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**Ritual Innovations of the American Bar Mitzvah;
The Making of An Archive**

by
Amy L. Morrison

Advisor: Dr. Bruce Phillips

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for Rabbinic ordination at
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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Introduction:

I have always been interested in sociology and what it says about people, community and culture. Since childhood I can remember making large general statements about what different phenomenon in life had to say about the people who enact them.

For example, when the Challenger Spacecraft exploded, I remember asking everyone what they were thinking and how they thought the event would affect their lives from that point on. I had so many questions about the situation. I was not interested so much in how or why it happened, but *that* it happened. How was the local community going to react? What questions would children be asking their parents and what were the parents' answers going to say about their personal values, ideas and morals?

Another memory of being a young sociologist occurred during the final week of my freshman year of high school. Three of my friends went on a road trip and never came home. Later, it was revealed that weather and speed were the main factors in their fatal accident, but I was not interested in those facts. I wanted to know how this tragedy was affecting those around me. I had so many questions. Was the emotional climate of the town going to change because the children killed were from the majority socio-economic class? Would the reaction be the same if the kids were poor, or black, or from single parent families?

Everything that happens, tragedy or just day-to-day life, there are always observable phenomenon that offer additional information about our society, people hood and culture. Everything we hear, look at, or experience can say something about the person we are, the people we are a part of, and the culture that surrounds us.

In the Jewish community there has become a rite of passage that marks much more than a child entering into Jewish responsibility and adulthood. This occasion does not resemble its original ritual once played out in the Old World Judaism of Europe. In fact, the prevalence of this celebration has even stepped outside of the boundaries of the Jewish religion.

The American Bar Mitzvah is a changing ritual that not only affects the 13-year-old child becoming it, but the parents, community, and Jewish people as a whole. The American Bar Mitzvah also affects the secular Jewish community, the Christian community, and people of many other faiths.

B'nei Mitzvah is a part of the American tapestry. Television, movies and the internet depict people participating and in some cases, enjoying their own Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Primetime shows such as The Simpsons, King of the Hill, 7th Heaven, and Law and Order have all taken the ritual of B'nei Mitzvah and used it in the storyline of their characters. In some cases, the story is actually of a non-Jewish character wanting to have his or her own B'nei Mitzvah. This ritual is a part of pop-culture.

This phenomenon is also played outside of the television set. In some large communities such as Los Angeles and New York, there are more than a few instances of non-Jewish children having a large party at the age of thirteen and calling it a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. This is the essence of assimilation. The outside community has attempted to erase barriers so that they too can enjoy and celebrate their children's entrance into young adulthood.

Many aspects play into the non-Jewish communities views of this ritual. One major change is the number of inter-faith marriages that occur each year between Jews

and non-Jews. Another contributor is the large number of Jews who are working in the secular work place. Non-Jewish colleagues, friends and even family all make up the diversified population attending and supporting the Jewish celebration for a thirteen-year-old child. Everyone is a part of the same American population and therefore, as a sociologist would put it, everyone is affected by the actions and events of everyone else.

I first became interested in looking at the American Bar Mitzvah and the ritual innovations surrounding it when I had a discussion with my professor Dr. Bruce Phillips in our class on American Jews. He and I discussed how American Jews have always created their own rituals to meet their needs. We talked about the ways in which B'nei Mitzvah allow the entire family to be celebrated and how people have expanded the ritual of the Bar Mitzvah far past the blessing of the Torah.

As our conversations progressed we spoke about how many people study the American Bar Mitzvah but only through the means of interviews and paper documents stored in physical archives. We both expressed the limitations of those methods as times have changed and people started to archive on their own with videos, DVDs and photography. We discussed that there were no formal collections of such sociological materials and that the absence of such a collection represented a deep black hole in the study of the American Bar Mitzvah. With my thesis we decided to change that.

Dr. Philips and I decided that through the collection of people's personal B'nei Mitzvah archives we would study ritual innovation that have implanted themselves fundamentally into the soul of what it means to have an American Bar Mitzvah. Innovations such as women having Bat Mitzvah, speeches celebrating the life and family, candle lighting, and booklets explaining the important people taking part in the ritual as

well as mitzvah projects imparting the values and ideas of the family out into the Jewish community all have changed the shape and cultural effect these celebrations have had on the greater population.

Times have changed and so too have our methods of archiving. Dr. Phillips and I started a new archive for the rituals and innovations surrounding the American Bar Mitzvah. Through methods I will discuss later in this thesis, we have approached the American and Canadian Jewish public to send us their material archives of their family's special occasion. Through sending, and our collection, we have been able to analyze home and professional videos and DVDs as well as speeches, prayer booklets, pictures and giveaways to explore where the American Bar Mitzvah was and where it has come to over the past 15 years. There have been many changes and we are lucky to be able to observe and write about the ritual innovations of the American Bar Mitzvah.

We are not the same Jews as our parents and grandparents, yet our values, ethics and sense of community have kept us intact as a people. In a book often given to young boys in the 1960's on their twelfth birthday, the author writes, "American Judaism is not simply a religion. It is a culture, a civilization, a complete way of life. It has its own language, literature, ethical values and aspirations. Its institutions are the family, the school, the synagogue, and society in general. Its aims are social justice and individual perfection. Its eternal goal is a better world—and toward this end it has made, and continues to make, inestimable contributions to the entire community of man."¹ This excerpt is the opening sendoff for young boys to eagerly begin their journey towards Bar Mitzvah. The author makes no excuse that Judaism is a separate and unique religion,

¹ Mandel, Morris. "Thirteen: A Teenage Guide to Judaism." Jonathan David Publishers, Inc. New York, NY. 1961.

culture or way of life. The book continues to tell boys to follow the laws of God and remain Jewish against all threats to their identity as Jewish Americans. But what were these costs and threats?

Jonathan Sarna explains that the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of American Jewry on the world Jewish scene.

As the century opened, the United States, with about one million Jews, was the third largest Jewish population center in the world, following Russia and Austria-Hungary. By contrast, just half a century earlier, the United States had been home to barely 50,000 Jews and New York's Jewish population had stood at about 16,000.

Immigration provided the principal fuel behind the American Jewish population boom. Where before 1900, American Jews never amounted even to 1 percent of America's total population, by 1930 Jews formed about 3½ percent. There were more Jews in America by then than there were Episcopalians or Presbyterians.

This massive population transfer radically transformed the character of the American Jewish community. It reshaped its composition and geographical distribution, resulting in a heavy concentration of Jews in East Coast cities, where Jews had never lived in great numbers before. Realigned American Jewry's politics and priorities, injecting new elements of tradition, nationalism, and socialism into Jewish communal life, and seasoning its culture with liberal dashes of East European Jewish folkways.

Although the American Jewish community retained significant elements from its German and Sephardic pasts, the traditions of East European Jews and their descendants dominated the community. With their numbers and through their achievements, they raised its status both nationally and internationally. With stability and the rise of a new generation came a growing commitment to communal unity.

Wrought by the Great Depression, it is no surprise that Jews during these years sought to bury their differences and stress their interdependence. Leaving old world divisions behind, they began to join together into a uniquely separate *American Jewish* community—a community that could attempt, at least on some issues, to unite in self-defense.

Burgeoning economic growth, increasing popular acceptance of religious and cultural pluralism, the high education achievements of native-born Jews, and an overpowering desire on the part of many Jews to "make it" in America all contributed during these decades to a spectacular rise of American Jews to positions of authority and respect within the general American community.²

Alongside growth and recognition came awareness that possibly not all attention is positive. Jews became increasingly anxious about their middle-class status. Americanization and assimilation allow Jews to be American on the streets. The problem became that those same Jews were acting American, and not Jewish, at home as well.

Jews started moving to the suburbs and leaving the spotlight of people's stares and comments. In the suburbs Bar Mitzvahs became extravagant. Sara Swartz explains these excesses as the desire to materially demonstrate the attainment of middle class status, "Moving into the suburbs required that people decide whether or not they wanted to declare themselves as Jews. At first everyone seemed amiable and anonymous, young and shiny, not stamped with an encrusted ethnicity."³ Attaining economic power in this new environment, American Jews felt compelled to display their affluence. The Bar Mitzvah became a celebration of the parents' position in the community. The bigger the occasion the more American Jewish adults could show their immigrant parents and

² Sarna, Jonathan and Jonathan Golden. *"The American Jewish Experience in the Twentieth Century: Antisemitism and Assimilation."* Brandies University. National Humanities Center. October, 2000.

³ Swartz, Sarah Silberstein. *"Bar Mitzvah."* Doubleday and Company, Inc. Garden City, New York. 1985.

grandparents, as well as "the gentiles peeking over the picket fences"⁴, that they arrived.

The Bar Mitzvah has evolved well past the post-war suburban extravaganza. Flowers have given way to canned goods for SOVA, for example, and American Jews have introduced a number of innovations to the Bar Mitzvah.

In my thesis I will take the example of the American Bar Mitzvah and explore the innovations that this ritual has gone through. From the ritual's original European practice of chanting the opening and closing blessings to the elaborate display of pomp and circumstance that plagued the late 1980's and early 1990's, the American Bar Mitzvah ceremony is as varied as those who celebrate it.

What exactly is an innovation? There are many different ways to define it. The classic definitions of innovation include:

1. *the act of introducing something new: something newly introduced*⁵
2. *the introduction of something new*⁶
3. *a new idea, method or device*⁷
4. *the successful exploitation of new ideas*⁸
5. *change that creates a new dimension of performance*⁹

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The American Heritage Dictionary

⁶ Merriam-Webster Dictionary On-Line

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Department of Trade and Industry, UK.

⁹ Drucker, Peter. Hasselbein, 2002.

My definition of the term *innovation* in my thesis is the process of making improvements by introducing something new. In other words, the Bat Mitzvah, Confirmation, Adult B'nei Mitzvah and the like, are all innovations based off the original Bar Mitzvah. Further, all of the changes made to the ceremony itself; the liturgy, customs, dress, and celebration are in themselves ritual innovations. Every addition and change made from the traditional blessings said before and after the Torah reading are ritual innovations worth studying.

Innovation is typically thought of as the introduction of a new idea or product or the dramatic re-design of that which already exists. American Jews have not radically changed the Bar Mitzvah. They have altered it by introducing new elements preserving tradition and at the same time making it more relevant. In this sense, innovations to the Bar Mitzvah tells us about what is important to American Jews.

Methodology:

There are many ways that one could go about collecting information for this thesis. I chose that the most interesting method would be to have actual documents, defined by the families themselves as archives, to explore and investigate.

Initially this seemed far too overwhelming for me to accomplish in one year. Who was I going to contact? How was I going to contact them? Why would they feel comfortable releasing their family's prized memories? What would I do with all the materials if anyone did send them? I was full of questions but I had few answers.

I knew that I wanted to analyze them by taking notes and observing changes overtime. How could I make my project more legitimate as well as more helpful to the Jewish community on a whole?

I decided to contact the American Jewish Archives¹⁰ in Cincinnati, Ohio for some help. The renowned historian Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus (1896-1995) founded the American Jewish Archives (AJA) in 1947. Dr. Marcus was moved to establish the archives in the aftermath of the European Holocaust when American Jews inherited a primary responsibility of preserving the continuity of Jewish life and learning for future generations¹¹.

"Today, the American Jewish Archives functions as a semi-autonomous organization to collect, preserve, and make available for research materials on the history of Jews and Jewish communities in the Western Hemisphere, primary in the United States. The term 'history' is construed in its broadest aspect to embrace data of political, economic, social, cultural, and religious nature."¹²

This organization seemed like a perfect partner for the project I was about to undertake. I contacted the head of the archives and explained my thesis, my process, and my hopes to partner with their highly respected organization. After numerous phone calls and discussions, the AJA felt that although the project was a great idea, a partnership was not in their best interest. In the end I realized that I should continue without the AJA as there really should be such a project on its own to purposely and systematically seek out such materials.

¹⁰ See Appendix M

¹¹ American Jewish Treasures. Cincinnati, Ohio. 2008.

¹² *Ibid.*

I decided to continue with those people closest to me. I already had trust in them through our relationships and I knew that they would help me by sending in all they could for my research. I contacted my family, friends, and HUC classmates on all three stateside campuses. I sent them a quick e-mail explaining what I was doing and asking them to send me their videos/DVDs as well as any other collected materials from their own B'nei Mitzvah. Initially I felt that this group would be my best support as they understood what a thesis was and they did not have to worry about the care of their documents and videos that they were sending to me.

The second group I decided to contact was the staff and faculty of the Hebrew Union College on the Los Angeles campus. I decided not to contact the other stateside campuses, as I knew I did not have a relationship with those groups and did not have the time to develop them for this purpose. I sent a more formal letter to this cohort and asked Dr. Phillips to discuss my project at his staff meeting the following week. I felt that someone would better address this method and cohort group with similar background and educational status so having Professor Phillips agree to this was a huge help.

The third group I formally contacted was rabbis and cantors that Dr. Phillips and I knew from the field. This group was not isolated by geographic region, gender, or age. We simply made a list of all rabbis and cantors that we knew across America and Canada who might be able to help us. Our hopes were that they had some sort of small archive themselves of the various Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies and parties. I sent out a much more formal letter to each person's place of employment in hopes that they would send home the message that this was a thesis¹³. I expected some issues with this group as many

¹³ See Appendix A

of them would have to ask each family individually for the release of their materials and therefore this would be a very time consuming process for the clergy member. I also included a flier to be copied by the clergy to be sent out to religious school and youth groups families, and to be posted around the synagogue to not only create more buzz for the project.¹⁴

Reviewing the sent achievable documents was a slow and frustrating process. For two months I received one video or DVD a week. A few came in from my family, however, it was the staff of HUC-LA who really helped. From secretaries to professors those who I had worked with for the past four years collected everything from videos to speeches and photos. In fact, it was this same group who also forwarded my original email to their own families and friends to help spread the word of my project. I learned later that many of the documents were the result of the HUC staff reaching out to their own Jewish communities to spread the word. I am grateful to my co-workers for this.

Another group that responded to my call for Bar and Bat Mitzvah documents was fellow students at HUC-LA. Quite a few students dropped off their own DVDs as well as the give-away gifts that were handed out at their own parties. It was also this group that provided me with many hypotheses about why they felt there had been such ritual innovations surrounding the Bar Mitzvah. Stories and photos came in by the handful when it came to my fellow classmate's descriptions of fashion, music, themes and venues that they experienced throughout their Bar and Bat Mitzvah season.

It was an HUC volunteer librarian who made this thesis a success. She saw one of my posters up in her son's religious school hallway and recognized my name. The

¹⁴ See Appendix B

following day she introduced herself to me and explained that she was the B'nei Mitzvah tutor for her large Reform synagogue in Orange County, California. She asked me to follow her to her car and when we got there I was shocked. In her back seat were four cardboard boxes filled with Bar and Bat Mitzvah speeches, service booklets, give-away gifts and photos. All of these artifacts helped open my eyes to the many ritual innovations of the American Bar Mitzvah that I never would have thought of.

There were many surprises that came my way because of calling out for all documents surrounding Bar and Bat Mitzvah. For instance, the Kabbalah Center of Los Angeles sent in a few programs explaining the significance of certain parts of the service that varied from the traditional Reform service. There were also Conservative and Orthodox documents that I received. I even received four Israeli Bar and Bat Mitzvah services that occurred at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Especially unique and wonderful was a photo album containing a drawing of a Bar Mitzvah boy taken in the early 1900's of a great-grandfather of the family who sent it in.

I found many other ways to collect data for my thesis besides asking people for it. U-Tube, the internet phenomenon of self-produced videos, has hundreds of Bar and Bat Mitzvah videos online for anyone to view. These ranged from religious ceremonies and video clips of photos, to satirical songs and late night TV spoofs of the Jewish ritual. Alongside each video a viewer can add comments and even their own video response to what they saw. In many of these cases there were up to 10 responses uploaded by viewers who wanted to share their Bar or Bat Mitzvah stories.

Another unexpected communication came from the authors of the book, "Bar Mitzvah Disco." Roger Bennett, Nick Kroll, and Jules Shell sent me an email asking if I

needed any help in terms of advice or resources. Their book is a favorite of mine and, although not scholarly per se *The New York Time Style Magazine* describes it as,

A collection of more than 30 photographs culled from bar and bat mitzvah from the 70s to the early 90s with essays by friends of the authors like Sarah Silverman and A.J. Jacobs, *Bar Mitzvah Disco*...is at first glance a nostalgia tour through an era of unprecedented bourgeois tackiness. But...it is also a cultural history, albeit one with a Duran Duran backbeat¹⁵." Although I did not take them up on their gracious offer to help, it was a big boost to my thesis ego and sense of legitimacy for my project.

I received an abundance of speeches written by both parents and clergy for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah child. These were full of changing messages over time. Some of the early speeches spoke of how wonderful the child was at sports or making people laugh while later speeches called attention to the community service and value based decisions a child made. These speeches offered a view into the lives of these individuals like no other area of my research.

I asked for specific items for my research project, but it was the unexpected documents that made my project enjoyable and engaging. I realized that research comes in all forms and it is not always what you ask for that teaches you what you want to know.

I was able to gather such a plethora of information but its size overwhelmed me when it came to the method in which I would use it most effectively.

I chose to approach my research in three ways. First I decided to look at *Content Analysis* (sometimes called textual analysis when dealing exclusively with text). This syle

¹⁵ Reviewed by New York Times Style Magazine "Bar Mitzvah Disco." http://www.amazon.com/Bar-Mitzvah-Disco-Stopped-Partys/dp/1400080444/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1203384098&sr=8-1

of analysis is a standard methodology in the social sciences for studying the content of communication. Earl Babbie, an American Sociologist at Chapman University, defines it as "the study of recorded human communications, such as books, websites, paintings and laws."¹⁶ Harold Lasswell, a political sociologist from the Chicago school of sociology, formulated the core questions of content analysis as: "Who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect?".¹⁷ This was a method I could understand.

Finally define content analysis a bit more clearly in terms of how exactly I was going to go about organizing all of my information? Dr. Kimberly A. Neuendorf offers a six-part definition of content analysis:

"Content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented."¹⁸

Understanding content analysis, I wanted to impart the ideas of *Grounded Theory* to help me explore what my possible hypothesis might be. Grounded Theory is a systematic qualitative research methodology in the social sciences emphasizing generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research.

When the principles of grounded theory are followed a researcher using this approach will formulate a theory, either substantive or formal, about the phenomena they are studying that can be evaluated. This contradicts the traditional model of research, where the researcher chooses a theoretical framework, and only then applies this model to

¹⁶ Earl Babbie, 'The Practice of Social Research', 10th edition, Wadsworth, Thomson Learning Inc.

¹⁷ Berelson, Bernard, *Content Analysis in Communication Research*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press 1971 (first edition from 1952)

¹⁸ Neuendorf, Kimberly A, *The Content Analysis Guidebook Online* (2002): [http:// academic.csuohio.edu /kneuendorf/content/](http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/content/)

the studied phenomenon¹⁹. Using this method I could allow the formulation of my hypothesis to emerge from the data I collected as opposed to trying to find out if my materials match my educated guess.

The third method I used for analysis was personal interviews. Much information can be gathered by observing various situations first-hand. I interviewed everyone who would give me time. I called rabbis, educators, cantors, parents and Bar and Bat Mitzvah kids themselves. I asked far less questions than the information they gave me instigated.

I started every conversation asking, "Tell me what you remember about your Bar or Bat Mitzvah." Often this was followed by a laugh or a rolling of the eyes by the person being interviewed. What followed next was almost always a roller coaster of moments of joy, followed by anxiety followed by more joy. Everyone had a story and everyone's story helped me with my research.

The process of gathering information and then analyzing that same information took almost seven months to complete. I think that the process of analyzing the information I gathered may never fully end as I continue on my Jewish journey with a sociologist's mind. I have greatly enjoyed my research thus far and look forward to sharing the many insights and explorations I have traveled while researching the ritual innovations of the American Bar Mitzvah.

Findings:

In my paper I will be focusing on five specific areas of ritual innovation to the American Bar Mitzvah. It is the combination of all five that allow on to see a fuller

¹⁹ Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

picture of how the American Bar Mitzvah has changed over the years. The aspects that I am looking at specifically fall under the subheadings of: innovation of expanding eligibility, ceremonial innovation, celebratory innovations, communal innovations and value-based innovations. Although there have been many more observable changes since the beginning of B'nei Mitzvot, my thesis attempts to categorize as many of them as possible.

Innovation of Expanding Eligibility:

The first category I will explore is the innovation of *Expanding Eligibility*. This section will ask questions of why other groups of people want to participate in a Bar Mitzvah type celebration and the challenges and support they received from the external community. For example, women, elderly and people with mental and physical challenges called for equal opportunities when it came to entering the Jewish adulthood with a ritually important ceremony. This innovation mimicked the Women Rights Movement as well as the People with Disabilities Act.

Bar Mitzvah:

Encyclopedia Judaica, citing Maimonides, defines the term Bar Mitzvah as both the attainment of religious and legal maturity as well as the occasion at which a Jewish boy's status is formally assumed at the age of 13 plus one day²⁰. *Bar* translated from Hebrew as son, and *Mitzvah* a commandment, prescribes obligations that a young man is to fulfill each and every commandments set out by the Jewish people²¹. In ancient times, the only ceremony that marked this transition out of boyhood was a blessing recited by

²⁰ Maimonides Yad, Ishut, 2:9–10

²¹ Avot 5:1; cf. Yoma 82a

his father which included thanking God for ending his responsibility for his son's observance of the *mitzvot*.

Until a boy turned 13, his father would be held responsible for any mitzvot not done correctly or even possibly omitted by the underage boy. This added stress for the father was relinquished on the date of his son's thirteenth birthday. Not only was the child released in adulthood by detaching from his father (and mother), but the father also experienced a similar release from the responsibilities of observing the mitzvot of his son.

According to Eleazar b. Simeon²², a boy from the age of thirteen can perform acts having legal implications, such as being a member of a bet din, being recognized as part of a minyan, and buying and selling property. Yet, as *Encyclopedia Judaica* states there are also notable exceptions, e.g., the testimony of a 13-year-old is not valid regarding real estate because he is "not knowledgeable about buying and selling"²³.

Jewish law mentions an additional reason to mark a young boy's thirteenth birthday within the Jewish community. As mentioned above, he transitions into manhood by performing and refraining from certain mitzvot, but it is also the time in the young boy's life when physical maturity runs its course on the child's body. Not only are bodily changes observable, but some philosophers believed that the changes were mental as well. "At this age young people are thought to be able to control their desires,"²⁴ stated a section in Avot de Rebbe Natan. This additional understanding created many challenges for our Biblical, Midrashic, and Talmudic characters.

²² Second Century C.E.

²³ Maimonides Yad, Edut, 9:8

²⁴ Avot de Rebbe Natan 16, 62-63

Rashi states that Bar Mitzvah has as a status of obligation "in the category of biblical laws, as it was given to Moses at Sinai"²⁵. Midrashic literature gives many references for 13 as the turning point in the life of a young person, e.g., Abraham rejected the idols of his father at this age²⁶, and at thirteen Jacob and Esau went their separate ways, the former to study Torah, the latter to idol-worship²⁷. Until thirteen a son receives the merit of his father and is also liable to suffer for his parent's sin; after that each one bears his own sin²⁸. Encyclopedia Judaica adds that this is also the time of transition from elementary school to the bet ha-midrash²⁹.

In Talmudic literature, it is mentioned that in Jerusalem during the period of the Second Temple, it was customary for the sages to bless a child who completed his first fast day at thirteen.³⁰ Only later, in the Middle Ages when the minor was generally *not* permitted to perform these mitzvot, did it make sense to celebrate their first public observance.

By the 14th century, sources mention a boy being called up to the Torah for the first time on the Sabbath coinciding with or following his thirteenth birthday. By the 17th century, boys were also reading Torah and delivering talks, often on talmudic learning, at an afternoon *seudat mitzvah* (ritual meal).

Moritz Oppenheim put together an early exposition of Jewish ceremonial life through drawings and descriptions. In a chalk drawing dated 1800, Oppenheim entitled a

²⁵ Commentary to Avot 5:1

²⁶ Pirkei de Rebbe Eliezar 26

²⁷ Genesis Raba 63:10).

²⁸ Yal. Ruth 600

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Encyclopedia Judaica

description and drawing, "The Bar Mizwah Speech."³¹ This unique look at a young boy's Bar Mitzvah, allows a modern researcher a glimpse into our Jewish ceremonial history.

The Bar Mizwah day is at hand. The boy, now in his thirteenth year, is repeating his Bar Mizwah speech...In a chanting tone he recites the religious theme assigned to him.

The costumes and furnishings of the room are historically accurate. The attire of the child is costly and beautiful. Note the satin vest, also the cap, covering the head, as is required.

At this period the fundamental thing was to learn all about one's religion. Ability to read the Talmud was considered the highest form of culture. Even at the present time the Orthodox Jews require that their adherents acquaint themselves with prayers for all occasions.

Again no women are present except the mother and the servants.³²

In Morris Mandel's, "Thirteen: A Teenage Guide to Judaism"³³, he illustrates a boy's movement into adulthood as a challenge to him as a responsible Jewish man.

Whether you win or lose your trail, whether you melt into the masses or become a part of the eternal masterpiece that is Judaism, depends upon your living according to the laws and traditions that distinguish the Jew and preserve his identity. Moreover, the strength of your case, the extent to which you enrich your daily life by following God's commandments, now rests entirely in your hands.

Not simply the young man, but the entire adult community, although not often talked about in our Jewish texts, felt this psychological weight, as well. If the children needed to become such conscious and active Jews within the community then what was expected of their parents?

³¹ Oppenheim, Moritz, Daniels. *The Oppenheim Pictures... Depicting Jewish Ceremonial Life*. Cincinnati, 1930.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Mandel, Morris. *Thirteen: A Teenage Guide to Judaism*. Jonathan David Publishing. New York, NY. 1961.

As time went on, the Bar Mitzvah itself became a catalyst for innovation. No longer was it the only marking of a person entering into the Jewish community. No longer would boys who were thirteen and a day be the only Jews welcomed symbolically into the Jewish community. Nowadays there are many ways in which all people, boys, girls, women, men, all with varying needs and educational levels can be welcomed into the Jewish community with a religious ceremony.

Confirmation:

Confirmation was the first innovation that was actually meant to replace the Bar Mitzvah. As opposed to later modifications of the Bar Mitzvah, Confirmation was the Classical Reform response to rejecting the idea of a mitzvah as an obligation. Therefore, by having Confirmation as opposed to a Bar Mitzvah no traditional idea of obligation was observed.

As time went on ritual focus of the bar mitzvah was a source of discomfort to religious reformers in 19th-century Europe. Many in the Reform community felt that thirteen was not a literal age at which a boy was ready to become a man and carry the responsibilities that the Jewish community attached to that title. Because of this, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, a founder of Reform Judaism in America introduced confirmation in the United States in 1846 in Albany, New York.

This additional ceremony (influenced by the Christian catechism³⁴) focused on knowledge of the principles of Jewish faith. This ceremony was to ensure that a young man continued on with his Jewish education beyond the age of thirteen. Here boys and

³⁴ Encyclopedia Judaica

girls were allowed to study alongside each other and attain the same symbolic achievement at age 15 or 16.

Confirmation is often marked at the completion of higher Jewish learning such as Hebrew High School or the completion of supplementary Jewish training. Although first conceived for boys only, girls were included later.

Originally linked to home and school, the ceremony quickly moved to the synagogue and found a home in the holiday of Shavuot, which celebrates the giving of the Torah. Shavuot worked well due both to its timing at the end of the secular school year and its thematic connection with the Torah. To distinguish Confirmation from Bar Mitzvah its supporters emphasized its focus on doctrine rather than ritual, its coeducational scope, and its occurrence at age sixteen or seventeen serving, thereby, to prolong the child's Jewish education³⁵.

Although the popularity of Bar Mitzvah may have waned in liberal circles during the rise of Confirmation, it has enjoyed a rebirth in recent decades. At the same time, bat mitzvah has developed as a ritual alternative for girls in the Conservative and the Reform movements.

After the success of Confirmation many families wanted their young girls to celebrate the marking of becoming a Jewish woman with an equal ceremony to the Bar Mitzvah.

³⁵ <http://www.mnment.com/barmitzvaht/kaplan.php>

Bat Mitzvah:

Many associate the first bat mitzvah ceremony with that of Judith Kaplan, daughter of Reconstructionism's founder Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, in 1922. However, there is evidence of earlier synagogue celebrations in Italy, France, and Poland.

Kaplan's ceremony was a pale imitation of what was to come. Judith chanted the blessings over the Torah and then read a passage in Hebrew from a printed Bible, yet the innovative spark of her bat mitzvah was its focus on the ritual involvement and coming of age of one girl.

How did Kaplan create such a ritual innovation? Clearly there were many people opposed to bringing a young girl into the Jewish community in the same fashion that a young boy ceremonially entered.

Kaplan researched and found that there was no specific prohibition to a girl marking her womanhood within in the Jewish community, and that the meaning, value, purpose and intent of the ceremony were not a limitations.

Throughout his research Kaplan also found that many women felt left out by being excluded from this right of passage. Kaplan "reconstructed" the practice to include women and titled the additional piece "Bat Mitzvah." In this way he did not "abrogate or undermine the practice or the beliefs that go into it, but he did make it applicable to a

more modern sensibility that there is a need to mark the entrance of a woman into the community in the same way as a man is welcomed".³⁶

Kaplan overrode the objections that could be raised about having a woman approach the Torah due to *niddah* (ritual impurity due to menstruation) for several reasons: there is no Temple so that the concern about ritual purity for service in the Temple is not applicable; the ritual of the red heifer is not available and therefore no one can be ritually pure; and there is a higher value to be placed on recognizing and valuing women in our community than on ritual issue that is dormant.

Thus, Kaplan did not eliminate the practice of Bar Mitzvah nor did he significantly change it, but he did "reconstruct" it to include a ceremony for women.³⁷

Below is an excerpt of an article written by Judith Kaplan Epstein describing the memories of her Bat Mitzvah day³⁸.

"It was a sunny day early in May of 1922. My two grandmothers, rocking gently in chairs provided for their especial comfort in our house, communed in Yiddish. Their conversation was not intended for my ears, but since Grandma Rubin was slightly hard of hearing, and since both were moved by intense emotion, I could eavesdrop without any difficulty.

"In-law," said my mother's mother, "Talk to your son. Tell him not to do this thing!"

"*Mahateineste* (in-law)," said Grandmother Kaplan, "you know a son doesn't listen to his mother. You talk to your daughter. Tell her to tell him not to do this thing!"

And what was this terrible deed which my father was about to perform, and which they both sought uselessly to prevent? He was planning to present me in a public ceremony in synagogue as a bat mitzvah.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Eyewitness to Jewish History, Vol. 4, edited by Azriel Eisenberg (UAHC).

The synagogue was the newly founded Society for the Advancement of Judaism. It had held services for only a few months when this new and dire occasion was contemplated. I was midway between my twelfth and thirteenth birthdays. At the time of my twelfth birthday, the age at which Jewish law recognizes a girl as a woman, subject to the *mitzvot* (commandments), there had been no synagogue where such a ceremony could be conducted. This was my father's first opportunity to put into practice one of the basic tenets of his then yet unnamed philosophy of Reconstructionism, namely, the equality of women in all aspects of Jewish life.

It would be less than the whole truth to say that I was as full of ardor about the subject of this ceremony as my father was. Oh, to be sure, I passionately espoused the cause of women's rights. Let us say that I was ambivalent (a word that had not entered the common vocabulary at that time), being perfectly willing to defy the standards of my grandmothers, pleased to have a somewhat flattering attention paid me, and yet perturbed about the possible effect this might have on the attitude of my own peers—the early teenagers (that word, too, was not yet in the vocabulary), who even then could be remarkably cruel to the "exception," to the nonconformist.

Everything else was in readiness. Invitations had been sent to family and friends for a party in our home on *Motza-ei Shabbat* (the evening following Sabbath). I had asked only one or two close friends in addition to my fellow members in the Yarmuk Club (a Hebrew-speaking club of girls who met in the Central Jewish Institute). The "club" could be depended on for sympathetic support, regardless of their precocious propensity for questioning all religious observance.

Everything was in readiness except the procedure itself. On Friday night, after Shabbat dinner, Father took me into his study and had me read aloud the blessings which precede and succeed the Torah readings. How severely he corrected my diction!...

The following morning we all went together, father, mother, disapproving grandmothers, my three little sisters and I, to the brownstone building on 86th Street where the Society carried on all its functions. Services were held in a long narrow room which led into a wider and more spacious one. In the wider room was the *bimah* (platform) with the Ark. The men of the congregation sat in that room and up one-half of the narrow room. Women's rights or no women's rights, the old habit of separating the sexes at worship died hard. The first part of my own ordeal was to sit in that front room with the men, away from the cozy protection of mother and sisters.

The service proceeded as usual, through shaharit (morning prayers), and through the Torah reading...I was signaled to step forward to a place below the bimah at a very respectable distance from the scroll of the Torah, which had already been rolled up and garbed in its mantle. I pronounced the first blessing, and from my own *Humash* (Five Books of Moses) read the selection which Father had chosen for me, continued with the reading of the English translation, and concluded with the closing *brakhah* (blessing). That was it. The scroll was returned to the ark with song and procession, and the service was resumed. No thunder sounded, no lightning struck. The institution of bat mitzvah had been born without incident, and the rest of the day was all rejoicing.³⁹"

Judith Kaplan's Bat Mitzvah was not immediately followed with other young girls knocking on the doors to their own synagogue, however, her father's ritual innovation did open eyes and minds to a new way of thinking about a girl's transition in being a Jewish woman.

As time went on, interest in participating in a Bat Mitzvah within the Reform and Conservative movements grew. Young Jewish girls were encouraged to study alongside their brothers and male cousins at Hebrew school. Religious schools added Hebrew courses to the regularly scheduled Sunday school day for both boys and girls.

As more time went on liberal Jewish American thirteen year old girls were not only enjoying studying Hebrew alongside their male counterparts, they were expected to participate in the right of passage as well.

Among traditional Jews, Bat Mitzvah has been slower to develop as a ritual observance. A small party or festive meal at the girl's home often affirmed the coming-of-age ritual. Recently in liberal Orthodox environments as the Jewish education of girls has become nearly identical to that of boys; girls have started to observe the occasion by

³⁹ Eyewitness to Jewish History, Vol. 4, edited by Azriel Eisenberg (UAHC).

giving talks from the pulpit after the service, either on the Torah portion or on some aspect of women's ritual involvement.

A twelve-year-old orthodox Miami girl, whose four siblings are male, shares her thoughts on her upcoming Bat Mitzvah:

" I get to have a special luncheon for me and my family. And after the salad is served I get to read my thoughts about the Haftorah portion. I am so excited for my Bat Mitzvah!⁴⁰"

Although the young girl's brothers each had an elaborate service and party to celebrate their coming of age, this young woman is marking the day happily with a much subtler meal and expression of her thoughts, not on the Torah portion, but the Haftorah. She does not express jealousy or seem to mind her much smaller celebration of entering Jewish womanhood, she simply enjoys the fact that in the eyes of her family and small Miami community she is now a woman.

Another influence on the development of Bat Mitzvah within Orthodoxy is the women's prayer group. These services offer role models for women's ritual involvement as well as a venue for bat mitzvah where girls can have an "aliyah" (with amended blessings), read Torah, and even lead services.

Today women in all forms of Judaism are given the opportunity to mark their entrance into the Jewish community. Although not all ceremonies are identical or even

⁴⁰ Evelyn Cohen, Personal Interview. Miami, Florida, 2003.

equal to their male counterparts, Judaism has opened its doors for this female ritual innovation.

Adult B'nei Mitzvah:

Another ritual innovation that has roots in the traditional Bar Mitzvah is the adult B'nei Mitzvah. For some this is a ceremony which marks an event in their childhood that his or her own family could not afford to bestow onto their children. For others this is the first chance after conversion for a Jew-by-choice to formally become a part of the "adult" Jewish community.

The adult B'nei Mitzvah is a way to re-engage with Judaism. B'nei Mitzvah has both advances learning as well as an adult-level discussion. Common to the adult B'nei Mitzvah is to publicly tell a Jewish story of how the individual decided to make this commitment. It also serves as an example to younger Jews that if an older person would take on this difficult task, they should serve as a model for why he or she should.

As early as the 1950s, there were intimations that men who had not had a bar mitzvah during adolescence felt Jewishly incomplete. In 1971, the first "belated" Bar Mitzvah was held and soon as part of the movement for gender equality in Judaism, women also began participating in this new ceremony of adult identity affirmation.

Either individually or in groups men and women studied for a period of time and then ceremonially reaffirm their connections with Judaism at a Shabbat morning service. Synagogues instituted more formal programs of study that enabled all to study about

Jewish history, text, liturgy, and ritual, and to learn to read Hebrew and chant from the Torah and haftarah⁴¹.

In the introduction to the book *"Adult B'nei Mitzvah: Affirming Our Identity,"* Rabbi Mark Warshofsky explains that although technically every Jew automatically reaches this important milestone of becoming a Jewish adult through puberty, an adult Bar or Bat Mitzvah represents far more than that.

We need a core of life experiences from which to experience profundity. These adults have wrestled with struggles and identity, with family and the creative work they wish to do in the world. They have celebrated and felt joy; they have had moments of intense aloneness. Having a lifetime of living makes this day all the more sacred, because of who they have become in the process of coming to this moment.⁴²

One special, yet much smaller, population within the category of adult B'nei Mitzvah is the mass movement to provide Bar and Bat Mitzvah to those residing permanently in old age homes. As our elderly increasingly reach out for opportunities not only to increase their secular learning but their Judaism as well, rabbis based in or around retirement communities have been swamped with those interested in formally affirming their role within the Jewish community.

At the San Francisco Jewish Home for the Aged, twelve people have become B'nei Mitzvah over the past twelve months. Two groups of six adult learners met weekly with both the rabbi and a Hebrew tutor who taught the residents not only Hebrew, but Jewish religious and cultural history as well.

⁴¹ http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Bar_Bat_Mitzvah/History.htm

⁴² Hochberg-Miller, Lisa. "The Nature of an Adult Journey." Shabbat Morning Address to the Congregation (Ventura, California: 10/22/99).

Average age 85, these twelve students not only read directly from the Torah but they also gave speeches, said prayers and offered thoughts to the congregation about what having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah meant to them.

In an excerpt from a D'var Torah given at the Jewish Home, Rachel⁴³ explains why she chose to have a Bat Mitzvah at the age of 90.

Well, I have gone through various stages in my spiritual life. I stopped believing in God when my only sister died unexpectedly at the age of 21, leaving me an only child at age 22, with inconsolable parents to console. But years later, when I saw Yosemite for the first time, I said, 'There must be a God.'

But it is only since I have become elderly, with a shunt in my brain (to restore my memory) and various other ailments and deformities that need to get correction, that I realize that only a God with an ultra-superior brain could have devised the human body with its intricate organs that all work together—as well as all the organs of all other animal species in the world. I thank God every day for allowing doctors and scientist to discover all kinds of new devises and medications that allow me to go on functioning and have a longer and better life.⁴⁴

Many older adults had lived out a majority of their years without becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, yet it is their hope to fulfill this wish before passing from this world.

Multi-Generational B'nei Mitzvah:

A more recent innovation of the Bar Mitzvah is when multiple people from within the same family choose to mark the Bar and/or Bat Mitzvah together. Much less a reaction to the high costs of bringing everyone in from out of town to celebrate, pairing different members of the same family together allows a special bond to be created.

This often takes the form of a mother and son, but there are multiple examples of other such arrangements. The Union for Reform Judaism has recorded that spouses have

⁴³ Pseudonym

⁴⁴ Congregation L'Dor VaDor Shabbat Morning Booklet, December 22, 2007.

shared this special occasion, grandparents with their grandchildren, and even a case of a man's first and second wives along with their common mother in law marking this ritual together⁴⁵.

This May I will be officiating at one such creative event. My maternal grandmother, aunt and cousin will symbolically mark their entry into the Jewish world together. They each have a very different reason to do so and after interviewing them I found myself move by their collective motivations.

Sylvia Levitsky was brought up in an orthodox family where her father and brother went to synagogue while she stayed home and cook. She secretively would study her brother's books late into the night but feared she would be caught and punished.

As she grew older and married her passion for Jewish learning never waned. She taught herself Hebrew and sought out places where she could tutor young children. She eventually applied to work as a full time teacher at a synagogue in Detroit, Michigan. 35 years later she continues to teach children Hebrew in preparation for their Bar and Bat Mitzvah.

When I asked her what finally helped her to decide to join forces with her daughter and grandson she said, "I wish I could celebrate my life among the learned Jewish community. I struggled long and hard to teach myself Hebrew and now I want to share my joy with my family."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Union of American Hebrew Congregations." Adult B'nei Mitzvah: Affirming our Identity." UAHC press. 2002.

⁴⁶ Levitsky, Sylvia. Personal Interview. December 26, 2007.

Dr. Holli Levitsky, professor at Loyola Marymount University, has a very different story. Brought up at a time when a Bat Mitzvah was a reality for many young girls, she chose not to mark her entrance into the Jewish community with the ceremony. She felt it was unnecessary.

Little did she know that when she had children of her own she would reclaim her Jewish identity with deep fervor. As a member of her temple's executive board, and the Dean of Jewish Studies Department, Dr. Levitsky has found herself missing a piece of her Jewish identity. She stated, "I never knew that I would regret not having a Bat Mitzvah. Now I feel like I am being given a second chance at marking my place within the Jewish community."⁴⁷

Her son Jakob is more typical. He did not share his grandmother's need to be recognized for his Jewish training and Hebrew skills nor did he feel the drive that his mother expresses about marking her place within the learned Jewish community. Jakob is twelve and is "having a Bat Mitzvah because [his] parents said [he] had to."⁴⁸

I can not say that I am surprised with Jakob's answer, but when probed as to why he agreed to share his special day Jacob simply replied, "Because it means more when I can share this with my family."⁴⁹

This sentiment crosses generational lines and differences as we see that many people are joining forces with their families, chevruta and other synagogue members to mark their symbolic entrance into Jewish adulthood.

⁴⁷ Levitsky-Weitz, Holli. Personal Interview. January 12, 2008.

⁴⁸ Weitz, Jakob. Personal Interview. January 5, 2008.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Special Needs B'nei Mitzvah

It has been estimated that 10-15% of any school population has learning difficulties requiring special education.⁵⁰ This number is obviously not reserved for only non-Jewish children. Driven by federal legislation in the past 20 years mandating equal access and an appropriate education for all, there has been a heightened awareness of individual differences both in the secular and religious world.

For Jews the act of inclusion influenced the ritual of B'nei Mitzvah. The special needs population was ignored by society and by Jewish education. With the addition of the special needs Bar or Bat Mitzvah a statement is made that not only is inclusion of all types of learners an American value but a Jewish one as well.

The impact of these social changes changed the ways in which Jewish day schools and religious schools view their special needs students. "It becomes incumbent upon the Jewish community to ensure that every Jew be given the opportunity to receive an appropriate Jewish education, including a chance to celebrate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah milestone."⁵¹

Congregations across the country have become increasingly flexible as to what they consider to be the requirements for a Jewish child to attain adult status within the community. There are many technological and attitudinal advances that have helped not only special needs students, but their teachers. There are also some modern Rabbinic Responsa that are reinterpreting traditional practices of becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah in

⁵⁰ Leneman, Cantor Helen. "Three Special Children." ARE Publishing, Denver, CO. 1993.

⁵¹ Simon, Sara Rubinow. "Children With Special Learning Needs." ARE Publishing, Denver, CO. 1993

light of new information regarding the ability of people with special needs to function effectively within the Jewish community.⁵²

Ceremonial Innovations:

The second specific area I will explore are *Ceremonial Innovations*. Within this subcategory I will investigate what kind of changes or modifications that have been made in the arena of the actual ceremony. For instance, liturgical changes have been made to allow the language used to be gender neutral and inclusive of all kinds of people. Another change is in the actual running of the services. Parents, grandparents, friends and the child him or herself are often called upon to facilitate the service or contribute significant pieces to the ceremony. Speeches about how great the celebrant is or displays of his or her talents through chanting and presentation of poetry called attention to the child as opposed to the process of becoming a Jewish adult through the B'nei Mitzvah. This innovation came about at the same time as American Jews were readily welcoming assimilation into their homes and excitingly providing for a child or family-centered existence.

Leading Service:

In the 14th century it became customary to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah by calling the boy to the Torah for the honor of reading the Torah blessings on the Shabbat of his thirteenth birthday. In modern times not only does the child male or female read the

⁵² *ibid.*

blessings for the reading of the Torah he or she also leads the entire Shabbat worship service.

This can include reading in English or Hebrew and it is often a combination of both. There can be responsive readings between the child and the congregation as well as readings or poetry that the child reads alone. If the child chooses to, many of the prayers can be sung to a traditional melody called troupe that the child can do as a solo or as the leader of the congregation.

Another feature of leading the service is calling out or orchestrating the choreography of when people should stand up, sit down, turn the page, or conclude the service.

This ritual innovation allows the young person to truly feel like he or she is entering adulthood in the eyes of the Jewish people. Danny Seigel energizes kids by telling them, "The congregation is listening to you: your parents, other relatives, friends, parents' friends, congregants, your rabbi...and many of your teachers. Because this is such a special day, they maybe paying more attention to what you have to say than what the Rabbi teaches every week."⁵³ To a 13year old, this send-off seems invigorating and a bit exciting.

Tallit Presentation:

It is traditional for men to wear a tallit, prayer shawl, in religious services when the Torah is going to be taken from the Ark and read. This ritual is no longer reserved for

⁵³ Siegel, Danny. "The Speeches." P. 53.

only men and it is customary for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah child to receive his or her "first" Tallit at the beginning of the service preceding the child's first reading from the Torah.

Although I have seen exceptions, it is often the parents who present the Tallit to the child in the presence of the entire congregation. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah recites the proscribed blessing, and the entire congregation full of family and friends responds with "Amen."

Danny Siegel explains what this moment means to him, "This young Jew, who is now officially joining the community as a full participant, learns once again that beyond family, there is Community with a capital 'C.' The message should come through very clearly: No one is ever alone and no one ever needs to feel alone."⁵⁴

From my research I have learned that parents often offer a blessing as they wrap their son or daughter with the tallit. An example of this prayer accompanied by the wrapping of the tallit can be found in Appendix C.

The tallit that the child is given often becomes the same tallit that they will be buried in much later in life. Because of this the significance of this ritual innovation takes on an additional level of importance to both the child and his or her family.

Passing Torah:

The Hebrew phrase, "L'dor Va'dor,"⁵⁵ from generation to generation, appears many times throughout Jewish liturgy. In fact, we are reminded of this phrase each time

⁵⁴ Siegel, Danny. "Some Additional Ceremonies and Rituals." P. 55.

⁵⁵ Isaiah 34:17, Joel 4:20, Psalm 10:6, Psalm 79:13

there is a Torah service in the synagogue. At B'nei Mitzvah this phrase becomes a symbolic cue for what has become a tradition people think originates with the first Bar Mitzvah. Although they are incorrect, the reverence and respectful tone taken on during this ritual makes it one of the most memorable innovations of my research.

The choreography for this ritual innovation does not change from B'nei Mitzvah to B'nei Mitzvah. When the Torah is taken out of the Ark to be later read by the celebrant, the family lines up and passes it L'dor Va'dor, from generation to generation, ending with the Bar or Bat Mitzvah who is going to read from it.

Although the actions taken by the family may look the same at every Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the players who participate in this ritual vary. There are many questions when it comes to who will participate in this ritual. Some synagogues only allow Jewish family members to pass the Torah while others encourage everyone in the family to participate; independent of if he or she is of B'nei Mitzvah age or not.

After conducting a few interviews with rabbis about this ritual, all of them shared that deciding who is "in a family" for the passing of the Torah caused the most arguments during the planning of the service. With the multitude of ways to define a modern day family, especially a less traditional American Jewish family, this ritual takes on a separate level of meaning for many individuals and can cause a great deal of stress for the B'nei Mitzvah families. Is the non-Jewish step dad any less a part of the child's life? What about the gay partner of the mother? These questions and many more arise at a time when the ritual was meant to unite a family and not divide them.

One synagogue in Orange County, California, allows the child to pick who should be included in the passing of the Torah. In one video I watched the child selected his religious school teacher, his paternal grandma, his best friend and his mom. He explained that these were the people who taught him the importance of embracing his Judaism.

Traditionally, the people chosen to pass the Torah range from the earliest generation to the new generation, or the child him or herself. For example, as I saw in most videos I viewed, it went from great-grandparent⁵⁶, to grandparents, to parents and on to the B'nei Mitzvah. There is often the addition of adult⁵⁷ siblings as well.

The passing of the Torah is done with the Ark open and the congregation standing. It is a beautiful display of welcoming a child into the ranks of his Jewish family.

Speeches/D'var Torah:

There are two categories of speeches. The first type of speech is the one given by the parents to the child on the day of his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah⁵⁸. When this speech is presented tastefully and with deep sincerity the formality of the day seems to melt away and draw attention to who the sweet and unique child really is.

Danny Siegel advises a parent that he or she should, "Tell your child how much you have been moved by her or his words and deeds, and how being proud on this day is a different kind of proud than taking pride in school, sports, and other activities. By

⁵⁶ If deceased it was often someone from that generation such as a great uncle.

⁵⁷ Over Bar/Bat Mitzvah age

⁵⁸ See Appendix D and E

speaking in this manner, you are setting an example for others to do the same and at the same time reinforcing the higher significance of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

The second category of speech is the one given by the Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrant. Oftentimes the child will address the congregation two separate times in the form of a speech. The first example is usually a short mention of those people who the child wants to thank for helping him or her get to their big day. This is often followed by a mention of relatives who are no longer alive to help celebrate in body but who are there in spirit. To conclude, the speech usually includes a brief teaching about the child's mitzvah project as well as why they chose to select such a mitzvah⁵⁹.

A child is reminded, "You should understand that describing your Mitzvah project with enthusiasm is not bragging. You are educating others about ways to do *Tikkun Olam*, and Jewish tradition teaches us that *Leshaym Chinuch*, for the benefit of educating people, you are not only allowed to do it, you should do it, so others will do the same. In fact, encourage others to do as you are doing. As the Talmud teaches us, 'One who works to get others to give is greater than one who only gives himself or herself.'⁶⁰

The second time the child addresses the congregation is in the form of a D'var Torah or Sermon based on his or her Torah and Haftorah portion.⁶¹ This is the chance for the child to express just how much he or she has learned throughout his or her Judaic training. It often includes an interpretive lesson that the child has taken directly from his

⁵⁹ See Appendix E.5

⁶⁰ Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah Book, p.53.

⁶¹ See appendix

or her Hebrew Torah reading. This is a wonderful time to hear about the issues and topics that are important to the child in their thirteen years of life.

Celebratory Innovation:

The third innovation I will look at is a category I call *Celebratory Innovation*.

Here I will look at what factors shifted the Bar Mitzvah celebration from within the frame of the synagogue service to elaborate displays of music, consumerism, and self-promotion. Giveaways, exclusive venues, and themes have become as standard as Torah readings, sermons and family pride. This display by American families seems to serve as announcement that "we have arrived into middle-class status."

Venue

Where to have your child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah party is not as easy as laying out a picnic blanket and enjoying your backyard. Although some of the videos I viewed did bring guests back to his or her home for a nice afternoon brunch, that situation was the minority.

More often than not especially in the interviews and videos from larger Jewish communities, families flaunted their wealth by selecting venues that were a once in a lifetime opportunity.

"Vibrant and Versatile and extraordinary Venue; Grove of Anaheim."

"Spectacular Oceanfront Setting; Duke's of Malibu." "NBC/Universal; This is one of a kind!" These are only three of hundreds of venue options offered in a Southern California Bar Mitzvah guide.

When interviewing a Rabbi from the South Florida area, I asked what some of the most popular venues have been for his congregants and their families. "People love to rent out the Miami Heat Arena. I had one family rent a Carnival Cruise and take their entire party on a three-day weekend jaunt to the Caribbean—all 200 guests. The most common party venue though has to be Oceanfront celebrations. They can actually rent the beach!"⁶²

Although many people may not be able to afford this kind of celebration all the time, it seems fairly standard that one is willing to pay large amounts of money to ensure that his or her child has a unique and memorable party venue.

Theme

The theme can act as a motif for the decorations, invitation and give-aways of B'nei Mitzvah parties. Oftentimes the theme reflects the child's interest in some way and therefore examples of themes could be sports, music, or animals. This innovation has taken many forms over the years and it continues to evolve as time goes on. What may have begun as a way to feature what a child's interests were at the time of his or her B'nei Mitzvah, now can be understood as an extravagant display of consumerism and excessiveness.

One video from Miami, Florida, featured the theme "Jonathan's Bloody House of Terror." Picture a room draped with red velvet sheets hanging from 20-foot rafters on the ceiling. Centerpieces were goblins with fountains of red soda dripping from their mouths

⁶² Rabbi asked not to be named.

onto large ice sculptures of corpses. Wax teeth were handed out and the main course featured head shaped chicken fingers covered in steaming dry ice.

Another unique video featured a party theme entitled "Natalie's Night Club." At this party, Natalie and her young friends were scantily clad in short skirts, neon tube tops, and go-go boots. Although the adults celebrated in another room, the 100 plus children filled the dance floor motivated by paid professional dancers as their partners. Non-alcoholic drinks were passed out in Martini glasses while cigarette shaped chocolate candies filled each dancing child's lips. Small neon lights were given to each child to place in his or her mouth to simulate what is done at Raves.

Both of these examples may seem extreme when it comes to describing the celebrations for B'nei Mitzvah but they are not. I viewed and heard stories of many similar occasions that were marked by the appearance of live circus animals, celebrities, NBA cheerleaders, and even the President of the United States.

There seems to be very little boundaries when it comes to how far a parent will go to celebrate his or her child entering the Jewish community as an adult.

Music/Band

The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Guide for California states that one should begin auditioning bands and DJs for their parties up to three years ahead of time. "It is one of

the most important decisions a parent can make for his or her child. The music is everything.⁶³ⁿ

The above statement leaves out any mention of Judaism or rituals. The music played at a party can affect the celebratory feel of the event. For example, many bands and DJs play Jewish folk music such as the Hora that encourages community circle dancing. Other music groups bring up the Bar or Bat Mitzvah child to help get the group excited about being there together.

Every video had some sort of music accompaniment to the celebration. There has become a new genre of music that is played primarily at B'nei Mitzvah. Some of the songs include: "YMCA" by The Village People, "Time Warp" from Rocky Horror Picture Show, "We Are Family" by Sly and the Family Stone, "Shout" by Rudolph Isley, "Twist and Shout" by Chuck Berry, "Electric Slide" by Marcia Griffiths, "That's What Friends Are For" by Dionne Warwick, the "Macarena" by Los Del Rio, "The Hustle" by Van McCoy and "Celebration" by Cool and the Gang.

The above songs, and many others, help to make B'nei Mitzvah parties fun and entertaining for all guests.

Walk in song

In 85 percent of the videos the child walked into the party room to one chosen song. In many cases the song helped to feature the theme of the party. For example, when the child's theme was Broadway, the song that was played, as the young girl walked in

57. Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guide. "The History of the Bar Mitzvah." 2007 Edition. California

was "On Broadway." Another example of songs that were chosen to walk in to, dealt with the child's name or nickname. "Eleanor" by the Turtles, accompanied young Ellie as she walked in the room. "Danny Boy," an old Irish folksong celebrated Danny, a child from an interfaith family proud to acknowledge their Irish heritage.

Music can play an important role in celebrations, and having a moment at the party where all attention is focused on the child and his or her completion of their religious service is a non-religious yet extremely present innovation.

Give-aways

The most "American" aspect of B'nei Mitzvah comes in the form of give-aways. This feature can include a single or multiple items that a guest of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah party can take home with them as a memento of the occasion.

60 percent of the videos had a give-away item. Some examples of this were CDs with the child's favorite music, monogrammed stuffed racecars, T-shirts with the child's name and Bat Mitzvah date printed onto it, and much more.

In each and every case the give-away items had nothing to do with Judaism or the religious meaning of B'nei Mitzvah. They were simply party favors for the guests to have as a memento of their attendance at this or that family's celebration.

Yarmulkies

The commemorative yarmulkie is a variant of the give-away. Throughout Jewish history the attitude towards covering the head has varied. The Talmud records two

opposing attitudes dealing with this issue; one states that covering the head is a matter of custom⁶⁴ while the other states that covering one's head insures piety⁶⁵. In the modern period the debate still exists. "The use of a kippah—skullcap or yarmulke—have become a symbol for Jewish identification and are often worn for that reason alone."⁶⁶

Understanding that most American synagogues provide skullcaps for their congregants and guests it has become fairly standard that the B'nei Mitzvah family purchases a bulk number of plain skullcaps monogrammed with the child's name and Bar or Bat Mitzvah date on the inside. Often the color of the skullcap matched the child's "theme color" for the entire weekend.

Communal Innovation:

The newest innovations shared by many in the Jewish community who participate in the B'nei Mitzvah process is the inclusion of entire community in the ceremony. This innovation I call *Communal Innovation*. I believe the shift from focusing on the individual child or family to now bringing in the community to help engage in the festivities is a reaction to globalization and the spreading out of families from one another. Services often include booklets that explain each section of the service as well as who will be participating. This printed explanation allows outsiders to better understand what is going on, but also brings the participants together in a makeshift one-time community.

⁶⁴ Nedarim 30b

⁶⁵ Shabbat 156b

⁶⁶ Siegel, Richard, Michael Strassfeld and Sharon Strassfeld. "*The First Jewish Catalogue*" The Jewish Publication Society of America. Philadelphia, PA.

Honoring various visitors with Aliyot is another way in which families showcase who is important to them and why their presence helps to increase the celebratory feeling of the day.

Another way communal innovation has had an effect on B'nei Mitzvah is with the addition of destination based B'nei Mitzvah. Some people are choosing to take their family and friends to Israel to celebrate the occasion. Destination Bar and Bat Mitzvah similar to their wedding counterparts, allow people to come together from all over the world to celebrate the important event. In everyway this fourth innovation shows a shift from child-based families to community-based celebration. This community-centric model represents a counter-culture reaction to consumerism and status.

Booklets

There is an old borscht belt shtick that mocks the huge outpouring of worshippers on the high Holidays: "Programs, get your programs! Can't tell the Rabbi from the Cantor without your program!"⁶⁷ Ironically, B'nei Mitzvah now includes programs. These programs identify who is receiving which honor, and often explain B'nei Mitzvah to non-Jewish relatives and guests. It assumes that the family exists in a multi-dimensional nexus of friends, colleagues and co-workers, neighbors, and relatives who do not know who each other are. It is also an opportunity to make a public proclamation about who the family is and what the ceremony means to them.

Another aspect of the program is that as a result of people reclaiming Judaism as their own, many synagogues and even many more families choose to create their own

⁶⁷ Story told by Dr. Bruce Phillips

unique service booklet for congregants to follow along during B'nei Mitzvah. For instance, in the book "Make Your Own Bar and Bat Mitzvah,"⁶⁸ families are encouraged to prepare a booklet of creative readings and explanations of the service and Torah reading. "Those designing a Bar or Bat Mitzvah that will be held independently of a congregation's prayer book generally include all the major prayers, along with their translations and transliterations in this booklet, so that it can serve as prayer book. These also serve as a gift for those who attend to take home for further contemplation."⁶⁹

In Appendix H the creative service packet can also include the order of service and who those people are in relationship to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Oftentimes special poetry or quotes are included in the booklet. Many booklets feature photos of the child both as a baby and recently⁷⁰.

Each booklet has its own unique features and expresses an additional element of ritual innovation when one chooses to interpret liturgy and music with his or her own translations⁷¹. Sometimes pre-B'nei Mitzvah classes work on helping the students to truly understand the liturgy in their own language and often times those samples end up in the booklet.

One of the newest features that has become almost a standard in Bar and Bat Mitzvah booklets is the inclusion of a glossary⁷² listing specific Jewish words and ritual items that will be used throughout the service. There is often a small descriptive

⁶⁸ Milgram, Rabbi Goldie. "Make Your Own Bar and Bat Mitzvah: A Personal Approach to Creating a Meaningful Rite of Passage." Jossey-Bass Publishing. San Francisco, California. , 2004.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ See Appendix I

⁷¹ See Appendix J

⁷² See Appendix L

paragraph explaining what B'nei Mitzvah are as well as the meanings behind some key prayers.

In my opinion this ritual innovation is one of the most telling features depicting the changing demographics of the Jewish community and whom we associate with. Not only are these few pages helpful to non-Jewish guests who come to share in the celebration, it is beneficial to the growing non-educated Jewish population as well.

No matter what a family chooses to include in their creative service packet, experiencing the original work of the child and his or her family is almost as special as being there to witness it.

Aliyot Honors⁷³

A wonderful way to say thank you to the people who helped to celebrate the child is by honoring them with a special task during the Bar or Bat Mitzvah service. While honoring guests with aliyot it is a tasteful way to honor friends, grandparents, aunts and so forth, the number of Aliyot, or Bima honors, that B'nei mitzvah families can handout on "their child's" Shabbat is a constant area of debate for synagogues. Not everyone who attends services on Shabbat is there because he or she is an invited guest of the family. Increasingly, temple members who are not connected to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah regularly attend weekly Shabbat services whether there is a Bar or Bat Mitzvah at all.

An article in the New Jersey Jewish News written in 2007 expressed this situation clearly⁷⁴.

⁷³ See Appendix K

When Linda Cohen's son celebrated becoming Bar Mitzvah on April 24, the family had some tough choices to make. "We wanted to honor everyone but we had to prioritize," Cohen told *NJ Jewish News*.

That's because the synagogue, Ahawas Achim B'nai Jacob and David, in West Orange, has strict rules about how many Torah honors a Bar Mitzvah celebrant's family may give to friends and relatives. Like many synagogues, the Orthodox congregation limits how many family members may recite the aliyah blessings that precede and follow the chanting of each section of Torah.

"The family is entitled to three aliyot, plural of aliyah, [of the traditional seven]. If they require more, a special request must be made," said Rabbi Yaakov Sprung, the congregation's religious leader. "It's a nice thing to celebrate a simcha (joyous event) but in a community as large as ours, if we permit the family to gobble up all of the aliyot, there wouldn't be any left for others."

Let's face it: When it comes to internecine religious struggles, the jockeying for bimah (podium) honors is not exactly "Who is a Jew?" But for parents of families planning a Bar or Bat Mitzvah--and for rabbis trying to preserve the rules and atmosphere of Shabbat (Sabbath) services--questions of crowd control loom large. Even when family and clergy agree on the principles, it's the rare simcha-planning family who doesn't ask, "How can we say no to Uncle Sid?"

It's an issue that synagogues face across the denominations. Call it aliyah wars, or more judiciously, a balancing act, but family needs and synagogue policies often come into conflict when it's time for young Jacob or Julie's big day.

And like so much else in Jewish life, the balance has shifted in recent years. When Rabbi Eliseo Rozenwasser arrived at the Conservative Adath Shalom 10 years ago (when the Morris Plains synagogue was still in Dover), "the Bar Mitzvah family would take over. The whole service was geared to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah to the point where the regulars did not feel comfortable. They would choose to come on Shabbatot when there was no Bar or Bat Mitzvah."

So Rozenwasser, along with the synagogue board, adopted a strict policy that the family could have four aliyot and the congregation would have three.

While reserving three or four aliyot for the family and the rest for the congregation appears to be the norm, the policy is more generous at B'nai Shalom, a Conservative synagogue in West Orange. Families are allotted between five and seven aliyot, and an additional aliya, or hosafa, can be added when needed and permissible.

⁷⁴ Ginsburg, Johanna. "Crowd Control: When it comes to honoring Bar and Bat Mitzvah Guests, Families and Synagogues Face a Delicate Balancing Act." *New Jersey Jewish News*. 2007.

But B'nai Shalom does not allow one innovation that other congregations have used to increase the number of people receiving honors: group aliyot. The practice of two or more people reciting the blessings in unison is considered a relatively recent variation on an honor intended for an individual.

"At some point there has to be a standard," said Rabbi Stanley Asekoff. "We will add [individual] aliyot when people show up unexpectedly at shul with things for which they need to have an aliyah," such as a yahrtzeit (anniversary of a death). "But you can't create honors that do not exist."

When the issue of group aliyot arose, Asekoff consulted the Conservative movement's responsa, or legal opinions, on the matter. He came to the conclusion that "group aliyot came into being to find a way to give more people honors. It's a way to mollify families who are upset because they have more people to honor. The more authentic way is for one person to have an aliyah. You don't use the Torah as a way of getting in honors. You can't use the Torah to honor people. It's an honor to be called up to the Torah."

There's another reason group aliyot are prohibited at B'nai Shalom, said Asekoff: When so many people get up for an aliyah, it creates a distraction from the service.

The idea of a group aliyah has made its way into at least some non-B'nei Mitzvah services. Rabbi Laura Geller, for example, has group aliyot related to the Torah portion and/or D'var Torah. For example, for "Lech-L'cha" she says "Let everyone who is starting their own journey come forward for the aliyah." She uses it as a way to connect people individually to the Torah. The fact that it is so common in B'nei Mitzvah has made it less strange for other occasions as well.

Independent of how many people B'nei Mitzvah families can call up to honor, the idea that the Aliyot even exist is a wonderful way to publically thank those who have come to share your family's celebration with you.

Photomontage

As one leafs through Bar and Bat Mitzvah resource magazines he or she will find three to four pages advertising photomontage companies that can "Put your family's memories on the big screen."⁷⁵

Technology has changed over the past fifteen years from slideshows to PowerPoint, the scene is the same. A large screen is rolled out onto the dance floor while party guests are entertained with pictures put to music of the child's life.

Often this ritual of the party is a helpful way to fill in the timeline of the child's life that each guest may not have been privy to. Some examples from my researched displayed 10 minutes of photos shooting on or dissolving off the screen while loud music played as accompaniment. Although this was one way, and often the most common way, to feature the child and his or her short 13 years of accomplishments, there was another video that really caught my attention.

A child from Cleveland, Ohio, decided to use his photomontage to show his party guests what was important to him. Although there were lots of pictures and music to help keep the movie flowing, this child selected very specific headings to set the photos apart into categories.

"People who have supported my decisions." "Family members who encourage my creativity." "Friends who God surrounds me with." These short phrases, when flashed onto the screen before a series of photos, allowed the community a chance to see who is

⁷⁵ Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guide; California

important to him but also why they are important. At the conclusion of his photomontage people were crying because they were so moved. I did not even know the people in the display and I was greatly touched by the child's attempts and success at sharing exactly what the people surrounding him meant.

Photomontages often include pictures of grandparents and great grandparents. It celebrates not only the maturation of the child but also the connection with family.

Cutting the Challah

It is traditional to say a blessing over the Challah before beginning the celebratory meal. Jews are commanded to say this prayer before every meal containing bread it is often a ritual observed only in public settings such as weddings, baby namings and B'nei Mitzvah.

The Jewish Home advisor explains, "In some homes, after the head of the household pronounces the Ha-Motzi blessing; he breaks off pieces of Challah and gives one piece to each person at the table. This custom has its roots in the Talmud, where Rabbi Yochanan expressed the view that it is the duty of the host to break the bread."⁷⁶

At many B'nei Mitzvah the Challah is placed on the dance floor as guests are seated at tables around it. Symbolically the braided bread is supposed to be large enough to allow each guest a taste before the meal is served. Regardless of a family's level of

⁷⁶ Kolatch, Alfred J. "The Jewish Home Advisor." Jonathan David Publishers, Inc. Middle Village, New York. 1990.

observance this religious blessing is recited. In fact, many challot⁷⁷ are enormous and could feed the entire room of guests.

I found a ritual innovation that I had not heard of previously. In two instances the Bat Mitzvah party had a challah large enough to fill a 10-foot table. In both videos that challah had been baked into the initials of the girls who were being honored. Therefore, although traditional to only have one challah, these two separate videos showed three large challot more as decorative features of the party and than ritual items for a blessing.

Independent of how large or where in the room the challah was displayed, each one of my research examples included a challah ceremony before the beginning of the party or at the conclusion of the service if there was no party.

I find most interesting who was included in them mitzvah of saying the blessing, or serving as the "head of the household," as the Jewish Home Advisor stated.

Except for three instances each of the videos exhibited an older man cutting the challah after the blessing. Often times it was the grandfather or great-uncle, and a few exceptions showed the father of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah performing the mitzvah. There was not a single example of a woman performing the ritual.

Although traditionally the head of the household, or the man, was the one to say the blessing and cut the challah, I found it very interesting that even in families where there was no father present, a male figure was still chosen to perform this ritual.

⁷⁷ Plural for Challah

Candle Lighting

B'nei Mitzvah parties can be overwhelming. With decorations, loud music, hundreds of guests, and caterers, people often feel like a faceless number in the crowd. However, there is a ritual innovation that has allowed people to feel individually welcomed.

Based on a wish made over a birthday candle many B'nai Mitzvah ceremonies roll out an oversized cake with thirteen to fourteen candles on it. This immense sheet cake is designed to feed the entire party and is often decorated with a Torah, the child's Hebrew name, or sometimes other decorations based on the child's theme.

One by one the child calls up members of his or her family and circle of friends to honor them for their part in helping to raise the young person. Often times this ritual is done with small rhymes for each candle and includes a background song that has been chosen specifically for the person being called up.

Carole Blake, a Los Angeles party planner, offers her services to help B'nei Mitzvah families ensure that their candle lighting is a special memory. "You're busy making all those plans; I'll take the work out of your hands. We'll talk; You'll give me all the facts. 'Bout Grandma Ann and Uncle Max. They'll light those candles on that cake; with special words from Carole Blake."⁷⁸

Whether professionally crafted or written by the child themselves often times deceased family members and long distance friends who could not make it are also

⁷⁸ Blake, Carole. www.cbpoems.com

mentioned. Sometimes a representative is called up when not everyone can fit around the cake. This is a common practice for the child's friends as well. Throughout my research I found that more than half of the videos sent to me included a candle lighting ceremony at the party.

Below is an example of an elaborate rhyming candle lighting ceremony from a Bat Mitzvah in Michigan entitled "Amy's Stroll Down Broadway." For each individual or group called up there was a corresponding song from a musical that matched the personality of those being honored.

Candle 1: Grandma Esther cooks the greatest; Grandpa Jud has a fast hand at cards. When we visit, after din, we always play gin. And I can always beat grandpa. Ok, I can sometimes beat grandpa, ok..I one time beat grandpa. So would Grandma Esther and Grandpa Jud please come up and join the fun as together we light, candle number 1.

Candle 2: Grandma Syl taught me to play basketball. Grandpa Lou picks me up when I fall. And one time on a field trip they took me to the mall. We've had the greatest time together and I know that the memories will last forever. Grandma and Syl and Grandpa Lou please come here and light candle 2.

Candle 3: I will light candle 3 for my Great Grandpa Ackerman who could not be with me tonight. This candle is also in memory of Nanny, Bubby, Grandpa Jack, Grandpa and Mother Morrison, and Grandpa and Grandma Bernstein. Although you are here in body, your spirit is felt with the lighting of candle number 3.

Candle 4: Aunt Linda is there is you need her. Uncle Duane is a real tall dude. Aunt Nancy is a real cool dresser and Uncle Herbie is never rude. Adam tells the greatest jokes and Jordan can sure spike the ball...so come on up here my Michigan family and light candle 4, y'all.

Candle 5: Uncle Neal knows his bars and cars. Aunt Holli is my very best friend. Uncle Mark is a real terrific guy..their great qualities never end. And Sofya, my new baby cousin, gets my kisses by the dozen. All the way from Detroit, that is no jive, come on up here with and light candle number 5.

Candle 6: Aunt Carol, Uncle Bill. Aunt Yvette and Uncle Gerson; I'm so glad I have you all here in person. Aunt Lee, Uncle Hy, Aunt Evelyn and Uncle Lou; you are amazing and that is sure true. Aunt Ruth, Aunt Florence, Uncle Mack and Uncle Hank; I sure love you all and I don't mind being frank. Come light candle six while we all intermix.

Candle 7: Joe and Lisa, Judy and Rob, Corrine, Elliot, and Wendy. Bring up Jillian, Harold, and Penny; don't you all look trendy. Lisa, Andy, Ricky and Jimmy, don't forget Arthur and Leslie and Marty, come join me at candle 7 and let's all enjoy the party!

Candle 8: Cantor Wechslor stuck in there for four long years. I am sure a few times I almost brought him to tears. Rabbi Hoffman sat in on a few of our classes. he even joked that my voice cracked his glasses. Together as team they helped learned the Torah portion great, so come on up here and light candle number 8.

Candle 9: Candle 9 is for my parent's friends; I've known you all for more than a year. There are too many of you for me to count, or to have come up here. So I will light this candle number 9 and know it's in honor of people who are fine.

Candle 10: My friends are next; too many to name. Everyone get up; I'll just exclaim. Come light this candle, number 10 you see, and know that without you I would not be me.

Candle 11: Candle 11 is for my brother; our friendship has grown kind of slow. But now that he has a car, our friend is gonna grow. I love you very much and although I don't say it enough—I am glad you are brother and all that mushy stuff.

Candle 12: The next candle is for two people who showed up at my birth. These two very special people know just how much I'm worth. So thanks for everything and this party sure is swell, come on up here right now and light candle number 12.

Candle 13: (Read by the Parents) You have made us so proud today, this next candle we light brings wishes your way ; Of happiness, health and good things to come. From Dad, I, and Jason, good friends and everyone⁷⁹.

Although this ritual innovation takes up a great deal of time at the festivities, it has become a wonderful way to introduce those people who are important to the B'nei Mitzvah and his or her family.

⁷⁹ The candle lighting concluded with the singing of happy birthday and the family surrounding the cake and blowing out the 13 candles together.

Value-Based Innovation

Early sociological studies of suburbanization noted the rise of "child centered" Judaism, which is to say a Judaism focused on and aimed toward children and not geared toward adult religious concerns. It would be easy to conclude that most B'nei Mitzvah innovations it not about the child is at least about the child's family. There is, however, another set of innovations, perhaps in reaction to the excesses of B'nei Mitzvah, which emphasize Jewish values.

This final innovation is possibly the most important innovation of B'nei Mitzvah. *Value-Based Innovations* call upon the celebrant and his or her family to remember the purpose of the celebration in the first place. Within this model families are asked to adhere to the guidelines of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world) in terms of their spending, celebrating, and honoring. It is now standard that children choose a Mitzvah project to participate in for the entire year preceding their right of passage. For example, a child may choose to raise money for purchasing new winter coats for the homeless that he will pass out after his December Bar Mitzvah. Centerpieces and left over food from the party are often donated to hospitals and homeless shelters. Party themes are shifting from cars to literacy, and children are donating portions of their cash gifts to MAZON: The Jewish Response to Hunger, and other worthy causes. This shift towards value-based celebrations runs along side another innovation of synagogue revitalization. Modern Jewish leaders have called for congregants to embrace serving those in need. This final innovation shines a new light on returning to the days when a Bar Mitzvah called upon the child to observe the commandments and serve his community.

Mitzvah projects

A wonderful innovation to the American B'nei Mitzvah is the addition of the Mitzvah Project. Purposely vague in the initial assignment by clergy and educators, the B'nai Mitzvah student is encouraged to choose an organization or cause that means something to him or her.

In his book about the various mitzvah projects kids can participate in⁸⁰, Siegel speaks directly to the B'nei Mitzvah children in his opening paragraph. "The number of possible ways to Fix the World are nearly infinite. You will want to pick one that is a combination of what feels right and comfortable for you, and what really needs to be done, and what you actually think you can do."

As Siegel continues to motivate the children to choose an appropriate project he reminds them: "There is no such thing as a small Mitzvah. Everything you do, every so-called little thing, is not little. Everything you do makes a difference and changes the world and people's lives."⁸¹ This message has caused this ritual innovation to take hold in the minds and hearts of both B'nei Mitzvah and their families.

Some examples from my research include a car wash between the Bar Mitzvah service and the party. Here the child and his friends washed the cars of the guests for small donations to be sent to an organization that supplied cars to low-income families. Many community members also joined in the mitzvah project driving their cars through the wash multiple times.

⁸⁰ Siegel, Danny and Naomi Eisenberger "*Mitzvah Magic*." Kar-Ben Publishing, July 2002.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Another example comes from Orange County, California, where a child who loves animals agreed to walk his neighborhood pets for one year in exchange for donations to be made to the local pet shelter. All together he raised over \$1000 and 7 pet adoptions were completed in his honor.

A third, very touching example, comes from a rabbi in Los Angeles who of one B'nei Mitzvah class that spent the year visiting local retirement centers. Once there, the students would use music, storytelling and books to connect with the residents of the home. Over the course of the year the students became very close with their elderly friends and even sent B'nei Mitzvah invitations to many of them asking for the honor of their presence. And this mitzvah project did not stop at the conclusion of the class's B'nei Mitzvah. The relationships continued to grow as the thirteen year olds matured. Many of the students from that Bar and Bat Mitzvah class continued visiting their elderly friends at the home well into high school. In fact, as the students were asked to serve community service hours as a graduation requirement, many chose to continue their mitzvah project all the way through college.

Centerpieces and Pulpit Flowers

Flowers to decorate the synagogue *bima* and to enhance the beauty of the party are a common expenditure for American B'nei Mitzvah. It is definitely more acceptable nowadays to have centerpieces and *bima* decorations that do not involve flowers. This great step towards adding more Tikkun Olam to the celebration includes centerpiece and bima decoration examples such as "canned, boxed, and jarred food, toys, books, games, puzzles, sports equipment, shoes, stuffed animals and dolls, baby items, toiletries,

cosmetics, videotapes, CDs and DVDs, balloons, plants, gloves, warm hats, and scarves.⁸²

Often time the decorations have some connection to the child's mitzvah project. Sometimes they are simply items that can be donated to hospitals, homeless shelters and schools. Using these items to 'decorate' B'nei Mitzvah sends a message to both the child and the guests; we care more about helping others than promoting ourselves and our money.

Mitzvah Money

In Danny Siegel's book on the many mitzvot a child and his or her family can participate around one's Bar or Bat mitzvah, he urges parents to explain,

"Money, money, so much money is all around you for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. 'Regular money for expenses, and Mitzvah money to be given away to Tzedakah...It is a most appropriate time to teach your child about the meaning of the word 'investments.' Buying stocks and bonds is one kind of investment...but the donating of Tzedakah may mean something else more sublime. Remind them that the benefit may not be immediately apparent, but they are no less real than periodic dividend checks. In many ways they are *more* real.'⁸³

Suggesting or even insisting that one's son or daughter donate all or a percentage of their gift money is a wonderful way to express the importance of Tzedakah and *Matanot L'ev Yonim* (giving gifts to the poor). It is also another way to instill to the child that deciding where to donate his or her gift money can be their first mitzvah to complete as a Jewish adult.

⁸² Siegel, Danny. "Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah Book." The Town House Press, Pitsboro, North Carolina. 2004.

⁸³ Ibid.

Foreign Twins

Jews have always been a group wanting and willing to help out those less fortunate, the idea of a young boy or girl "sharing" his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah with a child in another country is another innovation. Matching young American kids with children in impoverished and non-democratic societies added a new value-based meaning to a child celebrating his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Although the child abroad does not actually have a formal service and celebration, both children correspond as pen-pals, discussing their lives, families and what Judaism means to him or her.

This innovative partnership has been occurring since Jews in the former Soviet Union were unable to practice their Judaism publicly. As time went on and freedom was granted to Russian Jews there was no longer a need for American Jewish children to partner up with them. The spotlight then turned to those Jewish children in Ethiopia who were unable to practice their Judaism.

Other 'twinning opportunities' include the One Family Fund that is the central organization providing comprehensive assistance to victims of terrorism in Israel. Among the assistance they provide is financial help to pay for the costs of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration for a child harmed by terrorism.⁸⁴

The oppression of Jews in Russia has ceased, but many children there still do not have the benefit of religious education. There is a website that specializes in different

⁸⁴ <http://www.onefamilyfund.org/Default.aspx?tabid=127>

groups who need Bar and Bat Mitzvah twins. There are new opportunities to twin with children in Israel, including recent Ethiopian emigrants, or with a Righteous Gentile who helped to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. There are even a few programs of "Holocaust Twinning" where the student shares his experience with the memory of a child who perished in the Holocaust before reaching the bar mitzvah milestone⁸⁵.

Unfortunately, there will always be groups of Jews who are persecuted and kept from practicing their religion out in the open. So far American Jewish children have been able to respond to foreign Jewish children in need, but it is only with continued support for value-based innovations that this amazing ritual of twinning can continue.

Conclusion:

American Judaism has gone through significant changes since its appearance on this continent. Liturgy, membership, ideology and structure have all been shaped and reshaped in the past few hundred years but none have gone through as many changes recently as ritual. Ritual innovation allows all participants to engage and interact with how he or she will go about performing their beliefs in a myriad of ways. As society changes, the way in which people understand and relate to their religion and culture do as well. Impacting those changes on a larger scale lays economy, access to resources, social change and group identity.

American Jewry has and does find itself in the position of not only a model minority, but also the ability to achieve white middle-class status and above. Because of

⁸⁵ Greenberg, Gail. "Twinning Opportunities." [http:// www.articlecity.com/articles/parenting/article_1246.shtml](http://www.articlecity.com/articles/parenting/article_1246.shtml). September 26, 2006.

this, resources such as money, education, housing and culture, leave many American Jews with quite a comfortable disposable income to spend on themselves and their families. With so much affluence, Jewish Americans are able to organize extravagant displays of their status within every aspect of their everyday lives—religion not an exception.

I chose to study the ritual innovations of the American Bar Mitzvah because I wanted to explore when and how money was spent when it came to honoring a child for his or her religious achievement. This rite of passage did not traditionally include any expenditures nor was a public larger than a minyan of men present to witness it. Understanding this history, I was drawn to looking through sociologist's eyes to better understand how the ritual of a B'nei Mitzvah turned into something that even our non-Jewish neighbors envy.

By looking at five significant categories of ritual changes, I was able to compare and contrast how families go about marking this special occasion. I witnessed glitz, glamour, excess and gluttony. But, I also witnessed community, memory, hope and family. I never saw an example of one without the other. This unique partnership was fascinating to me as it occurred without fail in each one of my data.

One of the most rewarding aspects of doing this research came from the families who lent me their personal VHS videos. When I started to collect them in the summer of 2007 I was disappointed to learn that as I viewed my own Bat Mitzvah VHS the images and sound had begun to warp badly and was becoming unwatchable. This motivated me to offer those who were willing to lend me their own VHS tapes a chance to resuscitate

their memories. I was able to access a machine that allowed me to copy VHS onto DVDs. Although this process was extremely time consuming it allowed me a chance to thank the families that were kind enough to help me with my research. Not only was I able to supply them with a DVD copy but I could place a DVD into the New B'nei Mitzvah Archives as well. This insured that both the family's and the archive's copy would be enjoyed and researched for many more years to come. I received a great deal of thanks from the individual families once they received their new DVD, and I couldn't have been happier to help them preserve their memories.

Personally I was able to experience my own kind of rejuvenation as I prepared for this project. As I explained, I was the first to volunteer mine and my brother's Bar and Bat Mitzvah videos to the research. After finding them buried deep in a closet box, my entire family spent a Sunday afternoon watching the two videos back to back. It was a day I will remember for the rest of my life. We were laughing at our outfits. We were embarrassed by our hairstyles. We could not believe our lack of discretion when it came to over-decorating the tables with piles of candy. Although we would have had no way of knowing it then, we sat there that Sunday with tears in our eyes when we saw just how many of our friends and loved ones had passed away since then. All of a sudden the clothes, hair and centerpieces could have not have mattered less; my Grandpa Jud was waving into the camera telling me "he loved me that he [was] so proud it was my Bat Mitzvah." This was my motivation and enthusiasm for putting together a project with integrity and insight.

Finally, this thesis helped to move me from childhood into adulthood. As I watched my brother's Bar Mitzvah video from 1987 and realized that my grandparents then were the age of my parents now, I came to terms with the fact that I too am older and it is my turn to continue creating innovations for my generation and beyond. As I step out into the professional world as rabbi, I must remember that I have the influence to make healthy and helpful modifications to rituals throughout American Judaism. Just as I have learned from my research for this thesis, it is vital that I remember the reason why one participates in a ritual in the first place. As Jews we have a great deal to celebrate; but as human beings we must keep in mind that our souls, much like our planet, are on loan to us and when not treated with honor and respect, we can forget the true meaning of life.

Moving beyond the personal, two lessons emerge from this project. The first, evident over time, is the dialectic that has emerged between materialistic excess and spiritual meaning. The gaudy Bar Mitzvah of the 1960s has been tempered, and the mitzvah projects, food instead of flowers, and other innovations of meaning have become more evident. Second, the documentation of this ceremony via video has made these changes evident, and demonstrates the importance of such a repository that need not be limited to Bar and Bar Mitzvah ceremonies. Wedding ceremonies are an equally important lifecycle ritual that has seen innovation. The same-sex commitment/marriage ceremony is one such innovation, as are interfaith marriage ceremonies. The Brit Bat is yet another lifecycle innovation. All of these are evolving and will continue to do so; their documentation will be a valuable asset to current and future scholars.

Appendices

Appendix A:

Dear Rabbis, Educators, Students and Families,

American Jews have often added their own personal touches to important religious ceremonies and rituals. We are fortunate in that many American Jews have made video recordings of one very important ceremony: the Bar and Bat Mitzvah.

I am working with Professor Bruce A. Phillips at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles to analyze how American Jews have personalized this ancient ceremony. We will be publishing an article on this research in the next academic year and hope to use this demonstration in the value of ultimately creating an archive.

What we are asking is for you to send us a copy (audio/video/DVD) of any Bar and Bat Mitzvah service (and party if available) that you can provide us with. If you don't have a copy available we will copy it for you and return the original. (Forward this letter to parents, siblings, other relatives, friends, neighbors, congregants at student and full-time pulpits, and any one else you can think of)

Among the things we are interested in are:

1. Creative and original Bar and Bat Mitzvah prayer books and readings.
2. Bar/Bat Mitzvah "program" booklets - short family history as well as identification of the honorary participants in the ceremonies (e.g. opening the Ark and aliyot for the Torah reading).
3. Photo montages of child's photos
4. Passing of the Torah- who is included?
5. The "Candle Lighting Ceremony"- what is said and who is included?
6. Grandparent, Parent, Clergy and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah boy or girl speeches.

We would like to receive these materials as soon as possible. If you have access to a temple/academic/trade publication, we would appreciate you posting the attached flier in your December newsletters. Also, it would be wonderful if you could post the flier in religious/Hebrew High school hallways, distribute at staff meetings, discuss during Shabbat Announcements or any other way that you could help us get the word out.

Send all documents to:
B'nei Mitzvah Archives
c/o Dr. Bruce Phillips

3077 University Ave
Los Angeles, California 90007

For any questions or comments please email Dr. Bruce Phillips at: bphillips@huc.edu

Thank you,
Amy Morrison and Bruce Phillips

Appendix B:



**My Bar/Bat
Mitzvah
Rocked!**



**Wanted: All Bar and Bat Mitzvah Videos and DVDs
(Service and Party)
for the new
International B'nei Mitzvah Archive!**

Appendix C

The Tallit Presentation Joanne Ratner and Wayne Slavitt, parents

On becoming a Bat Mitzvah, Elizabeth is entitled to wear a Tallit for the first time. The fringes on the Tallit or prayer shawl are symbolic of the Mitzvot, or divine commandments. Their location at the "four corners of the Tallit" represents the "four corners of the earth", reminding us not only that God is present in every direction but also that throughout our lives, our moral obligations extend in every direction regardless of where we are. The fringes (tzitzit), wrappings and knots all add up to the Hebrew numerical equivalent of 613—the exact number of Mitzvot commanded in the Torah. *(Elizabeth chose her own Tallit and helped tie the tzitzit.)* The obligation to wear a Tallit comes from a later section of Elizabeth's Torah portion, Numbers 15:37-41.

"And God spoke to Moses: Speak to the children of Israel and tell them to sew fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to attach a thread of blue to the fringe at each corner. Look at the fringes of the Tallit, and remember to do all My commandments so that you will not follow the desires of your heart and your eyes which lead you astray." Thus shall you be reminded to do all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I am Adonai who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I am your God."

Parents' Blessing

May you live to see your world fulfilled,
May your destiny be for worlds still to come,
And may you trust in generations past and yet to be.

May your heart be filled with intuition
And your words be filled with insight.
May songs of praise ever be upon your tongue
And your vision be on a straight path before you.

May your eyes shine with the light of holy words
And your face reflect the brightness of the heavens.

May your lips ever speak wisdom
And your fulfillment be in righteousness
Even as you ever yearn to hear the words
Of the Holy Ancient One of Old.

Adapted from Talmud, Berachot 17a

Appendix D:

(Speech from father to child)

Katie... They say that good things come in threes, and I couldn't agree more as we celebrate our family's third bnai mitzvah in less than three years. You are our baby, but that no longer seems correct as I look at the fine young lady you have become about to take the most important step in your life so far. When you bring a child into the world, I believe that the one wish you have for them is that they be a success. I am not referring to financial or career success, but to the most important success there is, GENUINE HAPPINESS. This is not as simple as it seems. As we grow older we come to realize that true happiness comes from within. It is not achieved by fancy cars, closets full of designer clothes or large homes. Somehow you seem to have developed a genuine understanding of the important things in life. You have an open and caring heart, a good sense of humor, an appreciation of the value of good friends, and most of all you know the difference between right and wrong. As you grow up you will be presented with many opportunities to behave in a way you know not to be right. It is then that I know you will look to the values you have been taught in our home, in school and here at Temple Judea over the last ten years. You need to do only ONE thing as you grow up and that is to be true to yourself. To stay on the path of a truly happy life you just need to be KATIE LEVINE. I now if you do that you will succeed. I love you Katie and if you ever need a minor course adjustment on your path, I'll be there to help you.

Appendix E:

(Speech from mother to child)

Katie, I know you would prefer if I said only a few words, so I will TRY not to ramble on. But I do want to tell you just how wonderful I think you are.

You are smart, funny, happy, energetic, lovable, sensitive, sweet, beautiful, friendly, independent.... I could go on but I already promised I wouldn't.

It's difficult for me to accept the fact that you are becoming a teenager. I know it is true because you often wake up at noon on weekends. During the week however, you wake up early to get ready for school. You enjoy going to school each day I think basically because you get to see your friends. You like to arrive at Gulliver 30 minutes early and at the end of the school day, I literally have to pull you away from your friends into the car to take you home. Your friends from both camp and school mean so much to you.

You have a wonderful sense of fashion which helps you to look your best everyday. If only Gulliver would allow you to wear what you like instead of their boring uniforms. You have developed a sense of style all your own that I've come to appreciate. You are picky about your clothes and I must often compromise my standards to get you to buy something you like and will wear. You are a girly girl whose bedroom is decorated in Hot Pink. You have lots of dresses in your closet and shoes to match.

You are incredible patient! You will wait in line without complaining to get something you want. I am amazed at the patience you have with the straightening iron. You will get up 45 minutes early to have your hair look its best. You have taught me how to use this straightening device but you are much more competent at it than I am. I hear at camp, kids wait in line 45 minutes to have you straighten their hair.

At home you are very independent and do your homework without fuss. You are determined and once you start a task, be it large or small will work on it diligently until it is accomplished well. Your grades have been terrific, but I know you would rather I not mention them. But I really am sooooo proud.

You are however, not an adventurous eater. You are even pickier about your food than your clothes. I think you believe that Cream Cheese is a food group and would eat it with a spoon if I would let you. Though I must admit that your repertoire of food has grown a bit in the past few years. You have invented some very interesting food combinations such as Wheat thins with cream cheese on challah bread. I asked Mark, the Caterer, to serve them as an hor's doeuvres' tonight so that some of our guests can try your creation. (I know how much you love them.)

On our family vacations I worry about you finding food to eat. You like meringue cookies, English muffins, Life cereal, brie and macaroni and cheese. I am amazed at the amount of carbohydrates you consume and yet do not gain an ounce. You appease me by eating some chicken and steak occasionally, but not if I cook them on the grill. You like your vegetables smothered with cheese. And every night we make a deal about how many bites of vegetables you must consume in order to leave the table.

You despise the smell of peanut butter and bananas, which happen to be two of my favorite foods. You can smell it in the car if I had a banana for breakfast and quickly open the windows to fumigate the vehicle.

Your energy never ceases to amaze me. Many nights you tuck me into bed. There is a sweet snuggly side of you that I am privileged to know as well. Sometimes you just like to sit on my lap like you did when you were a toddler. Or when you put on your tazmanian devil pajama pants and ripped Ciao t-shirt and ask me to tuck YOU in at night. You treasure your stuffed animals and perfume

equally. You are becoming a woman and I am fortunate enough to be able to watch you grow up. It is such a treat. You are a gift from above and I feel so lucky to have a daughter as terrific as you.

For your mitzvah project you chose to help the hungry of our community with the "Pass a bar from your car" idea. You distributed packages of cereal bars to your friends which were to be handed out from their parent's cars to the less fortunate who are often begging for food. You have gotten quite a bit of positive feedback from this project, and I hope you will continue to do good deeds throughout your life. You have enjoyed numerous visits to MacTown with the temple youth group. Seeing you help the people there really warms my heart. You seem to appreciate that you are fortunate and understand the importance of helping others. This is an admirable character trait.

You often behave well beyond your years. You often act as a mediator when your brother and sister argue and many times have helped to divert tensions. You KNOW your siblings complain about you. They say that YOU get things at a younger age than they did. They say I spoil you, well you know what, they are right. You act so mature and grown-up that sometimes I forget your age. You reason with me so calmly and don't allow my ranting and raving to distract you from your goal. You treat me with kindness and for that I am grateful.

The past few months have been difficult for our family and you have remained on track even when I have lost my cool. Family members and close friends have been diagnosed with cancer and you have responded in a caring manner. Thank you. I know that I demand a lot of you. I know I am not the easiest mother in the world. I hope you know that I think the world of you. You are terrific! Wow!!! This day has arrived. Your friends and family have come from near and far to celebrate your becoming a Bat Mitzvah.

I am confident that you will shine here tonight. You have worked _have practiced many hours and are well prepared. You have risen to THIS challenge as you always do. I am SO proud of you. And So proud to be your mother.

You began school here at the Temple Judea Preschool 11 years ago, took your first ballet lessons right down the hall. Learned your abc's here and our temple family has watched you grow. I hope that you will continue your formal Jewish Education and go on to Judaica High School as your brother and sister do. I hope you will want to keep Judaism as a part of your life as you go off to college, get married and have a family of your own. Celebrating the traditions of our heritage are very important to me and I hope they will remain in your heart forever.

I sometimes wonder at night what you will be like when you get older. I wonder what career you will choose, a hairdresser, a fashion designer, a mediator, a food critic. I guess I will just have to wait and see. Whatever you choose I pray that your future will be full of good health, laughter, joy and love. I hope you know that I will be there beside to guide and support you on your journey through life.

Okay.... I have gone on long enough.

The world is an apple. You do eat apples don't you? Take a big bite. I love you sooo very much.

Appendix F:

Dear Friends and Family,

Today I fulfill the tradition in our family of becoming a Bat Mitzvah. I would like to thank a few people who have made this day so special for me. First, I would like to thank Kathy Kreida, for putting this beautiful service together for me. I would also like to thank my parents, for being here every step of the way to help and support me. Thank you Ariela, for being there for me when I needed you and for always being available to give me advice. Thank you Oma and Opa for doing so much to make this day happen. Thank you Bubby, Zayda and Grandoma, for always being there for me, and although you are no longer here to share this special day with me, I know you will be watching. I would also like to thank each and every one of you for being here on such a special occasion. Your presence means so much to me. On becoming a Bat Mitzvah, I am being given the chance to lead the congregation in prayer. I am acting as a leader, symbolizing my growing up and maturing. Thank you for coming from near and far to support me on this joyous day.

Shabbat Shalom,

Miriam

Appendix G:

(D'var Torah given by child)

My Torah portion, Vayechi, the last portion of the book of Genesis, is about carrying on Jewish tradition. In this Torah portion we find Jacob lying on his death bed preparing for his death. He has called all of his children together. Jacob gives each of his children his final words of wisdom, his wishes and his blessings. As you may know Jacob has 12 sons and 1 daughter. The sons become the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jacob predicts different futures for each of his children and their descendents. Some of his sons' futures are not as good as the others. I think this is because they have not followed Jewish tradition. An example of one of the sons who is blessed with a good future is Zebulun. He is blessed with land at the shore and love from his father. Issachar, whose symbol is the donkey, is another son. He is symbolized by the donkey because he is stubborn and because later this tribe will be a servant to the Canaanites.

Jacob also has a son Benjamin. Benjamin is a wolf with a war like temperament. Sometimes I feel like that I can be rowdy. I need to take responsibility for my temperament by controlling myself and my actions. I like to express my fierceness through my sports. When I am on the mound pitching or playing quarterback in football, that's when I release my inner wolf.

Although Benjamin is described a hungry wolf, I am not always that way. I try to show love for my parents when they speak and I listen and I am trying to get better at that. I show them I love them when I give them hugs and I demonstrate my love. I also show my love when I don't not argue about things. I show my love when I make my parents laugh.

Showing love is important because people are not psychic and so we need to express our love. Jacob shows his love and concern for his children through his blessings. Some of them are what you might consider tough love. His words may not seem loving at the time but Jacob has the interests of his whole family at heart.

My haftarah portion comes from the book of First Kings. It is about King David who, like Jacob, is about to die. He gives his son, Solomon instructions on how to live his life as a good Jew. David instructs him to walk in God's ways, to follow God's commandments and rules and to be respectful. Solomon is also taught to keep faith with God—which means praying to one God and not to idols. It means knowing God is always there for you—God will not desert you. It means keeping tradition going and following the many mitzvot prescribed by Torah and Jewish custom. To me, this means giving tzedakah, to lend a helping hand to all and to be an all around good person. This means, be nice, be kind, be ethical and refer to your values when making decisions.

Jacob and David are both important in the formation of the people Israel. Jacob's name becomes Israel and we trace our people's lineage through the twelve tribes which originated through his twelve sons. King David is important because he was the greatest king of Israel. King David was a great musician and a great warrior and he brought the tribes together around the city of Jerusalem when he brought the ark there. Jacob and David each unify the Jewish people in their own way.

Part of the way in which I have chosen to carry on the Jewish tradition is through my Mitzvah Project. As you all know, I have played sports all of my life. It is one of my passions. I have always been fortunate enough to have access to great sports equipment. For my mitzvah project I have focused my concerns on children who can't afford sports

equipment. They have no access to the equipment that they want and need. I want to share my love of sports with others. I have collected old sports equipment from around my neighborhood, including several baseball bats, skateboards and equipment for soccer and football. I even collected some baseball equipment from some of the commercial batting cages who donated their old bats. As I have learned from the examples of Jacob and David in my Torah and Haftarah portions, I am choosing to pass on my tradition by sharing my passions for sports with those who are less fortunate than I am.

I want to say thank you the many out-of-towners who came so far to celebrate my Bar Mitzvah with me. It means a lot to me that you came.

I want to say thank you to my parents.

Mom you told me to stick with it and never to give up on anything, especially this. You told me I can be anything I want to be. I will always take your advice and I will not quit on school or my dreams.

Dad, I am so glad that you have coached me in sports all these years especially in baseball. It means a lot to me that you take the time to help out.

Ima, my step-mom, thank you for being the rabbi, and for pushing me to stick with my studies.

I want to thank my Hebrew tutor – Rick for helping me learn my Hebrew.
Thanks to Cantor Mark for helping me, especially with the English prayers.

I want to thank my grandmother for always helping me out and keeping me on task.

I want to thank all my friends for coming and being here today.

I look forward to celebrating with y'all later.

Appendix H:



Presentations

From the Temple Board of Directors

Anne Levinstein

From the Rabbis

Rabbi Howard Laibson
Rabbi Rebecca Yaël Schorr

Thoughts from Mollie's Parents

Barbara and Rey Garcia

Appendix I:

JASON



Hi. My name is Jason Ross Dobkin. I am in the seventh grade at Chadwick School. In my free time I enjoy swimming, rollerblading, surfing, and hiking. I also like to play the guitar and listen to music. I enjoy spending time with my friends and going to the movies. My family consists of my parents, Deborah and William, my sister, Ashley, and my cats, Binx and Boots.

Thank you for sharing this special day with me and my family.

Appendix J:

Ashrei

The Ashrei prayer is mainly drawn from Psalm 145. The prayer is in the form of an acrostic: each verse begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The unifying theme of Psalm 145 is the happiness of those who dwell in the house of God. It speaks about the Jewish belief in God—a God who is eternal, universal, and uncompassionate.

אשרי

אשרי יושבי בך: עוד ועלולך בך.
אשרי העם שכבד לך אשרי העם שיהיה אלהיו.

Happy are those who dwell in Your house; they will sing Your praise forever.

Happy the people to whom such blessings fall; happy the people of the Eternal God.

I will exalt You, my Sovereign God, I will praise Your name forever.

Every day I will praise You; I will extol Your name forever.

—Psalm 145

Great are You, Eternal One, and worthy of praise, and infinite is Your greatness.

One generation shall acclaim Your work to the next; they shall tell of Your mighty acts.

They shall bring word of Your radiant glory, and bear witness to Your wondrous works.

They shall speak of Your awesome might, and make known Your greatness.

They shall tell the world of your goodness, and sing of Your righteousness. "God is gracious and compassionate, endlessly patient, overflowing with love."

You are good to all; Your compassion shelters all Your creatures.

All Your works shall glorify You; Your steadfast friends shall praise you.

They shall proclaim Your majestic glory; they shall tell of Your might:

To reveal Your power to the world, and the glorious splendor of Your rule.

You are sovereign to the end of time; You reign through all generations.

You support the falling, Eternal One; You raise up all who are bowed down.

The eyes of all are turned to You; You sustain them in time of need.

Appendix K:

Order of the Service

Opening prayer—Great Aunt Irene Kaufman

Presentation of the Tallit (prayer shawl) —Cousin Debra Kaufman

Passing the Torah—Simone's parents and grandparents

Torah and Haftarah Introductions—Aunt Debby and Uncle Robert Rogers

First Aliyah—Aunt Davie Miller and Uncle Daniel Bleiberg

Second Aliyah—Aunt Wendy Rogers and Uncle Joshua Neretin

Third Aliyah—Grandparents David Bleiberg and Murray and Ariene Rogers

Fourth Aliyah—Laura Bleiberg and Mike Rogers

Fifth Aliyah—Simone Rogers

Torah Reading—Simone Rogers

Parashat Shemot (Exodus 2: 1-15)

Dressing the Torah—Ryan Rogers

Haftarah Reading—Simone Rogers

Isaiah 27:6-9, 29:22-23

We remember, with great love and affection some of Simone's relatives

Great Uncle Moe Atlas, Grandma Leona Bleiberg, Cousin Peter Kaufman, Great Uncle Alvin Kaufman, Great Uncle Allen Richards, Cousin Barry Rogers

Their memories are a blessing for us.

Appendix L:

Ritual Objects

There are several Jewish symbols and ritual objects that you will see today. The first four date back to the beginning of Judaism.

Aron Hakodesh - The Holy Ark contains the sacred Torah scrolls and is located behind the *bimah* (pulpit) at the front of the Sanctuary. It symbolizes the original Ark, which was built to hold the tablets of the Ten Commandments.

Torah - The Torah is Judaism's most precious possession. It is referred to as the "tree of life", or *etz chayim*. This scroll contains the five books of Moses - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is completely handwritten on parchment with a quill pen, as has been done for the past 2,500 years. The writing is in Hebrew, with no vowels or punctuation. Learning to read and study the Torah is highly respected in the Jewish tradition. A silver pointer, known as a *yad* (Hebrew for "hand", because the pointer is often in the shape of a hand with a pointing finger), is used by the reader to keep his or her place while reading. It also protects the parchment from the oils found on human skin.

Ten Commandments - According to tradition, the Ten Commandments were revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai and form the basis of Jewish ethical conduct. They are represented in the front of our Sanctuary on the walls above both sides of the pulpit.

Ner Tamid - Located above the Ark is the Eternal Light, or *Ner Tamid*. It symbolizes the perpetual fire that burned on the altar at the Temple in ancient times. It reminds us of the continuous presence of God and the permanence of the Torah.

In addition, many worshippers wear one or both of the following:

Kippah (Hebrew) or Yarmulke (Yiddish) - A head covering is worn as a sign of reverence for a holy place, and as a reminder that God is above us and that we should always keep a sense of humility in our lives.

Tallit - The *tallit* is a prayer shawl made of wool, cotton, or silk. At the corners of the *tallit* are the *tzitzit* - fringes tied in special knots which symbolically total 613, the number of commandments (*mitzvot*) found in the Torah.

Appendix M:

Hi Norman and Gary

I am the adviser for a Rabbinic Thesis this year on participant innovations to Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. We are writing to solicit Bar/Bat Mitzvah dvd's and videos. We will be looking at the non-traditional rituals that have become common in these ceremonies such as passing the Torah, presentation of the Tallit, and the parents' remarks to the child. I am particularly interested in what both the parents and children have to say about who they are as Jews.

After the thesis is completed, I will co-author an article with the student for publication in a journal or book on ritual innovation among American Jews.

I would like to create a real archive of life cycle videos at HUC, and I see this thesis as a demonstration project. I am therefore writing to see if the College and/or the Archives could assist us in any of the following ways:

- 1) Are you aware of any existing collections of Bar and Bat Mitzvah videos that we could use?
- 2) Could I get the hechsher of the College for such a future archive? This would be helpful for soliciting materials if there were an "official" approved archive-even on paper.
- 3) In soliciting videos and dvd's, could we make reference to a future American Jewish Studies program at HUC with which the collected materials would be associated?
- 4) Is there an AJA solicitation letter that we could use as a model?
- 5) Could such an archive have the imprimatur of AJA in some way? Could it be an official(albeit unfunded) project of the AJA?
- 6) Aside from helping us out on this thesis, do you think that this project has merit?
- 7) Could/should I approach the Casden Institute at USC for sponsorship co-sponsorship?

Aside from the above requests, any thoughts or ideas about this project would be greatly appreciated.

-Bruce Phillips

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B'nei Mitzvah Invitations of: Philip Dahlin, Elizabeth Slavitt, Alyson Elizabeth, Daniel Davidson, Adam Glass, Jordan Glass, Amy Morrison, Jason Morrison, Noah Scheindlin and Micah Scheindlin.

Other B'nei Mitzvah Resources From: Ronnie and Michael Levine, Holli and Mark Weitz, Dvora Weisberg, San Francisco Jewish Home for the Aged, Carrie Frank, Alexandra Shuval-Weiner, Devorah Marcus, Andy Bachman, Deborah Shapiro, Carol Sofer, Francine Hament, Rabbi Steven Moskowitz, Rabbi Denise Eger, Jonathan Stern, Louis B. Silver Religious School, Temple Israel of Long Beach, Josh Sofer, Bruce and Susan Samuels, Ethan Samuels, Ben Eger, Chloe Glueck, Jewish National Fund, HUC-LA Library, Roberta and David Benor, and especially Janet Liss.