

Bar and Bat Mitzva Trips to Israel — Variations on a Theme of Affirmation

by Lisa D. Grant

Daniel and Abby Pearlman¹ joined a congregational trip to Israel during the summer of 1998. Although they had not planned to have a bat mitzva ceremony for their daughter in Israel, the decision to take the trip was linked to Aliza's recent bat mitzva. As Daniel said, "We felt the trip to Israel would be a great follow-up for the exciting year we just had." Once in Israel, the rabbi prevailed upon the family to recognize Aliza's becoming a bat mitzva as part of a group service. The ceremony took place during *Kabbalat Shabbat* on the last Friday night of their trip, just a day before they returned home. Daniel described the experience as follows:

We went to a synagogue in Jerusalem that had been bombed during the [Israeli] War of Independence. And it was left there as a memorial to the war. So it was... a building with no roof, and the bricks were collapsed at various heights up the wall. There was just a *bima* in the middle. And it was dusk. We had a short bat mitzva service there. Aliza led the service. The other girl read part of her *haftarah*. Rabbi Z. said some very poignant words about being in Israel at that time, and on that last day. That was incredible! I mean that bat mitzva service for Aliza was probably far more memorable than the one she had in our synagogue here. It was brief, maybe a half-hour, but... a moment we'll never forget. I don't think she's ever looked more beautiful.²

The Pearlman's are among a group of American Jewish families who choose to take a family trip to Israel during the year their child becomes bar or bat mitzva. This article will examine the motivation for and the impact of these experiences on a small number of such families. First, we will situate this phenomenon in the broad context of American Jewish life as a new variation on an old ritual. Then we will describe how different families and different kinds of trips enact the ritual itself and how the bar/bat mitzva fits within the overall structure of their Israel trips. While this study includes

only a very small sampling, the experiences of these families may be suggestive of the potential impact of bar and bat mitzva trips to Israel on Jewish identity and religious development. The data certainly raises questions regarding the educational impact and meaning of this experience for the parents and the *b'nai mitzva* themselves, which is the subject of the final section.

A TRIP AS A MEANS OF AFFIRMATION

My interest in understanding what an American bar or bat mitzva experience in Israel means to participants grew out of a broader study on adult trips to Israel. During the course of this research, I had the opportunity to observe the Blumberg, Rothstein and Werner families, who had held

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bar and bat mitzva ceremonies as part of a congregational trip with their rabbi. In addition to these three families, I interviewed the Pearlman's, who had been on another congregational trip. To gain perspective on a different kind of bar/bat mitzva experience, I also interviewed the Belker family, who went on a commercial bar/bat mitzva tour comprised of 22 families, all of whom had a bar or bat mitzva-age child.

American bar and bat mitzva ceremonies are a public, visible aspect of the Israeli tourist industry. They are big business. Open any Jewish periodical today, and you will see at least three or four advertisements from commercial tour companies promoting bar and bat mitzva tours to Israel. Congregational trips almost always include one or more families with a bar or bat mitzva-age child. Families can choose among options ranging in size and scope from an intimate

private affair to a three-bus extravaganza with 30 or more teens joining together for a 10-day to two-week-long celebration of their coming of age.

The ceremonies are held in private hotel rooms, in synagogues, at the Western Wall, and, most frequently, at Masada, which many American Jews perceive as the ideal site for affirming their commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. Many American Jewish visitors understand the dramatic story of desperate martyrdom on Masada as the archetypal story of Jewish survival against all odds. As Gloria Rothstein said, "Even though those Jews died, the bottom line is the Romans are no longer, and all these people who tried to kill the Jews throughout the centuries are no longer, and here we are still. And that, for me, brings the religious and people aspects of Judaism together."

MEANING OF THE BAR/BAT MITZVA RITUAL

Traditionally, bar and bat mitzva is a ritual that welcomes a young adolescent into the Jewish community. By chanting from sacred Jewish texts and participating in communal worship, the child is publicly affirming his or her commitment to the central Jewish values of study and prayer. He or she is accepting the responsibility of becoming an adult in the eyes of the Jewish community. Yet after this deeply moving experience of coming into the community, many Jewish American adolescents end their formal Jewish education. The experience is one of culmination rather than initiation. They and their families affirm symbolically their commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people, and then resume old patterns of episodic rather than ongoing participation in Jewish ritual life.

Despite this narrowing of meaning, the power of the ritual remains. The findings of a recent survey of *b'nai mitzva* students in Conservative synagogues point to the centrality of the ritual experience. Here, even with all the excitement and emphasis on the celebration, 90 percent of respondents cite the ceremony itself as the most important part of the experience.³ Rituals provide a

structured outlet for expressing emotions. They offer stability and a sense of being rooted during stressful and ambivalent times of transition.⁴ They mark time in a way that creates lasting memories. Ritual and ceremonial acts connect individuals to one another and to their common heritage. They commemorate continuity with the past and play a critical role in shaping collective memory, which in turn builds group cohesion and reinforces a sense of communal affiliation.⁵

Traveling to Israel at this phase of the family lifecycle fits with the increased motivation for engaging in Jewish life and learning that frequently occurs during the year or so preceding a child's bar or bat mitzva.⁶ In the same way that bar/bat mitzva has become a central rite of affirmation for many American Jewish families, so too an Israel trip serves the same purpose: Israel trips reinforce Jewish identity.⁷ They help American Jews feel better about being Jewish and proud of their connection to the Jewish people. Families who choose to have a bar or bat mitzva ceremony for their child in Israel often do so to intensify that sense of connection and meaning.

BAR AND BAT MITZVA CEREMONIES IN ISRAEL

Among the four families on congregational trips whom I studied, the Israel bar or bat mitzva was *in addition* to the ceremony that had already taken place or was planned for the upcoming year. Consistent with their relatively high level of affiliation and involvement in synagogue life, these families saw going to Israel as a way to further their joy at reaching this milestone and enrich the meaning of the experience. It also seems to set a precedent. All of the parents of *b'nai mitzva* celebrants I interviewed indicated that they plan to return to Israel when their other children reach bar or bat mitzva age.

In contrast to these families who had an Israel bar or bat mitzva ritual in addition to their American one, the Israel bat mitzva was the only ceremony that the Belker family held. While their daughter Julie prepared for bat mitzva at their synagogue, the family decided to cancel it once they determined they would be going to Israel. Julie's mother, Cindy, noted: "We wanted to do something that would have a little more impact on Julie's life, as opposed to a conventional bat mitzva with a party. Parties are in the moment. Some are successful, others aren't, but they're over in a snap. We wanted something that would linger."



A bat mitzva atop Masada can create a memorable family experience.

The Belkers' commercial tour appears to have attracted a more diverse mix of participants than those who chose to go on a congregational trip. For about half of the 22 children on the tour, the Israel bar or bat mitzva was to be the only ceremony. For the other half, it was an extension of their American celebration. Cindy recalled that some members of the group were members of Reform or Conservative congregations; others were unaffiliated. Some children came with one or both parents; others came with just a grandparent or with extended families and representatives from three generations.

There were significant differences in the ceremonies the two kinds of trips offered. The congregational trips held more intimate services that drew the entire community together. The bar/bat mitzva ceremonies on these trips were part of, rather than the centerpiece of, the group's itinerary. As already described, Aliza Pearlman's ceremony took place with one other girl on the last Friday night of the trip in the *Hurva* synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem. David Werner had an *aliya* and read from the Torah on a Shabbat morning at a Modern Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem where his father had a personal connection. Melissa Rothstein and Hillary Blumberg shared their ceremony on a Monday morning atop Masada.

The Masada service took place in a small chamber overlooking the western slope. The enclosure was divided by a low wall

that extended about half the width of the room. Both mothers stood behind this wall taking still photographs and videos of the entire service. The fathers stood close to their daughters the entire time, except when each was called for her *aliya* to the Torah. There was a palpable energy between the fathers and daughters at that moment of passing on the tradition. About a month after the trip, Larry Blumberg described this experience as a moment in time that stood out for him as something almost indescribable. Stuart Rothstein's reaction was even more profound. Shortly after the service, he came up to me and said: "I can't believe how powerful it was to put *tefillin* on my daughter. I hardly remember how to do it myself unless I close my eyes."⁸ Two months after returning home, Stuart reiterated that he thinks about this moment almost daily, and it remains "maybe one of the high points of my life."⁹

While their child's bar or bat mitzva was ostensibly the reason these families had decided to travel to Israel at this time, the ceremony was only one of many high points where they linked their own story to the grand sweep of Jewish tradition. In follow-up interviews these parents describe a wide range of experiences and encounters in Israel, unrelated to their child's bar or bat mitzva, as having deep personal significance. Six months after the trip, Larry Blumberg notes that his daughter's Masada bat mitzva no longer stands out as one of

his most powerful memories of the trip. Hillary's bat mitzva was indeed a ceremony of initiation rather than of culmination. Because it was not a one-time, finite act, she now participates regularly in services at home. Larry explained:

Viewing it backwards, it seems like Hillary's bat mitzva here [in the U.S.] sort of converged with that one. The one in Israel doesn't jump out now. She has read a number of times from the Torah since then. She's reading again on the High Holidays. They sort of merged now.¹⁰

While bar and bat mitzva ceremonies were viewed as part of an overall experience on the congregational trips, they were the *raison d'être* of the Belkers' commercial tour. Much of the programming for this tour was designed to spotlight the bar/bat mitzva event. Many of their experiences—such as planting a tree and visits to the Western Wall and Yad Vashem—had a ritualized structure which featured the b'nai mitzva children in key roles. The bar/bat mitzva ceremony itself had a performative character which included rehearsals with the tour's rabbi/director, costumes, and a series of cast parties/celebrations. It began with a special dinner that preceded "opening night." For the ceremony, the children were instructed to dress in white, according to the Belkers, "to symbolize purity and stress group solidarity." On Masada the group of 22 families was split in two. One group began their service while the other toured the ruins. When the first group concluded, the process was reversed. After the ceremonies, the tour's focus shifted toward celebration. The group enjoyed a series of almost nightly parties, including a grand banquet and "DJ" party complete with candle-lighting ceremony in which each bar or bat mitzva child gave a short speech prior to lighting a candle.

The trip appears to have met the Belkers' needs for creating a memorable family experience to mark their daughter's coming of age. A year later, they recall the experience warmly, highlighting the group experience rather than the specifics of the ceremony or any sites visited. When I asked how the trip had influenced their sense of being Jewish, Julie commented on the bond she established with a large group of American Jewish contemporaries. Cindy described feeling a stronger sense of Jewish identity and connection. She noted: "It makes me very proud. I'm in awe of what this tiny nation of

so few people has accomplished. They've made this country flourish.... It's kind of like finding roots. It's like I could live here. I could be a part of this."

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Bar/bat mitzva has maintained its appeal in the complex of American Jewish life largely because it is a singular ritual whose focus has shifted from a process of becoming part of the larger adult Jewish community to a celebration of achievement of a personal milestone. Though still framed within Jewish tradition, its meaning has been recast to fit secular American norms that value individual expression and freedom of choice. It offers families the right mix of nostalgia for their Jewish heritage and community without challenging their basically secular lifestyle.

Families who choose to travel to Israel as part, or in place of, an American bar or bat mitzva celebration appear to be seeking something more than what a ceremony and party at home offer. They hope the experiences of the trip will give the ritual a more tangible framework of meaning. For the families in this small study, it seemed to work. As Gloria Rothstein put it: "Melissa's bat mitzva made me feel such a powerful sense of Judaism in Israel—the feeling of belonging."

Most of the recent innovations in American *b'nai mitzva* education deliberately avoid association with the formal structures of conventional Jewish education.¹¹ These programs concentrate on what Isa Aron labels "enculturation," that is, "the process by which an individual is initiated into all aspects of a culture, including its language, values, beliefs and behaviors."¹² As Schoenfeld notes: "They feature activities which give the youngsters the experience of Judaism as part of life rather than something to be studied."¹³

CONCLUSIONS

A bar or bat mitzva experience in Israel is a profound experience in enculturation. It strengthens the impact of the initiation rite and reinforces Jewish identity for the celebrants and their parents. It solidifies group commitment.

However, these outcomes do not necessarily translate into substantive changes in religious beliefs or behaviors. Without an explicit educational agenda that focuses on how the skills learned and demonstrated during the ritual act can be used to enrich Jewish life, the experience remains primarily a

performative one. No matter how powerful the experience may have been in Israel, without linking it to programs of learning and doing at home, it remains an episodic, finite act.

Thus, the challenge for educators is the same whether the bar or bat mitzva takes place in Israel or in one's synagogue at home. The ritual act continues to have significance for the celebrants and their families both at the time and long after. How to connect that ritual act to the broader stream of daily religious life and practice remains the ultimate question.■

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.
- 2 All quotes are from interviews with parents of *b'nai mitzva* children who traveled to Israel during the year their child became bar or bat mitzva.
- 3 Jack Wertheimer, Project Director and Editor, *Conservative Synagogues and Their Members: Highlights of the North American Survey of 1995-1996*, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1996, pg. 39.
- 4 Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973. See also Barbara J. Wachs, "The Power of Ritual," *Jewish Education News*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Spring 1995.
- 5 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989. Also, Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, E.P. Dutton, New York, 1979.
- 6 Barry Kosmin, "Some Sociological Insights for Educators Arising from the Survey of Conservative B'nai Mitzvah Students in North America," CIJE Education Seminar, December 11, 1996; see also Perry London and Barry Chazan, *Psychology and Jewish Identity Formation*, American Jewish Committee, New York, 1990.
- 7 Barry Chazan with Arianna Koriansky, "Does the Teen Israel Experience Make a Difference?" Israel Experience, Inc., New York, 1990.
- 8 Paraphrase from conversation with S. Rothstein, 12/28/98.
- 9 Stuart Rothstein interview, 3/12/99.
- 10 L. Blumberg interview, 7/7/99.
- 11 Helen Leneman, editor, *Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education—A Sourcebook*, ARE Publishing, Inc., Denver, 1993. Also, Stuart Schoenfeld, "Ritual Performance, Curriculum Design and Jewish Identity: Towards a Perspective on Contemporary Innovations in Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education," *Bikurim*, 6/2: Winter-Spring 1989, pages 19-22.
- 12 Isa Aron, "Instruction and Enculturation in Jewish Education," paper presented at the CAJE Conference on Research in Jewish Education, Los Angeles, June 1987.
- 13 Schoenfeld, *op.cit.*, page 21.