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A Sociological Understanding of the Development of the Reform Jewish Community in America as Illustrated Through the Bar/Bat Mitzvah

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

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Referee, Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph
Referee, Dr. Jonathan Krasner

DIGEST

The goal of this thesis is to synthesize a sociological study of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the Reform Movement in America, data regarding contemporary Bar/Bat Mitzvah program characteristics, and interview data in hopes of identifying contemporary and historical points of disconnect between synagogue elites (clergy and educators), the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate. By recognizing the differences in the agendas of these three parties, analyzing them in light of contemporary congregational Bar/Bat Mitzvah educational programs and their development, and surveying actual representatives of each of the three groups, congregations can begin to navigate the various points of disconnect as they plan and execute Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs.

Chapter 1: This chapter presents a historical overview of Age of Majority distinctions within Judaism from the Biblical period until Emancipation.

Chapter 2: This chapter presents the struggle in the Reform Movement between the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation ceremonies.

Chapter 3: This chapter surveys the major themes and events that affected the Jewish community in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, illustrating through the use of archival evidence (letters, newspaper, first-hand accounts, and photographs) how those changes affected the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Chapter 4: In this chapter I use sociological methodology (interview data and survey, as well as collected printed materials) to present a theory that there are major points of disconnect throughout the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process in the Reform Movement between the institution (clergy and educators), the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate.

Chapter 5: In this chapter I present five superior programs- superior because they overcome some of the points of disconnect detailed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 6: As a result of the research from the first five chapters, some conclusions are drawn in this chapter about useful components to a superior Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. Furthermore, a model curriculum is developed with respect to these conclusions.

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This thesis is the product of many hours of interesting research. Throughout the project, I had the wonderful opportunity to work with some of the most dedicated rabbis in the field. I wish to offer my sincere gratitude to Rabbis Sandford R. Kopnick, Arthur P. Nemitoff, Joe Black, Mark Glickman, Stephanie Alexander, Goldie Milgram, and Bennett F. Miller.

I most humbly thank Rabbi Samuel Joseph and Dr. Jonathan Krasner for their friendship, guidance, and eternal patience. Their valuable insights and approach to qualitative data have added immeasurably to this research project and made it a very worthwhile exercise. Each have challenged and pushed me further than I dreamed possible, and each have mentored me and given me an approach to the study and practice of Judaism that will shape my rabbinate for years to come.

I would be remiss were I not to mention Rebecca—the love of my life, the inspiration and the voice in my head challenging me to go further, to try harder, to be better. She has patiently listened to countless drafts of the ideas presented in this thesis and has been a wonderful support when I needed it most.

Finally, to Ilana- my daughter who was born during the writing of this thesis but whose future, and Bat Mitzvah ceremony, were always present in my thoughts. Perhaps when you become a Bat Mitzvah, some of the ideas in this thesis will give your ceremony and celebration even more meaning. It is to Ilana, and to her future, that this thesis is dedicated.

-- Bradley G. Levenberg,
Cincinnati, Ohio

INTRODUCTION

The process and ritual of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is an important facet of most Jewish congregational religious schools throughout the United States. One need only survey rabbis and educators to discover the many different forms and approaches employed in the presentation of Bar/Bat Mitzvah education and rituals. This myriad of styles reflect a desire to imbue the educational process and ceremony with meaning while at the same time considering the fact that the ceremony represents a child joining the ranks of the greater community and thus a private ceremony may be in opposition to the goal of integration.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies and celebrations have been adapted by Jews and Jewish communities as a way of reflecting the core values, and concerns, of the family and community in which it takes place. This phenomenon has created much to be proud about as Jews in America. Sadly, however, there is also much that has gotten out of hand.

In this thesis, I argue that today's contemporary scholars can only understand the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the Reform Movement by becoming familiar with the evolution of the ceremony and celebration over time. I unpack the historical development, ideological assumptions, and contemporary conditions that inform Bar/Bat Mitzvah and try to demonstrate that an exploration of the themes of contemporary Judaism, and their evolution, may shed light on this fascinating and complex ritual. In other words, a

critical and scholarly approach to the study of Bar/Bat Mitzvah leads to a better understanding of what makes the Bar/Bat Mitzvah so meaningful, and so reviled, by many contemporary Jews.

My goal is that by understanding the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in this way, synagogues and rabbis may be able to better appreciate it as a fascinating ceremony that speaks in multiple voices to a multitude of listeners.

This thesis aims to understand the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in two ways. First, the reader will understand the historical development of the ceremony as a right of passage, a ritual designed to integrate the child into the Age of Majority distinctions within Judaism. This will demonstrate that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah has evolved over time to reflect the flavors of, and challenges to, the community in which the Bar/Bat Mitzvah took place.

The reader will then look at a contemporary example of this evolution by exploring the struggle within the Reform Movement between the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the ritual of Confirmation. By understanding this historical evolution through the use of a contemporary example, the reader will identify some of the major personalities and arguments that continue to influence the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process in the early twenty-first century.

After understanding the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in terms of its historical evolution, the reader will consider nineteenth and twentieth century influences upon the Bar/Bat Mitzvah

process and ritual. Once the development of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in Reform Judaism in America is understood, the reader can begin to identify how congregations responded to these events and possibly gain insight into how congregations need to respond to challenges as they arise today.

The thesis will build off of the historical study of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah with a sociological study of the rituals and educational programs associated with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The reader will sample a broad spectrum of contemporary practices and synthesize that data with interview data in hopes of identifying points of disconnect between the institutional elites (clergy and educators), the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah boy/girl.

After identifying the points of disconnect between the three parties, the reader will explore five superior Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs. These programs are superior because they address many, if not all, of the points of disconnect and navigate those points to imbue the process and ceremony with greater meaning.

Finally, in order to show how useful the research can be, I offer a sample curriculum designed with my research in mind.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL SURVEY OF BAR/BAT MITZVAH

In October of 1993, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism) adopted a set of guidelines for Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations. The impetus for the guidelines, according to Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, the chairman of the committee that made the recommendations, was "a growing concern that a centuries-old religious service was being overshadowed by affairs marked by conspicuous consumption."[1] What are the roots of this centuries-old religious service? How did the tradition of the Bar Mitzvah begin? A closer look at some of the main developmental theories of the religious rite and the subsequent celebration will present a foundation from which to address contemporary issues confronting the Bar and Bat Mitzvah in twenty-first century America. Thus, this chapter explores four subjects: the establishment of Age of Majority distinctions in sample cultures; Age of Majority distinctions within the ancient Israelite community, as depicted in the Bible; Age of Majority distinctions within the Jewish community in late antiquity and the medieval period, as presented in rabbinic literature; and Jewish Age of Majority rituals in the early modern period

The Age of Majority

[1] Renee Stovsky, Renee "The Bar Mitzvah Debate: Spirituality Competes with Celebration at some Coming of Age Ceremonies" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (December 1, 1993)

The Age of Majority, the period at which the child theoretically becomes an adult, is not fixed in the same way in all societies. "In primitive society the phenomenon of puberty marks the dividing line which indicated the attainment of social majority, the capacity to take part in the ceremonial world and the social activities of the group. In mature legal systems the attainment of majority, marking the commencement of full legal capacity, is wholly legal in its nature. In these systems the child remains a minor until a fairly advanced age after physical maturity in order to protect him/her from the consequences of presumed intellectual immaturity."[2]

There exist several methods among today's societies of determining the Age of Majority. In the United States and certain European countries, the age of majority is eighteen. Most civic and legal rights and duties accrue at the age of majority; for example, the rights to vote, to make a will, and (usually) to make a fully binding contract. In 1982, Zimbabwe passed the Legal Age of Maturity Act, according majority status to a person upon attaining the age of eighteen. This act, which applied equally to men and women, effectively raised the status of women from minors to that of adults with the capacity to enter into legal contracts without the consent of a guardian or parent. As a result of the act, women obtained the rights to vote; to open a bank account; to own a business; to access credit; to acquire passports in their own names; to be the guardians of their children if they were single, separated, or widowed; and to contract marriage without a guardian's consent.[3]

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[2] "Age of Majority," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publication Corp., 1933) 53

[3] Netsai Moyo, "Human Rights—Zimbabwe: Women's Rights Threatened By Parliament," *Inter Press Service English News Wire* (February 12, 1998)

Similarly, past societies used different methods to determine the Age of Majority. Within early Roman law, the Age of Majority was fixed at a period approximating the age of puberty: twelve for females and fourteen for males. The difficulty in establishing the Age of Majority based upon a physiological development is that not all children develop at the same rate. Some countries, anticipating this problem, have enacted maximum limits for children who do not attain puberty at the fixed age.

The test of puberty was not the only method for determining Age of Majority. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, English law had established economic motives for declaring an Age of Majority. Other motives for determining Age of Majority include military and legal (a court-ordered decree of Age of Majority status). Some legal systems incorporate a series of graduated majorities or a single Age of Majority. In 1989, the United Nations adopted the age of eighteen as the Age of Majority in General Comment No. 17: Rights of the Child (Article 24).

The Age of Majority in Biblical Israelite Society

Biblical literature states that a man attains the Age of Majority at twenty. According to Numbers 1:2–3:

ב שְׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם
בְּמִסְפַּר שֵׁמוֹת כָּל־זָכָר לְגֻלְגְּלֹתָם׃

Take a census of the whole Israelite community by clans of its tribes, listing the names, every male, head by head.

ג מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וָמַעְלָה כָּל־יֹצֵא צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
תִּפְקְדוּ אֹתָם לְצִבְאֹתָם אַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן׃

You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms.

A military rationale was the motive for the first Age of Majority distinction in Biblical Israelite culture.[4] It would appear that Age of Majority distinctions here depended upon physical prowess. This statement testifies that an Israelite under twenty years of age was not eligible for military service.

The age of twenty is also the age at which men in the Bible were commanded to pay the annual half-shekel tax for the sanctuary. Exodus 30:13–14 states:

יִתְּנוּ כָּל־הָעֹבֵר עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מַחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים
יג גֵּרָה |

[4] Also see Numbers 26:2, Exodus 38:26, Numbers 14:29

גֵּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מַחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לַיהוָה׃

This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight—twenty gerahs to the shekel—a half-shekel as an offering to the LORD.

הָעֹבֵר עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וָמָעְלָה יִתֵּן תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה׃

יד כֹּל

Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, shall give the LORD's offering.

This passage delineates an economic motive: If Israelites under the age of twenty are not required to give an offering and are not entered into the records, surely there is a distinction between those having attained Age of Majority (those responsible for the duties in this verse) and those who are technically minors.

Concerning the legal division between Age of Majority and minor, one may refer to Leviticus 27:2–3:

ב דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ כִּי יַפְלִא נֶדֶר

בְּעֶרְכְּךָ נְפָשֹׁת לַיהוָה׃

Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When anyone explicitly vows to the LORD the equivalent for a human being,

וְהָיָה עֶרְכְּךָ הַזָּכָר מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְעַד בֶּן־שִׁשִּׁים שָׁנָה וְהָיָה עֶרְכְּךָ

ג וה

חֲמִשִּׁים שֶׁקֶל כֶּסֶף בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ׃

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;

This thorough presentation of Biblical period text presents the age of twenty to be the age of valid military service, economic responsibility to the theocracy in the form of taxation, and contractual responsibility concerning commitments. The Bible is not concerned with puberty as a signifier of Age of Majority.

Age of Majority Distinctions in Rabbinic Literature

Post-Biblical Jewish law and usage revised the Age of Majority downward. Most certainly due to the fact that military and economic motives were no longer relevant to a

post-Exilic Judaism, the Jewish people assumed a religious character in a theocratic state. Age of Majority distinctions became religiously motivated and based upon the physiological distinction of the onset of puberty.

In early rabbinic literature, the terms used to distinguish minor from adult refer to the period before and after puberty. For example, a nine-year-old boy who had intercourse with a woman forbidden to him was not punished until he reached the age of maturity, thirteen years and one day. Once the Age of Majority had been reached, the individual could make a binding vow, consecrate property to holy purposes, be held accountable for his/her actions, and be held responsible in all ritual and criminal matters. Other benefits listed in rabbinic literature include the right to dispose of movable property and the right to have testimony accepted. As well, those who reached the Age of Majority were required to observe the commandments of Judaism and were counted within the minyan.

In Niddah 52a, it is written that "... a boy, if he has grown two pubic hairs, is under an obligation to perform all the commandments enumerated in the Torah." Evidence of thirteen as the age of being commanded to do mitzvot appears in Judah ben Tema's statement in the Mishnaic tractate Avot[5]:

בֶּן שָׁלוֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה לְמִצְוֹת

a son of thirteen years to (be responsible for) the mitzvot.

[5] Mishnah, Avot 5:24

Aggadic literature contains references that testify to thirteen being the age of moral maturity. Consider this story of Jacob and Esau:

> "And the boys grew." Rabbi Pinchas said in Rabbi Levi's name: They were like a myrtle and a wild rose-bush growing side by side; when they attained to maturity, one yielded its fragrance and the other its thorns. So for thirteen years both went to school and came home from school. After this age, one went to the house of study and the other to idolatrous shrines. Rabbi Eleazar the son of Rabbi Simeon said: A man is responsible for his son until the age of thirteen; thereafter he must say...[6]

Rabbi Jeff Salkin has proposed that the passage to the age of thirteen entailed three components: moral, religious, and legal.[7] Classic Jewish text describes the nature of a human being as infused with two conflicting impulses: the יצר הטוב, or good intention, and the יצר הרע, or evil intention. According to one source, every child is born with the יצר הרע and attains the יצר הטוב only after the age of thirteen, thus gaining the ability to control the evil inclination and perform mitzvot.[8]

Regarding specific religious obligations of the thirteen year old, the Midrash tells the story of Abraham and his father's idols:

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[6] Bereshit Rabbah 63:10
[7] Jeffrey Salkin, *Doctoral Thesis* (Unpublished: 1990)
[8] Avot de-Rabbi Natan 16:3

Abraham's father, Terach was an idol-manufacturer. Once he had to travel, so he left Abraham to manage the shop. People would come in and ask to buy idols. Abraham would say, "How old are you?" The person would say, "Fifty," or "Sixty." Abraham would say, "Isn't it pathetic that a man of sixty wants to bow down to a one-day-old idol?" The man would feel ashamed and leave. One time a woman came with a basket of bread. She said to Abraham, "Take this and offer it to the gods." Abraham got up, took a hammer in his hand, broke all the idols to pieces, and then put the hammer in the hand of the biggest idol among them. When his father came back and saw the broken idols, he was appalled. "Who did this?" he cried. "How can I hide anything from you?" replied Abraham calmly. "A woman came with a basket of bread and told me to offer it to them. I brought it in front of them, and each one said, 'I'm going to eat first.' Then the biggest one got up, took the hammer and broke all the others to pieces." "What are you trying to pull on me?" asked Terach, "Do they have minds?" Said Abraham: "Listen to what your own mouth is saying? They have no power at all! Why worship idols?"[9]

According to tradition, this story, in which Abraham assumed theological responsibility, occurred when Abraham was thirteen years old.[10] According to Talmudic text, Bezalel fashioned the Tabernacle at the age of thirteen.[11] Another Talmudic text teaches that a boy of thirteen years and one day should begin to fast on Yom Kippur.[12] A thirteen-year-

[9] Bereshit Rabbah 38:13
[10] Midrash Pirke De-Rebbe Eliezer 16
[11] Talmud, Sandhedrin 69b
[12] Talmud, Yoma 85a

old could help constitute a minyan, was expected to don Tallit and Tefilin, and was expected to assume responsibility for the yoke of Torah.[13]

Regarding legal obligations for the thirteen-year-old, Moses Mielziner states "the legal age for contracting a valid marriage is the time of puberty, thirteen years for males, twelve for females."[14] Further, the vows of a boy aged thirteen and one day are considered valid.[15]

Thus, within Judaism, the Age of Majority was reached in the Biblical era at the age of twenty, the time being determined primarily by military and economic motives. As the culture adjusted to a post-Exilic model, the Age of Majority was lowered to thirteen (to coincide with the physical changes of puberty) and took on primarily moral, religious, and legal distinctions.

Age of Majority Ritual from Rabbinic Period to Emancipation

While the age of thirteen was a significant age for boys reaching their age of maturity, it was not until the fifteenth century that the term "Bar Mitzvah" was used to signify a particular and specific occasion or ceremony during which the attainment of Age of Majority was marked.[16]

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[13] Midrash Tanhuma ha-nidpas, Bo, para. 14, p. 84a
[14] "Majority," *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publication Corp., 1933), 270
[15] Mishnah Niddah 5:6
[16] David H. Wice, *Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation in the Light of History and Religious Practice.* Unpublished Rabbinic Thesis, 1933

There are, however, few references in Rabbinic literature to an "official" Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Rather, it appears that there may have been many customs associated with the coming of age of Jewish boys. Joel Grishaver presented, in the *Jewish Spectator*, a collection of a collection of Age of Majority ceremonies in late antiquity and the early medieval period:

> In Maseket Sofrim we are told of a neo-bar mitzvah ceremony: in the days of the Second Temple the sages used to bless the twelve and thirteen year olds who completed their first fast. In Yalkhut Shimoni we are told that this fast marked the transition from elementary school to the beit Midrash. The first formal mention of a bar mitzvah takes place in 758 CE and is the bar mitzvah of Rabbi Yehuda Gaon's son. We are told that Yehuda's kid was called to the Torah and that Dad said the *Baruch Shepatarani* brakhah.[17]

These references are the exception to the normal silence in rabbinic literature concerning Age of Majority rituals.

The Talmud postulates that a minor was allowed to participate in all religious observances as soon as he was considered mentally fit. On Shabbat, the minor was called to the bima to witness the reading of Torah.[18] He was also expected to wear Tefilin and

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[17] Joel Lurie Grishaver, "All You Ever Wanted To Know About Bar Mitzvah," *Jewish Spectator* (Winter 1992–1993)
[18] Talmud, Megillah 23a

fast on Yom Kippur.[19] Therefore, the distinction between a minor and one who had obtained Age of Majority was theoretical.

In the twelfth century, this situation began to change. The religious rites accorded to the minor were restricted, perhaps as a result of the Crusades or the beginnings of anti-Jewish sentiment that led to the numerous expulsions of the Middle Ages. First, the minor was prohibited from wearing Tefilin. In the fourteenth century, the minor was still taught by his father to put on Tefilin as soon as he knew how to take care of them.[20] However, the objections grew, and in the sixteenth century among the Jews of Germany and Poland, it was the accepted custom that a boy could not begin to wear Tefilin before the day following his thirteenth birthday. This custom was modified in the seventeenth century. The boy was allowed to begin wearing Tefilin two or three months before he became Bar Mitzvah so that he would become well acquainted with the practice.[21]

Secondly, the minor was prohibited of the right to be called to the reading of the Torah. As far back as the thirteenth century, among the Franco-German Jews, the privilege of being called up for the reading of the Torah was withdrawn from minors. Only on Simchat Torah, the last day of the festival of Succot, could minors enjoy this right.

These two religious rights that now accrue to thirteen-year-olds—the right to don Tefilin and the right to be called up to the reading of Torah—became the most essential features of what was evolving into the Bar Mitzvah Rite of Passage. One notices in the historical

[19] Talmud, Sukkah, 42a; Yoma 82a
[20] Isserles to Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 37:1
[21] Ibid.

development of the Bar Mitzvah an institutionalized crystallization of some of the prerogatives, which the boy in an earlier age enjoyed as a minor. As a result of the elevated status given to a student who attains the Age of Majority, the "first time" the boy performed these religious rites was afforded special status. The ground was thus prepared for a ceremonial evolution around these rites.

The elements of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony, as it became known in the Middle Ages, included three aspects unique to a regular Shabbat morning service: the Baruch Shepatarani prayer, the Bar Mitzvah drash, and the Bar Mitzvah seudah (meal).

The Baruch Sheptarani Prayer

בָּרוּךְ שֶׁפְּטָרַנִי מֵעָנְשׁוֹ שֶׁל זֶה[22]:

Blessed is the One who relieved me of the punishment for this boy.

Many modern Jews are ignorant of this traditional response by a father to his son's Bar Mitzvah because it has been removed from most liturgies. Professor Lawrence A. Hoffman has written:

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[22] Solomon Freehoff, *Reform Jewish Practice and its Rabbinic Background* (New York, NY: UAHC Press, 1944), 23-24; Freehoff presents a discussion on the form of the blessing: "Moses Isserles, as late as the sixteenth century, had strong doubts as to whether it is proper for the father to recite this blessing. See Darke Moshe to Tur Orach Hayyim 225, where he said: 'Mordecai ben Hillel said that a man when he makes his son Bar Mitzvah is in duty bound to recite the blessing: Praised be Thou O Lord, etc., who has freed me from the guilt of this one. This also is the custom of Jacob Moellin (Maharil) but I do not find this blessing mentioned in the Talmud and it seems difficult to me (to agree) that they should pronounce a blessing that is not mentioned in the Talmud and in the Poskim.' Hence, Moses Isserles, in his gloss to Shulchan Aruch Orach Hayyim 225 #2 says that the blessing should not contain the name of God; thus one does not say: Blessed be Though, O Lord, etc. as in all blessings, but merely: Praised be He who has freed me, etc."

> It goes back, ultimately, to a Midrash that puzzles over the fact that even though both Jacob and Esau grew up in the same family environment, one turned to Torah and the other to idolatry.[23] Given how little parents can control their children's future, they are instructed to breathe a sigh of relief when children become old enough to be responsible for their own affairs. Until that age, we, the parents, are responsible—quite a burden. The Rabbis thought that responsibility entailed the possibility of divine punishment, which is worse still; especially since (as our Midrash makes clear, and as every parent knows) even the best parents may find their children inexplicably going wrong. As the child enters the age of responsibility, then, parents were urged to express gratitude at passing the point where they might be so punished. By the Middle Ages, when the bar mitzvah ceremony was invented, what had been Midrashic advice entered the bar mitzvah rite for fathers to say.[24]

Traditionally recited by the father of the Bar Mitzvah boy after the boy has had his aliyah to the Torah, in the sixteenth century it was discarded in many places, while the Sephardim give no place to the benediction in their liturgy.

A poetic justification of the continued usage of this blessing can be found in Linda Burghardt's book, The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Book:

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[23] *Encyclopedia Judaica* offers a different explanation than Rabbi Hoffman for the origins of this prayer: it places the origins of the blessing with Genesis Rabbah 63:10: R. Eleazar said, "A man is bound to occupy himself with his son until the age of thirteen, thereafter he should say; Blessed be He who has released me from the responsibility (punishment) for my son's conduct."

[24] Lawrence A. Hoffman, *My People's Prayer Book, v.4* (New York, NY: Jewish Lights, 2000), 117–118

> ...Today, for those traditional Jews who still recite the blessing, it is generally agreed that the prayer means release from responsibility for the child's conduct, not the actual child, in recognition of the reality that all thirteen-year-olds will be dependent on their parents for many more years. The child is now expected to be a mensch, an honorable and compassionate person, without any adult prodding, and to take on the obligation to fulfill the commandments. The bar and bat mitzvah ceremony celebrates this idealism, our belief that our children will find their way to goodness on their own at this age.[25]

The Bar Mitzvah Drash

During the Middle Ages, the reading from the Torah for the first time was a largely ceremonial "performance." The real test of the student's skill came in the form of the Bar Mitzvah Drash. The student would give a public or semi-public Talmudic lecture—not a speech of thanks or an idealistic statement but rather a discourse on Rabbinic learning. In fact, the crux of the presentation was *not* the Torah or Haftarah portions of the week but rather a Talmudic argument. This tradition was largely due to two reasons: First, the major emphasis of one's religious study was Talmudic; second, the attachment of the Bar Mitzvah Drash to the meal originated in Poland, a center of Talmudic learning in the sixteenth century. This discourse would take place most often not in the synagogue, in front of the Torah, but in the home and would serve as the climax of a banquet, which was given to celebrate the occasion.

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[25] Linda Burghardt, *The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Book* (London, England: Kensington Publication, 2004), 17–18

Hayyim Schauss has explained in great detail the development of the Bar Mitzvah Drash.[26] The Bar Mitzvah Drash dealt with the theme of Halacha and was delivered either before or during the meal by the Bar Mitzvah boy himself. The norm was not for the student to author the text himself but rather for learned scholars in the community to write his passage. Regardless, the student had to become thoroughly familiar with its contents, for only then could he succeed in explaining the Talmudic logic—especially when one considers that his Talmudic teachers were bent on interrupting him so that he might have the opportunity to show off his own knowledge and quick-wittedness. Some might even argue that it was a direct result of this "Talmudic teaching" that the festive meal took on religious significance (for the guests would have been regaled with Halachic discourse and Aggadic storytelling, in addition to Torahitic proof texts).

The Bar Mitzvah Seudah

Much has been made about the festive celebration after the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. The origin of the festive meal could very well be Biblical:

ל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגָּמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גָּדוֹל בְּיוֹם הִגָּמֵל אֶת־יִצְחָק׃

וַיִּגְדַּ

[26] Hayyim Schauss, *The Lifetime of a Jew Throughout the Ages of Jewish History* (New York, NY: UAHC Press, 1950)

And the child grew and he was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned.

Commenting on this passage, Rabbi Hoshaya the Elder said, "He was weaned from temptation."[27] The statement of Rabbi Hoshaya follows the notion that the two inclinations (the יצר הטוב and the יצר הרע) were not present in a child; rather, only the יצר הרע was present and thus the child was constantly tempted to violate God's law. Once the child transitioned into the Age of Majority (in this case, thirteen), the יצר הטוב became seated within the youth. In a display of a cunning syllogism, this would make Isaac thirteen years old—and thus, Abraham threw the first "Bar Mitzvah" party!

Turning to Talmudic literature, Tractate Kiddushin[28] presents an account of Rabbi Yosef, who was blind. He offered to make a huge party if someone could prove to the authorities that a blind person was obligated to perform mitzvot (as a blind person, he was declared, by rabbinic decree, to be exempt from the obligation to perform mitzvot). In other words, he would have thrown a party to celebrate the change in status from being exempted of the obligation to perform mitzvot to being mandated to carry the yoke of Torah.

The Zohar elaborates on this concept with the following episode: The Tanna, R. Shimon b. Yochai, adorned his house and invited the Rabbis to celebrate with him for three days.

[27] Bereshit Rabbah 53:10
[28] Kiddushin 31a

When they asked him the reason he was so joyous, he responded, "On this day my son Elazar becomes a bar mitzvah and thus acquires a holy soul."[29]

Rabbi Solomon Luria, in his sixteenth-century commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, ruled, "Concerning the feast of Bar Mitzvah which the German Jews make, there is no feast which is a greater mitzvah to make because thereby one praises God and makes known that the boy has merited to become Bar Mitzvah; and the mitzvah of the parents is great because they have reared a son and brought him into the covenant of the Torah."[30] The feast was served in the afternoon as the third meal of the Jewish Sabbath. Some time during this feast, the boy would "wow" the guests with an exposition of Talmudic arguments and would (most probably) lead the guests in the blessings of Kiddush, Hamotzi, and Birkat Ha-Mazon. Some commentators, such as Solomon Luria, criticized these occasions as being not for any religious significance but rather just moments of opulence, drunkenness, and gluttony.[31]

Around the sixteenth century, boys on their thirteenth birthday began reciting Talmudic teachings at the table. Some may argue that it is part and parcel of the very celebratory nature of Judaism around lifecycle events that the festive meal became such a success. Though it originated a century after the rite of Bar Mitzvah, the fact that this meal took on a religious-celebratory nature endeared it to other seudot, namely: the feast of the redemption of the first-born son, the circumcision feast, the betrothal and wedding feast, and, perhaps most relevant, the siyyum (the feast celebrating the finishing of a Talmudic

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[29] Zohar Chodosh 11:1
[30] Yam Shel Shelomo, Baba Kama
[31] Yam shel Shelomo, Baba Kamma 7:37

tractate—a very happy occasion!). While it may have originated as nothing more than a setting for the Bar Mitzvah Drash, the feast has since assumed an importance of its own.

At the dawn of European Jewish Emancipation, the Bar Mitzvah was a 300-year-old rite of passage that included ritualized reading of the Torah, the donning of Tallit and Tefilin, and a festive meal complete with a discourse.

Familiarizing oneself with the evolution of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony from earlier Age of Majority rituals within the Jewish world can help rabbis, scholars, and lay leaders to better understand the ceremony and celebration, the modern ritual, that is called Bar or Bat Mitzvah. From its origins in the Age of Majority distinctions found in the Bible to the ritual implications of that distinction enacted by rabbis during the Middle Ages come two important insights into the nature of the religious rite: namely, (1) that the Bar Mitzvah is a construction of society and that (2) reflected in the rite are the values and religious obligations that the society deemed important. What remains to be seen is how the ceremony and celebration transformed over time as a result of many competing forces acting upon it.

CHAPTER 2

THE REFORM MOVEMENT: BAR MITZVAH VS. CONFIRMATION

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, European Jewish Reformers welcomed the challenge of adapting Judaism to the modern world. Among these religious leaders, "it was widely felt that the Bar Mitzvah ceremony had in many instances become an empty shell ... and that in an era when powerful centrifugal forces were eroding Jewish identity there was an urgent need for some ceremony in which the Jewish child would solemnly declare his or her commitments."[1] Many of them advanced a Jewish version of the Christian Confirmation ceremony, a ritual that represented "the culmination of a course of study intended to prepare the young person for adult status outside the church."[2] Thus, the story of the development of the Bar Mitzvah in the Reform movement[3] would not be complete without a presentation of the Bar Mitzvah vs. Confirmation debate. As the early reformers struggled with modernizing the traditions and reforming Jewish ideology and practice, of particular note was the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Since the debate was held not by lay people but by the innovators of the movement, I will frame my presentation using as primary source material items found in the CCAR Yearbooks and writings by prominent Reform rabbis. To illustrate the practice, which at times differed from the discourse of the leaders of the movement, I will rely upon documents contained in the American Jewish Archives and writings of *The Occident*, one of the two prominent Jewish newspapers in the mid-19th century.

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[1] Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity* (Detroit, MI: Oxford University Press, 1988)
[2] Ibid.
[3] A discussion on the Conservative and Orthodox movements is presented in this thesis as Appendix A.

The Critique of the Reformers

The general critique of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony by the early reformers was that the ceremony had little to no meaning for "enlightened" Jews. "Reformers expressed a preference for a confirmation ceremony at which the thirteen year old would answer rehearsed questions about the tenets of Jewish faith. The Bar Mitzvah boy could at best display ability to read from the Torah and give a discourse; the confirmand could show he knew the religious principles of his faith."[4]

Dr. David Philipson, in the CCAR Yearbook in 1890, wrote, "Since the Bar Mitzvah is an antiquated, soulless ceremony with no meaning for us and our time, some public expression of belief is necessary...It is because of the soullessness, the meaninglessness, and the dry formality of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony that the confirmation has been introduced."[5] Dr. Philipson's critique was that the Bar Mitzvah would no longer read Torah *from* the Torah but rather either a translation or a transliteration of the text, that the clergy were writing speeches for the students, and that the drop-out rate was quite high—though, to be fair, there was not much in the form of education to continue past Bar Mitzvah.

Rabbi Kaufman Kohler in 1913 referred to Bar Mitzvah as an anachronism:

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[4] Debra R. Blank, " History of Confirmation," *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); reprinted from www.myjewishlearning.com November, 2004

[5] David Philipson, "Confirmation in the Synagogue," *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. I* (1890): 47-49

Now I ask, is the calling up of the thirteen year old lad to become Bar Mitzvah by reading or listening to the reading of the Torah, which is still the practice in many Reform congregations[6], in harmony with the whole of our Reform service?

Accordingly, it was the greatest privilege that could be bestowed upon the youth who had just attained, according to the juridical view of the time, the age of duty and responsibility, and the Bar Mitzvah, after having received his training in Scriptural reading, to be called up to the Torah like any of the learned men and thus be solemnly admitted into the membership of the congregation. And this custom prevailed even after the Congregation had been so enlarged as to admit many of those unable to read aloud from the Torah, so that the Reader (Hazan or Shaliach Tzibur) had to read the portion for them, while they simply recited the benediction preceding and following the Torah reading...Since the calling up of members of the congregation to read from the Scroll of the Law has been abolished in the Reform synagogue, the whole Bar Mitzvah rite lost all meaning, and the calling up of the same is nothing less than a sham...But there is a greater principle involved. When Confirmation was introduced into the modern

[6] In the *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. LXXII*, p. 157, Rabbi Leo J. Stillpass presented the results of a survey of congregational religious practice. Though presented in 1962, with the survey taking place in 1961, much later than Rabbi Kohler's statements, the results shed some light on his point: Of the 308 valid questionnaire responses, 228 congregations stated that they never parted with the practice of Bar Mitzvah, one instituted Bar Mitzvah, and five re-instituted it. Seven congregations do not permit Bar Mitzvah. One hundred and eighty-five congregations have Bat Mitzvah, eleven are contemplating adding the practice, and sixty-two do not permit Bat Mitzvah. One hundred and ninety congregations elicit a commitment from students to continue through Confirmation. The dominant belief is that Bar Mitzvah was replaced in the Reform movement by Confirmation, though it would appear from these statistics, as well as Rabbi Kohler's statement, that the two existed side-by-side for a time. Contrasting this conclusion is a statement by Rabbi Bernard Martin in the same text (p. 158) that Confirmation was instituted at the age of thirteen to replace Bar Mitzvah seamlessly. It would appear that some congregations merged the practice while others simply held Confirmation later. A discussion in other CCAR yearbooks (most notably XXIII) presents the debate to move Confirmation to the age of sixteen, which "is already the practice in many congregations."

> synagogue, the early Reform leaders had chiefly one object in view—to emancipate religion from the oriental view which regards religion in the main as the concern of man only, and not of women, and therefore essentially and intently neglects the religious training of the girl. In clear and emphatic opposition to such Orientalism as still prevails, the religious instruction was systematically extended so as to include the girls, and after the conclusion of the course of instruction, the young woman was solemnly initiated into the faith of the fathers at the age of maturity just as was the young man.[7]

From the statement of Rabbi Kohler, it would appear that one popular theory, that Confirmation was implemented for egalitarian reasons, is simply not true.[8] Rather, the contention that Bar Mitzvah discriminated against girls appeared to be a rationalization—an afterthought in the development of the Confirmation ceremony. In order to fully appreciate the rationale, however, the reader must understand that the Reform struggle with (and, at times, against) Bar Mitzvah was consistently framed in the language of the age. For example, the early reformers were against Bar Mitzvah because they were against extraneous ritual. The early American reformers disputed the validity of the ritual when students no longer read from the Torah or even recited their own drashot. By the 1920s, when equal rights and gender issues had captured the national discourse, the debate was initiated under the guise of gender issues. Thus, the response to Bar Mitzvah, favorable or not, was intricately connected to the era in which Jews were living.

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[7] Kaufman Kohler, "Responsa Committee" *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. XXIII*, (1913) 170

[8] This theory is clearly viewed in the writings of current Reform rabbis such as Rabbi Samuel M. Stahl (published sermon titled "What Has Happened to Confirmation?" found at www.beth-elsa.org/be_s0518.htm) and Rabbi Andrew Vogel.

Development of Confirmation

The process of Confirmation was based on the model of Protestant catechism, whereby after a period of study, the confirmand would answer questions that displayed a comprehension of Jewish religious principles. The culmination of the course of study indicated that the adolescent was now sufficiently responsible to graduate to adult status. Within the Protestant movement, the content of the ceremony and preparation varied widely, but it was usually characterized by some formal confession of faith or statement of principles, following a period of study.[9] In its initial stage, the Jewish ceremony of Confirmation was conceived simply as a repackaging of Bar Mitzvah, with a change in the educational focus from practice to doctrinal declaration.

The first known Jewish recognition of the ceremony was extended by the Jewish Consistory at Cassel in the year 1809.[10] It devoted two paragraphs to the duties of the rabbi, one of which read, "The rabbi must prepare the young for confirmation and himself perform the act of confirming them."[11]

Dr. Jacob Raider Marcus believed that Confirmation was an innovation of Israel Jacobson.[12] Dr. Marcus authored an extended article on Israel Jacobson for the CCAR

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[9] Debra Blank,"History of Confirmation," *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1996); reprinted from www.myjewishlearning.com (November 2005)
[10] Dr. Michael A. Meyer presents a discussion of the influences on the Westphalia ceremony, pointing directly to a ceremony that occurred in 1803 in Dessau. See *Response to Modernity*, page 39.
[11] David Philipson, "Confirmation in the Synagogue," *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. I* (1890): 44
[12] In fact, Heinrich Graetz, in *History of the Jews* (p. 562), writes of Jacobson: "He also introduced new forms and methods borrowed from the Church, such as German alongside Hebrew prayers, insipid German

Yearbook[13] and wrote, "Confirmation was introduced to help children live according to the religious and moral law and loyally to conform to the statutes of the land." Dr. Marcus then proceeded to detail the first examples (or, rather, precursors[14]) of the Confirmation ceremony, taking place as early as 1807 in Wolfenbuetel, Germany. His article also presents the argument that Bar Mitzvah was viewed by these original proponents of Confirmation as a ceremony that meant nothing, while Confirmation would "help fight the inroads of irreligion; it would strengthen the love for the faith. It would help the children to know Judaism."[15]

Another German ceremony was conducted by J. Johlson of Frankfort-on-the-Main, not a rabbi but rather a teacher who recommended Confirmation of his students, in 1810:

> Mr. Johlson who, in his school-house, established a sort of worship, commencing at a later hour than the Synagogue, with German hymns, organ, and preaching, to which was added *confirmation* of the young people:—the former as a means of drawing the grown persons into his place of worship; the latter, to impress the importance of religion upon the minds of those just entering into life, so as to bind them, through means of the promise then solemnly given, to the observance of the

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songs by the side of the psalms pregnant with thought, and the ceremony of confessing the faith, Confirmation, for half-grown boys and girls, an idea without meaning in Judaism."

[13] Jacob Raider Marcus, "Israel Jacobson: The Founder of the Reform Movement of Judaism," *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. XXXVIII*, (1928), 386

[14] I would hesitate to call this ceremony a Confirmation ceremony as defined by the 1810 ceremony. However, Dr. Marcus's description of this ceremony leads the reader to understand that the 1810 ceremony owed much to the 1807 precursor.

[15] Jacob Raider Marcus, "Israel Jacobson: The Founder of the Reform Movement of Judaism," *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. XXXVIII*, (1928), 490, footnote 73

duties taught them at school, and the belief in the doctrines which had been enforced by their teachers.[16]

One can notice from this article that the Confirmation ceremony was an innovation of the reformers and was one of the means of bringing people back to a religious sentiment that they feared had greatly gone into abeyance.

Dr. Philipson presented a well-researched paper on the early development of Confirmation to the CCAR in 1890. In accordance with the Cassel resolution, the first Confirmation on record occurred in Cassel in 1810, through the agency of the Westphalian Israelitish Consistory. Only one boy was confirmed and blessed by the rabbi, and the ceremony was performed not in the synagogue but in the schoolrooms. Throughout the next forty years, as Dr. Philipson demonstrates, the Confirmation ceremony grew in numbers of students and in ritual expression and formality and, in an action well ahead of its time, began including girls as early as 1817—over 100 years before the first Bat Mitzvah in America and before the serious American debates about equal rights for women. By 1843, the ceremony had spread past the borders of Germany and into France, where (for the first time) more girls than boys were confirmed![17]

In time, the ceremony also spread to the Western Hemisphere. A letter to *The Occident* describes a Confirmation ceremony that occurred in St. Thomas in 1846[18]:

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[16] *The Occident IV*, pp. 346–347; American Jewish Archives
[17] David Philipson, "Confirmation in the Synagogue," *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. I* (1890), 44
[18] A Note to the reader: at the time of the ceremony, St. Thomas was a Danish colony and was not part of the United States. This territory did not become part of the United States until 1917.

The Confirmants having undergone a course of instruction and preparation, and being perfect in their parts, a procession, composed of the confirmants, (the girls dressed in white, with white veils covering their heads and faces, the boys in their holiday suits,) walking in pairs, and succeeded by the Reader of the congregation, dressed in his robes, proceeded from the residence of the Reader to the Synagogue; arriving there, the service of the evening (eve of Shabungot [sic]) was commenced; at the appropriate time the Reader ascended the pulpit and delivered a discourse in English, the confirmants and their parents were then placed around the front of the Ark, in two ranks, the former in front and the latter in the rear:— the Reader, taking his stand on the platform of the ark, then interrogated the confirmants on the Decalogue and the thirteen principles of Faith, alternately in Hebrew and in English, the responses being all correctly made, in accordance with an established formula; the ark was opened, and three Scrolls of the Law were taken out and held by the dignitaries of the congregation; the confirmants then approached and placed their hands upon the Scrolls, they repeated a solemn pledge and promise that they (the confirmants) will always believe in what they have learned and repeated, and will never change their religion (or words to that effect) —the confirmants assented thereto, and the parents then laid their hands on the heads of the confirmants, and a blessing was invoked by the Reader. After this an exhortation was delivered, and the service was concluded.[19]

[19] *The Occident IV*, p. 339ff; American Jewish Archives

The author of the letter challenges the innovation of the Confirmation ceremony on several fronts but reserves the largest objection for the end of his litany:

> The Creed of the Jew is the emphatic declaration "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One*." It begins and it ends with that single, comprehensible and undisputed idea. But, in the ceremony of Confirmation, as it was performed here, this great truth is joined to what are termed the Thirteen Articles of Faith, all of which the confirmants are made to declare they believe with a firm faith...Is it either wise or proper to cause, or even to permit, young, inexperienced persons to make a solemn pledge before God and the world, always to *believe* what they have been taught and always to *act* in conformity to that belief.[20]

The American Jewish Archives contains a Confirmation Certificate issued to Hannah De Sola in a ceremony that occurred in St. Thomas two years prior. The text of the document reads:

Certificate of Confirmation

I, Benjamin Cohen Carillon,
Minister of the Israelitish Congregation in this
Island, certify that on Sabbath Shemini 5604
corresponding with 13 April 1844 I confirmed
Hannah De Sola

[20] Ibid.

Daughter of Isaac Haim De Sola

and Zipporah De Sola, born Hoheb.

The said person is consequently duly accepted
as a member of the Synagogue, and entitled to
all the rights and benefits thereof.

Signature of the
Confirmist
Hannah De Sola,

Given under my hand and seal,
in the Island of St. Thomas, on
Sunday, the 25th of Nissan 5604
14th of April 1844
B.C. Carillon

This document discloses a number of interesting facts. First and foremost, the date of the ceremony—April 13, 1844—was not Shavuot. In a letter accompanying the certificate, Hannah De Sola's birthday is listed as April 11, 1831. Thus, her Confirmation occurred on the Shabbat nearest her thirteenth birthday. From this fact, the reader can discern two important bits of information: (1) there was no set date for Confirmation, since each "confirmist" went through the ceremony on the Shabbat closest to his or her birthday, and (2) that the Confirmation ceremony was not a class activity but rather an individual ceremony (unless Hannah De Sola was a unique case—i.e., she was the only child that year; other students opted out of the ceremony; or the class ceremony was actually held once all students were thirteen, and Hannah was the youngest student).

The first known Confirmation ceremony in the United States was led by Dr. Max Lilienthal at Anshe Chesed Congregation in New York on Shavuot, 1846. As we learn from a correspondent of *The Occident* who wrote a full letter detailing the work of the rabbi, Dr. Lilienthal established, upon his arrival, several committees. These committees filed reports directly to Dr. Lilienthal. The summation of the Confirmation committee was detailed in *The Occident*:

> Every boy at twelve years of age, and every girl at eleven, is to receive preparatory religious instruction from the chief Rabbi himself, from the period of Hnucka to Shebuoth. These instructions are to consist of the knowledge of religion in general but particularly the principles of the Jewish creed and its revelations, the doctrine of the existence of God and of his commandments, the immortality of the soul, explanation of the thirteen articles of faith, the duties of man to God, to himself, and to his fellow-creatures, and all the requisites of the moral law. On the first day of Shebuoth of each year, the children who are properly prepared are to receive public confirmation. Last Shebuoth this ceremony was, for the first time, publicly performed in the Anshay-Chesed Synagogue. Upwards of fifteen hundred persons were present, and no one doubted the excellent effect it had on the whole assemblage. The Rabbi delivered an impressive sermon, which drew tears from all, and satisfied every one, that far from being a destructive innovation, "confirmation" was an earnest appeal to every Jew to rally with heart and soul round the standard of our holy religion, and

await with confidence for the fulfillment of the prophecies: "And the Lord shall be King over all the earth, on that day the Lord alone shall be acknowledged, and His name be one." He gave convincing evidence that the ceremony of confirmation is in accordance with the strictest rules of orthodoxy, as laid down in the Talmud and Shulchan-Aruoh. " Confirmation" is, however, not to interfere in the least with the ceremony of Bar Mitzvah, which is to be performed as heretofore.[21]

The Debate in the Reform Movement

As illustrated in Chapter 1, the Bar Mitzvah was the celebration of the attainment of the age of religious responsibility. The Confirmation ceremony was modeled after contemporary ceremonies, emphasizing a "solemn graduation from the school of religious and ethical instruction intended to consecrate the young to their duties as Jews."[22] Whether or not Confirmation was meant to replace Bar Mitzvah and serve as an initiation seems never to have been clear. Perhaps some of the original reformers had meant to eliminate the ritual of Bar Mitzvah, but more evidence points to their coexistence than to a general replacement—a statement made clear by the above article in *The Occident*. Even within this single article by Rabbi Kohler, there is a direct contradiction: "Confirmation is the solemn form of initiation of the Jewish youth into their ancestral faith…" yet later: "It does not mean initiation into the faith, or admission into the Jewish community, but it is a declaration of the candidates, after having been

[21] *The Occident IV*, p. 552; American Jewish Archives
[22] Kaufman Kohler, "Confirmation" *Jewish Education Vol. IV* (1931): 219

sufficiently instructed in their duties as Jews, and being imbued with enthusiasm for their religion, to be resolved to live as Jews."[23]

In fact, there was even disagreement among the advocate rabbis at the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Dr. Philipson details a controversy that occurred in 1860 between Holdheim, Leopold Stein, and Wechsler, rabbi of Oldenburg. Holdheim argued that the Confirmation ceremony marked the entrance into and acceptance of Judaism. Stein argued against Holdheim, articulating his view that Confirmation only designated the affiliation with the congregation. Wechsler declared that the Confirmation served as the end and conclusion of the religious instructions and the first public religious act of the child.

By 1890, according to Dr. Philipson, the state of the Bar Mitzvah was in disrepair:

> The boy recites no Sedrah, not even a Perashah; he learns the Beracha very often, if not in most instances, from an English or German transliteration, ascends the platform, speaks the lesson he has learned by rote, much as a parrot would, without understanding a word he says or that he hears read from the Torah, returns to his parents, and the religious conscience is satisfied. The whole proceeding partakes of the nature of a farce and the sooner it is done away with the better.[24]

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[23] Ibid.
[24] David Philipson, "Confirmation in the Synagogue," *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. I* (1890), 45

Dr. Philipson believed that the Confirmation service was meant to supplant the Bar Mitzvah service. The two had existed together for many years, both in Germany and in the United States, not out of respect for the Bar Mitzvah but as a precautionary measure: There was a fear of arousing more violent opposition than the institution of Confirmation aroused. One ceremony thus satisfied the conservative spirit, the other impressed upon the children the meaning of religion.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from the argument for Confirmation over Bar Mitzvah in the Reform movement? Dr. Philipson's objections aside, the Confirmation ritual was at first only a graduation exercise from the religious school and was conducted by a teacher in the school—not a rabbi—and only boys were confirmed. Gradually, girls were admitted to the rite, bringing about mixed classes instead of separate ceremonies. While the ceremony in Germany was not originally observed at a fixed time, by the time Dr. Lilienthal held the first Confirmation ceremony in the United States it had already become associated with Shavuot. The rabbi assumed the leading role as the ceremony took on religious significance. The institution of Confirmation spread from Westphalia to other parts of Germany, where it expanded to other parts of Europe and then to the Western Hemisphere.

The claim by advocates for Confirmation that it was created for egalitarian purposes has already been dismissed as a rationalization rather than a cause. This fact is demonstrated

by the documentation that boys alone were confirmed in 1810 and girls were added to the ceremony only in 1817.[25]

The critics were not kind to the Confirmation ceremony. Philipson wrote, "It was decried as a servile limitation of Christianity and entirely foreign to the spirit of Judaism."[26] Kohler pointed out that it contradicted the principle that the Israelite is pledged by the covenant of Sinai at birth, inasmuch as the confirmand is asked to pledge himself to Judaism as though he would have no heritage in that covenant without this pledge.[27]

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in North America, the assumption is that Confirmation had generally eclipsed Bar Mitzvah among North American Jews—an assumption that cannot be supported by this research.[28] Rather, it appeared that the two ceremonies had existed side-by-side starting in 1846 with Dr. Lillienthal—a move intended to ease Bar Mitzvah out of the ritual lexicon and replace it slowly with Confirmation. Though at times more popular than Bar Mitzvah, Confirmation never fully replaced Bar Mitzvah in the Reform movement. It is beyond the scope of this thesis, but an avenue for further research would entail going through a representative number of synagogue records to determine if it had ever completely done away with Bar Mitzvah. What quantifiable data we do have, the Rabbi Stillpass survey of 1962, details that most

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[25] Kaufman Kohler, "Confirmation" *Jewish Education Vol. IV* (1931): 219—the addition of girls to the ceremony is significant and indicates a departure in attitudes, a fact that makes this era worthy of further study.
[26] David Philipson, "Confirmation in the Synagogue," *CCAR Yearbook, Vol. 1* (1890), 43
[27] Kaufman Kohler, "Confirmation" *Jewish Education Vol. IV* (1931): 219
[28] Notably, Rabbi Kohler's statement from page 22 and Rabbi Stillpass's survey results from 1962 dispute this claim.

congregations never actually replaced Bar Mitzvah with Confirmation. Rather, the two ceremonies complemented each other.

By the early twentieth century, congregations began adjusting the age of Confirmation, making it two or three years after Bar Mitzvah. This move graduated the Confirmation to a different status altogether: The Bar Mitzvah became the right of passage into adult study of Judaism, and the Confirmation ceremony became the acceptance of that learning. In other words, the Bar Mitzvah boy would spend two or three years studying Judaism on a more adult level, with a different methodology, and would then return to the synagogue to "confirm" that he had, indeed, accepted Judaism into his life.

The nineteenth-century reformers in Germany viewed Bar Mitzvah as a 'hollow shell,' an empty ceremony. However, as Jenna Joselit has written, "in the process of transplantation from the Old World to the New, this rite of passage assumed a brand-new centrality and immediacy." Just how the ceremony was influenced by America is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON BAR/BAR MITZVAH

Journalist Mark Oppenheimer wrote in his book, Thirteen and a Day, that "B'nai Mitzvah are religiously important and they are sociologically interesting; they are the Christian's baptism and the Muslim's pilgrimage to Mecca combined, ritual of initiation and maturation. They are celebrations too: what begins in the sanctuary with piety, even solemnity, moves to the dining room, catering hall, or hotel ballroom, gaining in merriment along the way."[1] Published toward the end of the writing of this thesis, Mr. Oppenheimer's book uses the Bar Mitzvah ceremony and celebration as the vehicle to study the Jewish community in the United States in the twenty-first century. Similarly to this thesis, Mr. Oppenheimer concludes that a myriad of factors have combined to influence, and be influenced by, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony and celebration. To that end, a survey of major events, institutions, and trends that affected the American Jewish community in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will allow the reader to better contextualize the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of the initial years of the twenty-first century.

This chapter will detail the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual and process in relation to twentieth-century sociological and historical scholarship. The chapter is divided into five sections: (1) the effect on the ceremony of German immigration roughly between 1820-1880, (2) the ceremony as it responded to the Eastern European immigration between 1880-1945, (3) the ceremony as it appeared in the 1950s through the late 1960s, (4) the ceremony as it responded to sociological issues of the late 1960s through the early 1980s, and (5)

[1] Mark Oppenheimer, *Thirteen and a Day* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 5

changes in the American Jewish community in the last few decades of the twentieth century and how the Bar/Bat Mitzvah responded to those changes. The conclusion will synthesize the information in this chapter and lead into the next chapter of the thesis.

1820s–1800s

What information we have concerning Bar Mitzvah in America (from the earliest documented stories until 1924) comes in the form of letters, memoirs, and newspaper articles and announcements. Take for example this article that appeared in 1846, published in *The Occident*, responding to the rite of Confirmation:

> Jewish religious initiation should commence from the cradle; the children should be early taught some religious truth, induced to participate in some religious ceremony, so that when the boy arrives at his thirteenth, and the girl at her twelfth year, they may at once enter, understandingly and piously, upon the duties which are now incumbent on them, they being, from their respective ages, full members in communion with the household of Jacob. Whilst, therefore, we lived in the simplicity of ancestral manner, confirmation, initiation, or *chinnuch*, was not to be thought of, any farther than that the boys were counted among the ten requisite for constituting an assembly for public worship, or minyan (the number) as it is technically termed, called up to the public reading of the law, and were permitted to read their own portion, or even the whole weekly section. Occasionally a recitation or studied address was recited by the new members to the Synagogue,

> and a friendly invitation given to partake of a religious entertainment (Seudah shel Mitzvah) at the house of the parents or guardians. From the nature of our worship, female children could not participate in these ceremonies; hence their entrance into religious communion was not marked by any outward act, other than their gradual initiation of all the observances demanded of them.[2]

The article in *The Occident* implies that, during the period of Jewish immigration in the mid-nineteenth century, standards of Jewish education were low, perhaps matched only by expectations of the students' skill levels and enthusiasm.[3] Nevertheless, the Bar Mitzvah was considered an important event to be celebrated not in a home ceremony but instead in a public synagogue ritual; the "home" aspect was the celebration thrown by the boy's father. Stuart Schoenfeld has argued "the folk values gave higher—sometimes exclusive—priority to a successful performance than to understanding, even at the most basic level, or to behavioral commitment."[4] Essentially, while Judaism was being remade on American soil, the Bar Mitzvah was being remade as a synagogue-based ceremony.

A survey of Bar Mitzvah speeches of this period, all of which were found in the American Jewish Archives, illustrates that the Bar Mitzvah boy was either being humble in his words or truly felt not up to the task. Take, for example, the Bar Mitzvah address

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[2] *The Occident IV*, pp. 345–346- a collection of articles from the newspaper. This piece appeared in 1860.
[3] Stuart Schoenfeld, "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* (Denver, CO: A.R.E. Publishing, 1993), 79
[4] Ibid.

of the son of Benjamin Rosenblatt of Hartford, Connecticut, in 1860. In the introduction, he writes:

> A solemn duty calls me today on this sacred spot! It is the day of my Bar Mitzvah on which, according to the old custom of our ancestors, I have to appear before this devout assembly and to bring, as a novice in the priesthood of the Most High, the firstlings of the Lord's vineyard, "the Principles of Our Holy Faith," upon the altar of our Heavenly Father.[5]

At this point in the speech, the speaker has already mentioned his obligation to appear. Perhaps this son of immigrants was compelled by tradition, parents, or some other cause. Regardless, the language does not imply that the student *wants* to become a Bar Mitzvah; Rather, another force (or other forces) is acting upon him and his actions.[6] He continues:

> But, my friends, how can I, or any child, presume properly to discharge such an important task? How should I, yet a boy, be enabled to solve such a divine problem, that requires the divine knowledge and eloquence of an expert orator? Alas! I feel too well the insufficiency of my faculties...

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[5] American Jewish Archives; original text reported in *The Occident*, March 29, 1860, Volume XVIII (1860), pp. 5–6; Rabbi Dr. Isaac Mayer Wise, Officiant; Recopied for the AJA from *The Occident* by Abraham I. Shinedling, April, 1965. Sadly, the name of the Bar Mitzvah was not included in any records.

[6] Another issue here is whether this type of sentiment was stylistic of the times. One way to read this information is to conclude that perhaps a Rabbi or some other authority figure composed the address while the student merely recited it, or perhaps just inserted applicable, individualistic sentences and paragraphs. This conclusion is supported both by the plethora of books published around this time, including Bar Mitzvah drashot, and the evidence that exists to this day that many congregations utilize the "plug and punch" formula for the composition of these drashot.

The son of Benjamin Rosenblatt states that he does not feel sufficiently trained to take on the mantle of an adult in the congregation of Israel. However, later in the address, he comes to terms with what that means and states that, though he desires his new status and is excited about his new role as "an adult," he "feels deeply in my soul the great significance of this day." Many of the other addresses in the Archives use similarly flowery language to describe the significance of becoming a Bar Mitzvah, though only a fraction explore, in such detail, the Bar Mitzvah boy's feelings of incompetence.

The Reform Judaism developed in America by the German immigrants in the 1850s–1880s incorporated some of the innovations that were begun in Western Europe[7], among them the Confirmation ceremony.[8] The German Jewish immigrants were themselves overwhelmed by the Eastern European Jews who began arriving in large numbers in the 1880s. Largely due to immigration, the American Jewish population rose from about 280,000 in 1877 to 4.5 million in 1927.[9] These Eastern European immigrants settled in densely populated immigrant ghettos. Some of the immigrants were secular Zionists and socialists, but most were religiously affiliated. Many small synagogues were founded by *landsmenschaften*, associations of immigrants from the same small town or area.[10] The immigrants in these synagogues conducted services as if they were still in Europe; the language of prayer was Hebrew, and the language of conversation was either their lingua

[7] There is compelling scholarly debate, advanced most notably by Leon Jick's book *The Americanization of the Synagogue* (1992) that the Reform Judaism that developed in America was an indigenous product as opposed to a German import. While I believe that Reform Judaism as seen in America today is unique to America, the roots are Western European. While offering the permission to reform the traditions, adapt ideologies to include modernity, and liturgical reform, American Reform Judaism rests on the shoulders of the Western European reformers such as Hirsch and Geiger.

[8] For more information on this phenomenon, including evidence that the Confirmation ceremony was imported from Western Europe and was not a uniquely American innovation, see Chapter 2 of the thesis.

[9] Source: "350 Years of Jews in America" exhibit

[10] See Sarna's *American Judaism* and Moore's *At Home in America.*

franca (usually Russian or Polish) or Yiddish. Many Jewish boys became Bar Mitzvah in these synagogues—in the world of their fathers, not the new world in which they were growing up.[11]

1880-1945

Falling into place with the Reform Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which had moved away from outward mitzvah observance, the Reform Bar Mitzvah ceremony no longer acknowledged full participation of the thirteen-year-old in the sacred rituals described in the inception of the ceremony (donning Tefilin and Tallit, regular Shabbat attendance and worship, and the ability to lead daily prayers). Even for the more traditional Jews in America, it seemed to have become a ritual of discontinuity—the last time the boy was to present himself in the "old world" ritual of his father and grandfather. It became a ritual in which Jewish traditions—such as knowledge of Hebrew, laying Tefilin, even reading from the Torah—were affirmed and then ignored.[12] For the parents—themselves having left the traditional shtetl life of the old world in favor of a new world with new possibilities—it appears the ritual affirmation of religious continuity in and of itself was an important action (as opposed to the affirmation of individual belief and commitment to traditional behavior).

A fantastic example of this period exists in the film *Hester Street*. In the end, while Gittle insists that her son learn the prayers of the service, she still breaks with tradition

[11] Many of the texts, services, and speeches from Bar Mitzvah ceremonies from this period are inaccessible to me—every example found in the American Jewish Archives is in Yiddish or German!
[12] Schoenfeld, 79

and acknowledges his English name, Joey. Though it may be a leap to imply that Joey would not be as observant as his mother (who, by the way, had begun wearing the fashions of the day instead of the fashions of the shtetl), the example illustrates the old-world/new-world tensions faced by these late-nineteenth-century Jewish immigrants and their children.

Hungarian Rabbi Moses Weinberger (as translated by historian Jonathan Sarna) wrote, in his memoir of travels among American Jews, that although boys in New York lost religion immediately after their B'nai Mitzvah, they celebrated the event "by the hundreds every year...amid enormous splendor and great show." Weinberger wrote in 1887 that Bar Mitzvah "is celebrated here as the greatest of holidays among our Jewish brethren."[13] Weinberger's description of a Bar Mitzvah celebration stands as one of the few pieces of anthropological evidence from this period:

> I know of one important man here who on the day when his son became bar mitzvah, donated a fine Torah scroll, complete with magnificent dress...He also held a great reception to which he invited presidents, ex-presidents, and future presidents, as well as many preachers, lecturers, and good friends. All delivered wisdom-filled speeches. They thanked God who, in His abundant compassion, did marvelous things, and left each generation with remnants—men of extraordinary merit—who sacrificed their hearts and souls on the altar of Torah and faith. They then proceeded to laud the bar mitzvah boy's mother, teachers,

[13] Jonathan Sarna *People Walk on their Heads: Moses Weinberger's Jews and Judaism in New York* (New York, NY: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1982), 52

> and the boy himself, particularly his *maftir*...and especially the speech which was glorious and excellent. They praised the entire family and held it up as an example for all Israel. Seeing such a reception for the first time, I did not fail to enjoy it. I left happy and in good cheer...The next day, the boy's Hebrew teacher attempted to introduce him to the wearing of tefillin. This boy, like his five older brothers, adamantly refused.[14]

Weinberg's comments had little effect on the growing "Bar Mitzvah industry" of the late 1800s through World War I America. In the old world, the Bar Mitzvah was a religiously meaningful event; in the new world, immigrant Jews "fancified" the Bar Mitzvah. New rites of passage associated with the Bar Mitzvah began to take shape—among them the "Bar Mitzvah Photo." Jenna Joselit's book, The Wonders of America, contains a small collection of photographs of Bar Mitzvah boys posing for the camera. They stand straight, each wearing a tallis and a fedora, the fashion of the day. The boys are dressed in sharp suits, and several of the boys are holding a book, assumed to be a Jewish topical book. The photographs capture boys dressed as men—fitting, since these thirteen-year-olds are caught between the childhood of their secular culture and the adult world of their Jewish culture.

With the second and third waves of immigration (1840–1880 and 1880–1924), ritual reforms reflected a growing divide between Jewish immigrant newcomers to America and a more-prosperous, Americanized synagogue elite. The synagogue became a contested space over which Jews fought to assert what it meant to be a Jew, an American,

[14] Ibid., p. 76

and an American Jew. The solution to these conflicts was a reflection of democratic America: Those who shared a ritual aesthetic, a similar approach to prayer and observance, simply started their own synagogues. The response to the breakaway congregation was that older synagogues would Raise dues or deny voting membership to newcomers, thus excluding immigrants and creating a more Protestant style of worship (i.e., solemn services, use of the vernacular, etc.—the very reforms that the "immigrants" were against). The newcomers would in turn create synagogues in the style of the communities they had left.[15]

Secularization brought the usual challenges to Jews experienced by other immigrants in the twentieth century. "Many Jewish observances were disharmonious with the environment—they had been fashioned in the East and consequently were at odds with Western culture. Additionally, while the thrust of Jewish religious culture is sacramental, the thrust of American religious cultural is moralistic."[16] Thus, religious obligation began to give way to ethereal philosophy.

While many Orthodox Jews (and even some Reform and Conservative Jews) dismissed the popularity of Reform and Conservative Judaism as a result of Jews choosing "easy" ritual and lax practice, sociologist William Novak argues that the rise of Reform and Conservative branches of Judaism was directly related to "Judaism's sacramental emphasis and the inability of many a modern Jew to embrace the totality of the Jewish sacred system...Instead of receiving all that has been passed down to him, such a Jew

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[15] Ibid., p. 24
[16] William Novak "American Jews and American Judaism," *Commentary Magazine* (January 1996): 38

seeks to discover what mitzvot he can still adhere to out of the vast sacramental heritage. Whatever the particular results of such a confrontation, the mitzvot that many a contemporary Jew finds meaningful may not conform to the criteria internal to the religious system."[17]

Thus, the very tenets that drew a person to Jewish community in the shtetl may be the tenets that conflict with contemporary culture. Examples include keeping kosher, refraining from work on Shabbat, and adhering to the aesthetics of the old-world Judaism (head coverings for women, peyus and beards for men, etc.). Further, with the dismissal of some of these tenets that attained primary importance in Eastern European communities, the aspects that were of secondary importance in essence "moved up" to attain primary importance.[18] This might explain the rise in importance of the Bar Mitzvah ritual.

When religious observance and traditions could not be merged with the new American rites, new rituals emerged. The issue of gender inequality led to discussions within the Reform and Conservative Movements on the subject of Bat Mitzvah. While the Reform

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[17] Ibid.

[18] It should be noted here that the practice of Jewish Confirmation had attained an elevated position in Reform Judaism. Tracing its roots to the German Jewish Reform movement of the nineteenth century, the earliest reformers viewed confirmation as complementary to the Bar Mitzvah. They saw the older ritual as implying a technical change of status while the newer one reflected knowledge, motivation, and personal commitment. This attitude shifted among the leading reformers who entered the United States as part of this immigrant group in the mid-nineteenth century. For these founders of American Reform Judaism, group confirmation ceremonies represented a process of acculturation and adaptation of Jewish religious tradition to the values of American democracy and supplanted the individual Bar Mitzvah. Confirmation also provided an opportunity to include girls in a "coming of age ritual," reinforcing the Reform Movement's identification with contemporary and Western mores.
By the end of the acculturation process for the third-wave immigrants, Confirmation had supplemented, Rather than replaced, Bar Mitzvah. Confirmation found a place among fifteen-year-olds, while the Bar and (newly originated) Bat Mitzvah ritual was reinserted as a rite of passage for thirteen-year-olds.

Movement had already diminished the importance of the Bar Mitzvah in favor of the egalitarian Confirmation service, and Orthodox Jews accepted the gender segregation of the traditional synagogue, the Conservative Movement found tremendous struggle with the issue of the Bat Mitzvah ceremony.

As early as 1921, Conservative Rabbis discussed whether or not to adopt Bat Mitzvah. Like the Reform Movement, the Conservative discussion focused on gender inequalities. Some Conservative Rabbis, such as Rabbi Abraham Hershman, argued for a Bat Mitzvah ceremony simply because there was a rite of Bar Mitzvah.[19] Other Rabbis argued that the Conservative Movement should adopt Confirmation as opposed to Bat Mitzvah. One proponent of this view, Rabbi M. M. Eichler, saw the Confirmation ceremony as a "symbolic shift of modern women's influence away from the home and toward the synagogue and religious school."[20] Rabbi Eichler believed that the Confirmation ceremony at a later age would keeps boys and girls involved in the congregational religious school.

A third school opted against the establishment of Confirmation. Represented at the 1921 United Synagogue of America Conference by Rabbi Louis Feinberg, they argued that the Confirmation ceremony was simply a copy of a church custom, forbidden in Torah by the prohibition against following in the customs of another people.[21] Further, they argued, there should be no Bat Mitzvah; the point of the Bar Mitzvah is to symbolize the passage

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[19] Paula E. Hyman, "The introduction of Bat Mitzvah in Conservative Judaism in Postwar America," *YIVO Annual 19* (1990): 135

[20] Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America," *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 225

[21] Ibid.

of a boy from being accountable to his parents for fulfillment of Mitzvot to his being solely responsible for their fulfillment. As girls are not obligated to obey some of the positive commandments, such as the donning of *Tefilin* and *tzit-tzit*, the ceremony would be meaningless.

One major step in this process occurred in 1922, when Mordecai Kaplan famously arranged for his daughter, Judith, to celebrate becoming a Bat Mitzvah at a public synagogue ceremony. Without diminishing this monumental event, it must be noted that her ceremony did not involve either ascending the bima or the reading from the Torah (she was called to a lectern at the front of the sanctuary and offered the blessings over Torah, including reading a section of the weekly portion and the English translation). Her ceremony did bear considerable resemblance to a way of celebrating this passage in the synagogue that some girls in Italy and France had begun even earlier[22], and Rabbi Kaplan may have used for his daughter's rite what he had heard or seen of an Italian ceremony.[23]

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[22] Though Bat Mitzvah celebrations had occurred in other countries, throughout the ages, what gave long-term importance to Judith Kaplan's moment was that American culture supported transforming this hesitant beginning into wholehearted change. By the end of the twentieth century, in almost all non-Orthodox congregations, girls would be celebrating their coming-of-age as B'not Mitzvah through much the same ceremonies their brothers experienced. Arthur Waskow, on www.MyJewishLearning.com, detailed some of these ceremonies from other countries: "Elsewhere, too, in Jewish life, girls entering adulthood began to take part in a public ceremony. Late in the 19th Century, Joseph of Baghdad wrote: And also the daughter on that day that she enters the obligation of the commandments, even though they don't usually make for her a *seudah*, nevertheless that day will be one of happiness. She should wear Sabbath clothing and if she is able to do so she should wear new clothing and bless the Shehecheyanu prayer and be ready for her entry to the yoke of the commandments. There are those who are accustomed to make her birthday every year into a holiday. It is a good sign, and this we do in our house." Another Bat Mitzvah ceremony, in the synagogue, was celebrated in Lwow in 1902 by Rabbi Dr. Yehezkel Caro, "Rabbi for enlightened Jews."

[23] Linda Burghardt, *The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Book* (New York, NY: Citadel Press, 2004), 21

That the ceremony was not entirely original does not diminish the importance of Judith Eisenstein becoming a Bat Mitzvah, for it demonstrates yet another aspect of Jewish life that changed in concert with America. Following World War I and into the 1920s, the women's suffrage movement was at its peak, culminating in the 1920 adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The innovation of the Bat Mitzvah may have many predecessors in earlier eras, but this first ceremony in 1922 opened the door for the gradual rise of the Bat Mitzvah in Reform and Conservative Judaism, as well as giving strength for modernizing winds in each of the progressive Jewish denominations.

During the late 1920s, community became one of the most important parts of the Reform Jewish experience in America—perhaps even overshadowing religious observance. Sarna has discussed this phenomenon by detailing the resultant rise of organizations during this period, many of which placed *Jewishness* above *Jewish observance*.[24] Dedicated to study, worship, charity, tending the sick, burying the dead, and other communal obligations, these organizations were proud of being in America—they were not denying the benefits of America, but they were providing a "zone of influence"[25] of the customs immigrants brought with them. Essentially, they were focused on peoplehood and on ethnic and communal ties. The overall belief was that religious observance was not as necessary as ethnic identity and ethnic signifiers. The common denominators that united the new immigrants became the bonds that bound them together Jewishly. High Holidays took on new importance as immigrants longed for the culture of

[24] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 80–89, 164–168, and 223–225

[25] Or, as Fishman would explain it, Jews began to coalesce their American and Jewish identities. Of course, Daniel J. Elezar explained the same phenomenon as "zones of influence."

their homeland. Lifecycle events became more important than continuous religious observance.[26]

Take, for example, the experience of Sol Breibart: "I was bar mitzvahed in the little shul in Charleston in 1927. My family had some friends over to the house and served wine and that was that. I don't remember going to shul before that."[27]

As Jewish life was centered around the lifecycle events, the celebrations quickly increased in importance. Families that could not afford extravagances in their daily lives would splurge on these celebrations. Norman Tipograph commented:

> People were kind of broke when I was bar mitzvahed in 1927. Even so, I got quite a few fountain pens. Since my mother had no money to make an expensive affair, she took over an empty apartment on the fifth floor of our building in the Bronx. There were plenty of empty apartments in those days. She took an old door, put it across two wooden horses, covered it with a cloth, and that became our banquet table. She cooked a big dinner and invited my aunts and uncles.[28]

As Jews became more affluent in America, hotels supplanted the home as the venue of choice for the Bar Mitzvah celebration. Primarily a result of increased affluence Rather

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[26] Stuart Schoenfeld, "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* (Denver, CO: A.R.E. Publishing, 1993), 80

[27] Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *Growing Up Jewish in America: An Oral History* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 186. Sadly, there is no information given on what denomination the individuals who gave these testimonials were affiliated with at the time of their simcha.

[28] Ibid.

than increased secularization, the main event of the Bar Mitzvah "affair" ceased being the ceremony and became the celebration.

Though there are many examples from this period of the Bar Mitzvah family sacrificing for the Bar Mitzvah boy, there are also a few examples of the boy sacrificing for the family. Take, for example, the comments of Arthur Cantor:

> The party was in the ballroom of the synagogue. My father took the gift money. I was delighted that he did. He had no money. Times were very tough. This was during the Depression when you could get a small Hershey bar for a penny, a monster-sized bar for a nickel. That I helped him pay for this ceremony...meant so much to him was great. I would have hocked the fountain pens I got to help him.[29]

Arthur Cantor surely could have meant it when he uttered those famous Bar Mitzvah words, "Today, I am a man," for he began, at the moment of his Bar Mitzvah ceremony, to assume the secular role of breadwinner.

Influenced by the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan and the Reconstructionist Movement, Reform congregations in the 1930s began to reinvent themselves not only as buildings housing religious worship and a school but also with numerous auxiliaries. Not antithetical to this shift, some congregations began reinstituting or re-emphasizing various ritual practices. After all, weddings and Bar Mitzvahs had become affairs that the

[29] Ibid., pp. 186–187

newly middle-class Jewish communities would spend considerable amounts of money to celebrate. Synagogues expanded to make room for ballrooms, reception areas, lounges, professional kitchens, and more-formal lighting—not to mention the newly expanded parking lots surrounding the structures. The very architecture of Judaism in America was changing, keeping up with the affluent spending patterns of the Jewish middle class.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the ritual of Bat Mitzvah continued to gain popularity. In 1931, South Shore Temple in Chicago had the Bat Mitzvah ceremony and officially became the first Reform congregation to hold a Bat Mitzvah ceremony.[30] By 1953, 35% of Reform congregations practiced the ritual.[31]

The Conservative Movement also took quite a while to come to terms with the Bat Mitzvah ceremony. In 1932, the Rabbinical Assembly asked Conservative rabbis a question about the Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Only six of the 110 congregational respondents had adopted the rite, another three intended to introduce it in the near future, and two others planned to incorporate the ritual into Friday night services.[32] By 1948, approximately one-third of Conservative synagogues had developed a Bat Mitzvah ceremony.[33]

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[30] Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 472
[31] Debra R. Blank, "Jewish Rites of Adolescence," *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 99
[32] Silverman, "Report of Survey on Ritual," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly, 1930-32*, p. 331; Reported in Paula E. Hyman, "The Introduction of Bat Mitzvah in Conservative Judaism in Postwar America," *YIVO Annual, Vol. 19* (1990), 135
[33] Ibid.

The rise in Bat Mitzvah exercises can be attributed to many factors, among them the drive to keep children involved in religious school. Regina Stein wrote that:

> The traditional Jewish community had limited the access of girls to formal Jewish education and had emphasized informal education within the home. However, the general decline in Jewish knowledge and practice in modern times, the powerful lure of secular culture for those, like girls, who received little countervailing Jewish instruction, and the growing recognition that women played a central role in the transmission of Jewish sentiment to their children... stimulated Jewish leaders to find ways to enhance the Jewish knowledge and self-esteem of women.[34]

Stein goes on in her essay to offer four examples of congregations in which the Conservative synagogue emphasized the girls' involvement in the congregational religious school that was required of Bat Mitzvah.

Some Reform congregations even began asserting the need for a Jewish homeland. Sisterhoods were formed and met with great success, as were Brotherhoods and a remodeled educational system that, instead of turning young Jews into better Americans, began turning young Jews into better Jews.[35] In 1937, in Columbus, Ohio, the CCAR passed the Columbus Platform, amending many aspects of the philosophy of Reform Judaism. While Classical Reform Judaism spoke of Judaism as a religion, the new platform referred to the Jewish people, stressing that Judaism was both an ethnicity and a faith. It called for a reinvestment in Jewish music and the use of Hebrew and even called

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[34] Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America" *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 142

[35] Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 250

for the resettlement of Palestine. Thus, on the eve of World War II, Reform Judaism reinvented itself, including for the first time a place for Zionists, a commitment to Jewish peoplehood, and the inclusion of traditional rites and rituals.

Among these rituals was the re-emergence of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Though it never truly disappeared, the Bar Mitzvah had been the target of a campaign of elimination from the earliest reformers. Even going so far as to institute a new ceremony, Confirmation, the reformers failed to understand the appeal the Bar Mitzvah would have to their congregants. In an article discussing religious trends in Reform Jewry in 1935, the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods published the results of a survey they had conducted. The report established:

> Bar Mitzvah, the traditional rite of inducting a boy of thirteen into the congregation, is practiced in varying degrees in 92 percent of the Reform temples, and 77 percent of the laymen answering the poll endorse this practice. The recently instituted rite of Bas Mitzvah for girls has spread to the extent that it is now observed in 35 percent of Reform congregations, and 41 percent of the Reform Jews answering the poll endorse this practice. More than 60 percent of the Reform temples confirm their children at the age of fifteen or older.[36]

On the eve of the Holocaust and World War II, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony had become readily accepted in the Reform movement as a ritual ceremony occurring at the age of thirteen, and Confirmation was solidly placed at the age of fifteen. Equally important to

[36] NFTB Archives

the ceremonial aspect was the emerging "Bar Mitzvah Party Culture." Often, this culture consisted of lavish parties costing tremendous amounts of money. Part family reunion and part showcase, the Bar Mitzvah party materialized as an avenue for the blending of circles: Family members sat with business associates, friends sat interspersed, and the Bar Mitzvah's friends had a designated table (or collection of tables) to enjoy a hearty meal of the most fancy of foods. Often, the Bar Mitzvah himself only knew a fraction of the guests!

The tables at these affairs were decorated in fine linens, with uniformed waiters scurrying to and fro. "Novelties such as colored yarmulkes, calligraphied place cards, party favors, musicians, and ice sculptures were all on hand to dazzle the guests."[37] With increased commercialization, the caterer and restaurateur became staples in the industry, as well as the social choreographer—the inventor of the candle-lighting ceremony in which the Bar Mitzvah boy would light thirteen candles.

As American Jews became more comfortable in the middle class, everything about the Bar Mitzvah began to change—including the gifts. In a bygone era, the Bar Mitzvah would get traditional Jewish gifts—perhaps a donation to charity in his honor, a kiddish cup, some candlesticks, or even a siddur. In the interwar years in America, the gifts Ranged from fountain pens to watches, wallets to cuff links, and stocks and bonds to a collection of books. The gifts that the progressive Jewish community gave reflected their status: They cared about money, shiny things, and the latest fads. A fountain pen will prepare the Bar Mitzvah to enter the real world—what good would a siddur do?

[37] Jenna Joselit *The Wonders of America* (New York, NY: Owl Books, 2002), 98

Historian Abraham Duker wrote about the same period:

> The commercial Bar Mitzvah ceremony...has evolved its own ritual, resembling closely the extravaganza of the wedding ceremony...There is the march, the bringing in of the Bar Mitzvah cake, the lighting of the thirteen candles, or of fourteen—one for good luck—the use of the choir, the rendition, sometimes of "Mein Yiddishe Momme" by the Bar Mitzvah celebrant or of "Dos Pintele Yid" by an artist. So much importance is now being attached to this commercial hall ceremonial that we have heard of cases where it has replaced the synagogue ritual completely, even eliminating the custom of calling up the Bar Mitzvah lad to the reading of the Torah.[38]

Jews in America in the 1940s struggled to adapt to a world that was changing. They established clubs, formed lodges, and climbed the corporate ladder. They abandoned the "old neighborhood" in favor of more affluent areas and struggled to contain Jewish life in an upwardly mobile society.

Neil Postman became a Bar Mitzvah while his brothers were serving in the army during World War II. Neil's parents were not religious in an organized sense; they were two-day-a-year Jews (High Holidays only), yet then sent Neil to Hebrew school—not for ideological reasons but because the teacher lived in the same building as the Postman

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[38] Abraham G. Duker, "Emerging Culture Patterns in American Jewish Life" *The Jewish Experience in America, Vol. 5: At Home in America* (New York, NY: UAHC Press, 1977), 413

family and they felt it was a form of tzedakah. Neil recounts his World War II Bar Mitzvah:

> When I was bar mitzvahed on March 11, 1944, you didn't have to read your portion on a Saturday; you could read it on a Thursday. For a lot of boys that was it, followed by a kiddush; herring, wine, honey and sponge cake. But my bar mitzvah was on a Saturday and was followed by a party at a place on the Lower East Side called the French Romanian Restaurant. They served tenderloin steak and julienne potatoes—kosher style.
>
> My mother was something of a writer. She liked to write speeches that she delivered at the various organizations she belonged to. For my bar mitzvah, she wrote three speeches for me to deliver—memorized.
>
> I gave the first one Saturday morning at the Young Israel of Flatbush in Brooklyn. It was an Orthodox shul of course. Everything was Orthodox in those days. The second one was at the French Romanian Restaurant. This was the big speech. I stood behind a table that had two photographs, one of each of my brothers who were away in the army at that time. Although I didn't know it then, my brother Jack was on the Queen Mary on Fifty-seventh Street at that very moment, getting ready to ship out to England.

> I had to begin the speech, "Mom, Dad, sister Ruth," and then I had to look at Jack's picture and say, "brother Jack," and at Sol's picture, "brother Sol..." My mother said, "If you don't look at each of the pictures, the whole effect will be ruined."[39]

Moore reports that approximately 550,000 Jewish men and women served in the U.S. armed forces during World War II. Military service uprooted Jews from the cities and sent them to bases located in all areas of the country. As a direct result, Jews noticed the diversity of the Jewish Diaspora and how Jews differed from one another depending upon the region of their birth and adolescence.[40] Further, Jews began to experience first-hand Racial discrimination, especially when stationed in the South.

Fighting for their country emboldened America's Jews:

> In the armed services, they came to identify with America and its ideals...Jewish men began to consider the Jewish religion and their American identity as mutually inclusive. Kligsberg, in his text *Jewish Soldiers*, concluded that almost all Jews came back from the war with a feeling of pride in their Jewishness, with an awakened interest in Jewish life, and with a readiness to carry out actively certain Jewish responsibilities.[41]

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[39] Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *Growing Up Jewish in America: An Oral History* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 188–189

[40] Ibid., p. 8. Dash Moore offers several stories to illustrate this point. However, as it is not germane to the thesis, I refer the reader to her article for more information.

[41] Ibid., p. 11

As the revelations of the Nazi atrocities hit home, American Jews responded in several ways. Some American Jews were empowered to act and found Zionism an attractive avenue.[42] Some became disenchanted with Judaism, struggling with a theological response. They wondered how God could allow this tragedy to occur, especially to a community that many believed had been living Halachically and not struggling with their Jewish identity the way American Jews had struggled. Still others barely made mention of the Holocaust.

Abraham Peck became a Bar Mitzvah in the aftermath of the Holocaust. He described his ceremony and subsequent celebration:

> Only a couple of my mother's nephews had survived the war, and they came up with their families from New York City to our home in Waterbury for my bar mitzvah. There were also some friends and a few Holocaust survivors who were part of the community. My bar mitzvah was distinctive for its lack of family.
>
> The party took place in the house we had moved into the year before. My mother made everything except for the baked goods. As a young man in Poland, my father had owned his own bakery; he was a master baker and cake decorator. Like many survivors, he had developed a spot on his lung and could no longer work in an environment with a lot of flour. But he could still do the baking at home for my bar mitzvah, and he created all kinds of wonderful European pastries.

[42] Ibid. p. 13

> No one talked about the Holocaust. The Rabbi's sermon did not allude to the subject.[43]

In postwar America, the synagogue had once again become a central force in Jewish life. For many American Jews living a more secular, less obviously "Jewish" life, the modern synagogue offered a connection to a cultural and communal identity. In the shadow of the Holocaust, America suddenly became the host to the largest Jewish community in the world.

The period immediately following World War II was a period in which American Jews, by and large, neglected to react to the Holocaust. Instead, the Jews of this era were fueled by upward mobility and patriotism. Indeed, consider this quote from Hasia Diner:

> In an era dominated by the push toward suburbanization and the desire to "fit in," American Jews (of the 1950s) chose not to use the Holocaust as they participated in the larger political world around them. In their interactions with other Americans they saw no benefit in positing their recent history as one of victimization, but Rather opted for a bland kind of positive Americanism.[44]

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[43] Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *Growing Up Jewish in America: An Oral History* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 194

[44] Hasia Diner, "Post World-War II American Jewry," *American Jewish History Vol. 91* (September and December, 2003): 442–443

Jeff Solomon's parents left Germany in the mid-1930s and worked very hard to establish themselves in America. Despite the losses the family encountered after the Holocaust, Jeff's parents made his Bar Mitzvah celebration something grandiose. They "indulged themselves in a Cecil B. DeMille spectacular. Big time...This was my mother's opportunity, and she did a bar mitzvah *extraordinaire*. Sunday afternoon, 1948. One hundred and twenty people. The Sherry Netherlands Hotel in Manhattan. Hot and cold running hors d'oeuvres. My parents were in the food business and saw to it that the caterer did it right."[45]

If the actions taken by the second and third generation Jewish Americans to adapt Judaism to America can be seen as the first major step of the twentieth-century Jewish community to "Americanize" and the enlistment of large amounts of Jews into the armed forces during World War II can be seen as the second major step of the twentieth-century Jewish community to "Americanize," then surely the third step in the Americanization process was the later trend toward suburban communities that began in the 1950s. After the Second World War, American Jews became more affluent and "socially accepted,"[46] resulting in the Jewish move from urban areas into the suburbs.

Once in the suburbs, Jews again formed Jewish communities centered around the synagogue, which was quickly becoming the place for Jewish education and social

[45] Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *Growing Up Jewish in America: An Oral History* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 194–195
[46] Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, and Jew* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990)

activity.[47] David Kaufman expanded upon this idea: "The synagogue triumphed (over the Talmud Torah) by co-opting the educational function of the Talmud Torah and turning into the ideal Jewish center itself."[48]

While the 1950s saw a synagogue boom and a general relocation of the Jewish community in America away from urban centers (or, at least, extending past the urban centers), not all Jews affiliated. Alex Rosen's family did not belong to a synagogue, but that didn't stop Alex from becoming a Bar Mitzvah. His mother "hired this guy who used to travel around the countryside in a trailer performing bar mitzvahs. He claimed to be a Rabbi. Later we heard he was really a Presbyterian minister."[49]

Of course, synagogue membership did not correlate directly with a Jewish experience. Robert Leiter described his Bar Mitzvah experience:

> My bar mitzvah party was a Jewish-American extravaganza at the Barclay Hotel on Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, an old Waspy area filled with beautiful town houses. No *Yiddishkeit*. My father would not have allowed it.
>
> Before the dinner, we marched into the ballroom as the bandleader made the introductions. "Here comes Dr. and Mrs. Leiter, the parents of the bar mitzvah

[47] In his article *The Origin of the Jewish Community in the Suburbs*, Herban J. Gans offers an ethnographic account of this phenomenon through his study of Park Forest, Illinois. Though it could be said that the Jewish community had Rallied for years around the synagogue, the suburban synagogue was to become the primary outlet for Jewish expression, unlike previous inceptions of Jewish life in America.
[48] David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool* (Boston, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1989), 159
[49] Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *Growing Up Jewish in America: An Oral History* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 188

boy." Then the siblings. And finally, "Here he is, the bar mitzvah boy!" Everybody stood up and applauded. A grand production.

It wasn't even a matter of my being on display; I was inconsequential to the whole thing. My bar mitzvah was not for me and my friends. It was for my father and his friends. Aside from one table of older *Yiddishkeit* people who didn't have any money, it was an elaborate party for a crowd of elegant, well-dressed Jewish-Americans who had made it.

Once my bar mitzvah was over, I was not encouraged to continue my Jewish education. It had nothing to do with education. It was a ticket that enabled my father to stage a massive party that would prove to his peers that he had arrived.[50]

Another aspect of 1950s American Reform Jewry was that the Bat Mitzvah finally began to take root. Due primarily to the elite reliance on Confirmation, the Reform movement had relegated female participation only to Confirmation and had shunned the implementation of Bat Mitzvah. By 1953, thirty-five percent of all Reform congregations had instituted the practice of Bat Mitzvah—and that number was growing.[51]

There are a few reasons the Reform movement was slow in accepting the Bat Mitzvah. First, until the 1930s, the leaders of the movement were still fighting a losing battle to eliminate the Bar Mitzvah in favor of Confirmation. With the 1937 Columbus Platform,

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[50] Ibid., p. 195
[51] Jenna Joselit, *The Wonder of America*, (New York, NY: Owl Books, 2002), 129

the Reform movement rededicated itself to the use of Hebrew and other traditions previously discouraged—including the Bar Mitzvah. Second, the Confirmation ceremony addressed the egalitarian needs of the movement—hence, no need for a Bat Mitzvah. Finally, the ceremony was embraced by the Conservative movement and had many traditionalist connotations associated with it.

The climate had changed by the 1950s, and Reform Judaism needed to make inroads with suburban Jews. If adopting the ceremony would ease that process, then so be it! Further, Confirmation had not taken root as the egalitarian dream ceremony it was intended to be. In an age in which Jews stressed individuality, a group ceremony was destined to play second fiddle.

1950s–1960s

The general critique of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony in the years between World War II and the Six-Day War was that it combined a lack of religious commitment with a big party (not that this was anything new). For example, in the film *Marjorie Morningstar* (1958), Marjorie attends her brother Seth's Bar Mitzvah ceremony and celebration. However, it was only the celebration that Rated a comment: Marjorie muttered, "The Bar Mitzvah was oddly impressive, after all!"

It didn't take long for Rabbis to understand that one way of strengthening the substantive Bar/Bat Mitzvah Judaic segments was to mandate a higher level of commitment—

essentially, to tie the ceremony in with membership at a synagogue. By mandating affiliation, the Rabbis could ensure growth of their synagogue. By mandating attendance at religious school, the Rabbis could work toward a standard knowledge base. As early as 1945, the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues instituted a minimum affiliation requirement of two years (including school attendance), attainment of the age of thirteen, and a commitment to continuing attendance at religious school until Confirmation.[52] The very fact that Rabbis took this step is telling: First, the Bar (and perhaps Bat) Mitzvah ceremony was already extremely popular—popular enough that interest in the ceremony could be tapped in to for the purposes of promoting affiliation; second, Rabbis must previously have been officiating at Bar (and perhaps Bat) Mitzvah ceremonies for the unaffiliated.

According to the New York Federation of Synagogues, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony was to include a reading from Hebrew sections of the Union Prayer Book, a recitation of the blessing over the Torah in Hebrew, chanting from the portion in Hebrew in the congregations where laity normally did this, reading the blessings over the Haftarah in Hebrew, reading the Haftarah in either Hebrew or English, and a prayer or sermon that should express the emotions and thoughts of the candidate.

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[52] Stuart Schoenfeld, in his essay *Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism, and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America*, discusses a survey, commissioned in 1950, that details the realities of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony in the years following World War II. Interestingly, of the 112 communities surveyed, fifty-one reported no minimum educational requirements for Bar Mitzvah. The remainder indicated that at least one congregation in the community had made such requirements. The most common requirement was a minimum of three years of attendance. (p. 82)

The Bar Mitzvah ceremony, for years neglected by Reform Judaism, was becoming more common. At the CCAR Convention of 1961, Rabbi Jack Stern, Jr., commented on the status of Bar Mitzvah:

> During the pendulum counter-swing of the past decades, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony has been introduced or re-introduced into many Reform congregations. The impetus was derived from two sources: from our own Reform re-appraisal of the earlier anti-ceremonial attitude and from a "popular demand" by newcomers to our Ranks of Conservative and Orthodox backgrounds.[53]

Rabbi Stern continued, "The reappraisal of the classical attitude has been one of the most promising signs of maturity in our movement." Arguing that the classical reformers defined Reform Judaism for their era, the Jews of the post-World War II era were no longer wedded to those ideals. Thus, the dynamism of the movement—it was designed to respond to current trends. The movement is *Reform*, not *Reformed*, Judaism.

Rabbi Stern also addressed another impact of World War II, Israel, and the move to the suburbs: The Jews were flocking to Reform congregations. More traditional Jews were affiliating with the Reform movement for many of the reasons already discussed. The reality is that Reform Judaism has managed to respond to whoever is in the pews; while there are certainly ideological issues connected with Reform Judaism, the level of traditional observance has more often than not been dictated by the clergy and laity—not dogma alone. The classical Reform Jews thus found themselves as strangers in their

[53] Jack Stern, Jr. "Problems with the Bar Mitzvah" *CCAR Yearbook, LXXII*, (1962) 160

synagogues while the liturgy and ritual began to respond to a changing clientele—Orthodox and Conservative Jews who were affiliating with the Reform movement.

Rabbi Bernard Martin responded to Rabbi Stern that there was no longer any substance in the ceremony, nor was there any demonstration of learning on behalf of the student. Perhaps worst of all, Rabbi Martin charged, the "celebration is overshadowing the ceremony." However, he concluded, "To urge the complete abolition of Bar Mitzvah in the Reform synagogue today would nevertheless be naïve and unrealistic. Many of our laymen are at present too strongly attached to the ceremony, albeit for trivial reasons. If we cannot abolish Bar Mitzvah, let us, however, at least not promote or magnify its celebration."[54]

Both Rabbi Martin and Rabbi Stern appear to have had a certain disdain for the ceremony and celebration. Rabbi Martin could not bring himself to admit that it was Reform Rank and file who were calling for the ritual. Instead, he blamed it—along with many other aspects of Reform Judaism in the 1950s and early 1960s—on Jews of other denominations who were pulling Reform Judaism in another direction. Rabbi Stern used the well-worn arguments against Bar Mitzvah to criticize the ceremony. It seems as if the Bar Mitzvah ceremony is the vehicle these two Rabbis used to lament the status of Reform Judaism. And just as they realized they could not stem the tide of a movement drifting in a more traditional direction, they understood that the Bar Mitzvah ceremony was not going to vanish. They must have understood that the writing was on the wall for an entire generation of Rabbis—evolve with the movement, and accept certain aspects of

[54] Ibid., p. 159

Jewish tradition back into the fold, or find yourselves leading continually shrinking congregations.

Thus, we find, on the eve of the Six-Day War, the Bar Mitzvah process was becoming institutionalized. Religious schools in the Conservative movement began to institute two- and three-day-a-week programs aimed at teaching the students Hebrew and general Jewish practice, as well as the heroes of modern Jewish history as evidenced through the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel.[55]

During the 1950s, there were certain substantive differences between the Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah as practiced in the Conservative synagogue. While the Bar Mitzvah took place on Saturday morning, the Bat Mitzvah was held on Friday evening. The Bar Mitzvah read from the Torah while the Bat Mitzvah read from the Haftarah portion or from a printed Torah text. Even in congregations where there was parity with the Bar Mitzvah, including Shabbat morning services, Torah reading, and sermon-delivery, there was no expectation that the girls would ever return to read from the Torah again, or lead the community in prayer, or even be counted in a minyan. "For the Bat Mitzvah girl, it was literally a once-in-a-lifetime event that signaled the end rather the beginning of her inclusion in the synagogue service."[56]

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[55] Stuart Schoenfeld, "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* (Denver, CO: A.R.E. Publishing, 1993), 81

[56] Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America" *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 225

As Jews became more economically successful and suburban, the celebrations following the ceremony became more expensive and grandiose. Though a fictionalized account, television's "The Wonder Years" portrayed a Bar Mitzvah of this era. Kevin, played by Fred Savage, is jealous of his friend Paul, who is about to become a Bar Mitzvah. Kevin is moved when, having dinner at Paul's house, he sees Paul's grandfather give him, in anticipation of the big day, not a TV or a watch but a prayer book that his father had given him. Through an unfortunate turn of events, Paul's ceremony occurs on Kevin's birthday, and Kevin, overcome with jealously, refuses to attend Paul's Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Paul is understandably upset, but in the end, Kevin relents, showing up at the synagogue just in time to see Paul read from the Torah. But the reconciliation doesn't happen when Paul sees Kevin from the bima, nor when Kevin wishes Paul a "mazel tov" after the service; Rather, the episode ends with the two friends having reconciled off camera. How do we know this? The last shot is of the two boys dancing a rousing hora.

Another example of how the celebrations reflected the economic status of Jews in the 1960s comes from Leonard Sarko. Viewing his Bar Mitzvah celebration video, one can witness the guests, men dressed in black tuxedos and the women in impressive gowns with fancy jewelry, arriving in limos to the celebration venue. The first guests arrive and remove their coats, giving them to the coat check. Each guest arrives in a fancier fur coat—the women wearing white gloves and the men appearing without ritual garb. Leonard and his family greet each guest as they arrive into the celebration hall—many of the guests smoking cigars.

The room is ornamented with long-stemmed red roses, which serve as the backdrop for the four-piece band (aptly called an "orchestra," they consist of an upright bass, an accordion, a pianist, and a violin player). A huge chandelier in the center of the room provides what appears to be the only light in the room. There is a bar area in the back of the room where bartenders (all people of color) wear white tuxedo jackets and pour generous hard drinks while the men and women stand around smoking and sipping from their glasses. A few feet down from the bar is the reception table, where guests may find their seat assignments for the night.

The first course served is an appetizer course: egg rolls, kugle, sushi, shrimp, lobster, baklava, and other assorted foods. This course is presented on a buffet table with a massive yellow-rose bouquet as the centerpiece. Guests may walk on either side of the table, serving themselves on what appears to be china. There are two lit candles on the table, each about three feet tall.

Leonard and his family sit at a banquet table elevated above their guests, who each sit at smaller round tables. After some time, Leonard is asked to leave the room, only to return to the applause of those invited guests seated at the circular tables. He makes his way to the front of the room, where a three-tiered cake—eerily reminiscent of a wedding cake—with thirteen candles is strategically placed. One by one, family members of Leonard come to him and kindle one of the candles on the cake. When all the candles are lit, the

entire family stands around the cake and blows them all out. After that, a guest recites Motzi over the bread, and Leonard is given a cigar from his father.[57]

Many of the ceremonies of the 1960s began to display a new level of elegance previously unseen at Bar Mitzvah ceremonies. The Jewish community, which only a little over a generation before had hit the middle class, were now rising even higher in the economic strata of the United States.

1970s

The Jewish community's approach to the outside world took a dramatic shift after the Six-Day War. The Six-Day War in June 1967 coincided with—or perhaps aided—a shift from Jewish universalism to Jewish particularism. In the aftermath of that war, Jews thought about Israel and themselves differently; suddenly, American Jews were playing a very powerful role in strengthening Israel and helping over one million Jews in the Soviet Union move to America or Israel.[58] Following 1967, the Jewish causes were recast as particular causes for which Jews needed Jews to respond. The Jews of America needed to fight not for all liberation but for the liberation of Soviet Jews in particular. Socially speaking, the Six-Day War served as an identity marker—a "coming out" party for Jews in America.

[57] Private videotape of Leonard Sarko
[58] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004)

Ritually, the Six-Day War marked a turning point as well. In the aftermath of Israel's victory, almost all of the standard American Jewish non-Orthodox prayer books added prayers for the State of Israel as part of the weekly service.[59] Further, Waxman cites an *Encyclopedia Judaica* article by Eventov and Rotem indicating, "Israel now occupies an important place in synagogue activities, sermons, and various religious celebrations, including Israel Independence Day."[60] The citation continues:

> The Israel flag is frequently displayed in synagogues and community centers. In many synagogues, prayers for the welfare of the State of Israel and world Jewry are recited on Sabbaths and holidays following that for the welfare of the United States...Hebrew songs and Israel folk dances have become American Jewish popular culture: at weddings, bar mitzvot [sic], and on many college campuses...[61]

Waxman urges caution in over-interpreting the rise of Israel support among American Jews following the Six-Day War. He argues that instead of proving that Israel was elevated in the American Jewish identity, the rise in support of Israel is a reflection of the "Americanization of America's Jews in that many of them felt by then comfortable enough as Americans to express their support for Israel, especially since the United States

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[59] Chaim I. Waxman, "The Limited Impact on America's Jews" *The Six Day War and World Jewry* (London, England: CDL Press, 2000), 101
[60] Ibid., p. 102
[61] Ibid.

supported Israel, whereas in earlier times (1948 and 1956) they were less comfortable doing so lest they be viewed as less than complete Americans."[62]

Certainly, Waxman makes a good point. The era of the melting pot, in which ethnicity was a detriment, had ended in the 1960s. Further, there was an emerging climate of "cultural pluralism" in America, exemplified by the "Black is Beautiful" and "Kiss Me, I'm Irish" movements. The Jews were not the exception to the rule—as they assimilated within greater American norms, they too became more comfortable with a notion of particularism. Freed from the constraints of "sheltering" their Judaism, many Jews of the late 1960s and early 1970s were empowered to advertise and celebrate their Judaism-resulting in a preponderance of even more grandiose celebrations. "In Reform Judaism, the Bar Mitzvah was reinvigorated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when young Jews and their Rabbis, influenced by the ethnic pride movements of the counterculture and the resurgence of Zionism after the Six-Day War, began to emphasize the study of Hebrew—and the Bar Mitzvah was all of a sudden more than a rite; it was a proud, desirable alternative to the deracinated, Christian-seeming Confirmation."[63]

Sociologist Marshall Sklare discussed the role of the Bar Mitzvah in the Conservative movement, included here due to the similarities during the late 1960s and early 1970s between many suburban Reform and Conservative congregations.[64] Sklare noted that Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation ceremonies drew attendance at services that would otherwise

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[62] Ibid., p. 107
[63] Mark Oppenheimer, *Thirteen and a Day* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 12
[64] Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1972)

be sparsely attended, with the Bar Mitzvah service as the main support of the Shabbat morning service and the Confirmation service attached to the Shavuot service. He demonstrated that educational requirements—including synagogue affiliation—were common, as was the commitment from the Bar Mitzvah to continue studies until Confirmation; however, he also stated that many parents and children viewed the Bar Mitzvah ceremony as a graduation from religious school.

Sklare teamed with fellow sociologist Joseph Greenblum to publish another study on synagogue life, this time in a suburb of Chicago.[65] They found there were four Reform congregations, drawing almost seventy-five percent of the affiliated Jews. Of those affiliated Jews, ninety-five percent had children enrolled in Sunday or Hebrew school. The Shabbat morning service at the largest Reform congregation was supported by the Bar Mitzvah ceremony, and one of the issues that separated the Reform congregations from each other was the presence or absence of the challenge to continue Jewish education past Bar Mitzvah until Confirmation. Sklare and Greenblum identified affiliation for the purpose of Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a common practice with some reports of disaffiliation after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation ceremonies.

Although designed simply to offer public recognition of a girl's coming of age religiously, the Bat Mitzvah rite raised questions about the status of women within the synagogue. How could a girl be called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah and then never be able to do so again? The farther-reaching effects of the "gender equality" discussions in

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[65] Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

the Conservative movement began as early as 1955, when the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards discussed the issue of extending *aliyot* to women. Though the decision ultimately came down against doing so, a favorable minority opinion fostered the dissemination of this practice, which paved the way for women to play a much more active role in the annual- and daily- cycle of the synagogue. By the 1960s, almost all Reform and Conservative synagogues celebrated both Bar and Bat Mitzvah. As Regina Stein wrote:

> The voices of an earlier age raised in opposition to bat mitzvah had been silenced in all but Orthodox synagogues. Significantly though, women had no voice in this debate. Within both the Conservative and Reform Movements, Bat Mitzvah had come to demonstrate the equality of boys and girls, particularly with the changing status of women in society, the growing emphasis on adolescence, and the increasing call for gender equality in other areas of Judaism that followed World War II.[66]

Also in the late 1960s and 1970s, some—not many, but some—Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies were taking place outside of the physical synagogue. Perhaps an extension of the "culture of individualization" of the era, some families opted to hold Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies outdoors, either at home or at other estates. Still other families rented banquet halls and held the entire affair at that location. Most notable of these innovations, however, was the innovation of the Kotel Bar Mitzvah.

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[66] Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America" *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 232

Rabbi Hank Skirball[67] was a pioneer in the Israel Bar (and Bat) Mitzvah movement. He took his lead from Rabbi Morse in Florida, who, during the mid-1960s, organized entire tours of Israel for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and family. Until the mid-1960s, however, the "movement" was on an individual basis. Rabbis such as Uri Regev and other Progressive Jewish leaders officiated at ceremonies atop Masada and other areas of Israel—not relegating the ceremony to just Jerusalem and, more specifically, the Kotel.

Rabbi Skirball recalls a great many of these ceremonies were second ceremonies—the family had already celebrated Bar/Bat Mitzvah at home but were scheduled to travel to Israel the following summer. Perhaps the Israel experience was more of a supplement, and not a replacement, to synagogue affiliation and stateside ceremonies.

When I asked Rabbi Skirball why these ceremonies became so popular, he replied that the number "of Bar/Bat Mitzvahs was directly related to the numbers of tourists—it is possible the percentage of tourists who came for a Bar Mitzvah was not greatly different before 1967 than afterwards." I pressed him further, asking what the impetus would have been, then, for someone to travel to Israel to celebrate the occasion. Rabbi Skirball replied, "Believe it or not...for some families, it was cheaper than what would be expected of them back home." In the age in which the Jews had "made it"—they were living in the suburbs and were more successful than they had ever been—the cost of celebrations began to skyrocket. Sure, there were always extravagant affairs, but starting in the late 1950s—and really taking off in the mid-1960s—these affairs began to have tremendous budgets.

[67] Information from Rabbi Skirball comes from an unpublished interview on August 1, 2005

Rabbi Skirball also theorized that the Israel ceremony became popular in part because the requirements for the boy or girl were "flexible or even absent—the child did not have to be a member of a religious school for many years, the family did not have to belong to a congregation, and the number of verses read could be minimal." According to this theory, the popularity of the Israel ceremony would be directly correlated to the institutionalization of the synagogue ceremony.

Peter Ribicoff discussed his Conservative-affiliated son's Bar Mitzvah ceremony at the Kotel in the mid-1970s.[68] The immediate family members, visiting from America, were joined on a Monday morning by several Israeli relatives and a friend. An employee of the Ministry of Religion, whose job it was to help organize Bar Mitzvah ceremonies at the Kotel, escorted them to an usher at the Wall, who took the group to one of the several places at the Wall where services were held, gathered a minyan, and otherwise helped with the ceremony. The Bar Mitzvah boy, wearing a Tallit and Tefilin, recited the appropriate prayers, carried the Torah from the Ark to the table on which it was to be read, received an aliyah, and, after the service, delivered a drasha. Immediately after his aliyah, the Bar Mitzvah was pelted with candy and embraced by total strangers. Ribicoff reported that other minyanim were occurring at the same time.

The concept of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony in Israel has become common enough that travel agents regularly organize tour groups. Synagogues also organized Bar/Bat Mitzvah tours that sometimes included the option of a ceremony atop Masada or near the

[68] Peter Ribicoff, "Bar Mitzvah at the Wall" *Moment Magazine* (December 3, 1977): 49–51

Dead Sea. While Bar/Bat Mitzvah tours to Israel had begun prior to 1967[69], the ceremony option at the Kotel, a direct result of the Six-Day War, no doubt gave this option a more symbolic setting.[70]

Another option was the secular Bar Mitzvah, different from the movement of the 1980s calling itself "Secular Judaism." Beginning around 1970, small groups of religious innovators began catering Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies to the individual—with no requirements. The affair could happen at any time or place and was rarely, if ever, officiated over by a Rabbi. Stephen G. Estrati was involved in one such ceremony in Cleveland in 1970:

> At our son's Bar Mitzvah, each of the five children involved in the ceremony that day came to the lectern, accompanied by parents and siblings, and made a speech. There was no liturgy and there was no mention of a deity. My son's speech was about social justice, "Let My People Go," and his pride in being a Jew. My father-in-law, who had come from England for this, said: "it was the first time in my life that I knew what was going on. Very nice." My step-father, who had come from Boston, said, "That was no bar mitzvah."[71]

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[69] The Archives actually contain brochures from agencies dating back to 1965.

[70] An interesting note regarding the Israel Bar Mitzvah: Over the years, NFTY summer tours would arrange for Bar/Bat Mitzvahs for those who had not had them at age thirteen. Paul Reichenbach, Director of NFTY Summer in Israel, theorized that NFTY Rabbinic tour leaders probably officiated over 3,000–5,000 boys and girls (most of them group ceremonies) becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah over the nearly half-century of NFTY summer tours and long-term programs to Israel.

[71] http://groups.yahoo.com/group/eejh/message/10943; Secular Bar Mitzvah posting. Downloaded November, 2004

In the early 1970s, a new idea was born out of a longing for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. The Adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a contemporary adaptation of a traditional ceremony. Originally the impetus of men who had not become Bar Mitzvah and thus felt incomplete as Jews, and quickly picked up by women who never had an opportunity to become Bat Mitzvah, this ritual became progressively popular during the last thirty years of the twentieth century.[72]

While American Jews were coming to terms with the new era, there had never before been as many variations on the Bar Mitzvah. The Orthodox movement was offering Bar Mitzvah only, and only on Torah reading days. The Conservative movement, whose predominance in the suburbs was under siege, began offering innovative Religious School programming and Bar Mitzvah tutoring, as well as the practice of Bat Mitzvah. The Reform movement had accepted Bar/Bat Mitzvah into the fold and had begun the process of accepting—and teaching students about—Israel.

While the movements debated the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies and celebrations, organization and business groups began to offer innovate ways of commemorating this rite of passage. JCCs had begun sponsoring religion-void ceremonies known as the Secular Bar Mitzvah, Ayelet Tours and other Israel tour companies had begun offering Bar Mitzvah tours in Israel, and even the Jewish National Fund office in Jerusalem had organized "international B'nai Mitzvah" ceremonies in which boys from all over the world would gather together in Israel.

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[72] Stuart Schoenfeld, "Ritual and Role in Transition: Adult Bat Mitzvah as a Successful Rite of Passage," *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (JTS), 350

The American Jewish Community in the 1970s–1990s

The experiment with particularism continued in American Judaism over the next decades and mingled with a new concept: individualization. Sarna has written that this period of American Judaism was even called by some a renaissance, due largely to the newly spawned Chavurah movement, the Jewish Catalogue, the gains in the quality of Jewish education, and an expanding Jewish culture.[73]

Fueled by the rise of feminism, the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements all ordained women Rabbis. Spirituality became a "buzzword" as Jewish religious experiences utilized contemporary music and teachings and a new push for "healing services" transformed the rigidity of the Jewish worship service. Organizationally, Jews continued to work toward freeing Soviet Jews and building a relationship with Israel, as well as caring for the Ethiopian Jewish community that was airlifted to Israel.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony continued showing the effects of Jewish affluence in America. As Jews became more financially successful, the celebrations reached a new scale—larger and more grandiose than ever before. Take for example the story of Harvey Cohen.

[73] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (Boston, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004)

In 1919, Robert Cohen became a Bar Mitzvah in a noisy and crowded tenement flat on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Sixty years later, he stood on the fifty-yard line of the Orange Bowl at the lavish Bar Mitzvah party of his grandson, Harvey. According to press reports, the Cohen family spent nearly $20,000 to stage the celebration on the football field. They rented the stadium; catered the meal; hired the staff; and even had a sixty-four-piece band, cheerleaders, and pompon girls from the local high school march onto the field to a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday, Harvey."[74] Rabbi Irv Lehrman, a local religious leader who was not the officiant at the party, remarked, "In this case, there is more bar than mitzvah."

This rise in spending was particularly difficult on families, though perhaps not for the reasons one would expect. Ellen Ashenazy Ufberg described one encounter she had with a family in the *Jewish Exponent* on August 31, 1979:

> Poor David. I first met him when he came with his parents to see me. His big brown eyes were full of sadness and he hung his head in a downcast pose like one with the troubles of the world on his shoulders.
>
> His parents began by relating that David's personality had undergone a great change in the last few months. From a carefree, active, smiling 13-year-old, he had become listless, sometimes hostile and generally depressed. The parents could pinpoint the change to shortly after his Bar Mitzvah which had been a gala, festive affair.

[74] New York Times, May 15, 1978; Courtesy of the American Jewish Archives

"We had planned his Bar Mitzvah for months," his mother said. "We had the best caterer, the finest orchestra. Everybody had such a good time. And David was wonderful; we were so proud of him. He seemed to be excited about it, but afterwards we noticed this change. We thought it would pass, but it hasn't."

David couldn't say a word, so I met with him alone for several weeks. Gradually he shared his feelings. "What a bummer," he began. "I thought my Bar Mitzvah would be just like my brother's (who was three years older). For him they had a big family dinner at a restaurant Friday night, and then a dinner dance with *twice* as many people on Saturday night. He gets everything more than I do. He got more money and better gifts. That's not fair."[75]

While the stories of excess are interesting, and while the extreme excess of some of these ceremonies and celebrations is worth recapping, the Jewish affluence of the late 1970s and 1980s gave way to positive change as well. One such example is the organization known as Mazon.

In an article in the April 1985 issue of *Moment* magazine, editor and publisher Leonard Fein introduced the concept of Mazon, a Jewish organization that would Raise money for hunger relief through a self-imposed "tax" on joyous occasions. Later that year, a national group of Jewish community leaders incorporated "Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger."

[75] *Jewish Exponent*, August 31, 1979; courtesy of the American Jewish Archives

The 1990s saw the progression of the individualization of Judaism (or Jewishness). Cohen and Eisen classify this era as being dominated by an "unprecedented exercise of autonomy among the current generation of Jews."[76] This is especially true concerning ritual observance—Jews of the 1980s and 1990s did not see ritual observance as a black or white issue. Many Jews simply felt that they could reject Jewish observances they no longer found meaningful and accept those observances that contained emotional value.[77]

Rabbi Sam Joseph has lectured about this era in American Jewish history. He has argued that the Judaism of the last fifteen years of the twentieth century was a market-driven Judaism; it was a consumer culture. Jews, by and large, were not affiliating with synagogues—or any other dominant organization. Instead, the Judaism of this era was characterized by the personal Jewish identity without the Jewish social-structural support. The Jewish community in America no longer had to Rally against anti-Semitism, there was no longer a fear that Israel would be destroyed, Jewish neighborhoods were dying out, and what remained was a Jewish identity fashioned not by the "traditional" mold of "Holocaust-Israel-Ritual" but Rather by the mold of assimilation.[78]

Sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman discussed a similar view of the Jewish community in America at the end of the twentieth century. Fishman's argument is that the American Jewish community has, largely, been coalescing, not assimilating. She defines coalescence as "a pervasive process through which American Jews merge American and

[76] Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen, *The Jew Within* (Indianapolis, IN: IU Press, 2000), chapter 4
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.

Jewish ideas, incorporating American liberal values such as free choice, universalism, individualism, and pluralism into their understanding of Jewish identity." Thus, there is no such thing as the "vanishing American Jew"; Rather, the traits we use to identify American Jews need to be expanded.

While her primary source of data is the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, Fishman uses qualitative evidence found in interviews and pop culture (film, television, and novels). These techniques have led her to conclude, "Coalescence is not necessarily destructive to Jewish connections. Unlike assimilation, coalescence allows highly educated, highly achieving Jews to feel that their achievements bond them to, Rather than separate them from, their Jewish ethnicity. Because of internal ethnic identity reconstruction and external boundary permeability, contemporary Americans need not reject—or even 'tune out'—their Jewish identity."[79]

Fishman argues that Jewish identity is being constructed right before our eyes. While religious observance may be the key for many Jews, there has developed another group of Jews who find they no longer need to identify as Jews by separating themselves from others. Rather, they look for spirituality, not Halacha. They find support for their Judaism in the fact that, as Freedman states, "...bagels outsell doughnuts...(and) 'Seinfeld' is a hit even in Boise."

[79] Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (New York, NY: Statue University of New York Press, 2000), 190

Positing a different vision of the American Jewish community at the end of the twentieth century is sociologist Samuel C. Heilman. Heilman believes that one word categorizes American Jews since World War II: ambivalence. Tracing all modern Jewish problems to the suburbanization of the Jewish community in the 1950s, he documents that the Jewish community abandoned the shtetl life in favor of a different kind of shtetl: the suburbs. There, Jews built lavish synagogues that they barely attended and relegated religious education to a part-time enterprise. Striving toward mobility and acceptance in the greater American culture, the Jewish community placed a greater emphasis on public-school attendance than on religious school education. The result? An American Jewry that demonstrated ambivalence toward many of the traditions that their immigrant parents and grandparents had embraced. The continued acceptance of the Jewish community into the culture of greater America has led to a dramatic shift in the way Judaism is perceived by its adherents.

At the end of the twentieth century, Heilman was more concerned with the survival of Judaism, not the Jews. Heilman understood that Jews have never been more accepted into American life: Whether the corporate world, entertainment, or politics, Jews played a monumental role; they had an unimagined presence. Yet their ties to Judaism were ever in decline. Fewer Jews affiliated, sent their children to summer camps, and participated in the institutionalized Jewish community. Delving deeper into this philosophy, Heilman concludes that Jews must "change our perspective as well as the standards of what it means to be Jewish in America. Perceiving life out of their sense of deep-rootedness in and assimilation to this country, some people have suggested that anxieties about the

American Jewish future are unwarranted; Jews in America will survive but will be transformed, reconstituted in political, economic, and cultural styles that will provide new bases for cohesion and continuity."[80] And this success of the Jews, he argues, may mean the death of Judaism in America.

Heilman concludes, "The Jews of America will continue to have two hearts, show two faces, and turn toward two directions."[81] One of these directions is toward Judaism, in which the beat of America will simply frame that journey. The other direction is toward America, leading Jews on a journey ever farther from Judaism. This is what Heilman sees as the paradox of the "Jewish success story": It seems the more Jews are successful, the lesser the chances Judaism will survive.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah during this period continued to evolve. The pattern of Jewish education in North America was substantially different before and after minimum educational requirements became widespread.[82] For the synagogue elite—the engaged laity, the clergy, and the professional staff—the Bar/Bat Mitzvah drew increased importance as requirements were added, especially the required enrollment in the school. "These enrollments helped stabilize congregational membership and provided a more stable financial and membership base."[83]

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[80] Samuel C. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews* (Seattle, WA: Washington University Press, 1995), 161
[81] Ibid, p. 163
[82] Stuart Schoenfeld, "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* (Denver, CO: A.R.E. Publishing, 1993), 83
[83] Ibid, p. 85

While the synagogue professional staff and laity retained control over the setting and ceremony of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, families have gained control of the celebration. The imposition of attendance and education requirements did not curb celebration expenses and themes contrary to the ideals being affirmed during the religious ritual.[84]

Conclusion

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony (and even celebration) have not existed in a bubble. As the Jewish community has adapted to America in the twentieth century, so too has the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The ceremonies can be seen as a reflection of the times—when American Jews were concerned about Soviet Jewry, a program was initiated to "twin" the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student with a student in the Soviet Union who was not "free to become a Bar Mitzvah." When the American Jewish community responded to the Holocaust by retelling the exploits of Jewish heroes, that behavior manifested itself in the speeches and studies of children engaged in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. When the Jewish community began to distance itself from—and then cling to—ritual, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah responded, making a resurgence in a movement that had declared it dead only a generation or two earlier.

An overarching current unites each of these eras of development: concern over Jewish identity. There is a concern over the Bar/Bat Mitzvah's future identification as a Jew that emerges from the social history of the ceremony in America. In the ceremony, the boy or girl defines him or herself as a member of the community, with the personal resources to

[84] A further discussion will be presented on this topic in the next chapter.

acquire the skills needed to participate in that community and to resist the path of assimilation. The ceremony doesn't ensure success in the future struggle over how meaningful the Jewish identity will be to the individual, but it does guarantee a minimum acquaintance with Jewish religious knowledge and practice. Thus, with this minimum acquaintance ensured, parents and their children alike believe there is much to celebrate.

The story of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the twentieth century is the story of Jews in America in the twentieth century: Evolving, adapting, and either compartmentalizing or coalescing, the ceremony has always reflected the beliefs and values of the people who participated in it. This history "suggests that there was no golden age of the Bar Mitzvah in the United States, no time when the ritual reliably inducted believing boys into a fraternity of religiously committed Jewish men. It was always a source of tension and conflict."[85] The next chapter will analyze the current state of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony, and, through that analysis, will decipher some of the beliefs and values of the Jewish community in the early twenty-first century.

[85] Mark Oppenheimer, *Thirteen and a Day* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 13

CHAPTER 4

SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE CONGREGATIONAL LANDSCAPE

> "B'nai Mitzvah can call forth an especially poisonous form of self-loathing, a cocktail of bad childhood memories and condescending sneers that are really masking insecurity. Consider this email that one powerful New York editor, a Jewish man, wrote after reading my book proposal: 'I don't think I'll ever have the interest, or the patience, to go through the Bar Mitzvah process again. Once was enough.'"[1]

Having discussed the historical development of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the events and themes of the recent past that influenced the ceremony and celebration, the reader is now prepared to better understand the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as it exists in the early years of the twenty-first century. This chapter explores contemporary custom regarding the education process, ritual, and celebration involved in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. Understanding that there is tremendous diversity based upon geographic location, congregation size, and the size of the greater Jewish community, I have researched this chapter by inviting congregations to supply me with printed documents given to students and parents concerning the process of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in that particular congregation. This data provided me with a broad landscape view of the contemporary process.

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[1] Mark Oppenheimer, *Thirteen and a Day* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 5

To supplement the information gleaned from the collected documents, I also interviewed rabbis, parents, and students about the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. Adding to this a collection of pop-culture materials such as magazine and newspaper articles and evidence from television shows, novels, and movies, this chapter explores contemporary custom to gauge: (1) what factors play a role in congregations and how they "teach" and implement the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process; (2) how congregations are responding to the cultural climate that exists in America today; and (3) what possible moments of disconnect, or problems, can be addressed through an adaptation of the process.

This chapter is divided into four parts: (1) four explanations as to the resiliency of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony in Reform Judaism, (2) an exposé of congregational methods for engaging in Bar/Bat Mitzvah education (how Reform Jewish congregations are responding to the cultural climate as it exists today in America), (3) an exploration of possible moments of disconnect among the institution, the family, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate, and (4) a discussion of contemporary "ritual" that attempts to circumvent those moments of disconnect.

The Resiliency of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ceremony in Reform Judaism

My research has led me to characterize some of the reasons for the resilience of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in Reform Judaism: First, substantial demographic changes have occurred in Reform Judaism that have led directly to a rise, over time, of ritual observance. Second, there is the issue of Jewish survival. Third, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is more than simply an

affirmation in a belief system—it is a right of passage. Finally, there is a notion that the enduring popularity of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is connected primarily to what is happening with the parents and not with the children.

Demographic Changes

Classical Reform Judaism was, by and large, a product of bourgeois German Jews, containing its own cultural backdrop[2] and synecdochic[3] vocabulary. By the mid-twentieth century, however, many members of the movement were Jews from Eastern European Jewish backgrounds. These Jews brought with them a greater sense of folk Judaism and an emotional, even nostalgic, attachment to certain rituals.

One such ritual was Shabbat morning worship. "Not only has the Shabbat morning service become the preferred time for conducting Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies among the overwhelming majority of congregations, but more than half indicate that a Shabbat service is held regularly on mornings when there are no b'nai mitzvah. The reemphasis of Shabbat morning is further illustrated by the disclosure that many congregations have an alternate service when a bar/bat mitzvah is held in the main sanctuary."[4]

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[2] Including: Post-Enlightenment Europe; post-Kantian philosophy emphasizing an unknowable deity; German social system emphasizing social space between classes; and a cultural heritage of classical music, particularly nineteenth-century discovery of romanticism and emotionality (Larry Hoffman, *Beyond the Text*, p. 162).

[3] Including: Cathedral architecture, art, and musical style; worship choreography; favored words emphasizing majesty, grandeur, awe, reverence; "cratureliness" of worshipper standing reverently before God; and decorum limiting the freedom of the worshiper and accenting dependency on clergy as God's representatives (Larry Hoffman, *Beyond the Text*, p. 162)

[4] Sanford Seltzer, "Ritual on the Rise," *Reform Judaism* (Spring 1991)

The rise in ritual attained a major boost at the 1937 Columbus Platform, already highlighted in Chapter 2. Further, the Reform movement revised the Union Prayer Book in the 1950s to reflect this new dedication to ritual and, twenty-five years later, responded again to the rise in ritual with the publication of the Gates of Prayer siddur. A gradual development, the re-invigoration of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah followed the pattern already in motion by the Reform movement.

According to the *Reform Judaism* article "Ritual on the Rise," an increase in synagogue ritual and Jewish ritual objects is emerging in the Reform Movement. In a survey in 1991 asking 400 congregations to comment on ritual, 244 congregations responded that Kipot were provided, twenty-eight of whom required the wearing of Kipot; 373 congregations invited lay persons to recite the blessings surrounding the Torah reading; 160 congregations had lay persons read from the Torah; 200 congregations engaged in the ritual lifting and dressing of the Torah; and 216 had adopted the rituals associated with opening and closing the ark. Fully fifty-five percent of respondent congregations marched with the Torah, and 146 observed a second day of Rosh Hashanah.[5]

Worship modes of the Reform Jewish community in America at the onset of the twenty-first century are reflecting the needs and aspirations of a fully integrated Jewish community rather than a foreign importation. "The twenty-first century community is noted for its re-symbolization of Jewish life, the democratization of the synagogue

[5] Ibid.

experience, and a concerted effort after the Holocaust to recover Jewish memory."[6] Though a bit early to characterize the twenty-first-century Jewish community, many of these trends have been in existence since the passage of the Columbus Platform.[7]

Bar/Bat Mitzvah, then, may be connected with retaining contact with old traditions. This unique blend of nostalgia and innovation pave the way for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies of the twenty-first century.

Jewish Survival

Jacob Neusner has asked: Why has Bar/Bat Mitzvah taken on such massive proportions within the American Jewish community to the extent that it is celebrated even and especially by Jews who are not otherwise religious? He notes correctly the huge expense associated with the celebration. He also notes that most Jews find the ceremony deeply meaningful—even those with no theological drive. At a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, a parent thinks not so much of the future as of the past, especially if a grandparent or a parent is deceased; the entire family has assembled, and that is as much the future as the past.[8]

Stephen S. Pearce wrote:

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[6] Jill Jacobs and Mike Moore, "The *Yetzi'ah* Ceremony: Rethinking the Jewish Coming of Age," *The Reconstructionist* (Fall 1998)
[7] See Chapter 3 of the thesis.
[8] Jacob Neusner, *The Enchantments of Judaism*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1987) 143

> I have witnessed...anxiety-ridden parents who were themselves uncertain of the emotional pull that tugged at their hearts during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony...I have seen parents endeavor to hold back their tears when they surveyed the years since their own Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremonies and recalled their relatives now absented by death. The spoken or unspoken words: "My father was there when you were born, and he prayed he would live to see this day. But today it is only you and me, for he is long gone. May I live to be present when your children read from the Torah. But if I am not so privileged, then please be reminded of how much I loved you and how much I wanted to be there." At such a happy event, Bar and Bat Mitzvah teenagers are oft times uncomfortable or puzzled with tears that seem so out of place."[9]

The emotion pouring forth from the parents has little to do with the ritual of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Lois Gross offers a story to illustrate this point:

> The only thing we knew about my father's childhood was that he was born in Russia in 1910. My dad never discussed the past. Apparently, it was much too painful. My daughter Dayna's bat mitzvah provided me with the leverage I needed to get my dad to talk about his childhood. The funny thing about my father as a grandfather is that he is obsessed with the idea that he will not be remembered; that the traditions he grew up with will disappear with his generation. The summer before Dayna's celebration, I began talking to my Dad about the fact that he was the last surviving member of the family from the old

[9] Stephen S. Pearce, "Bar/Bat Mitzvah from the Other Side of the Pulpit," *Jewish Spectator* (Fall 1997)

country. It was important for him to share his history with Dayna while there was still time.

Lois bought a tape recorder and some tapes and, with the help of a set of genealogy questions, proceeded to have her father record his story and the story of his family and the Jewish traditions with which they grew up. The tapes were completed well before the Bat Mitzvah ceremony and made a fantastic gift to Dayna. The story continues:

> Grandpa's tape—which meant a great deal to Dayna—showed up in her speech only once, when she referred to the great-grandmother who worked hard to keep the family going when my great-grandfather came to America. "It is because of her that I am becoming a Bat Mitzvah today." Not much, you think? You should have seen the look on my father's face at this mention of his mother and of her sacrifice. That one reference transcended the generations as nothing else could have...[10]

In issuing a charge to her son on the occasion of his Bar Mitzvah ceremony, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso explained, "We would like you to be at home in the Hebrew language, in Jewish ritual, history and prayer, because it's beautiful, because it makes you think about what is most important, because it leads to good, because it gives a place of belonging. Television, video games, (and) rock music present you with what is new and passing;

[10] Originally printed in an article titled "Bat Mitzvah in the 90s" by Vivienne Kramer in *Lilith* magazine, Fall 1994

Jewish values and sources tell you about what is eternal."[11] Rabbi Sasso's charge exemplifies how to merge the tradition with the emotion. This complete charge—that her son feel comfortable exploring Judaism—should be the goal of all Bar Mitzvah charges. The emotion is not divorced from the ritual; rather, the ritual elucidates the emotion of generations past and dreams of the future.

Rite of Passage

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah is more than just a public affirmation of belief. As a rite of passage, the ceremony takes on an anthropological meaning, which may, in fact, have more significance than the theological underpinnings of the ceremony. Once the theology has vanished, people still have a need to symbolically mark the passage.

Take, for example, the "Today, I am a man" speeches of contemporary Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates. One Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate I interviewed, Jacob, answered my question "What does becoming a Bar Mitzvah mean to you?" by stating, "It means that I'm becoming a young man, or a man in the Jewish religion, and there are lots of different responsibilities that I have to take."[12]

Interestingly, becoming a Bar Mitzvah never had anything to do with becoming a "man." Sure, some have argued that the onslaught of puberty was the rationale for choosing the

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[11] Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, "On Becoming a Bar Mitzvah: The Words of a Rabbi and Parent," *Reconstructionist* (November–December 1989)

[12] Oddly enough, he followed that statement by saying, "If my Mom was here, I could take my folder and I have a card that I could just read to you. But I'm not really sure...she has my folder."

age of thirteen for a rite of passage into Age of Majority status[13], but that is only one theory. Textual documentation has presented a much different view—instead of attaining "manhood," the thirteen-year-old attained a degree of moral responsibility, ritual majority, and the connection to Torah.

When challenging Bar/Bat Mitzvahs with the idea that they are not, in fact, adults—they cannot do any of things that denote Age of Majority in our culture, such as drive, vote, drink, or even serve in the military—they immediately understand that not only is the perception a falsity but that they have fallen into the trap of believing the Jewish cliché—that at thirteen they are considered adults.

A recent episode of "Jack and Bobby" (original airdate: October 2004) featured one of the title characters' best friends studying for and becoming a Bar Mitzvah. When discussing the event, only a few months away, Bobby (who is not Jewish) remarked:

> "What does this stuff mean anyway?" His friend responded, "I don't know…something about God." Bobby asked, "But, once you're Bar Mitzvahed that means that you're, like, a man, right?" "Yeah, totally a man," his friend answered. "My Dad gets to stand up in front of everyone and thank God that he's not responsible anymore for my sins. It's like a really big deal for the dads."

In a later episode, the two characters had another dialogue. Bobby began:

[13] Sixty percent of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah packets I received from congregations that included a section on the history of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah included a line linking the ceremony, the age of thirteen, and the onslaught of puberty.

"Well, that's cool I guess...You know, I just thought that when you read from the Torah, you are, like, a man." His friend chuckled and replied, "That's just the service. Bar Mitzvahs? It's all about the party."

Parent Issues

Not only is this a transition for the children into Age of Majority status within Judaism, but it is also the transition of parents into middle age. Larry Hoffman identifies this as the passage from young adulthood to adulthood.[14] This may be the first time that they themselves are the hosts, responsible for paying for the affair and setting all the arrangements. Parents have been known to use Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a test of their own status, often determined by the size and composition of the guest list.

Thus, the sociological importance of Bar/Bat Mitzvah cannot be separated from what it means to be newly affluent in America. The ceremony and party imply competence not only for the candidate him or herself, but for the adults as well.

Conclusions

Any analysis of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process must address issues of a changing Jewish demographic, the fact that the survival of the Jewish people is accomplished in this single ceremony (at least in the eyes of some observers), the profound symbolism of a rite of

[14] Unpublished lecture, November, 2003, HUC-JIR, NY

passage ceremony, and the internal, psychological issues of the parental figures in the process. It is my theory that these four items are constantly at play in the behaviors and emotions of the three parties involved in the process: the congregation, the family, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate. Of the three parties, however, only one party is the primary author of the process and ceremony: the congregation. The next section of this chapter presents survey and interview data addressing the ways in which congregations structure their programs to cater to these four meta-themes.

Congregational Methods of Bar/Bat Mitzvah Instruction

On November 24, 2004(?), I sent the following email to a listserv known as HUCAlum, for alumni of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion:

> Shalom future colleagues,
>
> My name is Bradley Levenberg and I am a 4th year rabbinic Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate at the Cincinnati campus. I have begun research for my thesis and would very much appreciate your help. Could you please send me, via email or snail mail, any information that you give to Bar/Bat Mitzvah families as they begin or proceed through the intensive pre-ceremony study process? I know that many congregations supply families with entire packets of information and perusing those handouts would very much help to inform me of the direction of one of the chapters of the thesis.

Email can be sent to: rabbibrad@qn.net

Snail mail (for which I will send a reimbursement for postage and envelope) can be sent to:

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Thank you very much, in advance, for your guidance and help.

Bradley Levenberg

4th year Cincy

I received twenty-one Bar/Bat Mitzvah packets, some via email and some via the US Post Office. The information contained in these packets was very interesting. To begin with, the packets are from congregations all across America, representing varying sizes of Jewish communities. Some congregations are nestled in the suburbs of big cities, while others are more isolated from other Jewish institutions. Some of the congregations are large in number, while others have barely 100 member units.[15] Despite these differences, many congregations are engaging similar methodology in the instruction of Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates.

I have broken the results into four categories: (1) education of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate, (2) issues related to the (non-fiscal) requirements of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate/family, (3) issues related to the ceremony, and (4) congregational policies related to the ceremony.

[15] A complete list of participating congregations can be found in Appendix B.

Education of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Candidate

Of the twenty-one institutions represented, seventeen use in-house tutoring, while the remaining four congregations hire tutors from the community. All four congregations that hire tutors from the community have one clergy member (indicating a smaller-size congregation) and are located near large cities. Of the seventeen other congregations, most have one of the clergy members handle primary tutoring responsibilities, while six have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah class, which Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates attend, together, once a week for at least one hour. The congregations that utilize clergy to tutor Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates each meet one-on-one with the candidate (in some cases, the parent of the candidate may join the session as an observer). Further, thirteen congregations begin the intensive tutoring process six months or less before the ceremony, two congregations begin the process between six and nine months before the ceremony, and the six congregations that use a Bar/Bat Mitzvah class require the meetings to begin between ten and twelve months before the ceremony. Interestingly, five congregations that engage in the private tutorial of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate post in their written materials the length of each session: All five stipulate meetings once per week, with four stating that those sessions will last less than a half-hour (leading up to the ceremony, those sessions will be extended). Three respondent congregations provide Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates with either a tape or CD of the Torah portion, the Haftarah blessings, and the liturgy for the service.

All respondents expect the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to be enrolled in the religious school and/or Hebrew school. Thirteen of the respondents stipulate that the candidate must be enrolled for four years prior to the ceremony (including the year of the ceremony), five stipulate that the candidate must be enrolled for three years prior to the ceremony (including the year of the ceremony), and three congregations stipulate at least two years of enrollment before the ceremony. One congregation in Michigan stipulates that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates may demonstrate proficiency and "test out of" the Bar/Bat Mitzvah class.[16] Accordingly, every respondent congregation stipulates that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate must commit to continuing religious education after the ceremony. Sixteen of the respondents incorporate a commitment from the candidate and family to continue through Confirmation (usually done in the tenth grade), while five respondents simply stipulate continuing Jewish education.

Several congregations offer tools for adults in order not only to help their child but also to make the process more meaningful to them. A congregation in Alabama has a four-week course on the history of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Included in this course is an explanation of the prayers, a detailed study of the role of Torah through the ages, and a component on methods used by parents to individualize the party and ceremony for their family. One Midwestern congregation offers families an entire transliterated service so that parents who don't read Hebrew can still be involved in helping their child prepare for the ceremony. A Buffalo, New York, congregation offers four family-education sessions aimed at building community and understanding of the process.

[16] According to my research, these requirements are for a few reasons: perhaps to prevent unaffiliated Jews in the community from affiliating simply to have a ceremony, or perhaps to make a statement that continued Jewish education is integral to becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

One Southwestern congregation has instituted a "Bar Mitzvah Club": Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates attend monthly Saturday morning sessions with the rabbi to discuss the meaning behind certain prayers and to understand the philosophy behind various aspects of the service. In fact, several of the congregations include in their printed materials a section dealing with the philosophy and meaning behind numerous aspects of the service. Notable examples include the New Jersey synagogue that breaks down each piece of choreography and grounds it with a modern philosophical spin and the Chicago congregation that details the historical philosophy behind the Torah service. Another Chicago-area congregation offers two courses on exploring the meaning behind the ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Issues Related to the (Non-Fiscal) Requirements of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Candidate and/or Family

Fifteen respondents list a service attendance requirement of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates, ranging from monthly to twice-monthly (or more frequent) attendance. One congregation in Texas requires that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate and family attend all Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies taking place the year before the candidate's ceremony. A congregation in New York has a policy that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates in the sixth grade must attend either a Friday night or a Saturday morning service each weekend. Any candidate who misses three weekends in a row will have tutoring suspended. One congregation in the Southwest not only mandates monthly service attendance but also, at

some point during the service, has its clergy pull the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates onto the bima to lead a prayer. Of the respondents that list a service requirement, only eleven have the same stipulation for parents. Four congregations require the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to attend and make no mention of the candidate's family.

The Reform Movement has a profound attachment to the notion of *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world.[17] Eighteen of the respondent congregations have a requirement that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates engage in some sort of mitzvah project. One congregation in Illinois has an entire mitzvah program that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates must complete. The list of mitzvot is varied and includes activities in the areas of study (Hebrew school, learning philosophy behind Torah and Haftarah, B'nai Mitzvah lessons and practice), worship (attending services, leading the congregation in prayer, writing a personal prayer), and service to the community. Another congregation in Illinois breaks mitzvot into different categories (Torah Mitzvot, including completing projects related to the Torah portion; Avodah Mitzvot, including essay writing and prayer composition; and Gemillut Hassadim Mitzvot, a charitable act requiring a commitment of at least eight hours) and mandates that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates complete several mitzvot from each category. Of the mitzvah project component, congregations mandate a variety of

[17] The following statement appears in the 1999 Statement of Principles of Reform Judaism: "Reform Jews bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation. Partners with God in tikkun olam, repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue tzedek, justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice. We affirm the mitzvah of tzedakah, setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands."

hours of community service—from as few as six to as many as twenty hours of service. One temple in New Jersey insists that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates keep a mitzvah journal, in which they can record reactions to each component of their volunteerism.

In addition to the mitzvah project, nine respondent congregations encourage tithing a percentage of the financial gifts given to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate. Five of those congregations present Bar/Bat Mitzvah families with information on making a donation to Mazon, an organization that supplies food to the hungry (in fact, the Union for Reform Judaism, the administrative arm of the Reform Movement, has passed resolutions partnering itself with this organization).

As stated above, all respondents mandate that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates remain enrolled in religious school or Hebrew school throughout the year of their ceremony. Six respondent congregations, in their printed materials, state that failure to attend religious school or Hebrew school may result in a cancellation of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony.

Issues Related to the Ceremony

Respondent congregations no longer primarily offer Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies on Shabbat morning only. Only six respondents refuse to allow for Havdalah Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, Shabbat afternoon ceremonies, and Friday night ceremonies. Regarding the Friday night before the ceremony, eight respondent congregations encourage the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to lead some portion of the service, while six

congregations encourage the mother of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to light the Shabbat candles.

Though the tradition of Bar Mitzvah began with the candidate simply reading from the Torah or offering a Talmudic lecture over a meal[18], ceremonies today have ballooned both in the role of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate in the service and in the role of the party in the process. Twenty respondent congregations, out of twenty-one, encourage the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to lead the majority of the service. Only one respondent congregation mandates a Tallit presentation as part of the ceremony, three congregations present the opportunity as optional, and one congregation mandates that the Tallis presentation take place in the final moments leading up to the ceremony. One congregation insists that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate wear a Tallis and Kippah. Only two congregations address the issue of candy throwing (a custom originating in Sephardic communities to shower the candidate with sweets[19]), and both forbid the practice because (1) people may get hurt and (2) it is difficult to clean up.

No respondent congregation limits honors and aliyot to family. Nine respondent congregations present clear guidelines as to the participation of the non-Jew in the ceremony. Nineteen congregations forbid a non-Jew from participating in the "Chain of Torah tradition" (the tradition of removing the Torah from the Ark and passing it from one generation to the next, finally resting in the arms of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate). Both of the respondent congregations that allow non-Jews to participate in the "Chain of

[18] See Chapter 1 of the thesis.
[19] http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Bar_Bat_Mitzvah/History/HistoryBarMitzvah.htm; article downloaded November 2004

Torah tradition" stipulate that the non-Jew can only participate if he or she is a parent or grandparent.

Parental obligations during the ceremony are much more concrete. All respondents allow parents the following roles in the ceremony: They may receive an aliyah, the mother of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate may kindle the evening Shabbat lights, and the parents may (to varying degrees) speak to the child from the bima. One congregation mandates that parents spend the service seated on the bima.

All respondent congregations allow the parents to offer the blessings before and after the Torah reading. (Though this is only the case in congregations in which there is more than one aliyah. When only one aliyah is offered, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate will recite the blessings him or herself.) Seven respondent congregations allow the parent(s) to speak on the bima during the service. Of those seven, four congregations relegate that piece to a prayer that the parents may write, while three allow parents to compose a full-length speech to their child.

Eleven respondent congregations mandate that the family of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate sponsor the *oneg* following the Friday evening service (this cost is not covered in the fee charged to families for Bar/Bat Mitzvah), and ten require a minimal *kiddish* of challah and juice/wine following the Saturday morning service.

Congregational Policies Related to the Ceremony

All respondents listed a fee for Bar/Bat Mitzvah, ranging from $100.00 to $595.00. All respondents listed that meetings with the clergy are included in the fee, though ten respondents—nearly fifty percent—stipulated that Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates who require additional tutoring (more than once per week or as part of the class) would need to be charged an additional rate (none listed the rate). Sixteen respondents listed no additional fee for musical accompaniment during the ceremony, while five respondents bill families separately for the use of the accompanist. Seven respondents stipulated that all fees must be paid before the ceremony—five of whom refused to begin tutoring until all fees were received and processed by the synagogue. One respondent made a point of explaining that the fee for the security guard, normally used during religious services, is not included in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah fee and that the family would be billed separately by the company for this service.

Five respondent congregations encouraged an appropriate financial gift to the officiating clergy, either as honorarium (one New York congregation) or as a donation to a particular synagogue fund.

None of the respondent congregations has an exclusive contract with a caterer, though eight have a list of "recommended caterers" that they pass on to families. One congregation in the Midwest has a Kitchen Supervisor who must be hired if there are more than fifty people attending the party.

Regarding usage of a social hall, only two congregations require decorations to be regulated and approved by the Temple Administrator (or other Temple staff person). The social hall in two congregations is available for rental for private Shabbat dinners prior to services on Friday night.

Six respondent congregations require rabbinic approval of invitations for the ceremony, and all six state that the invitation must contain specific wording. Six congregations mandate that all classmates of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate receive special invitations to the service, while five respondent congregations require that all classmates of the candidate receive invitations to the celebration. All five explain that they are building community and community cannot be built at the exclusion of others. Of the twenty-one respondent congregations, four insisted that an invitation be sent to officiating clergy. Those same congregations insisted that an invitation be sent to the religious school director, but only two of those congregations mandate that an invitation be sent to the accompanist.

Much has been made in rabbinic circles of the deplorable dress at these ceremonies. While male Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates are generally relegated to wearing a suit, female candidates have a much broader window of interpretation of acceptable styles of dress. Eight respondent congregations saw fit to publish a statement about dress code for bima guests. One congregation in Florida concerns itself with the attire of those attending services and includes an insert for each invitation that reads:

We welcome you to Temple _____, our
spiritual home, and look forward to praying
and celebrating with you.

It is our custom to dress and conduct ourselves
in a respectful manner, always mindful that we
are in a sanctuary that is a holy place of
worship.

We ask that you wear appropriate, modest,
business-type attire when attending services.

Thank you for helping us to create a spiritual
environment for prayer.

The very fact that the congregation believes this statement needs to be inserted into all invitations testifies to the temporary nature of the "congregation" of some of these services.[20] Also regarding general decorum in the sanctuary, two respondent congregations encourage the families to sponsor babysitting for the duration of the service.

[20] The "audience" of many Bar/Bat Mitzvah services comprises only a few members of the community. The primary attendees are family members, business partners, and friends of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate. Thus, the notion has emerged of the "temporary congregation"—a congregation assembled only for one ceremony.

All respondent congregations include a section in their printed materials detailing rules for the photographer and videographer. All rules are similar: No photos may be taken during the service, video must be stationary and in the back of the sanctuary, photos may be taken before the service but must end twenty minutes before the stated start time of the service.

Seven congregations mandate that the family sponsor flowers for decoration of the bima during both the Friday night service and the Saturday morning service. Four congregations will publish a program for the service, and seven congregations suggest that the families publish the program.

In what can only signify a changing climate, three of the twenty-one respondent congregations devoted at least a page to unique procedures of dealing with divorced parents of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from the Bar and Bat Mitzvah information packets collected from twenty-one Reform congregations? First, there is remarkable similarity among the programs despite size and geographic location—somewhat surprising considering the Reform Movement prides itself on allowing "freedom of the pulpit" for

its clergy. Though some congregations may have experimented with the familial involvement in the service and process, all congregations mandate that Torah be read, that the service take place on Shabbat, that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate lead the community in prayer, and that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate prepare some sort of public pronouncement. Further, with the emphasis on decorum (exemplified through the removal of the ritual of throwing candy, the attire mandated by congregations, etc.), there is an attempt made to pacify the ceremony—to bring it more in line with regular congregational worship as opposed to encouraging the celebratory nature of the lifecycle event.

Second, the majority of congregations feel it necessary to require continued involvement in religious school after the ceremony. Through mandating commitments, both in verbal and written contracts, the synagogues are acknowledging that there has been a problem keeping Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates engaged past this ceremony. Though there are many reasons for this, one obvious reason must be that the curriculum for over fifty percent of the respondent congregations begins focusing on Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the fourth grade. Many congregations pride themselves on the focus of the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade years of Hebrew school being entirely devoted to prayer reading—while Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates must wait until seventh grade to obtain any philosophy behind the prayers. There is a heightened importance on prayer proficiency and not as much on the philosophical meaning behind the education. Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates spend years learning to read Hebrew and memorizing their prayers. One rabbi explained it brilliantly: "I find it really meaningful when a kid can conquer the learning disabilities that they have

in order to do what is very illogical educationally, that is, to learn how to read a language publicly without having to know what you're saying. Without understanding the grammar, without...you read it fluently even though you can't understand it fluently."[21]

Another interesting fact is that many rabbis decry the amount of time and resources the family spends dealing with the party and the social component of the process. That said, only four of the twenty-one respondent congregations offered suggestions or involvement in this aspect of the process. Seventeen congregations are silent in their published materials concerning the aspect that involves all family members.

These three conclusions are examples of a larger problem concerning the way congregations "do" Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The congregation speaks one language and has one set of concerns, while the family has a second language and set of concerns. Add to the mix the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate and a third language and set of concerns. What is left is a system breakdown. Only by identifying these moments of disconnect can a plan be established to address these issues, making the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process more meaningful for all parties involved.

The next section of this chapter builds off of the four theories presented in the first part of the chapter (concerning the resiliency and meaning of the ceremony to the families and/or Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate) and the current practices of congregations analyzed in the second section. I identify

[21] Rabbi B

Moments of Disconnect

In the conclusion of the first section, I asked the question: How do congregations respond to the four factors mentioned therein (changing Jewish demographic, issues of Jewish survival, the ceremony as a rite of passage, and the unique position of parents in the mix)? As the congregational section demonstrated, there are indeed profound moments of disconnect among clergy, parents, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates regarding the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process: The congregation is primarily concerned with the ritual on the one hand and in supporting itself as an institution on the other.

I interviewed clergy, parents, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates from seven congregations of various sizes and geographic locations (none of these respondents submitted Bar/Bat Mitzvah packets).[22] I relied heavily on contacts I have in the field, approaching first rabbis with whom I am friendly and second home rabbis of my classmates. I asked each rabbi to put me in touch with the next student, and his or her parents, in line to become a Bar/Bat Mitzvah at that congregation. These participating subjects were asked a series of questions divided into three sections: (1) ritual, (2) preparation, and (3) ideology. In the interest of receiving honest answers, unencumbered by repercussions from either clergy or laity who read this thesis, each interview was conducted with the promise of anonymity. All interviews except one were telephone interviews; the one exception was a personal interview.

[22] A key pointing to geographic location and congregational size can be found in Appendix B.

Ritual

The moments of disconnect in the ritual section stem primarily from a lack of communication among parties. While the clergy can certainly explain philosophical and historical reasons for the recitation of certain prayers and the performance of certain choreography, there is no sure way to gauge whether those philosophies are shared by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate and family. The clergy will often confuse regurgitated responses with internalization, memorization with understanding. Thus, when clergy "quiz" Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates or family members, it is entirely possible for the answers to be satisfactory, allowing clergy to move on to the next bit of information to be covered. If the ceremony is devoid of internalized ritual, or if that internalization is simply on the surface, then the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate and family are engaging in a process fully able to frustrate them, the rewards of a successful process lost.

Take, for example, the reading of the Torah. One of the respondent rabbis stated that the role of Torah in the Bar Mitzvah ceremony is "a chance for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to connect with antiquity and to see that he/she can proficiently perform a skill that will be with him/her forever."[23] Another rabbi had this to say:

> I think it's the point at which the community understands that this person moves from childhood to adulthood because it is a skill that I don't allow people to do if they are not Bar Mitzvah or older. So it's a gateway for the kid. In addition to that, it's a Saturday morning service, so the Torah reading is central to the

[23] Rabbi A, interview conducted November 2004

integrity service. That the kid is doing it makes that kid a part of a club that before the training and their age they would not be allowed to be part of. And that sense of exclusivity serves the Jewish people because, for the kids who understand that you are not allowed to read it publicly and from the scroll before that moment unless you are practicing to do it for that moment...that adds some importance to the Torah.[24]

Another rabbinic respondent appeared to view Torah reading from a primarily anthropological perspective with a "hint" of theology:

> Torah reading to me is extremely important because, as one of my congregants says, "It's Jewish opera." His name is Ron, and he's one of our tutors. That's not my quote; I have to give him credit. For children to encounter the story of their people as a sacred text, and that they vocalize that, that they learn that, that they comment on it, it's like they're literally taking Torah into them. So, to me that is very important that they get to play with and examine the ongoing story of our people—ongoing Revelation as well.[25]

One final rabbinic responded concluded that "not only did the reading of Torah fit historical and theological reasons but also that there was a contemporary anthropological 'fitting into the congregation' segment often overlooked by laity:"

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[24] Rabbi B, interview conducted October 2004
[25] Rabbi C, interview conducted November 2004

> Well, the purpose is you are supposed to read Torah on Shabbat morning. I think the role of Torah is...to hear the Torah being read; it's a mitzvah; you're supposed to read the Torah on Shabbat morning. So, to allow the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to take their place as *Baal Kriyah*. I also think it's to give the family honors, for aliyot, to show how much the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate has learned, and to give them a feeling of ownership of Hebrew and the value of reading Hebrew, to embrace them in the congregation and to let them know they have a vital function in the congregation and, hopefully, to encourage them to continue reading Torah on the anniversary of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah and other times as well.[26]

Families, on the other hand, seem to look at the role of Torah from a purely theological view. One parent responded that the Torah is a profound theological tool, for it serves to "get the kids comfortable with the fact that their heritage comes from the Torah, that it is the reason why we're there."[27] Another parental respondent explained that the beauty of the Torah is that her son had "completely internalized it. I think, what he reads in the Torah and the way he interprets it—it's in his heart. I think it makes him feel good. We even went looking at Bar Mitzvah invitations today, and he picked out one with a Torah print to it. I think it means a lot to him."[28]

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[26] Rabbi D, interview conducted November 2004
[27] Parent A, interview conducted November 2004
[28] Parent B, interview conducted November 2004

None of the child respondents had any idea how to answer any question dealing with the role of Torah in the ceremony. Only two child respondents attempted an answer—and, after stumbling along for a moment, concluded that they had no answer to the question.[29]

Considering that Torah is the central aspect of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, one would hope that the three parties would be on the same page. Yet while the rabbis speak of the skill of reading from Torah, the parents speak of the greater meaning behind Torah—the heritage and the theology—and the children have no concept of what Torah means to their ceremony, only that they have to read from it and there are a lot of choreographed steps to use it.

When asked about the meaning of prayer, or of the specific prayers recited in the service, one rabbi stated that the purpose or role in the ceremony is "mastering material that will enable the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to participate in Jewish synagogue life and worship anywhere in the world."[30]

A Midwestern rabbi stated, "This is the first time she'll be getting up there in front of the whole community and being our *Shaliach Tzibur* and leading the whole service. It's got a symbolic meaning to say that now you are an adult and you have the right and the capability to lead a community in prayer...and I hope this is something that she will want

[29] Students A and B, interview October and November 2004
[30] Rabbi D, interview November 2004

to do many, many times for us in the future and in whatever community she happens to find herself."[31]

Another rabbi stated that prayer is "critical":

> Unfortunately, most American Jews seem to sit through this as a family activity rather than a religious event, so they're more focused on how proud they might be as opposed to "we're actually praying a Saturday service." You probably hear my rabbinic naiveté about life coming out here, but to me, prayer is critical because it's about our relationship with God, and in our congregation, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates are supposed to write a personal prayer to God. So, to me, it's critical. I think that American Jews, Reform Jews as well, do a pathetic job of articulating our faith, and if we learned anything from the 2004 election, we need to do a better job being able to express, articulate, and be in touch with our faith.[32]

One parent responded, "When you bless certain things, you understand the meaning behind it. In prayer, you're not just doing it to read the words; you're doing it for meaning."[33] When I asked whether she understood the meaning behind the prayers recited in the ceremony, or whether her son understood the meaning, she answered honestly that she didn't—they hadn't gotten to that part of the tutoring yet. The boy had three weeks before his ceremony.

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[31] Rabbi E, interview November 2004
[32] Rabbi C, interview November 2004
[33] Parent A, interview November 2004

Another parent simply answered that the purpose and role of prayer in the ceremony is "tradition."[34] Still another answered that prayer is important because, without it, "there would be no connection to God."[35]

The children all gave similar answers: "It's what was said at Bar Mitzvahs for, like, a thousand years."[36] "Some of the prayers are found in Torah, so it's like we're reading Torah."[37] Not only are the answers from the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates incomplete, but I am willing to bet they are partially memorized statements from their tutors or clergy—perhaps even from parents. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates may have asked a question at one point about a particular prayer. If they did, the answer was wholly unsatisfactory. Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates could not give specific reasons even to *say* any of the prayers they had spent months learning.

One rabbi had this to say about the role of prayer in the service:

> Every service is an opportunity for prayer—for real prayer, as opposed to prescribed prayer—and if the kid is well enough prepared that it's not about all the mistakes that the kid is making but that the kid who's leading the service is not an obstacle to prayer...That it's actually a sweeter kind of a prayer because

[34] Parent C, interview November 2004
[35] Parent B, interview November 2004
[36] Student A, interview October 2004
[37] Student C, interview November 2004

> it's their voice, that immaturity of their voice, mixed with the maturity of what they're saying, and the confidence with which they say it.[38]

However, this rabbi quickly added:

> I don't think there's much prayer that goes on with the parents, or with the family—I think it's a show, and I can't stand that. But I think for the regulars, and for the kid, and for the clergy, it can be very meaningful. I find that there is some spontaneous prayer during the service, and those spontaneous prayers are usually very filled with meaning and very filled with *Kavanah*.[39]

Regarding prayer in the ceremony, the rabbis and parents seem to be at least in the same ballpark: Both are speaking about the theological importance of prayer, prescribed or otherwise. Yet the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates speak only of prayer from a historical standpoint—the prayers are not something to believe in, they are just something to practice and recite smoothly, because it's always been done that way.[40]

I also asked how things will be different for this Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate after the ceremony. One rabbi answered, "She'll be a lot more relaxed. She won't have any more studying to do for this, but basically that's it."[41] Another rabbi said, "The Bar/Bat

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[38] Rabbi D, interview November 2004
[39] Rabbi D, interview November 2004
[40] Students C, E, F, and G, interviews November 2004
[41] Rabbi G, interview October 2004

Mitzvah candidate is expected to be involved in our youth programs doing all kinds of adult responsibilities."[42] A third rabbi answered:

> She will be called on to lead a service from time to time, maybe with some of her social group or others. She will also be called on, as she already has been, to deliver some Divrei Torah which she already has done a couple of times. She'll be called on to learn other Torah portions, to be able to read Torah at other times. I've started a tradition here where the Bar Mitzvah—the people who have been Bar Mitzvahed in the year leading up to the High Holidays are asked to prepare the Torah portions over the High Holidays and this seems to be a pretty popular move on the part of the families of those B'nai Mitzvah.[43]

When I asked the parents that same question, the answers I got were quite surprising. One parent became emotional and said, "He'll be able to take an aliyah, but for me it's all inside. I want him to feel like he wants to take an aliyah, like he wants to take part in services and...the broader view is that he is a young Jewish man now and it's serious business."[44] Another parent responded, "I hope she will have a sense of accomplishment and then also to realize that she can do things that seem hard and she can excel at them, so I'm hoping for a self-confidence boost."[45]

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[42] Rabbi A, interview November 2004
[43] Rabbi E, interview November 2004
[44] Parent A, interview November 2004
[45] Parent G, interview November 2004

The point of disconnect between clergy and rabbis concerning how "things" will be different for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate after the ceremony is enlightening. The rabbis, by and large, responded in terms of opportunities presented before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate in the congregation—stating that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah would be able and expected to continue taking advantage of learning opportunities through the congregation, including high-school youth programming. The parents responded from a much more character-oriented perspective—they were hoping for demonstrable growth and maturity in their child. Some were hoping that their child would overcome certain fears, while others hoped their child would have a positive Jewish experience that would lead to renewed interest in Judaism. While rabbis spoke of youth group and Torah reading, parents spoke of maturity and growth. While rabbis spoke of continuing education, parents spoke of confidence and ability. Imagine the possibilities if the rabbis could frame their goals in the language of the parents!

Preparation

I asked several questions about the preparation for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ceremony. I first asked the clergy, family, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates to divide their preparation time based upon percentages and to rank the amount of time they spent on Torah, prayers, speech, social justice, and the party preparation.

Not surprisingly, this is the area in which there were the fewest moments of disconnect. The respondents confirmed that families spent the most time preparing for the celebration

and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate spent the most time preparing for the Torah portion.[46] Regarding this latter fact, each Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate interviewed was enrolled in religious school from a young age and had been attending Hebrew school for between three and four years. The curriculum covered in each Hebrew school is the liturgy for a Shabbat evening and morning service.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates spent a tremendous amount of time focused on Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. Beginning in the fourth grade, when they are introduced to the concept of Hebrew study and when the date for their ceremony is set, the next three years are basic skill acquisition. While many Hebrew schools present themselves as "teaching Hebrew," many of them are simply teaching "prayers for Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony."[47] With the goal of three years' worth of work attained in a single ceremony some time during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate's seventh-grade school year, is it any wonder so many Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates don't continue past seventh grade?

Ideology

Respondents were asked, "Why become a Bar/Bat Mitzvah?" One rabbi saw the entire process as a way of embracing Jewish education:

> It forces them to embrace Jewish education with standards that they would not have had had they not had a Bar Mitzvah. Of course, that presupposes that they

[46] Parents and students, interviews conducted October and November 2004
[47] This statement is exemplified by the interviews and congregational packets collected in the fall and winter of 2004.

will have a Bar Mitzvah (ceremony) and that they value having it, because of some social pressure having nothing to do with Judaism. If that's the given, then having a Bar Mitzvah gives me the opportunity to require things of them that I normally would not be able to require of them had they just gone to services.[48]

Another rabbi remarked that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate becomes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah simply by birth:

> ...because the minute they hit the age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah, they are. But you know what? Much like Havdalah celebrates three stars in the sky whether we do it or not, it is extremely important in a secular era to mark spiritual occasions. So I believe it is really obligatory to do something that sets you apart, that sets ourselves apart, from a larger secular and gentile society. It's more about identity than spirituality. If you don't know who you are, you can't be spiritual. And...it's important that a child learn to work for something beyond what is measured in a secular school setting.[49]

Other rabbis voiced similar opinions. One rabbi had this to say:

1. To connect with the past
2. To make a commitment to the future
3. For the feeling of personal accomplishment that is involved

[48] Rabbi A, interview November 2004
[49] Rabbi G, interview November 2004

4. To have an opportunity to have a family *simcha*
5. To have a Jewish experience that will help color—it really is a milestone that helps color the way you see the world before and after and you really can measure this wonderful feeling of everyone *kvelling* over you and making you feel very special
6. Because I think it's a mitzvah to read from the Torah and this is a formal way to do that, to feel part of the community. Ultimately, I think the most important aspect is to feel part of the community, I would say, to be embraced by the community[50]

Another rabbi believed "there are several issues. One is…it is a sense of Jewish accomplishment; it is a sense of Jewish memory; it is a way for many of these children to connect to the Jewish side of their family—because they are interfaith—and a way in which the non-Jewish parent and non-Jewish family can identify positively with Judaism and a way for the child to get to know the clergy of the congregation better and to identify with them, and it is probably one of the first times to do some serious, independent Jewish learning—basically, the creation of positive Jewish memories."[51]

When asked about the meaning behind the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, one rabbi responded that it is "a way in which a young person finds his or her own connection to Judaism, and I think that's very important. The challenge is for me, both as a Jew and as a rabbi, is that

[50] Rabbi D, interview November 2004
[51] Rabbi F, interview November 2004

I think it's been blown out of proportion and corrupted. But I think it has meaning as an opportunity to create a sense of Jewish memory and a sense of Jewish pride."[52]

I asked the parents that same question, "Why become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah?" One parent answered, "Because I think in tradition...it puts him in a Jewish place in a so-called society."[53] Another parent answered similarly, "Well, religiously I'd say it's a tradition and keeping in touch with the people who went before her and also keeping in touch with the religion."[54]

A third parent answered, "It's their turn to step up and carry on our traditions of Torah and prayer and...we are half of a half of one percent of the population here in the U.S., and that is slowly being diminished because of intermarriage. And...I want to see Jewish continuity, and that's why kids have to step up and be Bar Mitzvahed. Don't get me going now!"[55]

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates' responses to this ideological question were equally telling. One candidate remarked, "My parents made me."[56] Another responded with this insightful statement: "So I will feel older and so I will...like... it will be cool. So I will be cool. There are so many special things going on."[57] The number one reason was "to

[52] Rabbi C, interview November 2004
[53] Parent A, interview November 2004
[54] Parent G, interview November 2004
[55] Parent E, interview November 2004
[56] Student G, interview November 2004
[57] Student A, interview October 2004

have a party," but six respondent children also stated that they were happy to be considered an "adult."

In all, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates' responses demonstrated no understanding of the deeper meaning, or inherent philosophies, associated with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. This is especially disconcerting considering the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates have spent three to four years preparing the material for this ceremony.

The ideological points of disconnect between rabbis and parents are more pronounced (I classify the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates' ideological responses as devoid of ideology, ignorant of deeper meaning). To begin with, rabbis tend to view the ceremony and the educational process leading to the ceremony as a way of cementing a modern Jewish identity. The rabbis are looking forward, identifying this as the first public affirmation of Judaism in this child's life. The parents are looking backward, associating the ceremony and process to the "link-in-the-chain" theory of Bar Mitzvah: "Judaism will not stop with me—I am not an innovator, but I am another link in a timeless chain. Now my child will also be a link in the chain," as one parent remarked.[58]

The rabbis dictate the ceremony. Most printed materials were silent on whether a family can incorporate individual elements into the standard congregational ceremony, leading me to believe that the normal practice is the "cookie-cutter" Bar/Bat Mitzvah: This is what all Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates do, this is what all parents do, this is the role of the rabbi, and then you are done. Thus, families end up navigating between the historical

[58] Parent B, interview November 2004

family traditions and individual aspects of their child's personality. With little outlet in the ceremony for these important components, the family turns its attention to finding those opportunities within the celebration.

Contemporary Ritual: The Celebration

Familial responses to the issue of Bar/Bat Mitzvah appear in several aspects of the process. Of note for the subject of this paper are responses as played out in the celebration. Much has been written about the extravagance of many contemporary Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations. Consider these exceptional examples:

> On November 8, 1997, 14-year-old Grant Shapiro, son of O.J. Simpson attorney Robert Shapiro, was given a huge reception at the Museum of Flying in Santa Monica to celebrate his bar mitzvah earlier this year in Israel. The elder Shapiro, an amateur boxer, seems to have passed his passion for pugilism along to his son: Grant's entrance to the party began with a Michael Buffer-like ring announcer bellowing, "Let's get ready to bar mitzvah!" Young Shapiro then arrived in a helicopter and was escorted by two leggy ring girls to a boxing ring where he proceeded to duke it out with the Shapiro family trainer, who obligingly lost after two rounds. The evening concluded with the 400 guests watching a closed-circuit showing of the Evander Holyfield-Michael Moorer heavyweight fight in Las Vegas...[59]

[59] Mitchell Fink, "Torah! Torah! Torah!," *People Weekly* (December 1, 1997)

In 1991, the Bar Mitzvah celebration for TV star Fred Savage made the papers mainly because of the extravagance: taking the guests to Disneyland.[60] Arlo Guthrie discussed his affair during a TV interview, telling how he felt most neglected because, with all the guests dad Woody Guthrie had invited, the reception turned more into a folksingers' convention than a celebration of his coming of age.[61]

The St. Louis Dispatch covered Andy Salsman's Bar Mitzvah ceremony and celebration.

> "Andy is an only child, and the only grandchild on both sides of our family, so he felt keen responsibility to carry on Jewish tradition," says Iris Salsman, his mother. "He studied for an entire year to be able to lead the congregation in prayer, read a portion of Torah and Haftarah, interpret them and express what becoming a Bar Mitzvah meant to him. It was quite an accomplishment. I feel that when a child puts in that kind of effort, it's worth a real party." After Andy conducted a three-hour Shabbat service, almost in its entirety, for special guests and members of his traditional congregation, his parents were host to a Kiddush celebration and buffet luncheon for 200 at the synagogue. And on Sunday night, they rented the American Theatre downtown to treat family and friends to a comedy-themed party titled "Backstage With Andy." Guests arrived to a red-carpet treatment. There was valet parking. Andy's name was up in lights on the marquee. Posters of Andy in various theatrical poses adorned the walls of the venerable building. First, cocktails and hors d'oeuvres were served on stage.

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[60] Robert Maxwell Stern, "Famous Tales of the Bar Mitzvah," *Jewish Exponent* (August 15, 1996)
[61] Ibid.

> Then guests sat at tables topped by Calderesque centerpieces and partook of an elegant buffet in the theater. Cardboard cutouts of Fred Astaire, Claudette Colbert and others witnessed the affair from the balcony. As the crowd dined, a local comedian zinged them with one-liners. Andy also was the subject of an operetta takeoff of "Fiddler on the Roof," full of original song parodies and "Andydotes" supplied by family members. Upstairs, the entertainment continued with after-dinner drinks, impossibly tiny chocolates, and dancing to the music of the Rhythm Rockers. Downstairs, in the theater's lounge, Andy's young friends grabbed the mikes and performed karaoke-style in "The Comedy Underground." "I don't like to live with regrets," says Iris Salsman. "How many times in life can you get together with family and friends to celebrate a happy occasion?"[62]

That is precisely the question that the Union for Reform Judaism has been debating for years: How much and what kind of celebration is appropriate when a child becomes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The URJ, in October 1993, adopted a set of guidelines for these celebrations. Chief among them were two ideas: first, that "nothing in relation to the service and the celebration, whether music, dress, decorum, intrusive photography or videography at the service, should violate the spirit of Shabbat" and, second, that "the party itself should be appropriate for celebrating a religious event and not just a party for 'party's sake.'"[63]

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[62] Renee Stovsky, "The Bar Mitzvah Debate," *St. Louis Dispatch* (December 1, 1993)
[63] Herbert Bronstein, "UAHC Resolution on Bar/Bat Mitzvah"; downloaded from www.urj.org in November 2004

There are a number of economic and social reasons behind the lavish celebrations. Immigrant Jews, finally freed from the shackles of European anti-Semitism, were beginning to participate fully in American economic life and reap the rewards of material success. This financial largess, coupled with the newfound freedom to express religious convictions in a public arena, is believed by many to have spurred the spate of enormously lavish public celebrations.[64] Historically, as soon as a generation moves into the middle class and has access to material goods, the standards of celebrations and other observances tend to reflect that additional material wealth. Dr. Henry Klein described this phenomenon in *The Jewish Exponent*:

> After my Bar Mitzvah service in 1931, our family, and none of my friends, went back to our home for a light lunch. That was it. No kids' party, no nothing. Fast-forward to the late '50s: for our children's Bar and Bat Mitzvahs at Temple Adath Israel...we returned to our Wynnewood home for a luncheon on the lawn. Following the ceremony, our daughter, Sharon, joined with one of her classmates for a party for their mutual friends. Fast forward to the present: our first grandson has just received his Bar Mitzvah date two years from now. Already his parents are reserving the social room, auditioning musicians, forming the guest list, and talking about the videotape.[65]

Other causes include far-flung family members, divorced and blended families, and the much-documented trend of delayed childbearing among the baby boom generation.

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[64] Chaye Kohl, "Bat Mitzvah Celebrations for the 90's," *Emunah* (Winter 1997–98)
[65] Henry Klein, "Technically Speaking: Bar Mitzvah Celebrations, '90s-Style," *Jewish Exponent* (February 20, 1997)

Many grandparents are afraid they won't be alive to dance at a grandchild's wedding, so they want to dance at his or her Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration.

While the trend during the ceremonies is drifting more toward the tradition of yesterday, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of today seems to take place after the formal ceremony. Planned by family and friends, reflecting familial traditions often excluded during the ceremony, and fueled by an American idea to "keep up with the Schwartzes," the celebration takes on recognizable elements of a rite of passage in and of itself.

Evidence of this phenomenon comes in the form of the rising popularity of the Gentile Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies.

> She's got a deejay blasting Beyonce and a computerized light show. She has nearly 100 friends crammed into Manhattan's ritzy Bryant Park Grill. She's got the gift table groaning with Tiffany bags and guests greeting her dad at the door with "Mazel Tov!" Everything is perfectly poised for 13-year-old Kimya to have a world-class Bat Mitzvah, except for one tiny detail: Kimya isn't Jewish.[66]

Dubbed the "Faux Mitzvah" by *People* magazine and other news outlets, there is certainly a popularity component in the eyes of non-Jewish classmates. In predominantly Jewish suburbs of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, there may be only one or two non-Jewish students in a public-school class. One parent explained, "I want our kids to

[66] Alex Tresniowski, "The Rite Stuff: First, the bar mitzvah. Now...the faux mitzvah?," *People Weekly* (April 26, 2004)

be popular. I don't want them being the loner or the outcast. The party set Janie (the daughter) on the social list with all her buds, and she's been invited to every party since then."[67] Another parent explained, "I wanted my daughter to feel it was just as important to us that she was turning 13 as it was to other parents."

The Faux Mitzvah is not relegated to thirteen-year-old children. On April 25, 2004, Comedy Central celebrated its thirteenth birthday with U.S. cable TV's first Bar Mitzvah. Dubbed "Comedy Central's Bar Mitzvah Bash!," the retrospective of the network's first thirteen years included presentations by Ray Romano, Drew Barrymore, Hank Azaria, Lewis Black, and Snoop Dogg. "We still can't drink or vote, but what better way to celebrate the 13th birthday of the first all-comedy network than by throwing TV's first bar mitzvah?" asked Lauren Corrao, Head of Development and Original Programming at Comedy Central.[68]

For the past fifty years or so, the concern has been that big-budget Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations create a platform for some of the less salubrious aspects of modern North American Jewry, turning a spiritual rite into a gaudy show of wealth and status. "But there's another reason for it," explains Toronto DJ Florence:

> The trend in the Hebrew Schools is to invite the entire class. So by late May, your average seventh grader has attended twenty, thirty, perhaps even forty Bar or

[67] Ibid.
[68] United Press International, "Comedy Central to Celebrate Bar Mitzvah," *United Press International* (April 1, 2004)

Bat Mitzvah parties. They can get jaded, so to prevent this, the ante is constantly upped.

The heavier, religious aspects of the Bar Mitzvah, the synagogue side, are not so much our business. But even with the parties, at the end of the day, you are still talking about something meaningful for families, no matter what. There is a landmark aspect to the Bar Mitzvah that cannot be removed. My job is to make the most of that, to make sure big memories are created—no more, no less.[69]

One Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate from New York stated, "Bar Mitzvahs are joyous occasions for Jews. I certainly enjoy myself. This year I enter seventh grade and I will reach many milestones in my life. I will read from the Torah and have a splendid party."

Gail Greenberg writes, "Guests will be delighted by good food, beautiful decorating and wonderful music. But the most magical thing—the only unique thing—that a parent and Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate can give their guests is themselves—access to the world inside of the parents and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate on this amazing day. Through words and deeds, guests can be given some affecting moments in the course of the party—moments where they make a connection with the person, or with Judaism and the symbolism of the day."[70]

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[69] Mireille Silcoff, "Bar Mitzvah King" *Toronto Life* (April 2004)
[70] Gail Greenberg, *Mitzvah Chic* (New York, NY: MitzvahChick, Ltd., 2004), 35

Delivering affecting moments is the goal of the family during the celebration (well, either that or showing up the Schwartzes). Assuming this is indeed the goal, it's no wonder many family members obsess over the party. It has to be good enough to impress, yet it also has to have a personal component. It has to be better than so-and-so's celebration and it also has to please those difficult relatives.

This phenomenon is not unique to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah culture. The culture of consumption, or Conspicuous Consumption, can be observed in many other facets of American society not restricted to Jewish culture. Written over 100 years ago, Thorstein Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class still presents a theory on the culture of consumption. In his text, Veblen developed an evolutionary framework in which preferences are determined not by necessity but rather by social signifiers. These social signifiers are identified in relation to the positions of individuals in a social hierarchy. According to Veblen's theory of Conspicuous Consumption, individuals emulate the consumer patterns of other individuals situated at higher points in the hierarchy. This emulation is governed by social norms, economy, and the social fabric in increasingly upwardly mobile societies.[71]

Many traditions at the celebrations are not institutional innovations but rather stem from the family. One family from Detroit insists that chilidogs be served at midnight during the festivities.[72] Another family insists on playing a game that involves sitting on each

[71] Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1994)
[72] Leonard Sarko, personal family history, November 2002

other's laps.[73] These traditions are integral to the values of the family (don't ask me how!) and would be noticed if they were not present. But they are also specific traditions. Below is a description of some of the more popular Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration traditions:

Candles

"The Bar/Bat Mitzvah candle-lighting ceremony is a relatively recent Jewish-American tradition, probably dating back to the 1950s. Commonly, thirteen or fourteen people, chosen by the family, light candles on a cake, and perhaps make a special blessing for the child. Most likely the ceremony was a way of investing the celebration with more meaning and spirituality."[74] Variations occur in numerous places during this ceremony: Some families have the DJ call the honorees, other families have the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate invite them to the candles, and still others have the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate recite a poem detailing the relationship of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to the honorees. Most celebrations have candle-lighting immediately prior to the serving of the meal. In Mitzvah Chic, Gail Greenberg explains, "The ceremony isn't even Jewish—it was actually invented in the 1950s by a caterer who thought the Bar Mitzvah party needed a focus. It persists not because people love it. In fact, when we announced at my son's party that we weren't going to have a candle-lighting, people actually broke into applause. That's because, on top of being an emotional minefield, the candle-lightings are long and boring for the audience to sit through

[73] Sandy Hatfield, personal interview, November 2004
[74] Jayne Cohen and Lori Weinrott, *The Ultimate Bar/Bat Mitzvah Celebration Book* (New York, NY: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2004)

and they bring the party's momentum to a grinding halt."[75] Jeff Salkin has actually stated, "The day a caterer invented that ritual will eventually become a minor fast day in the Jewish calendar."[76] However, the tradition of lighting the candles has persevered primarily because it is a way of honoring family and friends who were not able to be honored during the ceremony. Though many families today dislike the candle-lighting tradition, it is nonetheless a tradition and shows very little promise of fading away.

The Hora[77]

Though technically not the right dance, it seems to be universal that when the opening notes of the "Jewish Medley" sound, guests crowd to the dance floor and know instinctively what to do. This Ashkenazi custom of dancing the Hora grew in popularity after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. As Israeli teachers were brought to the United States to teach in religious schools, they also brought with them the flavor of their music and dance. Whether the Hora grew in popularity due to baby-boomer nostalgia or some other reason, it seems here to stay. Some families invite certain older relatives to dance specific dances perceived to be from "the old country" in the middle of the circles. Inevitably, the Hora balances the rhythm of the music with the chaos of a dance that few people actually know how to do.

The Chair Lifting[78]

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[75] Gail Greenberg, *Mitzvah Chic* (New York, NY: MitzvahChick, Ltd., 2004)
[76] Renee Stovsky, "The Bar Mitzvah Debate," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (December 1993)
[77] Gail Greenberg, *Mitzvah Chic* (New York,NY: MitzvahChick, Ltd., 2004)

Following the Hora, at many Ashkenazi Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations, the child sits in a chair and is lifted by family and friends high above their shoulders and "danced" to the Jewish music being played. Often times the parents and siblings are held aloft as well. The joyous dance embodies the individual/community construct in Judaism: The individual is hoisted above the crowd, alone, in a starring role, and yet it is only through the support of the community that he or she is kept aloft. The custom likely evolved from a similar tradition at Eastern European weddings: Bride and groom sit in separate chairs and are lifted up, "attached" to each other by the handkerchief to which each clings.

The Shehechiyanu[79]

Many communities repeat the Shehechiyanu prayer when the Bar/Bat Mitzvah enters the room for the first time. This is the prayer reserved for the wondrous moments of life and is the blessing author Anita Diamant calls "the Jewish version of 'Wow.'"

It can be observed that each of these traditions has a formal structure but an informal substance. Each celebration has, for example, the candle-lighting, but the substance of what is said varies from family to family. Thus, the celebration becomes an outlet for creative expression—and control—of the family. Contrast the celebration with the powerlessness the families feel during the ceremony, in which clergy execute the program.

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[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

Underlying all of these traditions is a new phenomenon: the Bar/Bat Mitzvah "how to" books. Due to the popularity of Jeff Salkin's Putting God on the Guest List, in which the author offers suggestions on how to make the Bar/Bat Mitzvah party a more spiritual and inclusive event, many other books have been published offering similar tips. For example, Mitzvah Chic, by Gail Greenberg, offers parents suggestions to infuse the Torah portion with the party. Some books are written by therapists (Whose Bar/Bat Mitzvah Is It Anyway? by Dr. Judith Davis), some are written by parents (The Complete Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner by Linda Sage), and some are just plain sarcastic (How To Survive—And Profit From—Your Son's Bar Mitzvah by Marvin Shapiro). Each of these books points individually, and as a collection, to the fact that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is an enormous cultural event to today's parents, with as many pitfalls as not. While struggling to balance family traditions with synagogue obligations with the interests of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate, parents can easily become overwhelmed. These books, some good and some just plain bad, offer ideas for the confused parent. It should be noted, however, that as of September 2005, not one book on this topic has been written for rabbis who, I would argue, are navigating the same treacherous path.

Finally, some people are finding new and innovative ways to use technology in the realm of Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring. Rabbi Mike Moscowitz has developed a web site where students can record themselves, twenty-four hours a day, reading their portions. A tutor from Rabbi Moscowitz's synagogue can download the student's .wav file and respond accordingly. Leonard Sarko has developed "Mitzvah CD," a disc, with the option for a

download for MP3 players, that contains the student's verses either read or chanted, along with much of the liturgy and even a section on modern Midrash to aid in the student's understanding of the portion.[80] These technological options are responses to the age-old problem with Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring: transporting the student to and from the temple when it is convenient for the tutor.

If families and Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates are divorcing the celebration from the ceremony, is there anything the congregation can do to make these celebrations more reflective of the Jewish spiritual moment? Or can families have more of a say in assuring family values and traditions have a place in the ceremony?

Gail Greenberg, in her book Mitzvah Chic, encourages parents to read their child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah Torah portion. She encourages a theme taken out of the Torah portion—perhaps even in consultation with the clergy. She still argues for the use of music and dance, but she believes that the easiest way to connect the party to the process is simply to make the theme Judaism. "The magic comes from the tone you set and the many special moments: the speeches, the ceremonies, and the overall sense of a modern family reaching through the millennia to touch the eternal. Let the ideas, the values, and the personality of your party reflect YOU, not the party professionals you hire." She continues:

> Since the 1950s, B'nai Mitzvah celebrations have followed the same formula and nothing has changed except which trendy themes are in vogue. But now, we

[80] Information available at: www.mitzvahcd.com

> recognize that there's got to be more, that we've exhausted the thrills and satisfaction we can get through decorating and the old routines alone. The new bar or bat mitzvah harnesses the wonder of the human adventure. It's a potentially life-changing journey into the heart of the ancient mysteries and an exploration of what it means to be Jewish today.[81]

The Jewish Family Service Association in Cleveland has a different approach. They encourage families to sit down with clergy to reflect on the following questions:

- What are one or two main values that were transmitted to parents from their parents regarding what it means to be Jewish?
- What are one or two critical values, Jewish or otherwise, you want to transmit to your children?
- How do parents transmit these messages to their children in a way that is demonstrated by actions?
- What do parents want the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony and celebration to mean to the child?

The theory is that by articulating and discussing these intentions, parents can emphasize the spirituality and meaning of the event.[82] In other words, perhaps the rabbi, parents, and children can take more ownership of the ceremony to ensure that family traditions are

[81] Gail Greenberg, *Mitzvah Chic* (New York, NY: MitzvahChick, Ltd., 2004)
[82] Michele Cydulka-Weinstein, "Making it Meaningful," *Cleveland Jewish News* (June 29, 2001)

incorporated, taking the onus off the party as the only receptacle for the transfer of parental values.

Temple Beth Shalom in Florida has heavily encouraged families to turn the celebration into a *Tikkun Olam* project.[83] They encourage the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to select a mitzvah project he or she can work on throughout the year, and then, after the ceremony (in which the project is not only mentioned but highlighted by interspersing moving personal quotes between prayers), the guests attend a large-scale version of that project. One family had a party on the grounds of the ASPCA![84]

Robert E. Tornberg believes that the ceremony and celebration do not occur in a moment but rather are drawn out over a period of months and sometimes even years. He challenges Jewish educators and rabbis to create a program that keeps the following in mind: (1) the whole family undergoes the rite of passage, (2) the event is not the day it happens but the entire period before and after, and (3) creative participation of family members enhances the event for everyone.[85]

Speaking from his pulpit on the national airwaves, Dennis Prager encourages families to abandon altogether the party and instead focus on the ceremony. All monies used for the party could be funneled into bringing in a scholar-in-residence. According to Mr.

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[83] Steve Heisler, "Children of the Commandment: Temples build meaning and service into the rite of passage that is the bar or bat mitzvah," *Sarasota Herald Tribune* (July 2002)
[84] Another article that details the use of a mitzvah project to enrich the experience is Susan Werk's "Hand's On! Enriching the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Experience," found in *Women's League Outlook* (Fall 2000).
[85] Robert E. Tornberg, "Bar/Bat Mitzvah: A Bit of Theory and a Practical Response," *Compass* (Fall 1993)

Prager's web site, www.dennisprager.com, he is available to speak as a scholar-in-residence.[86]

All of these solutions to the party and to incorporating more of an individualized prayer experience of course have drawbacks. In an individualized ceremony, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate is the focus. The object of the ritual would be to give the child a valuable Jewish experience that will support a lifelong journey of Jewish connectivity. In addition, by becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the child demonstrates the ability to take responsibility for completing a task. The attainment of skills lessens in importance if the task is adapted to the ability of the child. The point then becomes that the child should feel no discomfort or embarrassment about how or what he or she is able to do during the service. The goal of the ritual then is for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate to feel that he or she has accomplished something important and that the job was well done. This last point bears emphasizing: The accomplishment in question refers to an act that is done, completed. How many rabbis utter at the end of the ritual, "You can sigh a sigh of relief now—it's over!"

In an individualized prayer experience, the ritual would hence seek to instill in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate a sense of connection with others who have crossed the same hurdle. Becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah is like having joined a club of those who have done the same thing. The event is a one-time experience, something to look back on and from which to draw strength and feelings of connectedness.

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[86] Dennis Prager, "Stop the Bar Mitzvah Madness: Spring for a Jewish Scholar, not FAO Schwarz," *Moment Magazine* (October 2000)

On the other hand, retaining a rigid service structure also retains the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as an initiation rite. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate formally enters the community of adults by behaving as they do. He or she demonstrates mastery of the skills needed to be an active participant in the service. This is further solidified if the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate is invited back to read Torah or participate in a service for the High Holidays or any other Shabbat.

Assuming the service must be standardized, to some degree, is there anything to be done to encourage Jewish growth after the ceremony? Or, to ask the question a different way, can the celebration be seen as an extension of the ceremony?

The congregation mentioned above in Florida seems to have done just that. And they are not alone. These two examples come from *Lilith* magazine:

- Gloria Rubin in New Jersey wanted her daughter Rebecca's Bat Mitzvah to incorporate all the aspects of Judaism meaningful to her family: Torah, prayer, Tzedakah, community, and Jewish music. Rebecca's ceremony took place on Rosh Chodesh, the beginning of the Hebrew month, traditionally a festival for women. The Rubins invited women and men to don Tallit for an egalitarian morning service where Rebecca led the service and read Torah. Rebecca's invitations solicited personal information from guests, which her mother collected into a booklet of lighthearted sketches.

- The Kauvars of Denver chose Tu B'Shvat, the New Year of the Trees, as the time for their daughter to celebrate her growing and blossoming. The Botanical Gardens proved an ideal location for their daughter's event. At her ceremony, Eloise Kauvar led her guests through the blessings, explained fifteen traditional fruits and grains, and connected Tu B'Shvat to ecologically endangered environments. Guests celebrated at Tu B'Shvat "stations," while musicians played. Each child received a sapling to plant at home.[87]

One parent explained, "The party was tough to plan. I had to fight an overwhelming temptation to build a monument of chopped liver in my daughter's likeness. As a parent, you're just so proud...it was one of the greatest days of my life. But I also think my daughter walked away from the celebration with some sense of spirituality."[88]

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter is to highlight points of disconnect between the congregation, the family, and the student engaging in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. The points were identified through a presentation of scholarly works as well as interview data and information gained from printed materials distributed by congregations. Having illustrated these points, the focus of the next chapter will be to create a program that aims to reduce those moments. How can congregations design a program to help students and families realize that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is just the beginning of Jewish commitment and

[87] Vivienne Kramer, "Bat Mitzvah In the 90's," *Lilith Magazine* (Fall 1994)
[88] Ibid.

not the end of synagogue involvement? Synagogues must demonstrate a commitment to navigating the points of disconnect to ensure that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process itself does not, in the end, drive the families and students from the synagogue.

CHAPTER 5

SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS: FIVE SAMPLE MODELS

Throughout this thesis, I have referred to Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a rite of passage. From the point of view of the institution, the rite of passage occurs when the student completes his or her tasks in the ceremony. From the point of view of the family, the rite of passage occurs from the time invitations are sent to friends and family to the time each out-of-town guest returns home—or to the time that all the bills are paid. From the point of view of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate, the rite of passage appears to end after the celebration—though, in reality, it ends after the "thank you" notes are written and the student can relegate the entire process to "memory."

It is no surprise that many people feel a great deal of malaise around the issue of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. At its best, it is a significant experience in a child and family's Jewish growth. It can be an affirmation of Jewish education and of Jewish continuity. The service can be one of great spiritual uplift, and the family's Jewish consciousness can be affected by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience for years to come. At its worst, however, Bar/Bat Mitzvah becomes a metaphor for all that is wrong with American Jewry: superficiality, anti-intellectualism, secularism, and materialism/commercialism.

In this chapter, I will present five innovative Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs. Each has something unique to offer to the discussion, and each has informed my thinking as to what my "ideal" Bar/Bat Mitzvah program should look like.

Program #1

Rabbi Ron Aigen[1], spiritual leader of Montreal's Reconstructionist Dorshei Emet synagogue, designed an innovative educational program. When designing the guidelines for the curriculum, Rabbi Aigen set participation in the congregation as the primary criterion for becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The guidelines they established are:

- All B'nai Mitzvah should attain the skills of leading Shabbat and holiday home rituals.
- All B'nai Mitzvah should be able to participate in the Shabbat morning service.
- All B'nai Mitzvah should understand the unique perspective Reconstructionist Judaism brings to Torah, prayer, and holidays.
- All B'nai Mitzvah should understand that Judaism extends beyond the synagogue and the home and into the greater community.

The program was intended for students in the sixth grade. The curriculum lasted eighteen weeks, during which time participating students would meet for a one-and-a-half-hour session with Rabbi Aigen. The fall semester found the class focused on learning the melodies of the Shabbat morning service and Shabbat home rituals, as well as a segment devoted to the ethical principles of *tzedakah* and *gemilut chasadim*. In addition, members

[1] Information concerning Rabbi Aigen's program comes from Helen Leneman's *Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education* (Denver, CO: ARE Publications, 1993) 255–260

of the class, as well as their families, were expected to attend services at least once per month. Slowly, the group was to take larger responsibility for leading parts of the liturgy.

The winter semester sessions were devoted to topics of current Jewish events. The goal of the winter semester was to broaden the definition of what the students believed constituted "Jewish" concerns. There is also a home-based *chevruta* component for homework and a three-session family-education component.

In all, I believe that the benefit of Rabbi Aigen's program is that it gives meaning to the phrase "becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah." The program involves students working together as a community as well as privately taking on a more active Jewish role at home. The program includes instruction with the clergy—a very important aspect that can make the ceremony, and the process, much more meaningful for the clergy, the student, and the student's family.

Referring to the survey highlighted in Chapter 4, most of the twenty-two respondent congregations indicated that Bar/Bat Mitzvah education begins prior to the ceremony. Twenty of the congregations meet with families and students one year prior to the ceremony to "set the date." The final two congregations meet with the students nine months prior to the ceremony—though one may assume the date has already been set on the calendar, as there is no mention of "setting the date" in the printed materials.

The importance of starting the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program prior to the seventh grade cannot be overlooked. While setting the date certainly gives parents the preparation time needed to reserve caterers, bands or DJs, and accoutrements for the celebration, it also gives the congregation an opportunity to plan ahead and involve more members of the congregation in the ceremony. As well, it helps the student understand the timeframe of when projects are expected to be submitted and when proficiency in Torah-reading and service-leading are necessitated.

But setting the date is simply one way congregations begin the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process before the seventh grade. As was demonstrated through the example of Rabbi Aigen's program, the amount of information a student is expected to prepare for use in the ceremony can be overwhelming. Devoting an additional year to Hebrew preparation and a better understanding of the principles and rituals associated with becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah can only serve to strengthen the experience for the student and imbue the ritual with a greater sense of meaning.

Program #2

Rabbi Burt Jacobson also designed a curriculum aimed at beginning the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process prior to the seventh grade.[2] Similar to Rabbi Aigen's program, Rabbi Jacobson's program begins with a clear set of goals:

[2] Information concerning Rabbi Aigen's program comes from Helen Leneman's *Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education* (Denver, CO: ARE Publications, 1993) 255-260.

- To make the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process an internal and external process, aiding the transition to adulthood
- To facilitate the emergence of ethical and religious mitzvot in the lives of the students
- To introduce students to a set of Jewish role models

Rabbi Jacobson's program also includes Hebrew instruction, a mitzvah project, and a tremendous amount of work in the areas of mitzvot and Jewish ethics. At the end of each session, Rabbi Jacobson offers a set of questions aimed at eliciting a response on the lesson of the day. The catch, however, is that while the students must answer the questions in writing or on video, they must also ask their Jewish "mentor."[3] A mentor is assigned to each student at the beginning of the year and works with that student in coming to terms with what it means to be a Jew—and a Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

The curriculum begins in sixth grade and serves as an excellent introduction of the student into the Jewish world of adults. Rabbi Jacobson's program suffers in two areas: The first is that the curriculum ends with sixth grade. How much stronger it would be if it were a two- or even three-year curriculum in which students are not only mentored in the beginning stages of the process but throughout the intense preparation and in the year following the ceremony! Many students abandon the formal education of their synagogues after the ritual ceremony ends—by continuing the mentoring program, the student could possibly find other outlets for Jewish education in the synagogue.

[3] An active high-school student in the congregation

Another concern I have with Rabbi Jacobson's program is that it fails to utilize lay leadership in the mentoring process. While his goal is to select mentors who are close to the age of the students—such as active high-school students and young adults who teach in the religious school—the program would benefit greatly from a more mature voice, an active congregant with years of experience at the synagogue.

Congregations are hoping that students make a profound commitment when they become Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The students are to continue their Jewish education, to continue participating in the lifecycle of the congregation, and to transition from child-learning to adult-learning in a Jewish setting. Certainly, such lofty goals can have a greater success rate if given more than simply a few months to achieve them!

There are many congregations that consider the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program an addition to the regular religious school curriculum. The students continue the seventh grade, studying either holidays or Holocaust, Jewish events or culture, and they supplement that regular program with Hebrew tutoring and, perhaps, weekly or biweekly meetings with clergy. The students rise to the occasion of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony—sometimes—and either continue on to the eighth grade or make their way out of congregational life for a time. And while programs like the one I have just described certainly have some aspects that make them appealing, the excitement in my learning is the study of the innovative programs.

Program #3

At The Valley Temple[4] in Cincinnati, Ohio, the formal religious school ends at grade six. There is, however, a combined seventh and eighth grade program that meets twice per month on Sunday mornings during regular religious school hours. This program, directed by the rabbinic intern, demonstrates to the religious school students and families that education continues after the ceremony. Interestingly, since the implementation of this program in 2002, the retention rate from seventh grade to eighth grade has been 100 percent.

There are several components to the program at The Valley Temple. First, in-class hours are reduced to meeting only thirteen or fourteen times during the year, usually twice per month. While the curriculum changes each year (in 2003–2004, the students studied the origins of Reform Judaism, 2004–2005 found the students studying a Jewish response to poverty curriculum, and students in 2005–2006 engaged in a trigger-film-based curriculum dealing with theology and theodicy), the strength of the program is the informal nature of the in-class sessions: The students can study just about anything, as long as they study together. This builds community amongst the students, which carries outside of the classroom.

[4] Before engaging in a discussion of the Valley Temple program, I must mention that I have spent two years serving as the rabbinic intern at The Valley Temple. Among my duties were the tutoring of Bar/Bat Mitzvah students, the teaching of the Seventh and Eighth Grade Program, and curriculum writing and retreat planning for the Seventh and Eighth Grade Program.

Supplementing the in-class sessions is a technology component. Once per month, the students gather in a private chatroom, designed by the directors of the program, for an instant-message led discussion on a different topic each month. The internet component excites the students, who look forward to the monthly discussions. Further, it serves as an addition to the in-class hours without inconveniencing families and students.

There is also a retreat component to the curriculum. Twice during the year, the students gather for a retreat—once to the regional URJ camp (GUCI) and once to another Midwestern city—usually Detroit or Chicago, alternating years. The retreats are chaperoned by the rabbi and rabbinic intern, as well as community Israeli Shlichim. The students have found the informal structure of the retreats to be conducive to further learning, as evidenced by the high percentage (eighty-five percent) of participants who listed the retreats as among their most profound Jewish moments.[5] Each retreat concludes with a family education component—either Havdalah or dinner and discussion or another program.

Additionally, The Valley Temple instituted a monthly social program designed to further build community amongst the seventh/eighth grade class. These programs deepen friendships and allow for further bonding with the clergy of the temple—all programs are chaperoned by the rabbi and the rabbinic intern.

Furthermore, the innovative program includes three opportunities for Torah study. The rabbi of the congregation, Sandford R. Kopnick, has designed special Torah studies

[5] Based upon statements made during Bar/Bat Mitzvah speeches

geared toward the students in an effort to further imbue the program with text study and formal education.

Finally, each student, beginning nine months prior to the date of his or her ceremony, engages in weekly study with either the rabbi or the rabbinic intern (often switching between the two). This study is focused primarily upon the recitation of liturgy, Torah, and Haftarah, but also includes a mitzvah project component as well as ten separate requirements for the students, ranging from papers to projects, attendance at programs, and analysis of other religious experiences.

There are many strengths to the Valley Temple model for Bar/Bat Mitzvah education. The program combines the seventh and eighth grade, as mentioned above, resulting in an astounding 100-percent retention rate between the seventh and eighth grades. Students understand that the ceremony is merely a climax to their education, not a culmination. Second, one cannot stress enough the importance of contact with the clergy; the program is designed and implemented by the two people sharing the bima with the student when he or she finally reaches the ceremony. The connections made imbue the ceremony with a tremendous interpersonal attachment and meaning. Third, the program takes place on Sunday mornings at the same time as the regular religious school. Thus, students in all grades are exposed to the nature of the seventh and eighth grade program, and many younger students look forward to their own participation.

As well, there is room to improve the program. While having the rabbinic intern spend so much time with the seventh and eighth graders has the advantage of building relationships between student and clergy, the rabbinic intern position is only a two-year position. Thus, the relationships built may do more harm than good: The students may deem it too difficult to forge relationships with each successive intern, leading to a possible drop-out rate after Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Further, the program is designed to minimize in-class sessions in favor of extracurricular social programming and tutoring. The issue is that students have a very difficult time adjusting to a pattern, as no pattern of attendance exists in the program—it doesn't meet every week, or even every other week, and thus the occurrences are few when the entire class is together for any aspect of the program. Finally, the student must be highly disciplined to attain much from the program. The student must be driven to participate in the discussions. While this may be true of any program, in large classes this could lead to several students skating by on the coattails of highly participatory students. Essentially, the program rests heavily on the clergy serving as teachers—and the relationship with the clergy makes or breaks the program.

Program #4

Another innovative program was designed by Steven M. Rosman, rabbi of the Jewish Family Congregation in Salem, New York, and author of The Bird of Paradise and Other

Sabbath Stories.[6] His program aims to empower seventh graders in particular, but one can clearly observe that his program begins this process at a much earlier point.

The first step in Rabbi Rosman's program is the introduction of Hebrew language learning, which he argues should be done at an early age. "Hebrew language is not just the obstacle to conquer so that one can get beyond the Torah portion to the reception, it is the language of our people whenever and wherever we have lived. The flavor of our tradition is more vibrant to those who appreciate the subtleties of the language. When Hebrew is merely a requirement for bar/bat mitzvah it can never be the flavor of Jewish learning."[7]

Also in the earliest grades, Rabbi Rosman argues for the introduction of mitzvah performance ("Mitzvah teachers, like Danny Siegel, have shown us how to teach tzedakah and mitzvot at the very earliest of ages. Active involvement in Jewish life includes the performance of mitzvot and tzedakah."[8]) and the introduction of Jewish books ("Enable families to build Jewish libraries from the moment they set foot in the synagogue and give the children the opportunity to explore the books they have purchased in their classes as part of their education—even start a Jewish book club!"[9]). He also advocates the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation program that will help introduce students to synagogue and Jewish leadership.

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[6] Details of Rabbi Rosman's program come from Steven Rosman, "Bar/Bat Mitzvah Program" *Compass: New Directions in Jewish Education, Vol. 16, No. 1* (Fall, 1993), beginning on p. 14.
[7] Ibid., p. 15
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

Included in his program, Rabbi Rosman advocates the selection of several mitzvah projects that can be performed often and regularly throughout the year leading up to the ceremony and the composition of an oral presentation to be made by the student during the ceremony on the importance of that particular project. He also includes parents in the Hebrew education program, introduces families (through the use of family-education programs) to holiday home rituals and basic Shabbat home observance, and helps families become familiar with Shabbat liturgy so that they can form their own prayers and blessings—an attempt to bring prayer to the center of their lives.

Regarding the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate, Rabbi Rosman gives him or her the opportunity to read a substantial part of the Torah as part of a regular Shabbat service, and he guides each student to create his or her own siddur for use during the ceremony. He follows up in this way:

> I follow up the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony with meetings in order to reiterate the expectations of the community for lifelong Jewish learning and lifelong membership in the synagogue. I offer the student more adult ways to become involved in Jewish communal life and leadership and I help the students and families understand the next stage in their Jewish development. For example, perhaps this is the time to invite the next generation of Jewish leaders to serve on congregational committees, or to lead parts of the regular worship service, or to give sermons before the congregation.[10]

[10] Ibid.

Certain aspects of Rabbi Rosman's program deserve special mention. The critique leveled by many of the students I interviewed in Chapter 4 was that the liturgy did not speak to them—in fact, many of the students I work with in my tutoring experiences don't even understand some of the English readings! The creation of a siddur is a way to empower the student and the family and to add meaning to the words being recited. The drawback is that this exercise would completely interrupt the flow of regular Shabbat worship at a congregation. Certainly, using a different siddur each week and having a different service leader each week—or even just once a year—serves to signify the unique aspect of the ceremony and to downplay the notion that the student is joining a community: a community that prays a certain way, has a certain identifiable siddur, etc.

I was surprised in my ethnographic research to discover only a very small number of congregations that encourage Bar/Bat Mitzvah students to return to the congregation for Torah reading at a future date. Rabbi Linda Steigman encourages students to read their "anniversary" portion, while Rabbi Karen Companez suggests that all the students who became Bar/Bat Mitzvah in a particular year serve as Torah readers at the next High Holidays. But Rabbi Rosman takes this one step further in encouraging students to return to the Torah on regular Shabbat worship. This not only builds the skill of Torah-reading but also serves to exemplify the place Torah has in the Jewish cycle: It is not something special, used rarely, but is central to Jewish observance.[11]

Program #5

[11] The congregations listed in this paragraph are not the result of an exhaustive search—I am certain there are other congregations that encourage Bar/Bat Mitzvah students to continue to volunteer as Torah readers, either on their anniversary portion, on the High Holy Days, or on a regular Shabbat morning.

A fifth program that is very interesting is the model of Rabbi Goldie Milgram, formerly of Congregation Etz Chaim in Chicago.[12] For Rabbi Milgram, the goal of the ceremony is that it brings families together in a Jewish context. Thus, she incorporates the entire family into each session.

Rabbi Milgram begins the process by inviting the family, during the seventh grade, to a planning session. At this session, everyone makes a list of emotions they anticipate feeling. They then brainstorm how these goals can be met (for example, Ben is anxious about public speaking; knowing this can add a segment to his prep work). The results of this initial planning session, as explained by Rabbi Wasserman (Milgram?), are tremendous:

- The student knows that there is a team (parents, rabbis, etc.) rooting for him or her
- The family sees the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as both a journey and a goal
- They are creating shared memories
- The unique talents and interests of the student are supported
- Once the most pressing hopes and concerns are supported, each person has the room to notice and support others
- The rabbi is included and learns of the family's process, which lets her (or him) contribute in a positive way

[12] The source of this material is my personal conversation with Rabbi Milgram, supplemented by her web page at http://www.reclaimingjudaism.org/bmitzvah/guideprint.htm.

- By putting logistical concerns into the mix, the family can keep a budget of the ceremony and celebration as a family unit, encouraging responsibility and adding a secular learning component to the process

Rabbi Milgram's plan addresses each and every point of disconnect discussed in Chapter 4—each party is on the same page, each party knows of the other's expectations and fears, and the rabbi understands better how to navigate the treacherous waters of familial expectations.

Rabbi Milgram holds a second meeting two months later with the family. The purpose of this meeting is to establish clear intellectual goals—for example, suggesting that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate explore how different scholars have interpreted the Torah portion. This family study session results in a (hopefully) patient family—ideally, they are not making decisions about anything at this point. Because the family is engaged in the process with Rabbi Milgram, and because the ideas are being expressed in an intellectual manner, ideas expressed by family members will be given more time and serious consideration.

Another result of this second meeting is that the party should emerge as a creative venue to amplify the themes that have meaning for the family—an area that the rabbi can become involved with as an outside observer. The family also begins making room for the individualization of the process to fit the student. Further, as the family and rabbi discuss the Torah portion, and as all parties bring interests, questions, and passions into

the discussion, the stories and concepts of the Torah will become a source of inspiration. This also casts the rabbi in the correct light—as a support system for the students and family, offering resources and guidance.

Rabbi Milgram holds a third meeting a few months later in which she discusses the spiritual aspects of the ceremony, specifically the rationale for ritual. During this meeting, students and families will attempt to put their thoughts and perspectives into ritual terms—for example, the student can ask if there is a blessing for a first kiss, or whether God will be present at the ceremony.

The results of the third meeting will be easy to observe: The family will become more passionate about mitzvah projects, especially if they are the product of the previous two meetings, and the family will find creative ways to pay homage to significant people in the lives of the student and family. The giving of time and space to strategic support and emotional and intellectual concerns will let a new wave of opportunity come through about the ritual experience—had the family dismissed the student's sharing of anxiety, the safety and respect needed during this process for discussion about other issues would have been damaged. Finally, prayer and reading from the Torah take on new meaning, serving as resources for healing, connection, and personal growth.

Rabbi Milgram's approach is based on the Friedman Family Systems model. Friedman coined the term "Hinges in Time" to describe the potential growth that can occur at the time of a lifecycle event. At each of these junctures, life changes radically for those

involved. One important point to remember, however, is that the rite of passage does not merely affect the person becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah—rather, the entire family changes. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah, which marks the entrance into puberty or adolescence, can turn a family upside down. All relationships change, nothing remains the same, and nothing will ever be the way it was. The question is will the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony and celebration aid the family in this transition, or will it add to the disconnect? Clearly, Rabbi Milgram's approach will add to the transition—and will hopefully bring the family closer together.

Conclusion

These five programs are not perfect; rather, they offer creative solutions to one of the most vexing issues of our day: the struggle for meaning in the rite of passage known as the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Each of these programs was designed according to the thoughts of the Clergy or Education in charge of the process. That said, the unifying factor in all five of these programs is that the program was designed with the particular congregation, and congregants, in mind. These were not programs imported from elsewhere- rather, they were designed both to address the unique situation of the congregation and to play to the strengths of the facilitator(s). In the next chapter, I will add my voice to the chorus of those designing their own Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION:

MY IDEAL PROGRAM

Throughout this thesis, I have repeatedly referred to the contemporary critique of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Since its inception, the ritual and process surrounding Bar/Bat Mitzvah has undergone a significant development. Often as a response to sociological or religious trends, rabbis, cantors, and educators have struggled with how best to implement training and ritual.

Each program that is created today aims to address some, if not all, of these issues:

- Though classically a ceremony of secondary importance and a minor part of the lifecycle, in contemporary experience the process has become central to the Jewish development of students and families. In fact, many families affiliate today simply for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process[1]. Congregations have been struggling with how best to respond to its rising importance.
- The emphasis on the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate in addition to the liturgy and lifecycle moment has largely turned the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony into a festival in which the candidate is put on show for friends and family.
- There are issues of public domain vs. private domain with regard to the ritual ceremony. The ceremony itself often occurs during a Shabbat service at

[1] As evidenced through qualitative data (interviews with clergy) and the phenomenon of the post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah drop-out rate.

which non-celebrants are in attendance. This "balancing act" has forced rabbis into the difficult position of facilitating one ceremony for two sets of eyes—one wanting only to relish the achievement of the candidate and the other wanting primarily to worship with their religious community. While this phenomenon has little to do with the process leading up to the ceremony, it is a symptom of the greater disconnect that exists between the desires of the congregation and the desires of the family.

- Though originally intended to symbolize the transition from childhood to adulthood in a religious context, the ceremony all too often represents another transition: the transition of the student out the front door! Post-ceremony dropout rates are nothing new—but neither are many of the solutions being put into place to address this growing problem.
- The religious school system, in many cases, primarily takes a philosophical approach to the performance of *mitzvot* and secondarily teaches the students how to fulfill those ritual obligations. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah process is, in many cases, primarily a behavioral study as opposed to a philosophical study. For example, many students understand the choreography of the Torah service but are unclear why they are reading Torah during their ceremony to begin with. Thus there lies a disconnect between *meaning* and *action*.

There are two overall goals of this thesis: (1) to trace the evolution of Bar Mitzvah with an emphasis on change within liberal Judaism, and (2) to address the above concerns by suggesting a new model regarding the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process within Reform

congregations. In addition to the numerous scholarly texts and journal articles I have used to construct my case and illustrate the problem, I have also utilized popular texts and magazines to illustrate further the point that culture change, in addition to curriculum change, is ultimately what is needed to engage better in the process of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. I have surveyed the history of the ceremony, emphasizing moments of change, through the study of biblical, rabbinic, and post-rabbinic texts, and have framed the historical chapters with the exploration of how the ritual and process reflected the time in which it was enacted. Through an understanding of the historical development through the modern period and a qualitative exploration of congregational and popular *Minhag*, I have coalesced the data to present a comprehensive program of options to allow congregations to adapt their Bar/Bat Mitzvah processes, highlighting five particularly innovative programs.

During my research I have found that there are points of disconnect between the institution, often represented by the clergy and tutors, the family, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate. I have explored the way in which Reform congregations throughout North America have responded to these points of disconnect- sometimes ignoring them, sometimes contributing to them, and sometimes addressing them. Further, the points of disconnect are directly connected to the Jewish community- the points have changed, over time, as the Jewish community in America responds to its own sociological place in greater society.

In this conclusion, I present the product of my research: my ideal Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. Though not to be used in all congregations, this program combines elements of many programs I came across during my studies and synthesizes them into a coherent, progressive program.

My Ideal Program

My ideal Bar/Bat Mitzvah program contains aspects of each of the five programs highlighted in the previous chapter. From Rabbi Aigen, I take the notion that Bar/Bat Mitzvah study will be much more effective when linked to previous years in a religious school. Institutions do themselves a disservice by compartmentalizing Bar/Bat Mitzvah training, relegating the Hebrew component only to a one- or two-day-a-week program and forcing students to jump through hoops to meet with a tutor—and sometimes the tutor is only a for-hire professional with no affiliation with the synagogue! Rabbi Aigen linked his program with the sixth grade, believing that by starting the process earlier, an institution will have a better shot at encouraging the students to make more meaning out of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. One may note specifically the section of Chapter Four in which I made mention of certain points of disconnect. In the Ritual subsection, I discussed the miscommunication between clergy and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate and the possibility that some of rationale or meaning behind the ritual, prayers, and choreography may be missed by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate. The clergy spend a high percentage of their time working on performative factors- smooth transitions, comfort on the Bima, and conversational recitation of the liturgy, Torah, and speech. At the same time, the Bar/Bat

Mitzvah student doesn't understand *why* certain things happen: why certain prayers are recited, why a speech is needed. The strength of starting the tutoring a year earlier, as Rabbi Aigen has done, is that there may be greater time spent dealing with these larger, philosophical aspects to the ceremony. The worst-case scenario is that the student has another year of sessions with their clergy, building a relationship that will carry on after the ceremony and celebration. The best-case scenario is that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate becomes literate regarding the non-performative, even theological, issues behind the Bar/Bat Mitzvah liturgy and choreography.

From Rabbi Jacobson, I borrow the concept of a mentoring program. Far too many synagogues relegate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program to a bubble—afraid, unwilling, or unsuccessful at engaging the congregation at large into the process, congregations have ceded Shabbat morning to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Institutions should be doing the exact opposite—by encouraging a mentoring program, the synagogue would begin to develop a class of lay leaders who are intimately connected with what is going on in the classroom. Perhaps then the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate would ascend the bima to find actual congregants in the pews—not just family and friends!

Rabbi Jacobson has addressed one of the larger, denomination-transcending critiques of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. The privatization of the synagogue during these ceremonies was one of the major concerns cited by Rabbi Respondents to my interviews in Chapter Four. One of the rabbis stated "...most American Jews seem to sit through

this as a family activity rather than a religious event."[2] Rabbi Janet Marder discussed this topic in 1992. In an article for Reform Judaism magazine, Rabbi Marder wrote:

> "Many rabbis speak regretfully of the 'privatization' of bar/bat mitzvah, noting that almost all of those attending a Shabbat morning service when a bar or bat mitzvah takes place are guests invited by the family. When congregants not invited by the family do show up at such services, they often express discomfort, feeling that they are not welcome in the synagogue without an invitation. Some b'nai mitzvah families object to the scheduling of congregational events such as baby namings during "their" service. 'I have to remind them,' says one rabbi, 'that it's not their service—it's God's.'"[3]

The real issue is about who owns the service. The ceremony is about welcoming the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate into the congregation, as an adult member of the congregation. Using Rabbi Jacobson's mentoring program, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate would be supported by members of the synagogue who are not friends from the religious school. Further, the congregation would be taught that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a congregational affair- the education, the ceremony, and the celebration. While the majority of attendees will still be family members and friends, this program would further the position that a Bar/Bat Mitzvah service is not a private ceremony.

By integrating the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process earlier in the religious school and by expanding the pool of those involved in the process to include lay people, the institution

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[2] For the full quote, see page 31.
[3] Janet Marder "When Bar/Bat Mitzvah Loses Meaning," *Reform Judaism* (1992)

would truly make the Bar/Bat Mitzvah into a community affair. After all, the event is intended to serve as a "coming out" party for a Jewish boy or girl as he or she demonstrates competency and a desire to continue learning as an adult in the Jewish community. I believe that the streamlining of the process into other facets of congregational life could actually make that goal a reality.

From The Valley Temple, I take what I call the "comprehensive program": A united seventh and eighth grade serves to inspire students to continue; a retreat program, internet component, and social programming serve to take the learning out of the classroom; and the classroom learning and Torah study program have the potential to engage the students in text immersion. The same old, every-Sunday-morning-for-two-hours does not inspire a student to continue past Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. In essence, if you build a program that is innovative and engaging, a synagogue might have excited and engaged participants.

Many of the child respondents do not see a qualitative difference between the day before and the day after they become a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The major difference they see is that they no longer have to attend tutoring, or focus on a service requirement, or even study as much in the evenings. Thus, a program that caters to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a different kind of student will attach meaning to a ceremony where many of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates struggle to find any sort of meaning.

From Rabbi Rosman, I take the Torah reading piece. It is a wonderful idea to have students explore the Torah once in a lifetime when they become Bar/Bat Mitzvah—but how much more tantalizing to have students overcome whatever trepidation they feel about the Torah and have them serve as fully integrated *baale kre'ah* in the congregation! Many of my respondent students admitted that they did not see why they were being forced to read from the Torah, especially considering the culture of the congregation was that they would read only once. Rabbi Rosman's idea has the potential to truly inspire love of the Torah.

From Rabbi Milgram, I take the approach that the moments of disconnect can be mediated through open and honest communication. My research has demonstrated that my theory of "points of disconnect" holds true- the clergy, parents, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate are not in agreement on rationale or meaning behind many of the aspects of the ceremony and celebration. If the parties could gather together, and agree to continue the process outside of the rabbi's office, then the moments of disconnect would be handled in a relatively smooth way—and the ritual of becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah would certainly bring closer together the student, the family, and the institution.

The education and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process have some effect on transforming the immediate family's perceptions of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. For those people who are active in the synagogue and in Jewish life, the process will affirm. For those who have been on the peripheries of Jewish life, there is the greater potential that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process will upgrade their commitment to Judaism—if only temporarily. As I mentioned

in the Introduction to this thesis, my conversations with a variety of congregants has taught me that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process has a way of heightening one's Jewish identity.

Clergy need to pay special attention to the needs of the uninvolved parents and students. The liturgy and Torah and, in most cases, the projects associated with becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah were composed by elites—rabbis, scholars, Jewish professionals. The need is to allow other voices to contribute to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah discourse. A process based more on family than theology, more on philosophy than the recitation of Jewish liturgy, may create more meaning than "nostalgia" in uninvolved families.

Many of the respondents to my survey—clergy, parents, and students alike—primarily view the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process as "traditional." From the memorization to the hours spent with a tutor to that brief moment on the bima, meaning has not been forged with *this* generation—only with the previous, sometimes *very* previous, generations. Revamping the approach to how congregations "do" Bar/Bat Mitzvah with an emphasis on making meaning for the student may mean the difference between an empty and a full ceremony.

Much more work needs to be done on the involvement of parents in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. Many of the parents I surveyed felt the impact of the event on their own person. This needs to be ritualized today more than ever before. Parents are not innocent bystanders in the process—they are integral. They are integral to the tutoring, the

mitzvah projects, the celebration, and the commitment of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah him or herself. Congregations need to do more to account for this unique position; after all, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process affects the whole family, not just the student on the bima.

For better or for worse, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony and celebration have moved to the center of the American Jewish lifecycle agenda. Such a state of affairs cannot be changed—so let congregations at least learn to live with it creatively, Jewishly, and meaningfully.

To that end, I have compiled, informed by Rabbi Jan Katzew and the URJ CHAI Curriculum and Rabbi Andrew Davids, formerly of the NFTY National Office, a roadmap for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process that is designed according to the approaches I have advocated:

> Fourth Grade: Many Reform congregations begin formal Hebrew school in the fourth grade.[4] In Hebrew school, the student continues learning the aleph-bet and begins focusing on liturgy for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. According to the majority of the printed materials I received from congregations, it is during the fourth grade year that the family sets a date for the ceremony. In order to establish a culture that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program is different from other programs, the congregation during this year begins initiating retreat and family-education programming geared toward developing a Jewish identity.

[4] Conversation with Jan Katzew, URJ NY, 2003

Fifth Grade: The student should spend the year in Hebrew school learning the liturgy of the Shabbat morning service in preparation for the intensive Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring to start the next year. At this point, the student should begin attending Friday night and/or Saturday morning services at least five times during the year.[5] Special emphasis should be paid to holiday observance, with family-education programs for the fifth grade preceding Sukkot, Hanukkah, Purim, and Passover. Retreat programming should continue.

Sixth Grade: The student should spend the year in Hebrew school polishing the liturgy of the Shabbat morning service. In accordance with the program of Rabbi Jacobson, a mentor should be assigned to the student, and the curriculum should focus on mitzvot and Jewish identity building.[6] In accordance with Rabbi Milgram's program, the first family meeting among the clergy, the student, and the family should occur. Two retreats accent the year.

Seventh Grade: Borrowing from The Valley Temple model, the student begins weekly tutoring with a clergy member who will be on the bima during the service and (from Rabbi Jacobson's model) continues discussions with his or her mentor. The religious school curriculum unites them with eighth graders, and incorporating a quantitative difference between the Bar/Bat Mitzvah year and previous years, programming switches to biweekly Sunday morning attendance.

[5] The number Five is based upon the median number of services required by congregations that responded to my request for printed materials.
[6] The assumption here is that students have a grounding in holiday observance and that the Hebrew component is covered during tutoring sessions and during continued participation in a congregational Hebrew program.

Students participate in a technology component, social programming, retreat programming, and text study segments of the curriculum. Students must engage in a year-long mitzvah project and attend services regularly. Students and families have the second and third meetings with the rabbi.

Eighth Grade: The student continues social programming, retreats, the technology component, biweekly religious school attendance, and text study components. Adult education can continue for eighth graders but is done via email or instant message. All eighth graders are approached by a high-school student to participate in Youth Group. Eighth graders are called to read Torah or help lead services and participate regularly in the lifecycle of the congregation.

Accepted in this program is the reality that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony and celebration are immensely important to many families and many of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates themselves. Chapter Three of this thesis demonstrated that this is not a contemporary phenomenon; rather, it has transcended the last hundred-or-so years, curricular development, geographic region, and congregational size. In order for a program to navigate the many points of disconnect described in Chapter Four, it must take into account that the cause of affiliation for many families is still this one ceremony, at this one moment in time.

Further, my ideal program is not meant to replace Religious School, or even to be as detailed as a full Religious School curriculum. Rather, I believe it is a way to integrate

the Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring and process into the greater curricular goals of a congregational Religious School/Hebrew School program. Many of the respondents to my request for printed materials portray the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process as an additional component to requirements of the Religious School. That separation is either a cause of or a symptom of the privatization of the ceremony. Integrating the many components of tutoring, mentoring, community service, Religious School, Hebrew School, and congregational attendance into one large program, the congregation can better put the focus on greater congregational participation and cast the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony as another event on the congregational calendar. Essentially, though families will still emphasize the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, congregations can take steps to remove congregational participation from the category of "mitzvah requirement" and place it front and center as integral to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. "Tutoring" thus shifts from focusing on basic memorization (or "parroting") and becomes more synonymous with "Congregational Mentoring."

The program I propose requires a mobilized collection of laity and a clergy that seems themselves as integral, not peripheral, to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process. While some congregations may have problems enacting certain features of my ideal program, the program is designed to include flexibility, to allow the congregation observe the end result and to best tailor a roadmap to get Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates and families to that point.

My ideal program aside, what I learned through my thesis research is this: Rabbis and educators design programs that consider a multitude of factors. Some programs cater to the interests of the Rabbis and/or educators while other programs are reactions to communal or congregational issues. Some programs were designed decades earlier and have hardly been revised while other programs are attempting to respond to initiatives from the Union of Reform Judaism. There is hardly a "one model fits all" solution to the issues congregations have with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process, ceremony, and celebration.

The theory of "points of disconnect" may have been examined in this thesis in terms of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but the theory is applicable to all areas of congregational life. The truly successful congregation studies and reduces these points in areas such as liturgical direction, committee work, adult and religious school education, and even interpersonal relations between staff members of the congregation. Reducing the points of disconnect encourages a healthy dynamic in the system that is the congregation.

APPENDIX A

CONSERVATIVE AND ORTHODOX RESPONSUM

My thesis research concerning the struggle of the Reform movement with Bar Mitzvah (Chapter II) led me to explore how the Conservative and Orthodox movements reconciled the Bar Mitzvah with the greater flow of Jewish life in those denominations. Under the direction of Dr. Mark Washofsky, in the summer and fall of 2005 I engaged in a study of several examples of responsa literature in the Orthodox (Modern Orthodox) movement. This essay is meant to serve as a companion to Chapter II of this thesis- while Chapter II details the Reform struggle with Bar Mitzvah and thus fit in with the greater themes of the text, this essay was deemed extraneous and better utilized as an Appendix as opposed to part of the second chapter.

Dr. Washofsky charged me with translating the select Orthodox responsa covered in this essay. We met weekly to discuss the translation and the meta-themes elucidated from the text. This essay walks the reader through the major arguments made by each posayk and then presents the implications at the end of each mini-section.

Conservative[1]

Rabbi Mordecai Waxman wrote, "Reform Judaism has asserted the right of interpretation but rejected the authority of legal tradition. Orthodoxy has clung fast to the principle of authority, but has in our own and recent generations rejected the right to any but minor

[1] Conservative Responsa found online at www.rabbinicalassembly.org

interpretations. The Conservative view is that both are necessary for a living Judaism."[2] Conservative Judaism holds itself bound by the Jewish legal tradition, but it also asserts the right of its rabbinical body, acting as a whole, to interpret and apply Jewish law.

Conservative Jews believe that Orthodoxy has deviated from historical Judaism through an excessive concern with recent codifications of Jewish law. The Conservative movement consciously rejects the Orthodox mythology of Jewish history, which entails near total deference to seemingly infallible rabbis, and instead holds that a more fluid model is both necessary and theologically and historically justifiable. The Conservative movement makes a conscious effort to use historical sources to determine what kind of changes occurred, how and why they occurred, and in what historical context. With this information, they believe they can better understand the proper way for rabbis to interpret and apply Jewish law to our conditions today.

I have selected three Conservative Responsa texts concerning Bar/Bat Mitzvah to discuss herein.

Responsa I

Rabbi David Lincoln wrote the opinion, passed by the Conservative Movement on May 28, 1981, on the topic of whether it is permitted to celebrate Bar Mitzvah early if the birthday occurs while the boy would be attending summer camp. Rabbi Lincoln begins

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[2] Waxman, Mordechai. *Tradition and Change: The Development of Conservative Judaism.* New York, Burning Bush Press, 1970

the position by stating that his inclination is that the issue is a matter of convenience of dates rather than a push to include the boy in the religious obligations at the home congregation. Citing first the practice of allowing such ceremonies when a parent or other relative is terminally ill, he then references Talmud Sukkah 42a, which mentions that the boy who understands the use of Tefilin can take his father's set and don them, implying that the issue is ability as opposed to age.

Rabbi Lincoln then references Orach Chayim 282, which offers evidence that young boys would read the *maftir* as long as it was not tied to holiday observance. However, he finally states Mishnah Avot 5:21 and RaSHI, which both present the view of holding off until after thirteen years of age.

In his conclusion, Rabbi Lincoln urges that every effort be made to keep the date of the ceremony on or after the thirteenth birthday. If that proves impossible, each community may rule on exceptions.

Interestingly, the Conservative Movement is responding to a social phenomenon—the popularity of its RAMAH summer camp system. The impetus for the change is not Halachic but rather cultural, tied with the belief that the Conservative Movement adjusts its Halachic interpretation when needed to fit the age in which it is being enacted.

Responsa II

Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser wrote the ruling on this question in 1981: In a congregation where women are not given Aliyot, is it permissible for a girl to recite the Haftarah at the Saturday morning service, thus enabling a Shabbat morning Bat Mitzvah ceremony to take place?

Rabbi Bokser begins his explanation with a statement that the Bat Mitzvah has become an accepted institution in Judaism in America, along with other manifestations of the ideals of egalitarian practice. He then states that the service regularly takes place on Friday night, which was the norm since it was a relatively recent innovation and there was a desire to ensure that it did not interfere with the familiar pattern of Jewish life in the synagogue. However, the Friday night service has been in decline in recent years as the Conservative Movement has placed more emphasis on Shabbat morning.

The ruling is that the girl should be allowed to recite the brachot and the Haftarah on Shabbat morning. The issue of Aliyah, however, is rendered "beyond the scope of the question" and is not dealt with in this text.

Interestingly, Rabbi Bokser did not cite one traditional source—only history. This point illustrates the value the Conservative Movement places on Minhag—that contemporary customs, and the historical roots that enabled them, are often enough to justify a change in approach to Jewish observance.

Responsa III

Rabbi David Lincoln wrote in 1982 concerning whether a pre-Bar Mitzvah boy may read from the Torah. Rabbi Lincoln began his response by citing sources that forbade the practice before citing the Taz, which in two places allows for the practice. He then cites another eight sources in which the practice is forbidden.

Rabbi Lincoln concludes that the boy should be discouraged from reading from Torah prior to the age of thirteen. The fear is that ten- or eleven-year-old boys would be reading from the Torah, which would lead to them dropping out of synagogue life even earlier. Rabbi Lincoln then adds, "The situation with post B'nai Mitzvah drop out is bad enough." However, he stresses that any boy can read the Haftarah and the Maftir and recite blessings well before the age of thirteen.

This third text is interesting because Rabbi Lincoln has ample textual evidence to forbid the custom of a boy reading Torah prior to the age of thirteen, yet the evidence that sways his opinion is the socio-political realities in the congregations: that the post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah dropout rate is high and that this is an embarrassment to the community.

Conclusions

Within the Conservative Movement, there is no uniformity on the presentation of textual analysis or sociological considerations. Rather, it seems that each Posayk may rely upon his or her own interests: A text-based scholar may cite more texts to prove a point than a

practicing congregational rabbi, who may rely heavily upon minhag. Yet, in the end, both Poskim are regarded as equally authoritative. This is reflective of the Conservative Movement in general and the unique position it holds between a movement that for years spurned or disregarded rabbinic precedent and a movement that for years spurned or disregarded contemporary innovation.

Orthodox

Orthodox Poskim have written numerous responsum concerning Bar Mitzvah and a few about Bat Mitzvah.

The stage is set—Bar Mitzvah exists. The overall issue of the Orthodox movement concerning Bar Mitzvah is understanding how to make it fit with everything else in Orthodox tradition, despite the fact that many aspects of the Bar Mitzvah at first glance appear to contradict other Orthodox rulings. Essentially, these Poskim may wish to disallow the Bar Mitzvah, but each of them bows to the sociological pressures that twentieth-century Jewish life in Europe and the United States has presented to them—perhaps not to the extent of *allowing* the ritual, as in the case of the Bat Mitzvah, but certainly of ceding a few very important points. While the universe of discourse will differ—certain assumptions are different—the goal of these Orthodox Poskim is to make the Bar Mitzvah fit into Orthodox living.

Under the leadership of Dr. Mark Washofsky, I have explored four selections of Orthodox Responsa literature. Three of those opinions are presented here in detailed analysis.

Responsa I

The first text is from *Sh'aylot U'Tshuvot Chilchot Yaakov, Yoray Dayah, Siman kuf lamed dalled.* The text is from Rabbi Teitlebaum, a twentieth-century Posayk. He is attempting to account for a contemporary minhag—the custom in some congregations of the Bar Mitzvah turning his back to the Ark. The issue brought to Rabbi Teitlebaum is that the Chazan never turns his back to the Ark, but the Bar Mitzvah has his back to the Ark, and thus the Torah, when delivering a sermon. Reform Jews had done this for years—one of the innovations of Reform Judaism was to turn the rabbi around to face the people in the congregation. But does doing so show disregard to the Torah?

Rabbi Teitlebaum peruses the sources as to whether this action shows contempt for the Torah. In the first paragraph, Rabbi Teitlebaum disagrees with the implication that facing the congregation is a sign of disrespect to the Torah. He supports this conclusion in three ways: First, according to the Turay Zahav, Rabbis could stand with their back to the Torah. The Shaaray Efraim argues that the Taz states that it is permissible to stand with a back to Torah only if the speaker has something important to say—unless the quality of the text warrants the stance. Rabbi Teitlebaum is thus doing two things with this first statement: He is pointing out that even respected Rabbis spoke with their backs

to the Ark and thus it can't be a sign of disrespect in and of itself. However, by citing these sources, he is connecting a quality of discourse to the posture, and the question now becomes whether or not a Bar Mitzvah sermon meets those expectations.

The second argument that Rabbi Teitlebaum makes with regard to respecting the Torah is that, according to the Turay Zahav, as long as the Torah is in the Ark, it is kept in a separate boundary. If this is the case, it would seem that the prohibition on turning a back to the Torah would be null and would thus have nothing to do with the Bar Mitzvah. Perhaps the problem is that the Turay Zahav speaks only about rabbis, which brings the reader back to the first issue.

Third, Rabbi Teitlebaum points out that Jews have been keeping their backs to the Torah for years—hence, it is an established custom and, since it does not counter Torah law, cannot be prohibited.

Thus, at the conclusion of the first paragraph, Rabbi Teitlebaum has transformed the issue a bit. Having demonstrated that there is nothing *wrong*, per se, with a person speaking with his back to the Torah as long as there is a certain quality to the speech, Rabbi Teitlebaum must now discern whether a Bar Mitzvah boy's speech actually falls into that classification.

He brings in a quote from Talmud (Shabbat 119b) to point out that the modern-day prophets are the Torah scholars. He then cites the *Hilkat Yaakov* to make the argument

that a person can't classify kids as having the ability to "insult" the Torah through the tenor of their discourse. Our tradition, he points out, defines Torah study as a sacred tradition and defines children as sinless beings! According to Rabbi Teitlebaum's train of logic, the kid is studying Torah and the kid is celebrating a simcha. This action is not a sign of disrespect for Torah; it is the opposite—it is giving honor to the Torah!

Rabbi Teitlebaum points out that the congregation must determine whether the sermon is of the highest possible quality. The congregation educates the student, and the congregation sets the tenor the Bar Mitzvah: Is it something that all congregants attend? Is it a private ceremony? Is the kid going through the motions? Congregants control this; thus, it is up to the congregation whether the Bar Mitzvah warrants having his back to the Torah.

The implications of Rabbi Teitlebaum's conclusions fit perfectly with the overall tenor of this thesis: It is not enough for congregants and congregations to simply lament the status of Bar Mitzvah—rather, we must address it. The Bar Mitzvah reflects the culture of the community, and the best way to elevate the Bar Mitzvah to a ritual with meaning is to ensure that the meaning is accepted and embraced by the community.

Responsa II

The second Responsa piece to study is from the *Sriday Ha Aish* by Yechil Yaakov Weinberg. Weinberg is a worldly Posayk. He was born in Poland, lived in Germany,

headed a seminary in Berlin (where he survived the Holocaust), and spent the rest of his life in Switzerland. He represents the Modern Orthodox community in Germany.

Weinberg responds to an issue of whether a child who was never circumcised can become a Bar Mitzvah. The underlying assumption is that the Orthodox community in Germany has already accepted the Bar Mitzvah as a custom; the issue is how to put the Bar Mitzvah within the context of other Orthodox lifecycle observances. Weinberg must decide whether inconsistent Halachic behavior should be rewarded (the lack of *brit* with the acceptance of Bar Mitzvah) and whether the community should deny the boy the rite of Bar Mitzvah as a way to induce his father to circumcise him. This Responsa is a case in which the Bar Mitzvah is being discussed as a tool for social compliance—an issue that rings true in the Reform Movement today; many congregations use the carrot-stick approach to Bar/Bat Mitzvah: withholding Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a penalty for poor religious school attendance or unpaid synagogue bills.

In the preface to Weinberg's response, he states that there are actually two issues before the community: The first is that the father has not taken the boy to be circumcised in violation of Torahitic law. The second is that the father keeps his shop opened on Shabbat—a clear violation of Torahitic and Rabbinic law.

Weinberg first addresses the issue of whether the community could, if it wanted to, prohibit the boy and his father from being called to the Torah. Can a person who violates a mitzvah directly and repeatedly be banned from reading Torah? Weinberg uses the

example of a Kohane, for the Kohane is the symbolic exemplar of mitzvah fulfillment. He cites the Shulchan Aruch, which he interprets as ruling that the Kohane who violates a mitzvah can be punished by losing his Kohanic privilege of being called for the first aliyah—though he can still be called to the Torah. Though there is disagreement within the sources, and Weinberg makes mention of these sources as well (such as Isserline's theory that the Kohane is banished from ever reading Torah again!), he still holds that the Kohane who violates a mitzvah loses his Kohanic right to the first aliyah.

He then turns his attention to the issue of the uncircumcised boy—whether he is allowed to read from the Torah. Assuming the boy is a Kohane, Weinberg cites the RAMBAM, who wrote, in Hilchot N'siyat Kapayim, that there are six requirements for a Kohane to lift his hands (i.e., fulfill Kohanic obligations such as blessing the congregation, reading the first aliyah, etc.): He must be able to say the blessing over Torah in Hebrew, he must not have any blemishes, he must have no sin, he can't be too young, he can't be drunk, and he cannot have impure hands. Just being a generally bad person, according to the RaMBAM, does not disqualify a Kohane from his Kohanic rights.

Weinberg takes it further: If we forbid the Kohane from doing his Kohanic rights, we are preventing him from fulfilling his positive mitzvah! The point Weinberg makes is that the congregation should not stop a person from fulfilling a mitzvah. There may be reasons for being disallowed from being called to the Torah, but just being imperfect in mitzvah observance is not one of them.

Skipping ahead a bit in the text, beginning in paragraph Yod Aleph, Weinberg tackles the different reasons that the father may not have circumcised his son. There are many reasons, but Weinberg, following the example of Isserline, separates mitzvah violators into two categories: those who don't know and those who do know but simply can't help violating the mitzvah. By the end of this section, Weinberg stipulates that a father who has not circumcised his son, either out of fear of his son's death or fear of inflicting pain upon his son, is not exempt from the ritual of circumcision. Therefore, he is not thought of as a *mumar*—he's just a plain old mitzvah violator. A person's status as a sinner doesn't get that person out of the obligation to perform positive mitzvot.

Beginning in Yod Bet, Weinberg uses several sources to point out that the congregation itself cannot simply classify someone a *mumar*; a Beit Din is needed to make legal rulings such as labeling someone a *mumar*. The point of the second paragraph is that the times have changed—David Svi Hoffman is quoted, "Since the majority of people in our day do it [referring to violating Shabbat by keeping the shop opened], it is no crime." Weinberg essentially says that there are other ways of being a good Jew, that simple mitzvah violation is not enough to excommunicate anyone anymore. The issue becomes a state of mind—sure, he violates Shabbat, but is he ashamed? Or is he proud?

There is a tradition of going through certain Poskim—starting with the Binyan Tzion, getting to Hoffman, and then hitting Weinberg—that is an accomodationist, permissive tradition. It reflects the German tradition of Weinberg's day—do a bit of outreach and expand the tradition as opposed to constricting it. Essentially, we are left with three

progressive opinions: The Binyan Tzion argues the mitzvah violator is not evil; Hoffman argues the intention may not be to separate from the community, especially if the rest of the community is violating the mitzvah; and Weinberg argues there is a distinction between flaunting the mitzvah violation and simply violating the mitzvah (e.g., there is a difference between whether a person violates Shabbat because he has to, because he wants to profit from it, or because he just plain disagrees with the idea of Shabbat observance). But one thing is clear as Yod Bet ends: Shabbat violation is widespread, and the prohibition against keeping a shop open on Shabbat is not as literal as it once was.

Thus, regarding the lack of circumcision, Weinberg is permissive—sure, the dad should not have violated the mitzvah, but he's not a *mumar*. Shabbat non-observance is a bit more difficult. Though the Talmud and other authorities place a ban on this activity, recent traditions place Shabbas violators under the rubric of *Tinuk Shenishba L'Goyim*, being held prisoner by the dominant culture of the day. This is the fine line with which the Halachic authorities try to understand modern life without approving of what others do but while still keeping the bar low enough that Orthodox congregants will continue to come to shul.

Yod Gimmel finishes the Responsa. In Yod Gimmel, Weinberg begins by stating that there is a distinction between law and what people are actually doing. He cites a case in which the community has imposed a Rabbinic Decree to do a particular mitzvah—the community forbids the boy from being called to the Torah unless he is circumcised. The

TashBetz is brought into the fold to take the argument to a logical extreme: Couldn't the community forbid the boy from reading Torah until he is married? A community cannot issue a decree forbidding a person from performing a positive mitzvah as commanded in Torah. But they can issue a ban on performing a Rabbinic Mitzvah. Since Torah reading is a Rabbinic Decree, wouldn't this be a good use of the community mandate to push for stricter observance?

Even the RAMBAM, who was supposed to be lenient, is being used by Weinberg to keep the Kohane from fulfilling Torah obligations—such as the raising of the hands—but not calling to the Torah, which is a Rabbinic Decree. Essentially, Weinberg is arguing that a community that forbids a person from reading Torah is perfectly within its boundaries—it is not taking away a positive mitzvah from the Torah reader because there is no requirement to be called to the Torah. And, to take it one step further, the Bar Mitzvah itself is a Rabbinic mandate, not a Torahitic obligation. Thus, Weinberg demonstrates that the Bar Mitzvah can be withheld for all sorts of reasons—among them to persuade a person to observe more mitzvot.

Usually, making this kind of Rabbinic Decree is a way of punishing a person—there is nothing the community can do to get a person to change his or her ways, so it attempts to make a bold statement, with the hope that being pushed away will eventually convince the person to return and comply with communal norms. The goal is to promote the standard of Torah observance. Thus, the community can deny honors to a person it

believes does not deserve those honors, but not if doing so will push that person further away—only if such an action is used as a tool to bring him or her closer to Torah.

Responsa III

In the third Responsa, written by Moshe Feinstein, the question arises of whether to accept the new rite of Bat Mitzvah into the Orthodox canon. Feinstein's style is unlike the other Poskim I have studied for this project, for he has a tendency not to quote his sources, especially when he feels he doesn't have to or when he feels the topic doesn't need citation. Certainly in the case of the Bat Mitzvah, one could see why a rabbi would not have a lot of sources available—there are no sources! No rabbi has discussed whether to have a Bar Mitzvah rite either; the rabbis of the modern era have inherited the tradition of Bar Mitzvah. However, this case deals with the social and religious implications of the *minhag*. *Hilkat Yaakov* implied the Bar Mitzvah was a waste of time, but Weinberg decreed that it was a good thing. Of course, he also had the luxury of the fact that Bar Mitzvah was and is a cultural reality. But Feinstein is asked about whether to establish the custom of Bat Mitzvah, which he determines may be more of a social question than a strictly Halachic one.

Feinstein forbids the Bat Mitzvah on four separate grounds: First, it is not required. He is against establishing the custom at the temple, for the shul is not the place for voluntary innovation. Second, it is not tied to a mitzvah. At least a Bar Mitzvah has a custom associated with it of reading from the Torah. But the girl would not read from Torah and

she would not serve as *Shaliach Tzibur*, and thus no ritual mitzvah would be fulfilled. Third, Feinstein likens it to a Conservative and Reform innovation. Orthodoxy, he believes, should not try to keep up the innovations of these reformers, for they are not following the same traditional guidelines as Orthodoxy. Finally, Feinstein argues that Bar Mitzvah is bad enough—if he had his way, he would do away with the whole thing! He believes it never drew anyone closer to the Torah or to fulfilling positive mitzvot and, even worse, the ceremony led to people violating Shabbat—many people had to drive to the shul to attend!

Feinstein is aware of the social customs and norms tied to ritual—we do ritual to bring people closer to Jewish life. If Bar Mitzvah actually did that, he says, he may have ruled differently concerning Bat Mitzvah. But as it stands, the Bar Mitzvah leads people to violate Shabbat, so he is against instituting a copycat ceremony.

Conclusions

The Orthodox community is discussing the influence of modernity on their ritual and lifecycle. What makes the Bar Mitzvah and, to the same extent, the Bat Mitzvah, such an important element in Jewish life is in part due to sociological pressure—to have a rite of passage for a child entering the age of majority. For the Orthodox, the issue is about more than just affluence and showing off for the neighbors. The same sociological trends that affected the Reform and Conservative worlds—the applicability of the ritual, the issues regarding community involvement, and the issues tied to the egalitarianism of the

twentieth century—are working in the Orthodox world. As insular as the Orthodox movement attempts to be, it cannot help but respond to Reform and Conservative innovations and the contemporary world around them. Each Posayk took his charge differently—some sought to distinguish Orthodoxy while others aimed to reach out to the community. Regardless of their conclusions, these Poskim could not deny that the Bar Mitzvah remains one lifecycle event integral to a modern expression of Judaism.

APPENDIX B: CONGREGATIONAL PARTICIPANTS LISTING

Congregation: City: Member Units (Source: www.URJ.org)

1. Temple Sinai: DC: 1101
2. Temple Dor Dorim: FL: 540
3. Temple Beth Zion: NY: 1075
4. Congregation Emanu-El Israel: PA: 97
5. Temple Kehillat Chaim: GA: 251
6. Temple Beth Am: NJ: 75
7. Temple Ner Ami: CA: 149
8. Temple Sinai: NJ: 500
9. Cong Gates of Prayer: LA: 27
10. Congregation Beth Israel: CA: 273
11. B'nai Sholom Reform Congregation: NY: 173
12. Temple Sholom: NJ: 213
13. Temple Jeremiah: IL: 570
14. Adat Chaverim: TX: 186
15. Temple Emanu-El: AL: 678
16. Temple Kol Ami: MI: 387
17. Beth Am Temple: NY: 266
18. Temple Kol Ami Emanu-El: FL: 1172
19. Temple Anshe Sholom a Beth Torah: IL: 379

20. Congregation M'Kor Shalom: NJ: 1089

21. Temple Shir Shalom: IL: 145

Rabbis, Families, Students:

A: Medium, Midwest

B: Small, Midwest

C: Small, West

D: Medium, Southwest

E: Large, Midwest

F: Large, Northeast

G: Small, Northwest

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