

Mitzvah

What is the Meaning of The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Experience? NEW YORK RABBIS SHARE THEIR VIEWS OF THE SPECIAL RITE OF PASSAGE

A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer / *Mitzvah Fall 2009*

Zoe, a budding violinist, took private lessons with klezmer-performer Alicia Svigals and later gave a multi-media presentation on the history of klezmer music. Jonah was curious why thirty percent of American Jews, including his own family, consider themselves Jews and Buddhists, and made a report on this topic. And Jake, a dedicated soccer player, was excited to learn that his great-uncle, Leo Drucker, had been a famous soccer player on the Jewish Hakoach team, founded in Vienna one hundred years ago. He shared his research in a powerpoint presentation.

What did all these kids have in common? They were all bar or bat mitzvah students at The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City, a community of secular Jews, that offers an exciting, innovative approach to celebrating a bar/bat mitzvah. These projects were the centerpieces of the students' celebrations. Unlike their peers in other temples or synagogues, none of our students read from the Torah, the scroll that contains the Five Books of Moses. That's because Humanistic Judaism regards all sources of our heritage with equal importance, and we don't put the Torah in a special place above the rest.

Instead, our students participate in a journey of self-discovery that individualizes the experience for them. While the students may choose any major project for research that they want that will make a connection to Jewish heritage or culture, their topics, more often than not, evolve naturally out of their own interests and family history. This makes these projects particularly significant personally.

The two-year program is quite ambitious and demanding. The students start out by exploring their family history and values. Ethan learned about the courage displayed by some relatives who escaped Nazi Europe, and of others who tragically died in Auschwitz. Yoela recognized that love and compassion was a family theme, especially manifest by her mother, who adopted her. Anshel heard about a relatives who came to America, worked hard, and then saved up enough money to bring over other family members. And Emily figured out that while her mother was raised Jewish and her father was raised Christian, both sides of the family have shared values including a commitment to bettering the world, a love of humor, and an appreciation of tradition.

Out of this investigation, the students figure out their own beliefs and values. This process then helps them think about criteria for choosing a hero or role model and what the difference is between these two figures. The students also put their values into action by undertaking community service. Then comes the major project and finally, each student leads a joyful Shabbat service that is filled with readings, songs, and presentations of their wonderful essays and projects. Family members and friends also participate as readers.

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The last paper the students deliver in the service is a reflection on what the experience has meant to them. There is no better way to convey how special we think our program is than to quote these students directly.

“For me,” wrote Irene, “becoming a Bat Mitzvah is all about learning to make choices. Making choices meant taking more responsibility and the more responsibly I act, the more choices I will be able to make in the future.”

Alex observed that it had been his decision to enter the program. “My parents certainly didn’t choose this for me. I did because I wanted to get more in touch with my roots.”

For Jake, “the creation of these papers has helped me establish what I value and how I fit into Jewish culture and religion. I found out that being Jewish does not have to do so much with faith or prayer, as it does with being part of the Jewish culture and community.”

Ben concluded that “These papers help me understand who I am and where I fit in our society. I don’t know what I am going to be yet, but at least I know who I am. My background means a lot to me. I am proud to come from a family that is committed to hard work and overcoming hardships and is not afraid to stand up for what they believe in.”

And finally, Zoe, our violinist, summarized the experience this way. “Having this Bat Mitzvah has connected me to a larger community. Before, Judaism was a title, but now it feels like an experience. I always knew I was Jewish, but that was only because I knew my ancestors were Jewish. Now I actually identify myself as a Jew. Before, I felt isolated as a Jew. Although there were often other Jewish people around me, this congregation has allowed me to meet people with similar backgrounds and ideas, so I can see myself in a larger context.”

Part of fitting into a larger context is also realizing that there are different ways to celebrate a bar or bat mitzvah and that we can enjoy and respect each others’ approaches. As Gabe learned, “I can do something different from friends and still be accepted by them.”

Whether one takes a traditional way or an alternative approach, each takes a lot of hard work and determination on the part of the student. The preparation all culminates on a particular day for celebration, but the sense of accomplishment and deepening connection to our heritage will last long afterwards.

Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer is the leader of The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City. Information about this bar/bat mitzvah program can be found at www.citycongregation.org or by calling 212-213-1002. Rabbi Schweitzer is the author of the “The Liberated Haggadah” (Center for Cultural Judaism) and contributes the Humanistic perspective to the “Ask the Rabbi” column in Moment Magazine.