There is hardly a Jewish professional working today who hasn’t let slip a rueful laugh at the old joke about the rabbi and the mice. In case you haven’t heard it, here is the short version: a synagogue has been overrun by mice, and the rabbi, desperate to get rid of them, tries everything she can think of—traps, exterminators, cats—to no avail, until she suddenly gets a brilliant idea. She gathers up the mice, teaches them some Torah, puts tiny little tallitot on them, and performs a b’nai mitzvah ceremony for them. The mice leave and never come back.

The joke stings, but we committed liberal Jews cannot help but laugh at it because it rings painfully true. It reflects the reality that for too many young liberal Jews, the bar or bat mitzvah ceremony marks the end of a Jewish learning journey, not its beginning. Liberal Jews generally “perceive the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony as the equivalent of the high school graduation” (Aron, 319): the culmination of years of Jewish schooling and participation in Jewish life, after which they are finally free to leave all that schooling and participation behind. We can hardly be surprised when the result is “staggering rates of post-b’nai mitzvah dropout” from Jewish learning and life (B’nai Mitzvah Revolution, 2015).

Of course, b’nai mitzvah is not supposed to be a Jew’s ticket out of Judaism; it is supposed to be an invitation into it. To become bar or bat mitzvah is to become Jewishly adult: a fully empowered Jewish agent, capable of taking on personal and communal Jewish responsibilities. For liberal Jews, this may or may not mean taking on mitzvot (commandments) as they are traditionally understood, but it definitely does mean a change to one’s status within

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1 In the category of “liberal Jews,” I include all non-Orthodox Jews and/or all those who would self-identify as liberal Jews, including Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal Jews.
one’s Jewish community. Students approaching b’nai mitzvah should be preparing for this fundamental change—exploring what it means to wear a tallit or to be counted in a minyan, for example, and learning how to take part in community activities generally reserved for adult Jews, such as visiting the sick and paying shiva calls. They should be investigating the norms and expectations of their particular Jewish communities, helping to serve those communities, and being guided by community members who can model integrated Jewish living. The outcome of all this preparation should be a ceremony that serves as a launching pad for the bar or bat mitzvah’s ongoing involvement in Jewish communal life.

I know that I am not alone in declaring that b’nai mitzvah must become a more meaningful and generative experience for liberal Jews. Certainly organizations like the B’nai Mitzvah Revolution are devoted to similar principles, insofar as their mission is to “create models of preparation and engagement for b’nai mitzvah that are more engaging, meaningful, and relevant for both young people and their families.” They add to this an aim to experiment with “more effective methods for teaching Hebrew and prayer,” and, finally, to create “rituals that tie b’nai mitzvah and their families more closely to the Jewish tradition and the Jewish community” (B’nai Mitzvah Revolution, 2015, emphases added).

While these are all laudable goals, the trouble is that they are in exactly the wrong order. As professionals and stakeholders in liberal Jewish education, our first priority in reimagining bar and bat mitzvah needs to be reintegrating it into the continuum of Jewish communal life. We do not communicate to prospective b’nai mitzvah that they are about to become full participants in adult Jewish life, with all the privileges and responsibilities that this entails, by perfectly tailoring their b’nai mitzvah ceremony to their every idiosyncratic preference, any more than we do by endlessly drilling them in liturgy and Torah trope. We must teach them about their Jewish
communities—how they work, what they need, what roles people play within them—and help them to determine how they can use their unique talents and interests to be of service to those around them. We must show them how they can be part of something larger than themselves.

It is clearly necessary that we who wish to see a robust future for liberal Judaism do this in order to maintain the integrity of our Jewish communities. It is hard to believe that the present exodus of post-b’nai mitzvah Jews from liberal Jewish communal life will be matched by an equally great influx; and, if it is not, liberal Jewish communities will inevitably dwindle in numbers. We must focus on the community aspect of b’nai mitzvah, however, not just for the sake of our communities, but also for the sake of our b’nai mitzvah themselves.

Developmentally, young Jews approaching b’nai mitzvah are likely to be at an age when they most need opportunities for role exploration. This is an ideal time for them to be exposed to a variety of Jewish communal roles—board member, religious school teacher, community service organizer, clergy, chevre kadisha member, choir member, etc.—and to try to imagine themselves in those roles.

More importantly, though, there may be no better way to help young Jews to develop a sense of Jewish communal belonging than to involve them in service-learning within their own Jewish communities. Service-learning, as the name suggests, is more than just community service: it is curriculum-based, integrating service work into academic study with clear goals and objectives, and it includes focused reflection upon those service experiences. Studies suggest that service-learning tends to increase participants’ feelings of social acceptance and inclusion (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014), and make them more likely to engage with community organizations, such as non-profit groups, churches, and synagogues (D’Agostino, 2010).

Moreover, in her doctoral dissertation, educational leader Erica Rothblum found that students
who feel disconnected from their community (in her case, a new school) can come to feel more connected through community-based service-learning. Interestingly, it was not the service itself that increased the students’ sense of belonging; it was the caring, purpose-driven, empowering micro-community that they had formed among themselves over the course of their service-learning project that ultimately bridged the gap between the individual students and their larger school community (Rothblum, 2008).

This is precisely the sort of experience that would help realize a genuine status change for b’nai mitzvah students who are entering into adult liberal Jewish communities. Imagine a b’nai mitzvah service-learning course in which students formed close-knit cohorts; studied Jewish thought and texts, ancient and modern, about community practices and policies; and learned about their own communities through interviews and first-hand experiences. The course could culminate with students designing and completing tailor-made service projects within their own Jewish community, or producing a “State of the Community” report summarizing their assessment of what their community was doing well to serve its members and where it could stand to improve. Through such a program, students would deepen their knowledge of Jewish tradition, and come to see themselves as useful, contributing members of their Jewish communities, all while forming close bonds with one another.

Imagine if b’nai mitzvah ceremonies, too, served the life transitions that they marked, and not the other way around. They would be very different from the ones we see today. While they might still include some creative flourishes specially chosen by the b’nai mitzvah, they would be woven into the service with a mindful eye toward enhancing the experience for all concerned, participants and congregants alike. The rest of the service would not only be consistent with community minhag, but could include participation from community members outside the bar or
bat mitzvah’s family: perhaps a recent confirmand reading Torah for one aliyah, or a congregant whom the bar or bat mitzvah wished to honor for their service to the community being invited up to make kiddush. B’nai mitzvah could even have been matched up with “big brothers” or “big sisters” from within their communities, or could have shadowed adults whose roles in the community they admired, and could co-lead sections of their services alongside their mentors. Such relationships would be invaluable in helping b’nai mitzvah to transition into adult Jewish life.

Whatever they look like, it is critical that b’nai mitzvah ceremonies amount to more than hollow celebrations that mark the end of compulsory Judaism. These ceremonies need to mark real, meaningful transitions in the lives of b’nai mitzvah, ones which both they and their community members understand and appreciate. It must be clear to all liberal Jews that to become a bar or bat mitzvah is to enter into Jewish community, not to leave it behind. If we cannot make this clear, then not only will our communities disintegrate for lack of membership, but our b’nai mitzvah’s Judaism will disintegrate for lack of community.
References:


