

“Getting the Most Out of a Bar Mitzvah Year”

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This time of year is such a moving one, lending itself to introspection and reflection upon important issues, which otherwise might not receive the attention they deserve. This day is truly a gift, bequeathed to us by our ancestors. Although they lived in a far simpler time, or perhaps precisely because they lived in an era unencumbered by the technological trappings of modernity, they recognized the value of setting aside a period for individual and collective consideration of spiritual matters.

Aharon David Gordon, one of the early secular Zionist ideologues commented, “The people has set aside this one special day devoted to meditating upon itself as a nation...for the contemplation of the self, for weighing the values of life, and for the complete devotion to the most lofty demands of the spirit of humanity... As members of a definite people, individuals feel themselves members of a single, sublime organism, a single nation. As units of one exalted personality, they come to take stock of themselves, with their lives and their world.”

As he and other sages have taught, these days of Awe are a time when our attention should be focused on the meaning of life, and how we live it, upon ourselves, our community, and our people. Having spoken about our country and people on Rosh Hashana, on Yom Kippur I would like to address matters pertaining to the individual and the community.

We Jews live within the rhythm of two cycles – the annual cycle of our holidays, and the life cycle. In the past, I have exhorted and encouraged you to make the holidays and shabbat a regular part of your lives by encouraging you to share the beauty of the holy days, and inviting you to participate in the unfolding drama of Jewish life.

Perhaps you heard the story about the man who called each of his children and said it was essential for them to come home this Rosh Hashana, due to a family crisis. None was planning to do so, as they were all so busy with their own schedules. He explained it was crucial, for he and his wife were getting divorced, after 35 years of marriage. After he got off the phone with their youngest child, who, like the others promised to take the next plane home, he turned to his wife and said, “Well, honey, that took care of Rosh Hashana. Now we have to figure out what we’re going to say to get them here for Pesah.”

Holidays, family, ritual, community, life cycle events --- they are all intertwined, and we have created a community which celebrates together the seasons of the year and shares the ceremonies which mark the seasons of our lives.

Tonight, I would like to focus primarily on that most Jewish of all life cycle events, the bar mitzvah. All of us, have either attended or celebrated, or in some way participated in one. In fact, I will let you in on a secret, if you promise not to tell your kids -- any Jew above the age of thirteen is considered a bar mitzvah, even if you never had one. That is because it is a status one attains, not something confirmed upon the individual.

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin in her book, "The Tapestry of Jewish Time", comments that the ceremony does not create the passage into adulthood. Nor does it mean that overnight the child has become an adult, although it may seem as if it transpired in the blink of an eye. She writes, "The ceremony opens the portal of adulthood through which the child now walks, and it reinforces the chosen identity of every Jewish adult in the room."

Although it is a ceremony for the individual and that individual's family, it is celebrated by the whole congregation and community of Israel. This is why the ceremony is public and even people who have no connection to the child or family rejoice and share in the joy of all that it symbolizes.

Rabbi Jacob Neusner explains the communal nature of the event, "The bar or bat mitzvah today celebrates continuity, tests the strength of the chain of generations, confirms its endurance, and demonstrates that parents, grandparents, and great grandparents are not the end of the line."

"...Not the end of the line." Ultimately, that is really what it is all about, and what we affirm each and every time we celebrate a bar mitzvah, as well as a Jewish wedding, or bris. Am Yisroel chai: the people of Israel lives. After the bar mitzvah of the grandchild of Holocaust survivors, the parent told me the special joy he felt, for it negated all that the Nazis and Hitler had tried to wipe out.

And yet, there are too many instances when it is the end of the line.

For some, it may be the last time children set foot in the synagogue. Too many foolish, short-sighted, cowardly parents let their children decide whether or not they will continue their religious education, thus negating the very essence of the whole process.

Some of you may recall the story I told you a few years ago about the synagogue that was having a problem with mice. Despite many unsuccessful attempts at extermination, the rabbi realized that the only way to succeed in getting rid of the rodents was the novel idea his colleague had -- of bringing all the mice into the sanctuary and giving them all a bar mitzvah. "That way," he explained, "you won't have to worry about ever seeing any of them again."

Bar Mitzvah is meant to celebrate our connection to torah, which is why it is read on this occasion; to celebrate the taking on of a role of responsibility in the community, and to uphold and live by the mitzvot. It is not a farewell party.

The event also operates on another, personal level, having a powerful emotional appeal, for as I wrote a number of years ago, “it is our last glimpse of our children as children.” How true this is. Invariably, within a few weeks of the service, the child has outgrown the bar mitzvah suit, and before we know it, they are seeking and asserting their independence.

I have learned over the years that, in many respects, the bar mitzvah is really more about the parents than the child. It is a chance to evaluate how successful we have been in passing Judaism on to our children. In making that assessment, and looking at how much of our heritage we have preserved, we should take advantage of this as an opportunity to measure how much of our heritage we practice.

The bar mitzvah of a child should be the time parents reclaim the values we Jews have traditionally held dear and invigorate, enhance and enrich their own observance. I will never forget when a parent from another congregation once declined to join their child in attending the requisite number of services. The parent said to me, “I don’t need to come, and you can’t require me to do so. I already had my bar mitzvah.”

I was tempted to check my Rabbi’s Manual to see if there was a ceremony to revoke one’s bar mitzvah. Realizing there was little if anything I could do, I just felt sad for the child, and the parent, who were passing up this wonderful opportunity to be together and to experience the beauty of Judaism.

It is by now a cliché that there is too much emphasis on the bar, and not enough on the mitzvah. I want to state unequivocally at the outset, that there is absolutely nothing wrong with a simcha, with having a celebration, a party and giving gifts. It is a joyous occasion. But we can at least maintain some sense of dignity and appropriateness.

I remember the wonderful scene from the album from the 1960’s entitled, “When You’re in Love the whole world is Jewish.” One very funny shtick has a family working with their bar mitzvah coordinator to outdo the father’s business partner. One suggestion --- arranging for the child to deliver his bar mitzvah speech to the United Nations General Assembly is rejected, because, as the mother says, “I have the feeling its been done before.” And so the family settles on an African safari, led by “Byona Goldstein”, only to find that they are delayed in the middle of the jungle because there is another bar mitzvah group ahead of them.

We do not need to think about how to top the previous party we went to. We can uplift our celebrations by making them consistent with the ceremony we have just attended. Nowhere in the Talmud does it require that shrimp, lobster, or ostentatiousness be served as hors d’oeuvres.

Listen to this passage written by Charles Angoff describing his bar mitzvah on a Thursday morning in the early 1900’s before about 30 people.

My father woke me up at 6:30 in the morning and took me to shul. I was called to the Torah for the first time, and that was bar mitzvah. Some of the congregants came over to me and wished me mazel tov. My father bashfully put his arm around me and also congratulated me...and he went off to work... I turned toward home, feeling terribly lonely. I had become a full, mature Jew, and most of Boston was asleep, and didn't care...

As soon as I reached our house, and put my hand on the doorknob, my mother opened the door and threw her arms around me and kissed me and hugged me...She took me to the kitchen, and there on the table was the shabbos tablecloth. To my mother it was yom tov. She had the usual booles on platter, but there was also a platter of the kind of cinnamon cakes I liked, and ginger jam, another favorite of mine..."Eat, Shayel, eat," said my mother... I was conscious that she was looking at me with great appreciation (that)... her oldest son was now a full man in Israel. I was embarrassed, but I was also delighted. I finished my cup of cocoa, and mother said, "Have another cup." The last time she suggested I have another cup of cocoa was when I was convalescing from a cold that had almost turned into pneumonia.... Mother said, "Father had to go to work. You understand.... we'll have a small reception on Saturday night, after mincha. We've invited the relatives and some friends."

"Oh," I said, too moved to say anything else.

She got up, patted my head and then kissed me. "Maybe you're a little sleepy, Shayel. Maybe you want to sleep a little more. I'll wake you up in time for school."

...I didn't want any more sleep. I lay down on the bed. I was profoundly happy. Everything was good. Everything was very good."

I am not suggesting that we return to such a simple time, for our world is far more complex, but let us at least nostalgically recall that the source of the author's happiness was the simple expression and embrace of love and pride. That can happen only in a society which appreciates traditional values and treasures learning and mitzvot.

Unfortunately, bar mitzvah is not the only ceremony we Jews have which is becoming too perfunctory and detached from its real meaning. All too often, the death of a loved one is taken too casually as well.

I am reminded of the story about the man who was playing golf, not far from here, at the Falls Road course. He stopped in reverence, and stood at attention, as a hearse, leading a funeral procession passed by. His partners were surprised, as they did not know their friend to be particularly religious. They commented and inquired about his newfound, albeit temporary reverence, and asked since when did he stop his golf game for a funeral procession? And he said, "Come on guys. It's the least I can do to show some respect. After all, this Tuesday, we would have been married 38 years."

How many of you recall a parent or grandparent going to shul on a regular basis to say kaddish for a whole year. How many of you have done it, or will do it? We are so busy. We relegate shiva to a few days, come to shul that Friday, and do not think it necessary to do any more than that. Attending services on a regular basis would be too much of an inconvenience, and so we rationalize that our loved ones would understand. But by not taking the time to fulfill these obligations, we deprive ourselves of experiencing some of the most powerful rituals for coping with loss ever developed by any culture or people.

I cannot emphasize enough that the rituals surrounding life's cycle of events and the Jewish holidays are so beautiful and so much more meaningful when the customs and traditions are invoked and practiced. Unfamiliarity and ignorance are no excuse for abstinence. Although Pirke Avot says that, "at thirteen, one is ready to fulfill the commandments," it is never too late to learn and take on Jewish rituals. Rabbi Akiba began his study when he was 40 years old. Franz Rosenzweig started his journey as an adult, and went on to become one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century.

So what are the commandments that a bar mitzvah, in other words, all adult Jews should fulfill? It basically comes down to -- a commitment to prayer, to continuing to study, and to being a part of the community. The bar and bat mitzvah ceremony is a means of celebrating the fact that our children assume their role as members of the community. They do this by engaging in study, by performing mitzvot, including the obligation to participate in services. It means that they must realize that the fate and survival of the Jewish people is now in their hands, and is their responsibility. After all, if we don't care about, and do things to insure Jewish survival, then who will? The Taliban?!

In June I met with the children who will be having a bar mitzvah this coming year to convey these concepts to them. At one point during my workshop, I took out a bunch of books from my library and stacked them on the table. I told the children if they ever thought for a moment that they had learned all there was to learn about Judaism, they should remember this pile of sacred literature before them. At another point, I held up a necklace one of the girls was wearing and likened it to the chain of tradition, and asked them to envision themselves as a link on that chain.

You may think it unusual that I have chosen to speak so extensively tonight about this one life cycle event. I address this as a means of teaching about the responsibility of all adult Jews. It is important to discuss because within a three year period, a little less than ½ of our families will be celebrating a bar or bat mitzvah. And finally, since this is the 13th year of our existence, our bar mitzvah year, I would like to suggest that each of us reflect on the significance of this milestone in the life of our congregation. In a way, each of us is a bar or bat mitzvah, and milestones offer us the chance to pause and mark a particular moment, and to appreciate all that it means.

I know that not all of you have been members for 13 years. There are some who joined 13 days ago, and some 13 hours ago. But let us all celebrate our synagogue's bar

mitzvah year by resolving to make it a time we dedicate ourselves to being as active as we can in the synagogue, and bringing as much Judaism as we can into our lives. Let this be a year of commitment by each of us to prayer, to study, and to being a part of the community by doing more than we did last year.

In conjunction with the celebration of our bar mitzvah year, we are further developing what we do in each of those three areas. After the holidays, we will inaugurate a daily weekday evening minyan, and extensively expand our already popular adult education program. We will also build upon our successful social action program and expand the work of our caring community committee. All of these are explained in further detail in the comprehensive Owner's Manual.

One last thing – all of this takes money. Is it realistic to speak about study and prayer, without talking about tzedekah. After all, the unateneh tokef prayer cites the importance of this mitzvah, along with prayer and teshuvah as one of the three redeeming pillars of our faith.

In the spirit of this day, I want to make a confession. I love talking to you about money, especially on the holidays. And the more people complain and squirm, and bemoan the fact that money is mentioned on the holidays, the more I know how right it is to do so. I say this because I am sure you would agree with me that Judaism has something to say about how we live our lives. It does not want us to spend our resources only on ourselves, and to satisfy only our own needs. We are implored by our tradition to think of and care for others.

This is why the truth is that the people who are upset when money is mentioned from the pulpit, on the holidays, are never the individuals who are generous with tzedekah. They know and understand how important it is to contribute to sustain our community. Invariably, it is the people who would prefer to spend on themselves, and who do not like being challenged to think about the needs of others who complain.

I feel this way with all my being, because I believe, as a result of my study of Jewish texts that our rabbis and the Almighty care about what we do with the financial resources which we may be fortunate enough to have pass through our hands during our lifetime. How we spend money reflects our priorities, and whether or not we recognize our obligation to care for the welfare of others and to insure the survival of the community. Yom Kippur is an appropriate time to ask -- do we seek only to enrich ourselves, or do we also try to enrich the lives of others.

By strengthening the synagogue, by participating in its activities, by contributing to it, you are strengthening the American Jewish community. We teach and practice Judaism here. Our success as a synagogue, however, comes not just from what we have built and the many wonderful programs we sponsor, but because of what people take away from here into their lives and homes. We have always tried to teach that Judaism does not begin and end at our doors. It goes from here to the homes of our congregants. It is not surprising that so many of our members who did not grow up in kosher homes and

did not attend synagogue, have decided to make their homes kosher, or to attend services and classes on a regular basis. And what we teach goes beyond B'nai Tzedek, and from here to the larger community. It is also not surprising that when you look at the rosters of the leadership of the major communal organizations in this community, an overwhelming number of their ranks come from our synagogue.

B'nai Tzedek is a place where we have grown and continue to grow Jewishly. We invite you to be a part of this renaissance of Jewish life by participating and by your contributions. Those who have not yet participated in the capitol campaign may still do so, so we can reach our goal of close to 100 % participation. We invite you to contribute to the Supporters' Fund.

We should always keep in mind the connection between what we do here, and what we do in our homes, and how it relates to the larger community. They are all interconnected. Listen to what Rabbi Alexander Schindler, wrote so poetically shortly before his sudden passing a few months ago, about the relationship between the synagogue and the Jewish people.

“Our lives are a wilderness, uncharted and unpredictable – untimely deaths, unexpected blows, unsuitable matches, unfulfilled dreams. And yet, by gathering our heartaches into a house of worship, we find something transformative happening – our sorrows become windows of compassion. Paths through the wilderness, hewed and marked by past generations give us our bearings. Patterns of meaning and significance emerge. We are moved from self-pity to love. Our individual heartbeats merge with the pulse of all humankind. Suddenly we no longer tremble like an uprooted reed.”

If there is anything we have learned after the tragedy of this past week, it is the central role community, our congregations, and faith can play in the healing process.

So in this bar mitzvah year, let us strengthen our commitment to the mitzvot, to study and prayer, to our synagogue, our people and community. Let us look backwards on what we have achieved in 13 short years and forward to the horizons and vistas not yet conquered. And mazel tov to all of us.

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