

# FOLK JUDAISM, ELITE JUDAISM AND THE ROLE OF BAR MITZVAH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SYNAGOGUE AND JEWISH SCHOOL IN AMERICA\*

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Most scholars of Jewish life in North America discuss bar and bat mitzvah only in passing. This is unfortunate because these commonly held, and typically very public, life-cycle events are a major part of the North America Jewish experience.

Three different types of questions may be raised by research on bar and bat mitzvah. First are those about social change and change in religious ritual. Bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah have a history, and their modern history in particular is one of innovation and variation. A study of this historical development gives the opportunity to explore theories about modernization, assimilation, and secularization while at the same time illuminating a life-cycle event which is part of the early adolescent experience of almost all North American Jews. A second set of questions is concerned with the meanings—overt and symbolic—conveyed in ritual ceremonies and celebrations. There are authoritatively defined meanings (see e.g., Spiro, 1977) and some attempts at interpretation by psychologists (see e.g. Arlow, 1982 [1951]), but very little ethnographic material using observations and interviews to discover what the rituals mean to those

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involved. (see Weissler, 1986, for an example). A third set of questions addresses the relationship between bar and bat mitzvah and the formal organizations of the Jewish community. Although scholars have not discussed it, "everybody" seems to know that most synagogues do not permit bar or bat mitzvah without affiliation and a specified minimum of Jewish education. The examination of the origin of these requirements, their functions, and changes in them should contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between North American Jews and their community institutions.<sup>1</sup>

This paper deals, in part, with the third set of questions. It is more historical than contemporary in its focus, calling attention to when and how minimum educational requirements became virtually unavoidable, the problems this strategy addressed, and some subsequent developments. The distinction between "folk" and "elite" religion is used to place the imposition of minimum requirements in context and to relate it to a broader framework for the interpretation of Jewish life in North America. The paper argues that there was, and to some extent continues to be, an elite-folk struggle over bar and bat mitzvah, and that the compromise adopted in that struggle was decisive for the direction that Judaism in North America subsequently took.<sup>2</sup>

## FOLK AND ELITE RELIGION

The contrast between elite and folk religion in Judaism comes from the work of Charles Liebman (1973)<sup>3</sup>. He describes elite religion as

the symbols and rituals . . . and beliefs which the leaders acknowledge as legitimate. But more importantly, elite religion is also the religious organization itself, its hierarchical arrangements, the authority of the leaders and their source of authority, and the rights and obligations of the followers to the organization and its leaders. (1973:46)

Folk religion is described as,

a kind of subculture . . . which the acknowledged leaders ignore or even condemn, but in which a majority of the members participate. . . . As far as the elite religion is concerned, folk religion is not a movement, but an error, or a set of errors, shared by many people. (*ibid.*)

Liebman cautions,

It is a mistake to think of folk religion as necessarily more primitive than elite religion. While its ceremonies and sanctums evoke emotions and inchoate ideas associated with basic instincts and primitive emo-

tions, it is also more flexible than elite religion. Hence it is also capable of developing ceremonial responses to contemporary needs which may be incorporated into the elite religion. (*ibid.*:47)

## FOLK JUDAISM AND BAR MITZVAH

There is scattered but abundant evidence to indicate that, in the period of mass migration at the turn of the century, standards of Jewish education were low, expectations were low, and teenaged boys who lived in conformity with the mitzvot were very rare. Nevertheless, the bar mitzvah was considered an important event, to be celebrated with a synagogue ceremony. The folk values gave higher—sometimes exclusive—priority to a successful performance than to understanding, even at the most basic level, or to behavioral commitment. As early as 1885, an elite critic of the religious practices of American Jews called bar mitzvah, “the greatest of holidays among our Jewish brethren” and ironically described the conspicuous donation, the emphasis on the reception, the inflated cliché-filled speeches and the boy’s subsequent refusal to allow his tutor to teach him how to wear tefillin (Sarna, 1981:76).

An observer of a later phase of the period of mass immigration stressed the estrangement between the culturally foreign immigrants and their American-oriented sons, who, he writes,

... gradually quit going to the synagogue, give up ‘chaiders’ promptly when they are thirteen years old, avoid the Yiddish theatres, seek the up-town places of amusement, dress in the latest American fashion, and have a keen eye for the right thing in neckties. They even refuse sometimes to be present at supper on Friday evenings. Thus, indeed, the sway of the old people is broken. (Hapgood, 1967:27; see also Feldstein, 1978:172)

Instead of being a ceremony acknowledging full participation of the adolescent in sacred rituals, bar mitzvah appears to have become a ritual of discontinuity, the last time the boy was obligated to present himself as a participant in his father’s world. It became a ritual in which traditional commitments were affirmed and then ignored. For the parents—themselves rebellious children who had left their own parents—it appears that the ritual affirmation of religious continuity was emotionally important.

The increasing importance of bar mitzvah as a public ritual, combined with the inability of most North American Jewish boys to prepare a d’rasha—a learned commentary on a biblical text—led to

the publication of books of bar mitzvah speeches which the boy could memorize. The first edition of what appears to be the first of these compilations appeared in 1907 and sold 10,000 copies (Engelman, 1951:36)<sup>4</sup>. These books continued to be published until at least 1954 (Wise, 1954).

Personal reports of bar mitzvahs in the early twentieth century recall differing experiences. Angoff (in Howe and Libo, 1979:122) writes of a simple Thursday morning ceremony and his delight at his mother's "great appreciation . . . [that h]er oldest son was now a full man in Israel." Marx recalls that he had a bar mitzvah ceremony "out of deference to Grandpa, who would have been bitterly hurt if his grandsons hadn't shown that much respect for their traditional faith." (1961:57) Levenson, on the other hand, remembers reading a speech "before a packed house of menfolk, womenfolk, and kidfolk" and realizing that the Jewish view of adult "rights" was that they were not only responsibilities, but "*privileges*, for which I had to be *grateful*." (1973:184)

The rise of the bar mitzvah as a major social event has not yet been studied. Rosenberg writes that in 1935 the bar mitzvah "affair," on Saturday night, with a catered meal and a band at a banquet hall "was just then beginning to become the rage in Flatbush" (1984:18). Levitats, writing in 1949, noted that "the reception party or dinner and ball are usually elaborate and sumptuous." (1949:153) He further noted the wide circulation of a film made of the bar mitzvah celebration in Hollywood of Edward G. Robinson's son, and commented, "The child usually measures the success of the event by the value of the gifts he receives." (*ibid.*) Duker reported, at about the same period, the following:

The commercial *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony . . . has evolved its own ritual, resembling closely the extravaganza of the wedding ceremony. There is the march, the bringing in of the *Bar Mitzvah* cake, the lighting of the thirteen candles, or of fourteen—one for luck—the use of the choir, the rendition, sometimes of 'Mein Yiddishe Momme' by the *Bar Mitzvah* celebrant or of 'Dos Pintele Yid' by an artist. So much importance is now being attached to this commercial hall ceremonial, that we have heard of cases where it has replaced the synagogue ritual completely, even eliminating the custom of calling up the *Bar Mitzvah* lad to the reading of the Torah. The *Bar Mitzvah* cake, usually in the form of a Torah scroll, is also an American innovation. (1969:413)

## ELITE JUDAISM AND BAR MITZVAH

This pattern of folk observance of the bar mitzvah was obviously distressing to those who participated in elite Judaism, whose values

and personal futures were committed to raising the standards of Jewish education and creating a stable membership for American synagogues.

The institutional base of elite Judaism had lagged behind migration patterns. Although congregations were almost always established in new locations after the settlement of only a small number of Jews, elite Judaism requires, in addition, higher level study for those with whom religious authority will be shared and formal structures to interpret and standardize beliefs and practices of those congregations which acknowledge common authority. In America, elite Judaism took the organizational form of rabbinic seminaries, rabbinic associations and federations of congregations. The national institutions of the Reform movement were established in the late nineteenth century, after several generations of German-Jewish immigration. The institutions of Conservative and Orthodox Judaism developed towards the end of the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews.

By the twenties, several competing elites were self-consciously fashioning somewhat different versions of American-Judaism, adaptations of the religious community to the conditions of North American life. On the one hand, these adaptations had to speak to a new constituency of "American Jews," to provide them a way of thinking about themselves that harmonized their Jewish and American identities (see Eisen, 1983). On the other hand, American Judaism is voluntaristic, sustained by the affiliation and financial support of members. A number of studies (cited by Sherman, 1960:208-209) suggest that overall from the end of mass immigration until after World War II, far fewer than one-half of American Jewish families were synagogue members. Organized Jewish schools enrolled only a minority of school-aged children and many received tutoring only before their bar mitzvahs.

The development of an American pattern of bar mitzvah observance combining lack of religious commitment with a big party was a continuing object of elite criticism. In 1930, a psychologist giving a series of lectures on Jewish parenting under the sponsorship of the Women's League for Conservative Judaism included a long critical section on bar mitzvah, which read in part:

... The ... celebrations do much to counteract whatever good the synagogue ritual may accomplish. ... I have seen children brought from the inspiring and chastening atmosphere of the synagogue to fashionable hotels where a great banquet was prepared in utter defiance of the Sabbath or the Jewish dietary laws and involving an outlay which made the occasion one of vulgar display of parental wealth rather than of

parental concern for the spiritual welfare of the child. . . . To make the party a real event vaudeville artists are sometimes engaged and one is privileged to enjoy the puerile vulgarisms of the variety theater capping the climax of a Bar Mitzvah ceremony. . . . (Kohn, 1932: 30-31, *passim*).

A rabbi, replying to a questionnaire item about whether his congregation conducted bat mitzvahs, wrote, "The Bar Mitzvah ceremony is enough of a farce." (Silverman, 1932:330)<sup>5</sup>

## BAR MITZVAH AND INSTITUTION BUILDING

One way of strengthening synagogues and synagogue schools and enforcing a higher level of adherence to elite norms was to use the folk expectation that Jewish boys would have a bar mitzvah ceremony as a basis for pressuring otherwise reluctant North American Jews to become more involved with the synagogue. A 1937 editorial in *The Reconstructionist* on confirmation and bar mitzvah included this succinct statement of strategy and tactics:

In order that these rites may not represent merely the attainment of certain ages, but also the accomplishment of certain minimum education, it would be necessary for the national organizations, such as the United Synagogue of America and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, to set up for their respective constituents standard requirements for *bar mizvah*(sic) and for Confirmation.

Another tactical variation was possible—setting standards through local boards of Jewish education. This local approach was implemented in Chicago in 1938 by a regulation binding congregations affiliated with the Board of Jewish Education to require all boys, prior to a bar mitzvah ceremony

(1) A minimum of three years attendance at a daily Hebrew School of recognized standing, or (2) Evidence of the candidate's fitness to be determined by the Board of Jewish Education through examinations that will test the following: (a) Understanding of the Hebrew language equivalent to what is expected of pupils in affiliated schools who have studied for a period of three years. (b) Ability to read the prayers with a reasonable degree of fluency as well as the ability to follow the services as practiced in the adult synagogue. (c) Understanding of the customs and ceremonies of Jewish life. (d) Knowledge and understanding of the major events, personalities and movements of Jewish history, and of the contemporary Jewish world with special emphasis

on the positive and constructive phases of present-day Jewish life. (quoted in Levitats, 1949:155)

National standards for bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah and confirmation were first implemented by the Conservative movement which included them in its "Statement of Objective and Standards for the Congregational School" adopted in 1946. This document specified for bar or bat mitzvah a minimum of three years' enrollment in a congregational school meeting three times a week for six hours, and for confirmation age of fifteen and five years' enrollment.

The most detailed discussion of educational requirements for bar mitzvah appears in a pamphlet published in 1951 by The American Association for Jewish Education, written by its director of research and information, Uriah Zevi Engelman. This pamphlet gives more details about the imposition of minimum requirements in various localities and strongly endorses the practice. This pamphlet did not necessarily have a direct effect—the A.A.J.E. was and remains<sup>6</sup> a purely advisory body—but it is a significant document because its records and comments on how tendencies towards folk and elite Judaism interacted in the shaping of American Judaism. The pamphlet was an unusual one for the A.A.J.E. Its eighteen previous pamphlets had dealt with such technical topics as directories, budgeting, salaries, enrollment and the funding of Jewish education by local federations. This was its first publication on a Jewish ritual.

The pamphlet is introduced by Judah Pilch, the Executive Director of the Association, who sets out immediately the elite critique of folk laxity. "In the past several decades," Pilch wrote,

Bar mitzvah has come to be considered merely a rite, and preparation for Bar Mitzvah has tended to become preparation for the ceremony itself. . . . As a consequence, the education of the child was in all too many cases restricted to the narrow requirements of the rite. . . . Bar Mitzvah represents a powerful motivation, a goal which children and their parents readily understand, and will work to attain.

Recognizing the value of this motivation, increasing numbers of Jewish educators and rabbis have sought to direct Bar Mitzvah preparation from mere coaching for a performance, to education for living as American Jews. . . .

The pamphlet then gives a brief but scholarly history of bar mitzvah and its relationship to Jewish education, a historical sketch of bar mitzvah in America, and detailed results of a 1950 survey of minimum educational requirements for bar mitzvah.

### *Community Practices*

One hundred and twelve communities participated in the survey. Fifty-one (45.5%) reported no minimum educational requirements for bar mitzvah. The remainder indicated that at least one congregation in the community made such requirements. Of the 112 communities responding to the survey, 107 had Jewish populations of less than 100,000. In communities of this size, minimum requirements were imposed by synagogues representing all branches of Judaism. For the five communities of over 100,000, no information was available beyond the fact that at least one congregation in each of these communities had educational requirements. The most common requirement in place was three years' attendance, but some congregations required less and a few congregations required more. (As might be expected, Orthodox congregations required more and Reform less, with Conservative in the middle, but the differences between them—in numbers of years only, as number of *hours* were not reported—are not dramatic.) The number of communities in which bat mitzvahs were held was not given; where bat mitzvahs were held, the educational requirements were the same for girls as boys.

### *Intercongregational Cooperation*

Minimum requirements were more effective where they were jointly imposed by congregations acting as a cartel. Joint congregational action, usually through the local board of Jewish education, was taken to standardize minimum regulations in Cleveland (1942), Cincinnati (1944), Minneapolis (1947), Schenectady (1948), Indianapolis (1949) and Bridgeport (1950).

### *Community Bar Mitzvah Boards*

Formal communities to "administer and enforce" communally adopted regulations were established in a number of larger communities. Chicago, which took the initiative in establishing minimum requirements, did so in 1938. It was followed by Philadelphia (1949), New Haven (1948), Los Angeles (1949), Miami (1950), and Boston (1950). The "smaller communities" of Akron and Syracuse set up bar mitzvah boards in 1944 and 1949, respectively.

### *National Action*

The pamphlet reported in a section on "bar mitzvah educational requirements by national organizations" on regulations established



by the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues in 1945 and the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education. The Reform regulations required two years' school attendance, attainment of age thirteen, and "a definite understanding" of continuing attendance at religious school until confirmation. The Reform ceremony was to include reading from Hebrew sections of the Union Prayer Book, reciting the blessing over the Torah in Hebrew, chanting from the parasha in Hebrew in the congregations where laymen normally did this, reading the blessings over the haftorah in Hebrew, reading the haftorah in either Hebrew or English and a prayer or talk which "should express the emotions and thoughts of the candidate himself." The United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education requirements mentioned are those discussed previously in this paper.

### *Bar Mitzvah Certificates*

Facsimiles of bar mitzvah certificates from New Haven and Syracuse were included in the pamphlet. These certificates were not worded to be records of a congregational ceremony, but spoke explicitly of education. The New Haven certificate spoke of "completion of the educational requirements for . . . bar mitzvah" and was signed by the president and director of the local board of Jewish education as well as the congregational president and rabbi. The Syracuse certificate spoke of "study" making the boy "eligible for the ceremony of bar mitzvah" and was signed by the President of the Syracuse Rabbinical Council, the Director of the Board of Jewish Education and the congregational rabbi.

Local and national educational standards for bar mitzvah could set a climate of opinion, but the autonomy of each congregation and the differences between the branches of Judaism ensured continuing diversity and competition. For example, the Conservative movement's standard of six hours of school, three days a week meant, in effect, phasing out the Sunday school, which had been the most common Conservative congregational school. This change led some families to change their affiliation to Reform, or to Conservative and Orthodox congregations which did not adopt these standards (Kelman, 1975:74). At an experience-sharing session at the 1949 convention of the Rabbinical Assembly, the phasing out of the Sunday school in favor of the three day a week Hebrew school was discussed by a rabbi from Youngstown, Ohio. In the first two years of this transition, about ninety families resigned from his congregation and joined the Reform Congregation "up the street, whose rabbi cam-

paigned on the platform, 'Come to us and they will be just as good Jews.' " (Karp, 1983:226) Nevertheless, by 1959 74% of Conservative congregations had phased out their Sunday schools (Wertheimer, 1984:128).

## ELITE AND FOLK ACCOMMODATION

In the social science literature on Jewish life in the fifties and sixties, bar and bat mitzvah are mentioned in passing. Gartner (1969)<sup>7</sup>, Sklare (1972)<sup>8</sup> and Sklare and Greenblum (1979)<sup>9</sup> have the most to say.

The data gleaned from these studies indicate the importance of bar (and later bat) mitzvah as a family event, the goal of Jewish education, and motivation for synagogue affiliation. However, these studies do not systematically pursue the implications of bar-bat mitzvah as an organizing event shaping local and national patterns in family life, synagogues, and schools. These institutions were linked by the establishment of normally unavoidable educational prerequisites for bar and bat mitzvah in a pattern which influenced subsequent developments.

It is not possible to argue strictly cause-and-effect in this pattern of development. The necessary scientific conditions for separating out the effects of variables are not present in a historical case study. It is simply argued that a discussion of the changes in Jewish education, synagogue affiliation, and family life which leaves out this educational requirement misses something important.

Changes in Jewish life in this period have been attributed to a reaction to the Holocaust, the psychological effects of the State of Israel, occupational mobility, geographic relocation from exclusively Jewish city neighborhoods to mixed neighborhoods in the suburbs, and the conventional expectation of religious affiliation within middle-class life. (Glazer, 1972:119-123; Janowsky, 1964:133; Gans, 1958 and many others). Explanations based on these causes make the changes in educational and affiliation patterns appear to be consequences of a spontaneous consensus among Jews in the post-war period.

While there was undoubtedly much enthusiasm for synagogue-building and a heightened interest in Jewish education, it is easy to overestimate the degree to which all North American Jews took for granted that affiliation with an expensive synagogue and a minimum of three or more years of Jewish education. In the sociological analysis of structural change, it has been firmly established for at

least several decades (the widespread attention given to Dahrendorf, 1959 is commonly considered a turning point) that what appears to be structural adjustments of one part of a social system to changes in another part may also be analyzed as a pattern of tension between interest groups, conflict, and accommodation. Certain features of Jewish education, synagogue affiliation, and family life become more understandable if the imposition of minimum educational requirements for bar (and by extension bat) mitzvah is seen as the outcome of a process of tension, conflict and accommodation between "elite" and "folk" interest groups within Judaism.

The pattern of Jewish education in North America was substantially different before and after minimum educational requirements became widespread. First, the percentage of enrolled school-aged children approximately doubled. From the period of mass migration until World War II, from 25 to 30% of Jewish children aged 5-14 were enrolled in Jewish education each year. A study of enrollment between 1948 and 1958 showed an increase of 131.2%, raising the percentage of children 5-14 receiving Jewish education to between 40 and 45%. In 1962, it was estimated that of Jewish children 5-17, 53% were enrolled in Jewish education. Second, the setting of Jewish education changed. While in the pre-war period congregational schools were common, a substantial percentage of students were enrolled in communally sponsored Talmud Torahs, tiny *hedarim*, secular Yiddish schools, or were privately tutored. By 1958, the congregational school had become dominant, accounting for 88.5% of total enrollments.<sup>10</sup> Third, it appears that attendance expectations changed. A 1918 New York report found that more than half of the students "dropped out" of class without completing the year. A 1919 Chicago report estimated a drop-out rate of one-third. By the 1950s, with a bar mitzvah ceremony usually dependent on continuous enrollment for a number of years, the drop-out rate was much lower.<sup>11</sup>

Coerced enrollment in Jewish education, however, was rarely accompanied by a change in the home environment. Tension between what the school taught and what the family believed and practiced remained an institutionalized part of Jewish life, with many students having a school experience that has been referred to as "siddur and yelling." Jewish educators, however, clearly preferred to have students under these circumstances than not to have them at all. Vastly increased numbers, the financial subsidies from synagogue dues, the apparent stability gained by integrating school and synagogue, and the investment in curriculum support by the Reform and Conservative movements made it possible to begin changing the concern over

the quality of Jewish education from hand-wringing rhetoric to modest action.

The "normalization" of several years Jewish education prior to bar mitzvah may also have contributed to the increasing frequency of bat mitzvahs. If coeducation was normal in the public schools which most North American Jewish children attended, and if Jewish education was mandatory for boys, it became harder to accept the idea that Jewish education was unnecessary for girls, or that they should be denied being the center of attention in an impressive synagogue ceremony. Scattered reports indicate female enrollment (as a percentage of the total) gradually increasing from the period of mass migration to 1962 (as reported in Janowsky, 1964:136-7).

The monopolistic imposition of minimum educational requirements was associated with intergeneration changes in expectations of what constituted a proper synagogue. Landsmanschaft synagogues evolved into synagogue centers (often shifting from Orthodox to Conservative and relocating in the suburbs in the process) or aged with their founders. New architecturally dramatic synagogues, featuring educational wings, attractive social halls, and catering sized kitchens, made symbolic statements about collective economic and cultural mobility. For some Jews voluntary affiliation, with its attendant financial obligations, with these multi-functional impressive and expensive synagogues was a matter of personal feelings of obligation or pride. For others—at least a significant minority—it was a matter of necessity. If one's two children were to have a bar or bat mitzvah at these synagogues, synagogue affiliation during the years that they were in Hebrew school was required.<sup>12</sup>

Assuming a family with two children spaced three years apart, coercive affiliation during the period of Jewish education usually meant about six years—from the time the older child turned ten until the younger child became thirteen. A 1967 Conservative movement survey of synagogue membership found that a son's completion of Bar Mitzvah or Hebrew School followed only death and geographic relocation as a reason given for disaffiliation (cited in Wertheimer, 1984:128)<sup>13</sup>. The period of mandatory affiliation could serve for some as a framework for the organization of new neighborhood social networks based on childrens' friendships, car pooling, and friendships developing from common organizational membership. From an institutional perspective, six years of mandatory but satisfying synagogue membership could sometimes lead to additional years of voluntary affiliation.

The setting of minimum educational requirements for bar and

bat mitzvah set a pattern for compromise between elite and folk. From the elite perspective, a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is not an important part of Jewish identity. Elite Judaism, of whatever branch, is committed to a Jewish way of life. Life-cycle ceremonies have meaning only because they are integrated into this way of life, and others—such as brit milah—have a more important place in this way of life. For the elite, the importance attached to bar mitzvah, and later to bat mitzvah, in North American folk Judaism provided an opportunity to pursue elite goals. The religious elite used their control over the setting in which bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies are held to require enrollment in Hebrew school. These enrollments helped stabilize congregational membership and provided a more stable financial and membership base.

While the elite have control over the setting and the ceremony, the laity have retained control over the celebration. The generally successful imposition of minimum educational requirements did not necessarily tame the vulgar excess about which secular as well as religious critics complained. A Reform rabbi in the 1950s inveighed in colorful detail against circus, cowboy, and baseball “theme” bar mitzvahs (Herman, 1967). Rabbi Moshe Feinstein in 1959 published a responsum condemning the American bar mitzvah celebration (quoted in Sherwin, 1973:53). In 1978 a bar mitzvah party at the Orange Bowl in Florida made the national press. However, the extent to which conspicuous consumption was ever the keynote of typical bar mitzvahs may be questioned; other, perhaps more important themes can be identified. And, as the folkways of American Jews—a community still in transition—continue to change, the celebrations have changed, and new elements have been added to the synagogue ceremony. These topics will be discussed in a subsequent paper.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis in this paper raises additional theoretical and substantive questions which go beyond its scope. To what extent is it legitimate to speak of American Jews as a “folk”? What are the implications of the extensive political science literature on elites for an approach to the understanding of American Jews? When, how, and why does a practice stop being a folk custom and either disappear or become an elite prescription? Has the gap between elite and folk Judaism narrowed or widened, or has the quality of the relation-

ship changed? Each of these questions requires an extended response.

Is it possible, however, to remark briefly on two implications of the approach taken in this paper.

First, the attention to "folk" religion suggests that a somewhat different set of questions be asked in research about Jewish identification. The set of questions reported by Cohen (1983:56-57), to cite a well-known example, includes questions about kashrut, sabbath candles, mezzuzot, fasting on Yom Kippur, taking part in a seder, attending services, synagogue membership, Jewish organization membership, non-sectarian organization membership, Jewish giving, non-Jewish giving, intermarriage and Jewish friends. While the responses to these items are informative and valuable, the list is essentially eclectic and not theoretically structured.

For those questions which deal specifically with ritual observance, one starting point for a theoretically derived list could be the sacramental function of religion. In all cultures significant status passages are socially announced through rituals. In most cultures these rituals have a religious content—relating the passing from one status into another to theological teachings and folk beliefs about the meaning of life. Using this as a guide, it would be informative for studies of "Jewish identification" to also include questions about bris, bar and bat mitzvah<sup>14</sup>, weddings and burials. Quantitative intergenerational data about these practices will give information about the extent to which this sacramental function of Judaism endures. Qualitative research will give some insight into the meaning of these events and the extent to which they are connected with other aspects of the lives of American Jews.

Second, this approach has implications for the debate over whether the American Jewish population identifies less with Jewish life with each generation, has developed a modest but stable identification with Jewish life or is becoming polarized (Cohen, 1983; Waxman, 1983; Silberman, 1985). Bar and bat mitzvah are major folk rituals of Jewish identification<sup>15</sup>, usually requiring months of preparation on the part of the entire family. While data on the extent of bar and bat mitzvah are not available, it does appear that even many families who are far removed from participation in Jewish life have these ceremonies. The content of bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies varies from setting to setting, but their ubiquity indicates that they are seen as conventionally expected events in the Jewish life-cycle. Data indicating a decline in the percentage of children having bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies would indeed be an indication of declining

Jewish identification. Data indicating the opposite would be an indication of stability. Qualitative data about different ways of celebrating bar and bat mitzvah and the meaning of the event to those who participate would give some insight into the alternative paths along which Jewish identification may be developing.

## NOTES

1. These theoretical perspectives are discussed in more detail in Schoenfeld, 1985.
2. Writing from Canada, the author is keenly aware of both substantial similarities and differences in Jewish life in the U.S. and Canada. As publications about bar/bat mitzvah in Canada and their relationship to Jewish education are completely lacking, the analysis in this paper relies on American sources. Research is presently being conducted on the hypothesis that in this particular case the American and Canadian patterns are very similar.
3. Liebman cites Bock (1966) as a source of this distinction. Mordecai Kaplan appears to be another, although uncited source. Kaplan (1967 [1934]) includes a chapter on "The Folk Aspect of the Jewish Religion" and one on "Jewish Folkways." Liebman elsewhere (1975) shows his awareness of Kaplan's thought and concludes that his approach to Judaism is widely shared beyond those who identify themselves as Reconstructionists.
4. In comparison, Janowsky estimates that in 1908 only 100,000 students were receiving Jewish education, *including* those "receiving private instruction" (1964:130).
5. In the Reform movement, the criticism is more complex because of the only partially successful attempt to replace bar mitzvah with confirmation. At the first convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (1890), Dr. David Phillipson characterized bar mitzvah as "an antiquated, soulless ceremony with no meaning for us and our time" (1890:47), "one of the many religious forms which have lived their day and should disappear entirely . . ." (50) He criticized, however, the "abuses" which were now associated with Confirmation—"extravagance in the dress of the girls, . . . the vulgar display of presents in every home on confirmation day, . . . grand and magnificent receptions, rivaling the splendor of wedding receptions." (57)
6. Now reorganized as The Jewish Education Service of North America.
7. Gartner observes that the rise of public education in the late nineteenth century led to a pattern of Reform Jewish education in supplementary Sunday schools; a typical three year program of education led to a graduating Confirmation ceremony for boys and girls around age thirteen. Some Reform congregations retained the bar mitzvah ceremony (1969:9-10). Later, the early twentieth century Talmud Torahs provided

an ambitious program of Jewish education. However, most students attended only two or three years and parents demanded preparation for bar mitzvah, an event “despised by the pedagogues.” The girls who attended were not preoccupied with bar mitzvah and made better pupils (*ibid.*:17). He also mentions the post-war establishment of prerequisites for “the still universally desired Bar Mitzvah” (*ibid.*:25). His collection of sources includes two bar mitzvah speeches—one from 1873 and one from 1931.

8. Sklare’s study of the Conservative movement notes that bar mitzvah and confirmation ceremonies attracted attendance to otherwise sparsely attended services (1972:99), with bar mitzvah ceremonies as a main support of the Saturday morning service and Confirmation attracting attendance on Shavuot (*ibid.*:101). Higher requirements for bar mitzvah—at least three years Hebrew school—extending years of Sunday school by setting the age of Confirmation higher, and the encouragement of female education leading to bat mitzvah are mentioned as common; at the time of his study, the parental desire for a bat mitzvah ceremony was still small (*ibid.*:155). He reports the “widespread feeling among both parents and children that *Bar Mitzvah* and Confirmation are equivalent to graduation exercises,” with virtually no classes held beyond them (*ibid.*:157).
9. In 1957-8 Sklare and Greenblum studied a mid-west suburb with a growing Jewish minority. Some of their findings about bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah and confirmation reflect the particular and unrepresentative makeup of the suburb. At the time of the study, the suburb had one Conservative congregation, with 27% of the affiliation of the study’s respondents, and four Reform congregations, with 73% of the affiliation (1979:97-98). As might be expected, there was also an unusually high percentage of fourth generation Americans and of those of German-Jewish descent (*ibid.*:32-33). In families with at least one child age 10 or older, 95% enrolled their children in Sunday or Hebrew school. A smaller proportion of both mothers and fathers reported having had formal Jewish education themselves (*ibid.*:294), including those who received tutoring solely as bar mitzvah preparation (*ibid.*:295). The Saturday morning service at the Conservative congregation and the largest Reform one were sustained by Bar Mitzvah ceremonies. The Conservative congregation also had a Tephillin club for recent bar mitzvahs and a Bat Mitzvah Club for girls. The congregation also had a Hebrew high-school program with a small enrollment. The Reform congregations were differentiated by social status, style and choices among the practices then controversial within Reform. Controversial issues within Reform included the relative importance of Friday night, Saturday morning and Sunday morning services; the challenge of bar and bat mitzvah to confirmation; and the relationship of Sunday school to weekday Hebrew school. There is no specific statement about compulsory education before bar and bat mitzvah. The only Jewish schools were



congregational ones. Affiliation rates rose from 19% of families in the "pre-school" years to 56% of families in the "early-school years" to 87% of families in the "peak-school" years (*ibid.*:181). Affiliation for the purpose of bar/bat mitzvah and confirmation was common. Some disaffiliation after these ceremonies is reported.

10. This was of course to change with the gradual but steady shift to day schools, most of which were not directly linked to a congregation.
11. The figures in the preceding paragraphs are taken from Janowsky, 1964:128-142.
12. Bar and bat mitzvahs could still be held at the few synagogues which did not impose minimum educational requirements, but these synagogues were usually aging, old-fashioned, poor congregations in "the old neighborhood." Simchas held in these settings in the 1950s appeared *declassé*. For families in transition, who still had some connection to "the old neighborhood," a Thursday morning ceremony downtown and a Saturday morning ceremony uptown were sometimes held.
13. Johnson (1978 [1974]:94) mentions a more recent case where a congregation retained only 10 percent of those families whose children reached bar mitzvah age.
14. After the preparation of this paper, the author learned that questions about bar mitzvah have been included in some community surveys and that statistically interesting results are found in the 1985 Philadelphia data (Yancey: 1985).
15. The assimilation of bar and bat mitzvah into civil Judaism is indicated by the practice of having adult bar mitzvahs as part of UJA tours of Israel.

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