

## What Is the Bar Mitzvah Revolution?

November 8, 2013

Rabbi Barry Block

“Bar Mitzvahs Get New Look To Build Faith.” So read the headline on page one – I kid you not, page one – of the New York *Times* on the eve of this Rosh Hashanah, September 3. Unsuspecting Reform Jews across North America, plus a smattering of us in the know, read about an initiative to revolutionize not just the Bar Mitzvah, but also the Bat Mitzvah, in what our Movement is actually calling the “B’nai Mitzvah Revolution,” the *Times* headline notwithstanding.

The article suggested, surely to the surprise of members of Congregation B’nai Israel, that the North American Bar and Bat Mitzvah experience is irrelevant and meaningless. Students, we were told, are tutored to recite rote passages they don’t understand and consider irrelevant to their lives. The results are well known, if not here in Little Rock. The very large majority of non-Orthodox B’nai Mitzvah celebrants consider an occasion like Leah is celebrating this Shabbat to be a “graduation ceremony.” Supported by their parents, most American Reform Jewish youth drop out of formal Jewish education and discontinue any meaningful connection to Jewish life, coming back only if and when they are ready for their own children to be trained for B’nai Mitzvah.

The “revolution,” a joint project of the Union for Reform Judaism and Hebrew Union College, seeks to identify and explore new models, with two goals in mind: 1. “To generate new ideas and images of meaningful observance of b’nai mitzvah, observances that would tie b’nai mitzvah and their families more closely to the Jewish tradition and the Jewish community.” And 2: “To create models of b’nai mitzvah preparation that are more engaging for both b’nai mitzvah students and their families.”

The goals are worthy. Ultimately, these change agents hope that more students will remain engaged in Jewish education beyond the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, to Confirmation and beyond; that they will be attracted to synagogue youth programming, camps and Israel trips; and that families will remain affiliated with congregations well beyond their children’s B’nai Mitzvah.

We at Congregation B’nai Israel could be tempted to ignore the B’nai Mitzvah revolution. For one thing, B’nai Mitzvah preparation here is already deeply meaningful. Our students may not be able to translate each word of Hebrew they utter; however, they do gain a profound understanding of their Torah and Haftarah readings, as Leah will evidence tomorrow when she applies her readings to her own life in her D’var Torah. Moreover, our students are engaged with a devoted and inspiring corps of volunteer B’nai Mitzvah tutors, who don’t stop at preparing them to stand on the *bimah* and lead the service, but also become Jewish mentors and role models, building relationships that often endure in meaningful ways beyond the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. From what I can see, virtually all of our young people continue their formal Jewish education here beyond Bar and Bat Mitzvah through Confirmation, and a very high percentage are involved in LaFTY, volunteer as Hebrew assistants after Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and later work in our Religious School as *madrichim*, assistant teachers, mentors and role models themselves to the younger children of our Temple.

At the same time, we do have a problem with Jewish continuity at Congregation B’nai Israel. We do ourselves, our children, and the Jewish people no favors by failing to admit it. An appalling number of people, raised in our congregation as Jewish youth, have left Judaism as adults. Admittedly, few of these folks have converted to another religion, but they have not raised their children as Jews in our congregation or any other.

Please don’t misunderstand my intention in bringing up this uncomfortable reality. I do not blame these people or their parents. I also don’t blame any one of my predecessors. The phenomenon

has been a reality of this congregation and community for generations. I am new here, and I don't yet fully understand why so many have grown up in this magnificent congregation and then have left Judaism. Somehow, though, Judaism at Congregation B'nai Israel has not sufficiently engaged our young people, kindling a burning desire within them to transmit Judaism to the next generation. I do not know why.

What I do know: Whether or not we need the current B'nai Mitzvah Revolution, Congregation B'nai Israel has been affected, to greater and lesser degrees, by two prior revolutions in the Bar Mitzvah, and later also Bat Mitzvah, in American Reform Judaism.

The first Bar Mitzvah revolution, though nobody called it that, came before history's first Bat Mitzvah. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Reform rabbis sought to abolish the Bar Mitzvah. Those first Reform rabbis had the same basic goal as the current B'nai Mitzvah revolution, namely to retain Jewish youth in Jewish education to a more advanced age. In place of Bar Mitzvah, they instituted Confirmation, later in high school, at an age that would permit the rabbi and other teachers to impart more advanced concepts. These early Reform Rabbis focused on the collective nature of our people's covenant with God: At Confirmation, the class receives the Torah as a community, rather than as individuals at B'nai Mitzvah.

That first Bar Mitzvah revolution was successful, if you will. Virtually all Reform young people were confirmed. In the process, though, something was lost. Those who completed Reform Jewish education with Confirmation in prior generations did not study Hebrew, the language of our Torah and the language that unites Jewish people around the world. Increasingly, Jewish adults felt incompetent, irritated if more than a token amount of Hebrew was included in the service and unable to participate when it was. It's no wonder that many among them weren't engaged.

The second B'nai Mitzvah revolution was not led by rabbis, but started against the clerics' will. Inter marriages – and here I'm referring to marriages between Reform and Conservative or Orthodox Jews – brought many into Reform congregations with an expectation that their sons, at least, would become B'nai Mitzvah. They pleaded with their rabbis to permit this traditional custom. Over time, young people themselves encountered Hebrew at Jewish camps. A new generation of rabbis was imbued with a zeal for Zionism, and later a connection to the State of Israel and to its newly living language. By the 1970s, Reform rabbis were taking their first year of training in Israel, and Bat Mitzvah migrated into Reform congregations from Reconstructionism where it started and the Conservative congregations where it first flourished. Now, rabbis were enthusiastic about B'nai Mitzvah. Hebrew training had become part of virtually all Reform Jews' education, and Bar or Bat Mitzvah was nearly universal.

But not here.

The Bar and Bat Mitzvah experience at Congregation B'nai Israel offers our young people a gift of inestimable value. While they may not fully understand the Hebrew language, they have acquired basic tools that may facilitate further exploration and education, not to mention connection to the larger Jewish world. Moreover, as Leah has tonight and will again tomorrow, our young people have an opportunity for an incomparable public success, unavailable to other 13 year olds. Let's be honest: 13 is an awkward age, even though Leah makes it look graceful. Thirteen year olds are kids in adult bodies, confronting changes too fast for anybody to negotiate painlessly. Being 13 was tough when I was that age, when you were that age, as it is for those born in the year 2000. But our kids who become B'nai Mitzvah get to shine, they gain access to tremendous Jewish role models, and they enjoy meaningful encounters with their parents, of all people, moments that they would not otherwise experience. And the payoff for Judaism? The most important moment in a young person's life, truly the most significant

occasion until high school graduation or maybe even later, happens right here, at the synagogue, in their second home, their communal Jewish home.

Today's Reform Movement is engaged in an important endeavor, revolutionizing the B'nai Mitzvah experience in order to inspire and retain a higher percentage of young people who celebrate this milestone in the cities and suburbs of New York and Houston, Los Angeles and Phoenix. We should support this important work, which is critical to our people's future.

Here at Congregation B'nai Israel, while we could always improve, our B'nai Mitzvah experience is already meaningful and engaging, and we retain our post-B'nai Mitzvah students well into high school. Instead, our challenge is the second B'nai Mitzvah revolution, the one that hasn't yet been completed here, spreading Hebrew education and the celebration of Bar or Bat Mitzvah to each and every one of our youth. Then, may each of our young people gain a connection to our people's language that is as alive as it is ancient. Then, may each of our youth be inspired to live Jewishly for a lifetime. Then, may we kindle in each young person raised Jewish at Congregation B'nai Israel that burning desire to transmit Judaism to the next generation.

Amen.