since he does not know its value, but in order ... to get something that he does desire—a nut or a piece of candy."[30]

The primer he received typically contained the following:[31]

- The Alphabet, listed from aleph to tav, tav to aleph, and in the atbash system of symmetrical alphabetical pairings.

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[29] Marcus, p. 1.
[30] Excerpted from Maimonides' Mishnah Torah (Marcus, pp. 18-19).
[31] Marcus, pp. 35-41.

- Deuteronomy 33:4, "When Moses charged us with the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob." This verse was used to substantiate both the Written and Oral Torahs, as well the imperative that every Jew should study Torah.
- Leviticus 1:1. A child's study in Torah began with the book of Leviticus rather than Genesis for several reasons. (Of course, we do not know whether the reasons are ex post facto or not.) First, children are pure and it is therefore appropriate for them to learn the laws of purity. Second, in ancient times, literacy was a skill of the priestly elite and the children of priests were probably the only ones taught to read the Torah; learning the Levitical laws of priesthood follows this ancient custom. Finally, the natural place to begin, at the beginning of Genesis, was considered mystical and inappropriate for study until one was older and wiser.
- The Talmudic quotation, "May the Torah be my occupation."

Children would study these passages using several mnemonic techniques. Following the repetition method of the Greeks and Romans, students would engage in extensive repetition using simanim, mnemonic acronyms and abbreviations created by the Rabbis and their teachers.[32] Often, teachers would instruct their students to employ other mnemonic gestures, such as singing or chanting texts or accompanying their studies with movements of the body. Teachers strongly emphasized such motion, whether of the entire body or just the mouth (i.e., while singing). "Forgetting what one had studied is attributed to studying silently (shoneh be-lachash); moving the entire body will enhance one's memory."[33]

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[32] Ibid, p. 47.
[33] Ibid, p. 72.

In addition to the use of symbolic foods and the primer, a boy was wrapped in a tallit during the school initiation rite.

> In the ritual, the child's being wrapped in a coat or tallit not only serves the function of protecting him from liminal danger but also symbolizes the tomb of his 'dead' first stage of childhood and the womb of his 'rebirth' as a schoolboy.[34] Being wrapped is also a sign of his return to symbolic infancy, as may be seen in numerous manuscript illuminations depicting medieval infants wrapped as if in cocoons, a practice found in other cultural initiations as well, [35] [such as those practiced by the Zuñi of New Mexico].[36]

Once wrapped in the tallit, family and neighbors then escorted the boy to the synagogue. Such a processional naturally likens the child to a Torah scroll, which is similarly wrapped and escorted when carried from place to place.

We can still find small traces of this school initiation rite in Jewish practice today. Though the modern ceremony of Consecration, which welcomes small children into the ranks of synagogue religious schools, typically takes place on Simchat Torah or during Sukkot (better situated as they are for the start of the school year in the fall), children might receive candy as a symbol of our hope that their learning will always be sweet. And the festival of Shavuot maintains its association with learning by serving as the locus for the graduation ceremonies of Confirmation. Yet, for the most part, the school initiation rite virtually disappeared and the new ritual of Bar Mitzvah emerged in the late Middle Ages to take its place.

A cultural transformation began to change the face of the general European society in the late eleventh-century and intensified through the early thirteenth-century. These changes saw a more urbanized, institutionally diversified, and physically rooted

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[34] Similar imagery is in play when a groom stands before the altar and his bride, clothed in the white shroud of a kittel.
[35] Marcus, p. 77.
[36] Van Gennep, pp. 77-8.

culture. As a result, the population of towns increased, demanding the expansion of town walls. Agriculture benefited from vast technological improvements, thus increasing trade and commerce. University life began and subsequently flourished, yielding a "new sensibility based on human reason and consent rather than miraculous act, on individual choice instead of custom. The belief in miracles and authority continued, but was now modulated by the increasing self-awareness that human reasoning and decision-making could make a difference."[37] In both the Jewish and Christian cultures, a new attitude toward children and adulthood emerged. "Both cultures were reexamining older practices and assumptions about children, the stages of childhood, and the age of religious majority."[38]

A rise in birthrate resulted in more sons within the household and this new society faced a new and pressing question: What are men who are not situated to inherit the land supposed to do with themselves? The Crusades, which had so willingly accepted, even demanded new members, were over. However, the church and monastic order were rapidly expanding, invested with the great responsibility of keeping the morality of an increasingly urban, wealthy, and educated society in check. So parents sent their sons, at a younger and younger age, to join the priesthood and monasteries, forcing the latter to face yet another question: At what age is one realistically fit to be a priest?[39]

Child oblation, the donation of small children to monasteries, seems to be modeled on the biblical story of Hannah and her son Samuel.[40] At a very young age, the text tells us, once he was weaned, Hannah offered Samuel to the service of Eli, the priest.

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[37] Ibid, p. 103.
[38] Ibid, p. 102-3.
[39] Class notes from Lifecycle Liturgy (Spring 2002), Dr. Lawrence Hoffman.
[40] I Samuel 1:1-2:10.

Parents therefore regularly sent their children away for a religious life in the priesthood or monastic order at age ten or eleven. Thomas Aquinas, a proponent for the legal change of this practice, was himself an oblate age six.[41] Sometime before 1115 CE, the house of Cîteaux ruled that oblation could only occur for children who had reached the age of twelve. The age was further delayed by the thirteenth-century to twelve for girls and fourteen for boys.[42] As human reason gained prominence and value within the society, so too did choice. This concern for consent and decision-making extended to children as well as adults, particularly when it pertained to a life of full religious responsibility.

Jews, too, now had to take a close look at their own practices regarding the incorporation of children into a life of adult religious responsibility. Perhaps it was inappropriate for children to engage in the same activities as adults, especially in the realm of ritual. A church law, passed in the thirteenth-century, to prevent children from mistreating and desecrating the Host is reminiscent of the rabbinic concern for a child's inappropriate behavior while wearing tefillin. It appears that in the thirteenth-century, under the influence of changing church practice, these concerns regarding the involvement of children in religious life began to dominate.

> Whereas the Talmud and early Ashkenazic custom permitted a boy well before the rabbinic age of religious majority to observe many adult religious rites, later Ashkenazic authorities objected to this practice. They insisted that full participation in adult religious life should wait until age thirteen or even until physical signs of puberty appeared. They insisted that children act like children, not little adults, as they had in the school initiation ceremony.[43]

Children were allowed to spend their childhoods as children and gain exposure to the religious life before committing themselves to it.

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[41] Marcus, p. 117.
[42] Ibid, p. 17.
[43] Ibid, p. 17.

Yet an important distinction separated Jewish practice regarding religious majority from that of the Christian community. For Christians, joining the priesthood was a choice, whether of a child or his parents. Pledging to live a religious life required an important decision, distinct changes in practice, often leaving one's home. Jews, however, are a nation of priests, and though some are more observant than others, Judaism expects everyone to commit to a Jewish religious life. Not every Christian child had to go to a monastery, but every Jew was expected to live a life of mitzvot. As Jews followed the lead of their Christian neighbors in delaying the age of religious majority, so too did they need public demonstrative rituals to commemorate the transition which occurred at that age. The school initiation rite failed to meet these needs as children began their schooling long before the age of thirteen. Additionally, nothing in the school initiation rite spoke to the significant change in a young man's status.

In order to emphasize the distinction between male children and adults, and in order to ensure that the age of thirteen and a day meant something in practice as well as in theory, rituals once made available by the Rabbis to young children were gradually reserved solely for adults. "Only then [at age thirteen] and not before could males put on tefillin, get called up to the Torah in the synagogue for the first time, and be counted in a minyan."[44] The initial emphasis of religious leaders, particularly in medieval Germany, served to forbid these practices to children under the age of thirteen. By the fourteenth-century, however, the focus had shifted to age thirteen, itself, and a young man's voluntary acceptance of religious responsibility. A public celebration evolved encapsulating the rituals of tefillin and Torah, the boy performing each for the first time.

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[44] Ibid, p. 123.

Parents made a festive meal for the community, and the boy demonstrated his learning by delivering a d'rash, an exposition of a biblical or talmudic passage. These customs, originating in Germany, spread to Poland, Renaissance Italy, and Provence and, by the fifteenth- or sixteenth-century, this rite constituted the occasion on which a boy was said to "become Bar Mitzvah."[45] Let us now discuss each component of this rite separately.

Tefillin

Rebbe Shalom of Belz (1779-1855), in Ta'amei HaMinhagim,[46] explained that the first performance of a ritual carries with it inspiration and supreme love. Therefore, ideally, the first time a boy wraps tefillin should be one day after his thirteenth birthday, when the ritual is incumbent upon him and he can fulfill the mitzvah.[47] However, a tremendous number of regulations accompany the ritual and can require an extensive period of time to master – how many times the straps should be wrapped, where the boxes should rest, which one should go on first, which hand should be used, what b'rakhot ("blessings") should be recited and when. For this reason, wrapping tefillin was one of the last rituals to be reserved until a boy turned thirteen, a custom recognized universally in Germany and Poland only in the sixteenth-century.[48] Several Jewish communities still permit a boy to practice the ritual of tefillin prior to his thirteenth birthday, with customs ranging anywhere from one day prior to his Bar Mitzvah to two or three years. However, most will still reserve the accompanying blessing until he is thirteen and performing the ritual in fulfillment of a mitzvah.

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[45] Ibid, pp. 17, 124.
[46] Vol. 3, p. 12
[47] Salomon and Weinrib, p. 110.
[48] Wice. Interestingly, one source from 15th-century Poland wished to reserve the ritual until after one was married due to the impure thoughts which might consume an unmarried man while he wore tefillin.

Reading Torah/Haftarah

As early as the end of the fourteenth-century in Germany, a boy's thirteenth birthday was already associated with his reading from the Torah for the first time. Thus, through the collective symbol of Torah, his personal moment of transition was co-opted for the public sphere and shared with the community. According to Marcus, the addition of collective symbols allowed initiation rites to operate "on two social and cultural levels. They continued to be opportunities for the individual to enter a new phase of community membership.... And the community also celebrated and affirmed its collective identity even as it welcomed the individual into its ranks."[49] We will continue to discuss the role of Bar Mitzvah for the community later, as well as that larger group's role in the ritual itself.

The background for all of this is Megillah 23a. After a discussion of *how many* readers are called to the Torah on various occasions, our source addresses *who* may be called. It is apparently a baraita so it may be dated prior to 200 CE.

ת"ר: הכל עולין למנין שבעה - ואפילו קטן ואפילו אשה.
אבל אמרו חכמים: אשה לא תקרא בתורה, מפני כבוד צבור.

> Our rabbis taught: Everyone may be called to the Torah for the seventh reading – even a minor or a woman. However, the sages said: A woman may not be called to the Torah, on account of the honor of the community.

Though the sources cited in this text disagree with respect to the permissibility of calling a woman to the Torah, they agree that a minor may be called for the seventh aliyah. As we learn earlier in the text, we only have seven readers on Shabbat, yet it remains unclear if a minor may read the last aliyah on other occasions, as well. Mishnah Berurah 282:1 eliminates this possibility, stating a minor may only read from the Torah on Shabbat. In

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[49] Marcus, p. 106.

France, where the honor of reading from the Torah was reserved until the age of thirteen, minors were called to read from the Torah on Simchat Torah in a tradition known as aliyat banim ("the children's aliyah").[50]

However, as the text of Megillah 23a continues, our sources disagree as to whether the final reading, the maftir, should be counted as one of the seven Torah readings or as an additional eighth. Proponents of the latter position claim that the maftir reader is really called to read Haftarah, and only out of respect for the Torah does he read a section of the week's parasha first. Calling a minor to read Haftarah, with or without an accompanying bit of Torah, parallels the custom in Morocco where boys as young as seven or eight years old may be called up to read Haftarah.[51] Mishnah Berurah 282:12 tells us, in most communities, the Bar Mitzvah is called to the Torah for the maftir reading. However, in some communities, any aliyah *except* for maftir is reserved for the Bar Mitzvah, as any boy is capable of reading that portion and a maftir ritual would lack the symbolic significance of a special practice accompanying the child's new status.

Barukh She-p'tarani

In the thirteenth-century, Orchot Chayyim, harking back to Yehudai Gaon in the eighth-century, cites the following blessing:

ברוך שֶׁפְּטרני מעונשו של זה.

"Blessed is the One who has released me from his [the son's] punishment."

Orchot Chayyim appears uncertain of the occasion on which this blessing was recited. Yehudai Gaon recited the blessing the first time his son was called to read Torah, though

[50] Wice, p. 30.
[51] Salomon and Weinrib, p. 116.

we do not know how old his son was at the time. Bereshit Rabbah 63:10 might suggest that a father recite this blessing upon his son's thirteenth birthday:

> "And the boys [Jacob and Esau] grew up." (Genesis 25:27) R. Pinchas said in the name of R. Levi: They were like a myrtle and rosebush that grew side by side with one another. When they have grown and blossomed, one becomes fragrant and the other produces thorns. Thus, for thirteen years, the two of them [Jacob and Esau] went to the house of study and the two of them returned home. Once they turned thirteen years old, only one went to houses of study, while the other went to places of idolatry. R. Elazar b. R. Shimon said: One needs to take care of his son for thirteen years. From that point forward he needs to say: "Blessed is the One who freed me from the punishment of this one [my son]."

This text, from the fifth-century, questions what kind of control a parent truly has over his children. It seems to suggest that at a certain point a parent must acknowledge that he, in fact, has very little. Note here, however, that the turning point occurs after thirteen years of school, presumably a longer period of time than thirteen years of life. In any case, the moral of this story becomes that one must care for his children for thirteen years, and then recite the Barukh She-p'tarani blessing.

Leopold Löw[52] (1811-1875) disagreed with this conclusion:

> The Midrash does not think of a benediction, and indeed could not think of such a thing according to the ritual of the time. The misunderstanding can be attributed only to the degenerate state of Talmudic learning among German Jews in the 14th-century. In the 16th-century, the benediction itself was dispensed with in accord with Talmudic legitimation, and its character as a benediction was stripped. The Sephardim give no place to this benediction in their liturgy.[53]

Löw refers to the textual discussion regarding the formulation of the blessing. As the wording appeared in Orchot Chayyim, it did not include Shem u-Malkhut ("God's name and sovereignty"), referring to the standard prayer formula: "Blessed are You, God, Sovereign of the Universe...." The debate continued for quite some time. A modern

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[52] Löw was the first to write at length on the subject of Bar Mitzvah. (Rivkind, p. 13)
[53] Translated from the original German by Wice, p. 33.

Israeli responsum from the 1980s revisited the question yet again. The author, Harav Yitzhak Nissim, notes that neither the Tur, Shulkhan Arukh, nor any of the Rishonim mention the blessing. Israel Isserlein (1390-1460), the author of T'rumat Ha-Deshen, adds Shem u-Malkhut to the blessing, but does so in Aramaic to avoid the possibility of violating a perceived prohibition. The responsum cites two reasons to add Shem u-Malkhut: namely (1) the prayer is labeled a b'rakhah and (2) Genesis Rabbah 63:10 did not say *not* to add Shem u-Malkhut. Ultimately, authorities remain divided on the issue.

In Ashkenazi synagogues, and some Moroccan communities, where the tradition of Barukh She-p'tarani has continued, the two possibilities suggested by Orchot Chayyim come together. A father recites the blessing when his son is called to the Torah for the first time at age thirteen. Supposedly Maharil, in fourteenth-century Germany, followed this practice: "When his son became Bar Mitzvah (na'asah bar mitzvah) he read Torah and blessed him: 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who exempted me from (responsibility for) this one's (punishment).'"[54] A father might also recite the blessing when his son leads a service for the first time.

Having resolved the particulars of *when* to recite Barukh She-p'tarani, we must now consider what the blessing means. What change in the relationship between a father and his son does this blessing acknowledge? Also, the meaning of the phrase מעונשו של זה is unclear, as 'onesh could refer to either punishment or responsibility. In the Decalogues (Exodus 20:5-6 and Deuteronomy 5:9-10), we learn that a father's sins are visited upon his children, down to the third and fourth generations. Thus the Torah paints a picture of collective responsibility. Ezekiel, however, emphasizes personal

[54] Marcus, p. 121.

responsibility: "Behold, all lives [n'fashot] are Mine; the life of the father, and the life of the son are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die." (Ezek. 18:4) One understanding of Barukh She-p'tarani suggests that the prayer synthesizes these two perspectives. According to this interpretation, a father bears responsibility for his son until age thirteen. For that period of time, a child bears punishment for his father's sins and, perhaps, a father receives repercussions for his son's sins, as well. However, once a son turns thirteen, neither father nor son must bear punishment for the other's sins, each assuming responsibility only for his own actions.[55]

> It is interesting to note that the interpretation given to this benediction became so much a part of the thinking of the Jew with regard to the thirteen year old boy that we find a society for the care of orphans in Fürth in 1763 stating that society cares for the orphans until they are thirteen. It is as though the society then felt itself freed from any further responsibility.[56]

Perhaps we still allow ourselves to feel this way. As we will see in Chapter four, too many of our synagogues' educational programs seem to take a similar approach. The structure of our programs often implies a need for participation prior to Bar Mitzvah, but afterwards one's presence is merely optional.

D'rash/D'var Torah

As we discussed earlier, the first wave of rituals to evolve in connection with Bar Mitzvah followed the larger trend of movement from the private realm to the public. The most prominent ritual to fit this bill was a public reading of Torah, and we could naturally conclude that the d'rash (a textual exposition, also referred to as d'var Torah or d'rasha) developed in the same context. However, it appears that the d'rash actually became incorporated into the Bar Mitzvah ritual only when celebrations had shifted back to the

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[55] Wice, p. 17.
[56] Ibid, p. 33.

private and intimate space of one's home. Rather than at a bimah, a public lectern, a d'rash was typically delivered from the "stage" of one's dining table at a festive meal, which we will explore in the next section.

Solomon Luria (the Maharshal), in the sixteenth-century,[57] is the first to mention a Bar Mitzvah d'rash. Anyone could deliver a d'rash – from any text, on any occasion. However, it made particular sense on the occasion of a boy becoming a Bar Mitzvah, as it was an opportunity for him to display the learning he had mastered to date and the original thinking he would pursue in the future. It was also an opportunity for parents to take pride in their children's education.[58] At least, that was the ideal. In practice, children relied heavily upon the d'rashot ("textual expositions") of others at the expense of their own insights. Over time, the community lowered its expectations and parents hired rabbis to "prepare" their children. As the following examples enumerated by Robyn Tsesarski demonstrate, by the nineteenth-century the d'rash had deteriorated into an often irrelevant, frequently dreaded, Bar Mitzvah speech.[59]

> **Yehuda Lieb Gordon** (1831-1892; Russian Hebrew poet and journalist): Mentions the *d'rasha* that his rabbi prepared for him, "It was a *hadran,* a formulaic statement about returning to study and the continuation of study, which marks the completion of a *masechta* [a tractate of Talmud]. The subject of the *d'rasha* was a question and answer on a compilation of *chidushim* by commentators on the Tractate." However, because of something that happened during the *d'rasha,* "it was interrupted and he never got back on track to finish."
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> **Simon Dubnov** (1860-1941; historian and political idealist): "I did not give the customary *d'rasha* on the day of my Bar Mitzvah. I began to prepare using the *Shagat Aryeh,* but the first lesson took away my desire to speak publicly. It dealt with the question, 'How would a left handed person put on *tefillin?*'"

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[57] Yam Shel Shlomo, Baba Kama 7, 37.
[58] Wice.
[59] Ibid, pp. 38-9.

Isaac Nissenbaum (1868-1942; rabbi, Hebrew writer and religious Zionist): "When I turned thirteen my family had a celebration at the house. A great, noted rabbi came and heard my *pilpul* [a literal and detailed exposition] which I had learned from the book, *Emek Yehoshua.* This noted rabbi who was present addressed certain difficult questions to me and I answered him properly. He patted me on the cheeks and said that years ago a good boy was somebody who was able to give a *d'rasha* based upon his on thoughts but nowadays a good boy is someone who can understand what someone else has said."

Shalom Alechem (1859-1916; Yiddish author and humanist): Dedicates a whole chapter in describing the Bar Mitzvah, the preparations and the celebration in the house, and the *d'rasha.* He is the only one who had the courage to admit that his *d'rasha* was in fact a sham: "From where, for example, did the writer of these memoirs [meaning himself] draw the strength and courage to fool so many Jews who had gathered and come from all corners of the city to my father's house to hear the Bar Mitzvah *d'rasha* on the day he became thirteen years old. He remembers well from the whole convoluted complicated *d'rasha* which his sharp rabbi taught him weeks before the great day. He remembers that he didn't understand anything and he could not find himself in it at all. And nevertheless the whole city was humming from having heard his *d'rasha.* All the fathers were jealous of his father, and all the women praised and blessed him.

Despite the negative impressions reflected above, a public speech of some sort has continued to remain a valued part of the Bar Mitzvah ritual and is now customarily delivered during the public worship service at the synagogue. B'nai Mitzvah in Moroccan communities typically expound on the topics of tefillin or tzitzit ("fringes" on the prayer shawl) during the early liturgy of a Monday or Thursday morning service.[60] One might deliver an additional Talmudic d'rash the night before the service and/or the previous Saturday night, as well.[61] An account from 1839 states that a talmudic discourse was delivered by the Bar Mitzvah in Arabic, a language that could be understood by both men and women. Following his d'rash, "scholars in attendance would engage the boy in deeper discussions on the subject matter."[62]

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[60] Said between Ashrei and U'vo L'tzion. Salomon and Weinrib, p. 16.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid, p. 122.

As of the 19th-century in Germany, and in most communities today, the d'rash typically comes immediately before or after the Torah reading in the synagogue and focuses upon the content of that passage. As Isaac Nissenbaum mentions above, rabbis and teachers have produced numerous books to assist with this task. The best among the collection contain commentaries and questions to provoke the serious consideration of the parasha. The worst contain actual complete speeches for each parasha and challenge the Bar Mitzvah with nothing but the task of memorization. Nevertheless, the community expects a Bar Mitzvah to teach some lesson from his Torah reading, preferably drawing relevant connections to modern times and the lives of those in attendance.[63] Several sessions with the rabbi assist the student in his task, and the last paragraph of his speech will usually express his appreciation for this attention.

Seudat Mitzvah ("Festive Meal")

Arnold Van Gennep explains that any rite of incorporation takes place in stages and consists of a set of symbolic acts. These acts may include any of the following:[64]

- Eating and drinking together
- Exchanging gifts (particularly the act of *accepting* a gift)
- Being tied together, physically, with a belt or rope; or, symbolically, with a handkerchief (or perhaps by the "Chain of Tradition" when passing the Torah scroll from generation to generation)
- Kissing sacred objects after exchanging them (such as the Torah scroll)

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[63] In some congregations, particularly those of the Conservative movement, the Haftarah reading achieved more emphasis than the Torah reading. In these settings, the Haftarah passage may determine the content of the Bar Mitzvah' d'rash, or he in fact be expected to deliver two speeches.

[64] Van Gennep, pp. 29-30.

- Holding hands or embracing
- Pronouncing an oath
- Various forms of greeting

Many of these symbolic acts have been incorporated into the Bar Mitzvah ritual. However, food figures first and foremost in this and nearly every Jewish celebration, all of which are rites of passage of some sort. A festive kiddush, at the very least, also accompanies a brit milah and wedding, such that the celebration simply would not be the same without it. In fact, the whole point is that the s'eudah is a mitzvah. We know Bar Mitzvah has become a true milestone in the life of a Jew, on the same level as circumcision and marriage, when it warrants a seudat mitzvah, a communal meal of celebration.

Bereishit Rabbah 53:10, written in the fifth-century, identifies Genesis 21:8 as a biblical reference for a festive meal on the occasion of Isaac's weaning at age thirteen. However, the origins of a seudat mitzvah on the occasion of Bar Mitzvah seem much more plausible in fifteenth-century Germany as the setting for the Bar Mitzvah boy's d'rash.[65] The Maharshal declares, "There is no greater feast than this [the Bar Mitzvah feast].... One offers praise and gratitude to God that the young boy has been able to become Bar Mitzvah ... and that the father has been able to raise him until now and initiate him into the entire Torah covenant."[66] Indeed, these feasts were great – they could be quite large, with guest lists spanning the entire community; they could be quite elaborate, offering extensive menus; and, as a result, they could be very expensive. We know this, not from surviving menus or descriptions of the affairs themselves, but from

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[65] Wice.
[66] Yam Shel Shlomo, Baba Kamma 87:37.

the vast literature produced by rabbis throughout the ages attempting to curtail the excessiveness in Bar Mitzvah celebrations.

The Jewish community of Cracow may have been the first to try and limit the scope of Bar Mitzvah celebrations. In 1595, they passed a regulation that limited a family's guest list to a maximum of ten people, and these individuals could only be invited on the Thursday preceding the Shabbat seudat mitzvah. The Cracow community also set limits for the cost of the meal: Only as much money as one needs to buy fish may be expended for the simchah.[67] In 1610, these laws were emended, permitting a donation of fish to the hosts of the meal. Under these circumstances, a few more guests might be invited, even though the closest relatives alone were permitted to eat the fish.[68] Other communities were concerned about the size of the affair, as well. In Worms, Germany, the Bar Mitzvah boy had to invite everyone personally no earlier than one hour before the meal, limiting the size of the celebration to the number of doors he could reach in that time span. A document from Fuerth, dated 1728, also applauded small and intimate affairs. That community set an elaborate system of limits, similar to those of Cracow, which determined the budget and menu of the meal according to the father's income.[69] A description of a Bar Mitzvah in Prague, 1767, reveals great concern for the mood of the gathering. "No musical or comedy presentations were permitted and the menu was considerably sparse. Only the one who led birkat ha-mazon ... was permitted to have a full cup of wine and no coffee was allowed!"[70]

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[67] Salomon and Weinrib, p. 118.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid, p. 119.
[70] Ibid.

The efforts to curtail spending on Bar Mitzvah celebrations and place the occasion's emphasis on the ceremony rather than the party continue to the present day. This objective motivates Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin's book, *Putting God on the Guest List: How to reclaim the spiritual meaning of your child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah,*[71] a resource many rabbis pass along to their congregants who are preparing for Bar and Bat Mitzvah. As late as 1991, Agudath Israel of America attempted yet another recommendation of guidelines for all lifecycle commemorations: [72]

- A kiddush for a yahrtzeit should serve cake and drinks only.
- A kiddush celebration for the birth of a daughter may include one additional item, such as fish or a hot dish.
- A festive meal for a Bar Mitzvah or aufruf may offer two additional items.
- Any celebration should be arranged in the synagogue building or its own reception facility.

Yet, despite the efforts of rabbis and community leaders throughout the ages, Bar Mitzvah celebrations have continued to grow in size, scope, and expense. In the next chapter, we will see how the seemingly uncontrollable state of these elaborate affairs influenced Reform rabbis in their attempts to abolish Bar Mitzvah. In chapter four, we will examine why rabbis from the sixteenth-century to the present have been unsuccessful in their bids for moderation and what these celebrations mean to Jews today.

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[71] Jewish Lights Publishing: Woodstock, Vermont (1992).
[72] Ibid citing Coalition, March 1991.

Chapter Two: Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Reform Judaism

In 1962, Rabbi Jack Stern addressed the issue of Bar Mitzvah at the annual conference of the CCAR. He cited David Philipson's epic history of the Reform movement as articulating Reform Judaism's classical attitude toward the ritual of Bar Mitzvah: "Bar Mitzvah is an antiquated soulless ceremony with no meaning for us and our time.... It is because of the soullessness, the meaninglessness and the dry formality of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony that the confirmation has been introduced."[73] In this chapter we will investigate the elements of the Bar Mitzvah ritual that rendered the practice "soulless" in the eyes of Reform rabbis, if not their laity. We will examine the Rabbis' attempts to introduce a form of the Christian ceremony of Confirmation as a replacement rite of initiation, as well as the great resistance of Reform Jewish laity to this proposed change. Finally, we will consider the conciliatory efforts of Reform Rabbis to harmonize the Bar Mitzvah ritual with the American Jewish reality.

At the same CCAR meeting that featured Jack Stern's remarks, Rabbi Bernard Martin enumerated his own reasons why Bar Mitzvah had "little value or meaning" for Reform Judaism. Few differences distinguish these reasons from those which had prompted the classical Reform rabbis to voice their opposition to Bar Mitzvah in the first place. First, Bar Mitzvah constituted "a ceremony without a purpose, since it cannot, as it once did, signify the youth's reception into the adult Jewish community and his

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[73] Stern, Jr., Jack. "Bar Mitzvah and Reform Judaism," CCAR Yearbook, Vol. 72, (1962), pp. 160-5. (p. 160)

assumption of full religious responsibility."[74] At age thirteen, a boy was still a child, not a man. Martin urged his audience to consider the secular rites of passage by which a child becomes an adult, all of which occur in stages, but none of them by the age of thirteen. A youth earns a driver's license, graduates from high school, registers to vote, enrolls to serve his country, moves out on his own, and eventually marries. These last two rites of passage are perhaps the most significant. A single person, especially one living at home, no matter what age, will always encounter difficulties in asserting his independence. One's financial independence often speaks to one's maturity and determines one's responsibilities more than age. In its constant attempts to create accord between religious practice and modern day life, Reform Judaism would therefore find little relevance in a ritual that affirms full responsibility (religious or otherwise) at age thirteen.

Second, the legal obligations that the Bar Mitzvah ritual marked were essentially irrelevant to Reform Jews. "When a boy celebrates Bar Mitzvah today, we in Reform Judaism neither impose any new obligations nor bestow any new rights upon him."[75] Tefillin, for example, had no place in Reform Judaism, whether for a child or a grown man. The Torah reading was downplayed tremendously, as well. The weekly portion was read in Hebrew, without translation, and some synagogues even omitted those passages which (as Philipson had put it) "no longer suit our time."[76] Even if leaders had still perceived the customs of saying Barukh she-p'tarani, reciting the Torah blessings,

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[74] Martin, Bernard. "Problems of Bar Mitzvah and Bas Mitzvah." CCAR Yearbook, Vol. 72. CCAR Press: New York (1962), pp. 158-9.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Philipson, David. The Reform Movement in Judaism. The MacMillan Company: New York (1931), p. 173.

and reading from the scroll as relevant, there was no longer time for these rituals in a newly streamlined service. Philipson had been quite clear that Reform leaders wanted to create a Reform service that was "decorous, uplifting, and reverential."[77]

> The chief liturgical and ritual reforms may be summed up as consisting in the reading of prayers in the vernacular..., the introduction of the organ with mixed choirs, the abolition of the women's gallery and the introduction of family pews, the worship with uncovered heads, the substitution of the confirmation ceremony for boys and girls in place of the Bar Mitzvah for boys alone, the abolition of the calling of the Torah, the selling of mitzvot and like practices that had become abuses, the abolition of the second day holidays; these reforms are now accepted as a matter of course, and show how completely Judaism in America has been modernized.[78]

The ritual celebration of Bar Mitzvah had thus been rendered obsolete for Reform Jews.

The third reason Reform rabbis sought to eliminate Bar Mitzvah was what they took to be an unseemly social importance that the event was generating in America of Martin's day. The Rabbis saw neither a significant impression made upon the Bar Mitzvah boy nor any lasting inspiring effect upon the witnessing congregation. More often than not, Bat Mitzvah served as a pretext for the child's terminating his formal religious studies immediately. Ironically, Bar Mitzvah had thus become the event at which one celebrated the culmination of a child's studies rather than his new pursuit of religious education with new adult sophistication. Yet, as the religious meaning of the ritual declined, its social significance escalated such that Martin described the event as "vulgar ostentation and extravagance."[79] Earlier authorities, too, had tried to curb the spending on such elaborate affairs, so, using their efforts as a precedent, the Reform rabbis sought simply to eliminate them. Some thought that a public *group* ceremony

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[77] Ibid, p. 377.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Martin pp. 158-9.

would generate less extravagance than ceremonies which focused upon and celebrated one specific *individual.*

The final charge leveled against Bar Mitzvah highlighted the gender inequality of the ritual. Only boys could become Bar Mitzvah, if for no other reason then by virtue of the masculine title (as of yet Bat Mitzvah had not come into practice). The Rabbis were certainly aware of the inherent inequality of Bar Mitzvah, as evidenced by Kaufman Kohler's 1913 responsum on the issue. In seeking to replace the ritual of Bar Mitzvah with Confirmation, he wrote, "the early Reform leaders had chiefly one object in view, viz., to emancipate religion from the Oriental view which regards religion in the main as the concern of man only, and not of woman, and, therefore, essentially and intently neglects the religious training of the girl."[80]

However, though Bat Mitzvah was not yet a reality, such a parallel ritual for girls did exist in theory. After all, Reform rabbis had already shown their willingness to change Jewish practice in order to involve women by establishing family seating, mixed choirs, and co-ed schooling. Why not extend the ritual of Bar Mitzvah, as well? David Neumark spoke for the majority of Reform rabbis who remained opposed to Bat Mitzvah, but encouraged both boys and girls to celebrate at a confirmation ritual.

> I am perfectly in accord with the suggestion to abolish [the] Bar Mitzvah ceremony in favor of (the) Confirmation on Shavuot for boys and girls alike. But in synagogues where the Bar Mitzvah ceremony for boys is still in practice, I would be in favor of letting the boy come to the Torah, whether to read himself from the Torah—as is the custom in some synagogues—or only to say the Benediction and to read from the Prophets. In the synagogues where this is practiced, it is considered as a religious function (which it really is, historically considered), and as such the boy is called upon to perform it, while the girl is deprived of that privilege, even within Reform Judaism. And this appears

[80] Jacob, Walter. American Reform Responsa: Collected Reform Responsa of the CCAR, 1889-1983. CCAR Press: New York (1983). Responsum #30, "Bar Mitzvah."

> strongly justified by the fact that a boy of thirteen may be called upon soon to decide to enter the Hebrew Union College, where he is admitted after completing his fourteenth year; this possibility is practically out of the question in the case of a girl.[81]

Clearly the rabbis had many reasons for wishing to replace the initiation rite of Bar Mitzvah, and certainly the inherent inequality of the practice was one of them. However, had this been their only argument, or even the most important one, it could easily have been addressed by creating a parallel Bat Mitzvah ritual for girls. Rather, the rabbis focused attention upon this facet of their arguments in order to build support for their alternative ritual of Confirmation. This point will become even clearer when we discuss that new innovation later in the chapter.

Reform rabbis borrowed their proposed replacement for Bar Mitzvah, the ritual of Confirmation, from the German Lutheran church at the very beginning of the nineteenth century.[82] This was by no means the first Christian practice to make its way into Judaism. David Wice cites numerous examples of other adopted practices, though not all of them from Christianity: Foreign names, godparents, the sermon in place of the talmudic d'rash, the practice of writing sacred scrolls on parchment, rhymed liturgical poetry, the transfer of home rituals into the house of worship, consolidating betrothal and marriage into one ceremony, stained-glass in synagogue windows, the use of eggs at a Passover seder, the ordination of teachers, collection-boxes outside of sanctuaries, and

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[81] Ibid, Responsum #31, "Bat Mitzvah," 1913.

[82] Sources differ as to the exact date, however. Walter Jacob, citing Jacob Rader Marcus, describes the Confirmation ceremony as originating with Ehrenberg in Wolfenbuettel in 1807 (Walter Jacob, "Reform Attitude Toward Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah," American Reform Responsa: Collected Responsa of the CCAR 1889-1983, CCAR Press: New York [1983]). Leopold Zunz, himself, was in fact confirmed in that ceremony. Michael Meyer, however, traces Confirmation ceremonies in Judaism back to 1803 in Dessau (Michael Meyer, Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement, Wayne State University Press: Detroit [1988] p. 39).

secular songs and organs at services.[83] Many Reform rabbis had even endorsed holding an additional Sabbath service on Sunday mornings. So while the ceremony of Confirmation was a new concept for Reform Jews, the notion of turning to the Christian community for such ideas certainly was not.

In its nineteenth-century Lutheran context, Confirmation signified that a young person had completed a significant course of study and was now prepared to enter the church with the status and responsibilities of an adult – precisely the type of significance and ceremony that the Reform rabbis were looking for. Yet, in its initial form, the ritual failed to address several of the shortcomings regarding Bar Mitzvah of which the rabbis had complained. Michael Meyer describes the confirmation ceremony of Leopold Zunz, in 1807:

> Zunz's confirmation began with the teacher asking the thirteen-year-old to give well-rehearsed answers to questions about his belief in God and its sources in nature and scriptural revelation. The confirmand then recited Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of Faith in response to a question asking what he was required to believe. Finally, the teacher gave him a paternal admonition and the young Zunz recited an original Hebrew prayer of thanksgiving.[84]

Note that, though the rabbis had declared age thirteen to be too young for a ceremony of religious maturity, Zunz was precisely that age at his Confirmation. Also, as we see in Zunz's ceremony, all Confirmation services featured only one individual (until 1822) and were usually held privately in the family's home.[85] Additionally, we have no reason to believe that the social festivities accompanying these celebrations were any less extravagant than those of Bar Mitzvah.

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[83] Wice, p. 51.
[84] Meyer, p. 39.
[85] Wice, p. 55.

Similarly, whereas the rabbis had claimed to seek a ritual that offered equal opportunities to both boys and girls, it was more than a decade after the first Confirmation ceremonies were held until girls were able to participate. Whether the first Confirmation rite was held in Dessau in 1803 or Wolfenbuettel in 1807,[86] girls were confirmed for the first time only in an 1817 ceremony held in Berlin.[87] The first mixed class of boys and girls was confirmed in 1822.[88] Max Lilienthal introduced confirmation in the United States with a New York ceremony in 1845; Isaac Mayer Wise brought the ritual to Albany in 1846; and Kaufmann Kohler, then president of Hebrew Union College, endorsed Confirmation in 1907 as "a befitting conclusion of many years of religious instruction."[89] Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations have since endorsed confirmation as well, and the ritual now occupies an important place in the life cycle for all three movements.[90]

American Reform Responsa regarding confirmation are concerned with two primary questions, in addition to those issues surrounding its relationship to Bar Mitzvah. First, at what age should young adults participate in confirmation? When the ritual was first introduced as a replacement for Bar Mitzvah, the proper age was considered by some to be thirteen, in order to directly supplant the latter. However, in a desire to engage

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[86] See footnote #10.
[87] Wice, p. 54.
[88] Ibid, p. 55.
[89] Fuchs, p. 2.
[90] Kaufman Kohler mentions that "Conservative congregations and rabbis all over Europe" had sanctioned the ceremony by the time of his writing in 1913. (Jacob, Walter. American Reform Responsa: Collected Reform Responsa of the CCAR, 1889-1983. CCAR Press: New York [1983]. Responsum #30, "Bar Mitzvah.") Mordecai Kaplan, in response to a question regarding the place of Confirmation alongside Bar and Bat Mitzvah, affirmed the important role of Confirmation. (Kaplan, Mordecai M. Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist answers, Reconstructionist Press: New York [1956], pp. 249-50.)

more mature pupils who could more appropriately commit to the fundamentals and ideals of the Jewish religion, many authorities in the first half of the twentieth-century advocated raising the age of Confirmation. A survey of 106 congregations in the 1930s found the following practices:[91]

- 1 congregation confirmed students at age twelve.
- 16 congregations confirmed at age thirteen.
- 45 congregations confirmed at age fourteen.
- 39 congregations confirmed at age fifteen.
- 4 congregations confirmed at age fifteen and a half.
- 1 congregation confirmed at age sixteen.

By the 1950s, it appears the majority of congregations held confirmation in the tenth grade, with some congregations observing the ritual even later. A 1959 resolution of the Central Conference of Reform Rabbis urged "that all congregations that have not already assigned their confirmation to at least the tenth grade make every effort to do so."[92]

The second question addressed by Reform rabbis regarding confirmation was the time of the year when the ritual should be held. On this question there is considerable consensus, with rabbis agreeing that confirmation should be held on (or at least near) the festival of Shavuot. On Shavuot, the holiday that commemorates God's revelation to the Jewish people, we remember that the Israelites were like children wandering in the desert as they prepared to receive Torah. Before they could receive the Teaching, they needed to be properly prepared and offer acceptable assurances of their commitment to the

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[91] Wice, pp. 69-70.
[92] Resolutions of the Central Conference (Passed by the CCAR 1889-1974). CCAR Press: New York (revised ed. 1975), p. 11.

continuation of their faith. Similarly, as the rabbis saw it, confirmation celebrates the induction of the youth into the faith of Israel. It encourages an active commitment to, rather than the passive acceptance of, the Torah's teachings. The rabbis therefore advocated an annual group ceremony, the Confirmation of students' faith on the festival of Shavuot, as a replacement for Bar Mitzvah.

Yet, despite all of the rational reasoning on the part of the rabbis, Bar Mitzvah would not go away. That is not to say that Confirmation has not gained a strong foothold in American Reform Judaism. Though far fewer young adults participate in Confirmation ceremonies than in Bar Mitzvah services, nearly every Reform congregation offers a Confirmation program and conducts such a service near Shavuot, even if for one or two students. In a few Reform congregations, the Confirmation service is the only *public* rite of passage offered to a teenager. However, even in these congregations, Bar and Bat Mitzvah services do occur, albeit neither recognized in the temple's bulletin nor announced publicly from the pulpit.[93] In the next chapter, we will take an in-depth look at the disparity between the leadership and laity with regard to the Bar Mitzvah ritual. But for now, let us examine the tensions between Confirmation and Bar Mitzvah that made it difficult for the former to supplant the latter.

Perhaps the most important difference between Confirmation and Bar Mitzvah became the age at which the respective rituals were conducted. In the previous chapter we saw the great significance associated with age thirteen. As Confirmation moved to older ages, the laity missed a ritual for early adolescence. Jack Stern alluded to this perception in his remarks to the CCAR in 1962: "For two thousand years, during a

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[93] See the constitution of Temple Emanuel in St. Louis, MO, as an example.

succession of social environments, thirteen was consistently singled out as the beginning of adult responsibility. Moreover, other cultures with a variety of social environments fixed thirteen as the age of responsibility."[94] To be sure, as we showed earlier, the initiation rite of Bar Mitzvah was never predicated upon physiological puberty, but rather on a social reality that was made to coincide with the age of thirteen. Ironically, now that the assumption of adulthood no longer accorded with a social reality at age thirteen, proponents of Bar Mitzvah cited the "biological and sexual validity" of a ritual at that age.[95]

> The Bar Mitzvah ceremony ... has been and, potentially, still is the Jewish response to this dramatic step in the life sequence. It is saying to a boy (and via Bas Mitzvah to a girl): "You sense in yourself the wellsprings of your own maturity. Here waiting for you is a people and a faith through which your maturity can be expressed. It will demand the best of your independence, of your self-control and your ambitions."[96]

Theoretically, Confirmation could once have been seen as responding to these physiological changes, but not after it was delayed to age fifteen or even sixteen.

The scope of their ceremonies constitutes a second significant difference between Confirmation and Bar Mitzvah. Whereas Confirmation had evolved into a group ceremony, an entire class of students (sometimes over a hundred in the largest congregations) affirming their faith together, Bar Mitzvah had always marked a significant transition for one individual.

> When a boy of thirteen or a girl of thirteen stands before a congregation alone, or even with one or two or three others, he is not one of a class, he is not a member of a group, but the one unique person that he is. That this rare, almost extinct, experience should be enacted in a synagogue, on a pulpit, before a congregation,

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[94] Stern, Jr. p. 161.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.

> creates for the child an association with his faith that no confirmation ceremony, however moving and impressive, can possibly duplicate.[97]

Here Stern presents the value of an individual ceremony from the perspective of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah him/herself. However, an individual ceremony and celebration has been of extreme importance from the perspective of the child's parents and family, as well, as we will see in the next chapter.

Finally, in the second half of the twentieth-century, the pendulum of Reform Judaism was beginning to swing, ever so gradually, back to the side of tradition. As Conservative Judaism became increasingly conservative, and many Jews of Conservative and Orthodox backgrounds married those raised as Reform Jews, joining the latter's synagogues, the face of the laity changed. These newcomers to Reform Judaism had deep attachments to Bar Mitzvah, because its practice had continued undeterred in their original movements. Their spouses and co-congregants were psychologically far removed from American classical Reform and, while many Reform Jews remained attached to their roots, others began to reconsider the movement's "earlier anti-ceremonial attitude" from a new perspective.[98]

Bar Mitzvah again became the norm in Reform congregations as the ritual was reclaimed by popular demand. In truth, in many congregations it had never totally disappeared. A survey conducted in 1962 revealed that 228 out of 308 Reform synagogues had always had the Bar Mitzvah ritual.[99] It was now up to the rabbis to reconcile themselves with this reality, some more easily, in the case of Stern who argued

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[97] Ibid, p. 162.
[98] Ibid, p. 161.
[99] Stillpass, Leo J. "Survey of Present Practices." CCAR Yearbook, Vol. 72. CCAR Press: New York (1962), pp. 157-8.

for its recovery, others less so, but necessarily going along with the demands of a new generation of Reform congregants. In any case, the rabbis who accepted it now felt obliged to justify it anew.

In this attempt to invest Bar Mitzvah with more meaning, Reform rabbis, followed by the leaders of other Jewish movements, began to seize the opportunities this ritual could offer for Jewish education. Beginning in the late 1930s, a new trend used the occasion of Bar Mitzvah as "motivation for the child's acquisition of a wider amount of Jewish knowledge than the rite itself requires, in fact, for his entire elementary Jewish education."[100] In the 1940s, community-wide educational requirements formalized this expansion of study. The 1951 Jewish School Census revealed the following, stating:[101]

> "The Bar Mitzvah ceremony is being used by an increasing number of congregations throughout the country as a means of motivating the children to enroll in weekday afternoon Jewish schools and to devote themselves to a more intensive study of the Jewish religion, the Hebrew language and related subjects, than would be required for the mere fulfillment of the rite."

- In 61 out of 112 communities (54.5%), one or more congregations enforced educational requirements in order to qualify for the public ceremony of Bar Mitzvah, in addition to those requirements pertaining to the ceremony.
- This trend was observed in small, intermediate, and large communities; in Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and inter/non-denominational congregations.

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[100] Engelman, Uriah Z. "Educational Requirements for Bar Mitzvah." Department of Research and Information of the American Association for Jewish Education. December 1951. Located in "Lifecycle: Bar and Bat Mitzvah," Box #11 on the third floor of the library at HUC-JIR, NY. p.8.

[101] "Jewish School Census," in Engelman.

- On average, congregations with educational requirements for Bar Mitzvah required 3 years of attendance at Hebrew school prior to Bar Mitzvah (Sunday School listed separately) – again, across denominations.
- Where girls were allowed and/or encouraged to become Bat Mitzvah, educational requirements were usually the same. Girls were usually required to be 13 or 14 for Bat Mitzvah, while boys were always required to be 13 for Bar Mitzvah.
- Several communities had instituted community-wide educational attendance requirements:
    - Cincinnati – 1944 (3 years at a Hebrew School [HS])
    - Minneapolis – 1947 (3 years at a HS + 1 year at services)
    - Indianapolis – 1948 (3 years at a HS); 1949 (4 years at a HS)
    - Bridgeport – 1950 (3 uninterrupted years at a HS)
    - Cleveland – 1943 (1 year at a HS); 1944 (2 years at a HS); 1950 (3 years at a HS and would not admit boys over 10 to their schools)
    - Schenectady – 1948-9 (2 years at a HS); 1949-50 (3 years at a HS); 1951-2 (4 years at a HS plus involvement in the Bar Mitzvah Club when 12 years old and 1 year at services)

In several cities Community Bar Mitzvah Boards were created to set educational standards, administer exams, and in some cases, even deny holding Bar/Bat Mitzvah services until the community requirements were met. These unique organizations were established in Chicago (1938), New Haven (1948), Philadelphia (1948), Los Angeles

(1949), Miami (1950), and Boston (1951).[102] (The specific requirements established by each are outlined in the appendix to this chapter, p. 50.) The 1962 survey of Reform practice alone reveals less demanding expectations than those of the Community Boards. Yet most of these congregations too emphasized continuation of schooling after Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The following data is tallied from the 308 valid questionnaires received in that survey:[103]

Bar Mitzvah services

228 have always had Bar Mitzvah
7 do not permit Bar Mitzvah
5 reinstituted the practice
1 just instituted the practice

Bat Mitzvah services

185 have Bat Mitzvah
62 do not permit Bat Mitzvah
11 contemplating its introduction

Requirements

224 require 2-3 or more years of Hebrew preparation, enrollment in religious school for as long, and Shabbat service attendance (1-2 or more years, weekly or bi-weekly)
17 require a minimum of one year's preparation or the ability to read the necessary portions of the ceremony

Continuation of schooling

150 require an *oral* commitment to continue through Confirmation, high school, or NFTY
40 require a *written* commitment to continue through Confirmation, high school, or NFTY

This survey also highlights the growth of Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. When Confirmation failed to displace Bar Mitzvah, rabbis had to address the need for an initiation rite for girls. Reform congregations had long since extended schooling to girls as well as boys, and the ritual of Bat Mitzvah slowly gained acceptance in Reform synagogues in this

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[102] Ibid.
[103] Stillpass, pp. 157-8.

context of religious education. Only in the last generation, however, has its popularity matched that of Bar Mitzvah.

In addition to using Bar Mitzvah as a means to increase attendance in synagogue religious schools, both the number of students enrolled and the length of their studies, Reform rabbis also co-opted Bar Mitzvah as a means for building attendance at Shabbat morning services. Confirmation ceremonies had effectively elevated the importance of, and attendance at, Shavuot services in Reform congregations. Rabbis who had been unable to eradicate Bar Mitzvah ceremonies now seized them as an opportunity to fill their pews on Saturday mornings, as well. As Rabbi Samuel H. Markowitz said at the same 1962 CCAR conference that featured Stern's remarks, "Let us make use of what we have.... If you can't beat them—join them."[104] Even when suggestions were made to conduct Bar Mitzvah services at other times, such as Friday nights, Saturday afternoons, or Sunday mornings, rabbis consistently insisted on Saturday mornings – citing as much concern for service attendance as the proper time for reading Torah.[105]

> We are interested in strengthening all public services, especially those on a *Shabbat* morning so that this day will be a day of rest, worship and celebration for us and our congregants. Permission for *Bar/Bat Mitzvahs* on Sunday morning would move us away from this emphasis. We would, therefore, urge that all *Bar/Bat Mitzvahs* be scheduled on *Shabbat,* even if it means that a number of children will share this occasion.[106]

Not every rabbi was willing to seize the opportunities Bar Mitzvah offered. Bernard Martin wrote, "If we cannot abolish Bar Mitzvah, let us, however, at least not promote or

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[104] Recorded in the CCAR minutes from the 1962 conference. Stern, Jr. p. 163.
[105] Where rabbis are under great pressure, other options are permitted. However, these other alternatives should not be encouraged. Freehof, Solomon B. Reform Responsa. CCAR Press: New York (1960), pp. 35-7.
[106] Jacob, Walter. Contemporary American Reform Responsa. CCAR Press: New York (1987), p. 235.

magnify its celebration."[107] He advocated making the ritual as simple as possible and making it clear to parents that Bar Mitzvah was certainly not required.

However, most rabbis did take advantage of their congregants' strong attachment to Bar Mitzvah. The CCAR conference minutes from 1962 record a brainstorming session on the possibilities Bar Mitzvah could offer, including the following suggested requirements, some already in practice in individual congregations:[108]

- A charitable contribution as well as an act of service to the congregation or community.
- The family's participation in Friday-night services preceding the Bar Mitzvah ceremony.
- Parents' attendance at a series of twelve lectures on topics such as adolescence, Jewish education, and the value of Jewish rituals.
- The practice of a number of specific mitzvot, such as birkat ha-mazon (the blessing said after meals).
- Sex education.
- Parents' presentation of a Jewish book as a gift to the Bar Mitzvah.

Several rabbis also noted that Bar Mitzvah offered a unique opportunity for rabbis and students to work together. Rabbi Leonard Winograd defied "anyone to say that spending many hours with the rabbi in preparation for the Bar Mitzvah wouldn't be of great value to the child."[109]

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[107] Martin, p. 159.
[108] Stern, Jr. pp. 163-5.
[109] Ibid, p. 163.

Many of these suggestions have in fact become commonplace in Reform congregations today. In chapter six, we will see how creativity goes a long way toward investing Bar Mitzvah with greater significance and meaning. There are many problems inherent in having both Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation – the latter was designed to replace the former; we were never intended to have both. Yet the two rituals coexist in Reform Judaism and do serve separate purposes. While Confirmation represents an additional opportunity to affirm one's commitment to Judaism, Bar Mitzvah has remained among the most significant rites of passage in the life of an individual, perhaps the most important transition with respect to his relationship within the larger Jewish community. In the next chapter, we will move beyond the mechanics of the ritual to examine the powerful meanings Jews have associated with Bar Mitzvah and what the experience means for Jewish families today.

Appendix: Descriptions of Individual Community Bar Mitzvah Boards[110]

Chicago (established in 1938) – required a minimum of 3 years attendance at a daily Hebrew School [HS] and examinations covering "understanding of the Hebrew language," "ability to read the prayers with a reasonable degree of fluency as well as the ability to follow the services," "understanding of the customs and ceremonies of Jewish life," "knowledge and understanding of the major events, personalities, and movements of Jewish history, and of the contemporary Jewish world with special emphasis on the positive and constructive phases of present-day Jewish life," and "ability to read with understanding some of the early chapters of the Book of Bereshit." In 1952-1953 attendance requirements were to be raised to 4 years at HS.[111]

Los Angeles (1949) – required a minimum of 3 years at weekday HS to be raised to 4 years in 1953; parents urged to enroll their children at age 6 or 7, however not considered part of the required 3 years until age 10; minimum of 5 hours per week; in special cases, an exam would be given for those who needed to be exempt from these requirements.[112]

New Haven (1948) – 3 years' attendance at a HS required by 1950, at least 3 sessions per week; those who did not meet these requirements or who received private instruction need to pass an exam of sight reading from the prayer book and "a written test on the narrative portions of the bible, the Ten Commandments, significance of Bar Mitzvah, Jewish holidays, and some customs."[113]

Miami (1950) – required 2 years' attendance at a daily HS which met for 4 hours or more per week, or 3 years at a daily HS which met for less than 4 hours per week. An exam was administered at the end of the student's instruction. For Reform congregations without daily Hebrew schools, only the exam was required. A special Certificate of Honor was given to those who passed an exam covering a 5-year curriculum.[114]

Philadelphia (1948) – required 2 years at a weekday HS or its equivalent. "In the case of boys who fail to qualify according to the regulations ... either the Bar Mitzvah is held during the weekday or it is postponed till conditions are met."[115]

Boston (1951) – requirements were to be raised to 6 years at a weekday HS by 1957, with an exam given to those who could not meet the requirements for a justifiable reason.[116]

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[110] Engelman, pp. 17-24.
[111] Ibid, pp. 17-8.
[112] Ibid, pp. 19-20.
[113] Ibid, pp. 20-1.
[114] Ibid, pp. 22-3.
[115] Ibid, pp. 23-4.
[116] Ibid, p. 24.

Chapter Three: Bar/Bat Mitzvah for Leadership and Laity

In the previous chapter we looked at a great disparity between the Reform leadership and its laity with regard to Bar/Bat Mitzvah and how that gap lessened as Reform rabbis and educators used Bar Mitzvah to bolster involvement in their synagogues and religious schools. Capitalizing on the laity's expectation that Jewish boys would become B'nei Mitzvah, leaders were able to pressure "otherwise reluctant North American Jews to become more involved with the synagogue."[117] Indeed, affiliation with a synagogue, and in some cases even attendance at a specified number of its religious services, became a prerequisite to Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Additionally, the establishment of mandatory educational requirements for Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the 1950s, whether by the leadership of an individual synagogue or a community board, drastically altered the pattern of Jewish education in America. First, the number of students enrolled in educational programs increased significantly as the percentage of enrolled children under the age of thirteen approximately doubled from the beginning of that decade to the end. Second, the dropout rate among these students plummeted, as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony was now dependent on continuous enrollment in a religious school program. Third, and perhaps most significantly, the setting for Jewish education in America changed. Whereas parents had previously opted for a Talmud Torah, chedar, secular Yiddish school, and private tutor to train their children, by 1958, private congregational

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[117] Schoenfeld, Stuart. "Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism, and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 78-89. (p. 81)

schools accounted for 88.5% of total enrollment.[118] Thanks in no small part to its compromise with the laity on Bar/Bat Mitzvah, American Jewish leadership successfully established synagogues as perhaps the most important institutions in Jewish life.

However, the difference in opinion between the leadership and laity of American Reform Judaism with regard to Bar/Bat Mitzvah remains significant. Stuart Schoenfeld, using the terminology of Charles Liebman, identifies the leadership (namely, the rabbinical leaders) as the proponents of "elite religion," while the laity espouses "folk religion." Elite religion, according to this scheme consists of "the religious organization itself, its hierarchical arrangements, the authority of the leaders and their sources of authority, and the rights and obligations of the followers to the organization and its leaders."[119] Elite religion includes only the rituals, symbols, and beliefs that the leadership acknowledges as legitimate. Folk religion operates on an entirely separate plane, almost as a subculture to that established by the leadership. This brand of religion demonstrates far more flexibility than that of the elite, and from the perspective of the elite may amount to "a set of errors, shared by many people."[120] As we saw with Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the leadership may ignore or even attempt to eliminate the practices of folk religion, yet a majority of the laity continues to participate in and perpetuate them.[121] Ultimately, elite religion, if it wishes to maintain its leadership, must find ways to incorporate folk practices and beliefs into its organization.

> For the elite, the importance attached to Bar Mitzvah, and later to Bat Mitzvah, in North American folk Judaism provided an opportunity to pursue elite goals. The religious elite used their control over the setting in which Bar and Bat Mitzvah

[118] Ibid, pp. 83-4.
[119] Ibid, p. 78.
[120] Ibid, pp. 78-9.
[121] Ibid.

> ceremonies are held to require enrollment in Hebrew school. These enrollments helped stabilize congregational membership and provided a more stable financial and membership base.[122]

While the leaders of American Judaism, the elite, may have been able to use the ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah toward their own ends, folk Judaism has maintained control over what the ritual means. Schoenfeld describes Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a major folk ritual of Jewish identification. "While data on the extent of Bar and Bat Mitzvah are not available, it does appear that even many families who are far removed from participation in Jewish life have these ceremonies.... They are seen as conventionally expected events in the Jewish life cycle."[123] In the remainder of this chapter we will attempt to uncover why Bar/Bat Mitzvah has earned such an honored place in Jewish life by investigating what this ritual has come to mean for today's Jews.

Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen provide a helpful sociological profile of modern American Jewry through in-depth interviews with affiliated and unaffiliated Jews across denominational lines. Only a generation or two ago, the three pillars of Jewish identity had been outrage at the Holocaust accompanied by a pervasive fear of future anti-Semitism, a strong connection to the State of Israel, and membership in the organized Jewish community. In recent years, however, all of these pillars "have been considerably undermined."[124] Today's Jews remain cautious and slightly anxious regarding the possibility of anti-Semitism at home and abroad, yet few have ever experienced it. Rather, today's Jews enjoy full participation in American society, a freedom most take for granted. American Jews have intimate relationships with non-

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[122] Ibid, pp. 84-5.
[123] Ibid, pp. 85-6.
[124] Cohen, Steven M. and Eisen, Arnold M. The Jew Within: Self, family, and community in America. Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis (2000), p. 10.

Jews, counting them among their closest friends and intermarrying with increasing regularity. In fact, Cohen and Eisen relate that most of their interviewees have come to terms with the fact that their children may very well marry non-Jews.[125] American Jews today have only a weak connection to Israel, made more complicated and difficult by the media's coverage of violence and tension in the Middle East. Finally, synagogue affiliation rates and participation in the organized Jewish community have drastically declined in many parts of the country. The Jews interviewed by Cohen and Eisen held little interest in denominational differences and most had availed themselves of only the most minimal opportunities for Jewish education offered by synagogues and other communal institutions. Few had extensive knowledge of Hebrew or Yiddish and most had received no Jewish education after adolescence, with the majority discontinuing their formal education after Bar/Bat Mitzvah.[126]

So, we must ask, what positive attributes of identity have come to characterize American Jews in place of those that have subsided in recent years? Today's Jews show a great concern for spirituality and individualism. For them, Robert Wuthnow writes, "faith is considered a private matter," and they resist any perceived attempts by communal institutions to shape their identity or behavior.[127] In public, many American Jews feel they are simply role-playing and therefore turn inward instead to find meaning. Yet American Jews overwhelmingly believe in God and are "surprisingly content with,

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[125] Ibid, p. 34-5.
[126] The picture may be somewhat different now, as there is an increased Israel consciousness coupled with new anti-Semitism in Europe and among liberals here in America. However, despite these changes, I still believe Cohen and Eisen's assessment is right.
[127] Ibid, p. 2.

and even fondly attached to, their synagogues."[128] However, rarely are the two connected, thus creating a pattern of simultaneous alienation and belonging. The mission to live a meaningful life in private spaces has supplanted the sacred mission of Jewish survival.

American Jews consider the quest for meaning personal, and, therefore, "the self is and must remain autonomous and sovereign."[129] As Robert Bellah writes, the first language of today's society is individualism and only after the autonomy of the individual has been secured do we begin to speak the language of community.[130] The maintenance and protection of sovereign individuals take precedence over communal obligations. In many cases, personal stories hold more importance than shared heritage. "The sovereign self," to use Cohen and Eisen's felicitous term for a modern Jew, is empowered to be the principal authority in decision-making. For moderately affiliated Jews, the choice of what to observe, as well as when, how, and how much, rests with each individual or family.[131] "Decisions about ritual observance and involvement in Jewish institutions are made again and again, considered and reconsidered, year by year and even week by week."[132] The worth of a ritual or practice, according to the scheme of this decision-making process, is most often a function of the personal meaning and relevance it holds for each sovereign self. In fact, seventy-five percent of Cohen and

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[128] Ibid, p. 11.
[129] Ibid, p. 7.
[130] Bellah, Robert N. et al. Habits of the Heart: Individualism and commitment in American life. University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London (1996).
[131] Cohen and Eisen, p. 91.
[132] Ibid, p. 2.

Eisen's interviewees agreed with the statement: "I have the right to reject those Jewish observances that I don't find meaningful."[133]

Moderately affiliated Jews consistently choose to participate in the ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. For many of them, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service and the preceding years of preparation constitute their moderate affiliation. We have no statistics to describe the popularity of the ritual, yet its persistence despite the overwhelming disapproval of Reform rabbis' until only a few decades ago demonstrates a great commitment to this practice. Religious School classrooms swell in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades with new students whose families previously may have only entered the building for the High Holy Days or another Bar/Bat Mitzvah.[134] Today's Jews embrace Bar/Bat Mitzvah and, as Cohen and Eisen observe, "if they come to a particular observance, it is because of an *experience of its meaning.*"[135]

For the child becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the ritual usually constitutes the first rite of passage in his/her life in which s/he is an active participant. Such rites of passage, according to Arnold van Gennep's definition, accompany every significant change of place, state, social position, and age in one's life.

> The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Wherever there are fine distinctions among age or occupational groups, progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts.[136]

The rituals performed as special acts have three major phases, with each phase sometimes demonstrating its own three phases, as well. Victor Turner further elaborates on this

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[133] Ibid, p. 75.
[134] Ibid, p. 169.
[135] Ibid, p. 93.
[136] Van Gennep, Arnold. The Rites of Passage. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago (1960), pp. 2-3.

structure of ritual for rites of passage: The first phase, separation, "comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both."[137] This phase is most prominent in funeral ceremonies. The second phase is one of transition, termed the threshold phase by van Gennep and the liminal period by Turner. In this phase,

> The characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.... Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."[138]

The transitional phase is most pronounced in rituals accompanying pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation, such as Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The final phase, that of incorporation, announces that the passage has been consummated. The "passenger" has achieved his/her new position and has clear expectations and obligations determined by his/her new state. Wedding ceremonies place primary emphasis upon this last phase.[139]

There have been numerous interpretations over time as to the precise nature of the transition that occurs for a child during the ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The most common proclaims Bar Mitzvah as the means by which a boy declares his readiness to assume the responsibilities that have awaited him since his birth as a Jew. Leopold Zunz perhaps best articulated this understanding:

> The admission of a child into the synagogue community, i.e., into the Jewish "church," needs not formality; it takes place through birth, and besides this, among boys, through circumcision.... The child is a Jew by birth, that is, he is a

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[137] Turner, Victor. The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-structure. Aldine de Gruyter: New York (1965, 1995), p. 94.
[138] Ibid, pp. 94-5.
[139] Van Gennep, p. 11.

> member of the "church," and whatever other ceremonies he goes through are not in the sense of granting him a right because of the initiation ceremony, but that the ceremony is a recognition or a public declaration of those rights which have been his since birth, only that he has later reached the age of religious responsibility and now makes acknowledgement of these responsibilities and his intention of assuming them. He takes on no new rights through the ceremony, but assumes responsibilities now towards his inherent rights as a Jew through birth.[140]

In traditional circles, Bar Mitzvah still sends communal messages of responsibility. When a boy is called to the Torah, he proclaims, "Count me for a minyan." When he delivers a d'var Torah, he declares, "I can teach others." When he reads from the Torah and chants the service's liturgy, he promises, "If ritual leadership is needed, call me."[141]

These messages are not so clear in modern American Reform congregations, where we rarely extend invitations to follow-up Bar/Bat Mitzvah in such ways. In our congregations we seem to have blurred the rite of passage structure, where a ceremony of transition "enable[s] the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined."[142] Rather we better recognize the "state" of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and by extension families who are going through the process, than we do the states that come before and after the ritual. What happens for a child in our synagogues when s/he reaches the age of thirteen and a day? What changes for a child, in practice as well as theory, after the last celebration has ended following the Bar/Bat Mitzvah? The answer is very little. In the next chapter we will look at some ways to mold our synagogue's educational programs such that a real change does occur following Bar/Bat Mitzvah. However, today's thirteen-year olds do experience numerous changes in other ways, and

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[140] Wice, p. 10.
[141] Salomon and Weinrib, p. 31.
[142] Van Gennep, p. 3.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah remains a meaningful ritual as it coincides with these developmental changes.

We often mistakenly conceive of Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a ritual to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, hence the common allusion to "Today I Am a Man" speeches. However, Erik Erikson's work on human development shows us that such an understanding is both overly simplistic and inaccurate. In reality, most B'nei Mitzvah are transitioning from the latter years of the school age stage, or pre-adolescence, to adolescence. In the preadolescence stage, children face the primary task of balancing feelings of industriousness with those of inferiority. To help them in this task, conflicts should be framed as opportunities for problem solving and, in the end of their work, children should feel that they have accomplished a significant task and their preparation has brought them to a new place.[143] Following Erikson, Ian Russ summarizes the issue:

> Homework and project-oriented assignments in school offer the child the opportunity for planning, completing, and reviewing his or her own work which, in turn, leads to a sense of mastery.... Meaning and purpose develop as a person is able to blend his or her ideas with a goal and to act on them. The family and synagogue assist in this process in setting the goal of Bar/Bat Mitzvah and, where possible, negotiating with the child the specific responsibilities to be undertaken.[144]

Unfortunately, the skills involved in Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and "performance" rarely correspond to a preadolescent's strengths.

> For the twelve-year-old, the idea of leading a congregation in prayer, singing in front of an audience, reading a language which the child only in part understands (in front of many who might understand), and giving a speech/sermon which

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[143] Russ, Ian. "The Psychosocial Tasks and Opportunities of Bar/Bat Mitzvah." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 309-15. (p. 310)

[144] Ibid.

> expresses personal ideas to a group of adults and peers can be overwhelming. If this sense of feeling overwhelmed persists, it can lead to feelings of inferiority resulting in the child's giving up [if not before Bar/Bat Mitzvah, then certainly afterwards].[145]

However, by making these tasks manageable, breaking them down into small pieces that can be mastered, and then acknowledging each small accomplishment with praise, adults (whether teachers, clergy, or parents) can help to combat these anxious feelings. We can also explore the incorporation of other tasks that might reflect more of who the child is and where his/her skills and talents truly lie. In so doing, the preparation leading up to Bar/Bat Mitzvah, which can begin as early as third or fourth grade, can greatly assist a child in balancing the feelings of industriousness and inferiority that emerge in the preadolescent stage.

By the time a child reaches the rite of passage of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual, s/he is making the next transition into adolescence. At this stage, according to Erikson's paradigm of human development, a teenager's primary tasks are identity formation and role acceptance or repudiation, "an active and selective drive separating roles and values that seem workable in identity formation from what must be resisted or fought as alien to the self."[146]

> A pervasive sense of identity brings into gradual accord the variety of changing self-images that have been experienced during childhood (and that, during adolescence, can be dramatically recapitulated) and the role opportunities offering themselves to young persons for selection and commitment.[147]

Through this process of self-selection and commitment, a teenager comes to make new voluntary relationships with his/her community. "Bar/Bat Mitzvah is an opportunity for

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[145] Ibid.
[146] Erikson, p. 73.
[147] Ibid.

the adolescent to balance inner wishes with the demands of the family and community."[148] The ritual has been established as a community expectation, yet through it a teenager disengages from childhood, asserts a certain degree of independence, and accepts at least the basic responsibility of completing the necessary preparations.

Teenagers have unique needs and present unique challenges for parents and teachers alike. Especially in this day and age, teenagers are over-programmed and crunched for time. They are extremely self-critical and therefore critical of others (people and programs), as well.[149] The maturing thought process of teenagers enables them to think abstractly and, combined with their critical, analytical lens, often leads them to hold unrealistic expectations of themselves and others.

> Suddenly, idealism is possible, and fantasy takes on a new role. The adolescent is not yet burdened with the internalization of what society says is possible and impossible. The newly found ability for abstract thinking, without the firm internalization of society's belief restrictions, allows many teenagers to find creative solutions outside the boundaries of conventional problem solving. Abstract thinking also allows the teen to greatly expand his or her vocabulary and develop a sense of satire and sarcasm. Metaphor becomes an important tool for the adolescent to express ideas and experiment with new beliefs.[150]

Rather than fighting the tendency of adolescents to question everything we try to teach them, Ian Russ says we should encourage their creativity by providing opportunities for them to "play" with the material intellectually.

> Play for the child is perhaps the primary way he or she makes an idea or value his or her own. Intellectual play for the budding adolescent is found in wit, satire, plays on words, placing ideas and events in peculiar juxtapositions, and thinking up problems and solutions they are sure no one before them ever considered.[151]

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[148] Russ, p. 311.
[149] Protter, Susan. "Post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 291-301. (pp. 291-2.)
[150] Russ, p. 314.
[151] Ibid.

In the next chapter we will explore some of the ways educational programs for Bar/Bat Mitzvah can incorporate more opportunities for such intellectual play and creativity.

Finally, from the perspective of the children becoming B'nei Mitzvah themselves, the ritual holds meaning as it mimics the movement from family to peers, a basic and important task of adolescence. Stuart Schoenfeld, who has written extensively on the significance of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, notes that:

> Neither the synagogue ritual nor the social events make the transition happen. The child is in the process of entering adolescence, entering a period of life in which s/he must learn to rely less on parents and more on self and peers. The rite of passage, which consists of the sequence of social and ritual events, is a staged acknowledgement of the transition.[152]

Schoenfeld observes this transition in the sequence of the candle-lighting ceremony, which has become a very popular custom at Bar/Bat Mitzvah receptions, and in the order of social events planned over the course of the weekend. During the candle-lighting ceremony, the first candles are usually offered to extended family to light, while friends of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah receive invitations to light the last candles. Similarly, during the weekend of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Friday night dinner and services are usually family-oriented. Saturday morning's service includes guests of the parents and child, but primarily constitutes an adult activity. (Some congregations will invite the Bar/Bat Mitzvah's classmates from religious school to join him/her on the bimah for the closing song.) By the time of the reception, where the guests are also mixed, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is primarily found among his/her friends.[153]

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[152] Schoenfeld, Stuart. "The Significance of the Social Aspects of Bar/Bat Mitzvah." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 325-338. (p. 334).
[153] Ibid.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah not only represents a significant rite of passage for young teenagers on their way to full-fledged adolescence. The ritual has deep and personal meaning for parents who experience it with their children, as well. Roberta Israeloff writes about struggling with her son, Jacob, while making plans for his upcoming Bar Mitzvah.

> Although we were scrupulous about including him in all the preliminary planning—having him meet the caterer and the DJ with us—he's suddenly sour on the whole thing. He wants a "big" party. He wants it at a "place." He wants live music and tons of expensive party favors emblazoned with his name—the list goes on.
>
> I hate this. Children are experts at throwing monkey wrenches into the most thoughtful, collaboratively-executed plans. On the one hand, I'm tempted to say, "All right, I give in; have it your way." After all, it is Jacob's day. He's the one who studied and prepared; he's the one on whom the spotlight will shine. Let him call the shots.
>
> But then I stop myself. It's not that simple. Jacob may be called up to read the Torah, but our entire family is participating in the event. A Bar Mitzvah is a rite of passage for parents, siblings, and grandparents as well, a portal through which we all walk, which changes us in subtle ways. It's not simply that we're older; we've moved on, our perspective on what's behind us and what's ahead, and on what we mean to each other has deepened.[154]

Modern Jewish adults, who have shown they are overwhelmingly intent upon providing their children with Bar/Bat Mitzvah experiences, have found great personal meaning in the ritual. Most significantly, I believe it provides a sense of transcendent belonging, which Cohen and Eisen describe as among the chief objectives of this modern generation of seekers. Additionally, Bar/Bat Mitzvah provides a ritual that brings family members

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[154] Israeloff, Roberta. "Traveling Light: Concessions." Locate on the Internet at http://www.jewishfamily.com/families/robertaisraeloff.

closer together—a brand of spirituality Cohen and Eisen call "familism," which "*commands* in a way that God and community do not."[155]

Transcendent belonging is "a feeling of deep connection to previous generations and future generations as well as to Jews of today who are scattered around the globe."[156] It grants a sense of history, which often stretches back much further than the history of the ritual itself. Adults who are intent upon providing their children with Bar/Bat Mitzvah experiences identify an "appreciation for a transcendent, historic connection with the Jewish people and culture."[157] They acknowledge a feeling of participation in nothing less than three millennia of history, "rejoicing in collective survival against the odds and achievement out of all proportion to the Jews' small numbers."[158] They also feel a deep connection to future generations, and take pride in the feeling that they have done an important part in passing the Jewish heritage down to future generations. In this way, perhaps commitment to Bar/Bat Mitzvah has become a "self-sustaining pattern of belief."[159] A traditionally patterned culture assures those who abide by it that they know the truth and they are protected by their group. As one of the perennial concerns of Judaism is continuity, Bar/Bat Mitzvah has become a custom by which the older generations can reassure themselves that the younger generations will keep the culture and faith alive. Finally, the feeling of transcendent belonging at Bar/Bat Mitzvah also encompasses a sense of connection to other communities of Jews around the world.

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[155] Cohen and Eisen, p. 98.
[156] Ibid, p. 114.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid, p. 115.
[159] Spindler, George D. "Current Anthropology." Education and Culture: Anthropological approaches. Spindler, George D. (ed.) Hold, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.: New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto, and London (1963), pp. 15-48. (p. 29)

Perhaps no custom made this more apparent that the popular practice of twinning American B'nei Mitzvah with Soviet children who were unable to celebrate their own Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Yet even more commanding and meaningful for today's Jews than a transcendent sense of belonging to a community of Jews past, present, and future, is "familism," the deep value of ritual "because it brings [Jews] closer to grandparents, parents, partners, spouses, children, and grandchildren" within one's own family.[160] Today's Judaism is most commonly practiced at home with its focus upon the family's youngest generation.

> [Children] elicit from grandparents—without much coaxing—the Jewish activities later recalled with great affection. They provoke the spouses who are their parents to consider and refine their differing approaches to establishing a Jewish home and raising Jewish children. They offer parents, separately and together, the opportunity to put into action the lessons they have learned about Judaism and to play out the emotions they bring with them to their Jewish home. In sum, children powerfully exemplify the confluence of affection, reflection, conflict, and meaning-creation that are at the heart of the family relation, making family the principal arena for the expression of contemporary American Jewish identity.[161]

Bar/Bat Mitzvah, with its explicit focus upon the child, allows for these same powerful emotions and opportunities in the public sphere. It is one of the few rituals, along with a Jewish wedding, performed at the synagogue that still permits a family an intimate and deeply personalized experience.

As we saw in the first chapter, Jewish leaders have consistently bemoaned the extravagance of Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations and many make the comparison to elaborate weddings. However, Schoenfeld observes that perhaps Bar/Bat Mitzvah has actually come to serve as a substitute for Jewish weddings.

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[160] Cohen and Eisen, p. 97.
[161] Cohen and Eisen, pp. 71-2.

> Marriage has traditionally been the real rite of passage into full participation in the Jewish community.... Children became full participants in the community when they married and established their own households.... The age of first marriage among Jews is now later than a generation ago. The chance of a child having a non-Jewish marriage is also much greater. In some families Jewish continuity is more precarious than others, but no family has guarantees and everybody knows it. The social dramatization of Jewish continuity has, to some extent, shifted down from the wedding to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.[162]

Additionally, with extended families increasingly dispersed geographically, Bar/Bat Mitzvah provides a necessary, if infrequent, opportunity for families to gather together, on an occasion of meaningful and symbolic celebration.

Yet when the family does come together, it does not just pick up where it left off. "Symbolically, the bar/bat mitzvah [sic.] ceremony allows us to proclaim that as a family we are changing and the changes are good."[163] Parents have a chance to reflect upon their own personal histories—to see themselves in the same role filled by *their* parents at their own Bar/Bat Mitzvah, while perhaps simultaneously making some different choices and setting different priorities. "It is a time at which feelings about the changes in the relationship between parents and children come to the fore," for last generation's parents and children—now grandparents and parents—and this generation's children presently becoming B'nei Mitzvah.[164] Yet, at the same time:

> It allows us to proclaim that as a family, we are stable and connected emotionally...to each other and to those who came before us. And what's so interesting is that *it is precisely this stability, these connections, that allow us to change.* To the extent that we feel stable and connected, we are capable of taking risks and of moving on.[165]

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[162] Schoenfeld, "The Significance of the Social Aspects of Bar/Bat Mitzvah," p. 335.
[163] Davis, Judith. Whose Bar/Bat Mitzvah Is This, Anyway?: A Guide for parents through a family rite of passage. St. Martin's Griffin: New York (1998), p. 60.
[164] Schoenfeld, p. 336.
[165] Davis, p. 60.

Martin Buber describes community as "being no longer side by side…but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*. Community is where community happens."[166] More often than not, as testified to by the ongoing commitment of modern Jews to the ritual, Bar/Bat Mitzvah allows families to experience one another as a community. As such, it provides deep meaning for all its participants—the Bar/Bat Mitzvah standing on the bimah, his/her immediate family gathered around, and the entire extended family seated just below.

[166] Turner, p. 127.

Chapter Four: Transforming Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education

When it comes to the educational programs surrounding Bar/Bat Mitzvah, there is no shortage of complaints. Helen Leneman lists six primary deficiencies: Hebrew skills for adequate preparation of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service; lack of sufficient exposure to Torah and Prophets prior to preparing the portions contained within the child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah service; time, teachers, and motivation for learning trope; understanding of the basic concepts underlying Bar/Bat Mitzvah; parental involvement in the entire Bar/Bat Mitzvah process; and commitment on the part of the child and his/her family to continuing religious education after Bar/Bat Mitzvah.[167] Yet these are only a few of the numerous difficulties cited by clergy, teachers, and tutors who also regularly bemoan the sheer volume of Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies in many congregations (commonly referred to as Bar/Bat Mitzvah factories). This predicament creates yet another set of difficulties: too little time spent with clergy, particularly rabbis; little, if any, reflection of each individual's uniqueness in the process and service; and programs that lack depth and demand too little of their participants. Additionally, those who train B'nei Mitzvah complain of too much emphasis on skills as opposed to meaning, and the conflicting interests of parents (who hold short-term objectives and expectations) and our congregational schools (whose vision and goals often reach much further).[168]

However, I find the most intriguing charge leveled against Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs to be their lack of relevance – a complaint which, as we have seen, has

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[167] Leneman, Helen. "Survey Results, Implications, and Evaluation." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 1-24.
[168] Ibid, p. 17.

remained at the heart of Bar Mitzvah discussions ever since early Reform rabbis tried to do away with the ritual and Reform Jews refused to let it go. Yet, as we have also seen, Bar/Bat Mitzvah *does* hold a great deal of meaning for Reform Jews. For the children, parents, families, and community who experience the ritual Bar/Bat Mitzvah represents a chance to showcase creativity and innovation, and the opportunity to celebrate and to connect with one's family and tradition.

This conflicting web of interests challenges us to mold our educational *programs* such that they capture the meaning families associate with the *ritual.* Our task is to create a significant transition within our religious schools – to engender continuity before and after the ritual while simultaneously making thirteen and a day mean something with respect to the child's education. Outside of our synagogues, little changes when a child becomes Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Therefore, we need to mold our educational programs such that they empower our B'nei Mitzvah to feel like adults when it comes to learning and inspire younger children to look forward to the time when they might feel the same. In this chapter, we will focus on ways we might accomplish this transformation of the educational programs in our synagogues.

The ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah already marks a moment of transition, if only by sheer virtue of the fact that prior to the service one's time is supremely consumed with preparations, and afterwards one is "free" once again. Leading up to the service are countless hours of religious school attendance and tutoring sessions; then meetings with the rabbi and cantor, and lots of practice in between. Bar/Bat Mitzvah folders containing the prayers, speech, and Torah/Haftarah readings that the child will recite during the service are laboriously carried back and forth between these meetings. All in all, the

pencil marks, highlighting, and wear and tear on the pages of these folders bespeak the tremendous amount of preparation that went into "the big day."

The majority of this preparation focuses on rote liturgical and textual skills that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah needs as s/he stands before the congregation. Whether s/he can read the V'ahavta, for instance, will be far more apparent than whether s/he understands it. Therefore, only once skills have been mastered, and if any available time remains, might a class explore larger issues like meaning and personal observance.

A distinction should be made between a Bar/Bat Mitzvah curriculum and a curriculum designed for B'nai Mitzvah students. The first implies a curriculum focused exclusively on material relating to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony; the second is a broader concept implying the inclusion of all material germane to this age group and in particular to the year of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.[169]

According to the research of Helen Leneman, it would appear that many Bar/Bat Mitzvah curricula aspire to both designs. Based on her surveys of both Reform and Conservative congregations, she describes the content of the basic curriculum for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah classroom course as follows:[170]

- Torah and Haftarah blessings;
- Order and structure of the service;
- The history of Bar/Bat Mitzvah;
- Meaning of responsibility, both Jewish and in general;
- Meaning of mitzvah.[171]

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[169] Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), p. 247.

[170] Leneman, Helen. "Designing a B'nai Mitzvah Curriculum." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 249-254. (p. 250)

[171] This is usually pursued through mitzvah projects, which we will explore later in the chapter.

Additional topics, if time permits, might include Bible, Parashat Ha-Shavua ("the weekly Torah portion"), Prophets, lifecycle events, holidays, history, Holocaust, ritual objects, symbols, ethics, and values.[172] However, few congregations ever get past the prerequisite skills they are required to impart and find themselves with enough time to explore topics of broader meaning. Surveyed congregations identify other reasons, besides time constraints, for emphasizing skills, as well:[173]

- "Our emphasis is on skills ... because our Bar/Bat Mitzvah teachers really aren't equipped to handle concepts, and our Rabbi isn't as active at teaching them in his hour a week with the kids as he should be."
- "I believe strongly in *na'aseh v'nishma,* we will do and *then* we will understand. Effective Jewish education has always stressed learning through doing."
- "Skills are most easily learned at a younger age; values and concepts can be better grasped at an older age."
- "In the context of our program, skills are what we can teach successfully. Concepts grow out of understanding skills; values grow out of analyzing concepts. The establishment of skills provides a foundation upon which we might build the other two."
- "Skills are a good access to values and concepts. And a good excuse to meet often!"

There is certainly some validity to all of these rationales for focusing upon skills during Bar/Bat Mitzvah instruction. However, the primary goal of education, most especially religious education, should be the transmission of culture over mechanics.

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[172] Leneman, p. 250.
[173] Leneman, p. 15.

J. James Quillen describes education as "the instrument through which cultures perpetuate themselves."[174] It is the means by which a society assures itself that the behaviors and beliefs necessary to insure its continuity will be learned.

> Erich Fromm has pointed out that the culture has to be built into the personality structure of the people so that they will *want* to act as they *have* to act. The goals, the motivations to secure and express the goals, and the ways of attaining them are internalized by the individual as they are transmitted to him by the agents of the culture (parents, teachers, elders, and so on) so that he supports the norms of the culture as *though they were his own.*[175]

As we have seen from Cohen and Eisen's study of Jews in the twenty-first century, meaning is paramount today – for children, as well as their parents. A Jew today, particularly a Reform Jew, will often not act unless s/he *wants* to. S/he will not support the norms of the culture unless they appear meaningful. The message we communicate through our current Bar/Bat Mitzvah educational programs establishes Bar/Bat Mitzvah as their sole culmination. Unwittingly the way we have structured the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience informs a child that s/he has met the most basic expectations for his/her religious education. Today's Jews understand that implicit message and embrace it. Everything from here on out, though commendable, is portrayed as purely optional, so that we rely on the example and pressure of parents, rather than the structure and inspiration of our educational programs, to convince children to continue their religious learning.

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[174] Quillen, J. James. "Problems and Prospects." Education and Culture: Anthropological approaches. Spindler, George D. (ed.) Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.: New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto & London (1963), pp. 49-52. (p. 50)

[175] Spindler, George D. "Current Anthropology." Education and Culture: Anthropological approaches. Spindler, George D. (ed.) Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.: New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto & London (1963), pp. 15-48. (p. 36)

We have come to treat Bar/Bat Mitzvah as though it were a graduation ceremony, indicating a mastery of an academic corpus of material. Larry Cuban's study of public schools and congregational schools explores the differing, but often interchanged and confused, goals of secular and congregational education. Cuban enumerates the goals of tax-supported public schools as follows: to help students "(1) acquire basic academic skills that will equip them for the job market or further education; (2) become active citizens; and (3) acquire a sound moral character, in that order."[176] Congregational schools have mistakenly adopted these same goals, in the same order, as well. First, we emphasize Hebrew-reading skills. On the occasion of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, all of a child's learned skills are showcased as s/he recites prayers in Hebrew as well as English, chants from the Torah and Haftarah, and delivers a prepared and rehearsed speech. Second, we may attempt to involve the child in a mitzvah project. These projects hold a great deal of potential, but time constraints usually do not permit much depth or reflection upon the experience. Only at the end and only if time permits is moral character, in the form of responsibility and commitment to the Jewish religion, explored.

On the one hand, then, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, which emphasizes the first goal of basic skills, mirrors that of a public school graduation ceremony. On the other hand, however, the standard for a child's readiness to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is not solely a function of knowledge, like that for which academic institutions must prepare and test. Bar/Bat Mitzvah reflects a commitment to a standard of living and learning. As a meaningful rite of passage, Bar/Bat Mitzvah must have an eye on the future, as well as

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[176] Cuban, Larry. "Changing Public Schools and Changing Congregational Schools." A Congregation of Learners: Transforming the synagogue into a learning community. Aron, Isa, Sara Lee, and Seymour Rossel (eds.) UAHC Press: New York (1995), pp. 119-38.

reflecting the progress of the past. It must provide for changes that mark a significant transition, but also establish a thread of continuity between a child's experiences before and after "the big day."

Too often our congregations promote a pediatric form of Judaism – look at what has become the standard for children's and family services in many Reform congregations. Most agree that interaction and participation for children (indeed for everyone) is good. For example, little kids should be able to get their hands on things, sing from the steps of the bimah, and pray from colorful books with big letters. Yet these activities have come to describe the sum total of many of our Family Services and, with the exception of their appeal for the youngest family members only, these really are not *family* services at all. The momentum of creativity in our congregations is often in a freefall downward spiral. It peaks in the years from preschool to third grade – when artwork is showcased in the hallways and projects are brought home; when music is learned because it is fun, active, and meaningful; when celebrating the holidays still seems relevant because of all the creative activities we can do with our kids. However, from that point forward it seems as though most of a child's instruction is geared to short-term goals in the future – she learns a song because her class will be singing it at their grade-level Friday night service, he practices a prayer because he will have to recite it at his Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Ironically, preschoolers and our youngest elementary school children bring with them the most natural excitement and enthusiasm. Our challenge is not only to capture this young energy, but also to build upon it and invert the spiral of our congregations' enthusiasm. Our task is to create a culture in which Judaism becomes even more dynamic and engaging as one matures, constantly presenting new

opportunities for meaning and creativity. Our job is to reconstruct our congregations' educational systems such that they support and inspire a culture of growth.

In this area of motivation and enthusiasm, public schools and the secular world in general, provide a very compelling model. In public, secular schools, younger kids see high-school kids driving. They watch older students playing varsity sports, going on school-sponsored trips, and displaying their growing talents in art, music, and science exhibitions. They see the increased freedom in older students' schedules and they look forward to the wide array of specialized activities in which they will also get to take part one day. Conversely, in religious schools and throughout our congregations, we do a very poor job of advertising the new opportunities that await a young child as s/he gets older. We do a poor job of showcasing post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah role models for pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah children to look up to. Keeping children involved after Bar/Bat Mitzvah not only holds great worth for their own Jewish identities and continuing education. It also serves as acute motivation for younger children first beginning to prepare for Bar/Bat Mitzvah when they can see what awaits them on the other side. A bit later on in this chapter we will look at some ways to strengthen post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah education. For now let us recognize the impact a successful continuing education program could make on Bar/Bat Mitzvah itself, and turn our attention to other ways we might improve upon Bar/Bat Mitzvah education to create a more meaningful experience for those engaged in this unique ritual.

The first improvement stems from better integration throughout the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. A parent's response to Helen Leneman's survey reads:

> My experience has been that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program is usually not integrated into the Religious School program.... I feel the lack of continuity and

> cohesiveness is a real negative for children, and a disincentive to continue participating in the congregation whose school has such a fractionalized system.[177]

Complaints like these, regarding the lack of integration between Bar/Bat Mitzvah and religious school programs, usually point to the disjunctive coordination of the programs on the staff level. An incomplete list of the various personnel that might work with a child over the course of his/her religious school education and Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation includes the education director (often solely responsible for the religious school), rabbi(s), cantor, classroom teachers, and tutors. Integrating the efforts of all of these players is vital to the success of the child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the family's disposition to religious education in general.

Integration involves the instructional content, as well. Far too often Hebrew, trope, Torah, and Prophets are taught as much as a year apart, and by separate instructors. A student might learn Hebrew in religious school, for instance, while only gaining exposure to trope with a private tutor or the cantor. In this way, a student fails to grasp the integral relationships of the material: Hebrew as the language of Torah and the Prophets; trope as the mechanism for articulating and punctuating Hebrew; meaning, values, and core moral concepts as the product of our textual tradition. Only when the material is made to flow one topic from another can the transmission of meaning come from the learning of skills.

Integration also implies heightened involvement of parents and families in the experiences of their children as they prepare for and become B'nei Mitzvah. Minimally, this simply means making parents more aware of the structure and expectations of the

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[177] Leneman, p. 21.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. As one respondent to Leneman's survey wrote: "Parents are entitled to be told far more about the whole B'nai Mitzvah process."[178] At a deeper level, parental interest can be channeled into family educational pursuits. As of yet we have only skimmed the surface of what family education surrounding Bar/Bat Mitzvah could look like, but many congregations are rapidly picking up on this trend. One of the most successful models is the formation of small groups of families. At an Indianapolis congregation, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso describes informal, small-group, family seminars with the rabbi which meet for five to six weeks.

> Time is spent on gaining a better understanding of the Torah and in planning a group *tzedakah* project. But sessions are also spent on talking about growing up. Parents are asked, "How do you want to treat you son/daughter as a thirteen-year old Bar/Bat Mitzvah? What freedoms should he/she have, what responsibilities? Do you have any worries?" B'nei Mitzvah are asked, "How do you want to be treated as a thirteen-year old Bar/Bat Mitzvah? What freedoms do you want? What responsibilities will you accept? Do you have any worries?"[179]

The Sasso program combines fixed content – writing a Torah scroll, a child's particular Torah portion, the meaning of prayers, or the order of the service – and flexible time when parents and children engage in dialogue with one another and with peers on topics they find pressing. Another congregation begins such a process as early as fourth or fifth grade, by inviting five or so families to congregate for "parlor meetings" in a home.[180] Yet another congregation encourages a Bar/Bat Mitzvah's tutor and family members to

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[178] Ibid, p. 22.
[179] Eisenberg Sasso, Sandy. "Growing Up: Expanding Our Bar and Bat Mitzvah Horizons." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 316-7. (p. 317)
[180] Leneman, p. 19.

read Torah at his/her service. "This makes it more of a family project and shows that learning continues."[181]

If instructors and clergy can help these individuals to engage in a dialogue around and about the text they are all reading, even better. Vicky Kelman has designed a Bar/Bat Mitzvah family curriculum to facilitate such discussion on four primary topics. Her program, called *Windows,* helps families to take a look at:

- Becoming a grown up (Bar/Bat Mitzvah)
- Being a good person (ethics)
- Believing and having faith (God)
- Belonging (community).[182]

One of the goals of such a program, as with all good family education, is to help the different generations of a family more fully understand one another, not just the material they are studying.

While much is to be gained by education that links family members as they learn together, it is equally important to link a child to his/her peers in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. As we saw in the previous chapter, a young teenager begins to shift alliance from parents to peers. Our Bar/Bat Mitzvah instruction should recognize this developmental stage, taking cognizance of adolescent struggles to formulate a positive self-identity based on deepening peer-relationships.

Consider, for example, the process of writing a speech. Usually the child meets one-on-one with the rabbi to uncover some significant lessons implicit in his/her Torah or

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[181] Ibid, pp. 19-20.
[182] Leneman, Helen. "*Windows* by Vicky Kelman." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 221-2.

Haftarah portion. Risa Gruberger suggests instead a mini-course that accomplishes this goal.

> Often, when an adolescent is asked to contemplate intellectual ideas in the company of an authority figure, the student is intimidated. He or she may respond by acting out or clamming up. In the group, however, where young people are able to exchange ideas freely with peers, and in a suitable environment, defenses disappear and students can make great strides in discovering their identity.[183]

Since preparing for Bar/Bat Mitzvah presents a unique opportunity to develop relationships with the rabbi and cantor, students should still receive one-on-one time with the congregation's clergy. But these meetings are better devoted to open-ended conversation, rather than a discussion whose primary purpose is the generation of an appropriate speech.

The most important improvement we must make in our Bar/Bat Mitzvah educational programs will help to achieve all of the above goals, from integration to relationship building: Our programs are in dire need of more creativity.

> As long as Bar/Bat Mitzvah is inevitable, our students will be fidgety teenagers with short attention spans and the feeling they have outgrown Religious School. The most successful Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs are tailored to these realities. They represent a clean break with the school. By utilizing mini-courses or projects, they avoid the tedium of year-long course of study. By meeting at different times from the rest of the school such as Shabbat mornings before services, Shabbat afternoons or during the week, they are different from Religious School. Ideally, the teacher/advisor is a new face, unconnected with the Religious School. Texts give way to brightly colored workbooks or filecards, requiring students to work individually or with their families.[184]

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[183] Gruberger, Risa. "A Mini-course on Writing a Drash." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 281-7 (p. 281).

[184] Ingall, Carol K. "Bar/Bat Mitzvah: Policies and programs." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 39-44. (p. 43)

Fortunately several pioneers have provided models for creative educational approaches to Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Jeffrey Schein includes several creative components in his "ideal" Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. Among these is the Mikraot G'dolot project, which takes the place of the student's d'var Torah. To begin this project, students select a single line from their Torah portion that they find to be the most interesting. They write this verse in the center of a large piece of paper and then supply the first piece of commentary to this line of Torah in the remaining margin. All the members of the class then have the opportunity to contribute their own insights and comments, as well.

> The second step in the process is to provide the students with some hermeneutical tools that might give them a deeper understanding of their line. Students are introduced to three metaphors for understanding the expansive nature of Torah commentary: the Torah as a puzzle, a mirror, and as an old-new book. The puzzle aspect of Torah study points to the unanswered questions (pieces of the puzzle) found in the Torah itself. The mirror metaphor helps the student see himself/herself in the characters of the Torah. The old-new book metaphor is designed to help students see the great perennial questions of human existence that are still with us today even though we dress them in different cultural garments than are found in the Torah.... Students are asked to apply these metaphors to key sections of the Torah (e.g., the Joseph story, Cain and Abel, etc.). Students then return to their own Torah portions and try to apply these metaphors to their own portions.[185]

Finally, the students spend some time learning calligraphy and composing the final version of their Mikraot G'dolot pages on sheets of parchment.. The final projects of the entire class are bound together, put on display for the congregation outside of the sanctuary, and turned to the page of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah each week. Recognizing the developmental stage of Bar/Bat Mitzvah students, and realizing that "we have given

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[185] Schein, Jeffrey. "My Ideal Bar/Bat Mitzvah Program." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 45-9. (pp. 47-8)

B'nai Mitzvah students a task that is more appropriate for older adolescents" in terms of composing a d'var Torah, Jeffrey Schein devises a creative and more meaningful project to take its place.

Carol Ingall demonstrates creativity through both the structure and content of her Bar/Bat Mitzvah program, now published by the Melton Institute. Each Bar/Bat Mitzvah student receives thirty-two color-coded project cards to complete at his/her own pace over two years. The questions and assignments outlined by the cards cover cognitive learning, the synagogue, community, rituals and life-cycle. A weekly drop-in center provides support for those who need guidance or assistance as they work on their own; frequent workshops, periodic field trips, a Shabbat morning discussion group, and monthly newsletter supplement students' independent efforts and help to create community among the Bar/Bat Mitzvah class. The program also strives to connect its students to the larger Jewish community. For instance, the Shabbat morning discussion group spends one month's sessions introducing Bar/Bat Mitzvah students to Jewish communal agencies and their leaders. "The great value of a Mitzvah Program," she writes, "is the opportunity it gives students to act like adult Jews in the community."[186]

The B'nai Tzedek Program strives toward the same goal by establishing endowed tzedakkah funds in the name of those who choose to participate.

> How do we make our children's Bar or Bat Mitzvah the life-changing, meaningful experience that we wish it would be? What can we do...to give this important rite of passage the sense of being an introduction to life as a responsible Jew and human being? B'nai Tzedek offers an engaging solution. By giving kids the

[186] Ingall, Carol. "Enriching the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Experience with a Mitzvah Program." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 187-93. (p. 187)

> opportunity to be philanthropists, we place into their hands the most valuable Bar or Bat Mitzvah gift we can give them: we teach them how to give.[187]

To participate in the program, each Bar/Bat Mitzvah sets aside $125 from the gifts s/he receives. This amount is matched by one Jewish foundation and doubled by another, resulting in an initial fund of $500, which can be augmented by further contributions on special occasions. Each year thereafter, the individual is empowered to designate a local Jewish charity to receive five percent of the fund's amount. The opportunities for additional educational programming are numerous, including volunteering activities and leadership development in the form of a Teen Endowment Board.

A healthy dose of creativity, along with the other improvements listed above, will go a long way toward improving the educational experience of our students as they prepare to become B'nei Mitzvah. In turn, a more favorable experience in our religious schools will make our students more inclined to continue their studies and involvement in our congregations beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah. However, our post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs also need reexamination if we hope to meet the needs of our older students, create an exciting environment for continuing education, and evoke a commitment to life-long learning.

> Education ... is not at all circular but linear: education is progress, it takes us where we have never been before.... Education is movement—movement forward and outward. And all these images express openness.... We do not value learning or skills for their own sake, nor the scholar for the sake of his scholarship. We value education for the opportunities learning opens up, for the multiplicity of new directions.[188]

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[187] Excerpt from B'nai Tzedek publicity, a program sponsored by Grinspoon Foundation and The Jewish Endowment Foundation.

[188] Métraux, Rhoda. "Implicit and Explicit Values in Education and Teaching as Related to Growth and Development." Education and Culture: Anthropological approaches. Spindler, George D. (ed.) Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.: New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto & London (1963), pp.121-31. (p. 126)

Several writers have noted that there should be some change in the relationship of a student to his/her synagogue following Bar/Bat Mitzvah.[189] There is no better setting for such a change than educational programs.

> Many congregations simply lessen the time commitment to Jewish study, giving the opposite message from what they want to say.... Classes for teens must be new and uniquely different from other educational programs in which students have been involved. And effective program must be flexible and creative in both subject matter and time requirements.[190]

There are a host of creative models from which to draw inspiration for meeting the needs of this particular student population.

Successful post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs show sensitivity toward a number of structural factors inherent in addressing the teenage years. First, classes mix students of different ages, to "foster leadership and role modeling and teach patience, tolerance, and listening skills, while challenging students to learn from each other's experiences."[191] Second, classes are kept small and active teachers participate in every aspect of the classroom, from discussion and role-playing to art and debates. This enables teenagers to see their teachers as role models, rather than authoritarian figures, and encourages strong relationships between teacher and students. "Students stay enrolled ... because they feel connected, needed, and respected by the staff."[192] Third, the topics for study reflect the

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[189] Helen Leneman and Sherry H. Blumberg ["Reflections on Bar/Bat Mitzvah." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 27-9], among others.
[190] Leneman, p. 239.
[191] Protter, Susan. "Post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 291-301. (p. 294)
[192] Ibid, p. 293.

needs and challenges faced by teenagers. Susan Protter outlines a schematic approach to the content of post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs:[193]

1) To address the changing emotional and intellectual needs of teenagers: issues of trust, communication, compromise, use of the telephone, choices in friends, curfew, use of the car, and interdating.
2) To address the more serious social challenges faced by today's teenagers: divorce, blended families, changing societal sexual morals, computer technology, and increasing demands for academic achievement.
3) To address a teenager's choices and decisions that can mean life or death: alcohol and drug abuse, the impact of media descriptions of an increasingly violent world, and AIDS.

Ideally, each topic begins with the contemporary issue and then blends in Judaic content and text, while using "hands-on" experiential teaching activities and techniques. "The fact that we have realized that teens want to talk issues first and Jewishness second," Protter writes, "is another key factor in the school's appeal."

Unfortunately, one of the most significant changes to occur once a student becomes Bar/Bat Mitzvah, is the discontinuation of Hebrew. The decision not to continue Hebrew effectively communicates that by Bar/Bat Mitzvah, enough Hebrew has been learned for the rest of one's lifetime. While changes must certainly occur with the transition away from Bar/Bat Mitzvah, we must preserve some continuity, as well. Any number of advanced and continuing Hebrew classes could be offered to post-Bat/Bat Mitzvah students and adults in a synagogue – such as Modern Hebrew (for those who

[193] Ibid, p. 293.

have focused solely on reading the prayers), Hebrew calligraphy, or Hebrew translation. Additionally, teenagers who were just recently Hebrew students may become Hebrew tutors for their younger peers. Some congregations assign post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students as one-on-one tutors to younger students who need a little extra help. Other congregations establish study hall hours where any Bar/Bat Mitzvah student can drop by the temple and receive assistance from a few monitoring post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students.[194]

It is also crucial that we follow-up with our post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students, communicating their importance to us and working to connect their skills and interests to potential areas of involvement in the temple. Thinking outside the box of classroom education empowers older students to take ownership of their own Jewish journeys. The most exciting model of post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah education I encountered, which strives toward precisely this goal, is the Chai Program. In this program, beginning in ninth grade, eighteen credits are needed each year and students design their own program to meet this requirement.[195] Maximum amounts are allotted to each option in order to ensure a more diversified experience. Available options from which the students can choose include:

- Community service work
- Assistant teaching
- Youth group
- Retreat

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[194] Silberman, Shoshana. "Setting Standards: The Bar/Bat Mitzvah committee." Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education: A Sourcebook. Helen Leneman (ed.). A.R.E. Publishing, Inc.: Denver, Colorado (1993), pp. 73-7.

[195] In the eighth grade program, which precedes the Chai Program, students have more limited choices and earn a greater percentage of their credits in classroom and group settings.

- Service attendance
- Independent study
- Seminars, which take place in the homes of students and include lunch. Topics are chosen from a list distributed in the spring of the preceding year and often students are given material to read in advance.
- Other miscellaneous options, including community programs such as special lectures, movies, concerts, and other Jewish cultural events.

In addition, all students write a journal, consisting of at least ten substantial entries discussed with program advisors throughout the year. Advisors oversee the programs of every eight to twelve students, monitoring their progress, reflecting upon their individual experiences, and serving as mentors. In addition to monthly meetings with these advisors, students also attend group meetings; Confirmation sessions, rehearsals, and service with the rabbi during tenth grade; and a graduation service and dinner in twelfth grade.

Creative programs, such as the Chai Program for post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah study and Jeffrey Schein's creative envisioning of Bar/Bat Mitzvah education, hold great promise for the future by putting us on the path toward a culture that values life-long education. Shifting student roles from learning to teaching solidifies their transition away from Bar/Bat Mitzvah toward eventual adulthood. After focusing so much of their time and energy on the specific occasion of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students may now approach their studies with an eye on sharing their learning with others. Perhaps these students could team up with a rabbi, cantor, educator, teacher, or any other adult to combine their interests with Jewish learning and offer courses on

virtually anything: Bible, Hebrew, literature, sports, drama, Midrash, art, history, Israel, social action, or whatever other topic an adolescent is drawn to.

In general, post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah should receive its due share of attention as a significant transition in the life of a young, maturing Jew. The uniqueness of the teenage years require better definition and articulation as the next stage to which young adults are transitioning. Bar/Bat Mitzvah training must incorporate a vision of these years that follow the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual itself. Congregational leaders must welcome these links between childhood and adulthood by creating educational programs that successfully navigate this rite of passage.

Conclusion

Bar/Bat Mitzvah holds a great deal of meaning and significance for today's Jews. While the ritual only dates back to the fourteenth-century, Jews of all denominations consistently display their attachment to the observance. When Reform rabbis attempted to eradicate Bar/Bat Mitzvah in favor of Confirmation, the vast majority of Reform congregations continued the practice. While Jewish adults maintain the right to reject religious practices and observances they find meaningless, most insist their children become Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Today's Jews have demonstrated their desire to maintain a traditional and individual rite of passage at age thirteen.

For the teenagers who invest years of preparation for their "big day," Bar/Bat Mitzvah coincides with a time of important psychological development. These young adults are navigating the difficult waters of identity formation and separation. They are forging deeper relationships with peers and their community, while simultaneously redefining existing relationships within their families. B'nei Mitzvah are also exploring new intellectual abilities that enable them to think abstractly, analytically, and creatively. Bar/Bat Mitzvah students need equally creative educational programming that will enable them to engage their new skills and address the important transitions they are experiencing.

For the families of Bar/Bat Mitzvah students, as well, the ritual holds great significance. Parents identify a feeling of transcendent belonging during their child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah—a deep connection to generations past, present, and future. While watching their child lead the congregation from the bimah, they feel reassured that

another generation will keep Jewish tradition alive and preserve Jewish continuity. All members of the family—grandparents, parents, partners, spouses, children, and grandchildren—value the ritual for its ability to bring one another closer together. In a time where families are separated by increasing distances, Bar/Bat Mitzvah provides a welcome opportunity to gather together for a meaningful and symbolic celebration. These important components, which lend significance to the ritual for today's Jews, suggest excellent opportunities for relevant and meaningful family learning and discussion leading up to Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

At present, Bar/Bat Mitzvah educational programs fail to connect with the ritual's true significance for today's Jews. While they provide a child with the necessary skills to participate in his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, they fall short of addressing the transitions the ritual symbolizes. As such, we should not be surprised that so few post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students continue in their pursuit of Jewish education, nor that most families wait until it is absolutely required to enroll their children in religious schools. Fortunately, creative and exciting educational models for Bar/Bat Mitzvah do exist, but more work remains to be done to integrate these isolated programs into the core of congregational education. The transition from pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah to post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah education also warrants additional attention. I believe there is great promise in a move from learning to teaching, or, more accurately, learning in order to teach. Further study might evaluate creative roles in which teenagers and adults may pursue their own educational interests by leading and teaching others.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah provides a tremendous opportunity for congregations, even as it offers deep meaning and significance to congregants. The ritual occurs at a moment

when the needs of parents intersect the developmental changes experienced by their children. Amazingly, Bar/Bat Mitzvah brings families into our synagogues with an open invitation to help them navigate these challenging times. Educational programs that demonstrate sensitivity to their needs and offer creative approaches for learning might help to keep that invitation open in the future.

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This thesis is a study of Hirsch Weintraub (1813-1881), his music, and his lasting contributions to Jewish music. It contains three chapters, the first of which is a biography of Hirsch Weintraub told through those who taught him, those who were his peers, and those who were influenced by him. The second chapter is a look at H. Weintraub's *musach* as well as his father's, Solomon "*Kashtan*" Weintraub's (1781-1830), *chazzanut*. The third chapter contains analyses of four choral compositions of H. Weintraub's.

The pieces I analyzed are "*Ein Kamocha*," "*Vay'hi Binsoa*," "*Adon Olam*," and "*Hal'luyah*." In these pieces, I looked at the formal design of each composition, the chordal structure, the aspects influenced by the Classical and Romantic Period, and the relation to the text. Throughout the pieces, I noticed the traditional ethos of the liturgy was not overcome by the use of Western harmony, rather enhanced by it.

H. Weintraub's contributions are numerous, but have largely been forgotten. He is accredited with being the first to harmonize within the modes, his choral music is innovative and full of unique aspects from the Romantic and Classical Periods, and he was the model of how to combine the sounds of Eastern and Central Europe. He influenced the likes of Louis Lewandowski and Josef Singer. Besides these contributions, he also transcribed and harmonized his father's *chazzanut*. It is possible that this *chazzanut* influenced the *chorshul* that developed later in the century.

The goal of the thesis is to bring these contributions to light. With the help of the recital, it is my wish that both Hirsch and Solomon Weintraub's music will not be forgotten, rather used in our synagogues.

The materials used were *Schire Beth Adonai*, Weintraub's published books, manuscripts from the Eduard Birnbaum Collection, Idelsohn's *Jewish Music in Its*

Historical Development, Friedman's *Lebensbilder bereumter Kantoren*, and numerous articles from *Yuval*, *Encyclopeadia Judaica*, *Grove* Dictionary, and others.