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Final Paper/Article: The Bar Mitzvah Phenomenon

History of Jewish Education: From Talmud Torah's to Learning Communities

During my two years working as a Youth Education at Temple Beth Shalom I witnessed what felt like one of the largest migrations in Jewish History- 7th graders dropping out of Religious School the day after their *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. This phenomenon burdened me because I was in charge of their retention. I was the one responsible for building up a large and strong youth group and Hebrew High School program, which the incoming 8th grade class fed into. I watched my class become smaller and smaller in my first year as a 7th grade teacher. Every day I would take attendance: "Josh, where is Josh today?" Inevitably one of my students would answer, "Josh had his *Bar Mitzvah* this weekend. It was so much fun! Maybe he'll be back next week?" This pattern repeated itself week after week, until in the spring, my class of twenty-five had turned into a group of ten.

After a few months, I decided that I had the answer to this growing problem: create a better Junior High School experience for the students, offer them exciting electives, great teachers, and *then...*the students would not leave. That spring I made some large changes. These changes sparked exciting conversations in Education committee meetings and in the religious school parking lot. After watching *Gesher*—the 7th and 8th grade program—turn into an exciting place to be, those 7th grade parents who felt guilty about allowing their child to drop out set up meetings to discuss that guilt with me. I had parents tell me that their parents made them stay until their *Bar Mitzvah*, and they still remained Jewish. Why was I worried about their children, they would ask. Other parents would leave messages on my voicemail explaining that religious school

had been the priority for years, but now that their daughter has become a *Bat Mitzvah*, it was time for non-religious activities—dance, or cheerleading—to take priority so that Sara wouldn't resent being Jewish. I soon realized that this trend did not reflect only a negative religious school experience (although that didn't help the situation), it was the result of systemic problems within the entire community of Jewish learners; it was a problem with the synagogue as a whole.

The *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* experience is a milestone in a young adult's life, but it has become a major milestone because of the structure that we have built around it. Since the 1930s religious school standards have been in place that Jewish children must abide by to become a *B'nai Mitzvah* because of the high drop out rate of boys in religious school. "There is scattered but abundant evidence to indicate that, in the period of mass migration at the turn of the century, standards of Jewish education were low, expectations were low, and teenage boys who lived in conformity with the *mitzvot* were very rare." (Schoenfeld, page 79) By 1938, the first standards were being formed for pre-*bar mitzvah* boys. The first requirements created by the Board of Jewish Education in Chicago required all of the congregations affiliated with the Board to require a minimum of three years of religious education, understanding of the Hebrew language, ability to read prayers, understanding of the customs and ceremonies of Jewish life, and knowledge of the major events in Jewish history for Boys becoming *Bat Mitzvah*. (Schoenfeld, page 81) These types of requirements were replicated by the different movements of Judaism, all of which were responding to early criticisms of lavish *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* celebrations. The fact that parties were not kosher and in direct defiance of the Sabbath created dilemmas for Jewish professionals and psychologists who were hired to lecture parents about these events,

which were evolving into rituals themselves, “resembling closely the extravaganza of the wedding ceremony.” (Schoenfeld, page 80)

Standards were set up to counter the extravagant parties that were becoming the norm. These standards had nothing to do with Jewish education after *B’nai Mitzvah*. One might argue that these standards were too high, or too low, and a family could choose to change movements or synagogues based on these standards. There should be no disagreement, however, about the absence of Jewish communal responsibilities after the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. The *Bar Mitzvah*, itself, inherently requires Jewish engagement as a new Jewish adult. Sociologists have noted “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.” (Schoenfeld, 79) These standards were not set up to prompt future engagement beyond the ceremony, and often they ended up creating literate Jews who would soon leave the Jewish community.

There is one positive outcome that came from these types of standards for *Bar Mitzvah* families. “If one’s two children were to have a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* at these synagogues, synagogue affiliation during the years that they were in Hebrew School was required.” (page 84, Schoenfeld) Families affiliated for a minimum of four years would, by default, become apart of synagogue life. Unfortunately, that affiliation didn’t last very long. “A 1967 Conservative movement survey of synagogue membership found that a son’s completion of *Bar Mitzvah* or Hebrew school followed only death and geographic relocation as a reason given for disaffiliation.” (Cited in Wertheimer, 1984, 128, Schoenfeld, page 84)

The situation has not drastically changed in the last thirty years; some may say it has only gotten worse. Where can we go from here? Standards were set, families joined synagogues and religious school students had their *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvot*. Despite these standards, families then disaffiliated. The dilemma still remains: how to encourage post-*Bar Mitzvah* participation in the Synagogue. We know that increased participation in Jewish life from childhood on leads to committed Jews. As educators what do we need to do to increase participation in our programs and educational opportunities beyond age thirteen?

Jack Wertheimer believes that we need to “link the silos”. He writes that “adults and children mutually reinforce each other’s Jewish engagements.” (page 2, Wertheimer) After observing the extent to which parents affect their children’s Jewish educational experiences, Wertheimer notes that “parents who had attended supplementary schooling beyond the *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* year tended to enroll their children in more programs of Jewish education than those who did not continue their education. While other factors, such as denomination, play an important role in these decisions, the educational experiences of parents significantly shape their aspirations for their children.” (page 12, Wertheimer) Unfortunately many of the parents that we work with have not had positive Jewish experiences. Thus, the importance of the *B’nai Mitzvah* experience is further emphasized by its role on future generations.

When our families enter our religious schools, at whatever time they choose, we need to set our expectations high. Religious education needs to be a family experience so that our parents can shape their aspirations for their children within a welcoming and flexible Jewish context. Adults need to understand as much as their children, that

participation in Jewish education is a life long experience, not simply a childhood experience. Furthermore, the actions of these adults will impact not only their children's Jewish identity, but also their grandchildren's Jewish identities. A support network of committed Jews is cultivated only when community expectations are such that teenagers attend Hebrew High School, join the youth group, and adult groups who care deeply about the education the teens are gaining in the synagogue support these experiences.

Although Wertheimer's observations remain true, they do not fully solve the problem. Parents must be encouraged to be involved in the Synagogue even if they too dropped out of religious school. Adults must model Jewish engagement so that young adults understand that participation in post-*B'nai Mitzvah* schooling is not the only way in which they can remain active in their Jewish community. Judaism needs to be taught as a way to interact with the world around us. Becoming a teacher's assistant in the religious school, volunteering at a local shelter with synagogue members, and attending synagogue trips to Israel are all examples of programs that allow engagement on a non-traditional level.

We need to continue to search out what our families want from their synagogue and what synagogues need from the Jewish people in order for Judaism to continue to flourish in American society. While we search, we need to provide entry levels at every stage in life for Jewish education. We cannot assume that those parents who allow their children to drop out before the twelfth grade are not interested in Adult Education. And we certainly cannot assume that teens that are uninterested in youth group would not like to spend a summer in Israel. We have multiple ways in which a young adult can remain active in their Jewish community. We need the professionals and the will to keep those

entryways open for our community rather than concentrating on the one entry way that most 7th graders quickly fall out of.

Bibliography:

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