

What lies beyond the Bar Mitzvah?

How to change the traditional narrative which has framed our definition of the Bar Mitzvah to influence longevity. Inna Serebro-Litvak, Spring, 2016

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Historical Background

While today's *bar/bat mitzvah*¹ ceremony is seen as a major life-cycle event, often competing with weddings and other worthy milestones, there is nothing in the Torah that talks about a child entering adulthood and becoming obligated to fulfill the *mitzvot*. As a matter of fact, the Torah cites the age of majority as twenty years old. We can derive this from the following verses: “...Every one that passes among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the offering of the LORD...”² and “...take you the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, by their polls; from twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel: you shall number them by their hosts, even you and Aaron..”³

Based on these verses, the rabbis declared that the age of maturity is established when one reaches the age of twenty. For example, the rabbis drew inferences and concluded that a person should not receive severe punishment for sins of transgression before age twenty⁴. It is worth noting that twenty was also the age when a male child is eligible to be drafted into an army. Rashi's comments on Numbers 1 further suggest that from the age of twenty years, all who are fit to go out to the army in Israel, shall be counted (in the census).

In that case, when did the age of thirteen become the age of maturity according to Jewish tradition? Age “thirteen” was first mentioned in *Pirkei Avot* 5:21 as an age of maturity. The

¹ Throughout this paper, the term *Bar / Bat mitzvah* will be substituted with *bar mitzvah* for readability purposes only.

² Exodus 30:14

³ Numbers 1:2-3

⁴ Talmud Bavli Shab. 89b

term occurs in the Talmud for “one who is subject to the law”⁵. “To the ancients, thirteen was the age of spiritual and moral choice. Some rabbinic sources say that only upon turning thirteen is a youth first able to make mature choices, because then the child becomes endowed with both the *yetzer hatov* (the good inclination) and *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination), the dueling forces that Jewish theology perceives are within the human psyche.”⁶

The Shulchan Aruch⁷ cites the following law on the age requirements for fasting on Yom Kippur: “A girl of twelve and one day and a boy of thirteen and one day who have brought forth two hairs are considered adults with regard to all of the commandments and must complete the fast as an obligation from the Torah, but if they have not brought forth two hairs then they are regarded as minors and complete the fast as a rabbinical obligation only.” In “Putting God on the Guest List”, Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin responds to this law and contends that a child shall be included in a minyan and is obligated to fast on Yom Kippur when reaching the age of thirteen. “A minor tractate of the Talmud, Sofrim, mentions that in the era of the Second Temple (approximately the first century of the Common Era) there was a ceremony for twelve or thirteen year olds who had completed their first Yom Kippur fast. In that ceremony, the elders of the community blessed the children on the occasion of completing this important mitzvah. Perhaps this was the first bona fide Jewish coming-of-age ceremony.”⁸

In drawing from historical context, in “*Putting God on the Guest List*”, Salkin makes note of how Spanish Jews preserved their religious and spiritual identity during the period of Spanish

⁵ Babylonian Talmud Bava Metziah 96a

⁶ *Putting God on the Guest List* Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin p. 7

⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Chapter 55

⁸ Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin p. 7

Inquisition. Sadly, we know that Jews who remained in Spain were forced to convert to Christianity, oftentimes with severe repercussions for nonconformance. The term used to describe these Jews was "Marranos". Oftentimes, and in spite of great danger to themselves, their families and their communities, Marranos secretly tried to preserve their Jewish identity. One of the ways in which Marranos preserved their Jewish identities was to inform their children at the age of thirteen about their Jewish roots. Why wait until thirteen? Finding this balance was critical, for if a child was younger than thirteen, the risk of exposing the secret amongst the community was great. Whereas waiting much longer beyond thirteen risked the child being influenced by Christianity beyond the point of no return and losing hope of preserving their Jewish identity.⁹

In the Middle Ages, a boy was considered mature and obligated to follow the *mitzvot* at the age of thirteen and a day. Therefore, a blessing was established and recited by the father of the boy: "*Baruch she petarani me'onsho shel zeh*" ("Blessed is the One Who has now freed me from responsibility for this one"). We can conclude that this marks the period that the father is no longer responsible for the sins of his son.

The Mishnah¹⁰ states that a minor can read and translate from the Torah. Later, such privilege was withdrawn from minors, except for Simchat Torah in European countries such as France and Germany. Age thirteen was the age when a boy reached a majority and was given an honor of reading from the Torah, as well as obligated to wear *tefillin*. In Midrash Tanchuma, Exodus

⁹ Based on the book *The Other Within: The Marranos Split Identity and Immerging Modernity* by Yirmiyahu Yovel, p.230

¹⁰ Mishnah Megillah 4:6

13:10 we find: "Can even minors don *teffilin*?" We are taught "You shall observe" (Exodus 13:10), for everyone who learns to observe can learn to do. This eliminates minors because they are not obliged to observe but if a minor is *bar mitzvah* (old enough to do mitzvot and observe them) and (*bar de'ah*) knowledgeable, he is obligated to don *teffilin*."¹¹

By the 16th century, customs and traditions began to take shape in Europe. In fact, the celebration of a boy becoming *bar mitzvah* as well as the ceremony resembles what we see today more than four hundred years later.

While boys celebrated their *bar mitzvah* with their communities since ancient times, girls didn't have that privilege until the 1800's. Early mentions of girls partaking in these rituals are seen in Western Europe, notably France, Italy and Germany. "...Talmudic discussion in Kiddushin 16b clarifies that a boy is of age when physical signs of adulthood appear after he is 13 plus one day. Maimonides completes the equation and specifies that a girl's signs of adulthood are those that appear only after her 12th birthday plus one day..." The author continues "... Aside from assuming ritual obligations, adult responsibility meant that a young woman was no longer dependent on her father, mother, or brother in marital arrangements and could act on her own behalf. Prior to the modern era, this change in a girl's status was rarely celebrated in a communal context. It is not until the 19th century that indications of ceremony or public recognition come from Italy, Eastern and Western Europe, Egypt, and Baghdad. These acknowledgements of female religious adulthood include a private blessing, a father's *aliyah* to the Torah, a rabbi's sermon and/or a girl's public examination on Judaic matters. *Bat mitzvah* as

¹¹ Midrash Tanchuma Exodus 13:10

a female ceremony equivalent or identical to the male *bar mitzvah* is not found until the middle of the 20th century and is an American innovation...”¹²

In his responsum, Rabbi Moses (Moshe) Feinstein, a Lithuanian Orthodox Rabbi who was a famous *posek* and authority in *halakhah* in United States in the mid-20th century, forbade the use of the sanctuary for a *bat mitzvah* and only allowed a special birthday *kiddush* for a girl, permitting her to say few words after the service. “He opposes a Bat Mitzvah ceremony (*IM OH* 1:104) on many grounds, especially because it emanates from branches of Judaism that he does not recognize. He calls it worthless. But in a different responsum (*IM OH* 4:36), he calls the *bat mitzvah* a *simḥah* and permits a *kiddush* and a speech in the synagogue proper, thus extending male ritual patterns to females and creating a vehicle for a Bat Mitzvah celebration in an Orthodox context.”¹³

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist movement, officiated at the first *bat mitzvah* ceremony in the United States. The significance of this event is recognized as the first time a girl was permitted to chant a Haftarah portion. The *bat mitzvah* girl was Rabbi Kaplan’s daughter, Judith Kaplan. The ceremony took place in May 1922. In spite of a record marking this event and the public recognition of a girl coming of age in Jewish communities throughout the century, Judith Kaplan’s *haftarah* chant was the first occurrence of a girl taking part in an actual service. This was a great reform that took place in any progressive movements. The age

¹²Jewish Virtual Library “Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah”

¹³ Jewish Women’s Archive

for a *bat mitzvah* girl, unlike *bar mitzvah* boy which is 13 and a day, was 12 and a day. Today, in the Reform movement the girls celebrate their *bat mitzvah* after they turn 13.

At the height of the Emancipation and Enlightenment period that took shape in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, the Reform Movement emerged in Germany which quickly spread throughout Europe. The leaders of Reform movement, pursued among other things, equality in rights for men and women. Taking note of the *bar mitzvah* ceremony and its historical traditions, norms and customs that Jews preserved until this period in time, the Reform movement made significant changes, in what has arguably been a ceremony for boys only. Two important changes were introduced which had a profound impact on the *bar mitzvah* ceremony. Girls would be permitted and encouraged to participate in *bar mitzvah* ceremonies and the confirmation of children was established at age sixteen.

To further establish their identity, and since the *bar mitzvah* ceremony was traditionally seen as an Orthodox ritual, Reform leaders looked to make a bold change. In its place, the *bar mitzvah* ceremony was replaced with the confirmation ceremony. Leaders of the Reform movement also wanted to integrate into German society, and because Confirmation was a big part of the Lutheran Church, German Reform Jews decided to adopt this custom as well. As a result, since the confirmation took place later in the lives of young people than *bar mitzvah*, it encouraged children to have longer term connections with their religious schools.

When Reform Jews of Germany immigrated to the United States in the 19th century, they continued with the established ceremony of Confirmation in newly opened Synagogues. Eventually, the Conservative Movement realized the value of encouraging a Jewish education

post-*b'nai mitzvah* by introducing Confirmation and many Conservative congregations introduced the Confirmation ceremony. In spite of the attempt to maintain Confirmation as a way to encourage young people to continue with the religious school program, it did not succeed in becoming an enduring ceremony, and today it is less and less observed by liberal communities. With the large wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe throughout the 20th century, many young people and in some cases extended families, pursuing their desire to assimilate, didn't want to attend synagogues which continued to preserve the traditional way of conducting services. This was a reminder of the life they abandoned and it was no longer attractive to the younger generation, who wanted to integrate in American society.

A dilemma arose for rabbis in America as to how to attract families and especially children to attend synagogues. "Of all the problems that beset the American Rabbi of today", admitted Rabbi Israel Goldfarb in 1927", "none is more complex and more difficult to solve than that of how to bring the child closer to the synagogue, how to arouse his interest in things Jewish and how to secure his permanent attachment to the ideals of our faith and people."¹⁴

Reform leaders were forced to come up with changes to traditional rituals and activities that would draw parents and children to synagogues. *Bar mitzvah* and Confirmation became that draw. The rabbis determined that the age at which a child becomes a *bar mitzvah* is the most impressionable and that if they manage to bring that child along with the family, they will most

¹⁴ *The Wonders of America, Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* by Jenna Weissman Joselit; Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, New York 2002) (p.87)

likely stay through the Confirmation. Once a young person went through these two major life cycle events, the hope was that he would not divert from their Jewish heritage.

The popularity of the *bar mitzvah* ceremony grew immensely amongst American Jewry in the late 1940s. Of all observed rituals at the time, *bar mitzvah* became the focal point for many families. The ceremony was also sculpted in such a way that the *bar mitzvah* child became a focus of attention. Finally, this was also an opportunity for parents to announce their child's achievements to their local community. The *bar mitzvah* ritual became a link to connect the chain of the religious behavior from the past to the innovations of the modern life style. "In the process of transplantation from the Old World to the New, this rite of passage assumed a brand-new centrality and immediacy. Taking a meaningful, if restrained, religious event and transforming it into something larger than (and quite different from) the sum of its parts, immigrant Jews invented the "fancier" *bar mitzvah*."¹⁵

At the turn of the twentieth century, the curriculum of many religious schools included the staple of Jewish education: Hebrew alphabet, basic history, prayers and *bar mitzvah* preparation activities. It is worth noting that this curriculum is firmly established in many Reform and Conservative congregations and can be found across most congregations today. Most notably however, the key focus is to prepare students for a successful *bar mitzvah*.

At the same time, the popularity of a *bar mitzvah* giving a "*drasha*", a teaching on the weekly Torah portion, grew. "Speeches typically opened with the greetings to one's parents, teachers

¹⁵ *The Wonders of America, Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* by Jenna Weissman Joselit; Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, New York 2002) (p.90)

and honored guests and closed with the tendering of “heartfelt thanks” to the president of the *shul* and luminaries. In between the texts ranged from such concepts as “This is the most important day of my life. For today I am admitted into the Brotherhood of Israel,” to the more succinct “Today I am a man, to “From today on I am a perfect Jew.”¹⁶

What started out as a religious ritual that framed a child's transition into adulthood, and throughout the pivotal 19th and 20th centuries during which time Reform and Conservative movements took shape, the once simple and stoic ceremony was slowly reframed into a grand ritual. The clergy also used the *bar mitzvah* ceremony to encourage family membership. Once the families joined the synagogue, they were likely to stay, especially in the suburban synagogues, due to the ties the families created with other families who used to live in the close proximity.

The tradition of the *mitzvah* project also took shape in the early stages of the 20th century and is partly a byproduct of the gifts that would often precede these monumental events. Today, this tradition is continued and is used to reinforce philanthropy as well as the importance of social justice. The *b'nai mitzvah* have an opportunity to develop their own mitzvah project which often highlights fundraising, volunteering and historical Jewish culture and identify preservation. We should not underestimate this great opportunity to teach children an important Jewish concept of *tzedaka* and *chesed* charity and kindness.

¹⁶ *The Wonders of America, Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* by Jenna Weissman Joselit; Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, New York 2002) (pp.92-93)

Throughout Germany, during the 19th and 20th centuries, *bar mitzvah* ceremonies were replaced with Confirmation. Preserving their traditions and customs, when German Jews came to the United States, they continued by holding Confirmation and foregoing the *bar mitzvah* ceremonies. With the growth of the *bar mitzvah* popularity, Reform clergy had to adopt the ritual back under the pressure of the families' demands. Nevertheless, Reform synagogues maintained the existence of Confirmation, which began to serve as a goal for a continuation of religious study for children post *bar mitzvah*. "Like first communion, with which it was often compared, confirmation marked the religious maturity of fourteen-to-sixteen-year-old girls and boys by means of dignified, stately public ceremony."¹⁷

The coexistence of *bar mitzvah* and Confirmation marked the period of the connection between old tradition and innovation in the Reform movement. Today in the United States, both *b'nai mitzvah* and Confirmation are celebrated and have become a part of life-observances not only in the Reform synagogues, but across Conservative congregations as well. The Conservative Movement realized the value of encouraging a Jewish education post-*b'nai mitzvah* by introducing Confirmation. Unfortunately this has fallen in to disuse today.

Analysis and Observations

Sadly, many chose not to continue their Jewish studies after becoming *bar mitzvah*. The problem faced by Conservative and Reform Movements is becoming unambiguous: the *bar mitzvah* ceremony is widely seen as the finality of Jewish studies. The original plan of attracting

¹⁷ *The Wonders of America, Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* by Jenna Weissman Joselit; Henry Holt and Company, LLC, New York, New York 2002) (p.105)

and encouraging Jewish families in becoming members of their local synagogues was to have their children go through the process of preparation for the *bar mitzvah*. This plan led to the notion that the sole purpose of Jewish education is to enable a child to read from the Torah and the *haftarah* at the *bar mitzvah* and recite some prayers. Children are not encouraged by parents to remain in religious schools. Thus, the education in most Reform and Conservative religious schools become superficial and the *b'nai mitzvah* preparation process resembles a *b'nai mitzvah* "factory".

Looking from the prism of the community, the *bar mitzvah* service in most Reform synagogues resembles a private affair. Congregants do not come on Shabbat morning, knowing that the child is the center and the focus of the service. (This trend is increasing in the Conservative synagogues with the *mincha/ma'ariv/havdalah* service where only *b'nai mitzvah* family and friends are present.) Although often beautiful and meaningful for families and friends of the *bar mitzvah* child, the ceremony may have inadvertently morphed beyond its original intent and has stolen from the feel of the "regular" Shabbat service. This is not yet the case in most of the Orthodox synagogues, where a *bar mitzvah* boy is called as the *maftir* during the service, but there is no family monopoly on the event. (Similarly, in Israel and Europe the *bar mitzvah* is part of the regular Shabbat service, attended by the "regulars".)

In the book *13 And a Day*, Mark Oppenheimer describes his experience visiting various synagogues during *b'nai mitzvah*. Oppenheimer's passage on B'nai Mitzvah follows: "I found that it was not the lack of vigor, the watery Judaism, the shortened service, or the relative absence of Hebrew that bothered me most...What saddened me about the Scarsdale *b'nai*

mitzvah was how they had overshadowed Shabbos; by robbing the day of its central purpose, communal prayer and public Torah reading, *b'nai mitzvah* heightened importance within the Jewish community actually seemed to cripple the ritual's religious potential... At large synagogues, especially the ones that irreligious parents join to get their children "bar mitzvahed", what used to be just a young boy reading a *bissel* of *haftarah* and then taking his seat again is now a child star whose moment of celebrity trumps traditional worship..."¹⁸

My journey in understanding and connecting the traditions of the *bar mitzvah* to the continuation of a relationship between a congregation and a family lead me to Chabad. Interviewing Rabbi Sholom Lubin of the Chabad Jewish Center of Madison NJ provided me with a different insight into how *bar mitzvah* are conducted in a Chabad synagogue. In exploring how students prepare for their *bar mitzvah*, Rabbi Sholom Lubin suggested what I already knew from my research: "Historically, *bar mitzvah* wasn't important at all. What was important – become an adult but the celebration of becoming an adult was not. The same is true about *bar mitzvah* in our community. In the past, once a year kids were called to the Torah and that was how the community marked the *bar mitzvah*." When attempting to reconcile why ceremonies in Reform and Conservative synagogues have manifested in their current format, Rabbi Lubin suggested the following: "...The ceremony has become an incentive. Pretend it wasn't there, how do we get people to be interested?..." I asked Rabbi Lubin how Chabad keeps children engaged and what specifically prolongs the relationship with the congregation. "...God is the

¹⁸*Thirteen and a Day, The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Across America* by Mark Oppenheimer, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York. April 1, 2010 (pp. 25-26)

center of the problem...” I was taken aback by the manner of his response but he clarified. “...You have to start talking with children about God from the very young age; similarly you need to teach children the commandments from the young age too. Just like we teach the children the rules of proper behavior in the society, we need to teach them the commandments because the commandments have direct connection to God:

- Mitzvah – Commandment
- We – Commanded
- God – Commander

If we don’t follow the commandments, then we take God who is a Commander out of the equation; and if we take God out of the equation, then what are we left with?...”

My interpretation and rationalization of Rabbi Lubin’s words in connection with the *bar-mitzvah* follows the following narrative: *bar mitzvah* means the one who is commanded, meaning a person who connects to God through the commandment, therefore it is a privilege in itself to be connected to God and that should be enough of an incentive for us! I realized that when we talk to students and parents during the *bar mitzvah* preparation, we hardly ever bring up God. It is almost as if the *bar mitzvah* has nothing to do with the religion but has to do with the established tradition.

Continuing with our discussion, Rabbi Lubin noted “...We care more about the child’s feeling toward God and Judaism before and after the ceremony. The ceremony itself is not the biggest milestone in a Jewish life and Chabad doesn’t make it a focus of a child’s upbringing. Since children go to day school, Hebrew is not a problem for most of them and the part they may do

on Shabbat of their *bar mitzvah* is teaching some Talmudic discourse or perhaps chant some Torah. The biggest deal for the *bar mitzvah* boy, nevertheless, is that becoming of age marks the time when he can start putting on the *teffilin* like his father. As a matter of fact, the boys may start putting *teffilin* on two months prior to the *bar mitzvah*.”

Finally, Rabbi Lubin went on to describe the recent *bat mitzvah* of his daughter. Unlike the customary *bar mitzvah* that takes place in the heart of the Chabad congregation, the *bat mitzvah* of his daughter took place at the family residence amongst friends, relatives and congregants. In the tradition and customs of Chabad, Rabbi Lubin believes that girls who study Torah and Talmud in *yeshivas*, may choose to teach the text of the *haftorah* portion or conduct a research project and report on it the day of their *bat mitzvah*. A ceremony, equal in all parts to boys is sadly not acceptable. Rabbi Lubin’s daughter chose to do a research about the women throughout Jewish history who carried her name – Rivkah.

After the interview with Rabbi Lubin, I re-read the chapter “Putting the Mitzvah Back in Bar and Bat Mitzvah” from the book “Putting God on the Guest List” by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin and was surprised to see the number of similarities between the two denominations. Rabbi Salkin writes: “...Jewish children become bar or bat mitzvah because of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. The *mitzvot* are our end of covenant. *Mitzvah*, in fact, is one of the most important ideas Judaism gave to the world: A relationship with God entails mutual responsibility... The idea of *mitzvah* is central to Jewish identity. It is the essence of the Covenant, our end of the agreement made at Sinai, the summit of Jewish existence...”¹⁹ In this

¹⁹ *Putting God on the Guest List* Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin P. 63

chapter, Rabbi Salkin stresses the significance of the *mitzvot* as much as Rabbi Lubin. Unfortunately, this teaching does not always translate in the religious school setting and during the preparation for the *bar/bat mitzvah*.

In a recent article “Revolutionizing Bar/Bat Mitzvah”, Isa Aron writes: “...Over the centuries *bar mitzvah* changed from a modest ritual celebrating the point in a male’s life when he becomes obligated to fulfill the full range of *mitzvot* to an elaborate ritual in which observing mitzvot is less important than connecting to family and expressing one’s Jewish Identity...”²⁰ The historical transformation of the *bar mitzvah* in the United States, the ceremony itself, was “reinvented” and “reengineered”. Unfortunately, clergy bear some responsibility for this transformation. Even if this transformation started with the best of intentions (such as to attract people to the synagogue), it created a situation where clergy are adjusting the curriculum of the religious school to satisfy the desires of the families, altering it so that it will be easier to digest. The effects are significant in their own right and have monumental impact on Jewish education. Children who attend religious school become the part of the process, whereas Isa Aron words it “preparation... is somewhat like a production line at a factory.”²¹

Under these changes and with continuous pressures to adjust to the ebbs and flows of cultural demands, how can we expect children to maintain emotional connections and intellectual curiosity, after being asked to memorize unfamiliar words, spending most of their time at the religious school without fully having the means to comprehend the contextual meaning of the

²⁰ Reform Jewish Quarterly CCAR Journal Fall 2015 Page 13

²¹ Reform Jewish Quarterly CCAR Journal Fall 2015 Page 23

prayers and the reason for their existence in the prayer book? How can we expect children to come back after their *bar mitzvah* if they see no interest in continuing their education that leads to very superficial knowledge? Regretfully, and as a result, when children transition out of their *bar mitzvah* stage, their understanding of Judaism and knowledge of Torah is best described as pediatric level.

While blessed to work with many students who understand the importance and significance of the process and the participation in services, and who are proud of their Jewish identities and will stay through confirmation, there are those who approach it as an unwanted chore. I fear this as my saddest revelation. In cases such as this, I often question the integrity of the process. What do children ultimately gain from memorizing the few *p'sukim* in Hebrew and reading a two page speech often written by their parents?

Laurie Goodstein in her recent New York Times article, “...*Bar Mitzvahs* Get New Look to Build Faith” writes: “Families have been treating this rite of passage not as an entry to Jewish life, but as a graduation ceremony: turn 13, read from the Torah, have a party and its over. Many leave synagogue until they have children of their own, and many never return at all — a cycle that Jewish leaders say has been undermining organized Judaism for generations...”²²

In addition to Rabbi Lubin, I interviewed five clergy across different denominations:

²² New York Times publication article “*Bar Mitzvahs* Get New Look to Build Faith” by Laurie Goodstein. September 3, 2013

1. Rabbi Neil Zuckerman: Director of Congregational Education in Park Avenue Synagogue, New York, NY;
2. Rabbi David Wise: Rabbi at Hollis Hills Jewish Center, Hollis Hills, NY;
3. Cantor Sergei Schwartz: Cantor of Temple Sinai, Roslyn, NY.
4. Rabbi Steven Bayer: Rabbi at Congregation B'nai Israel, Millburn, NJ.
5. Cantor Erik Contzius: Former Cantor at Temple Israel, New Rochelle NY.

My questions to these clergy were different from the interview with Rabbi Lubin. They were as follows:

- How many *bnai mitzvah* a year does your synagogue have?
- What is the required age or grade when the child has to attend religious school to be eligible for *bar mitzvah* ceremony at the synagogue?
- Is there a standard requirement of the prayers, Torah and *haftarah* that the children need to learn for the service?
- Who is involved in the child's preparation process for the *bar mitzvah*?
- Is the family involved in the preparation?
- How many children stay after the *bar mitzvah*?

[Interview: Rabbi Neil Zuckerman.](#)

Rabbi Zuckerman is the director of Congregational Education and Associate Rabbi of the (Conservative) Park Avenue Synagogue. There are close to seventy *b'nai mitzvah* children a year. In order to accommodate every family, administrators responsible for scheduling events have to pair up *b'nai mitzvah* – called double *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies. As a result of this

backlog, additional changes are also required to hold overflow ceremonies during *mincha*, *havdalah*, and Sunday *rosh chodesh* services.

The faculty and leadership strongly suggest that families enroll their children in the religious school no later than third grade. Notwithstanding, exceptions are sometimes made to accommodate families who chose to affiliate with the congregation at a much later stage. It is understood and hoped that for such situations, the *mitzvah* of the *bar mitzvah* itself must be counter balanced with the hope that a family will maintain their membership and affiliation beyond the ceremony itself. Sadly this is frequently proved otherwise and regrettably the outcomes are poor for both parties. The *b'nai mitzvah* student is often fast tracked through a program to accommodate this request and does not benefit from the prerequisite benchmark that is required of similar students. The synagogue on the other hand skirts with the potential liability of amplifying this possibility with other prospective members, yielding a revolving door policy for families with *b'nai mitzvah* children.

At Park Avenue Synagogue, all *b'nai mitzvah* are required to chant from the Torah and Haftarah and rarely take part in leading the Shabbat service. The synagogue employs a *bar mitzvah* coordinator and six tutors who are responsible for preparing a child for the *bar mitzvah*. The three rabbis who are on staff take turns to work on speeches a month prior to the *bar mitzvah*.

The synagogue engages families by inviting parents of the *b'nai mitzvah* to attend a minimum of seven programs throughout the year. People seem to enjoy these family friendly programs. There is always a learning component during the sessions.

With regard to the question of how many children staying beyond *b'nai mitzvah*, Rabbi Zuckerman shared that they lose a lot of kids after the ceremony, but the parents remain members. I also asked Rabbi Zuckerman what changes he would like to see adopted to improve retention. "...We focus exclusively on teaching children the portion, and not preparing for Jewish life. At the time of the preparation for the *bar mitzvah* there should be more clergy involvement..." Rabbi Zuckerman also expressed that ideally he would like to leave out the Haftarah portion and leave only the Torah. He said that the kids are generally very well prepared for the *bar mitzvah* service but has little knowledge of Jewish life and traditions.

[Interview: Cantor Sergei Schwartz](#)

Cantor Schwartz is the senior Cantor of the Reform Temple of Long Island New York. His synagogue schedules approximately eighty *b'nai mitzvah* throughout the year. Similar to the schedule of the Park Avenue synagogue, Reform Temple of Long Island often coordinates double *b'nai mitzvah*. It is not unheard of for the congregation to see up to four *b'nai mitzvah* on peak months. The suggested age for beginning religious school is fourth grade. Similar in the flexibility required to accommodate late members, families can join any time.

The *b'nai mitzvah* have a standard service requirement: leading part of the service with prayers in both Hebrew and English, twelve verses of the Torah portion and six verses of *haftarah*. Families have an orientation meeting with the rabbi, cantor and religious school director approximately seven months prior to the scheduled date of the *bar mitzvah*. The first meeting is with the cantor. Then children study with the assigned tutor and cantor resumes lessons three months prior to the ceremony. Due to the volume of *b'nai mitzvah*, the associate rabbi

works with children on their speech during the course of four meetings. The main rabbi meets with the child twice before the ceremony.

The large number of tutors at Temple Sinai is proportional to the size of the *bar mitzvah* class. At the same time, due to the work load that clergy at Temple Sinai are experiencing, it doesn't allow them to spend more time with the children personally. On the other hand, there is enough staff to provide each student and family the attention needed.

On the question concerning what is the percentage of children continuing to Confirmation, I was pleasantly surprised to hear that in Cantor Schwartz's Temple it is 60% of the children. I inquired as to what in his opinion is the success in maintaining the children beyond *b'nai mitzvah*. Cantor Schwartz shared that their Temple has an incredibly strong youth program with one full time and one part time youth director. The children want to continue because they want to be involved in the active and developed youth program. I asked Cantor Schwartz to share with me the information on the youth program. He gave me a very colorful and comprehensive brochure, as professional as the flyers and brochures Chabad usually sends out with the invitation to Purim or Passover services and celebrations. The brochure had many photographs with teens, demonstrating the many activities they are engaged in, which in my opinion looks very attractive to the younger members of the synagogue.

Cantor Schwartz told me that he insists on parent's participation during the tutorial because that way he also gets to know the parents of the *bar mitzvah* and establishes connection with the family.

Interview: Rabbi David Wise

Rabbi David Wise is the senior Rabbi of (Conservative) Temple Hollis Hills Jewish Center of Hollis Hills New York. Due to the demographic change that many communities are seeing, the congregation has seen a significant decline in their *b'nai mitzvah* classes. With well over two hundred families, the recent classes have dipped below 10 students.

Similar in ways to the Park Avenue Synagogue, the required age for religious school is third grade, and Rabbi Wise does not turn families away who are looking for a ceremony on short notice. The requirement for the *bar mitzvah* child is to chant a section of the Torah portion, full *haftarah*, the *maftir* is optional and a speech.

The synagogue makes use of a flexible staff and employs part time tutors to prepare *b'nai mitzvah* students. The rabbi works with children on their *divrei Torah*, beginning four to six weeks prior to the ceremony. Rabbi Wise stressed the importance of establishing personal connections with each student and places a high emphasis on mentorship and personal relationship development.

Rabbi Wise is actively involved in the religious school, although the synagogue doesn't have its own religious school due to the number of the *b'nai mitzvah* students. The congregation has partnered with similar sized congregations in adjoining communities to provide religious education. The rabbis each rotate and take responsibility in leading religious school classes throughout each year. Due to funding appropriation decisions and a deficit in the number of available staff, the congregation doesn't have a youth program nor can it provide post *bar*

mitzvah education to its members. Nevertheless, most of the families continue their membership even after the *bar mitzvah* ceremony.

Finally, with the hope of expanding religious studies and encouraging participation with the extended family, Rabbi Wise also welcomes parents at his sessions with the *b'nai mitzvah*.

When asked what he would like to change in the *bar mitzvah* preparation process, Rabbi Wise emphasized two key changes: further emphasis on the *mitzvot* (which brings me back to Rabbi Lubin and Rabbi Salkin), along with the elimination of the required chanting of *haftarah* in favor of the Torah chant. According to Rabbi Wise, Torah chant is an important skill that will benefit future lay leaders. Rabbi Wise clarified: "There is something to be said about connecting to an ancient ritual even if it isn't fully understood."

Finally, Rabbi Wise suggested that social collaboration tools can be used in more effective ways to offer additional flexibilities and convenience to families. The future of religious school will "...be more individualistic..." placing more emphasis on next generation learning which emphasizes technology and self-paced programs.

On the question of relevancy and meaning of the *bar mitzvah* ceremony and the extent to which the ceremony needs to be reinvented, Rabbi Wise's response was resolute: "...the *bar mitzvah* must be preserved and maintained in our synagogues for it provides each child with a tremendous sense of accomplishment and is a connection to our Jewish identity and history..."

Rabbi Wise's hope is that we can bring changes to Jewish education so that the joy in utility of Judaism should be the same as the joy in the utility of science.

Interview: Rabbi Steven Bayar

I interviewed Rabbi Steven Bayar, of (Conservative) Congregation B'nai Israel in Millburn, NJ after reading the "Shul Adjusts Requirements for B'nei Mitzvah" article²³ on the merits of eliminating *haftarah* chant from *bar mitzvah* programs. Rabbi Steven Bayar supports substituting time traditionally spent on learning the Haftarah portion with learning prayers of various services.

Rabbi Bayar believes that by teaching *b'nai mitzvah* students prayers from Shabbat Service, children receive necessary skills that will later be required for leading services as lay leaders. According to Rabbi Bayar, these skills are also useful when students attend college and participate in services on college campuses.

In discussing reasons that lead Rabbi Bayar to introduce this change, he explained that the *haftarah* chant is a skill that children will not likely use in later stages of their lives. The ability to lead the service, on the other hand, will always be a useful skill. When there will be a need for a capable lay person to lead services, whether in the college, or later in life if someone would need a *minyan* but would not be able to find a professional clergy, this skill will come in handy.

The time that is typically spent learning the *haftarah* portion can be utilized on prayers, *nusach* for Shabbat and Torah cantillation. I agree with Rabbi Bayar's change as does Cantor Wallah who is quoted in the aforementioned article. "...What do we do to empower them more, to

²³ Online New Jersey Jewish News publication article "Shul Adjusts Requirements for B'nei Mitzvah" by Johanna Ginsberg, May 2015

include them more in the service and have their children and the family do more so it doesn't feel like the clergy are leading the whole service. We want to see more kids able to participate and lead the service... It's one thing to chant along from the pews, and another to lead..."²⁴

Given the limited amount of time we have with impressionable children who are moving through the mechanics of learning a new language and with additional constraints placed on their time, we must face the realization that investment must be made in areas that have the highest priority. An ability to lead a service is such an investment that I believe is worth undertaking in.

On the preparation process for the *b'nai mitzvah*, Rabbi Bayar explained that children begin activities and tutoring eight months in advance. The additional time is required due to the amount of the material that is covered. The topics and skills prepare the *b'nai mitzvah* to lead a full service, chant the *haftarah* and Torah portion. The students initially meet with the cantor, then after two months they work with tutors for four months, and return to work with the cantor two months prior to their *bar mitzvah*. The students also meet with the rabbi several weeks prior to the date to work on the *d'var* Torah.

The number of the *b'nai mitzvah* a year in this congregation of 450 families varies from 30 to 45 children a year. I asked Rabbi Bayar how many of the children stay post *bar mitzvah*. He said about 50%. To my question of whether he thinks it is the *bar mitzvah* process and ceremony

²⁴ Online New Jersey Jewish News publication article "Shul Adjusts Requirements for B'nei Mitzvah" by Johanna Ginsberg, May 2015

that encourages children to stay in the religious school and if he thinks that the change in the program might help to get even greater number in the post *b'nai mitzvah* students. He replied that the fact that many children stay is not rooted in the *bar mitzvah* preparation program or the service. He said that the main reason children stay is because of parents. Rabbi Bayar explained that they have a very strong community and that most of the families that join the congregation are not joining just to have their child *bar mitzvah*. They join because they think that it is important to be part of a Jewish community. The synagogue clergy and leadership works hard on creating programs that answer the interests of all variety of groups of people and so adults of all ages find activity that speak to them. Rabbi Bayar said:” You have to give validity to all groups.” The programs vary from adult education and Friday Night dinners to Social Action. (I noticed that the programs are thematically similar to what my synagogue is offering as well.) When I asked the rabbi to give me approximate number of adults who show up for the programs, he couldn't estimate.

I was curious to know if the congregation has a Confirmation program, since a large number of children continue with the religious school following their *bar mitzvah*. While a Confirmation program does not exist at the synagogue, a program has been developed to promote continued Jewish and language studies. This program is called Hebrew High. Rabbi mentioned that the congregation also has a very active youth group which is lead by two part time professional educators. The age of participants is sixth grade and up. Rabbi Bayar said they have approximately fifty children in the youth group.

To summarize what I learned from this interview; social connections, family influence and a strong staff network all play a role in encouraging and supporting children in continuing their education.

Interview: Cantor Erik Contzius

One of the more valuable interviews I conducted was with Cantor Erik Contzius. Cantor Contzius used to serve as a cantor in (Reform) Temple Israel of New Rochelle, NY. Under his supervision, a new program was developed called “Torah Corps”. While the Torah Corps emphasizes many different techniques, the key change focused on group learning. Unlike traditional *b’nai mitzvah* teaching techniques that favor personal lessons with the rabbi, Cantor Erik Contzius understood the importance of group dynamics and positive peer pressure. Torah Corps encouraged group participation, cultivation of new connections that would otherwise be limited and placed emphasis on team work. A typical group included up to eight *b’nai mitzvah* students and would almost always take place on the *bima* with the sound system activated (which also enabled children to get used to being on the *bima*.) The duration of each group lesson is one hour. Each student would recite the assigned prayers as well as Torah and *haftarah* portions. Taking turns leading their portion of the assigned lessons, the rest of the group were required to follow either in the prayer book or in the *chumash* (that also helped to teach the students to navigate in the *sidur* and *chumash*). Cantor Erik Contzius believes that the positive peer pressure served as an incentive to study at home, because the children didn’t want to be embarrassed in front of each other. I asked Cantor Contzius whether he included the children with disabilities in the group and he replied that he didn’t, because these children

needed more time and special attention, although once he felt that they are ready, they were introduced to the group lesson.

Several years ago, I also experimented with a similar program at Temple Beth Am. After a period of time, the program was discontinued due to scheduling conflicts with the religious school. Cantor Contzius had the same dilemma at first, but he insisted on adding this hour on a different day of religious school and eventually built it in to the curriculum. The rabbi of the synagogue liked the idea so much that he too added an hour to Cantor Contzius's program and began meeting with the group of students, studying and exploring together the meaning of their portions. The parents really liked the new system and are very supportive of it.

Apart from changes made to the *b'nai mitzvah* program, the temple also invested in a modern website to promote their outreach campaign. The website is interactive, clear and easy to use. A section is devoted to illustrating and covering the process of the *b'nai mitzvah* program appeals to prospective members.

I asked Cantor Contzius to estimate the percentage of the children remaining after the *bar mitzvah*. He said that out of approximately forty five *b'nai mitzvah* a year, 70% stayed. He admitted that part of the reason is a strong youth group.

While Cantor Contzius is no longer working at Temple Israel, the program remains the same.

Work observations

I am nearing my fourteenth year as a professional cantor. Throughout this period, I was directly involved in the process of *b'nai mitzvah* training at multiple congregations. I worked in

many Reform temples that have implemented similar systems and requirements for the preparation process. Children are required to read or chant prayers in Hebrew, such as *Elu Devarim*, *Chatzi Kaddish*, *Bar'chu*, *Shema* and *Veahav'ta*, *Avot* and *Gevurot*, *Modim*, and Friday Night *Kiddush*. Additionally, the *b'nai mitzvah* are required to learn twelve verses of Torah and six verses of *haftarah*. Normally, I begin six months prior to the date of the ceremony with the assumption that each student is thoroughly familiar with all blessings and prayers, including the Torah and *haftarah* blessings in the religious school.

Temple B'nai Or, my first full time pulpit had approximately 750 families. The number of the *b'nai mitzvah* varied between 50 to 60 each year. Several tutors were on staff to assist me with *b'nai mitzvah* preparatory tutoring. The temple also had a song leader for their religious school and a professional youth group director. I was involved in the religious school primarily by leading services for Sunday religious school and occasionally teaching electives. While children had some interaction with me, I didn't have a chance to establish individual level connections with each student prior to the tutorial for their *bar mitzvah*. About fifty percent of the children stayed for the confirmation academy and were part of the youth group which at the time was very vibrant.

At Temple Beth Am, where I serve as the senior cantor, we have twenty *b'nai mitzvah* a year. The temple is nearing its 50th year anniversary and fluctuates between 200 and 230 active families. I lead all *b'nai mitzvah* students, teach music, electives, and lead services during religious school. The size of the congregation and my position as a pulpit leader affords me the benefit of establishing a relationship with each student over a longer period of time and

adopting my style of teaching to the unique personalities of each student. When the *bar mitzvah* student comes to me for their first lesson, I already know the child from the young age and have a prior connection from teaching him or her in the classrooms and being part of their transformation at school. Similarly, I know most of the *b'nai mitzvah* families from talking to them at various temple events. The fact that I am friendly with parents and their children certainly helps to establish a positive attitude for the bar mitzvah lessons. The parents of the upcoming *b'nai mitzvah* have been at the *bar mitzvah* services in the temple, have witnessed the high level of preparation and trust that I will make sure that their children will be well prepared for the service.

In an effort to establish a welcoming environment, I have begun to deviate from the mechanics of traditional *b'nai mitzvah* tutoring. Each lesson, especially during the early stages of the tutoring program, includes time for student and cantor to stretch the definition of tutoring and cover topics which include hobbies, sports and other interests that a teenager may have. While maintaining focused discipline, I have come to the realization that each child must find their balance to undertake this important transition into adulthood and for this reason, maintaining a welcoming environment has become my priority.

Early in my career I realized an important lesson: personal connection helps motivate children to study and do well. It is my opinion that *b'nai mitzvah* are engaged more because they don't want to disappoint me. Each lesson covers Judaism, historical events that have meaning to the student and general religious identities that bind us together.

Recognizing that each student works at different paces and a uniform approach to *b'nai mitzvah* is unlikely to bring consistent results to each student, I became more flexible with assigning the “standard” amount to each student. As a result, I adjust the lesson plan based on my assessment of the student, the family and any additional circumstances that may influence the pace and the rigor of the *b'nai mitzvah*. For example, one father told me that his son, who has learning disabilities and anxiety issues, can do most of the required components but not all and that if we eliminate two prayers that are especially difficult for him, we will lower his stress level. With mutual agreement the student excelled throughout the remainder of the tutoring sessions and was well prepared to lead the Torah and *haftarah* portions during the service. That gave him confidence on the day of the *bar mitzvah* and he remembers fondly the Shabbat morning service.

Understanding how vocal tones influence memory, I no longer record and share common Torah portion recordings with students. Instead, and to deliver the *aliyot* in the same vocal range of each student, I record the portions in each student’s vocal range. This minor adjustment has been well received and is a significant improvement that makes it easier for students to learn their individual portion.

Virtual conferencing also plays a key part in schedule management. While debate continues on the merits of cloud based tools and the extent to which virtual meetings and cloud classroom tools can influence traditional classroom learning, Temple Beth Am has begun to experiment with supplementing face to face lessons with virtual lessons where schedule or other conflicts prevent personal engagement.

To summarize, I have developed and refined a comprehensive approach to preparing *b'nai mitzvah* which emphasizes learning, nurturing and supporting students and families throughout this period of time. In spite of these changes, I have not seen meaningful improvements to the attrition rate of *b'nai mitzvah* who complete their *bar mitzvah* requirements.

Working on this thesis has forced me to confront alternate reasons which must be acknowledged, analyzed and explored amongst clergy, children and parents before meaningful change can be introduced to encourage participation beyond the *bar mitzvah*.

Case Analysis

After many years of research on peer pressure, we have a better appreciation and a comprehensive understanding on the role that peer pressure plays on youth. Can this pressure be redirected to have a positive effect on young Jewish adults? This segment focuses on how peer pressure can be the catalyst for change and follows three *b'nai mitzvah* who in spite of all evidence pointing to an immediate exit following the *bar mitzvah* chose to maintain their relationship with the congregation.

Case Study 1

Student A had a difficult time memorizing prayers and portions of the *haftarah*. Nevertheless, the student worked extremely hard and made sure that all reasonable activities and lessons were prescriptively followed in preparation for the *bat mitzvah*. During the final rehearsal, the tension, fear and exhaustion broke in a torrent of tears which could no longer be held back. I reassured the student that she was well prepared and that I would stand next to her

throughout the service. Student A composed herself on Shabbat morning prior to the service and led a beautiful service.

Following up with Student A several years later, I tried to understand the perspective of the preparation process from the student's frame of reference. Now seventeen and a gifted student, I was not surprised to hear "overwhelm" mentioned frequently when recounting the process leading up to the bar mitzvah ceremony. Student A felt overwhelmed and frustrated with the amount of work she undertook. Also, she was scared to be in front of people. Yet after the service was over, she felt that she had a great sense of accomplishment. When I asked if she thought that it was worth the time and effort, her response was unambiguous: "...Absolutely, it was worth working as hard as I did because I gained the understanding what it means to be responsible to plan the time so that I can do all my school work as well as prepare for the bat mitzvah lessons...". "...Now that I am in a high school, my workload is even heavier, but I am used to organizing my time to make sure that I do all I have to...". Asked if it would have been helpful if a young person who had gone through bar or bat mitzvah would come and speak to her class prior to her becoming a bat mitzvah, she strongly agreed that it would have helped to relate to someone who already had experience with the process.

I suggested to the congregation's rabbi and the religious school principal the idea of creating a mentorship program where the post *b'nai mitzvah* students come to speak to the sixth and seventh graders. Both had agreed that it is a great idea and that we will implement it.

After finishing the seventh grade, Student A continued to attend religious school and became active in the youth group. Today, Student A is a *madricha* in the religious school and helps with

the Torah Tot Time – a program for the preschoolers that is held on Sunday mornings. Student A takes part in the organization of most activities for youth in our synagogue and is a co-president of the BATTY, our youth group.

Student A's most important feedback was one that I least expected. The decision to continue with Temple Beth Am was one based on peer pressure from friends who also chose to maintain a relationship with the youth group and the congregation. Student A's mother also played a role and can be accredited with her decision to stay. The family plays an active role in the congregation which includes board membership and education committee.

Parental involvement throughout this period must not be underestimated and can also influence key decisions on participation. In the case of Student A, her parents chose to encourage small changes and asked for a commitment of one year in the Confirmation class before deciding whether an extension would be appropriate. Looking back, Student A developed appreciation for Jewish study during the post bat mitzvah years. During the Confirmation classes she really enjoyed discussing the relevant topics through the prism of Judaism. Student A said to me something that any clergy would be happy to hear from their students: "Judaism is a big part of my life now."

Additional feedback captured during the case analysis stage suggested that more time directed towards group based participation outside of the temple. Examples include field trips, community volunteering, etc.

Case Study 2

Another unexpected success came from Student B. Student B's family joined our temple as a transfer family. Shortly after joining the temple, Student B joined the youth choir and enrolled in the religious school. It became clear to the faculty that Student B was academically behind his classmates and would often struggle to keep pace. In spite of his difficulties, I noticed how diligently Student B worked with his teacher in the *mirkaz*, overcoming his challenges with Hebrew. Consistency was also important, and Student B rarely missed religious school or monthly service participation. Why then did this student choose to continue with his education in spite of what would arguably be seen as an opportunity to abandon the religious education in favor of other activities? Perhaps the factors that influence a child's decision to continue with religious school education are not as complicated as we want them to be; they are after all children who have a very different set of wants, desires and aspirations which don't necessarily replicate across adults. While trying to catalogue the complicated web of reasons which may have lead Student B to reengage and extend his relationship with the temple, the feedback that I collection from Student B's parents and confirmed after conducting additional interviews with Student B, were simple. Student B's decisions were affirmed because of previous investments made by the temple to enrich teen programs, participation in Jewish summer camps and a strong network of friends. Having a peer social network that provides another means for engagement outside of religious school classes is arguably an important reason which is basic in its origin.

Case Study 3

An abridged case study was conducted by interviewing the parent of a recent *b'nai mitzvah* student. A board member and *b'nai mitzvah* coordinator in our temple, Parent A was also a graduate of the Reform Jewish summer camp program. During her youth, Parent A was accepted into an advanced Hebrew class "*Yad Beyad*". The program indirectly lead Parent A to establish more connections with her peers who at the time were also actively involved in the congregation. Parent A recalled that she was really looking forward to spending time with her friends, because she only had a chance to see them at the religious school, since all of them lived in the different towns. In later years, Parent A became a vice president of the youth group that consisted of thirty children at the time. The youth group was very active and was led by a professional school advisor. Students stayed active in the youth group even after the confirmation.

Additional case studies were conducted over the course of this thesis research project. While I had expected that different case studies will yield alternate reasons which may be considered to adjust our perspective on what situations work best to encourage participation, I have come to the realization that each case study bolsters the basic premise discussed earlier. Youth networks and friendships have a much higher impact on retaining the continuity of education among young Jewish adults.

Conclusion

My idea for this thesis was spurred from the realization that the *bar mitzvah*, an important milestone in Jewish families, is a cornerstone in disengagement. The modern *bar mitzvah* has followed a transformation which weakens our efforts to invest in and establish long term relationships amongst families and their congregations. Reconciling the *bar mitzvah* with historical background brought me to the first stage in understanding the narrative of the *bar mitzvah* in the context of religious laws and customs. Tracing the evolution of the ceremony brought perspective to the significance of this life cycle event and the connection of the modern day *bar mitzvah* to the origins of the ceremony which date back to 13th century. Having established a fuller dimension of the *bar mitzvah* it was time to take stock of changes which must be pursued in an effort to combat the modern day exodus.

My perspective has been framed by case studies and interviews conducted during this period of time and the recommendations cited below will continue to evolve as I transition into rabbinical duties in the years to come. However, I am absolute in reaching the conclusion that social networks are a critical component that must have our foremost attention and will have a higher influence on the decision for children to continue their affiliation. The social networks, once reserved for senior members of the congregation have the power to motivate, influence and excite families to continue their relationship with their congregation. Our attention must be directed towards the development and cultivation of youth groups, summer camps and retreats which are all working together to strengthen the individual bonds among the next generation of Jews.

As a result of my findings, I compiled a list of recommendations for the synagogues of various progressive movements. I believe that this suggestions may enhance the religious school programs, *b'nai mitzvah* experiences and will encourage the young Jewish adults to continue their ties with the synagogue, where they have been attending the religious school, by extending Judaic learning as well as connecting with their Jewish peers on a deeper intellectual level within the frame of Jewish living.

Recommendations

- Group learning opportunities
 - Emphasize group versus individual lessons.
 - Promote additional opportunities to lead services.
- Social and extended networks development
 - Promoting camps: invite camp representatives to speak to parents and students of religious school during religious school sessions or family services; explore programs camps offer and enroll religious school children in these programs.
 - Active and engaging youth group: providing grade appropriate activities within the synagogue setting as well as organizing trips and outings.
 - Engage post *b'nai mitzvah* who stayed through confirmation to speak to the students of 5th, 6th and 7th grades in classrooms and during *b'nai mitzvah* family meeting.

- Organize group social activists for sixth and seventh graders, such as museum trips, theater or social action, such as visiting assisted living and participating in the soup kitchen.
- Support system
 - More personal connection with clergy: more clergy participation in the classrooms of religious school in all grades, clergy presence during social events.
 - More parental involvement and engagement: family study sessions.
 - Professional youth group leader/leaders
 - Create multi-tiered integrated system that has enough staff to give individual attention to the children and parents.
 - Engaging children in the choir and other group activities or electives within the religious school curriculum which will help to connect children based their interests.

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