

BAR/BAT MITZVAH:  
A STOP OR A DEPOT ON THE TRAIN OF OUR CHILDREN’S JEWISH  
JOURNEYS?

We don’t really have to name the problem anymore. In professional circles, all one has to mention is lavish parties, the Shabbat morning take-over, religious school drop-out rates, or even add the dreaded word “factory” into a sentence. Professionals wince, cringe and are all too often drawn back into their state of disillusionment.

It is true that Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a sacred and important ritual. It is part of our religious tradition, our culture and our history. And it seen as valuable to so many stakeholders in our community. Professionals recognize this as an opportunity to educate future Jewish leaders. Lay leaders hope that new families and individuals will use this as a gateway into involving themselves in the community. Parents realize that this is an essential Jewish lifecycle event and want their child to do this, even if they do nothing else.

The problem however, is not necessarily with the list of reasons above, but rather the problem is what is *missing* from that list. Few people state outright that the goal of this ritual is to *begin* a child’s Jewish education and journey of building a Jewish identity. No one seems to talk about the need to use this ritual to establish a teen’s place within the Jewish community, both locally and globally. Since we do not explicitly communicate these ideas to our students and children, they do not understand the rich totality that is really part of this ritual.

Today's religious school students see Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a means to an end. They believe that Bar/Bat Mitzvah is the end of Jewish education, and possibly even the end of Jewish life all together. They gain Hebrew decoding skills only to forget them months after the "big event". They grow up with a stunted and under-developed Jewish identity, Jewish knowledge base and relationship to the Jewish community. Rabbi Leon Feuer states the fallout of this quite blatantly: "The most damaging aspect of this, of course is the increasing number of dropouts from the precious remaining years of Jewish education when we are trying desperately to increase the amount of time spent on it...Bar[/Bat] Mitzvah is coming to be conceived as the great climax. Why go on when you have had it?"<sup>1</sup>

What makes all this even more sad is that Bar/Bat Mitzvah has great potential as a pubertal rite of initiation. "Ritual and ceremonies attendant to the period of puberty are virtually universal among primitive tribes as well as modern ethnic groups."<sup>2</sup> The Bar/Bat Mitzvah is just another one of these ultimate rites of passage, and is meant to be perceived as such even when stakeholders add their own ideas and distort the purpose of the ritual. These incredible "rite of passage" rituals serve to transmit the culture of the group to the child, integrate the child into the group and perpetuate the group itself. Rabbi Jack Spiro of Richmond Virginia expounds on this idea, saying: "The [pubertal rites of initiation] therefore serve an integrative function, keeping the society together and integrating the individual into the society in order to secure the perpetuation of the culture's life force."<sup>3</sup> Children are supposed to be more grounded in and more committed

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<sup>1</sup> Second Thoughts about Bar-Bat Mitzvah, Leon I. Feuer, p4-5

<sup>2</sup> The Educational Significance of the Bar Mitzvah Initiation, Rabbi Jack D. Spiro, p383

<sup>3</sup> The Educational Significance of the Bar Mitzvah Initiaton, Rabbi Jack D. Spiro, 386.

to their community - their group - after this ritual. If that is the fundamental purpose of a pubertal rite of initiation, than clearly we have missed the point somewhere with what Bar/Bat Mitzvah has become. After all, in Reform Jewish communities, more children and families leave the community after the “big day” than stay.

I’m sure that some people would argue with my categorization of Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a pubertal rite of initiation, stating that it is an archaic and primal way of looking at this ritual. Those people might dispute that we are modern Jews and we live in a modern world. We cannot use Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a rite of passage into adulthood since we do not consider thirteen year-olds to be adults. And this argument is valid except for one problem. It disregards the historical and sociological basis from which we need to draw upon in order to enrich this “rite of passage” experience for our children and students.

The question becomes how do we shift the three main focal points of today’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah– lavish parties, the end point of Jewish education, and the only way that most of our congregants understand Shabbat - back to what its original purpose was a pubertal rite of initiation? How can we reinvigorate a sense of history, tradition, and obligation into this ritual, while at the same time recognizing the need for change and hybridization? How do we multiply the likelihood that families and children will stay involved in all aspects of a congregation after age thirteen?

The hardest part to change - cultural attitudes - may need to be altered first. What we lack most on the ground are people who truly believe that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is nothing more than trail marker along the hike of Jewish education. Even those who do not see Bar/Bat Mitzvah as the ultimate end of Jewish education, still put a considerable

emphasis on this event. We pay extra attention to the training that students receive in the year prior. We talk about our pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah Hebrew program as though its only purpose is to prepare students for this one day. We even discuss how many years students are required to attend our religious school prior to their participation in this ritual. I wonder what would happen if we talked about Bar/Bat Mitzvah with the same attitude of calm importance that we use to talk about consecration or confirmation?

First things first, we must begin by reframing the way in which we talk about Bar/Bat Mitzvah. New language, new attitudes and new emphasis must all be part of this paradigm shift. The question of what comes next, however, must be determined by each congregation. But given this opportunity, I would be happy to give some suggestions.

The most radical solution to this problem would certainly shift the paradigm quite rapidly. There have been Jewish professionals who have dreamed of removing the age restriction from the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual and placing a Hebrew and Judaic knowledge standard in its place. Doing this makes a strong statement that Bar/Bat Mitzvah is truly about having received the transmitted knowledge and that there is a serious obligation being taken on by going through the ritual. However, this seems to be more than just change. This suggested solution would create a canyon of distance from the original and authentic ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, possibly one that would be too wide to bridge. If we instituted this solution, would our Reform Jewish ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah be at all similar to those in the Conservative and Orthodox movements?

There are less radical options as well. Many congregations have begun holding pre-B'nai Mitzvah family classes, where the importance of the learning opportunity has been stressed. This gives families a chance to talk about the real value of this ritual, to

read about the history of this rite of passage and to think about what it means to end Jewish education at age thirteen.

Another possibility would be to create a requirement for post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah study. In order to really do this however, we must invest a great more time, energy and resources into our Hebrew High School programs. However, the state of affairs in those programs is another issue for another article. There is no reason that we cannot create programs that promote our Hebrew High Schools and show that continued education is truly a value at our congregations.

One final option that I will suggest is to begin talking to parents about the entire Jewish educational experience of a child, including confirmation and graduation, in all congregational educational materials. This will establish the congregational value of Bar/Bat Mitzvah as single marker along a child's Jewish journey. When a family comes to explore the possibility of joining a congregational religious school, we could be discussing the entire experience of education through high school graduation. If we mention every marker, every stage than no one stage is overemphasized or seen as an end point.

I realize that by merely writing this article, I am reinforcing the attitude and conceptions that I am hoping to destroy, the power and importance of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. However, I know no other way to address an issue other than head-on. Until we smash the Bar/Bat Mitzvah idol, it will continue to reign and rule our Jewish educational lives.