

## ***Every Year a Bar and Bat Mitzvah Year***

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When I arrived to Durham a few years ago, I got a strange call from someone who you know is a close friend of mine, Rev Joe Parker, then pastor of First Presbyterian Church. He told me that they were having a big problem with mice at the church, that they'd tried everything – exterminators, traps, even a special prayer service – to get rid of the mice, and he was wondering of maybe a blessing or a prayer in the Jewish tradition that could help them. I thought it was a strange request, but that I thought I had something that would do the trick. “You don't need exterminators or a special blessing – just bring them together and give them all a bar and bat mitzvah, and they'll never come back.” 😊

For the record, please don't call Joe – it was just a joke.

In our journey through the lifecycle, I want to begin the conversation about bar and bat mitzvah with an observation similar to what I said yesterday about birth and birthdays: Jewish tradition says precious little about bar and bat mitzvah.

In a 650 page volume by Professor Daniel Sperber on custom and lore of the Jewish Life Cycle, there is not one entry about bar and bat mitzvah. The age of majority is not 13; it's 20. That's when you eligible for war and taxation. Talmudic times that it moves to 13. Later, bar mitzvah would be marked by a child reading Torah or putting on tefillin for the first time which would be followed by a celebratory meal, but these rituals around bar mitzvah only developed in the last 300 to 500 years.

Bar mitzvah did not used to be a transitive verb. We now say, “Rabbi so and so bar mitzvahed me” or “I got bat mitzvahed” as if bat mitzvah is something that one person does to another. But bar and bat mitzvah are not a verb. One becomes a bar or bat mitzvah. One becomes a son or daughter of the commandments; historically at 12 years old for a girl and at 13 years old for a boy. I suspect Jewish tradition made so little of the moment because

there was nothing special a child did so the moment passed without much fuss.

Bar and Bat mitzvah is now a central lifecycle moment. At first blush, that would seem to be a good thing; it is certainly better than having no bar/bat mitzvah at all. But the popularity of this moment might not be such a good sign after all.

We know the stories of bar and bat mitzvah parties in big cities that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars, filled with dancers and celebrities. We are thankfully relatively immune from such ostentatious displays here in Durham. On the other hand, many observers of modern Jewish life have pointed out how bnei mitzvah ceremonies are the engine that drives the American synagogue; that people join synagogues to have a bar or bat mitzvah and then, like the mice, never come back again.

In an article called *The Seven Types of Forgetting*, Paul Connerton writes about how after the first World War, European countries built monuments to the war dead and annually observed two minutes of silence, while “10 million mutilated survivors [of the war] still haunted the streets...They were dis-membered, not remembered men...” Connerton argues that the rituals of memory enabled a different sort of forgetting. I wonder if the modern Jewish emphasis on the bar and bat mitzvah ritual – even with its accompanying focused period of learning and preparation – enables a collective forgetting of Judaism during the rest of our lives. “I gave my child a bar or bat mitzvah” we tell ourselves, so we can forget.

Midrash Kohelet Rabbah teaches: "It is for our own good that we learn Torah and forget it; because if we studied Torah and never forgot it, the people would struggle with learning it for two or three years, resume ordinary work, and never pay further attention to it. But since we study Torah and forget it, we don't abandon its study." Unless we do. Our children study Torah for 2 or 3 years and stop, even though they have forgotten. We think that a Jewish education is a possession, a precious heirloom we can put away into a drawer and take out years later to pass along to our children or grandchildren when we're gone. It's not a possession. It's a way of life. It's what Jews do.

My teacher, Rabb Brad Artson, once wrote: One of the laws of thermodynamics is the principle of entropy -- that everything returns to chaos eventually. In the world of biology and physics, only the investment of new energy can counter the inevitable spread of disorder. True of the world of spirit as well, Judaism has made a cardinal mitzvah out of Talmud Torah, out of Jewish learning...[because] through that study, we can experience God's presence."

I'm not arguing against bnei mitzvah ceremonies, but I'm saying they are a beginning not an end. They are there to help us remember the importance of Jewish education, not forget it.

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**\*\*Something unorthodox for a sermon\*\*** If we're really going to explore these ideas, it can't be just my voice that's heard. A unique feature of our bar / bat mitzvah process is dialogue because it's the child's, not the rabbi's, voice that must be heard. So, I want to pause and ask a question: **Do you think it should be up to kids as to whether or not they should have a bar or bat mitzvah? Why or why not?**

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Card: "Dedicate a child according to his or her own way, and even when he grows old, he won't turn from it."

You may see that word at the beginning - הניח – translated as teach or educate. Educate comes from educare which means to draw out. But הניח comes from Hanukkah – meaning to dedicate, when we dedicated to be used again. הניח means beginning to use something for the purpose for which it was created. For example, you don't dedicate a house when you dig into the earth to begin building for the first time. You dedicate a home when you are ready to move in and begin living there. We have a hannukat habayit – the dedication of a Jewish home – but hanging a mezuzah as a way of saying, this house was created as a resting place for God's presence.

It seems strange to think about "dedicating a child" but all education involves beginning with a conviction that a child is created for a purpose. True education involves some coercion, some indoctrination if you will. Not

everything is up for grabs. The Jewish educational theorist Professor Michael Rosenak wrote,

“It is indeed the aim of the educator that the young person makes up his own mind, but...it is also his aim that the student accepts the basic principles he believes. Every democratic educator will do everything he can to prevent his pupil from developing Nazi convictions...” If a democratic educator’s student developed such convictions, “the educator will judge himself [as] having failed [his] pupils...”

And rightly so! We want our children to make up their own minds about Jewish life, but there are basic principles we aim to teach. Community. Learning. Jewish people. Morality. Questioning. We may even value the belief that our children should walk away from Jewish life if that is what they really want to do. We may not all agree on what those values in Jewish life are, but nobody escapes imposing a set of values upon one’s children. חנך means dedication – it means beginning with a sense of the purpose for which a child comes into the world and dedicating, imposing those values upon them because those are the parts of our tradition we refuse to leave up for grabs. We should acknowledge and be thoughtful about our bottom lines as an inescapable part of the process of חנך / education.

But the second part of the card says, “According to his way”

Which is in direct tension with this idea of imposing our beliefs upon a child. Dedicate the child, but you must do so according to his, or her, way, not your own. We must listen, not just speak. If there is one central message of Rosh Hashanah it is that God is the True Judge, not me, not any of us. In his book *On Jewish Learning*, Franz Rosenzweig wrote, “no one can take another person to task, though he can and should teach him; because only I know what I can do; only my own ear can hear the voice of my own being which I have to reckon with...”

Bar and bat mitzvah is that liminal moment when we acknowledge that my child hears the voice of her own being, that my child is becoming an independent soul. Bar and bat mitzvah is that transition in the parent-child relationship when you stop walking into your child’s room without knocking,

when you are grudgingly admit or, perhaps you joyously celebrate, that there is a part of your child that is separate from you, that you must respect, and into which you must be invited before entering.

Our son, Benjamin, will become bar mitzvah this fall. I have not been immune from the temptation to over-manage his preparation, to try and force him to love what I love as much as I love for the reasons I love it. I have felt the sadness at a distance that once felt like it was not there, at the loss of innocence and closeness. I'm going to do my best to sit and watch his conversations with Rabbi Sager. And I'm trying to teach myself to savor his questions, those moments when he offers me a glimpse into the private life developing within him, and an invitation to share of my deepest self with his.

I'm not saying we have to leave our children alone – in their rooms or in the world – to fend for themselves. We can still knock! We should still knock. When discussing the mitzvah of visiting those who are ill, the Talmud teaches, “a prisoner cannot free himself from jail.” Sometimes our kids are suffering or confused – they need us to knock, to reach out, to tell them, “hey, you look upset. You're not alone. I'm here when you need me.” And if and when they invite us into their lives, we should be present for them, not with ready-made answers, but with listening ears and a compassionate heart, and gratitude for the gift of sharing our lives with one another.

As I said yesterday, the audience for these reflections upon lifecycle moments is not merely for those who experience these occasions first hand. I will take a moment to make a plug for the Walking With God course that is starting on Sunday mornings after the High Holidays – it is open to people who are interested in celebrating an adult bar or bat mitzvah on Shavuot next May, but not only those; rather to anyone seeking to study and explore notions of God in the Jewish tradition as an adult.

But as we relate to one another in community – when we talk to each other about politics, or Israel, or religion, or parenting, or career, or matters of the synagogue, or illness – as we communicate with each other, we should all remember on the one hand that nobody has a monopoly on truth, that we must enter into conversation with an open heart and with a respectful knock upon the door that is respectful of the infinite uniqueness of each person,

that each person must learn “al pi darko” / “according to his/her way.” On the other hand, we must also hold each other accountable in a sacred commitment to the Jewish tradition. We can dedicate not only our children, but one another, to values and practices in Jewish life that are not negotiable, and we can do so because we believe that life is more richly lived in community. We can knock on one another’s door because we care deeply about each other.

I want to answer the question that I asked a few a minutes ago: I do think it’s okay to force our kids to have a bar / bat mitzvah – not for the ceremony, certainly not for the party, and not because the preparation for a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is sufficient for a lifetime of Jewish education. We can force our kids when they are young because our children internalize our most deeply held values by what we don’t give them a choice about. Jewish education should mean that much to us.

A few weeks ago I was learning a teaching from Pirkei Avot with the faculty of our synagogue Talmud Torah. Rabbi Yochan ben Zakkai received from Hillel and Shammai: “If you learned much Torah, do not attribute too much value to yourself, since for this you were created.” How would it change our approach to Jewish education if we really took this to heart – that perhaps the very purpose of our lives is to learn, to learn Torah in its deepest sense.

I remember once meeting with the mother of one of our counselors at Ramah. She was a brave woman who was very ill with cancer. As we sat together and talked about her kids, and her illness, I will never forget when she said to me: “I’ve stopped asking the question, ‘Why me?’ and I’ve started asking the question, ‘What can I learn from this?’” Her question was not naïve, nor did it deny the pain of her experience. In the midst of great darkness, she did not succumb to platitudes and self-pity; she challenged herself to learn, to grow because that was the very purpose for which we are created.

You might be surprised to know that the Zohar – Judaism’s foundational mystical text – and thinkers such as Nachmanides and Rabbi Isaac Luria endorse a belief in gilgul nefashot – reincarnation. Luria explains

that reincarnation offers the opportunity to a soul that lived before to repair itself and continue to grow in a later life. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai taught the very purpose of our lives is to learn, to grow, to improve our souls. The High Holidays are a time when we ask again: Why am I here? Not just did I get a promotion or earn money, but what is my life's purpose and have I lived the past year in fulfillment of that purpose? Did my soul grow? Did I learn Torah in its deepest sense? Did I teach it to the next generation? Every year should be a bar or bat mitzvah year. As Rosenzweig said, "Only my ear can hear the voice of my own being which I have to reckon with." Only we can ask, and only we can answer, "What sort of year was it for us?"

We are, in Rosenzweig's words, "our [parents'] children and our grandchildren's ancestors. Therefore we may rightly expect to find ourselves again, at some time, somehow, in our [parents'] every word and deed; and also that our own words and deeds will have some meaning for our grandchildren." כן יהי רצון May it be so, and let us say, Amen.