

Rethinking B'nai Mitzvah

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Rabbi Levitt offered this challenge to the Jewish community as the closing speaker at the Ma'yan Symposium on Bat Mitzvah. Ma'yan is grateful for her permission to reprint these remarks.

In the thirty years that I have been a rabbi, twenty of them were spent in two congregations. I did a rough calculation and think that I have officiated at about 450 b'nei mitzvah services. When we add to that the number of services I have attended where a child becomes a bar/bat Mitzvah, well... you get the picture.

And here's one thing I know. On that day, regardless of how difficult, painful, challenging a path it was to get to (and unlike most rabbis, I trained the kids so I experienced quite a bit of that pain), regardless of all of that, on that day, some magic occurs. Children step up to the plate and are often transformed before our very eyes. Parents look lovingly and often with some amazement that their child has accomplished so much and can stand in front of hundreds of people and, in a language not their own, chant from sacred texts or speak with poise, if often too quickly, about the Torah portion read that morning.

The large majority of Jewish families participate in this ritual, despite the required hours of study that are often poorly executed by a community that has not yet figured out how to transmit its values and traditions to the next generation. They do it despite the excessive cost, the endless planning and arrangements, and the sheer time involved. The underlying motivation that draws them appears to have very little to do with its religious significance. In fact, the change in status for the child—moving from child to adult in legal terms—has virtually no meaning to the overwhelming number of families whose children will not be called to the Torah again until their own children become bar mitzvah, and who will never find themselves as the tenth person in a minyan. These responsibilities—the primary ones that become real for b'nei mitzvah—are largely irrelevant to most non-Orthodox families. What is relevant is the movement from child to adolescent, the self-esteem that can result from hard work and the attention that a child receives as a result of standing before hundreds of people and, despite everything raging within that child—hormones, acne, cracking voice, sullen behavior, weight issues and attention deficit—everything that plagues the lives

of thirteen-year-olds—something good can happen. It's a wondrous thing.

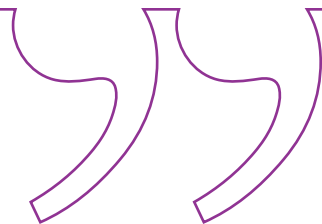
And yet...here's the other truth. The likelihood that this child will return voluntarily to the synagogue in the next ten years is remote. As positive as the experience of the day itself might be for many children—probably more positive for girls than boys—the emotions of that day do not translate into a sense of connection or commitment to synagogue, Jewish life, Jewish community, or Jewish tradition. In fact, usually the opposite occurs. The process leading up to that wondrous day—Hebrew school, tutoring, learning texts that often have little or no relevance to their lives, learning skills like Haftarah chanting that relate not at all to their experience—that process actually works against any chance of connection with Jewish life.

It's all a little ironic. In the Talmud, becoming a bar/bat mitzvah is not about achievement. Nowhere does it say you have to go to Hebrew school, learn a Haftara, learn Hebrew, and chant from the Torah. In fact, the only thing required of a bar/bat mitzvah is that he or she reaches a certain age. Liberal Judaism has actually intensified the demands in such a way that bar/bat mitzvah has moved from something one becomes to something one achieves. I want to suggest that this has come at a great price. I want to suggest that we reconsider its value.

For however great the child and family feels on that day, what the Jewish community actually needs is children who understand their own particular gifts and spend time developing those gifts so that when they come of age they actually have something to offer the community. In some cases that might be a special talent for chanting text, but more than likely, it will be something else.

Equally ironic though not surprising, the bat mitzvah ritual has adopted the identical unhelpful achievement based learning that has become normalized in non-Orthodox bar mitzvah services. We have demanded equal access to chanting Torah and Haftara and for the most part we have won these rights in non-Orthodox communities, thereby giving our girls the same irrelevant experiences, however wonderful on that day. We have done great things for girls but I would submit we have not helped Jewish life in the process. At least not yet. So I leave you with this challenge. What would it look like if we said to eleven year old children the following: In two years, you will be considered assets to our community. You won't be adults, but you will be able to contribute

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a great deal. And we will need you. We will need you to start contributing to our community, to living its values, adding beauty and texture to its traditions. What would it look like if we designed curricula that enabled each child to spend those years exploring their own strengths, developing specific skills that our community needs? Perhaps some children would in fact learn how to chant Torah, not because it was required but because they were really interested and excelled in it. Other children might explore caring for those who are ill, or elderly, or disabled. Others might develop artistic skills. Others might study Jewish texts in a serious way, or work on environmental issues or decide they really want to learn how to speak Hebrew. While all children might be called the Torah on the day of their bar/bat mitzvah, they would be spending those two years leading up to that day working on a value that is not only important to Jewish life but important to them as well.

This is a risky proposal. It means replacing an existing, well-embedded practice that “works,” at least in the short run, for an untested idea that will require synagogues and schools to rethink not only that special morning but the years leading up to it as well.

But if we could improve the process of helping children figure out how they can help strengthen Jewish life, then becoming bar/bat mitzvah would not only be an amazing personal and family experience; it could have extraordinary opportunities for Jewish life as well.

Our community is losing our best resource—our children—by expecting so little from them at a moment when they are quite capable of growing so much. It's time to reclaim the tradition here, to understand that becoming bar/bat mitzvah is not about how well our children perform in ways that have no meaning to their lives, and all about how they learn who they are and how they can contribute to the ongoing story of the Jewish people.