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You are SO Invited to my Bet Mitzvah:
Historical and Contemporary Approaches to Jewish Coming of Age Ceremonies

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Abstract

The bet mitzvah is a quintessential milestone for the modern Jewish world. The coming-of-age ceremony carries tremendous weight in the lives of adolescents and their families, yet the rite is a relatively new invention. Throughout the centuries, the bet mitzvah came to be through evolving definitions of maturity, readiness, ability, and responsibility. Through historical analysis, this thesis explains how the ceremony expanded and grew across the Jewish world, eventually becoming the norm for young adults of all genders and backgrounds.

In recent decades, Jewish communal leaders have personified the ceremony to best fit the needs of different family systems and learning styles. The bet mitzvah ceremony takes place during a critical time period for adolescent development. The preparation, practice, and mentorship all take place while students are able to process more complex thoughts about themselves and the role they play in the world. Students, particularly, Jews of Color, are able to unpack and better understand their racial identity at the same time they are preparing to publicly claim their Jewish identity. Through interviews with b'notai mitzvah officiants, this thesis demonstrates ways that communities can best support the needs of Jews of Color and their families during this important Jewish life cycle event.

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Acknowledgements

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה.

Praised are You Adonai, sovereign of all, for keeping us alive, sustaining us, and allowing us to reach this moment.

It is with an abundance of gratitude that I complete my thesis at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. I am who I am today because of my rabbis, teachers, counselors, mentors, colleagues, classmates, friends, campers, teens, and students. I have loved learning from and with you all, and I know this is only the beginning.

Thank you to Rabbi Nancy Wiener for advising this project with wisdom, *chesed*, and constant words of encouragement. I could not have arrived at this moment without the support of my mom, Emily, who encouraged me to become a bat mitzvah and comforted me when I cried over learning the correct trope. And thank you to my b'sheret, Hannah, for adding meaning and joy to the mundane and the holy.

To everyone who wants Jewish spaces to be places where they can bring their full selves- this is for you.

Thank you.

Introduction

In modern American Judaism, b'notai mitzvah[1] ceremonies are quintessential milestones. The coming of age rite holds tremendous precedence in the contemporary Jewish world, serving as sources of great pride, joy, and stress for families. However, these ceremonies are relatively new inventions–a culmination of centuries of innovation, modernization, and ritual development.

In December of 2023, I had the honor of officiating a bar mitzvah of a kid I used to babysit. A black and Jewish teen, I felt the need to craft a ceremony that lifted up both of his identities in order to help him and his family understand the importance of becoming a Jewish "adult" without ignoring his transformation into a black "man." While creating the ceremony, I craved resources that could help me, as the rabbi, apply Jewish tradition, text, and liturgy in a way that honored, embraced, and highlighted his racial identity as well as his Jewish one. This project is an attempt to better understand how b'notai mitzvah ceremonies evolved and emerged in order to demonstrate that the Jewish world can continue to adapt in order to best support all students.

In Part I, I dive deeply into the history of Jewish coming-of-age ceremonies. I walk through how each element of the ceremony we know today emerged, evolved, and spread. I explain how the recitation of the *Baruch She-p'tarani* blessing (Blessed is God who has absolved me of the punishment of this one"), first documented in 5th century Palestine in *Midrash B'reishit Rabbah*, combined with the *aliyah* to the Torah, the *se'udat mitzvah*, and the speech, introduced by the 16th century in Germany, combined

[1] B'notai Mitzvah is the non-binary Hebrew plural of "b'nai mitzvah." For more, https://www.nonbinaryhebrew.com/

to create a new ceremony. The bar mitzvah rite continued to change into the modern era, as elements including the speech, the meal, and the rise of confirmation and bat mitzvah became increasingly popular. While these ceremonies spread at different rates and with different customs throughout the Jewish world, this thesis mainly focuses on European and American traditions and resources.

In Part II, I dive into discourse around identity development in order to better understand the psychological trends and capabilities among 11-14 year olds. I explain when, how, and why "Jewish identity" emerged as a focus of institutional educational programs and resources. I also describe when, how, and why racial identity evolves in this age cohort in order to prove that b'notai mitzvah students are developing multiple senses of self while preparing for the ceremony.

In Part III, I return to the history of b'notai mitzvah ceremonies, this time focusing on contemporary innovations and developments. I compare the ritual-related inventions of the early and medieval periods to the contemporary trends, including family involvement, mentorship, and determining levels of preparedness. In addition to primary and secondary sources, I include material from interviews I conducted with 5 rabbis and spiritual community leaders who have experience officiating innovative b'notai mitzvah ceremonies, including those of Jews of Color.

In the concluding section, I demonstrate why b'notai mitzvah ceremonies are great opportunities for students of color to celebrate both their racial and Jewish identities. Clergy and Jewish communal leaders of all racial identities can help support their students through individualized mentorship and preparation, which is already the norm for many American Reform Jewish b'notai mitzvah programs. The term "Jews of

Color" encompasses individuals within the Jewish community whose familial roots trace back to regions like Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Within this spectrum, individuals may, for example, identify as Black/African American, Latino/a/x, Indigenous/Native American, Asian-American, or come from mixed heritages, including biracial or multi-racial backgrounds. Within these groups are people who are from racially homogenous families or interracial families, are trans-racially adopted, or are Jews by choice. While there are important distinctions among each of these categories, and every individual has a unique experience with their family of origin, this thesis will largely not distinguish among sub-groups.

The terms bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah, bet mitzvah, and b mitzvah, currently in common usage, refer to both the religious and ritual ceremony and celebration rather than the individual, as it originally did. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using the language that was common at the time period I am covering. In Part III, I will use the nonbinary term "bet mitzvah" in accordance with the shift in CCAR Press publications, CCAR statements, and social media channels beginning in April of 2023. I will be using the plural term, "b'notai" mitzvah in that section, following the guideline of the Nonbinary Hebrew Project.

Part I The Evolution of Jewish Coming of Age Ceremonies

Chapter 1- Becoming an Adult from Classic Jewish Sources to the Middle Ages

Introduction

Despite its prominence in American Jewish culture in the 21st century, the bet mitzvah ceremony as we know it today is a relatively new ritual invention.

"Bar Mitzvah" is often translated literally to "son of the commandment." "The word *bar* is Aramaic, corresponding to the Hebrew *ben*, meaning "son," and *mitzvah* is Hebrew for "commandment." Originally, the term referred to a male responsible for carrying out a particular duty, with no mention of the coming-of-age ceremony we know today. Throughout the centuries, the term evolved to denote a Jewish boy, aged thirteen and one day, entrusted with the responsibility of performing all the religious duties of a Jewish man.

There is no clear record of the first bar mitzvah ceremony–the Torah and ancient rabbinic writings make no mention of this rite that serves as a fundamental milestone in 21st century Judaism. The ceremony known as "bar mitzvah" grew and spread across Europe and beyond only in the late Middle Ages, with most of the earliest references originating from France, Germany, Poland, and Italy.[2] During the medieval period, these sources focus on two elements of the ceremony: the father pronouncing a special

[2] Ivan G. Marcus, *The Jewish Life Cycle: Rites of Passage from Biblical to Modern Times* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015), 83 and David Golinkin, "The Transformation of the Bar Mitzvah Ceremony, 1800–2020" in *No Small Matter: Features of Jewish Childhood*. United States: Oxford University Press, 2021, 554.

blessing through which he relinquishes responsibility for his son and the celebratory meal.[3] From the 16th century onward, the sources also document readings and speeches recited by the bar mitzvah boy, and starting in the 17th century, they mention a comprehension test for bar mitzvah.[4] In the 19th century, Reform Jews in Germany introduced the concept of Jewish confirmation for both boys and girls to replace the bar mitzvah.[5] Bat mitzvah is believed to have originated in 1922, but it did not gain popularity until decades later.[6]

Originally, the term bar mitzvah referred to the transition from being exempt from the commandments to being obligated to fulfill them. Exactly which commandments a young person became responsible for at which age varied by time and region. The time from which a parent was obligated to ensure their child fulfilled a particular commandment also varied. This transition from being exempt to being obligated could depend, for example, on chronological age, biological development, and/or psychological development.

The debate over the thresholds of “readiness” is echoed in the modern era, in which families, educators, and clergy seek to find best ways to support children who may or may not be developmentally prepared or educationally prepared to fulfill the communities' requirements for b’notai mitzvah.

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[3] Michael Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 401.
[4] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 109.
[5] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle*, 113.
[6] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 106.

Age of Maturity

Over time, the rabbis tried to figure out who is responsible for following which of God's commandments. There are considerable contradictions between *when* a child (of all genders) reaches maturity, *what* defines maturity, and *which* obligations (mitzvot*)* a child is responsible for once they reach maturity.

In Mishnaic and Talmudic-era texts, maturity was largely defined as the time a child transitions from the category of קטן *katan* to גדול *gadol*, literally translated as small and big. However, exactly when this transition occurs is not clear.[7] The age of maturing from *katan* to *gadol* was subject to change, depending on the type of mitzvah in question and the personality of the child.

Furthermore, there is a difference between mitzvot that are mostly about doing and acting, such as sitting/dwelling in a sukkah, making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and wearing *t'fillin*, when the child has the physical ability to do them, and the mitzvot that have legal halakhic significance, which require maturity, judgment, and/or physical-sexual maturity.[8]

Chronological Age

Bible

According to the biblical authors, 20, not 13, is specified as the determining age for matters that reflect belonging to a community and the age for assuming public

[7] There is no clear definition for the term "katan" in the Mishnah. The definition is based on the topic in question. For example, "katan" is defined as someone who is too young to walk to the Temple in the discussion of a mitzvah that depends on going on a pilgrimage and walking. Regarding a mitzvah in which the mandatory age is twenty, the Mishnah calls a "katan" to anyone who is under the age of twenty.
[8] Yitzhak Gilat, פרקים בהשתלשלות ההלכה (Ramat-Gan: Universiṭat Bar-Ilan, 1992), 19-31

responsibilities and roles. At 20, men can be counted as part of the census, can serve in the army, can be recognized as craftsmen, are commanded to give a half shekel to atone for their sins, are punished for complaining in the desert against God, and start paying the adult rate for Temple vows.[9] At 25, they can join the workforce in the service of the Tent of Meeting.[10]

In the Apocrypha, a collection of Jewish writings from the Second Temple period, excluded from the Tanakh, the mitzvot related to the pesach sacrifice also apply only to men 20 and up. The apocryphal Book of Jubilees reads, “Regarding the pesach [offering], do it on the 14th of the first month…every man who comes on his day will eat in the house of God in front of God from the age of 20 and up.”[11] According to the Temple Scroll, “From the age of twenty years and up, they will make [the pesach sacrifice] and eat it at night.”[12] If the general command is for all of Israel to do something, the ancient writers are referring to men aged 20 years and up.

Mishnah

At some undetermined point, 13 became an age of significance. Often, *Pirkei Avot* 5:21 is used and translated to justify the first record of 13 as a transitional birthday: “He used to say: a son of five years old for Scripture: ten years old for Mishnah: thirteen years old for the mitzvot, and fifteen years old for Talmud.”[13] The list suggests that these are the ideal ages for boys to start learning about the particular subjects. This

[9] Numbers 26:2 (census); Numbers 1:2 (army); Exodus 30:14 (shekel for sins) Numbers 14:29 (complaining); Levitcus 27:1-8 (vows).
[10] Numbers 8:24.
[11] Book of Jubilees 49:1,17.
[12] Megilat haMikdash 17, 8.
[13] Pirkei Avot 5:21.

statement, though, has no legally binding status. It refers to the age to begin studying, which is separate from bearing responsibility for the contents studied. The alleged 2nd century authors suggested ages in an amusing way:

> "Eighteen for a wedding, twenty for a job, thirty for authority, forty for intelligence, at fifty able to give counsel; at sixty old age; at seventy fullness of years; At eighty the age of strength; At ninety a bent body; At one hundred, as good as dead and gone completely out of the world."

Yitzvah D Gilat argues that this Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* is a later addition. He points out that the emphasis on the age of 13 is missing from the earliest commentators of the tractate. It is not mentioned in the Rambam's version, in several other manuscripts, in old *mishnayot* books, *Tosefot Yom To*v, nor in *Melakat Shlomo* just to name a few, debunking the myth that *Pirkei Avot* is the origin of the emphasis on 13.[14]

Furthermore, "10 for the Mishnah…and 15 for the Talmud" could not be referring to the texts of the Talmud, which were written after *Pirkei Avot.* The verb in Mishnaic Hebrew for teach is the root שנה, as seen in the line in the prayer *V'Ahavta*: ושננתם לבניך, meaning and you shall teach them to your children. Maimonides (1135–1204) did not include this section in his version of the Mishnah and did not use it in his Torah educational curriculum. There is no clear evidence that the famous line, "thirteen for the commandments" was considered part of the Mishnah until at least the twelfth century.[15]

However, 13 became notable in the era of rabbinic literature for reasons outside the age of obligation for the commandments (mitzvot*)*. The age of 13 is first mentioned in the Mishnah as the time a spoken vow or oath is taken seriously:

> "A girl of eleven years old and one day's vows are examined [to make sure she knows what she is doing]. A girl of twelve years old and one day's vows are valid. One checks them for all of her twelfth year. A boy of 12 years old and a day's

[14] Gilat, פרקים בהשתלשלות ההלכה, 20.
[15] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 41.

> vows are checked. A boy of 13 and a day's vows are effective and checked all of his 13th year. One checks them for all of his thirteenth year. Prior to that time, even if they say "We know in whose name we vowed," or "we have made the consecration," their vow is not a vow and their consecration is not a consecration." But after that age, even if they say "We do not know in whose name we have made the vow" or "we have made the consecration," their vow is indeed a valid vow and their consecration is a valid consecration."[16]

The age of 12 for girls and 13 for boys holds weight when making vows and oaths, an important component of Jewish law and practice. The phrase "plus one day" implies a need to be absolutely certain that boy or girl is the correct age.[17]

The Mishnah contains debates over which functions are assigned to Jews based on which age or stage of life. The rabbis are interested in, for example, determining when a *katan* who has not begun his education goes from "exempt" to no longer "exempt."[18] The rabbis make a distinction between those who need their mothers and those who do not.

When it comes to the biblical obligation to dwell in the sukkah, Shammai, a 1st century scholar often known for his strict interpretation of Jewish law, says that even a baby in a crib who "always needs his mom," is obligated to sit in the sukkah.[19] When it comes to the annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Hillel the Elder, Shammai's contemporary, said that even young children just able to walk were obligated to participate in rituals of the event. A child who could hold his father's hand and go up to the Temple Mount was also commanded to bring the sacrifices.[20]

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[16] Mishnah Nidah 5:6.
[17] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History*, 39.
[18] Clarified in the *Bavli* in *Sukkah*:28b. According to Gilat, "The Bavli in Sukkah:28b comments on the contradiction between the Sifra that requires "All- including the katanim" [to sit in the sukkah] and the mishnah which states/establishes that a katan is exempt from the (mitzvah of the) sukkah. And the Talmud explains, that our mishnah deals with a katan who did not reach education, whereas the Sifra rules on a child who has reached the age of education and reads 'Talmudical hermeneutics.'"
[19] Mishnah Sukkah 2:8.
[20] Mishnah Hagigah 1:1.

In the Mishnaic era, 13 gained significance as the age when vows went into effect, but did not serve as a threshold for participating in acts of mitzvot.

Midrash

Rabbinic eisegesis allowed writers of the midrash to extrapolate from the Torah and to label 13 as the age a young man forms his own clear beliefs. The midrashists of *B'reishit Rabbah* suggest that 13 was the age that Esau grew to become a man of the fields and Jacob a man of the tents.[21] Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, took revenge on the people of Shechem for the rape of their sister Dinah at the age of 13.[22] The age of 13 is also mentioned in the 8th/9th century aggadic-midrash *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* as the age Abraham smashed his father's idols.[23] The age of 13 became the mark of the boy's ability to make independent decisions separate from their parents.

Biological (Physical) Age and Physical Ability

Jewish authority figures used physical signs in determining the age of maturity. According to the authors of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, both girls and boys reach the age of maturity once they have two pubic hairs. In the tannaitic period, religious authorities actually checked the body of adolescents for signs of the arrival of biological maturity in order to determine matters of personal status.[24]

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[21] Bereshit Rabbah 63:10.
[22] Bereshit Rabbah 80.10.
[23] Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer 16:1.
[24] The Tannaitic period, also known as the Mishnaic period, lasted from approximately 10–220 CE. It was a time of political turmoil and significant changes to Jewish law. *Mishnah Nidah* 5:9; *Mishnah Nidah* 6:8.

In the 3rd century, the attempt to determine maturity depended on a combination of physical signs of puberty and chronological age. Rabbi Yossi Bar Yehudah, a contemporary and friend of R. Yehuda Hanasi, believed that even a boy of nine years and one day who had two pubic hairs was mature, and therefore was treated as an adult and obligated in all of the mitzvot.[25] However, according to *Tosefta Nida* 6b:

> "[If] a boy of 9 and a day that has two hairs…it's [considered] a mole.., From nine years of age until the age of twelve years and one day, it's considered a mole. Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Yehuda, says: 'it's a sign.'"

The sages quickly clarified the belief that any pubic hair grown by children twelve and under was nothing more than mere "moles" and could not count as a sign of maturity.

Specifically, the tannaitic writers explained the need to check a girl's body in order to determine if she was ready for intercourse, marriage, divorce, levirate marriage, and *chalitzah*.[26] Overtime, religious authorities stopped conducting this invasive exam. By the time of the *Amoraim*, age became a more important sign of responsibility than the evidence of the onset of puberty. Rava (c. 280 – 352 CE) says, "a girl who has reached the required number of years need not undergo a physical examination since we can make a presumption that she has produced the marks of puberty."[27]

Justinian Caesar prohibited the examination of bodies to determine the arrival of maturity in the 6th century.[28] It would seem that in the same era, the rabbis adopted a similar approach by ruling that the age of thirteen plus one day for boys and twelve and a day for girls became a sufficient measure for marital matters.

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[25] Babylonian Talmud, Nidah 52a.
[26] BT Nidah 46a-b.
[27] BT Nidah 48b.
[28] Gilat,פרקים בהשתלשלות ההלכה, 28. While Justinian restrictions were poorly enforced, it is important to note the parallel in state laws and Jewish court customs. Justinian Codes banned the reading of the Mishnah and required the public reading of the Torah to take place in the vernacular, rather than Hebrew.

Mental and Psychological Maturity as a Sign of Readiness for Fulfilling Mitzvot

The Mishnah and the Talmud teach that a Jewish father must teach his son to fulfill the mitzvot when he can do them properly, and not at a specific age. The rabbis determine this as 1) when he no longer needs his mother, 2) when he reaches the age of learning how to fulfill the commandments, and 3) when he knows how to do something.[29]

As mentioned above, some mitzvot did not require any knowledge on the part of the child to fulfill them.[30] The Mishnah teaches, "a minor who knows how to shake the *lulav* is subject to the obligation of the *lulav*."[31]

At the time of the Mishnah, a *katan* (a boy only) could read the Torah in public and translate the text for the congregation into Aramaic as long as he knew how, but was not allowed to recite the introductory prayers nor the blessing before the *Sh'ma*. The *katan* could not pass before the ark to lead the congregation in prayer, nor lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction.[32] There is no evidence on whether this was common practice or if there was an age minimum to read and translate. In response, the Jerusalem Talmud asks if the boy really understands what he is doing.[33] The Talmud teaches:

> "A minor who knows how to wave the *lulav* is obligated in the mitzvah of *lulav*; one who knows how to wrap himself in a *tallit*, is obligated in the mitzvah of wearing *tzitzit*; if he knows to preserve the sanctity of *t'fillin* in a state of cleanliness, his father buys him *t'fillin* if he knows how to speak, his father must immediately teach him Torah and the reading of the *Sh'ma*."[34]

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[29] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle*, 82.
[30] Mishnah Sukkah 2:8.
[31] Mishnah Sukkah 3:15.
[32] Mishnah Megillah 4.
[33] Yerushalmi Berakhot 7.2,11b; Shulchan Arukh Orach Chayyim 282.3 via Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 44.
[34] BT Sukkah 42a.

In Talmudic times and the early medieval era, a young boy was not required to reach the age of 13 and a day in order to perform several ritual commandments, including putting on *t'fillin* and being called to read the Torah with its blessings. Instead, a boy could complete these tasks as soon as he was mentally and physically capable and properly prepared by his father. During this time, a boy under 13 could be counted in a minyan and count in the quorum needed to recite the grace after meals.[35]

Tractate Soferim (debatably 750 CE, but likely later than 1000) says that a boy must be 13 to be included in a minyan.[36]

Conclusion

Classic Jewish sources, from the Tanakh to the Middle Ages offered varying opinions on when a *katan* becomes obligated to fulfill the mitzvot. Thresholds of maturity ranged from physical markers to chronological age to mental ability. These documented discourses, that spanned the Jewish world, serve as the foundation of the rite, ritual, and formation of Jewish coming of age ceremonies.

[35] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle*, 83.
[36] BT Soferim 16.12 via Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 46.

Chapter 2- Innovations in the Middle Ages into the Modern Era

Introduction

In the Middle Ages, thirteen and a day became the age of Jewish majority, meaning a boy could wear *t'fillin* and be counted in a minyan. During this time, rabbis across the Jewish world continued to debate when a boy is 1) able to participate in certain tasks and 2) be obligated in performing commandments, making him a bar mitzvah—a son of the commandments. It remains unclear when 13 and a day became the official age marker for when a boy could be called up to the Torah and when a boy could read Torah in every community. It is also unclear when reaching the age of 13 and a day and accepting the responsibilities of an adult male was recognized as a milestone to be celebrated and ritualized. We do know the debate over obligation and responsibility becomes connected to the blessing a father is to recite when his son reaches the age of 13 reemerges in Germany in the Middle Ages.

Responsibility for Sins and Actions

There seems to be uniformity that at the age of thirteen, the boy is legally responsible for his own religious acts. Scholars debate, however, about what it means for a son to be "responsible" for himself. While today it is understood to refer to being obligated in the commandments, prior to the Middle Ages, a young boy could perform mitzvot as long as he was capable of doing so. Boys under the age of 13 would be able to put on *t'fillin* and be called to read Torah in public, in addition to reciting the blessing before and after the reading.

There is contradictory evidence as to when thirteen became the age at which minors are responsible for their sins. There is evidence of a debate over the age of religious responsibility, especially among rabbis of the 13th and 14th centuries in Germany. The early 13th century work *Sefer Hasidim* argued that boys under 13 are still responsible for their sins.[37] By the end of the 13th century in Germany, rabbis added restrictions of minors and their abilities to perform ritual commandments described in the Talmud, mirroring the decisions of contemporary Christians to require sufficient awareness before performing acts.[38] In the 14th century, Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel, a century later, argues 13 year olds and older are responsible for their sins.[39]

To this day in some communities, boys under 13 are permitted to wrap *t'fillin*. However, they are still restricted in when they can start:

> "The wrapping of *t'fillin* is customary for *katanim* and *gadolim* .The Talmud says: 'And you shall keep this law [of wrapping *t'fillin*].' I only said those who know how to keep/protect the mitzvah of *t'fillin*. Therefore the sages said the *katan* who knows to keep the *t'fillin* places the *t'fillin* on himself." [40]

It is clear that, during the Talmudic and early medieval era,[41] the mitzvah of *t'fillin* is not related at all to the age of 13, but rather the ability of the *katan* to keep the body of the *t'fillin* clean and pure. Rabbi Isaac ben Abba Mari of Marseilles in the late 12th century, and Rabbi Mordecai ben Hillel Ha-Kohen in the late 13th century objected to boys wearing *t'fillin* under the age of 13, citing the Talmudic text.

In the 16th century, Sephardic rabbi Joseph Karo in the *Shulchan Aruch,* the collection of commentaries on the Torah that serve as a foundation for Jewish law,

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[37] Judah ben Samuel, He-Hasid, *Sefer Hasidim* via Marcus, *The Jewish Life Cycle,* 93.
[38] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 94.
[39] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 93.
[40] *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon* and *Mehilta de-Rabbi Ishamel* via Gilat, 24.
[41] Gilat, 24.

argued that a *katan* who is able to keep the *t'fillin* pure will not sleep, flatulate, or enter a bathroom while wearing them. However, Ashkenazic rabbi Moses Isserles disagreed, arguing in his gloss that it is the *custom* that a minor should wait until he is "13 years and one day."[42]

According to Joseph Karo in his *Bet Yosef*, a child could not lead the prayers on behalf of other adults because a child was not obliged to pray regularly.[43] In his commentary to the *Shulchan Aruch*, Moses Isserles adds that when he is 13, he is counted as an adult that has two pubic hairs…"This is the custom and there is no need to change it."[44] In his *Darchei Moshe*, Isserles explicitly defines "bar mitzvah" as "meaning…13 years and one day old."[45] Therefore, we can deduce that in 16th century Ashkenaz, the term bar mitzvah refers to the age of 13 years old and one day, which marks the age at which a boy is *obligated* in fulfilling the commandments for the first time, regardless of his level of physical or intellectual maturity.

It appears that in the early modern period, young boys could read from the Torah. Rabbi Joshua Falk of Lvov (1555–1614) mentioned the practice of a boy being called up for the maftir Torah reading, and not the first few Torah readings on Shabbat morning. According to *Machzor Vitry,* the 11th century prayer book, a younger boy was permitted to read from Torah, but had to be 13 and a day and have the physical signs of maturity in order to lead a service, including the *Sh'ma,* and recite the *Birkat HaMazon*.[46] This is because a *katan* can only complete the obligation for himself and

[42] *Shulchan Arukh*, Orach Chayim 37:3.
[43] *Beit Yosef*, Orach Chayim, 53.6.
[44] *Shulchan Arukh* Orach Chayyim 199.10.
[45] *Darchei Moshe*, Orach Chaim 37:2.
[46] *Machzor Vitry*, Laws of Shabbat 133:1.

cannot yet exempt others from performing the mitzvah for them. By the early modern period in Europe, only skilled adult leaders read and translated Torah.[47]

Father's Blessing

The earliest hint that thirteen and a day is the age at which religious obligation goes into effect for all males is found in *Midrash B'reishit Rabbah*, compiled around the 5th century in Palestine.[48] The text details directions for a father to declare his son is responsible for his own actions in a blessing known as *Baruch She-p'tarani*: "Rabbi Elazar said: A father must be responsible for his son until age thirteen. From there on, he must say: 'Blessed are You Who has absolved me from the punishment of this one.'"[49] The blessing is notably missing the complete formula of a rabbinic blessing– "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe," because of its midrashic origins.

Scholars do not know if the *Baruch She-p'tarani* prayer was part of a larger ritual or ceremony, or if it was said privately or publicly. It is also unknown if the boy needs to be present. During late antiquity, the age of 13 is not related to the earliest time a boy was allowed to perform religious obligations but is referring to when a boy is responsible for performing religious acts.

Scholars believe that Rabbi Aaron ben Jacob Ha-Kohen of Lunel of 14th century France wrote about a bar mitzvah rite from the days of the *geonim*.[50] He connected the

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[47] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History*, 44.
[48] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 87.
[49] Bereshit Rabbah 63:10
[50] Rabbis of Babylonia (now Baghdad) known as authorities in Jewish law and who headed chief centers of Jewish learning from the late 6th to early 11th century.

father's Baruch She'p'tarani prayer to the son's first reading of the Torah. In his *Orhot Hayyim*, he includes the father's blessing mentioned in the passage from *B'reishit Rabbah*: "There are those who say it the first time a son goes up ('oleh) to read Torah." He continues, "And the Gaon Rabbi Yehudi, of blessed memory, stood up in the synagogue and recited this blessing the first time his son read from the Torah."[51] According to Rabbi Aaron of Lunel, there was not yet an official link between the father's blessing and the son getting called up to the Torah. By writing, "there are those who say it," we can infer that the father's blessing at the boy's age of 13, combined with a boy being called up to the Torah, was still a relatively new custom in Southern France.[52][53]

Rabbi Judah ben Barukh, an 11th century German rabbi, is quoted in a collection of rabbinic decisions from 13th century northern Europe, later transmitted by German authorities: "Whoever has a son age thirteen, the first time he gets up in public to read the Torah, the father must bless [as follows]: Blessed are You Who redeemed me from the punishment of this one." The text continues, "And the Gaon Rabbi Judah ben Barukh got up in the synagogue and said this blessing when his son got up and read for the first time from the Torah, and this blessing is an obligation (hovah hi).[54] As noted, a father is obligated to say the blessing when a son gets called up to the Torah for the first time at the age of 13.

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[51] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 88 and Note 22 (Aaron ben Jacob Ha-Kohen of Lunel, *Sefer Orhot Hayyim,* pt. 1, 40c, par. 58.).
[52] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 89
[53] While this is helpful when dating the combination of rites, Ivan G Marcus argues that Rabbi Aaron of Lunel is not referring to the Gaon Rabbi Yehudi ben Nahman of 8th century Iraq, but rather to Rabbi Judah ben Barukh of 11th century Germany, who is quoted with the title, "ha-gaon." The recitation of the blessing is not found in the writings of the great sage Gaon Rabbi Yehudi ben Nahman, nor in any writings of Sura in the 9th and 10th centuries. For more information visit Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 89.
[54] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle*, 90 and Note 25. This text used peda'ani (redeemed me), not pe'tarani (absolved me); and 26 Hora'ot Mei-Rabbanei Zarfat z l," 82.

While these two sources quote Rabbi Judah ben Barukh of the 11th century, there is no evidence that this was a widespread custom of his time nor is there proof that this was not a stand alone Barukh family event. Because of this inconclusive evidence, we cannot say that by the 11th century fathers regularly recited the blessing when their sons were called to the Torah at the age of 13 nor can we say 13 was the age of their first public reading of Torah. However, we do see proof of this pairing spreading by the 13th century.[55]

In early 15th century Germany, Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Ha-Levi Molin (the Maharil)'s son "became bar mitzvah and he read the Torah,"and the Maharil recited the *Baruch She'p'tarani* blessing.[56] While this text is often cited as the origin of the bar mitzvah ceremony, we do not know *who* was the one to read from the Torah, the father or the son. If it was the son who read from the Torah, we do not know if it was his first time. Perhaps, the Maharil simply recited the blessing when his son had an *aliyah* once he reached the age of 13, as mentioned in the midrash in *B'reishit Rabbah*. There is no proof that the son got up and read Torah for the first time at age 13 and a day. Additionally, the blessing in Maharil's text uses the entire formula: "Blessed Are You, *Adonai, Our God, Ruler of the Universe*, who absolved me from the punishment of this one," and not the original text found in the Midrash, "Blessed Are You, who absolved me from the punishment of this one." The latter became the preferred form because the blessing is not prescribed in the Talmud.[57]

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[55] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 90.
[56] Jacob ben Moses Ha-Levi Molin, Sefer Maharil, Minhagim, 453.
[57] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 91.

The practice of reciting the *Baruch She'P'tarani* blessing was not widespread. The formalized practice of reaching the age of 13 in order to read the Torah–and that being a notable occasion is also widely unknown. The coupling of a boy at 13 reading Torah and his father reciting *Baruch She'Ptarani* appears to be a practice of *some* rabbis in Germany and Southern France, but not a formalized or widespread practice in other Jewish communities.[58]

The Talmudic Rabbis considered a boy's father responsible if a boy under 13 failed to carry out the commandments he was capable of fulfilling. Ivan Marcus argues, "Perhaps the custom developed in late antiquity for a father to recite a blessing that he was no longer responsible for his son's punishment because there were others in ancient Palestine who thought the son should be punished like an adult for not doing the commandment even though he was still a minor."[59] Minors were not responsible to God, but to their fathers. Therefore, when a son turns 13, the father is no longer in the middle between his son and God. Afterall, the father is the one who recites the blessing because it is his responsibility that is ending. Until his son reaches age 13 the father carries the weight of the consequences and the pressure to have his son perform accordingly. The blessing is not a statement of pride that the son is now responsible for his own independent actions. Instead, the blessing emphasizes the shift in responsibilities from father to no longer minor child.

[58] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 92.
[59] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 92.

Party and Meal

The practice of throwing a bar mitzvah boy a celebratory meal, known as a *se'udat mitzvah*, spread throughout Europe in the early modern period. Exactly how and when the custom gained in popularity is a subject of scholarly debate. However, it is known for sure that a series of texts, beginning in the 16th century, led to the popularity of hosting a *se'udah* for a bar mitzvah boy.[60]

In the 13th century, Rabbi Avigdor Ha-Zarfati of Vienna wrote about a custom in Germany of preparing a celebratory meal for a boy to mark his 13th birthday. His statement was incorporated into the *Zohar,* disseminated in Spain beginning in the late 13th century. However, this is just a birthday meal not yet associated with other bar mitzvah rites.

In the 16th century, Rabbi Solomon Luria (Maharshal) recorded, in his *Yam Shel Shlomo*, attending a feast for a 13-year-old. This influential text highlights the growing popularity of a customary celebration in late 16th century German that included a party and a suggested speech, referred to as a bar mitzvah. He notably writes, "the German Jews make a bar mitzvah feast" and "there is no greater obligatory religious feast than this. . . . One offers praise and gratitude to God that the young boy has been able to become bar mitzvah . . .and that the father has been able to raise him until now and initiate him into the covenant of the complete Torah."[61] This represents the earliest confirmation of the bar mitzvah meal evolving into an established tradition. Indeed, it is the first documentation of a celebratory gathering, beyond the religious service itself, associated with the bar mitzvah.

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[60] David Golinkin, "Transformation of the Bar Mitzvah Ceremony," 308.
[61] Luria, Yam shel Shlomo, to Bava Kama 7:37, 98a via Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 97.

The widespread adoption of the bar mitzvah party as a customary practice also indicates the growing popularity of the synagogue ceremony during this period. Starting in the sixteenth century, the typical form of the bar mitzvah party is a *se'udat mitzvah*, a festive "meal" extended to family and other invited guests. Such celebratory meals have been a part of Jewish tradition since ancient times.[62] According to Luria, the feast is obligatory “when the boy is trained to offer a Torah exposition appropriate to the occasion.”[63]

Luria’s account is notably recorded by a resident of what is now Poland observing an event in the German Empire. It is the first known mention of a bar mitzvah speech, incorporating an explanation of the Torah portion and a display of Jewish knowledge, linked to the comprehensive ritual we now associate with bar mitzvah. While this record is noteworthy, it seems that this combination of Torah exposition with the *seudat mitzvah* was not yet widely established in Germany.[64] Luria adds that he is against the standardization of the meal at the age of 13 and preferred to see the meal held at the age of puberty as defined in the Talmud.[65]

Rabbi Yisrael ben Binyamin of Belćec wrote in *Yalkut Hadash*, published in 1648, “It is obligatory on a man to make a meal at a bar mitzvah just as when he comes under the bridal canopy, and great is the reward.”[66] It is important to note that this reference equates the milestone of the bar mitzvah with the milestone of getting married, pointing to an increased emphasis on the importance of the achievement.

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[62] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History*, 69.
[63] Luria, Yam shel Shlomo, to Bava Kama 7:37, via Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 98.
[64] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 99.
[65] Golinkin, “Transformation of the Bar Mitzvah Ceremony,” 308.
[66] *Yalkut Hadash*, 183a, Likutim 29 via Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: a History*, 72. See note 22 for more.

Avraham Gombiner recorded the bar mitzvah custom of 17th century Poland, "Bar mitzvah—this is when a boy reaches the age of thirteen years and one day, and in our time the custom is to say a blessing when the lad prays or reads on Shabbat for the first time, and then everyone recognizes that he is bar mitzvah."[67] In addition to the *Baruch She'p'tarani* blessing, the father is responsible for providing the meal to honor his son. Gombiner writes, "It is a duty for a man to make a meal on the day when his son becomes bar mitzvah like the day when he comes under the wedding canopy . . . if the boy makes a speech, it is a meal of obligation." Gombiner explains the customs of his day- a boy is called to the Torah on Shabbat, a blessing is recited by the father, considerable party follows, and a boy provides a *d'rash*, an explanation of the week's Torah portion.[68]

By the 17th century, it became customary in central Europe for a father to organize a celebration for the son becoming bar mitzvah, which would occur shortly after his son reached the age of 13 and a day. Rabbi Juspa, the sexton of Worms, recalls his own bar mitzvah in 1617:

> "The following incident occurred when I reached the age of thirteen on Sabbath, Parshat Tezaveh, 13 Adar I, 5733 [February 18, 1617]. I was taught to chant the Torah portion, but when the Rabbi was informed of the situation, he did not permit me to read Parshat Tezaveh. Rather, he required me to read Ki Tavo on the following Sabbath, for they decreed that the one who chants the Torah portion must have reached the age of thirteen years and one day...Similarly, I observed that the members of the Yeshiva in Worms prevented the lad Barukh the son of Zekli from Alsace from chanting the Torah on the Sabbath on which he turned thirteen. He read the portion on the following Sabbath; by then, he had already attained the age of thirteen and one day."[69]

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[67] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: a History*, 72- See note 23 (Magen Avraham to Shulchan Arukh Orach Chayyim 225.4, citing Maharshal and Yalkut Hadash).
[68] Magen Avraham to *Shulchan Arukh* Orach Chayyim 225.4, citing Maharshal and Yalkut Hadash via Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History*, 122.
[69] Juspa, Minhagim di-K.K. Vermaisa. English translation from Eidelberg, R. Yuzpa Shamash and Yuspa Shamash, Minhagim, 167; Rabbi Juspa, Shammash of Warmaisa (Worms).

We learn from Rabbi Juspa's account that reaching the age of 13 and a day was a requirement for the Torah reading in his community. While we have these occasional records of bar mitzvah celebrations, there is no evidence that this practice was widespread. There are historical memoirs, writings, and records from the 18th and 19th century that describe a boy's life and relationship to mitzvot but fail to include any mention of a bar mitzvah rite. This is because, for the majority of the Jewish world, there was no recognition that 13 and a day was a life cycle milestone, known as a bar mitzvah to be publicly celebrated through ritual and feasting. Boys were obligated to fulfill mitzvot based on regional customs. For example, 17th century Italian Leon Modena writes of different personal and familial births, circumcisions, weddings, and deaths, but never mentions a rite of bar mitzvah held for him or his son.[70] He writes that at the age of 13 and a day, a boy is considered an adult man, meaning he is no longer exempt in the observation of mitzvot, counts in a *minyan*, and has valid vows, and is called bar mitzvah.[71] However, there is no mention of a formal rite including being called to the Torah and celebrating with a festive meal. There is no mention of any such rite among Mediterranean and Yemenite cultures.[72]

In addition, in those communities that did celebrate this coming of age there are discrepancies about what exactly a boy was required to do at his bar mitzvah. According to one Hamburg-Altona synagogue in the 1700s:

> "A bar mitzvah may not take the Torah scroll out or return it to the Ark. But he may read from the Torah on Shabbat and undertakes the duty of being called up. But not on a Shabbat which falls on a festival and especially not on the High Holidays. And the junior cantor must teach him the reading. And he must pay him five marks. And if he does not have membership of the congregation he may not

[70] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 101.
[71] Marcus, 101.
[72] Marcus, 103.

> read from the Torah and there is no obligation at all [to call him up]. In the year 1700 it was added that a bar mitzvah may not read more than one section and then only if the cantor bears witness that he is skilled in the chanting of the whole Torah and if the cantor does not so witness, he may not read even one section."[73]

In this particular community, a boy was to be taught by the cantor, for a fee. There is no mention of the parent's responsibility to help prepare the boy for his bar mitzvah, nor to participate in the ceremony. The boy would only read from the Torah on his bar mitzvah day if he proved himself able to read the Torah blessings and chant a single *aliyah*.

The *se'udat mitzvah* became increasingly important in Poland, Germany, Lithuania, and Italy according to a variety of written works. Descriptions and laws to limit the lavishness of such parties are found in the *takanot* of almost two dozen communities from 1595 to 1793.[74] While we have a handful of accounts of various combinations of events–boys being called to read from the Torah on the Shabbat following their thirteenth birthday, boys' fathers reciting *Baruch She'p'tarani* blessings, and festive meals–such ceremonies do not become widespread until the 18th and 19th centuries.

One reason could be that bar mitzvah rites rose in popularity as the notion of childhood became widespread.[75] The idea of "childhood" only became recognized as a life stage in the modern era, as evidenced by the rise in new creations, such as clothing that differed from that of adults, art that depicted them with less adult-like features, and new games and pastimes.[76]

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[73] Hilton, *Bar MItzvah: A History*, 138 via note 31-"Graupe, Die Statuen der drei Gemeinden, 2:4–5 (text): 1.72–73 (German trans.).
[74] David Golinkin, "Transformation of the Bar Mitzvah Ceremony," 309.
[75] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 102.
[76]Roy Lowe, "Childhood Through The Ages," n *An Introduction to Early Childhood Studies. Second Edition*, ed. Trisha Maynard and Nigel Thomas (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009), 22.

Speech

The practice of a bar mitzvah boy delivering a speech that explains, in his vernacular, an aspect of Torah goes back centuries. Rabbi Solomon Luria mentions this practice and references books of such speeches published in 16th century Poland.[77] However, the boys did not always write the speeches themselves. In the late 16th century, Rabbi Leon Modena published the speeches he wrote for boys to deliver in a book. According to Meir Sered, a speech could last from 30-60 minutes in length and could cover a variety of topics learned by the student since the age of 5, including the mitzvot the bar mitzvah boy was now obligated to follow.

By the turn of the 20th century, students chose 5–10-minute speeches from published books that did not correlate with their assigned Torah portion. Instead, these speeches served as proof that the boy had successfully learned various topics in Jewish text, history, and practice. One such book, *The Jewish American Orator*, over five hundred pages in Yiddish, English, and Hebrew, was first published in 1907. One speech in *The Jewish American Orator* read:

> In the presence of my dear parents, teachers, friends and honored assembly, I pledge my word to-day that I will be a reliable soldier in the army of the Jewish people... My only striving is to give honor to my parents who have done so much for me, to give honor to my people, to participate in its joys and woes, and do all there is in my power to honor the name of the Jew."

The speech helped the bar mitzvah boy confirm his identity as a Jew as he balanced what it meant to be an American.[78] It served as a pledge to honor and give thanks to his

[77] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History*, 148.
[78] While this practice hints at the developing rite of Confirmation, it was referred to as a Bar Mitzvah. More on Confirmation and speeches in the next section.

parents by remaining a part of the Jewish people. Some boys would learn their speeches by heart. The last of these books was published in 1954.[79]

Maftir and Haftarah

Today, some b'notai mitzvah students read the final section of the Torah reading for the week. Known as *maftir*, this section is usually a repetition of the last few lines. In addition, some also chant the haftarah, the weekly reading of the Prophets, and recite its accompanying blessings. The origin of this practice as part of the bar mitzvah rite is suspected to be from the Maharil's account of the 14th century.[80] As stated previously, bar mitzvah "norms" did not catch on or spread widely until at least the 18th century. There is evidence of bar mitzvah boys reading haftarah in Amsterdam in 1759.[81] It is possible this became the custom because it is read from a printed book that includes vowels and trope marks, making it easier to learn and recite.[82]

Conclusion

The bar mitzvah rite developed out of different components that emerged in varied regions over many years. Eventually, the rite came to involve a boy reaching the age of 13 and a day, making him obligated (and no longer exempt) to perform mitzvot required of adult males, including being counted in a minyan, donning *t'fillin*, being called to the Torah, and leading prayers. To mark this transition, his father publicly recited the *Baruch She-p'tarani* blessing in which he declared that he was no longer responsible for

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[79] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 147
[80] Hilton, 145 via Sefer Maharil, 453.
[81] Hilton, 146
[82] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 146.

the sins of his son. The boy gave remarks on the Torah portion at a festive meal separate from the services that marked the occasion. Each of these elements of the rite evolved in their own time, and came together for the first time in the German Empire around the 16th century.[83] It remains unclear how the elements of a bar mitzvah spread beyond the German Empire into Eastern Europe and the Sephardic world, but it appears that expansion did not happen until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."[84]

Chapter 3- Variations in Modernity

Introduction

The rise of progressive Judaism in the modern era led to innovations in all areas of Jewish life, including coming-of-age ceremonies. In 19th century Germany, the emergence of confirmation expanded the rites of passage to encompass both boys and girls. Supporters of Reform Judaism carried this trend with them to America, where they introduced confirmation as a representative of modern ideals and a replacement for bar mitzvah ceremonies. The rise of group confirmation, influenced by Jewish tradition yet responsive to Christian influences, showed the changing landscape of Jewish ritual practice and the new progressive ideals of egalitarian and assimilation.

Simultaneously, group coming-of-age ceremonies for girls emerged as counterparts to bar mitzvahs in Europe. In the United States, Judith Kaplan had the first

[83] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 85.
[84] Rachel Kranson, "More Bar than Mitzvah: Anxieties over Bar Mitzvah Receptions in PostwarAmerica," essay, in *Rites of Passage: How Today's Jews Celebrate, Commemorate, and Commiserate*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (Purdue University Press, 2010, 10.

solo bat mitzvah ceremony in 1922. However, it took decades for the ceremony to become popular.

Confirmation

The coming-of-age ceremony known as confirmation gained popularity as a liberal Jewish practice in Germany in the 19th century. These ceremonies soon evolved into elaborate synagogue rituals held during the festival of Shavuot for 15 and 16 year olds. A departure from traditional bar mitzvah customs, confirmation included children of all genders, representing the first instance in Jewish history where a coming-of-age ceremony was extended to girls. Confirmation supplanted the traditional bar mitzvah in the liberal synagogues that embraced this new rite, as these communities embraced collectivism, secular language, communal obligation, and egalitarianism.

History

In the 19th century, German rabbis attempted to harmonize Jewish practices with the changing cultural and intellectual landscape. Embracing modernity, Reform Judaism in Germany aimed to reconcile traditional Jewish beliefs with the values of the Enlightenment, fostering a more inclusive and adaptable expression of Jewish identity in the face of societal transformations. Early reformers sought to replace the bar mitzvah ceremony with confirmation. The introduction of confirmation as a life cycle event ritual mirrors the early Reformer’s embrace of other Protestant practices. These include praying in the vernacular language, integrating an organ into the service, wearing

secular clothing, and relocating the bimah to the front of the synagogue, drawing parallels with the Christian altar.

Jewish confirmation contains similarities to Christian confirmation. Borrowed from the Protestant rite, Jewish confirmation originally included a confession of faith, the invocation of God's blessing, sermons promoting morality and virtue, and a commitment to equality for both boys and girls.[85] The eventual celebration of the ritual at Pentecost/Shavuot was also borrowed from the Protestant ritual practice in Germany.

There are two distinct origin stories for confirmation in liberal Judaism. One origin story claims that confirmation was first instituted in Dessau in 1803 before spreading to Woldenbüttel, where Leopold Zunz, Judaics scholar, was confirmed in 1807.[86]

The second origin story claims that Israel Jacobson, a prosperous German businessman, called for the first confirmation in 1810, when he donated over $100,000 of his personal funds to construct a new synagogue in Seesen, Germany, and introduced reforms like an organ and mixed-gender seating. Considering the bar mitzvah ceremony outdated, Jacobson devised a novel graduation ceremony held within the school, rather than the synagogue, when faced with the graduation of five 13-year-old boys, thereby giving rise to the concept of confirmation. Jacobson opened the Seesen Temple, now considered to be the world's first Reform Synagogue, in July 1810, and the first confirmation there was held during Shavuot in 1811.[87]

Confirmation ceremonies, initially limited to boys, were typically conducted on the Shabbat coinciding with their bar mitzvah. Due to the contentious nature of the

[85] Hilton, *Bar MItzvah: A History,* 179.
[86] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 113.
[87] Hilton, *Bar MItzvah: A History,* 186.

ceremony, early rituals were often confined to homes or schools. While the bar mitzvah ceremony was historically initiated by Jewish fathers, confirmation was initially led by teachers and later, rabbis. In 1817, the Berlin synagogue initiated a distinct confirmation program for girls; however, by 1822, the practice of confirming both boys and girls became widespread.[88] In 1831, Rabbi Samuel Egers of Brunswick, Germany, opted to hold confirmation on Shavuot.

By the 1820s, confirmation had evolved into a collective ceremony, consistently held annually at the age of thirteen for boys, twelve for girls, or for a mixed-age group. In the early 20th century, the age for confirmation experienced an upward shift from thirteen to fifteen and, at times, even beyond, aligning with the concurrent extension of school leaving ages.[89]

Shavuot, the holiday dedicated to commemorating the bestowal of the Torah upon the Jewish people, was deemed a fitting moment for a declaration of faith. In its early stages, confirmation was rooted in a "catechism" framework, in which students provided formal educated responses to their rabbis and teachers. It mirrored a graduation theme, involving a public examination after a specified period of study. Subsequently, students articulated personal confessions of faith in the presence of the rabbi, followed by the rabbi's address, prayer, and blessings. This initial service was uncomplicated, lacking a fixed ritual. Jewish confirmation has never adhered to a fixed or prescribed format. However, as confirmation transitioned into the synagogue and its association with Shavuot became stronger, the ceremony evolved into a more elaborate affair. By the early 1900s, confirmation acquired a ceremonial grandeur, with flower

[88] Hilton, *Bar MItzvah: A History,* 153.
[89] Hilton, 175

offerings lining the bimah, and participants donning robes and engaging in dramatic readings and vocal compositions illustrating themes of their dedication to Judaism.

The widespread adoption of confirmation ceremonies saw geographical expansion, reaching Charleston, South Carolina in the 1820s before making its way to New York's Anshe Emeth in 1846 via Rabbi Max Lillienthal.[90] A year after arriving in the US, Lilienthal led a confirmation service for the first day of Shavuot, including the catechism questions, declarations of faith, and a blessing by the rabbi.[91] Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise led his first confirmation service in Albany, NY in 1848, two years after his arrival to the United States, and again in 1856 during his first Shavuot service in Cincinnati. Reform rabbis who emigrated to the United States introduced the new ritual shortly after their arrival, hinting at a degree of dissatisfaction with the bar mitzvah rite.[92]

In 1864, Altona became part of Prussia, where confirmation for girls as well as boys was required.[93] In 1866, Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger officiated a confirmation ceremony exclusively for girls in Altona despite opposing them 30 years prior. During the ceremony, after the confirmation students took a formal exam, the boys choir sang Psalm 119, and R. Ettlinger gave a speech, recited "May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah" and offered the priestly blessing. In his speech, Ettlinger, noted the differences between Christian and Jewish confirmation ceremonies, which

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[90] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 114.
[91] Bruce L. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal: The Making of the American Rabbinate* (Wayne State University Press, 2011), 85.
[92] Hilton, *Bar MItzvah: A History,* 206.
[93] David Golinkin, "The Participation of Jewish Women in Public Rituals and Torah Study 1845–2010," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 46–66, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/440822/summary, 47.

"includes the mitzvah of kiddush hashem, the sanctification of God's name, which is considered by us one of our most important mitzvot."[94]

Confirmation initially diverged from bar mitzvah in that it mandated that a child make a declaration of faith and pass an examination, eschewing the customary involvement in the Torah reading. The bar mitzvah ceremony symbolized through ritual that a boy could lead a service and therefore a community. In reality, the bar mitzvah in Reform spaces was often seen as the culmination of their Jewish education and a once in a lifetime rite for boys. [95] Through the confirmation service, both boys and girls showed Jewish erudition through their preparation of personal statements that demonstrated their ability to affirm their Jewish identity within a broader societal context. However, only young men were permitted to continue on in their formal Jewish education and become clergy.

While some communities kept the custom, many synagogues abandoned bar mitzvah ceremonies in favor of confirmation. Those who opposed the ritual of bar mitzvah, particularly those in the Reform Movement, argued against the need to provide liturgical and service leading skills to boys when only professionals led services.[96] In a Reform Responsum from 1913, Kaufman Kohler writes:

> How, then, can a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, as a survival of a dead past, claim any importance beside the Confirmation? Is it not an altogether false pretense that the young man is a more important factor of religious life in the community than is the young woman? Granted for argument's sake that the individual allegiance entered into by the Bar Mitzvah is of some value and impressiveness, let us see whether these very Benei Mitzvah are kept from violating the Sabbath as soon as

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[94] Golinkin, "The Participation of Jewish Women in Public Rituals and Torah Study 1845–2010." 48 via footnote 7 "(See Avraham (Rami) Reiner, "The Attitude to *Bat Mitzvah* Ceremonies: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Responsa," *Netu'im*, 10 (2003), pp. 55–77 (Hebrew). For oppo-sition to confirmation for girls, see R. Aharon Walkin (1865–1942), *Responsa Zekan Aharon*, I (Pinsk, 1932), no. 6.)."

[95] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 114.

[96] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 114.

> they enter business life. On the other hand, watch the girls after Confirmation and see how eagerly and conscientiously most of them become and remain attendants at the divine service and prove powerful influences for religion at home! Disregarding altogether the false claim of mental maturity of the thirteen-year-old boy for a true realization of life's sacred obligations, I maintain that the Bar Mitzvah rite ought not to be encouraged by any Reform rabbi, as it is a survival of Orientalism like the covering of the head during the service; whereas the Confirmation, when made, as it should, by the rabbi to be an impressive appeal to the holiest emotions of the soul and personal vow of fealty to the ancestral faith, is a source of regeneration of Judaism each year, the value of which none who has the spiritual welfare of Israel at heart can afford to underrate or to ignore.[97]

Kohler, leader of the early American Reform Movement, argues that confirmation is more relevant to his time than the bar mitzvah ceremony because of its egalitarian nature, the challenge of keeping mitzvot as a working American, and the lack of "mental maturity" of 13 year olds. Kohler was a prominent rabbi and theologian who notably argued for enlightened approaches to education, spirituality, and thought. With limited interest from liberal rabbis in the early 20th century, bar mitzvah standards and practices fell. Parents did not see the purpose.

Bat Mitzvah

Introduction

In the early 20th century, confirmation ceremonies held in place of b'nai mitzvah ceremonies were met with growing criticism. Confirmation, in some places, became seen as more of a social event than a marker of religious commitment. Henrietta Szold, founder of Hadassah,[98] wrote in 1903: "The confirmation service for girls . . . fell far short of fulfilling the hopes it had aroused . . . It failed to stimulate the Jewish

[97] Kaufman Kohler, *American Reform Responsa* "30 Bar Mitzvah" Vol. XXIII, 1913, pp. 170-173.
[98] Women's Zionist Organization.

development of women because it was an assertion of the principle of female education in theory only. In practice it put up with a minimum of superficial knowledge and an apology for Jewish training."[99] It is possible that the criticism of group ceremonies paved the way for girls to have their own bat mitzvah.

In 1922, Judith Kaplan approached the bimah for what became known and widely celebrated as the first ever bat mitzvah at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ) in New York City. The daughter of Mordecai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, read from a printed Torah, not the scroll, in Hebrew and English after the main service ended. Mordecai Kaplan did not decide on the details of this milestone until the night before, when they practiced the blessings and readings at home. Judith Kaplan's bat mitzvah did not mirror the traditional boy's ceremony. It was also another 20 years until the next bat mitzvah at SAJ. [100]

Judith was called to the Torah at 12 and a half in accordance with the teaching in *Mishnah Nidah* 5:6, which states that a boy's vows are valid from the age of thirteen years and one day while a girl's vows are valid from the age of twelve years and one day." According to Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah,* a girl is considered a minor until she is 12. Even if she begins puberty and grows two pubic hairs before the age of 12, those are considered moles, and she is categorically a minor. Once a girl reaches the age of 12 and she manifests this sign of physical maturity, she is referred to as a נערה, or "maiden," for a period of six months, meaning she is still not a mature woman. From the end of this six-month waiting period and onward, she is referred to as a בוגרת, or a

[99] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: a History*, 304.
[100] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 109 and Golinkin, "The Participation of Jewish Women in Public Rituals and Torah Study," 51.

"mature woman." According to Maimonides, there is a transitional period of 6 months between maidenhood and maturity.[101]

If a girl is older than 12 years and a day and she does not develop these physical signs of maturity, even until the age of twenty, she is still considered a child. If during her 12th-20th year, she grows two pubic hairs, she is considered to be a maiden for six months. Only after this six month period is she to be considered to be a mature woman.[102]

Coming of Age Ceremonies for Girls

While Judith Kaplan is known to be the first girl to participate in the public rite of being called up to the Torah as an individual, she is not the first girl to have a Jewish coming of age ceremony, nor the first to be called a "bat mitzvah."[103]

Girls in Turin and Milan, starting in the second half of the 19th century, participated in a rite that mirrored Catholic confirmation. At synagogue, the girls would dress in white on a weekday and gather in front of the Holy Ark, the Chief Rabbi, and their families. Together, the girls recited a combination prayer of *Birkat HaGomel, Sheheheyanu, Kiddush HaShem*, biblical verses, and a declaration of faith.[104] The rabbi then blessed them. Historians compare this ceremony to the Catholic Catechism and First Communion ceremonies due to the attire, the group setting, prayer offered by clergy, and timing around Shavuot, which occurs around Pentecost in Christianity.[105]

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[101] Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Ishut 2:2
[102] Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Ishut 2:3.
[103] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 290.
[104] Golinkin, "Participation of Jewish Women in Public Rituals and Torah Study," 48.
[105] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 111.

Italian Jews brought this practice with them to Alexandria and Tunis in the 1930s.[106] These group confirmation ceremonies for girls were not individual b'not mitzvah ceremonies in which a girl read from the Torah or haftarah and had a festive meal.[107]

Mordechai Kaplan traveled to Rome a few months after his daughter's bat mitzvah in 1922 and witnessed a ceremony for girls that seemed to be the custom of the community. He describes:

> "I was very much pleased to see that they had the custom of taking cognizance of a girl's becoming bas mitzvah. They call it entering minyan at the age of twelve. The ceremony consists of having the father called up to the Torah on the Sabbath that the girl becomes bas mitzvah. She accompanies him to the bima and when he is through with the part, she recites the benediction of she-heheyanu. Before Musaph, the Rabbi addresses her on the significance of her entering minyan. On the Sabbath I was at the synagogue there were three girls and one boy who entered minyan."[108]

According to this account, girls and boys entered the minyan in the same ceremony. The father played a crucial role in the ceremony- calling her up to the Torah from the bimah, officially making her "bas mitzvah" while he was nearby. Although the girls did not read from Torah, they still publicly recited the Shehechiyanu blessing and became recognized as Jewish adults in this rite.

The bat mitzvah ceremony we know today developed from the Jewish coming of age and confirmation ceremonies of the 19th century.[109] Girls were not included in the first confirmation ceremonies, perhaps because they were seen as replacements for typical bar mitzvah ceremonies.[110]

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[106] Golinkin, "Participation of Jewish Women in Public Rituals and Torah Study," 48.
[107] David Golinkin, "Transformation of the Bar Mitzvah Ceremony," 314.
[108] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 292 -Quoted in part from Vinick and Reinharz, Today I Am a Woman, 258; and in part from Kessner, "Kaplan and the Role of Women," 351."
[109] Hilton, 238.
[110] Hilton, 296. Referring to the 1810 confirmation ceremony in Westphalia.

In 1817, at the “Beer Temple” in Berlin, Dr Eduard Kley, director of the Jewish Free School, led the first confirmation ceremony just for girls. Dr Kley publicly blessed the girls and gave a sermon in front of 10% of the entire Berlin Jewish population. Later that year, Dr Kley published a prayer book that did not include the morning blessings thanking God for “not making me a woman.”[111] Confirmation ceremonies held to honor girls were held in Hamburg in 1818, Dessau in 1821, and Munich in 1831. The Hamburg Temple was Germany’s first official Reform synagogue. The ceremony reflected its values of “refined and enlightened religious spirit,” with its young women representing “beauty and morality, progress and peace, purity and transcendence.”[112]

In France, a similar confirmation event for girls, called “initiation religieuse,” was first recorded in Bordeaux in 1842.[113] A group of thirty girls each read a profession of faith and one recited a prayer in a ceremony that was followed by a celebration with certificates and speeches. Two days later, a similar ceremony was held for boys.[114]

In Verona, Italy, a similar ceremony took place for girls at on Orthodox Synagogue in 1844. Girls wore white and were expected to know Hebrew, history, and “sacred catechism.” There is a lack of description of these ceremonies–it is unknown exactly which prayers were said and the exact age of the girls.

In Leipzig, Germany in 1847, Rabbi Adolf Jelline held a confirmation ceremony on Shavuot. Rabbi Jelline used the phrase, “Pflichtbare Tochter der Synagoge,” meaning “a dutiful daughter of the synagogue.” This could be seen as the earliest

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[111] Hilton, 299.
[112] Benjamin Baader, *Gender, Judaism, and Bourgeois Culture in Germany, 1800-1870*. (Indiana University Press, 2006), 40.
[113] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 302.
[114] Hilton, 302.

known reference to a “bat mitzvah” girl. In the Talmud, the phrase “bat mitzvah” referred to a woman who was obligated in the mitzvot. This was the first time a modern use of the phrase is tied to a coming-of-age ceremony.[115]

Other elements of the developing bar mitzvah ceremony were extended to girls in the 19th century, Rabbi Avraham Musafiyah (Jerusalem 1760—Split 1837) wrote,

> “He who makes a festive meal (seʿudah) on the day that his daughter reaches the age of mitzvot, i.e. 12 years and one day, it seems to me that it is a seʿudat mitzvah like that for a boy at 13 years and one day, for what is the difference? And this is a correct custom, and so do they make a seʿudat mitzvah and a day of joy in the cities of France and other towns for a boy and also for a girl.”[116]

Rabbi Musafiyah notably refers to the age of 12 and a day as the “age of mitzvot (bat mitzvah).” While there is no mention of any text-based ritual component, it is important to note the use of the phrase and the nonchalant notion of equity.

In the late 19th century, halakhic scholar Rabbi Yosef Ḥayim of Baghdad also writes about a girl reaching the age of 12 as a noteworthy milestone because of her new requirement to observe the mitzvot. He writes that it is not needed to make her a festive meal, but, “she should be happy that day and wear Shabbat clothes, and if she can afford it, she should wear a new garment and recite sheheḥeyanu and also intend [the blessing] to include her entry into the yoke of commandments.”[117]

As noted, there are examples of girls throughout the 19th century participating in ceremonies that marked their age of obligation to the mitzvot, literally making them bat mitzvah. However, a ceremony in which girls were called to the Torah like boys did not

[115] Hilton, 307.
[116] Golinkin, “Participation of Jewish Women in Public Rituals and Torah Study,” 48.
[117] Golinkin, “Participation of Jewish Women in Public Rituals and Torah Study,” 49.

develop until the 20th century. Even then, it took a few decades to spread because of considerable pushback and community norms.

Boys and girls did participate side by side in many synagogues in the mid 19th century, particularly as Reform Judaism spread, bringing with it its ideas of egalitarianism and mixed seating.

The first recorded bat mitzvah in which a girl was called to the Torah in an American Reform synagogue was held at the Chicago Temple in 1931.[118] By 1950, approximately a quarter of Reform rabbis officiated bat mitzvah ceremonies.[119] However, many Reform rabbis opposed individual ceremonies for girls and boys in favor of group confirmation ceremonies. Rabbi Israel Bettan, chair of the Rabbis' Responsa Committee, was against instating b'nai mitzvah ceremonies, which he viewed as overly lavish and "counter to tradition and for which there is no popular demand."[120]

Bat mitzvah began to spread by the 1970s, notably during the second wave of feminism and the ordination of Sally Preisand by HUC as the first woman rabbi in 1972. Some bat mitzvahs occurred on Friday nights, with the girls reading haftarah only.[121]

Return to Bar and Bat Mitzvah

In the 1920s and 1930s, synagogues took control of the formal education and preparation for bar mitzvah, leaving families to plan the parties and meals. In response, bar mitzvah began to rise again in popularity. Philadelphia's Keneseth Israel in

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[118] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 309.
[119] Hilton, 312.
[120] "ARR 86-89," Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1890-1982, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/arr-86-89/.
[121] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 109.

Philadelphia reinstated the bar mitzvah ceremony in 1924 and Shaarey Shomayim in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1933. In 1934, Mount Zion Temple in St. Paul, Minnesota, celebrated its first bar mitzvah in fifty years. Some historians point out that as Zionism grew as a movement, Hebrew revival gained in popularity,[122] and, by extension, the bar mitzvah returned to some communities. Nonetheless, by the 1950s, around 45% of surveyed Reform communities had no education requirement. The communities with standards usually required three years of Sunday school attendance, prior to a bar mitzvah.[123]

The reinstatement of the bar mitzvah ceremony on Shabbat mornings was encouraged in an effort to restore the "spirit of worship on the Sabbath Day."[124] In a responsum from 1953, Israel Bettan[125] described how the Reform movement essentially abolished the bar mitzvah "to make the practice of religion less of a routine, as well as to give it a more modern and more realistic tone…not to supplant but to supplement the confirmation service. The innovation has met with little opposition, since we are all eager to strengthen and enrich our Sabbath worship by all the means we can muster."

In 1979, the Reform *Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle* devoted an equal amount of space to bar and bat mitzvah as confirmation. The authors of *Gates of Mitzvah* disagreed with a decision made by Kaufman Kohler's 1913 conclusion, in which he described the bar mitzvah ceremony as obsolete in comparison to

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[122] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 221.
[123] Hilton, 383
[124] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "ARR 91-92" 1890-1982, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/arr-91-92/.
[125] President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

confirmation. Also in 1979, Rabbi Walter Jacob and the CCAR Responsa Committee wrote the following:

> "The Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremony possesses considerable meaning both to the young people and to their parents. It strengthens their bonds to Judaism and the synagogue, helps cement family ties, and marks a step in the religious education of each child. The nature of the ceremony and the participation of the child and his/her parents varies from congregation to congregation, but always includes reading from the Torah and the Haftara (on Shabbat morning), as well as a blessing by the rabbi. Bar and Bat Mitzvahs are normally conducted on Shabbat morning or at any other service at which the Torah is regularly read. The ceremony celebrates the entrance into the initial stages of adult life. It marks a change toward physical maturity and a new degree of intellectual maturity, as demonstrated by the curricula of the Middle School and a wide variety of ancillary programs. Most important of all, it demands responsibility for mitzvot within the framework of the modern family and society. The actual responsibility assumed may be modest, but the process of decision-making must now be undertaken in a more serious manner." [126]

According to the 1979 responsum, each ceremony serves a unique purpose. A bar or bat mitzvah is celebrated for an individual's role in the community and enforces the study of Hebrew. Bar and bat mitzvah were, "virtually, universally observed by Reform Jews."[127] Confirmation, still important, was seen as a group ceremony and the next step in the process of a young adult's Jewish education.[128]

Conclusion

During the modern era, the Jewish coming of age ceremony went through a series of innovations in order to best represent the trends and needs of the time. The ritual evolved as the fathers' *Baruch Sheptarani* blessing combined with an *aliyah* to the

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[126] "ARR 86-89," Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1890-1982, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/arr-86-89/.
[127] "ARR 86-89," Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1890-1982, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/arr-86-89/.
[128] "ARR 86-89"

Torah, the *se'udat mitzvah*, and the speech by the 16th century in Germany. By 1800, this custom spread throughout Germany, France, Eastern Europe, and Italy. The ceremony was transformed in the 19th century through the increased popularity of Confirmation and in the 20th century through the increased popularity of bat mitzvah. By the late 20th century Reform communities celebrated both b'nai Mitzvah and confirmation as significant coming-of-age rituals. (The Sephardic, Mizrahi, and Yemenite Jewish world adopted the bar mitzvah ceremony for 13 year olds in the 20th century.)

Part II- Identity Development in Adolescents

Introduction

The preparation for adolescent b'notai mitzvah ceremonies typically occurs at a crucial stage of human development. While adult b'notai mitzvah ceremonies are important milestones worthy of praise and recognition, the following section utilizes research on how identity formation occurs in adolescents aged 11-14. It outlines the history of how Jewish identity became a focus for Jewish education organizations beginning in the second half of the 20th century through today, and what exactly we mean when we say "Jewish identity." It also addresses key terms and psychological findings around development of racial identity because people of color make up a growing percentage of Jews in the United States.

There are many types of identity that are formed, wrestled with, and embraced during early adolescence as a child is preparing for a bet mitzvah. This section only focuses on religious and racial identity.

Identity Development and Intersectionality

The term "identity" is largely influenced by the work of 1950s psychologist Erik Erikson, who defined identity as "a subjective sense of continuous existence and coherent sameness."[129] Identity involves a connection to a larger group externally and an internalization of its values, culture, and philosophies. The formation of identity is

[129] Jonathan Krasner, "On the Origins and Persistence of the Jewish Identity Industry in Jewish Education," in *Beyond Jewish Identity: Rethinking Concepts and Imagining Alternatives*, ed. Jon A. Levisohn and Ari Y. Kelman (Academic Studies Press, 2019), 36.

influenced by individual characteristics, family composition, history, and sociopolitical context.[130] It also refers to how others may perceive and label an individual.

A sense of Identity emerges as children start to understand their concept of self. It remains a consistent aspect throughout different stages of life and includes a person's memories, experiences, relationships, and values. Identity formation, however, is a subjective and deeply personal experience. External and internal reflections interact together and influence a person in unique and complex ways, shaping who they are.

The foundation of identity is created early on in childhood. During puberty, the brain is developing an increased capacity for complex thinking and questioning, which leads to the ability to challenge values, attitudes, and beliefs inculcated by families, schools, and peers. While adolescents feel pressure to fit in with their peers, young teens often still feel a deep emotional connection to their parents and other adults, who serve as role models.[131] The change of social expectations and expanded cognitive abilities in adolescence allows for simultaneous reflection and observation, leading to experimentation and a self-creation of identity. Adolescents are now able to think about themselves in an abstract way. By asking themselves who they are, who they want to be, how they want to be perceived, what they believe, and who they want to surround themselves with, young teens begin to make sense of their identities.[132] It is important to note that while reflecting on identity first occurs in a meaningful way during puberty, identity is constantly in formation throughout one’s life.

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[130] Beverly Tatum, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (Basic Books, 2017), 98.
[131] Nydia Garcia Preto, “Transformation of the Family System During Adolescence," In *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives*, edited by Elizabeth A. Carter and Monica McGoldrick, 3rd ed. (Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 307.
[132] Beverly Tatum *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (Basic Books, 2017), 101.

An individual's identity is complex, comprising many identities. In order to gain a full understanding of one aspect of our identity, we have to look at how that identity interacts with other identities, such as race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, and religion (Figure 1.1). Kimberlee Crenshaw coined this idea, known as "intersectionality," in 1991.

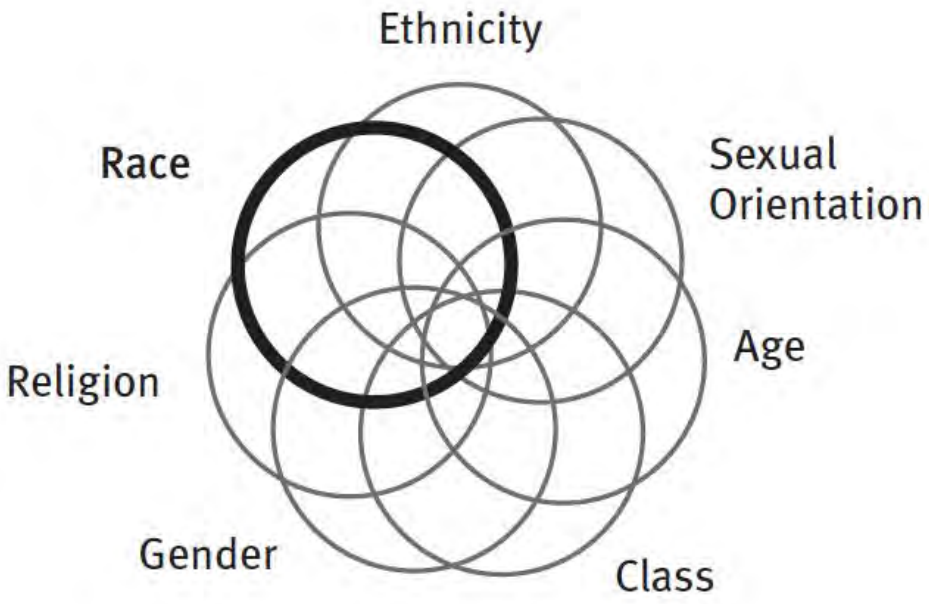

Figure 1.1[133]

Identities do not exist in a vacuum–they all work together to inform how a person is perceived and perceives themselves in a certain place and time. This perception is informed by the dominant culture and a history of ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized oppression.

[133] Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe and Bailey W. Jackson III, Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe and Bailey W. Jackson, *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: Integrating Emerging Frameworks, Second Edition* (NYU Press, 2012), 46.

When a person belongs to a dominant group (white, cis-gender, straight, Protestant, etc), they are more likely to see themselves reflected in leadership, politics, and mass-culture. According to Erikson, when one's image of self is similar to the image reflected by the dominant culture, there is harmony.[134] However, when there is dissonance, those identities stand out, capturing the attention of others, and by extension, the self. Holding onto one or multiple of these non-dominant identities (black, trans, queer, Jewish, etc), also known as "target" identities, creates a sense of being an "other." This "otherness" defines one's experience in group settings. In the US, people are defined as "other" based on categories of race or ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability.[135] They are less likely to see themselves reflected in leadership, politics, and mass-culture and become aware of their differences at an earlier age. People can hold both dominant and non-dominant identities at the same time. Understanding the complexities of intersectionality is important.

What is Jewish Identity?

In the 21st century, the term Jewish identity raises more questions than it answers. Is it something that is created out of nothing? Is it quantifiable? Is it an achievable task for Jewish education programs to take on? How does it exist alongside other identities? While there are infinite questions and a plethora of research that could help pinpoint the meaning of Jewish identity, there is no single discourse or set

[134] Tatum, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 175.
[135] Tatum, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?,* 98.

definition.[136] The popular phrase, Jewish Identity," in Jewish education practices, is used in a variety of settings and with a variety of meanings.

One discourse treats Jewish identity as producible, so resources are directed at "building" and "strengthening" identity. Some programs aim to create interventions to change already existing identities in a positive way. Most leaders in Jewish education treat identity as something a person already has, and they aim to transform weak Jewish identities into strong ones. According to researchers Jon A. Levisohn and Ari Y. Kelman, "having a 'strong Jewish identity' comes to mean, roughly, being more normatively involved in Jewish life, or more interested in or committed to Jewish causes, communities, knowledge, etc."[137] There is a preconceived objective standard of what having a Jewish identity means in Jewish institutional spaces.

The assumption that participation in Jewish education programs leads to a stronger Jewish identity seems true. Those who attend these programs are more likely to affiliate with institutions, engage in ritual, donate to Jewish organizations, and maintain a higher percentage of Jewish friends.[138] Jewish educational efforts should be celebrated for their ability to have a largely positive impact on the lives of young Jews. However, being able to objectively measure levels of Jewish involvement does not mean we can objectively measure the level of Jewish identity. Chances are, most children who enter a Jewish educational program already are told they have a Jewish identity. Therefore, Jewish identity is not just an educational goal, but a requirement for inclusion.

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[136] Levisohn and Kelman, *Beyond Jewish Identity*, vi.
[137] Levisohn and Kelman, *Beyond Jewish Identity*, ix.
[138] Levisohn and Kelman, *Beyond Jewish Identity*, x.

A sense of Jewish identity should be seen as one factor of an individual's entire being, inseparable and intertwined with all influences. Jewish practice contributes to Jewish identity as people reflect on the meaning behind their actions. Individuals participate in rituals based on the customs and norms of a community. In addition, it is important to note that Judaism is not just a religion, but a peoplehood. Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, in his 1934 *Judaism as a Civilization* claimed that a Jewish person could remain Jewish even if they rejected religious beliefs and practices.[139] Judaism includes religious practice, but it is not a requirement to belong to the Jewish people or to have a sense of peoplehood.

Literature on Jewish identity formation goes in the direction of separating ethnicity from religious identity. This results in a division between Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, and other types of Jewish cultural expressions. The stated goal of many Jewish educational programs is to unite these ethnicities and prioritize a sense of peoplehood, regardless of what families look like.

According to the 2020 Pew Research study, 42% of American Jews are married to non-Jews. Of those marriages, 61% took place from 2010-2020.[140] While there is an abundance of research on interfaith relationships, there is limited scholarship on interfaith identity development. The focus has been more on dating, marriages, divorce, and discourse, and less on the children who are raised in a home with more than one faith.[141]

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[139] Shulamit Reinharz, "The 'Jewish Peoplehood' Concept: Complications and Suggestions," in *Jewish Identities in a Changing World*, volume 22 (Brill, 2014), 66.
[140] Mitchell, Travis. "Jewish Americans in 2020 | Pew Research Center." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/.
[141] While there are growing numbers of families who are raising children with multiple faith systems, for the purpose of this research I am focusing on interfaith families in which children are raised within a single

Having an identity is not a zero-sum game. Someone can hold an identity that is in combination or conflict with other identities. The key question is not whether someone *has* an identity, but what conditions cause someone to act upon the identity in question instead of another identity or mix of identities. Individuals bring forward multiple and intersecting identities in different ways and at various points in their day, year, and life.[142] When researchers and educators think about Jewish identity, it is important that they not deny the role other identities play in shaping a person's values, decisions, and lifestyles.

History of Jewish Identity Education

Jewish leaders of the 20th century developed theories to create positive experiences for American Jews of all ages in order to counterbalance the effects of immigration and antisemitism on the Jewish psyche. For example, John Slawson, head of the American Jewish Committee from 1943-1967, wrote about Jewish belonging and its relationship to psychosocial development beginning in the 1920s.[143] He advocated for the retention of Jewish ethnic identity in the wake of melting pot Americanization in order to prevent psychological distress caused from pressures to assimilate. Following World War Two, Slawson attempted to create programs with the AJC to raise Jewish pride in the wake of growing ambivalence and self-deprecation. He created a pamphlet in hopes of encouraging Jews to connect the benefits of belonging to a group with

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faith system. Ariel Horvitz, "Childhood Experiences of Biracial and Interfaith Identity Formation." (PhD diss., The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 2018), 83.

[142]Levisohn and Kelman, *Beyond Jewish Identity*, ix.

[143] Jonathan Krasner, "On the Origins and Persistence of the Jewish Identity Industry in Jewish Education," 44.

higher self-esteem. It read, “The Jews of America… want us to help them obtain a balanced perspective with regard to their Jewish identity, and they want us to contribute not only to their personal morale, but to the group morale of the Jewish community.”[144] As head of the AJC, Slawson influenced the American Jewish community to embrace the mission of strengthening Jewish identity while integrating into broader American society.

Jewish identity theory informed Jewish education practices starting in the 1960s, as Jewish Americans began to fear the impact of college education on “Jewish survival.”[145] For example, in an address to the American Jewish Congress, Irving Greenberg, Orthodox rabbi and professor at Yeshiva University, called college campuses a “disaster area for Judaism, Jewish loyalty and Jewish identity.” He continued, “The failure of Jewish identity on campus must also be seen as a further revelation of the insufficiency and irrelevance of much of Jewish education in America.” He believed that college students were unprepared to commit to their Judaism in a universal setting and therefore, came under the “negative influence of the college experience on Jewish identity.” Greenberg worried about the threat of assimilation and outside influences on Jewish survival.[146] The Israel war in 1967 led to divisiveness among Jews on college campuses, leading many students on the left to question their affiliations.[147]

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[144] Krasner, 45.
[145] Ari Y Kelman, “Identity and Crisis: The Origins of Identity as an Educational Outcome,” in *Beyond Jewish Identity: Rethinking Concepts and Imagining Alternatives*, ed. Jon A. Levisohn and Ari Y. Kelman (Academic Studies Press, 2019), 66.
[146] Irving Greenberg, "Jewish Survival and the College Campus," *Congress Bi-Weekly* 35, no. 11 (October 29, 1968), 5.
[147] Kelman, “Identity and Crisis,” 73.

The anxiety over Jewish survival manifested in criticisms of American Jewish education programs. A new revival of Jewish education emerged that aimed to provide young Jews with the skills and information needed to avoid assimilation and universalist uniformity through fostering a sense of Jewish identity. This resurgence in Jewish education in the 1960s and 1970s occurred as a result of a new spotlight on personal identity in politics, culture, and science.

During this time, identity came to be seen as "under crisis" by Jewish psychologist Erik Erikson. In his, *Identity: Youth, and Crisis* Erikson argued that crisis, meaning self-doubt and confusion, is inherent to identity development. He wrote, "The search of youth is not for all-permissibility, but rather for new ways of directly facing up to what truly counts."[148] While Erikson's research was geared towards adolescents in college, his research influenced a resurgence of K-12 Jewish education.

The concept of shaping identity and providing students with the tools with which to hold onto their identity was seen as a way to relate to the needs and interests of a new generation of parents.[149] Vice-Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Simon Greenberg, said, "The fundamental goal of Jewish education has from time immemorial been that of training the young so that they would identify themselves as Jews and with the Jewish people (a) rather than merely by the accident of birth; (b) happily—rather than reluctantly; and (c) significantly rather than peripherally." He went on, "We would find it more difficult to agree on a definition of happy Jewish, self-identification, and most difficult to arrive at a consensus regarding the meaning of

[148] Erik H. Erikson, I*dentity Youth and Crisis* (National Geographic Books, 1994), 37.
[149] Kelman, "Identity and Crisis," 75.

significant Jewish self-identification."[150] Establishing strong Jewish identities through education in order to ensure Jewish survival was a clear goal, but the process to achieve it was not as clear.

In 1972, the American Jewish Committee created the "Colloquium on Jewish Education and Jewish Identity," served by Jewish community professionals, lay leaders, rabbis and scholars from various movements, psychologists, and educators. Together they asked how Jewish communities can "provide experience[s] and environment[s] conducive to the formulation of Jewish identity?" The formation of this Colloquium reflected the belief that strong Jewish education leads to strong Jewish identity, which in turn leads to Jewish survival. [151] The Colloquium included Geoffrey Bock, who wrote his dissertation on Jewish schooling and argued that Jewish schools are more equipped to influence "public" affinities than they are to shape "private" values. According to Bock, Jewish schools could create affiliations with Jewish institutions, but struggled to create an impact on individual identities, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings.[152]

Despite Bock's criticism of the combination of private and public, the relationship between education and identity became solidified by the mid 1970s.[153] The question was no longer if education and identity are connected, but how to make this connection most effective. The perception of Jewish education failing to prepare its students for college led to a desire to invest in a K-12 education. Educators believed that if students could learn the meaning of being Jewish in the 20th century, they would more easily be

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[150] Simon Greenberg, "New Approaches in Jewish Education," *Journal of Jewish Education 37*, no. 4 (1967): 164. https://doi.org/10.1080/0021642670370404.
[151] Kelman, "Identity and Crisis," 66.
[152] David Sidorsky, *The Future of the Jewish Community in America: A Task Force Report* (New York, NY: The American Jewish Committee, 1972), 8.
[153] Kelman, "Identity and Crisis," 79.

able to hold on to their identity through the impressionable college years. By this time, identity became the defining purpose of programs, mission statements, and investments in Jewish education.[154] Identity, through a strong foundational education, was supposed to help create a strong sense of self in the young Jews who would one day go off to college campuses.

Data on the Intersection of Jewish and Racial Identity

Jewish children are learning about their religious and cultural identities at the same time as they are coming to understand their racial identity. More than 1 in 7 children born in the United States today have parents from different ethnic-racial backgrounds.[155] According to the Pew research study, “Jewish Americans in 2020,” 92% of U.S. Jews describe themselves as White and non-Hispanic, while 8% say they belong to another racial or ethnic group. This report classifies approximately 5.8 million adults (2.4% of all U.S. adults) as Jewish. This includes 4.2 million (1.7%) who identify as Jewish by religion and 1.5 million Jews of no religion (0.6%). Of those surveyed, 1% identify as Black and non-Hispanic; 4% identify as Hispanic; and 3% identify with another race or ethnicity – such as Asian, American Indian or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander – or more than one race. In addition, 13% of respondents live in multiracial households and 4% live in single-race, non-White households. Therefore, the survey finds that 17% of U.S. Jewish adults live in a household where at least one person (adult or child) is

[154] Kelman, 80.
[155] Scott Seider et al., “How Parents in Multiethnic-Racial Families Share Cultural Assets with Their Children,” *Race and Social Problems* 15, no. 1 (January 5, 2023) https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-022-09384-1. 5.

Hispanic, Black, Asian, another race or multiracial. These numbers are growing as each generation is more racially diverse than the previous generation.[156]

13% of U.S. Jews live in multiracial households; 17% live in households where at least one person is Hispanic, Black, Asian, other race or multiracial

% of U.S. Jews who ...

	NET Jewish	Jews by religion	Jews of no religion
	%	%	%
Live in multiracial households	**13**	**9**	**23**
Respondent White (non-Hispanic), at least one other adult or child Hispanic, Black, Asian or other	9	6	16
Respondent Hispanic, Black, Asian or other, at least one other adult or child of a different race/ethnicity than respondent	4	3	7
Live alone or in households where all people have the same race/ethnicity	**87**	**91**	**77**
All adults and children White (non-Hispanic)	83	86	74
All adults and children another race/ethnicity	4	4	3
	100	**100**	**100**
Respondent lives in household where at least one person is Hispanic, Black, Asian, other race or multiracial	**17**	**14**	**26**

Note: Based on respondents who provided complete information about the race/ethnicity of all members of their household. Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults.
"Jewish Americans in 2020"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1.2[157]

However, according to *Counting Inconsistencies: An Analysis of American Jewish Population Studies, with a Focus on Jews of Color*, researchers estimate that Jews of Color were underrepresented in the Pew Study. Instead, they argue that Jews of Color represent at least 12-15% of American Jews, or about 1,000,000 of the United States'

[156] Mitchell, Travis. "Jewish Americans in 2020 | Pew Research Center." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/.
[157] Mitchell, Travis. "Jewish Americans in 2020 | Pew Research Center." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/.

7,200,000 Jews.[158] The actual number depends on who “counts” as a Jew and whether that is determined by the researcher or the individual.

What is Racial Identity?

For decades, scholarship of Jewish identity worked with a template that assumed “white” and “Ashkenazi" to be synonymous with “American Jews.” As noted above, this is no longer a reality. Each generation of Jews is more racially diverse than its predecessor. Jews can and do hold multiple identities at once–race and religion are just two examples of intersecting identities.

The term “racial identity development” is difficult to define because of the many influences on the study of race and its distinguishability from ethnicity. Beverly Tatum, author of *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, defines racial identity development as “the process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group.” She goes on to clarify between race and ethnicity:

> “An ethnic group is a socially defined group based on cultural criteria, such as language, customs, and shared history. An individual might identify as a member of an ethnic group (Irish or Italian, for example) but might not think of himself in racial terms (as White). On the other hand, one may recognize the personal significance of racial group membership (identifying as Black, for instance) but may not consider ethnic identity (such as West Indian) as particularly meaningful.”[159]

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[158] “Counting Inconsistencies: An Analysis of American Jewish Population Studies With a Focus on Jews of Color - Jews of Color Initiative,” Jews of Color Initiative, August 1, 2023, https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/research-article/counting-inconsistencies-an-analysis-of-american-jewish-population-studies-with-a-focus-on-jews-of-color/. Counting Inconsistencies is a meta-study that examined 15 local and community studies (Los Angeles 1997, Seattle 2000, Phoenix 2002, Atlanta 2006, Denver Boulder 2007, Philadelphia 2009, Chicago 2010, Cleveland 2011, New York 2011, Miami 2014, Boston 2015, Pittsburgh 2017, SF Bay Area 2017, and Washington DC 2017); seven national population studies (National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) 1970, NJPS 1990, National Survey of Religious Identity 1990, NJPS 2000, Heritage and Religious Identification 2002, Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews 2013, and the American Jewish Population Project), and four population specific studies (Generation Now, Generation Next, Jewish Futures Project, and Hillel International Research on College Students).

[159] Beverly Tatum, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?,* 96.

Scholars attempted to refine how the terms “race,” “ethnicity,” “racial identity,” and “ethnic identity” are used in psychology-based research settings. These terms have been expanded to include the reality that race is a social construct, void of exclusively biological or genetic evidence. Race is based on perceived differences and social distance between sociocultural groups, measurable by features of intermarriage rates, degrees of segregation, and attitudes of other races.[160]

Ethnic identities develop through kinship and in-group structures. Racial identities develop in response to societal structures, such as laws, customs, and stereotypes. In the United States, where society consciously and unconsciously values others based on their racial group membership, race and racial socialization is a significant component of an adolescent’s self-conceptualization.[161]

The idea and perception of race develop in various stages throughout childhood. While young children can comment on skin color, the idea that race is unchangeable (race constancy), develops around 6 or 7 years old.[162] Young children are able to learn and question racial stereotypes. However, adolescents of color in the US are more likely to question and engage in conversations, both internally and externally, around race because they belong to the non-dominant group. Specifically, black children internalize messages received from society at an intensified rate as they are exposed to a predominately white culture with Eurocentric standards of beauty.[163] As they enter

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[160] Stephen M Quintana, "Racial and Ethnic Identity: Developmental Perspectives and Research," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 54, no. 3. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.54.3.259., 259.
[161] Janet E. Helms, “Racial Identity and Racial Socialization as Aspects of Adolescents’ Identity Development,” in *SAGE Publications, Inc. eBooks*, 2003, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233642.n7, 2.
[162] Tatum, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*), 116.
[163] Tatum, 397.

adolescence, children of color are capable of understanding their own sense of self as well as a new understanding of how the experience of their *people* differs from the experience of white people. In short, they have a new awareness of the significance of racism on their group.[164] By middle school, children are able to carefully examine their own racial and ethnic identity. The onset of this self-discovery depends on the demographics of an adolescent's school, neighborhood, family, and community and their level of exposure to members of different racial groups in person and online.[165]

Black children, for example, also begin to define their identity based on the different stereotypes they witness and internalize. They often begin to value "authentically black" style, speech, and dress and begin to distance themselves from the white cultural associations that make up the norm. Later in this stage, the adolescent seeks out ways to learn about their history and culture through peers and role models. Access to other black people helps the young adult define their own sense of racial identity and affirm their sense of self.[166] According to identity-based scholarship, primarily white schools can work against the positive development and strong racial identity formation of children of color. These schools, which formally and informally maintain the socially constructed barriers of racism, lack opportunities for young people to engage in "same-race peer relationships."[167] While there are benefits to "cross-race" friendships, including interracial understandings, having friends of a similar minority

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[164] Tatum, 126.
[165] Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor et al., "Ethnic and Racial Identity During Adolescence and Into Young Adulthood: An Integrated Conceptualization," *Child Development* 85, no. 1 (January 1, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12196, 27.
[166] Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Family Life and School Experience: Factors in the Racial Identity Development of Black Youth in White Communities," *Journal of Social Issues* 60, no. 1 (February 11, 2004): 117–35, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-4537.2004.00102.x., 119.
[167]Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Family Life and School Experience" 132.

background is important in maintaining success and resolution in issues related to racial identity. Educators largely lack a framework of racial identity development needed to help foster a positive upbringing and make needed interventions on behalf of all students.[168]

Multiracial individuals are the fastest growing population in the US, but research on the group's identity development is limited.[169] From the scholarship that does exist, we can glean that multiracial youth have to navigate social groupings in a way that differs from monoracial youth. Multiracial youth have a higher rate of identity exploration and affirmation than white youth. During their upbringing, they experience more confusion and less commitment to their ethnic identity than the dominant monoracial group, but less identity affirmation than other target monoracial groups.[170] Adolescents of mixed race heritage shape their self view by a number of factors, including by their socialization, community, gender, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, and neighborhood. Their racial identification and affiliations change over time based on age, context, region, parent background, and external perception.[171] Multiracial individuals usually receive external messages based on "non-white" appearances. During adolescence, there is a spotlight on physical appearance, causing an emphasis on the question of identity.[172]

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[168] Beverly Daniel Tatum, 133.
[169] Sycarah Fisher et al., "Examining Multiracial Youth in Context: Ethnic Identity Development and Mental Health Outcomes," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 43, no. 10 (August 7, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0163-2. 1689.
[170] Fisher et al, "Examining Multiracial Youth in Context," 1695.
[171] Michael Song, "Learning From Your Children: Multiracial Parents' Identifications and Reflections on Their Own Racial Socialization," *Emerging Adulthood* 7, no. 2 (September 4, 2018): 119–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696818795248, 2.
[172] Helms, "Racial Identity and Racial Socialization," 3.

Parents are one of the most influential forces in a child's identity development. However, research shows that "ethnic–racial socialization is clearly a bidirectional process shaped by parents and children." A child's development prompts parents to share their own values and reflect on their own upbringing and identifications. This is especially the case for parents of a dominant group who raise children of a target group.[173] White parents are more likely to encourage children to value character traits and avoid any mention of race in favor of a color-blind mentality. Parents can play a key role in helping their adolescent children make sense of the world.

Conclusion

Discovering one's voice poses a significant challenge for young adults amid pressures exerted by parents, society, and peers. Striking a balance between individuality and societal expectations becomes paramount as their developing brains navigate the complexities of developing their racial, ethnic, moral, spiritual, cultural, gender, and sexual identities. These questions of self-arise as many Jewish adolescents are preparing for their bet mitzvah ceremony. In addition to asking, "Who am I?," students ask themselves, "What does it mean to be a Jewish adult?" and "Is a Jewish adult who I want to/imagine myself becoming?"

Jewish educational institutions commit themselves to fostering a strong sense of "Jewish identity" in their students. Programs help children create foundations of understanding that they continuously build upon as they are capable of more complex thoughts. By learning ritual, history, and values with their peers, young Jews gain

[173] Song, "Learning From Your Children," 3.

exposure to one avenue through which to operate in the world. However, it is impossible to separate one identity from all others.

Jewish identity can exist even when it isn't the dominant aspect of one's identity. Focusing on Jewish identity alone “curtails our ability to recognize complex expressions of Jewishness, which are often articulated in concert with beliefs and practices associated with other religious and cultural traditions.”[174] As each cohort of b’notai mitzvah students is more racially diverse than its predecessors it is essential not only to envision the world we wish to see, but to confront its current reality. Currently, Jewish educators largely lack a framework of racial identity development needed to help foster a positive upbringing and make needed interventions on behalf of all students. How can the preparation for a bet mitzvah ceremony be an opportunity to support adolescents in their exploration of multiple identities?

[174] Samira K. Mehta, "You are Jewish if You Want to Be: The Limits of Identity in a World of Multiple Practices," in *Beyond Jewish Identity: Rethinking Concepts and Imagining Alternatives*, ed. Jon A. Levisohn and Ari Y. Kelman (Academic Studies Press, 2019), 18.

Part III- Contemporary Considerations Related to Reform Bet Mitzvah

Introduction

During the modern era, the Jewish coming of age ceremony went through a series of innovations in order to best represent the trends and needs of the time. The ritual evolved as the fathers' *Baruch Sheptarani* blessing combined with an *aliyah* to the Torah, the *se'udat mitzvah*, the speech to form the proto type of today's bet mitzvah ceremony. Parental involvement, learning, celebrating, and reflecting remain key areas of focus. The coming-of-age ceremony continued to spread and evolve into a major milestone of contemporary Jewish life. The bet mitzvah service and the accompanying party are more popular now than in any other time in history. There are also more Jews of Color in our communities than in any other time in history.

Jewish communal leaders help students mark this major rite of passage by supporting families and helping them make sense of what it means to be a bet mitzvah in the modern world. In the past decades, efforts have been made to better include students with parents of interfaith backgrounds, students of all genders, and students with individualized learning needs. Meetings with mentors (usually rabbis or cantors) provide an opportunity for students and their families to ask questions and personalize elements of the service. Recently, leaders are starting to use the opportunity of bet mitzvah mentor meetings to help students of color understand how their racial and Jewish identities inform the "adult" whose emergence they celebrate on their bet mitzvah day.

In 2012, a group of Reform congregational professionals, lay leaders and educators from various backgrounds joined together to rethink and innovate the bet mitzvah experience. This "B'nai Mitzvah Revolution" (BMR) sought to create new "models of preparation and engagement" that appealed to students and their families. They met with the goal of generating new ideas for rituals that congregations could use to better connect families to Jewish tradition and community in the 21st century.[175] In addition, the process was used to connect congregational professionals and lay leaders across the country and inspire the sharing of resources, models, and results.

Beyond the ceremony itself, the leaders of BMR hoped the process of preparing for bet mitzvah could serve as a jumping off point for long-term Jewish engagement and combat the high religious school dropout rate. Isa Aaron, BMR co-leader and former professor of Jewish education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, described the program: "It's not just about memorizing Torah portions…Families should understand what bar and bat mitzvahs are and why they are important."[176] Aaron's statement implies that 21st century b'notai mitzvah ceremonies lacked deeper meaning and represented a culmination, and not a jumping off point, of a young adult's Jewish learning. BMR was created to add more meaning to the lives of the student, the family, and the community. Aron said, "For some, success equals increased engagement of b'nai mitzvah students and their families; for others, a higher percentage of retention

[175] "B'nai Mitzvah Revolution," n.d., http://innovations.bnaimitzvahrevolution.org/about/.
[176] Kylie Ora Lobell, "Students Connecting with Growing B'nai Mitzvah Revolution," *Jewish Journal,* June 26, 2016, https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/186676/.

after bar or bat mitzvah; for others, a greater sense of community; and for some, a mixture of all of these, and possibly others."[177]

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was organized into six categories of innovation:

- **"Becoming an Adolescent**: Innovations that support children and their families by focusing on the social, emotional and spiritual changes and milestones that accompany adolescence.
- **Family Engagement:** Innovations that work to engage whole families in Jewish learning and practice.
- **Innovative Rituals:** Innovations that add new rituals into the b'nei mitzvah process or inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to Torah (learning) and avodah (prayer or ritual).
- **Mentoring**: Innovations that connect b'nei mitzvah students and/or families with others in the community, who will nurture, teach and guide them.
- **Participating in Community:** Innovations that infuse the b'nei mitzvah preparation with personal meaning, while maintaining the communal nature of the congregation and the worship service.
- **Repairing the World:** Innovations that inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to g'milut chasadim (loving acts of kindness), tikkun olam (social justice)."[178]

Each category has its own page on the BMR website that includes 10-19 innovative programs run at different Reform congregations across the US. While some of these six categories are centered around contemporary themes associated with b'notai mitzvah, others have been relevant for centuries. As detailed in Part I, themes of transitioning to maturity (Becoming an Adolescent), fathers' involvement (Family Engagement), determining readiness (Mentoring), and communal duties (Participating in Community) have been the focus of Jewish conversations about b'notai mitzvah since the days of the Mishnah.

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[177] Julie Bien, "B'nai Mitzvah Revolution," *Jewish Journal*, December 18, 2013, https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/125485/.
[178] "B'nei Mitzvah Revolution," Union for Reform Judaism, October 5, 2016, https://urj.org/bnei-mitzvah-revolution.

In order to better understand contemporary considerations that go into b'notai mitzvah ceremonies, I interviewed 5 rabbis and Jewish spiritual leaders in the field: Rabbi Isaama Goldstein-Stoll, Rabbi Kelly Levy, Rabbi Mira Rivera, Rabbi Ellen Lippman, and Sabrina Sojourner. Each of these leaders has officiated and helped prepare for innovative bet mitzvah ceremonies that considered the race, ability, and identity development of the child, as well as the child's family composition.

Becoming an Adolescent

The centuries-old conversation on when a child comes of age remains relevant in the modern age. As described in Part I, 20, not 13, is specified as the determining age for matters that reflect belonging to a community and the age for assuming public responsibilities and roles in the biblical era.

Throughout the Jewish world over many centuries, the age of maturity was accepted as 13 and a day for boys and 12 and a day for girls, marking the time when they became legally responsible for their own religious acts. These ages continue to serve as a firm transitional period into Jewish adulthood, even in light of contemporary psychological research on adolescent development, the established modern concept of childhood, and a more robust cognizance of puberty. While 20th century reformers encouraged the Jewish community to replace bar mitzvah ceremonies with confirmation ceremonies held at 16, a more developmentally appropriate age to mark the transition into adulthood, 13 remains the accepted year to "come of age." Reform Judaism's

commitment to egalitarianism led them to fix the point of bet mitzvah to the age of 13 for students of all genders.[179]

Modern Jewish communities view bet mitzvah as a point of importance in an ongoing transition to adolescence. They ascribe meaning to the changes that occur as a result of their students preparing for the bet mitzvah process. Jewish communities give 11- and 12-year-olds a new type of accountability in preparing for the ceremony. The ability to engage with Torah in new ways represents both an intellectual and spiritual transition. According to Rabbi Isaama Stoll, "the age of 13 marks the transition [of] their relationship to the text itself. They get to have a piece of Torah that is their piece of Torah, that they get to figure out what it means to them, and then argue with the rabbi and the parents about why they have the interpretation that they have… So, it really is a spiritual and emotional and even an intellectual transition that most kids don't fully understand until they actually go through it." The age of 13 is not special because of the changes that occur; these changes occur because communities trust 13-year-olds with sacred text.

In addition to wrestling with Torah, in many communities, students lead all or part of a Shabbat morning service in front of their friends and family, often for the first time. Rabbi Ellen Lippman said, "I really came to think that 13 is a great age. I was amazed over and over again, at the difference between seeing a kid a month before being a bar mitzvah and [again] two months later…Very often it was a time of physical growth, so like you're three feet taller than you were, but it was also …clearly a player in a maturing process through requiring a lot of concentrated learning, right on top of school."

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[179] "5774.2" Central Conference of American Rabbis, February 26, 2018, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/bar-bat-mitzvah-observance-prior-age-thirteen/.

Regardless of the quality of the bet mitzvah, Rabbi Lippman noted a clear change in her students after the ceremony because of how hard the students worked for months. She explained that a major part of the transformation occurred as a result of being celebrated by a large group for an individual achievement. She added, “It's about a certain kind of cusp of change and development. And about achievement and possibility…and hopefully, it's a little bit about cementing some Jewish identity.”

B’notai mitzvah ceremonies occur during the stage of puberty in which children develop the ability to engage in more complex thoughts. Rabbi Stoll explained, “So you're kind of teaching the critical thinking piece as they go along by asking…questions and slowly unwrapping some of their assumptions.” Even if 13 is not a clear indicator of adulthood, Jewish communities embrace the ability of many young adults to engage in more complicated subject matters.

But what about becoming bet mitzvah before the age of 13? A Reform Responsa from 2013 asked if a synagogue’s policy could be flexible and allow for the bar or bat mitzvah of a child who has not yet reached the age of 13. The Responsa Committee responded, “‘Bar Mitzvah’ and ‘Bat Mitzvah’ are terms of status: they indicate that the person in question is a Jewish adult, responsible for fulfilling the obligations (mitzvot) that define the covenant between God and the Jewish people. One becomes Bar-or Bat Mitzvah simply upon reaching the age of Jewish majority.” The authors explain that Jewish ritual majority is determined by chronological age, and not physical or intellectual ability because it reflects the historical norm. However, the authors argue, “Like all other rules, especially rules that have complex histories of development, it may admit of exceptions. But because we take our standards seriously, those exceptions should be

weighty, substantive, and rare." For example, the committee is okay with "situations of urgency" that would allow a family to move the date up, and not okay with "reasons of convenience," such as a family vacation, or to appease orthodox family members who would prefer a girl to become bat mitzvah at 12.[180]

Family Engagement

Parental involvement has always been a crucial component to this Jewish coming of age rite, ritual, and ceremony. As detailed in Part I, the earliest hint that thirteen and a day is the age at which religious obligation went into effect for all males is found in *Midrash B'reishit Rabbah*.[181] The text details directions for a father to declare his son is responsible for his own actions in a blessing known as *Baruch She-p'tarani*: "'Blessed are You Who has absolved me from the punishment of this one.'"[182] Until the prayer was recited when the child turned 13 and a day, the father bore the burden of consequences and the obligation to ensure his son adhered to Jewish laws. The blessing emphasized the shift in parental responsibilities for their minor child. Eventually, a set ritual formed as the father's blessing combined with the child's first time reading from the Torah scroll. The speech and party were added to the custom by the 16th century, as the responsibility of the day became shared between the father and the child; the father responsible for the party, the child for the ritual.[183]

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[180] "5774.2" Central Conference of American Rabbis, February 26, 2018, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/bar-bat-mitzvah-observance-prior-age-thirteen/.
[181] Marcus, *Jewish Life Cycle,* 87.
[182] Bereshit Rabbah 63:10.
[183] Patricia Keer Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America*, *Rutgers University Press eBooks*, 2019, https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813575964., 3.

While the coming-of-age ceremony is an important milestone for the young adult, who serves as the focus for the celebration and ritual, parent(s) remain the driving force of today's b'notai mitzvah. As Jews immigrated to America in the 19th and 20th centuries, they questioned how they could assimilate into American culture while holding on to their Jewish ethnic culture. Parents enrolled their sons, and later daughters, in educational programs to help them become bar mitzvah. The ceremonies became opportunities for parents to show off their American-born children who remained loyal and learned in Judaism.[184]

In the 21st century, b'notai mitzvah ceremonies continue to serve parents as a way to boast about their child's ability to engage with tradition in the modern era. In addition to celebrating their child, parents view the ceremony as a reflection of their parenting skills that contributed to the child's accomplishments up to that day. B'notai mitzvah ceremonies are viewed as a culmination of Jewish education. Even though the teaching of the majority of the Jewish content happens in classrooms and with tutors, parents feel a sense of ownership. Jewish educational institutions take the responsibility for teaching the students and preparing them for b'notai mitzvah because they cannot assume one or more parents has the requisite knowledge.[185]

And yet, parents can have high expectations for their children. Parents who had their own bet mitzvah in an era that did not prioritize mental health often feel as if their child has no choice. According to Sabrina Sojourner, "they just take the same attitude that their parents took, which is, 'You HAVE to do this.'" She continued, "maybe if we give them a choice, they may actually want to do this very big transition. Some of [the

[184] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America*, 3.
[185] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America*, 86.

parents] are actually traumatized by their own experience." Sojourner represents a growing number of clergy who let the student, not the parents, decide whether or not they will become bet mitzvah.

Students often feel pressure from their parents. Rabbi Levy explains, "it's part of their family. [Becoming bet mitzvah] is something their parents did or something that their grandparents did. It is important to them to feel like they are doing something that their family did." Many children do not want to embarrass their families as they begin to see themselves as adults. However, the pressure can become overwhelming, and the process can create a disdain for Judaism, creating the opposite of the desired effect.

Parents can play a main role in supporting students at home, where the majority of the preparation takes place. While they may not teach the student, they can coordinate lessons, drive from place to place, help them with their speech, pay tutors, determine the size of the celebration, and determine how Judaism is (or is not) experienced in the home.[186] Ensuring that these tasks get done falls to the parent(s), who also take on a lot of stress in preparation for the event.

Each family is unique. Congregational leaders encounter disruptions when the needs and wants of the parents are in conflict. These differences can be exacerbated by divorce, regardless of the parents' individual religious identity. In the 21st century, b'notai mitzvah ceremonies of children of divorce are commonplace and require careful intentional planning from the rabbi and synagogue professionals. Most parents, married or not, attempt to present a united front during the symbolic ritual that showcases the continuation of Judaism from one generation to the next.[187]

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[186] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America*, 43.
[187] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America*, 44.

Parents model a relationship to Judaism, regardless of their own religious identity. The percentage of Jews who married non-Jews began to grow incrementally from the 1970s through today, where the current rate is approximately 50%.[188] By 1977, the Reform movement allowed Jews of patrilineal descent to have b'nai mitzvah ceremonies without first needing to "officially" convert. The CCAR Responsa Committee said, "When a couple has made every effort to educate their child as a Jew and intend him to live a Jewish life…we should welcome this lad and accept his Bar Mitzvah as a further step to becoming an adult Jew. That occasion should be treated like any other Bar/Bat Mitzvah."[189] The Central Conference of American Rabbis declared that the child of one Jewish parent, mother or father, is of Jewish descent. They clarified their stance by adding, "This presumption of Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people."[190] These public acts include the study and participation in a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony. Children of interfaith marriages are seen as Jewish as long as they are raised intentionally Jewish.

However, restrictions applied to the role of non-Jewish parents during b'nai mitzvah ceremonies. The 1983 responsum states, "A Gentile may not participate in any of the rituals surrounding the reading of the Torah, since this act, which requires a minyan of Jews, is one of the central liturgical means by which the community affirms its existence as a covenant people."[191] However, in recent years, non-Jewish parents

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[188] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America*, 106.
[189] "CARR 237-238," Central Conference of American Rabbis. https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/carr-237-238/.
[190] "On Patrilineal Descent Archives" Central Conference of American Rabbis, n.d., https://www.ccarnet.org/responsa-topics/on-patrilineal-descent/.
[191] "On Patrilineal Descent Archives - Central Conference of American Rabbis," n.d.

increasingly play a role in their child's ceremony, including reciting the Torah blessing. Individual rabbis and communities decide if a non-Jewish parent can say the *aliyah* blessing (Who has sanctified *us* with God's commandments and commanded *us*), wear a *tallit*, sit on the bimah, open the ark, hold the Torah, or pass the Torah. The latter symbolizes passing down of the teachings of Judaism from one generation to the next. It is typical for parents to receive the second-to-last *aliyah* (the child receives the last one) during the Torah service. Individual communities decide how to honor the role the non-Jewish parent has played in preparing their child for the ceremony, while preserving Jewish tradition.

Regardless of the parent's identity, all families are celebrated during b'notai mitzvah ceremonies. Some rabbis do so through extra-liturgical prayers or creative additions to the Shabbat service.[192] Some rabbis make no distinction at all. At Congregation Beth Israel in Austin, Texas, non-Jewish parents play an equal role on the bimah to Jewish parents. According to Rabbi Kelly Levy, "whether somebody is Jewish or not, they are bringing this person to Torah. So even if they're not a Jewish parent, they've still been a part of this kid's life and are bringing this kid to this moment. So we incorporate non-Jews in every way that you would incorporate a Jewish person." Rabbi Levy added, "We take our cue from the family." She makes decisions based on the comfort levels of individual families.

The Mishnah and the Talmud teach that a Jewish father must teach his son to fulfill the mitzvot when he can do them properly, and not at a specific age. Starting in the Middle Ages, boys became responsible for their own mitzvot and sins at the age of 13

[192] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America*, 115

and a day and their father said the *Baruch She-p'tarani* blessing. While Reform Jewish parents tend not to prioritize the role of mitzvot and sins in daily life, they still play a major role in preparing their children for b'nai mitzvah ceremonies. In the 21st century, engagement in Judaism is often a choice for families. By electing to have their children go through the process, parents are affirming their own and their child's connection to Jewish tradition.

Mentoring and Determining Preparedness

The bar mitzvah rite developed out of different ritual components that emerged in varied regions over many years. Throughout Jewish history, scholars debated what it meant for a son to be "responsible" for himself.

Eventually, the rite came to involve a boy reaching the age of 13 and a day, making him obligated (and no longer exempt) to perform mitzvot required of adult males, including being counted in a minyan, donning *t'fillin*, being called to the Torah, and leading prayers. In Reform Jewish spaces today, following mitzvot, wearing ritual garments, and daily prayer are not requirements or expectations for the bet mitzvah student. Therefore, the day marks the transition of children of all genders into symbolic adulthood. Jewish communal leaders, alongside parents, put time, money, and resources into making sure the b'notai mitzvah students are prepared for the big day.

Students sometimes lead the entire Shabbat morning service, including the Torah reading section–recite the prayers before and after reading Torah, chant from the Torah, chant haftarah, deliver a speech, and lead the *Kiddush*. Some don a *tallit* and/or *t'fillin*. Some do a combination, part, none, or all of those components. Rabbis, cantors,

congregations, and families decide what students are responsible for during the bet mitzvah ceremony.

Before the student ascends the bima, clergy determine if the student is “ready” for the milestone. In Talmudic times and the early medieval era, a young boy was not required to reach the age of 13 and a day in order to perform several ritual commandments, including putting on *t’fillin* and being called to read the Torah with its blessings. Instead, a boy could complete these tasks as soon as he was mentally and physically capable and properly prepared by his father.[193] Today, “readiness” is determined based on the individual student and community.

Rabbi Kelly Levy determines readiness by assessing the social and emotional needs of the student, taking into consideration external factors.” She said, “Has there been a major transition or challenge in the family in the last year or two?… It's a lot about how they're feeling in that conversation and checking in with them and making sure that they know that the door is open.” In order to help quell some of the fears, Rabbi Levy holds meetings for families starting in the 4th grade. She also requires students to go to each other’s bet mitzvah service to see the diversity in what students do on the bimah. Rabbi Kelly said that it helps, “students understand that you see how this kid read all that Hebrew and then this one read a lot of English and this one just did the Torah blessings and this one chanted 10 verses of haftarah. It's just so different. There's an array and a spectrum of what people do and wherever you are is fine.” It is impossible to determine a unified standard of readiness when students are capable of different achievements.

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[193] Marcus, *The Jewish Life Cycle*, 83.

All of the rabbis I spoke to mentioned officiating or observing innovative approaches to b'notai mitzvah ceremonies for students with varying learning needs. In a 1963 responsum, the CCAR declared,

> "In Reform congregations, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony is not taken to have a strict formal and legal meaning as it might have in an Orthodox congregation. The six hundred and thirteen commandments do not become more a part of the life of a child after this Sabbath than they were before. The Bar Mitzvah is taken to be a symbol much like the general spiritual symbol associated with Confirmation, namely, that it is a taking on of a new and stronger sense of ethical and spiritual responsibility, of becoming adult in mind, heart, and conscience….We would rather judge the ceremony on its spiritual and ethical side."[194]

Jewish communities today make careful efforts to make sure any student who wants a bet mitzvah can have one. The bet mitzvah of a young person with a disability requires intentionality and understanding. This is not primarily a Jewish or congregation consideration, but rather part of a broader sociological inquiry into how to best allow for the inclusion of students of all varying intellectual and developmental levels. Preparing a student with a disability for a bet mitzvah is now commonplace but looks different based on the individual student and community.[195]

Embedded in the justification for the bar mitzvah party is a story about a person with a disability. Isaac Luria's 16th century *Sefer Yam Shel Shelomoh*, a primary text in the historical study of bar mitzvah, includes an insert from the Talmudic story of the blind Rav Yosef. The rabbis originally said a blind person is not obligated in mitzvot. Ultimately, Rav Yosef replied that he would prefer to be obligated because "One who is

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[194] "RRR 23-27" Central Conference of American Rabbis, February 22, 2018. https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/rrr-23-27/.
[195] Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah: A History,* 403.

commanded and performs a mitzvah is greater than one who is not commanded and performs." He said, "I will host a festive meal for the rabbis."[196]

The contemporary innovations specifically around including people with disabilities in Jewish coming of age ceremonies is an important topic that requires careful study and analysis that is outside the scope of this thesis.

The relationship between all b'notai mitzvah students and their rabbi is largely dependent on the size and style of the congregation. A team of mentors, tutors, parents, rabbis, cantors, and educators all contribute to the process. They help them practice public speaking, learn Hebrew, review trope, write *divrei Torah*, make meaning of the milestone, and get them ready to speak publicly, often for the first time. Each community determines what and how Jewish content is learned, balancing standards from the religious tradition with needs of the individual student. Rabbis and congregation professionals also attempt to create meaning that they hope will continue beyond the bet mitzvah day.

Religious school programs are meant to train students for b'notai mitzvah ceremonies while simultaneously avoiding the assumption that they serve as "graduations." Rabbi Goldstein-Stoll said, "A lot of my chanting learning is done through recordings that they take home, and a lot of my focus is on [asking] 'how is this meaningful?' and 'What does it mean for me to connect to Judaism?" Working on the speech, Rabbi Goldstein-Stoll says she "really tries to find something substantive that they can latch on to" by asking questions related to the text of Judaism more broadly. Material learned in classrooms can have everything or nothing to do with the bet

[196] Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 87a:4

mitzvah day, yet they hold tremendous importance in shaping the foundation for engagement in lifelong Jewish education.

Mitzvah Projects

Nowhere is Reform Judaism's emphasis on "repairing the world" more prevalent than in the ubiquity of the bet mitzvah project. The "B'nai Mitzvah Revolution" describes these projects as, "innovations that inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to *g'milut chasadim* (loving acts of kindness), *tikkun olam* (social justice)."[197]

When bar mitzvah ceremonies first began to be regulated, many congregations required families to give gifts to community charity funds. In 1638: "We have established as a binding rule that every householder from here, whose son begins to learn Torah, shall give a donation to this Society of 18 tefalim [small coins], and also that anyone who makes a bar mitzvah meal for his son must also give a donation of 18 tefalim to this Society."[198] In late 20th century America, these projects took off as ways to support Soviet Jewry. The bet mitzvah student would write to their counterpart who was unable to practice their Judaism due to the nature of communist rule. The community would place a tallit and prayer book on an empty chair to symbolize the counterpart's presence in the ceremony and the student would speak about their relationship during the speech.[199] Today, mitzvah projects are ways for students to engage in embodied Judaism. Students can engage in direct service or advocacy work, choosing to engage in the systematic or symptomatic social justice issues of their

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[197] "B'nei Mitzvah Revolution," Union for Reform Judaism, October 5, 2016, https://urj.org/bnei-mitzvah-revolution.
[198] Hilton, *Bar MItzvah: A History,* 449.
[199] Hilton, *Bar MItzvah: A History,* 452

community. They can serve food at shelters, lobby their local representative, start a goods drive, spend time with the elderly, or volunteer at animal shelters.[200] These projects help create a sense of responsibility, accountability, and a chance to engage in the world outside of their comfort zone.

Innovations Related to Jews of Color

Over a decade ago, Reform Jewish educators, leaders, and thought partners formed the “B’nai Mitzvah Revolution" with the goal of generating new ideas for rituals that congregations could use to better connect families to Jewish tradition and community in the 21st century. As demonstrated above, b’notai mitzvah ceremonies continue to evolve and change to best fit the needs of the contemporary American Jewish world. In addition to making alterations in order to better support students from interfaith families and students with disabilities, Jewish communal leaders are also beginning to come up with ways to better include Jews of Color. In 2021, a study by the Jews of Color Initiative estimated that Jews of Color represent at least 12-15% of American Jews.[201] These numbers continue to grow as each generation is more racially diverse than the previous generation.[202]

The innovations already made largely depend on the racial identity of the student, family, rabbi, and educator. As mentioned in the Introduction, an individual may

[200] Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, *Putting God on the Guest List, Third Edition: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah* (Turner Publishing Company, 2011)., 47-51.
[201] “Counting Inconsistencies: An Analysis of American Jewish Population Studies With a Focus on Jews of Color - Jews of Color Initiative,” Jews of Color Initiative, August 1, 2023, https://jewsofcolorinitiative.org/research-article/counting-inconsistencies-an-analysis-of-american-jewish-population-studies-with-a-focus-on-jews-of-color/.
[202] Mitchell, Travis. “Jewish Americans in 2020 | Pew Research Center.” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/.

self-identify as a Jew of color because they belong to one or more non-white racial, national, or geographic groups. Within these groups are people who are from racially homogenous families or interracial families, are trans-racially adopted, or are Jews by choice. There are a vast range of experiences and identities within this umbrella term, but using it helps the community form a sense of belonging and understanding.

Mentorship is a crucial component to the bet mitzvah process. The b'notai mitzvah officiants I spoke with used a variety of techniques if and when they brought up race with students. Many of the leaders of color talked about race with their students during 1:1 meetings. Rabbi Goldstein-Stoll said she is more likely to bring up race with a student of color than a white student. She said, "If we're reading a text that is about slaves, I want to say to a black kid, 'My ancestors were slaves not so long ago. I have people in my life that I'm close to who knew people who were slaves. What about you?' And then really start to dive into that in a different way. There's no reason why I couldn't have those conversations with people of all races, but I don't usually make it a priority." It is important for students to have role models who look like them.

According to Rabbi Mira Rivera, 1:1 meetings are a great way to really know the student. She said, "I mean, even when we are studying, it's like you're entering somebody's house. When you start meeting with a child, you start to see what is dominant here and what is a source of shame." She naturally brings up race with her students of color. She said, "We just start talking about it. It's just it's, it's not like taboo; I'm not dealing with them like they're white. You know, if it's a person of color, I say, 'Hey, I'm, you know, my parents came from the Philippines,' and I go straight for it. And

I've never had any pushback." Rabbi Rivera explains that she cannot leave her racial identity at the door when she meets with students.

Alternatively, Sabrina Sojourner said she only brings up race if the student brings it up first. She described one meeting in which she encouraged a student to bring it up:

> "I had one student… who clearly wanted to ask questions and was not asking questions. And so one day instead of meeting in their house, I told him to go to a coffee house…While we were waiting for our drinks to be served, I said, 'You know, I've been sensing the last few times that we've been together that there's something you want to ask or something you want to say that you are afraid your mom or your dad might be in earshot of and you don't want them to hear And for a moment he sat frozen because I don't think he'd ever…felt that seen."

Sabrina explained that they then had a good conversation on "why racism exists in the Jewish community when clearly we're all Jewish." Sabrina needed to meet the student outside of the earshot of his white parents in order for the student to engage in a discussion on race and racism.

According to Sabrina Sojourner, her b'notai mitzvah students face discrimination in Jewish supplementary schools. She said, "For some kids, it's really hard...they talk about how even some of the teachers dismiss them." When working with students on their speech, Sabrina allows students to take the lead. She said the speech was an opportunity for students to work through difficult topics related to race and racism. She said, "Working to prepare their *d'rash* enabled them to have conversations that they've not been able to have with...the rabbi or the head of the school."

In 2021, Rabbi Goldstein-Stoll co-officiated the "B Mitzvah Pilot Program" program with Be'Chol Lashon, a non-profit organization devoted to educating and uplifting Jewish people from racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse backgrounds.[203] In

[203] According to their website, "Be'chol Lashon (Hebrew for "in every language") celebrates and prioritizes diversity as a Jewish value by uplifting the historic and contemporary racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity

the months prior to the ceremony, held via zoom the weekend of Juneteenth, students discussed and unpacked their intersectional identity and their relationship to their family. The students were made up of a diverse group of Jews of Color from racially homogenous families, interracial families, and adopted into families with white parents. In addition to covering topics of race, the students learned Hebrew, trope for three lines of Torah, the *Sh'ma*, and the blessings for before and after the Torah reading. According to Rabbi Goldstein-Stoll, the ceremony was focused more on "reflecting and doing this internal wrestling" than showing off that the students could "chant four *aliyo*t." Be'Chol Lashon's "B Mitzvah Pilot Program" helped students connect to others who shared having a target identity. However, these programs are rare.

Rabbi Mira Rivera spoke about officiating a bet mitzvah for a student of Japanese-Ashkenazi descent at Romemu in New York City when her supervisor, the senior rabbi, was on sabbatical. She explained that his course of study and Torah reading mirrored that of white students, but his speech was more about his racial identity than those of his peers. She said,

> "I allowed more for his voice than the senior rabbi would initially allow. I said, 'Please talk about your family, really explore it.' And whereas the senior rabbi would have wanted more [Jewish text] sources. There were [Jewish] sources, but I also said, 'Let's really discover that [family history]' and he spent time figuring it out. And what I've seen for some of the people that I've worked with, the figuring it out is actually as important as learning the [Torah] portion."

Rabbi Mira Rivera said that her white colleagues are focused only on scholarship and it does not matter at all if the student talks about identity. These rabbis, according to Rabbi Rivera "prefer the colorblind approach," a societal ideal that skin color is

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of the Jewish people and in doing so, strengthens the entire Jewish community." Learn more at https://globaljews.org/

insignificant. This practice ignores the effect that race and racism have on a student and their family.

Rabbi Rivera intentionally adds “culturally sensitive material” to a bet mitzvah of a student of color. As she leads the service, she makes sure that she learns the correct pronunciation of family names and towns. She said using proper pronunciation is “just as important as making sure the *nikudot* is correct.” Calling someone by their correct name is a sign of respect. If a bet mitzvah student is part of a Spanish speaking family and their non-English-speaking relatives are present, Rabbi Rivera will include Spanish translations.

Rabbi Goldstein-Stoll spoke about the impact of the unique ceremony on the parents of color: “There's a lot of, you know, pain, frustration and anxiety that needed to be worked through on the parents' sides for this to be able to be a meaningful process.” According to the Jews of Color Initiative *Beyond the Count* survey, 80% of Jews of Color said they have experienced discrimination in Jewish spaces. More than half reported experiencing discrimination specifically in a Jewish spiritual community, congregation, or synagogue.[204] Of those surveyed, 66% agreed they have been asked questions about their race/ethnicity that made them uncomfortable," 60% said they felt tokenized, and 58% said they have been treated as if they don’t belong.[205] Programs created specifically for students of color, like Be’Chol Lashon’s “B Mitzvah Pilot

[204] Belzer, Tobin, Tory Brundage, Vincent Calvetti, Gage Gorsky, Ari Y. Kelman, and Dalya Perez. "Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color." Commissioned by the Jews of Color Initiative, 2021, v

[205] Belzer, Tobin, Tory Brundage, Vincent Calvetti, Gage Gorsky, Ari Y. Kelman, and Dalya Perez. "Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color." Commissioned by the Jews of Color Initiative, 2021, 20

Program" help protect students from being exposed to microaggressive comments and behaviors in primarily white Jewish institutions.

Conclusion

Preparing for a bet mitzvah requires tremendous time and attention from the student, the family, and the mentor. Each congregation and rabbi decides who and who is not allowed on the bimah and what they are able to do during the bet mitzvah ceremony. Students in Reform spaces do not need to pass a threshold of ability in order to ascend the bimah. The team of people work together to ensure the student is ready and able to enter Jewish adulthood by introducing them to Jewish materials to reflect on their own lives. In recent decades, communities are prioritizing a personalized approach to allow for students of all family compositions and abilities to achieve this milestone. As the Jewish world becomes more racially diverse, rabbis and Jewish communal leaders are working to bring this constantly evolving history of bet mitzvah into their approach to working with students of color.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the 1979 *Gates of Mitzvah*, “The Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremony possesses considerable meaning both to the young people and to their parents. It strengthens their bonds to Judaism and the synagogue, helps cement family ties, and marks a step in the religious education of each child.”[206] This sentiment remains true in the decades since the publication of this Reform life cycle guide. Rabbis and educators work with families to help craft an event that helps a student reflect on how Judaism will play a role in their new “adult” life.

Including students of color and their families through innovative and creative methods will help Jews of Color feel more seen in their Jewish communities. High rates of discrimination against people of color leave Jews of Color feeling unwelcome in Jewish spaces. Normalizing the existence of People of Color in Jewish spaces helps decrease incidents of intentional and unintentional bias.

B’notai mitzvah ceremonies are family events in which students can take pride in their journey into adulthood. By acknowledging their developing racial identity in the process, students can reflect on and present their full selves on the bimah during their big day. Reflecting on her own bat mitzvah, Rabbi Isaama Goldstein-Stoll said, “It was not lost on me that I was standing in a space where I felt like my family had often been looked at as ‘other’ and not quite belonging. And there I was, on the bimah, leading the congregation. It allowed me to flip that script a bit for myself.” B’notai mitzvah

[206] “ARR 86-89,” Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1890-1982, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/arr-86-89/.

ceremonies are opportunities for all students to see themselves leading their community.

Students of color study for their b'notai mitzvah at a crucial period of identity development. Providing students of color with individualized support could help them unpack how their Jewish and racial identity intersect. This could happen by making sure students have access to tutors, teachers, or clergy who are People of Color. During the service, clergy and communities can allow more room for acknowledgement of a student's racial background.

As the students begin to wrestle with more complex thoughts, it is important to have mentors who look like them for several reasons:

1. Representation: Seeing someone who also belongs to a target racial identity group, in a position of authority and leadership can be empowering and validating for students of color. It shows them that people who have a non-white racial background can achieve important milestones and hold positions of respect within their community.
2. Relatability: A mentor who has non-dominant cultural experiences and backgrounds can better understand the challenges and nuances that students of color may face. This relatability can foster a deeper connection and understanding between the mentor and mentee, making it easier for the student to relate to their mentor's guidance and advice, adding to the meaning of the process.
3. Cultural Understanding: A mentor who shares a non-dominant cultural background can provide insights and perspectives that are relevant to the student's cultural identity. This can include understanding the significance of belonging to multiple traditions,

navigating family dynamics, and addressing any cultural sensitivities that may arise during the bet mitzvah preparation process.

4. Role Modeling: Having a mentor who also belongs to a non-dominant group can serve as a positive role model for students of color. It provides them with tangible examples of individuals who have successfully navigated similar journeys and achieved their goals, inspiring them to strive for excellence in their own endeavors.

5. Support and Encouragement: A mentor who shares similar experiences can offer personalized support and encouragement tailored to the unique needs and challenges faced by students of color. Regardless of their parents' racial identity, the mentor serves the student *en loco parentis*. This support can be instrumental in helping students overcome obstacles, build confidence, and succeed in their bet mitzvah journey.

It is not always possible to ensure that a student can have access to a qualified mentor of color. White clergy and Jewish educators can still have meaningful conversations around the intersection of race and Jewish identity in their 1:1 meetings. Before that could happen, I recommend the white mentors undergo a period of guided reflection on their own racial identity and work to challenge their own internal biases. Most of the preparation for a bet mitzvah takes place outside of the synagogue. Clergy and educators can provide families with the pre-existing resources to have conversations around race at home. Bet mitzvah students of color can be invited, but not required, to write about their racial identity during their speeches.

During the service, clergy can be sure to properly acknowledge, recognize, and respect parents who are bringing their child into Jewish adulthood. Therefore, they should learn proper pronunciation of names, understand family dynamics, and be

prepared to interrupt and prevent microaggressions. They can also introduce new blessings and musical settings to allow for non-Jewish family members to participate in the service. In addition, communities can encourage the student, if applicable, and their families to wear clothes and accessories from their cultural heritage.

Throughout the religious school curricula, educators can create opportunities for Jewish adults of color to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives in order to diversify students' exposure to the reality of the greater Jewish world. Communities can ensure that educational materials, resources, and visual representations used in bet mitzvah preparation reflect the diversity of the Jewish community, including Jews of Color. This can include books, videos, artwork, and other materials that feature diverse narratives and perspectives. These steps can help affirm their identity and sense of belonging within the Jewish community while fostering a culture of inclusivity and acceptance.

The umbrella of "Jew of Color " casts a wide net. So does the scope of this thesis. Going forward, I recommend more attention be directed towards the practical elements of officiating a bet mitzvah ceremony. For example, crafting prayers and blessings or composing songs to be used during b'notai ceremonies for Jews of Color and their families. This can look like special translations of the *aliyah* blessings or crafting siddurim or inserts that include writings from a student's racial or cultural heritage. Shabbat morning prayers could incorporate melodies from a student's national culture. Another option could be creating a guidebook containing resources for white clergy to best support their students of color by suggesting conversation topics, books, podcasts, and sample blessings.

In addition, research is needed to better draw out differences and similarities among Jews of Color subgroups. For example, additional research could look into how to best support trans-racial adoptees and how that compares to approaches for students from multi-racial homes. Another area of focus could emphasize how Sephardi, Mizrahi, and Yemeni communities came to adopt Ashkenazi b'notai mitzvah practices and focus on the contemporary considerations related to coming-of-age ceremonies in those communities.

Each generation, Jewish coming-of-age ceremonies evolved, innovated, and contemporized to best fit the needs of the Jewish community. These changes often have been made not by the b'notai mitzvah students themselves, but by the parents, guardians, clergy, educators, mentors, and leaders who hope to ensure that Judaism continues to grow and thrive. By making these alterations to the preparations and ceremonies, they aim to create a positive relationship between Judaism and the next generation.

Adults involved in the bet mitzvah process may not always get to benefit from the fruits of their labor. However, making small changes to better include Jews of marginalized communities helps create the building blocks of a community in which all people can thrive. According to the Talmudic aggadah: *"*Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants."[207] It is important to put in the work to make changes now to ensure the continued relevance, engagement, inclusivity, and ethical grounding for future generations. Just as our ancestors planted seeds for us, we must sow seeds of meaningful traditions and practices for the generations to come.

[207] BT Ta'anit 23a

Many parents bless their children each Shabbat with the contemporary version of a family blessing by Marcia Falk: “Be who you are and may you be blessed in all that you are.” May our bet mitzvah students learn to love all parts of who they are, and may our communities be places that they can grow and thrive.

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