

Lessons from the Bar Mitzvah

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My guess is that most Americans assume that the practice of the bar mitzvah is a centuries-old norm among the Jewish people. That assumption is wrong, but the real story of the bar mitzvah is truly interesting. In *Thirteen and a Day: The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Across America*, author Mark Oppenheimer traces the history of the bar mitzvah and what it represents (or does not represent) in terms of the Jewish experience.

The bar mitzvah celebration has roots in medieval Judaism, but it became an important part of American Judaism only in the twentieth century, Oppenheimer explains. “The typical bar or bat mitzvah ceremony—the religious part, anyway—is quite simple. A boy of about thirteen, or a girl of about twelve or thirteen, leads a portion of the traditional Jewish Sabbath service and reads aloud some of the Bible portions assigned to that week,” he summarizes. “The event is supposed to mark the moment when a young Jew assumes the responsibilities of religious adulthood.”

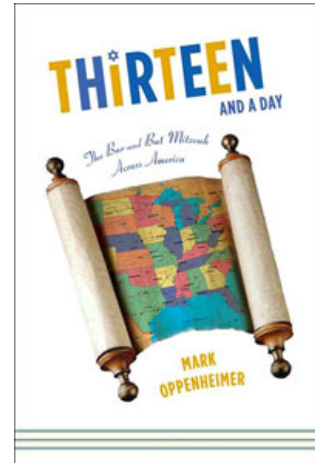
The big problem is that few people really seem to believe that the bar mitzvah does any such thing. The thirteen-year-old who celebrates the bar (for boys) or bat (for girls) mitzvah is still a thirteen-year-old. Furthermore, the ceremony has been eclipsed by the celebration that follows. In wealthy Jewish communities, these parties are often outlandishly expensive. Oppenheimer provides an insider’s perspective on this transformation of the tradition.

Reading *Thirteen and a Day* is an introduction to many of the issues facing contemporary American Judaism and a truly interesting historical and sociological analysis of a familiar ritual. Christians reading the book are likely to think about how we conceive of early adolescents and the transition to adulthood — and the challenge of instilling a clear identity within our own children.

An excerpt:

The popularity of the b’nai mitzvah is not the result of their usefulness. There is no strong evidence that the bar or bat mitzvah will reverse Jews’ low birthrates or counter religious indifference. While committed Jewish families see b’nai mitzvah as necessary to raising a good Jewish child, that is no way to account for adult b’nai mitzvah—and what’s more, it’s no way to account for the enthusiasm of the children themselves, whose excitement has little to do with abstract notions of Jewish survival. B’nai mitzvah cannot be explained through Torah, which nowhere mentions the ceremony; Jews are not commanded to celebrate the mar mitzvah.

Rather, they are commanded to act like Jews; to pray, to tell the story of the Exodus every Passover; to reproduce young Jews, to circumcise the boys. But as rewarding as the Jewishly lived life can be, and as fun as reproduction is, they seem to express inadequately our religious peoplehood. What evangelical Christians express by being born again, or Mormons by going on a two-year mission, Jews express through the bar and bat mitzvah. They proclaim their commitment to Judaism every time they say their prayers, but this is the only time that make that commitment with an audience watching.



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