

Attending a lot of Bar/Bat Mitzvahs has led me to the conclusion that we have a problem on our hands. For those of you struggling in the vineyard this is nothing new.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations have increasingly become family celebrations. This is true in congregations that historically had Shabbat morning services, where now the service is threatened by inundation by the family and their invitees. In these synagogues rabbis count on an often numerically limited number of “regulars” to hold the fort as far as decorum and participation are concerned. The distribution of honors, the speech of the parents to the child, and well meant rabbinic attempts to please the family, contribute to this situation. This is even truer in congregations where Bar/Bat Mitzvah was long absent, and when brought back, was assigned a Saturday morning slot, so as not to interfere with the Friday night service. There, the families takeover of Shabbat morning services is a *fait accompli*, because often there is no other Saturday morning service, or if there is, it is at a different time. There is a sense that the premises and the professional clergy staff, *k’lei kodesh* are rented to a specific family for their private celebration, uninvolved with congregational life, except insofar as the child has invited his/her religious school friends among others.

These family celebrations though worthy and understandable are not what Bar/Bat Mitzvah is about. Their not so subtle message undermines the potent and useful message of Bar/Bat Mitzvah which is--

The Initiation of a young person into the Community Israel.

What follows is a suggestion for Bar/Bat Mitzvah mornings that puts a frame of “Initiation” around the whole morning. Ritualizing it this way frames the event as something beyond a family celebration. Treating Bar/Bat Mitzvah in this way teaches the assembled invitees what they are attending is all about. It will also by its repeated ritual nature teach our own loyalists. This ritual frame also deals with the parents speech to the child about to be initiated, which has become *de rigueur* in many congregations and which as I have experienced it often, can run on and on, and sometimes be quite cloying.

In what follows, explanatory notes are *italicized*.

A Bar/Bat Mitzvah Initiation Ceremony

The parents are asked to come to the pulpit. The rabbi says something like;

I (we) now ask Mr. and Mrs. Yaakov Almoni to come to the pulpit and present their (your) son/daughter who this day will mark his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah, to this Congregation in Israel.

The parent's response begins with a *standardized* format.

Rabbi Gaon; It is our pleasure to (or alternately; It is with pride, joy and gratitude, that we) present our son/daughter Ploni Almoni to this congregation in Israel, that they may accept him on behalf of the people Israel as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

What follows replaces the parent's speech to the child. It allows the parents to praise Ploni, but within the ritual framework of an Initiation. The parents have been instructed in advance to write a piece about their child, describing how wonderful he/she is, and how much they love him/her, The speech is to be no longer than 200 words. This will focus the talk and keep it brief. The talk remains personal, about the child, but is directed to the Rabbi, who is conducting the initiation, and is said within a ritual framework.

Parent(s) then read the brief talk to officiating Rabbi-- **Ploni is, blah blah blah**

If a talit is to be put on, the parent(s) say;

I (we) now place this talit on his/her shoulders. We pray that God may envelop and protect him/her all of his/her days. May Gods mitzvot be upon his/her shoulders, a comfort and joy, a challenge and commitment, always.

If no talit is to be put on

We pray that God may envelop and protect him/her all of his/her days. May Gods mitzvot be a comfort and joy, a challenge and commitment, always.

Then the Torah reading and Haftorah, etcetera take place.

The Rabbi speaks to the child and blesses him/her.

Following Rabbi's blessing, three congregants (an intimation of a Bet Din, or perhaps a Bet Din itself.) stand on the Bimah.

The rabbi invites them using their covenant (Hebrew) name, mentioning their role as representatives of the Congregation and the Jewish People.

N.B. Creating a core of people in the congregation who do this task, can be an educational tool in itself.

This adds to the congregational honors available, publicly declares that this is a congregational event and strengthens the ongoing crowd of regulars.

One of the three-or each in succession says;

May the blessings of our rabbi and our people go with you always.

On behalf of this congregation, Congregation _____, duly assembled here this Shabbat, Parshat whatever and the Jewish people wherever they may be gathered in the worship of our God, we welcome you to a life of Jewish responsibility and commitment.

Our history is your history.

Our destiny is your destiny.

May your dreams be our dreams.

Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh ba zeh.

We are responsible for each other.

Together let us build the future of our people.

The rabbi invites the parents and family, the congregation devoted to the covenant between God and Israel to rise for She-hecheyanu.

This expresses gratefulness to God for reaching this day, which is now a response by all to the young person's initiation ceremony.

So the whole thing from the introduction of the child, is one ceremony, with a beginning and an end thus marking the Bar/Bat Mitzvah's moving beyond membership in the family to full membership in the people Israel.

None of this is written in stone. The core of this is the attempt to change Bar/Bat Mitzvah into an Initiation Ceremony. You may find better ways. I hope this is useful and that you play with it creatively.