

# MEDIATING THE TENSIONS OF *BAR/BAT MITZVAH* The Cleveland Experience

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*The tension between the religious meaning of the Bar/Bar Mitzvah and conspicuous consumption reflected in lavish parties led to the formation of the Cleveland Bar/Bat Mitzvah Task Force. It has created and disseminated community guidelines for celebrating B'nai Mitzvah and a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner and has sponsored educational programs and a community dialogue. Including all relevant stakeholders in this communal initiative was essential.*

Rabbis put their heads together to discuss *B'nai Mitzvah* gone awry, shaking their heads with saddened faces as they swap horror stories of lavish parties following minimal performance. Educators field frustrated phone calls from parents who are overwhelmed by the enormous task of planning the *Bar Mitzvah*. They respond with worry and frustration as students drop out of their educational programs, just as they have reached the point where their studies can become more advanced and sophisticated. Teachers and tutors spend hours motivating youngsters to practice *haftarot* in readiness for the climax in their Jewish educational career—the day that they become a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*. But, to what end?

On a more theoretical plane, such Jewish researchers and educators as Levitats (1949), Spiro (1977), and Schoenfeld (1988) have tried to capture the changing significance of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* for the North American Jewish community. Inevitably, these researchers find a wide gap between the perceptions and aspirations of the various participants in the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* process.

Schoenfeld argues that the present status of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* in North American Jewish life can be understood as the interfacing of the tensions between the elite and folk religions within Judaism. The tensions have been ameliorated by ceding to the rabbis and educators the rights of the elite reli-

gion of Judaism, namely the right to prescribe the course of study that entitles a child to become a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. The ambassadors of the folk religion of American Jewry—parents—retain the right to control the *simcha*, the party. But the implicit “deal” has not kept the unresolved issues and tensions from periodically erupting in the ways detailed in this article.

The key question is whether the contract in which rabbis control the ceremony and parents the *simcha* can be renegotiated. Through education and consensus building, can a community retrieve the right to either control or at least strongly influence the party, the folk religion of American Jewry? And if Jewish professionals achieve such influence, can parents reciprocally claim a greater say about the educational process, the previous province of elite Judaism? Everything that has been done in Cleveland by the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Task Force can be seen as a kind of *midrash* to Schoenfeld’s framing of the issue of the contemporary status of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*.

American Jews answer the fundamental question of the purpose of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* in very different ways. While rabbis and educators focus on the spiritual and educational aspects of the event, and students take pride in a job well done, seeking reward through the celebration, their parents often translate the “family experience” into a party to end all parties. Perhaps one

could find a meeting ground in terms of an espoused theory that had something to do with the rite of passage in the journey toward Jewish maturity. But the theories-in-use of these different stakeholders in the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* process create enormous tensions in the Jewish community and account for some of the problems noted above (Agrys et al., 1974).

#### ONE EFFORT TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES

Within the Cleveland Jewish community the tension issuing from a lack of consensus about the role of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* in Jewish life and an awareness that such other cities as Chicago and Philadelphia had tried to respond communally to this tension led the Cleveland Board of Rabbis and the Jewish Educators Council to form the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Task Force. Its charge was to address the following issues:

- the needs of young adolescents for appropriate Jewish programming and communal recognition
- the struggle of the family to find religious meaning in the experience, as well as to manage the stress and magnitude of the event
- the behavior of young guests who become bored from attending too many *B'nai Mitzvah* ceremonies and celebrations
- the exaggerated concern for the celebration, often at the expense of the religious character of the ceremony

The *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Task Force was the first effort of its kind in our city. It incorporated the concerns and skills of the Cleveland Board of Rabbis, representing both Conservative and Reform congregations, and the Jewish Educators Council, representing educational directors and agency educators. Overarching all of the objectives listed above was the goal of achieving communal consensus on both the problems to be addressed and the solutions we hoped to create.

The Task Force was formed in 1993. To bring the broadest perspective to these concerns, rabbis and educators from all congregations were invited to participate; ten rabbis from the Conservative and Reform movements and fourteen educators responded affirmatively. Although invitations were extended to members of the Orthodox community, they responded that Orthodox families did not experience the tensions of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, and declined to participate. To round out the membership, two cantors and five social workers, including one school psychologist, sat on the Task Force. Several social workers sat on the Task Force as lay members. Agency representatives of the Jewish Family Service and the Community Youth Resource Office of the Jewish Community Center also participated. There was representation from the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies, which served as convener and academic resource, and the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, which provided resources and financial support.

After several months of discussions aimed at identifying the major challenges facing the community, three subcommittees were organized to address the most serious tasks about which the committee had achieved consensus:

1. A subcommittee to establish community guidelines for *B'nai Mitzvah* preparation and celebration. These guidelines would speak to generic tensions, but would not promote any particular synagogue training program. Training children was still considered the province of the individual congregation.
2. A subcommittee to create educational programs that would address the concerns that led to the establishment of the Task Force. These family programs would have a threefold focus: child development, spirituality and student attitudes, and community participation.
3. A subcommittee to inventory resources for use by all congregations, schools, and agencies. To achieve its task, this

subcommittee devised a survey that each congregation was asked to complete in order to establish a baseline for future research, as well as to take an accounting of resources already in place in the community.

In addition, the Task Force envisioned convening focus groups to assist in taking the pulse of the *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* consumers: the youngsters and their parents. These focus groups would center their research on parental and student attitudes about the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* experience. They would also provide an arena for parents and preteens to discuss their concerns and expectations regarding this life-cycle event.

During the initial stage of problem identification, several members of the Task Force requested that one other issue be considered: the timing of the distribution of the actual *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* date for each child. Some congregations work two years ahead of the event, whereas others assign dates three years ahead. As no consensus was reached, the Task Force determined that these decisions should remain within the domain of the individual congregations, and the issue has been forwarded to the Board of Rabbis for further discussion.

#### OF GOALS AND PROCESS

The enthusiasm the Task Force members brought to this process was infectious. Although there was consensus that there were problems within the system in providing *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* ceremonies and celebrations, the Task Force's first task was to decide on the emphasis of its efforts. These initial discussions were beneficial in bringing all the issues to the table and in reviewing the variety of attitudes that existed in the synagogue community. We proceeded in our work, certain that we constituted a true communal voice and committed to standards that we determined were acceptable to every congregational environment. Guidelines and educational programming were created by teams of educators, rabbis,

and social workers in a multidisciplinary effort. The survey was written and rewritten to create a document that was easy to complete, yet would provide adequate information for our research. A forum was planned to formally share the concerns of the Task Force and the first year's work with the synagogue community, with the intent of mobilizing a complete community effort. At last we were ready to move beyond the scope of our Task Force. The question remained—was the community ready for us?

Because this was a coalition formed of the integration of the rabbinic and educational collegial networks, the completed guidelines were brought to these respective councils for approval before the community-wide presentation and final printing. It did not take us long to realize the challenges and shortcomings that we had accidentally built into our process. Yes, we were formed as a coalition, but it soon became apparent that although the Board of Rabbis had given us approval to proceed, too few rabbis had attended Task Force meetings with regularity, and our communication with their network proved to be unsatisfactory. Each rabbi had concerns about the wording of the guidelines, the way concepts were presented, and the tone of the document. In fact, although the guidelines were approved by the educators with only a few minor suggestions, the rabbis refused to approve them without some definitive rewriting—a delay of several months, which left only one month before the cross-congregational community dialogue.

Although final approval was withheld until the fall meeting of the Board of Rabbis, the *Greater Cleveland Community Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guidelines* were approved in theory, and the *B'nai Mitzvah* Community Dialogue was held as planned in June 1994. Congregations were invited to send rabbis, cantors, educators, lay leadership, and executive directors—indeed anyone involved in the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* process. The seventy participants, representing nine of the thirteen congregations in the community with significant *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* popula-

tions, generated an electric energy in sharing common concerns, similar frustrations, and noteworthy advances. After the presentations and breakout sessions, synagogue teams met to plan the next internal step within their own organizations.

Despite this successful dialogue, the Task Force soon came to realize that its efforts were restricted by both political and practical realities. A few months after this dialogue, which had been reported in articles in the local Jewish newspaper, a Jewish agency sponsored a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* fair entitled *PARTY! PARTY! PARTY!* Its purpose was to acquaint families with the array of resources available to make their *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* affair a success, as well as to highlight membership in the agency. This "service" to the community negated the spiritual, family message of our *Community Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guidelines*. It became apparent that there was an important player missing on our Task Force. This agency had not been invited to sit on the Task Force, and this oversight probably set our efforts back a few paces!

Representatives of the Task Force then met with this agency's leadership to reiterate our message. A representative of this agency has been added to our Task Force, and we are already negotiating to hold a joint forum to highlight the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* experience filtered through the Task Force lens. This experience illustrated the importance of choosing participants for a community effort who reflect all significant communal players.

### **CHALLENGES THAT FACE COMMUNITY EFFORTS FOR CHANGE**

#### **Selection of the Participants**

Our Task Force made an error in hand-selecting those rabbis and agency staff whom we thought would have a stake in our work and would devote the time required to our activity. For a community effort to move forward, participants need to include representatives who are central to the leadership of these institutions, and in fact the Task

Force has been expanded to include more rabbis, cantors, and agency staff. An assessment of the stakeholders in this kind of endeavor requires a very honest look at the community, with all of its political implications. Treating this process with care is necessary to achieve a successful consensus.

#### **Appropriate Communication**

Disseminating information about a community effort for change requires careful planning and creativity. For community recognition, the Cleveland Task Force made frequent use of the local Jewish newspaper. For congregational recognition, our members made frequent reports at the meetings of both the Cleveland Board of Rabbis and the Jewish Educators Council. The creation of the Community Dialogue brought common congregational issues to the table and helped bring more participants on board to address the challenges. But the work is not complete unless the message reaches families still planning *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* ceremonies and celebrations.

The distribution of the *Community Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guidelines* was followed by a community gathering in the fall of 1995, the time at which dates are disbursed, to assist congregations in generating interest and enthusiasm for highlighting the *mitzvah* in the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* experience. The event featured Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, author of *Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah*. With specialty booths highlighting *mitzvah* centerpieces, such as food baskets to be donated to a soup kitchen, and organizations to be considered for support, such as Mazon or the Jewish National Fund, this was a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Fair unlike any that the Cleveland community had seen. This program is described in detail in the concluding section.

The Task Force is well aware that the process for change takes time, and is currently reviewing ways to keep the process in motion. A *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Planner that includes suggestions for monitoring the child's practice schedule and the timing for

making family decisions regarding a program of *mitzvah* activities was recently distributed.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE BAR/BAT MITZVAH TASK FORCE

### Community Guidelines

Final adoption of the *Community Guidelines* followed a conclusive editing by the chair of the Cleveland Board of Rabbis, with input from his colleagues at their summer meeting. When the Board reconvened in the fall of 1994, the *Guidelines* met the rabbis' approval without reservation, and they were ready for dissemination.

Through the Jewish Educators Council, *Community Guidelines* were distributed to future *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* families by their educators and clergy when dates were assigned. It was recommended that the disbursement be part of a general orientation, with an explanation of the community initiative. Those congregations that took more active roles on the Task Force have been reliable about making use of these *Guidelines*, as evidenced by their requests for replacement sets for the second year of date assignments since the inception of the Task Force.

We are beginning to receive requests for our *Guidelines* and *Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner* from congregations outside the Cleveland area. The Task Force is currently considering the possibility of a second printing to cover the number of requests that we anticipate in the future.<sup>1</sup>

### Educational Program

The educational program created by the Task Force subcommittee is a three-session workshop targeted for families of sixth-grade students. The first session provides a look at the social and spiritual needs of early adolescents. Parents meet with a child psychologist who frames a portrait of the preteen years. A rabbi is present to lay out some of the spiritual possibilities available to *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* families in their approach to the experience. Simultaneously, the sixth-grade students discuss what *Bar/*

*Bat Mitzvah* means to them, review the "Ten Commandments for Attending *B'nai Mitzvah*," and with their parents jointly write goals for the *mitzvah* experience. "The Ten Commandments" outlines synagogue etiquette in a concise and easy-to-read format.

In the second session, families explore together the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* as a total community experience. A panel presents some of the opportunities that the community has to offer directly to the pre-*Bar/Bat Mitzvah* parents, while students meet with counselors to participate in a variety of exercises and games created to sensitize these youngsters to their new status in the community. A comparison of congregational services among the denominations of Judaism is presented to teach mutual respect. The goal is to sensitize these young people to the variety of religious and spiritual opportunities within Judaism.

The final session is an all-community gathering—a cross-congregational orientation for sixth and seventh graders. Each year, the Cleveland Task Force plans to highlight the important spiritual imperative of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* experience with an inspirational keynote speaker and a variety of activities designed to begin a family dialogue. The families are asked to construct their own program for sharing their special event with the community through *tzedakah* and are given an opportunity to examine a myriad of *mitzvah* opportunities. An original game based on the theme of continuity provides enthusiastic interaction for the youngsters.

This three-session program was included in the packet presented to each synagogue at the Community Dialogue, with follow-up information provided at a meeting of the Jewish Educators Council. Each congregation is invited to utilize and adapt this program, and a half-dozen synagogues and schools have reported positive responses

<sup>1</sup>The Greater Cleveland Community *Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guidelines* are available at a cost of \$4.00 from Enid Lader, *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Task Force, CCJE, 26500 Shaker Blvd., Beechwood, OH 44122.

from families. It will be another year before we can truly assess the results of this educational package. Parents who have attended these sessions have expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to begin a family dialogue before the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* experience that they would not have initiated on their own.

### The Congregational Surveys

One of the pleasant surprises that the Task Force discovered in the congregational surveys was that there was more orientation activity in place that we had anticipated, although it was not necessarily organized into an integrated curriculum. Most congregations have a strong ritual-training component in place and indicated that they could use assistance with the broader educational process. Across the board, synagogue articulated a common concern for capturing the spiritual possibilities for *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* for their families—taking advantage of the “window of opportunity” that the *mitzvah* experience presents.

### Community Staffing of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Task Force

A member of the Cleveland Fellows Program under the auspices of the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies occupies the part-time staff position that has kept the wheels of the Task Force in motion over the last two years. This Cleveland Fellow, supported by the Fund for the Jewish Future of the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, created the newly published *Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner* and oversees distribution of the *Community Guidelines*. This year, the conception and implementation of the community gathering was the fellow's biggest Task Force challenge. The position's two years of funding will end in June 1996, and the Task Force is faced with the challenge of finding a new source of staffing for the upcoming year.

### New Initiatives

The latest initiative on the Task Force

agenda is the creation of a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* resource center. This center would provide ideas for creative services, celebrations without excess, and *tzedakah* links as families begin to consider their many options. Once the resources have been gathered, they will be arranged in a central, easily accessible location. This plan, the one original goal of the Task Force that as yet has not been realized, is still in a rough draft stage of development.

### Response of the Non-Jewish Community

The Task Force has publicized its Speakers Bureau to local public and private middle and upper elementary schools, encouraging them to engage speakers for students and their parents on the topic of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* year. There has been enthusiastic response from the private schools, for even those with minority Jewish populations have experienced the effects of the overactive social life of the average seventh grader. They want their students to come to a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* as a good guest, to understand the import of the event, and to bring honor to their school through appropriate and respectful behavior. It is interesting that this invitation has not been answered within the public school community. We can only assume that the barrier between church and state makes this a difficult program for a public school to endorse. In one school district, the Task Force was invited to bring in their presentation through the PTA and was received with enthusiasm. Parent organizations will probably be our best venue for entrance into the public school arena. Becoming the communal address for clarification and education about the nature of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* is another dimension of the process we are just beginning to understand.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Central to the work of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Task Force was the creation and distribution of the *Community Guidelines*. To de-

termine whether the *Guidelines* have had any impact within our community, these questions need to be answered by future research:

- How were the *Guidelines* distributed within the congregations, and is there a method for follow-up? What impact do rabbis and cantors see of the creation of *Community Guidelines*?
- How are the various stakeholders reacting to the *Guidelines*? Do the reactions of the youngsters differ from that of their parents? How are the *Guidelines* interpreted by each interest group? If interviewed, are responses different when given individually or in groups?
- What kinds of support are families looking for as they enter the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* process? What do they consider a good service or a good party? Do their goals conform with those of the community? How can the community assist them in achieving their goals?
- How does one build consensus for community initiative? Who is really in control of what is happening relative to the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* experience? What coalitions need to be built?
- Where is there room for compromise? If parents are asked to spiritualize their efforts, do congregations also have to give something in return?
- Are there ways to offset the flight from religious school after the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* ceremony?

### CONCLUSION

We have suggested at several points in this article that the ideal of an integrated American Jewish identity is undermined by the internal tensions of that dual identity: specifically, a Jewish push toward religious meaning that is at odds with American goals of affluence and conspicuous consumption.

Ironically, these tensions affected even our attempts to help families deal with the conflict. The Fall 1995 community event sponsored by the Task Force featuring

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin as our guest, "The Spotlight's On You: Party Meister or Mitzvah Maker," needed to be rescheduled. Why? Because the Cleveland Indians had made it to the World Series and it was scheduled for Game Six.

A month later, the rescheduled event took place. Approximately 180 individuals (75 families) from congregations across the community attended. Sixth and seventh graders and their parents were the invited audience, although a considerable number of younger siblings and grandparents also attended. Rabbis, educators, and lay leaders from across the community were also in attendance. A feature ad in the *Cleveland Jewish News* welcoming Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin and reiterating the message of the Task Force was paid for by "Friends of the Task Force."

The program had been developed by a committee of two synagogue family educators, the directors of the community youth resources and curriculum departments, and the staff person for the task force. The program had four components.

1. Opening remarks by Rabbi Salkin
2. A dialogue between parents and children called "On the Doorposts of Your House," which focused on Jewish memories and values
3. Parallel study in which students played an especially designed educational board game ("I'm Standing on the Shoulders") and parents studied in *hevrotot* (partners) with Rabbi Salkin a variety of traditional texts about turning thirteen and achieving religious maturity
4. A concluding slide show of sixth and seventh graders throughout the community studying and celebrating

The Task Force has evaluated the program quite positively, being generally pleased with both the numbers attending and the quality of the program. The data collected from participants' evaluations are presently being analyzed. Plans are being made to

keep in touch with these new "allies" through follow-up programs in the congregations, mailings directly from the Task Force, and the possibility of developing a program for mentoring families through the family education courses at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies.

Anecdotal evaluation, although limited by its nature, gives one perspective on the event and even more broadly the goals of the Task Force. There was concern at the Task Force evaluation session that perhaps we had only preached to the converted and that, while overall attendance was good, the families we most needed to reach did not attend. Yet, one member of the Task Force reported the following conversation at a local restaurant with a family he did not know prior to the event:

*Task Force Member:* Were we both at the same event?

*Parent (smiling):* Yes, we were.

*Sixth Grader:* Yea, I was there.

*Task Force Member:* How was it for you?

*Sixth Grader:* Okay, a little better than I thought.

*Parent:* Very good. You know we consider ourselves fairly involved in our congregation and supportive parents. But we never would have found the time to talk about the *mitzvah* dimension of our daughter's *Bat Mitzvah* without this kind of program. We would have just gone through the whirlwind without thinking very much about it. The program gave us plenty to think about and a way to begin talking with one another about it. We are appreciative.

In pragmatic terms, no one on the Task Force could have created a better benchmark for success.

Meanwhile, American Jewish life continues. Priorities need to be re-evaluated. The Task Force will soon have to make a decision about whether its work is done. The general sense of the group at that

evaluation meeting was that our work has only just begun. And yet the gift of a part-time staff person from the Cleveland community is not secure. There may be other communal priorities that require staffing, and the believers in the work of the Task Force may have to commit even more personal and professional time to bring the work of the Task Force to fuller fruition.

And we recently learned that the same communal institution that last year sponsored the "Party, Party, Party" *Bar Mitzvah* fair will do so again because the fair is an effective way of signing up new members and obviously meets a need in the community. Now we have a Task Force member connected to this institution. He does not believe that we can get the sponsors to change the fair to "*Daven, Daven, Daven*" or "*Tzedakah, Tzedakah, Tzedakah*," but he does believe we can have a table at the fair or perhaps a place on the agenda. Perhaps the title can even be changed to "How To Make a *Simcha*."

We humbly leave it to the readers to judge the kind of impact we have had on the community or perhaps to advise us "how far we have to go before we sleep."

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