

Attending a lot of Bar/Bat Mitzvahs has led me to the conclusion that we have a problem on our hands. For those struggling in the vineyard and for those of us who attend Shabbat morning, this is no chidush.

In her excellent article "Defining Community: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ritual (Conservative Judaism Vol; 56; 2 Winter 2004,) Barat Ellman, has not placed sufficient emphasis that the celebrations have increasingly become family celebrations, symbolic of what the family has accomplished Jewishly in both Temple Y and a tad less in Synagogue X, i.e. in both Reform and Conservative congregations.

As a member of both the RA and the CCAR and of both a Conservative congregation (which I founded) and a local Reform congregation (which has grown increasingly traditional) it has been interesting to note the similarities and differences, in two congregations appealing to essentially the same "clientele". The difference is less in what the symbolic meaning is to the child as individual as it is to the "family" aspect of the simcha.

Conservative congregations, which historically had Shabbat morning services, now have to deal with their service being inundated by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah's extended family, their invitees and a phalanx of public school classmates who find the service incomprehensible and sometimes intolerable. In these synagogues rabbis count on a numerically limited number of "regulars" to hold the fort as far as decorum and participation are concerned. The distribution of honors to those who have no familiarity with how to do them often mars the performance of time-tested rituals. And a new ritual, placing the Talit on the shoulders of the celebrant, is often accompanied by the parents delivery of an often cloying speech to the child, noting how wonderful it was to see her first smile, or how his good sportsmanship on the soccer field has brought honor to the family, how the 13 year old through good marks, good cheer, good attitude etc. has been a joy to raise. Well intentioned rabbinic attempts to please the family, by praising their paradigmatic efforts only make it ever more clear that the event is first and foremost a family celebration.

This is even more true in most Reform congregations where Bar/Bat Mitzvah was long absent, and then was installed in the attempt to recruit families used to the ritual from their more traditional origins. Bar/Bat Mitzvah was remembered by them fondly and was the perfect family

celebration. Though eager to include Bar/Bat Mitzvah, ("what could be bad!") while not intruding on or interfering with the Friday night service, for generations the main service of Reform congregations, with the best of intentions Bar/Bat Mitzvah was assigned to what was often an empty Saturday morning slot. In these, 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, much earlier time. There is a sense that the premises and the k'lei kodesh have been leased to a specific family for their private celebration, that has little to do with congregational life, except insofar as the child has invited his/her religious school friends among others.

That a family should celebrate a child's reaching 13, though worthy and understandable, is not as Barat Ellman points out what Bar/Bat Mitzvah is about. The not so subtle message that this is first and foremost a family celebration undermines (as Ms. Ellman has well demonstrated) the potent and useful message of Bar/Bat Mitzvah; The Initiation of a young person into the Community Israel. It certainly gives a message to the child, that the morning's event, so long prepared for, has little to do with being part of the greater community of the Jewish People. Optimally it would be good to reincorporate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah into a regular ongoing Shabbat morning service, where a large cohort of regulars would far outnumber the family and their invitees, yet under present circumstances, the family and their invitees seem to take over.

Yet we are not helpless. Ritualizing Bar/Bat Mitzvah as an initiation ceremony frames the entire morning as something beyond a family simcha. Treating Bar/Bat Mitzvah in this way teaches the assembled invitees, that they are attending an Initiation/Induction. It is also an opportunity by its repeated ritual nature, to teach our own loyalists. This ritual frame can also deal with the parents speech to the kid, which has become de rigueur in many congregations and which as I have experienced it often, can run on and on, ad nauseum.

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

I (we) now ask. Yaakov and Rahel 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 parents' 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 that they may on behalf of the people of Israel wherever they may be gathered this Shabbat morning accept him/her as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Parent(s) then say to Rabbi (**not to child**); ***Ploni is, blah blah blah...***(having been instructed in advance to write a piece about the child, no longer than 200 words, describing how wonderful he/she is, and how much they love him/her. The talk thus is focused and brief. It remains personal, allowing the parents to praise Ploni, but is said to the Rabbi, within the ritual framework of an Initiation.)

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

I (we) now place this talit on his/her shoulders. I (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 Torah reading, Haphtarah, etcetera...

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

The rabbi then calls three congregants to the Bimah. (An intimation of a Bet Din, or perhaps a Bet Din itself.) Creating a core of people in the congregation who do this task, can be an educational tool. This adds to the congregational Kibudim, publicly declares that this is a congregational event and strengthens the ongoing crowd of regulars.

I now ask Mrs. Ploni Almoni, Mr. Ploni Almoni and Dr. Ploni Almoni, who have this morning been authorized to act on behalf of this congregation and of the people Israel wherever they may be gathered in worship this morning, to step forward. Being an initiation ritual, this is done with formality.

One of the three 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 bazeh.

We are responsible for each other.

Together let us build the future of our people.

Parents and family now rise for She-hecheyanu, which is now a response to the child's initiation/induction ceremony.

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

In those synagogues with regular Shabbat AM Services it will strengthen the regulars and in those where only the family is there it will convey a message about what the simcha is all about, welcoming a young person to the fellowship and commitments of 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.

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