

CHANGING PATTERNS OF NORTH AMERICAN BAR MITZVAH  
TOWARDS A HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

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Bar mitzvah is a widely celebrated, widely criticized and rarely analyzed event in Jewish life. There is a prescriptive literature on how it should be done, written by rabbis, educators and advisors on the etiquette of large social gatherings. There is a critical literature on what is wrong with the way it is done, written by rabbis, educators and literary rebels against middle class standards. There is, however, little in the way of sustained social history or sociological analysis.

This gap reflects the social historical and sociological paradigms which have informed the study of North American Jews. Research on North American Jews has examined the immigration experience, institution building, upward mobility, political attitudes and behaviour, religious attitudes and affiliations and the intergenerational transmission of minority group identity. With a few exceptions -- notably the work of Heilman (1976, 1983) and Shaffir (1974) -- little has been written on how North American Jews experience their participation in rituals. Bar mitzvah, specifically, has been written about only in passing (Resnick, 1982:129, Sklare and Greenblum, 1979). Arlow (1978 [1951]), over thirty years ago published an analysis from a psychoanalytic perspective which subsequent writers outside that perspective appear to have almost entirely ignored. A search of the published literature has produced neither a critique, or an analysis from another perspective in response, nor even many citations.

This paper moves bar mitzvah to the center of attention, examining the historical development of the concept and attendant ceremonies, interpreting it as a socio-cultural drama in which larger issues of Jewish life are articulated and somehow dealt with. In this way the focus of research is shifted from an abstract discussion of issues in response to questions from a social scientist to the concrete cultural patterns used to confront general issues in particular life experiences.

The history and analysis of bar mitzvah are only begun in this paper. As notes for a social history, the paper identifies the main features of the ceremony's evolution. Historians have not thoroughly researched the topic and much additional work could be done. As an analysis, this paper is limited to exploring the applicability of several themes and concepts. Liebman's usage of the distinction between "elite" and "folk" religion (1973) helps to clarify the question under study. Williamson's (1983) analysis of ritual behaviours as means of dramatizing and managing problematic relationships suggests a methodological approach to interpreting historical changes in the

celebration of bar mitzvah. Myerhoff's concept of definitional ceremonies (1978), suggests that attention be paid to the ways in which cultural and personal meanings may be fused in rituals.

Liebman uses the contrast between folk and elite religion as a theme in his interpretation of the religion of American Jews. The contrast, he writes, "is informed by, but not identical to, Bock's definitions" of folk and official religion (1966). Elite religion consists of

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)

The folk religion he characterizes 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 emotions, 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)

Williamson's analysis of festival rituals in Middletown provides an approach to American folk religious practices. Her analysis illustrates the observation that "ritual is concentrated on those aspects of a society that are at risk, so to speak, because of conflict or contradiction and loss of credibility." (1983:241) She continues,

It is impossible for a system of cultural ideas to be free from contradictions, but the acceptability of such a system is diminished by a burden of obvious contradiction. . . . We assume that rituals avert the threat to institutional survival by resolving the dilemmas created by conflicting values and by endowing the entire system with an aura of unimpeachable truth and virtue. (ibid.)

In contrast to Williamson's focus on culturally problematic relationships, Myerhoff's discussion of definitional ceremonies (1978) focuses on the ways in which individuals use social opportunities to make presentations of self. When innovating or elaborating in socially structured situations, including routines

and rituals, individuals are selectively using culturally available resources to construct and present a socially valued self.

Williamson's and Myerhoff's studies, like the recent study by Martin (1981), indicate the transition of anthropological approaches to symbols and rituals developed in non-western ethnographies to the study of European and North American culture. Both Myerhoff and Martin derive their theoretical frameworks from Turner, who is a major figure in this transition (1974, 1977).

## THE EVOLUTION OF BAR MITZVAH PRACTICES

### BAR MITZVAH AS STATUS PASSAGE

Initially a status passage, bar mitzvah has acquired ceremonial and festive characteristics.

Earliest references to bar mitzvah are post-biblical. The term "bar mitzvah" does not appear in the bible. Early rabbinic sources make references to the age of thirteen as one which marked the point at which a young man became responsible for his own action, i.e., subject as an autonomous individual to the discipline of the commandments (see Sherwin (1973) for a detailed review). There was no need for a special ritual; bar mitzvah was the age of ritual and ethical responsibility. Its place in the life cycle is indicated by the following quote from Ethics of the Fathers, a book of the Talmud:

[Judah son of Tema] used to say, at five years of age for the Scripture, at ten for the Mishnah, thirteen for the commandments, fifteen for the Talmud, eighteen for marriage, twenty for one's life pursuit, thirty for mature strength, forty for understanding, fifty for counsel, sixty for age, seventy for old age, eighty for exceeding strength, ninety for decrepitude, and a hundred as though one were already dead and passed away completely from the world (25:4).

A second rabbinic commentary often cited is that of Rabbi Eliezer, "A man has to support his son until he is thirteen years old. Thenceforth he says, 'Blessed by He who has freed me from being responsible for this young man's conduct.'" (Midrash Gen.63:10, quoted in Wice, 1940:74). This blessing is still said in some traditional settings.

Sherwin, in his review of the rabbinic sources, does find, however, the following Talmudic source which "hints" at a ceremony: "At the age of thirteen, the boy was taken round and presented to every elder to bless him and to pray for him that he might be worthy to study the Torah and engage in good deeds." (1973:57)

## THE BAR MITZVAH CEREMONY

The status passage to bar mitzvah did acquire ceremonial significance with the growing importance of attendance, ideally on a daily basis, at the synagogue as an obligation of adult males.

The historical origins of synagogue worship are obscure. Whether it came into being during the reforms of Josiah, the exile in Babylon, the Hashmonean revolt or the rise of the Pharisees (Gutman, 1975:72-76), by time of the second Temple, the synagogue, as a house of meeting and study, coexisted with the centralization of sacrifices at the Temple. After the destruction of the Temple, the synagogue became the centre of Jewish worship, with attendance twice daily mandatory for adult males. The synagogue ritual included the wearing of tallit and tefillin and the public reading of sections of the Torah. The tallit (sometimes spelled in English "tallis") is a fringed prayer shawl worn at all morning services. The tefillin are two black leather boxes, each containing verses from the Torah, which are attached to leather straps. One is bound upon the left arm and hand; the other, upon the forehead. Tefillin are worn at morning services during the week. The Torah was divided into sections to be read each Sabbath, covering the entire five books of Moses each year. Each Sabbath seven men are given the honour of an "aliyah", being "called up" in succession to the reading of the Torah. Portions of the next Sabbath's section are read at the Monday and Thursday morning service; on those days there are only three aliyahs. Special readings from the Torah were assigned to Holidays; on most holidays there are five aliyahs.

Because synagogue worship was mandatory for adult males, the legal status of bar mitzvah became relevant to some of its practices, for example, being included among the quorum of ten men (the minyan) required for the recital of communal prayers. Sherwin's review of the rabbinic literature which discusses when a boy could be considered to have reached his legal and religious majority indicates that physical maturity, intellectual maturity and age were all proposed as criteria. This suggests that some discretion was exercised in specific decisions about exactly when a boy was considered bar mitzvah. The debate ended with Rabbi Isserles in the sixteenth century who ruled that a Talmudic source justified using only the criterion of age thirteen (Sherwin:1973:58-63). Since in the process of interpreting Jewish law there is no official way of ending a debate, Rabbi Isserles "last word" on the topic may be taken to indicate a rabbinic consensus and well established common practice.

Bar mitzvah is most closely linked to the synagogue service in the practices governing the assignment of aliyahs. For example, the Shulchan Aruch, the 16th century compilation of traditional Jewish law which was viewed as authoritative by Ashkenazi (central and eastern European) Jews, says simply, "A minor should not be a Reader of the Torah, neither should he be

called up to say the benediction over the Torah." (XXIII.24) This clear statement is somewhat qualified by another section of the Shulchan Aruch, as follows: "A minor who arrived at the age proper for training and who knows how to pronounce the words distinctly, may be called to maftir on the Sabbath or Festivals . an additional aliyah which honours the person who will chant the haftorah, a selection from the prophets matched to each Torah portion and chanted immediately following the Torah reading. In practice, it became customary for a boy to be given an aliyah on the Monday or Thursday following his thirteen birthday as a public acknowledgement of his having become bar mitzvah.

Wearing of the tallis was not linked directly to bar mitzvah although wearing of tefillin came to be. Bloch (1980:81), who writes from within the Ashkenazi frame of reference, states that the tallis was traditionally worn only by married men; it was a customary wedding gift from the bride to the groom (Bloch, 1980:81). It is now common for young men to wear a tallis after bar mitzvah, and they may do so before. In contrast, the traditions concerning tefillin are explicitly linked to age. The proper wearing of tefillin was to be taught to young men no later than the age of bar mitzvah. The Shulchan Aruch states, "The father of a minor . . . who knows how to take care of tefillin . . . must provide him with tefillin so that he may put them on. Nowadays there is a prevalent custom that a minor begins putting on tefillin two or three months before he becomes thirteen years old." (X.24) Among North African Jews, the boy's first public wearing of tefillin became one of the central events in the bar mitzvah ritual.

Bar mitzvah, initially a purely legal status, became the time in the Jewish life cycle when the father would buy tefillin for his son, sometimes also a tallit, and when the boy would receive his first aliyah. This rite of passage took place in the context of continuous socialization (Benedict, 1934). Jewish boys attended synagogue with their fathers, learned their prayers and associated rituals, and began the life-long study of the sacred texts at an early age. Bar mitzvah became a definite stage in the life-cycle of a sacred community, but not a major transition.

The historical point at which a formal ceremony was introduced to mark the assumption of ritual privileges attendant upon adult status is not known. Low (1875) identifies the first formal recognition of bar mitzvah as an event with the introduction into the service of a prayer to be said by the bar mitzvah's father. This prayer was based upon the previously quoted midrash of Rabbi Eliezer. According to Low, Ashkenazi Jews used this verse as a basis for introducing in the 14th century the prayer which the father still says in some synagogues, "Blessed be He who has freed me from being responsible for this young man's conduct." (Wice 1940:74) Rivkind (1942), however, finds authority for this blessing in a tenth century source, indicating that the origin of a formal ceremony must go back at least that far. (Duker, 1943:390). Sherwin cites a twelfth century source which attributes the

origin of the practice to the eighth century (1973:57). Bloch, however, contends that "The earliest mention of a Bar Mitzvah in the modern sense of the term appears in a thirteenth century manuscript of a German rabbi." (1980:20) Bloch appears to be referring to a formal recognition of the boy's first aliyah. He speculates that

In the face of spreading massacres in Western Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, parents sought divine protection for their children through religious ceremonies which evoked congregational good wishes and blessings. It is also possible that growing anxieties and dangers produced a yearning for happy days in the family calendar as an escape from the dismal realities of existence. (Ibid. On life in Europe in the 14th century, see Tuchman (1978), esp. 109-116 passim.)

Two other ceremonial elements were introduced, both apparently in the 16th century -- the d'rasha (bar mitzvah speech) and the s'udah (bar mitzvah feast). Low attributes the introduction of the bar mitzvah d'rasha to 16th century Polish Jews (Wice 1940:74). Rabbinic Judaism made the life-long study of sacred literature an obligation of every Jewish male. The aim of this study was not memorization, but the ability to think logically about the implications of the text in light of the large literature of rabbinic commentary. The d'rasha gave the bar mitzvah boy the opportunity to show how well he had acquired this skill. The s'udah, or feast on the occasion of the bar mitzvah, seems to have begun at the same time among Ashkenazi Jews (Katz, 1961:164). Bloch, however, speculates that the practice of serving light refreshments after the service, a custom in keeping with traditional synagogue practice, began with the formal introduction of a bar mitzvah ceremony. Wice writes, "The Seudah (sic) began as a modest religious meal, but soon went to such excesses that in Cracow, Poland, in 1595 a communal tax was placed upon it in order to discourage extravagance." (1940:74) Again, there is a difference between Wice and Bloch. Bloch assumes an earlier date for the introduction of the s'udah and finds the omission of it from medieval sumptuary regulations an indication that it was generally frugal (1980:21). Bloch finds the earliest mention of the bar mitzvah s'udah in the 1766 sumptuary code of Ancona, Italy which permitted only "coffee and a biscuit to those who go to congratulate the parents at home." (Cecil Roth, quoted in Block, 1980:22).

These ceremonial innovations did not alter the essentially legal and automatic transition to adult status, and they were not universally adopted. These innovations were made in the context of continuous socialization; they confirmed rather than conferred adult status.

The historian Cecil Roth hypothesizes that for one group of Jews in early modern times Bar Mitzvah did become an important ritual of discontinuous socialization (Benedict, 1934). At the end of fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries, the Jews of Spain were subjected to anti-Jewish edicts and mob violence which resulted in large numbers either killed or converted under threat of death. Despite intermittent respites, the increasing intolerance of Judaism led to the establishment of the Inquisition to discover and punish "conversos" (those converted under threat) who continued Jewish practices and to the expulsion of Spanish and Portuguese Jews from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 15th century. The Spanish Inquisition continued for generations after the expulsion, discovering and punishing those who, in secret, passed their Judaism on to their children. Of these, Roth writes,

. . . whichever way they turned, they were faced with danger. If the younger generation were initiated into their secret from earliest youth, their childish prattle was likely to jeopardize the lives of the whole family. If they waited until maturity, Catholicism might be so deeply instilled in them that disclosure would be dangerous as well as useless for religious zeal was no respecter of so trivial a consideration as family ties, and cases where children accused their parents, or even husbands their wives, are by no means uncommon. The obvious compromise between the two alternatives was to wait until adolescence, when parental authority on the one hand was still strong, and on the other discretion might be expected. For this purpose, the ancient Jewish rite of Bar Mitzvah . . . when a boy entered upon his full religious responsibilities, was naturally indicated. It appears highly probable that the traditional introduction at this age to full performance of the precepts of the Law became transformed into initiation into the secret rites and mysteries of Marranism. (1974:173-4)

Roth cites two cases from the records of the Inquisition which support his hypothesis (1974:174). Other historians, however, have been more cautious. Braunstein, in his analysis of Inquisition documents in Majorca, found that the age for introducing children to the secret practices of Judaism was "close to the traditional age of Bar-Mitzvah" (1972:108), but he notes that there was no uniform age. His sources also indicate that this introduction was essentially a private communication; no liturgical ceremony is mentioned. Braunstein writes, "the father (or the mother) summoned the child to tell him of the Mosaic law which he was henceforth expected to observe . . ." (ibid). Neither Baer's history (1961) nor Beinart's detailed analysis of trial documents (1981) mention bar mitzvah as a stage in the life cycle of "conversos" or as a ritual known or practiced by them. Beinart writes, "It would seem that education in mitzvoth [sic] was given to the conversos' children mainly during their adolescence . . ." but he also describes the variability and circumspect nature of Jewish education among conversos (1981:276, passim.).



## MODERNIZATION, TRANSITION AND CELEBRATION

The change from a simple event in a continuously sacred lifestyle to an occasion for ostentatious festivities is often identified as an American transition. However this opinion appears to be another example of simplifying and romanticising the past. There are both theoretical and historical grounds for concluding that the transition began in Europe. On theoretical grounds, one can relate the ostentatious bar mitzvah celebration to the secularization of Jewish consciousness and to affluence, either singly or in combination. Both of these trends can be found in Europe, particularly Western Europe. On historical grounds, there are some published indications that ostentatious celebration by marginally devout Jews is not unique to America.

Jewish intellectual life in Europe, first in the west, then in the east, was affected by the secular rationalism and later the romanticism of modern European thought. Traditional beliefs and customs were challenged by skepticism, reformed by some, defended by some, and abandoned by others in favor of nominal or sincere conversion to one or another Christian church or to some secular faith. There was no longer any certainty in virtually any family that the sacred way of life passed down for centuries would be transmitted from one generation to the next. This was true not only in the more tolerant societies of western Europe, where assimilation was more likely, but also in the more closed societies of eastern Europe, where secularization took the form of a variety of secular ideologies of modern Jewish identity.

Indeed, one scholar (Gittleman, 1978) has concluded that intergenerational conflict is the primary theme of Yiddish literature. In this context of widespread doubt about continuity and family conflict, it seems likely that bar mitzvah was often experienced within the family as an event which raised questions rather than one which signified a smooth life-cycle transition. Isaac Deutscher, a Talmudic prodigy in his youth and a leading spokesman for revolutionary intellectuals as an adult, recalled that his bar mitzvah was an important event on his journey away from Judaism (Deutscher, 1968:5-7).

In Eastern Europe, where traditional life was stronger, the rituals which had grown up around bar mitzvah now offered more overtly the opportunity for the thirteen year old boy to publically affirm his fidelity to the traditions of his father. In Yiddish literature, which was usually a literature of satire, social criticism and rebellion, bar mitzvah is hardly mentioned. There are two portrayals of 19th century eastern European bar mitzvahs written in Hebrew. One, by Sholom Aleichem (1982) -- famous as a Yiddish writer -- presents the giving of the bar mitzvah d'rasha as a very public "big event" at which the boy proves himself before an audience of family, friends and teacher, thereby giving great pleasure to his parents. The other story, "The Kerchief" by S.Y. Agnon (1963), is concerned with the

feelings of a boy from a poor, pious family on the day of his very simple bar mitzvah -- a weekday on which he is called to the Torah for the first time. As in Agnon's other work, Jewish traditions are treated in this story with affection and respect.

In western Europe, uncertainty about intergenerational transmission of Jewish identity may be related to several changes in bar mitzvah practices. By the 19th century in western Europe, traditional Jewish beliefs and practices were already weak and bar mitzvah appears to have become a less effective ritual of Jewish continuity.

In France, Jewish life was reorganized in the early 19th century to parallel French Protestant church organizations. The government recognized a corporate community which governed itself through a dozen geographically defined consistories into which French Jewry was divided. Through the course of the 19th century the consistories moved in two major directions -- lay domination and reform. The Judaism approved by the consistories gave priority to morality and civics -- the common values of the Jews and the French. In an attempt to enforce this liberal interpretation of Judaism, consistories sometimes insisted that a bar mitzvah could not take place unless the candidate passed an examination based on the Precis elementaire, the official "catechism" adopted by the central consistory in 1820. (Albert, 1977) Marrus, writing of the end of the 19th century, comments on the noticeable absence of French Jews from the synagogue, even on the High Holy Days (1971:57). He notes that while bar mitzvah continued to be observed,

the institution was in decline. Before each Bar Mitzvah it was the custom to have a rabbi examine the candidate to determine if he was sufficiently prepared in his knowledge of Hebrew and the Scriptures. By the middle of the 1890s this examination had become a simple formality with virtually no one being rejected. The ceremony itself was considerably reduced in length; often it consisted only of the recitation by heart of five verses from the Pentateuch. (ibid.)

Marrus also notes that orthodox Jews, mainly immigrants from eastern Europe, accounted for a disproportionately large percentage of bar mitzvahs (1971:59).

The major change affecting bar mitzvah in western Europe practices was the introduction of the confirmation service, which was first held in Germany in 1810 and was adopted widely by religious reformers. Because it was an innovation, confirmation offered reformers the chance to design a new ceremony suited in substance and style to their movement. A group ceremony (and reception) could be held; girls could be included; the ceremony need not involve reading of a fixed Torah or haftarah portion; new elements could be introduced into the ceremony; the vernacular could be used; and age thirteen could be changed. There was some ambiguity about whether confirmation would replace

or supplement bar mitzvah, but it was clear that the reformers saw a need for an adolescent religious ritual different from a traditional bar mitzvah (see Plaut,1963:171-177).

In some places in western Europe, bar mitzvah did not fall into neglect, nor was it replaced by confirmation. Questions about the continuity of religious life need not be associated with a decline in festivities. Judaism is not an ascetic religion. On the contrary, Jews are traditionally obligated to rejoice on a number of religious occasions. Affluence gives the opportunity to demonstrate fidelity to tradition through financial sacrifice instead of life-style and also the option of introducing elements into the observance which give it value in secular terms. However, Roth (1982:20-21) gives examples from various parts of western Europe where religious standards became lower and festive standards higher.

#### NORTH AMERICAN BAR MITZVAHS

Jewish immigrants to North America, then, brought with them ideas about bar mitzvah which were already effected by the Jewish encounter with modernity. The earliest Jewish immigrants appear to have marked major life cycle transitions by traditional Jewish rites but not to have been particularly pious. In his study of the American colonial period, Marcus concludes that, although few records exist, it was the normal practice in settlements that had a synagogue for boys to have a bar mitzvah ceremony (1970:989). Jewish education normally stopped at age 13 (ibid.:1074) and was limited to learning to read (not translate) the Hebrew of the prayerbook and preparation of portions from the Torah and the Prophets for the bar mitzvah ceremony (ibid.:1063).

In the mid-19th century, large numbers of German Jews emigrated to the United States (but not to Canada, see Schoenfeld, 1978). The Reform Judaism they developed in America systematized the innovations begun in western Europe, among them the replacing of a bar mitzvah ceremony with a confirmation ceremony. Glazer reports that Kaufmann Kohler, the first president of the Hebrew Union College, the Reform rabbinical seminary, "violently attacked" bar mitzvah and that "strong efforts were made to eliminate it from Reform practice." (1972:55; see for original source documents Plaut,1965:311-316;Jacobs,1983:79-82;Kohler,1973).

The German Jewish immigrants were themselves numerically overwhelmed by the Eastern European Jews who began arriving in large numbers in the 1880s. Largely due to immigration, the American Jewish population rose from about 280,000 in 1877 to 4 1/2 million in 1927 and the Canadian Jewish population rose from 2,400 in 1881 to 157,000 in 1931 (for sources of statistics see Schoenfeld, 1978). These Eastern European immigrants settled in densely populated immigrant ghettos. Some of the immigrants were secular Zionists and socialist, but most were religiously affiliated. The most pious, however, did not usually come (see

Liebman, 1973:52-57). Many small synagogues were founded by landsmenschaften, associations of immigrants from the same small town or area. The immigrants conducted the services in these synagogues as if they were in Eastern Europe. These synagogues were important as meeting places as well as places of prayer, particularly for the men who attended regularly every morning and evening. The language of prayer was Hebrew; the language of conversation, Yiddish. Many Jewish boys had their bar mitzvah ceremonies at these Yiddish speaking, European like synagogues. It was, indeed, the "world of their fathers." It was not a world in which most Jewish adolescents stayed.

The mixed feelings surrounding bar mitzvah are indicated in what two sources report about it at this period. Weinberger wrote in 1887 that bar mitzvah "is celebrated here as the greatest of holidays among our Jewish brethren." (Sarna, 1981:52) He ironically described one such celebration,

I know of one important man here who on the day when his son became bar mitzvah, donated a fine Torah scroll, complete with magnificent dress . . . He also held a great reception to which he invited presidents, ex-presidents, and future presidents, as well as many preachers, lecturers, and good friends. All delivered wisdom-filled speeches. They thanked God who, in His abundant compassion, did marvelous things, and left each generation with remnants -- men of extraordinary merit -- who sacrificed their hearts and souls on the altar of Torah and faith. They then proceeded to laud the bar mitzvah boy's mother, teachers, and the boy himself, particularly his maftir . . . 'and especially the speech which was glorious and excellent.' They praised the entire family, and held it up as an example for all Israel. Seeing such a reception for the first time, I did not fail to enjoy it. I left happy and in good cheer. (Sarna, 1981:76)

Weinberger goes on to relate that the next day, when the boy's Hebrew teacher attempted to introduce him to the wearing of tefillin, this boy, like his five older brothers, adamantly refused. (Ibid.)

Hapgood, writing two decades later but still in the period of mass migration, stresses the estrangement between the culturally foreign immigrants and their American oriented sons, who he writes,

. . . gradually quit going to the synagogue, give up 'chaider' 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. (19:27; 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. Sarna connects the description of the bar mitzvah and the day after given by Weinberger to Weinberger's more general description of the style of synagogue life emerging in New York -- an emphasis on the externals, an impressive building and a "sweet singing" chazzan, and a neglect of what is required for a traditionally religious Jewish life, Jewish education for the young, continuing study for adults, and personal piety. (Sarna:11-21)

In a poor, immigrant community bar mitzvah celebrations were presumably modest. Lower standards of religious education also meant that less could be expected of the boy's participation. 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. These appeared as early as 1908 (Zelikowitch) and were still being published as late as 1954 (Wise).

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] her 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)

In the early twentieth century, the gulf between the orthodoxy of the Eastern European immigrants, even though in many cases it was laxly observed, and the very untraditional practices that had been systematized in North America into Reform Judaism was very great. Conservative Judaism developed as a middle position. It was particularly attractive to the children and grandchildren of the Eastern European immigrants (see Sklare, 1972 and Glazer, 1972). There has been no study of the early development of bar mitzvah practices within Conservative Judaism. As a ritual, bar mitzvah seems particularly well suited to the way in which Conservative Judaism was practiced (i.e., as a folk religion in contrast to the prescriptions of the elite version of

Conservative Judaism). It provides the occasion for the affirmation of commitment to Jewish ideals and Jewish peoplehood in a dignified, affluent, symbolically traditional setting, before a large and varied audience of regular worshipers and invited guests, mainly family. By the mid twentieth century, the Jews in North America had already been living for two or three generations with the awareness that the Jewish identification of each successive generation was at risk. Bar mitzvah launched the Jewish boy into adolescence with a vivid reminder of how important it was to others that he declare himself a Jew. This concern about the continuity of Jewish identity may also be seen in the innovation by the Conservative movement of the parallel bat mitzvah ceremony for girls. (Bat mitzvah presents its own issues for analysis and requires a separate paper; the common practice of discussing bat mitzvah briefly in the context of a longer discussion of bar mitzvah raises some rather predictable objections.)

Even as the Conservative movement developed as a middle position in North American Judaism, Reform congregations began slowly reintroducing traditions back into their services. As early as 1910 Rabbi Judah Magnes called upon Reform Judaism to, among other things, return to the bar mitzvah (Davis, 1960:534). Bar (and bat) mitzvah has now become standard practice in Reform temples. The author does not know of any Reform temples which resisted reinstating a bar mitzvah ceremony later than 1972, the year in which Temple Emanu-El, the largest temple in the U.S., one of the oldest and most "left", resumed the practice. (Baer, 1982:32)

#### THE DEBATE OVER THE BAR MITZVAH CELEBRATION

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 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)

The emphasis on ostentatious celebration was not, of course, universal, and the most outrageous and daring examples of conspicuous consumption understandably attracted the most attention. The pattern was common enough, however, so that by the time that Herman Wouk included an unflattering description of such a bar mitzvah in his best-seller, Marjorie Morningstar (1955:86), it was no longer news.

The criticism of the way in which bar mitzvah is celebrated in North America which began in the late 1940s has continued. An article by a Reform rabbi reported his first hand account of bar mitzvahs featuring, among other things, French champagne instead of kiddush wine, two hundred parakeets fluttering through the catering hall, and a circus bar mitzvah complete with elephant (Herman, 1967). In 1959, Rabbi Moses Feinstein, a leading American Orthodox rabbi, published the opinion, "If I had the power I would abolish the bar mizvah ceremony in this country." (quoted in Sherwin, 1973:53) Mordecai Richler's best-seller, The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravetz, published in 1964, contains a long satirical description of a bar mitzvah. A book on Jewish life in America published in 1968 refers to "horrible examples of lavishness and vulgarity . . . provided by many bar mitzvah . . . parties." (Yaffe, 1968:270) A historian of Jewish life in America quoted in 1978 the reaction of a journalist to a showy, elaborate celebration; it "signified nothing . . . except the bare fact that a religiously ill-educated boy reached the age of thirteen." (Feldstein, 1978:434)

Nevertheless, bar mitzvah remains widely celebrated among North American Jews. Large synagogues have one, sometimes two, almost every week. The continuation of its common celebration as a major social event is indicated by the appearance of detailed books on how to prepare for it (Eisenberg, 1968; Jeiven, 1983).

#### RECENT INNOVATIONS IN BAR MITZVAH PRACTICES

There are recent signs, however, of continuing innovation in bar mitzvah practices.

The most public of these innovations connect the event to the state of Israel. In 1967, Jews again had access to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the remaining ruin of the Temple, Judaism's holiest site. A congregation was organized and daily prayer begun. Bar mitzvahs at the Wall began shortly thereafter.

Ribicoff wrote about his son's bar mitzvah at the wall in the mid-70s. The immediate family, visiting from America, were joined on a Monday morning by several Israeli relatives and a friend. An employee of the Ministry of Religion, whose job it was to help organize bar mitzvahs at the Wall, escorted them to

an usher at the Wall who took the group to one of the several places at the Wall where services are held, gathered a minyan and otherwise helped the ceremony to go smoothly. The bar mitzvah boy, wearing tallis and tefillin, recited prayers appropriate for wearing these as an adult for the first time, carried the Torah from the ark to the table on which it is read, received an aliyah, and after the service, delivered a bar mitzvah speech. Immediately after his aliyah, the bar mitzvah was pelted with candy and joyously embraced by total strangers. Ribicoff reports other minyans with bar mitzvahs occurring at the same time, including kibbutzim who brought all of their thirteen year olds for a simultaneous bar mitzvah and a group of fifty young men from Russia, many of whom were past thirteen (Ribicoff, 1977).

Bar mitzvah at the Wall has become common enough that travel agents regularly organize bar mitzvah tour groups. Synagogues also organize bar mitzvah tours and may include the option of a ceremony at the synagogue at Masada, the ruined fortress which has acquired some of the attributes of a national shrine. Individual families also travel to Israel to celebrate bar mitzvah at other places, for example, particular synagogues or on kibbutzim. Bar mitzvah tours to Israel and trips for the purpose of celebrating bar mitzvah had begun earlier than 1967, but the bar mitzvah at the Western Wall gave this option a more symbolic setting and greater visibility. A bar mitzvah held in Israel may supplement a more conventional one back home, or it may be the only one.

Adult bar mitzvah is another innovation. Adults who, for one reason or another (see Kerber, 1981 and Axelrad, 1976) did not have a ceremony at age thirteen may have a synagogue ceremony later as "a public act of dedication [or] . . . consecration." (Siegel, 1975:66) This practice apparently began around 1970. Numerous congregations now hold adult bar/bat mitzvah classes (see, e.g., Baltimore Jewish Times, 1983). In addition, regular synagogue goers who reach their eighty-third birthday (seventy + thirteen, see the quote from Ethics of the Fathers above, page 3) sometimes celebrate by having a "second bar mitzvah." Adult bar mitzvahs are also held in Israel. Jewish newspapers periodically print photographs of members of organizational tours having "bar mitzvahs."

Another alternative is a group bar mitzvah held outside of a specifically religious context. Alternative bar mitzvahs were introduced by secular Zionist movements to provide to their youth ceremonies which fit better the symbols and values of the movement. The non-religious bar mitzvah is most established on Israeli kibbutzim, where it is practiced in a decidedly non-traditional but very serious way. In North America, the small number of Jewish groups which educate their children in a non-religious framework have developed simple group ceremonies which mark graduation from the Jewish school and entry into adolescence. Some children who participate in these ceremonies also have synagogue bar mitzvahs.



The Jewish National Fund office in Jerusalem recently organized an "international bar mitzvah" linking twelve boys (and one bat mitzvah) via telephone. The ceremony was held on a weekday and was not part of a synagogue service. In Canada, the witnesses to the event were teachers, parents, board members and students from the school of the bar and bat mitzvah. The group in the twelve countries were greeted by secular and religious Israeli officials, and each said a prayer or delivered a d'rasha. After the telephone link, those present in Canada were addressed by the synagogue's rabbi and the school principal. The event concluded with musical presentations from the students. (Canadian Jewish News, April 5, 1984:3) Presumably, for most of those involved, this "international bar mitzvah" supplements but does not replace the synagogue service and celebration attended by family and friends.

The religious ritual may also be held somewhere other than in a synagogue. Small groups of religious innovators began holding experimental bar mitzvahs in the early 1970s (Morton, 1976). These ceremonies could be individually designed by each family and freely adapted traditional and non-traditional elements. To some extent this small scale personalized ceremony is an aspect of a broader attempt to recapture a feeling of religious immediacy and community not experienced in large "privatized" congregations; this innovation in bar mitzvah was part of a process of religious explorations which led to the creation of numerous havurot (Hebrew -- "fellowships") and similar groups. The personalized non-synagogue ritual is also part of a family life-style in which organizational skills and creativity are highly valued.

There are also recent trends in bar mitzvah observance which elaborate the synagogue service rather than replacing or supplementing it.

In the mid-70s, North American Jews who were in contact with Jews in the U.S.S.R. began to arrange "twin" bar mitzvahs. The invitations sent to the North American guests include information about the family in the U.S.S.R. who are also celebrating a bar mitzvah. The "twinning" is also marked at the service at which the bar mitzvah ceremony is held.

A recent article (Siegel, 1984) reports several instances in which the children becoming bar and bat mitzvah requested donations to charity in lieu of gifts or made donations themselves from what they received. These few instances are less significant than the fact that a national Jewish publication has printed an article recognizing the practice and endorsing it.

## CHANGING BAR MITZVAH PRACTICES: A PRELIMINARY INTERPRETATION

### ELITE AND FOLK RELIGION

Traditionally a minor ritual in elite Judaism, bar mitzvah is a major ritual in North American folk Judaism. As well as this difference in evaluation of the event's importance, there is also an obvious contest between the rabbinate and the laity over control of the event, with the rabbinate wanting to conserve traditional meanings and the laity wanting to use the occasion to confront issues in their lives which are the results of recent social changes.

The laity have won control over the celebration; the meanings they invest in the celebration will be discussed below in the section on bar mitzvah as social drama. The elite, however, gained control, in most cases, over the circumstances under which it is celebrated. Plesur estimates that in 1908 in the U.S. 75% of Jewish children between 6 and 16 were not enrolled in Jewish education while 75% of the boys were "bar mitzvahed" (1982:14). In the early part of the century, during the period of continuing mass immigration, rabbinic leadership and religious organizations were weak, but the importance of bar mitzvah was already established. One way of strengthening synagogues and synagogue schools was to impose a requirement of minimum attendance at Hebrew school prior to bar mitzvah. The more individual synagogues in a locality imposed mandatory attendance requirements, the fewer alternatives the laity had and the more effective the policy. In Chicago in 1938 all the synagogues affiliated with the Board of Jewish education agreed to specify a minimum of three years Hebrew school as a prerequisite for bar mitzvah (Levitats, 1949:155). During the 1940s, similar requirements were imposed in many places and are still in force. In Toronto, for example, in 1984, Conservative synagogues require five years Hebrew school and two years weekly Sabbath attendance prior to bar or bat mitzvah (Canadian Jewish News, 1984a:39).

Support for the synagogue as an institution is also linked to the laity's desire to celebrate bar and bat mitzvah. The modal pattern of synagogue attendance in North America is to attend on the High Holy Days and on those Sabbaths on which one is invited to a bar or bat mitzvah. An even more direct link is the desire on the part of previously religiously uninterested persons to affiliate with a congregation when raising children. Gordon quotes the president of an enthusiastic congregation in his study done in the 1950s, "I still can't believe it. Do you realize that 90% of these people haven't been in a synagogue since they were Bar Mitzvah?" (1959:101). These are the generation Hapgood wrote about shortly after the turn of the century (see above), American raised children who rejected the religious practices of their immigrant parents. Gordon also quotes the congregation's brochure, which politely acknowledges their motivation,

Many of our people have had little previous contact with synagogue life, having hitherto regarded the synagogue as the province of their elders. Many have not seen the inside of a 'shule' since their Bar Mitzvah. . . . The responsibilities of parenthood have led many to rethink their position with regard to the Jewish heritage which they now seek to maintain in order to be able to transmit it to their children. . . (ibid.:99).

In addition, the elite strategy is to coopt the lay mystique of bar mitzvah in order to better educate the laity in the opinions and actions the elite prefer. Rabbis have introduced classes for parents of boys preparing for bar mitzvah, occasionally with success. Rabbis may also personally teach the class of boys preparing for bar mitzvah, or entrust the responsibility to one of the school's best teachers. In schools which have adopted progressive educational techniques, projects, not part of the rote learning of the school, but developed to meet the individual needs of students may be seen as modern equivalents of the d'rasha. Congregations may organize weekly services conducted by post-bar mitzvah teen-agers or bar-mitzvah brotherhoods which parallel the adult brotherhoods. These provide a supportive peer group of post-bar mitzvah teenagers engaging in worship, service and social activities. These are more common in large Conservative congregations than in Reform ones, where the congregational strategy is to try to keep teenagers involved in preparations for a confirmation service held several years after bar mitzvah. In most orthodox congregations, boys continue to attend the main service as part of the congregation.

There is also the elite sanctioning of non-traditional bar mitzvah practices which support traditional values. The twinning of bar mitzvahs with those in the Soviet Union, the bar mitzvah tours of Israel under synagogue sponsorship, the recently reported international bar mitzvah by satellite electronics all point quite clearly to the traditional linkage of Jewish religion and peoplehood and the traditional teaching that all Jews are responsible for one another's welfare.

#### BAR MITZVAH AS A SOCIAL DRAMA

Williamson's approach to the analysis of ritual practices leads to the question of what culturally problematic relationships are being dramatized and how the ritual affirms what is threatened by conflict, contradiction and loss of credibility. Myerhoff's approach leads to the question of what are the socially valued personal attributes displayed as an idealized self in this ritual performance. These two approaches may appear somewhat contradictory. If a ritual performance is experienced as acting out a socially honoured role, how can the ritual at the same time express a crisis of cultural credibility? The contradiction is resolved if we see the ritual as a

preparation for later struggle. The ritual, by focusing on a problematic area of experience, where cultural guidance is inconsistent or unable to guarantee success, brings a problematic issue of personal life to the surface. The person who goes through the ritual is encouraged before, during, and afterwards to think of himself in heroic terms -- as someone who can meet and overcome the difficult challenges that lie ahead. (My thanks to Louise Rockman, who pointed out this connection to me.) The relationship between heroism and rites of passage has been made by Campbell, who identifies the structure of the heroic "monomyth" as a magnification of Van Gennep's (1960) stages of separation, initiation and return (1968:30). The bar mitzvah may be "read" then as a life cycle event in which a problematic cultural issue or issues is (are) dramatized and identities are defined or affirmed which allow the participants to confront the issue(s).

This interpretation of bar mitzvah leads us to reformulate what the critics of vulgar, ostentatious bar mitzvahs complain about and to examine other aspects of the event. The critics see lavish bar mitzvah celebrations expressing a certain amount of status anxiety. One stereotype of the of the North American Jew is that of the nouveau riche outsider who disclaims the lower status from which he came by ostentatious displays of wealth. Insecurities are compounded by being part of a nouveau riche group in which there are strong social pressures to "keep up with the Cohens." As one critic puts it,

Nobody profits, except maybe the caterers, the local department stores, and gift shops. The social pressures that operate in this arena are a useful index of almost every other aspect of Jewish community life in America. The need to 'appear' -- successful, rich, responsible, dutiful, charitable, religious, or what have you -- drives most middle-class Jews. (Rosenberg, 1983:20)

This characterization is more a provocative challenge than an expression of empathy, but those whose behaviour is challenged have not defended their conspicuous consumption. Perhaps lavish displays of affluence dramatize the problems of developing a secure, satisfying identity in a culture which trains its members to evaluate themselves according to their continuous acquisition and usage of things. Perhaps the idealized self defined in these celebrations is the heroic materialist who works hard and takes a justified pleasure in his rewards. (Siegel (1984:106) reports the comments made to him by teen-agers that the preparation for bar/bat mitzvah is hard work and the presents are earned.) These lavish celebrations would be definitional ceremonies not only for the boy but also for his parents, and to some extent for the guests as well.

This reformulation of the criticism of bar mitzvah celebrations leaves an important question unanswered. Even if it provides a partial hypothesis about what people are experiencing in the celebration of the ritual, it does not account for why the

ritual is included among the events for which it is considered proper to have a major celebration and not among those events which are less conspicuously observed. Moreover, the "nouveau riche" part of this interpretation appears to be less appropriate now than a generation ago as an ever larger percentage of the North American Jewish population has been affluent for more than one generation. Nevertheless, the celebrations associated with bar mitzvah remain a well established part of North American folk Judaism. There are clearly other problematic aspects of Jewish life in North America which are dramatized and other dimensions to the idealized selves displayed.

## ESTABLISHED DRAMATIC THEMES

### Jewish Identity

Cultural conflicts involving continued Jewish identity in an open society are expressed at this ceremony just when the boy begins to experience the greater independence of adolescence. This concern over the boy's future identification as a Jew emerges clearly from the social history of the ceremony in North America. In the ceremony, the boy defines himself as a member of the community, with the personal resources to acquire the skills needed to participate in it and to resist the path of assimilation. The ceremony does not guarantee success in the future struggle over how meaningful to him the boy's Jewish identity will be, but it does ensure a minimum acquaintance with Jewish religious knowledge and practice and a rather greater amount of social reinforcement.

Less obviously, the ceremony and celebration also dramatize parental conflicts over the nature of their Jewish identity and allow them to present an idealized self prepared to confront the conflict. Even though they are not "religious," they care enough to affiliate, to send their son to Hebrew school and to lavishly celebrate his ritual performance. They may be lax in their religious observance; they may not want their child to be "too religious" (several sources indicate that parents express their resistance to more Hebrew education for their sons by saying, "We don't expect him to be a rabbi."); but "in their hearts" they are "good Jews."

Sklare, writing in 1971, interpreted the importance of bar mitzvah in "acculturated" families as a public affirmation by the parents of their transmission of Jewish identity to their children. He further hypothesized that the ceremony and celebration indicate the importance the parents attach to future endogamous marriage. He writes,

. . . in its new elaborateness the Bar Mitzvah party has taken on elements of a Jewish wedding celebration; it has come to constitute a rehearsal for such a celebration. Understandably then, rabbinical attempts to discourage elaborate Bar Mitzvah celebrations have been met with firm

objections by parents. (1971:195)

Despite the elaborate bar mitzvahs of the 1950s, '60s and '70s, the Jewish intermarriage rate in North America has continued to climb. If parents felt the Jewish identification of their children was at risk, they were right.

### The Importance of Extended Family

The way in which bar mitzvah is marked also indicates very strongly that extended family ties which are considered valuable are not kept up in the normal daily routine and require special periodic reinforcement. The extended family is highly valued by North American Jews for religious and socio-historical reasons.

Family rhetoric is fundamental in Judaism; it is the religion of patriarchs and matriarchs whose descendents became the twelve tribes of one nation. The Jewish people are presented essentially as an extended family. A strongly bonded extended family is a cultural ideal. The importance of extended family ties in Jewish Eastern Europe is suggested by the richness of kinship terminology in the Yiddish language (see Rosten, 1968).

Unlike some other immigrant groups, Jews came to North America with the intention of permanent settlement. Young women as well as young men made up a large proportion of the immigrants. From the turn of the century until the 1920s, they married and followed the fertility patterns of Eastern European Jews. This means that they had large families. Unlike Eastern Europe, the extended families descended from groups of siblings tended to lose touch with each other. One response to the erosion of extended family ties was the formation of family clubs -- family circles, cousins clubs and the like. Mitchell (1978) reports that Jews were more likely than other groups to form these clubs.

Because the Jewish cultural tradition values, indeed, sanctifies the extended family as a source of security, strength and common values, Jewish ceremonial occasions elicited a desire to repair eroded extended family ties. Weddings, funerals, circumcisions and bar mitzvahs became times when it was mandatory to invite extended kin and mandatory to attend.

The large number of invited guests at bar mitzvah celebrations from the 1930s on are mainly relatives. Rosenberg's 1935 bar mitzvah was attended by many adult cousins and distant relatives "whom I barely knew, even by name." (1983:21) The transition from a landsmanschaft bar mitzvah to a ceremony in a more modern synagogue followed by a celebration was a transition in the audience before whom the ceremony was enacted, from an audience of adult men to an audience of extended family. The transition was not abrupt and was supported by the general North American pattern of familial religiosity.

Use of the bar mitzvah for an extended family gathering largely explains the tendency to stretch the festivities out over the weekend. Relatives from out of town will often want to make the most of the opportunity to become reacquainted. The host, out of the desire to spend more time with relatives or out of obligation to look after guests who have travelled from other cities, will often plan more social events. It is now common for families of the bar mitzvah to book a group of rooms at a hotel and to include a Friday night dinner and/or Sunday brunch for out of town guests.

Critics of the North American synagogue now speak of it as "privatized," by which they mean that instead of being a setting for a religious community, the synagogue has become a place which individual members who hardly know one another use for life cycle ceremonies to which they invite guests, primarily extended kin. A series of articles and letters in the Journal of Reform Judaism (Feuer, 1980; Freehof, 1974; Goldman, 1974; Meyer, 1980; Schwartz, 1982; Siskind, 1981; Snyder, 1980) debate the effects of bar mitzvahs on religious services in the Reform movement. The writers agreed that it was usual for bar mitzvah guests to far outnumber other worshipers at the Temple and that many families affiliated with the Temple only until the last bar or bat mitzvah ceremony. What was at issue was whether it matters more that the emphasis on bar/bat mitzvah weakens efforts at fostering a religious community or that bar/bat mitzvah brings many people into Temple, keeps the organization solvent and contributes to maintaining the embryo of a religious community.

### The Survival of the Jews

For the past generation, North American bar mitzvahs have taken place after the destruction of one third of world Jewry. A ritual which affirms the continuity of the Jews from one generation to the next stands in stark contrast to their attempted annihilation. I have little evidence on the use of the bar mitzvah ceremony and celebration as a symbolic affirmation of Jewish survival after attempted genocide, only a chance remark heard years ago and a hypothesis. The chance remark was a comment made on an extravagant reception. The speaker asked rhetorically, after all the suffering this family has had, who can blame them for going all out on occasions like weddings and bar mitzvahs? The literature on bar mitzvah doesn't discuss this link, yet it is consistent with one type of reaction reported of Holocaust survivors and their children, the symbolic act which affirms life and dignity. The hypothesis that feelings about bar mitzvah and feelings about the Holocaust are linked is presented here for further investigation. It may be seriously argued that this historically unprecedented national disaster casts its shadow over all aspects of contemporary Jewish life. Afterwards, can any part of Jewish life be unaffected?

Although only one published article makes an explicit link

(Addison, 1982) this is the type of hypothesis which is impossible to disprove. Emotional connections between bar mitzvah and the Holocaust may be unconscious or only partly conscious. Researching the linkages may make them conscious or it may, because social science is part of the cultural life which it is studying, suggest to people that they should make linkages.

#### EMERGENT DRAMATIC THEMES

The recent innovations in bar mitzvah practices dramatize different cultural conflicts and define the bar mitzvah boy's identity in different ways. The innovations indicate two types of changes. First, that some families are no longer able to use the established framework of ritual affirmation to confront a cultural conflict, contradiction or loss of credibility; they are unable to appear as if they are successfully performing what is expected in the ritual. Second, new issues in Jewish life have elicited new practices which are replacing or supplementing the inherited practices which dramatize inherited issues. Specific innovations may reflect both types of changes.

#### Inappropriateness of Old Practices: the Effects of Low Birth Rates, Divorce, Intermarriage and Secularization

The bar mitzvah celebration acquired great importance in North America as a symbolic affirmation of eroding extended family ties. Lower birth rates mean a smaller kin network of aunts and uncles of the bar mitzvah boy. Consider a group of five siblings born between 1910 and 1920, each of whom married between 1935 and 1945 and had two children, five boys and five girls. The five boys would reach bar mitzvah between 1950 and 1960. Each would have four sets of uncles, aunts and cousins from one parent's side and perhaps an equal number of sets from the other parents side, leading to a core group of extended kin of at least thirty-two. In contrast, consider a group of two siblings born between 1935 and 1945, when Jewish fertility dropped and subsequently remained low. Each sibling married between 1960 and 1970 and had two children, one boy and one girl. The boys' bar mitzvahs take place between 1975 and 1985. Each bar mitzvah boy would have one uncle or aunt from each side of his parents' families. Adding two cousins on each side produces a core group of extended kin of eight. In addition to the smaller number in the core group of extended kin, there is a corresponding decrease in the number of bar mitzvahs in the family to which one is invited. In the earlier period, uncles, aunts and cousins would be invited to ten bar mitzvahs (five on each side of the parents' families). In the later period, uncles, aunts and cousins would be invited to only two (one on each side of the parents' families).

While these contrasting figures are hypothetical, they do reflect a real drop in the Jewish birth rate and the consequently smaller number of closely related extended kin. Families



planning bar mitzvahs may continue to invite large numbers to the celebration, including parents' cousins and their children and parents' aunts and uncles, or they may have a relatively small-scale celebration. Both trends are occurring. As the generation with large sibling groups passes from the scene and their children and grand-children see less of each other, the smaller scale family celebration is likely to become more common. Fewer boys will have their bar mitzvah in a room packed with relatives.

Divorce causes more serious disruption to a family celebration, undermining not only the extended family symbolism but even the nuclear family symbolism. Jewish divorce is much more common than it used to be. A number of articles which appeared over the past decade indicate that bar mitzvah is a stressful event for divorced families and that children in divorced families express strong painful feelings about the divorce in the way they talk about and go through their bar/bat mitzvahs. Rabbis (Freehof, 1974; Friedman, 1981) have acknowledged the difficulties with both the ceremonial and social parts of the occasion and suggested things which might be done to handle the problems. Social workers have identified the occasion as one which is stressful and problematic for the children (Cottle, 1981; Friedman and Rogers, 1983) and have discussed appropriate case work techniques (Blitstein, 1982; Perlmutter, 1982).

The ritual requires the parents and the boy to appear in idealized roles. Divorce undermines the "loving parents passing on the life-style which they find deeply satisfying" role and the "son who finds guidance and inspiration in the lives of his parents" role. Preparation for the bar mitzvah may revive or intensify antagonism between separated or divorced parents; quarreling but not yet separated parents may find bar mitzvah preparations a new and volatile topic about which to argue. Some separated or divorced parents are able to appear together at the ceremony before each others' relatives but a joint celebration with both sides of the family presents obvious difficulties. A trip to Israel for a bar mitzvah at the Wall gives those fathers who can afford it a way of having a special bar mitzvah with their sons while at the same time avoiding an extended family celebration. As an alternative, the participation of a number of children in a joint ceremony involves a group of families and may dilute the tension accompanying the common presence of former spouses.

Intermarriage, which has also been steadily increasing, presents other difficulties of ritual performance. An extended family religious ritual in which one parent and all the relatives on that side are not Jewish gives ambiguous messages about the Jewish commitments of the parents and child. Where a Jew has chosen to marry out of the faith, religious commitment is likely to be weak and the home life likely to have very little Jewish content. Some who cannot accept the religious roles of the traditional ceremony affiliate with an organization which sponsors a group secular ceremony. They are able to invite the

Jewish relatives to a ceremony in which they can more authentically allow their child's participation. The child is able to feel that he has had a bar mitzvah and to have an experience which is more in keeping with his family's life-style. In other intermarried families, approaching bar mitzvah may be a time when religious attitudes and practices are re-examined, with varying outcomes.

Intermarriage is to some extent associated with secularization. In general in North America, attendance at religious services, religious schooling of children, religious affiliation and clarity of belief have been declining. When gentiles took their Christianity more seriously, Jews were under social pressure to remain involved with their Judaism. This social pressure has diminished and more Jews are content to remain religiously unaffiliated. Overtly secular Jewish families are probably less common than marginal Jewish families. Some families who do not observe any of the Jewish home rituals and who rarely, if ever, attend synagogue services resist the mandatory three to five years of synagogue affiliation and Hebrew school which precede the bar mitzvah. Some engage a tutor and have a ceremony at home or at a small synagogue that does not have a school. Others will combine a vacation in Israel with a simple ceremony at the Wall. Others will join organizations which hold non-religious bar mitzvahs.

#### New Issues and New Practices: Israel, Community, Conversion and Religiosity

If the continuation of Jewish identity is at risk in North America, the Israel centered innovations in bar mitzvah practice emphasize the traditional Jewish link between religion and peoplehood. Unlike immigrants or children of immigrants, bar mitzvah boys whose parents and perhaps even grandparents grew up on this continent may be ambivalent about their connections to Jews in other parts of the world, particularly in Israel.

Israel is in the news almost every day. Its policies, even its existence, are controversial. North American Jews, who are not Israelis, are associated, by others and by themselves, with Israel. They are required, among themselves and in their relationships with others, to take public positions about controversial topics involving Israel. Most adult Jews in North America feel they are both good Jews and good American or good Jews and good Canadians. The belief that democratic, humanitarian values and support for Israel are mutually supportive is part of the "civil religion" of North American Jews.

The Israel centered innovations dramatize Israel's high visibility and salience for North American Jews. These ceremonies indicate to those who participate and those who observe them that the identification with Jews in Israel and other parts of the world is religiously sanctified. The bar

mitzvah at the Wall, the bar mitzvah tour of Israel or donations to charities in Israel express the fusion of religion and peoplehood. They also allow those families which feel a stronger commitment to Jewish peoplehood and to Israel than to a religious life-style to participate in a religious ceremony.

In contrast to divorced and intermarried families which find it difficult to participate in a religious ceremony involving extended family, for another growing group, converts to Judaism, bar mitzvah is attractive as an occasion which consolidates and confirms the new identity. As intermarriage has increased, so has conversion to Judaism, although at a lower rate. Each year about 10,000 persons convert to Judaism in North America, mostly just prior to marriage.

The bar mitzvah ceremony of a boy born into a family where one parent is a convert is an indication enacted before the Jewish relatives and the congregation that the conversion was undertaken in good faith. Kukoff's book on conversion describes, in addition, several ways in which the bar mitzvah may be experienced as special by a family which includes a convert. The ceremony and celebration may be arranged in such a way that the non-Jewish grandparents are made to feel comfortable; their presence at a Jewish ritual signifies their acceptance of the Jewish identity of their child and grandchild (Kukoff, 1981:81-82). The bar mitzvah provides an opportunity for the non-Jewish grandparents to get to know their grandchild in a setting where his Jewish identity is highlighted (ibid.:92-93). Kukoff also quotes an acquaintance who was inspired during the ritual to redefine his own commitments to Judaism, as follows:

. . . over the years I fell away from Judaism. But then I watched how Shelly loved Judaism, and how our children came to study Judaism and to love it as a result of her influence. This moved me deeply. And then, at my son's bar mitzvah, watching him up on the bimah, reading from the Torah and loving his Judaism so much, I took a silent vow that I would once again become a Jew. Shelly is a Jew by choice. And she has given my Judaism back to me. From that day forward, I, too, became a Jew by choice. (61)

If bar mitzvah of a child is especially meaningful to converts as indirectly signifying their membership in the community, the adult bar mitzvah allows direct symbolization of participation in the religious community. An adult bar mitzvah means one of two things. Either someone is learning synagogue skills he never acquired and is using the ceremony as a goal towards which to direct his learning, or someone is using in a ceremony skill which he already has. In either case, it is not so much identity as a Jew which is at issue, but his participation in community life.

Bar mitzvah is fundamentally a legal status. One need not have a ceremony and there is nothing done in the bar mitzvah ceremony which is unique to that situation. The bar mitzvah

simply performs the rituals that may be done by an adult male. As long as participation in the religious community was taken for granted, there was no need to mark the event in a major way. As religious participation became problematic, the bar mitzvah came to be taken as a ceremony marking entrance into the religious community. This is reflected to some extent in the North American neologism which uses the noun "bar mitzvah" as a verb meaning to go through the ceremony (as in "He was bar mitzvahed.").

Some of those who, for one reason or another, did not have a bar mitzvah ceremony at age thirteen came to feel that they had never been properly admitted into the religious community. Jews from a secular or marginal background may use a belated bar mitzvah to affirm their membership. Converts, for example, go through what is virtually a private experience. There is no communal ceremony in the conversion process and Jews are traditionally enjoined to treat the convert simply as another Jew, not to remind him/her of his/her previous identity. Converts who wish to have a ceremony affirming their participation in the community and at the same time enhance their knowledge of texts and rituals may prepare for an adult bar mitzvah on the basis of equality with other Jews.

The adult bar mitzvahs, the more personalized ceremonies, the practice of giving charity instead of or in addition to receiving gifts, and the inclusion of symbolic expressions of concern over Israel and the Jews of the U.S.S.R. all suggest something different from the nominal, often rote, performances which are a prelude to a gathering of extended family.

Jews in North America may be thought of as an ethnic group which expressed itself corporately mainly in religious organizations. An overview of religious trends in Jewish life written in 1946 and published in 1949 (Duker, 1949), noted a continuing decline in religious observances in the direction not so much of participation in a liberal, reformed Judaism, but towards religious acculturation (e.g., Christmas trees in Jewish homes) and indifference. Yet a few years later, Lazerwitz's research found that all the "strongly," "moderately" and "somewhat" identified and even some of the "marginally" identified Jews wanted bar mitzvahs for their sons (Lazerwitz, 1953). North American Jews moved to the suburbs, built imposing synagogues and temples and celebrated bar mitzvahs in a way which emphasized the social continuity of Jewish identity.

The development of legitimacy for secular ethnicity has made the expression of Jewish ethnicity in religious organizations one option, but not the only one. Supplementing the well developed organizational structure of the major branches of Judaism, the structure for non-religious, ethnic participation in the Jewish community has gradually become stronger in North America (see Elazar, 1976). These organizations provide the opportunities for important participation in Jewish life in non-religious settings.

Even though the structure for non-religious, ethnic participation in Jewish life presently exists, it may be argued that with each generation the feeling of ethnic distinctiveness declines. In a well-chosen phrase, Lucy Dawidowicz (1978) has written that Jewish identity is no longer "a matter of fate" but "a matter of choice." With the general decline in religiosity in North America, with the piety, language and folkways of immigrant forebearers passing from memory to history, the cultural differences between Jews and non-Jews are in many cases not very great.

Innovations which introduce more personal and contemporary elements into the bar mitzvah ceremony suggest a shift from "fate" to "choice" in the identity the ceremony defines. "The dutiful son accepting the traditions of his parents" role gradually shifts to "the individual who uses the resources of his heritage to fashion a personally meaningful way of life" role.

When a boy celebrates his bar mitzvah in a congregation where adults also do so, donates to charity as part of his observance, celebrates in a congregation where members attend regularly rather than in a "privatized" synagogue, the ceremony dramatizes not only identification with a group but also participation in a subculture with a way of life distinct from the non-Jewish environment. Instead of affirming Jewish identity and extended family, the ceremony takes on more qualities of what might be called, for want of a better word, a "religious" experience. The social aspect of the bar mitzvah, while still important, becomes less dominant, and the cultural aspect becomes more significant.

Those Jews who remain within the religious framework tend more to look to it for the cultural content religion traditionally provided -- a structure of meaning which gives guidance on how to live a dignified and worthwhile life. It may be hypothesized that over the next generation these "more serious" bar mitzvahs may become more common. Parents will have made a choice to affirm their Jewish identity in a religious context and the bar mitzvah boy's awareness that this is a matter of choice and not of fate will be higher. Within the orthodox community, which is small but has a high birth rate, bar mitzvah is likely to be experienced traditionally, as a stage in a process of continuous socialization into a religious life-style shared by parents and community. In non-orthodox congregations, where the awareness of being in an open society is higher, the experience may still become more one of affirming distinctive values and life-style. What is hypothesized here is not the replacement of one type of bar mitzvah with another, but a gradual shift in the cultural issues that are dramatized in the ritual and the identities defined in it.

## CONCLUSION

The social history and sociological analysis of bar mitzvah are only begun in this paper. Some parts of it are attempts to find patterns and interpret experience where data are incomplete or inconclusive. More detailed historical and sociological research which includes Sephardic and Israeli practices as well as North American ones will produce a richer portrait of how bar mitzvah has been and is experienced. A fuller exploration of the analytical literature on ritual may take the analysis in additional directions. This paper sets an agenda for academic research and, may also act as an exercise in reflexive sociology, raising issues for debate within the Jewish community.

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