

# Bar/Bat Mitzvah can be more than a reason for a party

## THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

There is something deeply wrong with Bar and Bat Mitzvah. All of us know it, but no one seems quite ready to do anything about it.

American Judaism has made this ceremony a major focus of family life and the excuse — for some, I'm afraid, it is really the reason! — for Jewish education. "My kid is going to get up there and do it right."

And there we have them, week after week — nervous parents, smiling grandparents, giggling seventh- and eighth-graders and bored relatives and family friends — watching another pubescent boy or girl come into his or her own by chanting an uncomprehended chapter from the Prophets and waiting awkwardly for the party and the gifts.

We Jews are the only ones here in the Western world who still actively celebrate a puberty rite. There is something exciting about that. I know that many a non-Jew envies us for having that as a living part of our tradition.

Such rites are practiced, of course, among "primitive" peoples all over the world. They usually involve isolation of the young initiate from the world of childhood, dwelling for awhile "outside" the tribe and learning some mysterious rites that represent the tribulations of oncoming adulthood. The candidate is then welcomed back into the tribe in some ceremonial way and becomes a member of the adult community.

As anthropologists know, there are as many variations on these rites of adolescent initiation as there are tribal societies in the world.

Our initiation rite seems to be just a vestige of such practices. The young person hardly understands — and often doesn't care — what it's all about. This seems to be something done to please one's older relatives and to garner a certain status, accompanied by gifts.

For several generations in America now, post-adolescents, once they reach the great wisdom of college age, have poked fun at the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony as being the apex of American Jewish hypocrisy. They see it as a hollow and meaningless rite that exists largely to give parents a chance to show off how much money they can spend on a lavish party.

Each such generation seems sure that *they* would never do anything like that. And yet, as the generational wheel turns, they seem to put their children through the same "meaningless" ritual, hosting a party not completely unlike the one they thought was so awful in their years of rebellion.

What can we do with Bar Mitzvah? At one time, I thought the age structure was all wrong and that we should move it from 13 to 16. If preparation for the initiation rite is the only thing that keeps kids working at their Jewish education, why not have the initiation at an age when the young person's understanding of Judaism could be more serious and mature?

I am still partially sympathetic to this view, but only partially. I have come to realize that the association of Bar/Bat Mitzvah with the onset of puberty is so powerful that we dare not tamper with it. If anything, our children are becoming less sexually innocent at ever younger ages. A *real* ritual commemoration of puberty may be a great opportunity, if we are

willing to develop it that way.

No, I am not proposing that we encourage our children to become sexually active at the age of 13! What I am proposing is that we re-create the link between Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the onset of puberty. We should be willing to deal with the *questions* of sexuality that are very much on their minds at that age.

During the Bar Mitzvah year, each day school or Hebrew school should take kids away, separated by gender, for a few days' retreat in the country. This event should be built up in the young peoples' eyes as a major event in their education. There, sensitive teachers and counselors — perhaps in some combination of parent, psychologist and rabbi — could discuss with the kids such issues as sexual fears, inadequacies, fantasies, guilt and so forth.

They should also talk about the relationship between sex and love and seek to help the kids understand how perverse is the relationship between sex and violence, as so often portrayed and glorified in our culture. This retreat should serve as a reward for Jewish education, but also as a time to learn about being a Jewish mensch in the way we treat people in relationships.

The retreat should include some special appreciation of nature, especially including attention to dawn and dusk as the natural times for prayer. The young person should come out of this experience with a sense that Judaism has something to say both about the natural order and sexuality, critical areas in the growing sense of self and world.

The young person should come away with a beginning of a sense of what it means to be a Jewish man or a Jewish woman on such issues as caring for others and responsible personal behavior.

For boys — or should I say young men? — I would like to see tefillin again become an important part of the Bar Mitzvah ritual. I am as yet unconvinced on the question of whether girls should put on tefillin, too, or whether some parallel but more feminine form should be created. Placing the name of God on one's hand and head is an extraordinarily powerful act, as is being bound — both to God and to past and future generations — by the straps around one's arm.

The great power of this act, unfortunately, is lost on most people. I would like to see each Bar Mitzvah include an early morning service — and here I mean dawn, not 8 a.m. — in which the young person, along with friends and significant teachers, puts on tefillin for the first time.

There might be something even more powerful about this if it were preceded by an initiatory visit to the mikveh as a sign of new birth. The early morning rite would be a private one, celebrated in a circle of intimates, which would then be followed by the larger, public occasion on Shabbat.

To some, this will all sound rather weird. What kind of need do we have to add these things if they were not part of Jewish tradition as we received it? But to think that way is to miss the point. The tradition, as we have received it and passed it on in the last few generations, is, in fact, a very much truncated one, hardly the full-blooded Judaism our ancestors knew before the world was turned upside down.

And even the Judaism of the shtetl represented a narrow and overly intellectualized version of religious life, created by the rather unnatural experience of Galut that so dominated Jewish history.

We live now in an age of the open society, with all its freedoms. Our children grow up in a world of almost unrestricted freedom. Many of them are frightened and led into disturbing places by the lack of limits, sexual and other, in the life that lies before them. To use Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a way of exploring these fears and showing that Judaism has something to say about this crucial area of life would lend to Judaism a richness it has been lacking in modern times.

Whether we pick up these forms and, out of them, create a Judaism that is vital and exciting for new generations — or whether we leave things as they are, letting young Jews continue to think we have nothing to offer but a meaningless, empty shell — is up to us. For the future of Judaism, our choices will make all the difference.

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