

1The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living
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Topic: Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Key Idea -The Hebrew term *Bar Mitzvah* is a term applied by the Talmud to every adult Jew in the sense of “man of duty.” The Aramaic word *bar*, like the Hebrew word *ben*, denotes, age, membership in a class, or possession of some quality. Therefore, the widespread literal translation *Bar Mitzvah* as “a son of the commandment” is misleading and inaccurate. At the age of thirteen, a Jewish boy is considered to be personally responsible for the performance of his religious obligations, such as putting on *tefillin* and serving as part of a quorum of ten required for prayer (*minyan*). His becoming *Bar Mitzvah*, which he will remain for the rest of his life, is celebrated by his being called up to the Torah for an *aliya* or reading from the Torah and/or Prophets, which he is now required to obey. Many scholars believe that Bar Mitzvah celebrations date back six centuries, while others argue for an earlier date. The Bible says nothing about Bar Mitzvah, and while the Talmud gives 13 as an age when a boy must fulfill the commandments and when his vows become binding, no ritual for marking the event is prescribed, and mention of the father’s recitation of a blessing on the occasion does not appear before the 16th century.

Traditionally girls did not have an immediate precept such as *tefillin* to perform when they reached puberty and became physically and religiously mature. But apparently there were celebrations to mark a girl’s entry into maturity based on evidence in rabbinic responsa. Sephardim were apparently ahead of Ashkenazim in their adoption of Bat Mitzvah celebrations, which appear to have begun in Italy and the Balkans in the mid-1800’s, and one was reportedly celebrated in Cairo in 1907. Nevertheless, the Bat Mitzvah of Judith Kaplan in 1921 is often cited as “the” first *Bat Mitzvah*. In the Reform movement, Confirmation, modeled on the Christian ritual, was introduced for girls but was also advocated for boys by some Reform rabbis as an alternative to *Bar Mitzvah*. *Bat Mitzvah* has gained increasing acceptance in the Conservative and even in some segments of the Orthodox community.

For most Jews today, the reality is that social pressure to make Bar/Bat Mitzvah a lavish social event with a theme unrelated to, and even antithetical to, Judaism or a child’s physical and emotional maturing has transferred responsibility for *Bar and Bat Mitzvah* preparation into the hands of professional party-planners. This has further eroded any connection between the Bar/Bat Mitzvah of most of the texts below, and that with which most Jews today are most familiar.

Our discussion of the texts:

Text 1: Jeffrey Salkin, *The River of Sacred Time*. How life cycle events create Jewish identity and have become the locus of spirituality that is lacking elsewhere.

Text 2: Mishna, Avot 5:21. Thirteen as the age of responsibility for a boy observing the commandments.

Text 3: Genesis (*Bereishit*) 25:24-34. Differences in personality and inclination become more observable in adolescence

Text 4: *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10. Early midrashic commentary on above Torah text. A parent’s declaration of relief when a son becomes responsible for his own religious actions.

Text 5: Mishna, *Niddah* 6:11. Physical signs of puberty mark the age of responsibility. Girls mature before boys.

Text 6: David Kraemer, *What Does Bar/Bat Mitzvah Really Signify?* The parallel development of awakening sexuality and moral awareness as aspects of maturity.

Text 7: Shulchan Arukh 37:3: Yosef Karo, Moshe Isserles and Avraham Gombiner (*Magen Avraham*). Tefillin and Bar Mitzvah.

Text 8: Shlomo Luria, commentary on Babba Kamma 37:7. The Ashkenazic custom of a “mitzvah meal” (*seudat mitvah*) to express gratitude when a boy becoming *Bar Mitzvah*.

Suppl. text: Celebrations for girls: Rabbi Joseph Hayyim Eliyahu ben Moshe of Baghdad, *Ben Ish Hai* (Jerusalem, 1870, Parashat Reeh, p. 132:

The male becomes obligated to perform the commandments at the age of thirteen years and one day. Therefore on the first day of the fourteenth year his father takes him by the hand and says, "Blessed is he who has freed me from the punishment incurred by this one." . . . He makes a banquet for friends and relatives, invites to it sages, and increases the banquet and the joy as the hand of God has been generous to him. This banquet will provide great protection for the Jews when their defenders say before God, 'Master of the universe, see how happy your children are to enter the yoke of the commandments. This banquet is called a *seudat mitvah*. . . and those present will bless the son that he will merit Torah, fear of heaven, and fulfillment of the commandments. The great among the invited will place their hands on his head and bless him with the priestly blessing. If the son knows how to preach about the Torah he will give a proper word of Torah, if not the father will preach, and if not a sage among the guests will preach. . . .

And also the daughter on the day that she enters the obligation of the commandment, even though they don't make for her a *seudah*, nevertheless that day will be one of happiness. She will wear new clothing and bless the *sheheheyanu* prayer and arrange for her entry to the yoke of the commandments. There are those who are accustomed to make her birthday every year into a holiday. It is a good sign and this we do in our house."

Text 9: Jeffrey Salkin, *The Ethics of Jewish Celebration*. Contemporary observance of bar and bat mitzvah highlights deep ambivalence about the relevance of religion among Jews.

Suppl. text: Sharon Duke Estroff, "All Bar and no Mitzvah." *Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 16, 2007.

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1186557462952&pagename=JPArticle%2FShowFull>

It's been said that when it comes to raising children, the days go slow and the years go fast. As I find myself in the thick of planning my second son's *bar mitzva*, these words ring all too true. But who has time for sentimentalism when you've got to pull off a colossal *bar mitzva* bash in less than a year?

The first item on my party-planning agenda was to secure the entertainment.

"Bar Mitzvas'R'Us," said a perky voice on the telephone.

"I'd like to know if you have availability on April 7, please," I inquired, cordially.

"Is that 2009 or 2010?"

"2008," I answered, panic rising.

"Ha!" said the voice (no longer sounding so perky). "Good luck."

Fifteen phone calls and 14 rejections later, I'd managed to land a living breathing master of ceremonies (who'd miraculously just had a cancellation for my date).

The next morning, I was sipping Starbucks with an MC named Rhythm - a hulking, albeit friendly man who, I can only assume, plays for the NFL during his off-season - to nail down the details of my family's fast approaching event.

"Do you want to do the *motzi*?" asked Rhythm.

"Yes," I answered, "of course."

"How about a candlelighting?"

"Umm, I'm not sure."

Things proceeded in this manner. Was I interested in *birkat hamazon*? What about feather boas? Did I want to do the hora? How about the chicken dance?

As Rhythm threw me option after option without missing a beat, I felt myself entering a transformational spin. Like Lynda Carter on the old Wonder Woman TV show. And when I stopped whirling, I was sitting on the other side of my frappuccino - in Rhythm's shoes (enormous though they might be).

I could suddenly grasp the stark bizarreness that this 300-pound linebacker - whose bling didn't include a single Star of David - was so incredibly well versed in terms like *motzi* and *birkat*, and, more bizarre yet, was using them in conjunction with terms like feather boa and chicken dance.

I could now clearly see what Rhythm (and the rest of the gentile world, for that matter) must think from the outside looking in at the modern American *bar mitzva* phenomenon. And how he might interpret the ways we Jewish parents choose to celebrate these meaningful religious rites of passage for our children.

On the heels of this revelation came an unsettling flashback to a Web site entry I'd encountered earlier during a cyber-hunt for hopping *bar mitzva* party themes. It was written by a non-Jewish mother about her son's experience at a friend's *bar mitzva*. Here it is, slightly abbreviated and 100 percent true:

Best bar mitzva party theme - Terminator

My son William was recently invited to his friend Josh's *bar mitzva*. William had never been to a *bar mitzva* before, and he's still talking about it.

The invitation was a video tape of Josh, dressed like the Terminator and doing an Arnold Schwarzenegger impression: "Come to my *bar mitzva*, or else!"

When I dropped William off at the five-star hotel ballroom, everything was decorated to look like metal. There were robots standing guard with blinking eyes and moving arms; destroyed tanks and cars strewn about (rented from a movie prop house); and inflatable jungle gyms and slides, all in camouflage colors. There was even a life-sized Arnold Schwarzenegger cutout for guests to sign.

After the *aliya latorah*, Josh made his grand entrance on a "T2" motorcycle - his *bar mitzva* gift from his parents! Following the *motzi*, a live rock band played modern techno music. Josh did a really cool robot dance.

During the traditional candlelighting ceremony, Josh lit 13 candles with a butane lighter shaped like a Terminator rifle. My son wished he could take it home with him.

At midnight, Josh's parents announced that a collector's Terminator action figure was hidden somewhere in the ballroom. While everyone searched, an Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alike dressed like the Terminator walked in. Every kid got a picture taken with the surprise guest.

William had such a great time that he asked if he could have a *bar mitzva*, too.

FUELED WITH newfound perspective and courage (and an unmistakable wave of nausea), I thanked Rhythm for his time and made a dash for my bookshelf to retrieve my dog-eared copy of the Book of Jewish Values to see what the ever wise and rational Rabbi Joseph Telushkin might have to say about the situation. He didn't let me down.

"Out of the desire not to appear cheap or unloving to their children, many... Jews feel forced to spend far more on [*bar mitzva*] parties than they can or want to," he writes. "Furthermore lavish parties often end up diminishing, sometimes even eliminating, the religious significance of the *bar mitzva*. For many of the celebrants, what counts is the 'bar,' not the mitzva."

What we desperately need, says Telushkin, are some "wealthy moral heroes... prominent, affluent Jews in our largest Jewish communities - to throw a simple *bar* or *bat mitzva* celebration, one in which the party is very pleasant and celebratory, but not lavish." In doing so, he holds, "the good they would do for their fellow Jews would be almost incalculable."

In my community, I've seen a few brave parents heed this critical calling with wonderful results, and I - post-Wonder Woman-style transformational spin and faithful Telushkin fan - plan to do the same (even if I may fall a tad short of affluent, pillar of the Jewish community status at the present time).

At this stage in my *bar mitzva* planning process, I'm still not sure where this journey will take my family. But I do know where it won't.

The writer is an internationally syndicated parenting columnist, award-winning Jewish educator and mother of four.

Text 10: Mayer Rabinowitz, *Bat Mitzvah*. A history and background of *Bat Mitzvah* in the Conservative movement.

Text 11: Mark Washofsky, Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The Reform movement in North America attempted to replace *Bar/Bat Mivzva* with Confirmation, for both boys and girls, but *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* proved to be more popular and more effective in encouraging Jewish study and identity.

Text 12: Norma Baumel Joseph, "Ritual, Law and Praxis: An American Response/a to Bat Mitzvah Celebrations." The growing recognition of the need for *Bat Mitzvah* in the Orthodox community.

13 and Counting

In N.Y., Bar and Bat Mitzvah Parties Add Up to Lavish, Theatrical Events

By David Segal

Washington Post Staff Writer

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NEW YORK

A state-of-the-art New York bar mitzvah owes more than a little to theater, and like all theater, it requires props. That's where Pat James comes in. An event planner with the soul of a Broadway fanatic, James doesn't just throw a party -- the guy puts on a show.

"We had a kid who was really into 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,' " James recalls, "so we had a purple suit made for him, and we hired these people to be Oompa Loompas and they came out and danced. We had these trees with candy all over them, with signs that said 'Do not eat.' It was fantastic."

For a girl named Lexy, James devised what he called a "Lex and the City" theme, for which he rented a pink couch that was an actual prop in the similarly named HBO show. For a lad nicknamed Bull -- yes, a Jewish kid called Bull -- he rented a mechanical bull and built a saloon around it.

On a recent Saturday night, James is padding around the top floor of a loft in Long Island City, which he and 50 employees have turned into a sort of dinner theater fun house. The theme tonight is guitars because the star of the evening, the just-bar-mitzvahed Russell Efros, is a budding guitarist. Secondhand six-strings are perched on the centerpieces of each table. An ice sculpture of a guitar is melting in a corner.

"Five minutes to showtime!" James shouts in a way that suggests that he's looking forward to the show.

James has hired, as he always does, a group of men from a modeling agency, whom he calls "butlers" and whose job it is to greet guests and fetch drinks. He's also brought along a group of women in tight black bodysuits. One of them is now stationed by something called a "vodka slide," a massive block of ice with a groove carved down the middle -- for the adults, of course.

"It's one of the things we're known for, hiring gorgeous staff," James says as he helps a bartender prepare martini glasses right before the start of festivities.

A few minutes after 7, the doors to a large elevator open and a few dozen well-dressed preteens scatter like it's recess. Adults are not far behind. A mob surrounds a sushi bar, where two Japanese chefs roll and slice as fast as they can. Waiters with trays of Peking duck in mini cones slalom through the hordes. A guy hurriedly hands out packets of play money for games of Texas Hold 'Em poker about to start in the back.

"That's really popular these days with the kids," says James, shouting over the music, which a DJ has suddenly turned up. "Casino stuff."

This, by local standards, is a modest affair. Hundreds of New York bar mitzvahs cost \$100,000 or more. Many top the quarter-million-dollar mark. If you're ready to spend that sort of money on a five-hour shindig for an eighth-grader, Pat James is the man to see.

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By general consensus, this whole bar mitzvah thing started to supersize about 25 years ago. Before that, it was possible to celebrate this rite of passage with a modest affair, perhaps a cocktail party followed by dinner. Maybe a band. There were plenty of expensive spectacles, of course, but they were the exception.

Not anymore -- especially in New York, the bar mitzvah capital of the world. Nobody seems to have ever done a study of the economic impact of local bar mitzvahs, but it keeps legions of people employed here -- caterers, event planners, celebrity impersonators, acrobats, videographers, musicians, floral designers, photographers, games people, bus drivers and so on.

This is the height of the fall bar mitzvah season, the months after the Jewish high holidays in September and before schools break for winter vacation. A few weeks ago, David H. Brooks, the CEO of a body-armor maker, reportedly spent millions on his daughter's bat mitzvah, renting out the Rainbow Room, which sits atop Rockefeller Plaza, and flying in the rapper 50 Cent, as well as Aerosmith, Tom Petty and Stevie Nicks. Brooks, by all accounts, set a new standard of excess, but he, as statisticians say, is an outlier. What's every bit as striking around here is the norm.

For 16 years, James has been throwing parties that make Rio's Carnival seem dreary. There are scores of event planners working in New York, many staging the extravaganzas of drama, kiddie games and three-course feasts now in vogue among the Jewish elites of Manhattan and nearby suburbs. James is arguably the most sought-after in the bunch. Hire him and you'll get a noisy, colorful and -- here's the key part -- custom-made affair. In a typical year, New York City kids in the thirteen-ish age range, and their parents, will attend dozens of bar and bat mitzvahs. (Bat mitzvahs are for girls.) It's understood in this rarefied stratum that each event should be not merely lavish but unique. No copying allowed. Nothing generic, either.

"It can get pretty competitive among the parents," says James, who always speaks in the rushed tones of a man late for a meeting. "I've had fathers say, 'I'll hire you, but only if you put on my son's bar mitzvah first' " -- meaning early in the season, ahead of the crowd.

There have been bar mitzvahs at Yankee Stadium and Radio City Music Hall. James has a client who plans to rent out the entire Museum of Natural History on a Saturday night. No matter the venue, James will engineer a gaudy entrance for the 13-year-old guest of honor, one that invariably gets a standing ovation. His go-to move is something called a "fantasy video," which plays on TV screens right before The Moment arrives. Most of them are filmed and edited weeks in advance, by professionals whom James hires.

"We had this one kid who was really into the Yankees and we sent him to Tampa, where the Yankees were in spring training," he says. "And we filmed him in a Yankees uniform, around the park, pretending to play with the team. We even had a couple Yankees say, 'Happy bar mitzvah,' I think. Then you saw him waking up in his bed, realizing it was all a dream. And he looks at his clock and sees that he's late for his bar mitzvah party."

* * *

The origins of the bar mitzvah are something of a mystery. There's nothing about it in the Bible, or the Talmud. It probably first cropped up in 5th century Europe, according to Mark Oppenheimer, author of "Thirteen and a Day: The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Across America." Not until the 15th century, though, does it become a celebration that bears any resemblance to the bacchanalias of today, and even then it was the province of the small fraction of very wealthy Jews.

"It was considered an event worthy of celebration, but that might mean you have your first glass of schnapps," Oppenheimer says.

The grandiose bar mitzvah -- here's a shocker -- seems to be an American invention. It isn't hard to find rabbis who worry about this arms race to ever-flashier fetes, who think parents are driven by the need to publicly demonstrate their affluence, who wonder what poker and popcorn have to do with Judaism.

"I think these events miss the point," says Rabbi Jon-Jay Tilsen of Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel in New Haven, Conn. "A bar mitzvah is about connection to community and connection to God, it's about accepting responsibility, it's the moment that parents accept that their children are growing up."

Parents who bankroll these events tend to think of them as separate from the religious component of the day, and don't think one impinges on the other. And of course, pricey coming-of-age rituals are not an exclusively Jewish phenomenon. They cut across any number of cultures, and in some cases their scale provokes plenty of intramural

hand-wringing. Consider *quinceanera*, the Latino celebration of a 15-year-old girl's transition into womanhood, a day that is marked by a special Catholic Mass and, in the United States, parties that keep getting glitzier.

"With quinceanera and bar mitzvahs, you see the exact same tug of war between religious authorities and party planners," says Elizabeth Pleck, a professor of history at University of Illinois and author of "Celebrating the Family."

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In New York, it's safe to say that the party planners currently have the upper hand.

James got his start in the '80s, working as a "motivator" for a party-planning company, a job which required him to dragoon guests onto dance floors. (Odd as that gig might sound, there are sometimes five or six "motivators" at bar mitzvahs these days.) Other times, James would don a costume and perform.

"I'd dress up like a steam train from the [Andrew Lloyd Webber] musical 'Starlight Express,' " says James. "I played the Phantom from the 'Phantom of the Opera' a few times."

James was constantly pitching his bosses elaborate ideas for the next event, and after a while he thought he deserved to get paid for his innovations. They offered him a raise of \$100 per party. He quit and started Parties by Pat James in 1991. The company plans about 80 bar mitzvahs a year.

Most start with a field trip around the city, or suburbia, to find the right venue. A few weeks ago, James was taxiing around midtown Manhattan on one of those venue-hunting expeditions with a woman named Aimee Stoopler. Stoopler, who speaks with a slight Long Island accent and looks to be in her late twenties, is planning her second bat mitzvah.

"It's not till 2008," Stoopler says, "but you've got to make a reservation early, or you could get shut out."

Her first daughter, Amanda, was bat mitzvahed a few weeks ago, and during the cab ride she and James leafed through a scrapbook with photos of the event. The room, you can see, was festooned with poster-size, glamorous photos of Amanda, who looks like a model. You can't tell from the photos, but Stoopler says a performer from Cirque du Soleil was there all night, hanging and twisting from a silk rope attached to the ceiling.

"She was a big hit," says Stoopler, smiling. "My husband liked that."

One of the stops is at Cipriani, a cavernous former bank that is one of the city's poshest rentable party spots. A saleswoman is going over the particulars. (Dinner, for example, is \$400 per adult.) Stoopler doesn't blink at the price, but she'd like to know if they could set up a huge, floor-to-ceiling drape so that when guests first arrive and grab a cocktail, they won't be able to see the tables.

"We call it 'the reveal,' " James explains to a baffled reporter. "It's a moment when we pull back the curtain and people get their first look at the room. Usually there's a lot of oohs and ahhs."

Sure, the saleswoman, says, the curtain is doable. She says yes to just about everything, actually. Even a woman from Cirque du Soleil, hanging from the ceiling.

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A couple Saturday nights ago, James orchestrates the bar mitzvah of Stephen Serota, an affair held in ornate Garden City Hotel on Long Island. He describes the event as one of the glitzier of his recent confections. Sure enough, at 8:30 p.m. the place is buzzing.

Stephen is a fan of spy flicks, so the theme here is espionage. An Austin Powers impersonator works the room. Two performers stand frozen atop a table in the cocktail room, covered in gold paint, like victims in the Bond movie "Goldfinger." There are round magnifying glasses at each place setting -- vaguely spy-like -- and a few tables have Tiffany-style jewel cases in the middle, filled with fake diamonds.

Spies, jewel thieves, whatever. Stephen makes his entrance, which happens in the hotel's huge rococo-style grand dining room. An MC who looks a bit like Kid Rock, only much taller and far raspier, introduces the Serotas, while a 13-piece band vamps to the theme from "The Pink Panther."

"This is the coolest family ever," the MC shouts into a microphone. Stephen's parents are introduced. A round dining table, covered by a white cloth, is then wheeled into the middle of the dance floor.

"Did somebody order room service?" yells the MC. An actor playing a cat burglar suddenly runs into the room and pretends to snatch someone's purse.

"That man is a thief!" howls the MC. "Don't let him get away! Somebody stop him!"

That somebody is "Special Agent Stephen," who emerges from under the table and, after pantomiming some act of derring-do, collars the villain. The MC promptly hoists him on top of his shoulders, as if he had just won some flyweight boxing title. Everyone claps, the band turns up the volume. Strobe lights flicker.

Stephen is later seen walking around during the dinner course, pretend-puffing on the wrong end of a candy cigarette.