

FATHERS AND SONS: RETHINKING THE BAR MITZVAH AS AN AMERICAN RITE OF PASSAGE

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The bar mitzvah draws popular as well as folkloristic attention because it is one of the few publicly recognized American rituals for entering adolescence. Popularly categorized as a Jewish folk tradition, the bar mitzvah is hardly a private affair; it is recognized, if not participated in, throughout the general population of North America as a result of being featured in popular films, television shows, and novels. Some of the notice for the bar mitzvah owes to depictions in the media of material excess. Additionally, the bar mitzvah raises a social psychological question of the relatively early coming of age at thirteen years old. The age is perceived as early in a modern American society characterized by an extended childhood and adolescence before adulthood. Elaborating on this critical coming-of-age issue, I propose that the folk sources of the bar mitzvah reveal a symbolism that suggests the ceremony acts to resolve father-son conflicts. Further, in the American context both non-Jews and Jews have heightened the ceremony's importance because the event represents public displays of, or compensations for, uncertain masculine status.

Problem Statement and Background: The Folk and Popular Logic of Bar Mitzvah

The bar mitzvah is the coming-of-age ritual that everyone knows, in image if not in practice. If one has never attended the event, he or she probably has been exposed to it in popular television and film. Jonathan and Judith Pearl, discussing media portrayals of Jewish themes in *The Chosen Image* (1999), claim that "of all the Jewish rites of passage depicted on popular TV, none has received more attention than the *bar mitzvah*" (Pearl and Pearl 1999, 16). Since their book has come out, the bar mitzvah has been dramatized, or spoofed, in popular movies such as *Glow Ropes: The Rise and Fall of a Bar Mitzvah Emcee* (2005), *Keeping Up with the Steins* (2006), *Sixty Six* (2006) *Knocked Up* (2007), and *Two Lovers* (2008), and television series such as *Entourage* (2005), *Sex and the City* (2000), *Frasier* (2002), *The Simpsons* (2003), *Unfabulous* (2005), and *Naked Brothers Band* (2008). It has been the butt of many jokes and cartoons among Jews and non-Jews alike, many of which concern the apparently young age, 13, when the boy is pronounced to be entering manhood or which question the Jewish boy's claim to manliness. In the *Naked Brothers Band* episode "The Bar Mitzvah," for example, wordplay is evident when a parent commands the bar mitzvah boy to join his friends with the Yiddish word *gey* meaning "go," but the Americanized boy understands the word as questioning his masculinity for acting "gay." Related to this humor in a surfeit of comic graphics and mocking photographs is the common theme of discomfort for the boy in the fabled misfitting bar mitzvah suit. The humor depends on the perception that the Jewish boy is uncomfortable in, or not ready for, the commanding pose of an adult suit.

The kind of bar mitzvah commanding popular culture attention is likely of non-pietistic Jews, often called liberal or assimilated. In such satirical portrayals, viewers become aware of anxieties, not just for the bar mitzvah boy's relation to his faith or ethnicity, but also for the modern consumer society of which he is a part. Depictions of the bar mitzvah in popular culture focus primarily on the party because of the broader societal interest in modern materialism, or parental indulgence, that it raises, but contextualizing the celebration within traditional practices and symbols for the bar mitzvah boy leading up to, and during, the event sheds light on the inherited, and invented, meanings for the bar mitzvah. To get at these meanings, I will examine more closely the folk cultural aspects of the event to explain its growing appeal since the mid-twentieth century.

The folk cultural source of the bar mitzvah appears rooted in synagogue practice. Along these lines, Jewish parents will probably voice the attitude that the bar mitzvah is the most self-conscious expression of Jewishness in one's life and understand that it signifies entrance into what is known as religious majority: the ability associated with Jewish maturity to participate in a *minyan* (quorum of 10 for prayer), fast, and read from Torah. Orthodox Jews may more clearly recognize the obligations it represents to Judaism to put on *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries), but the bar mitzvah in Orthodox communities does not have the conspicuous consumer display that it does among liberal Jews. For many Jews, it signals a finality rather than a transition to another stage; it is an end rather than a beginning of religious participation. Ivan Marcus writing on the Jewish life cycle observes that the bar mitzvah "can be seen as a finishing rite for many young Jewish adolescents. It moves the child from Judaism into the larger world possibly without any additional traditional Jewish rites until death, if then" (2004, 123).

That a traditional ceremony would contribute to discontinuity rather than the continuity expected of rites of passage has not only been a concern of historians and ethnographers. American rabbis since the early twentieth century have complained about the use of the bar mitzvah to conclude synagogue attendance. Rabbinical philosopher Mordecai Kaplan during the 1930s, for example, in his incisive tome *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934) criticized the "spiritual chaos" caused by "so casual a contact with Jewish knowledge" in short-lived attendance at a Hebrew school before the bar mitzvah (Kaplan 1994, 58). Although acknowledging that the Jewish educational focus on preparing for the bar mitzvah kept youth in Jewish schools, he advocated for a reorientation to signal entrance into a new stage of life or developing a life-long commitment to Judaism (Kaplan 1994, 58-59). A later popularly known rabbi, Joseph Telushkin, renewed the complaint in *Jewish Literacy* (1991) by stating, "While the bar mitzvah is intended to mark the beginning of a Jewish boy's adulthood, for non-Orthodox Jews it frequently signifies the end of his Jewish education" (1991, 612).

Surveys by Jewish organizations of their youth members verify that children perceive the bar mitzvah to be a conclusion to education rather than a transition to another stage. Barry A. Kosmin found, for instance, for the bar/bat mitzvah that less than a quarter of Conservative Hebrew school students showed a high score on their plans for attending synagogue monthly or more after the bar/bat

mitzvah (2002, 263). Despite the intentions of this minority, actual attendance was even lower, and this disengagement is typically blamed on teens focusing on secular high school studies and extracurricular activities with the support of their parents (Leneman 1993, 17-19; Sidlofsky 1993, 302). A higher percentage of boys go through a bar mitzvah than girls for the bat mitzvah, and the boys report feeling pressure more intensely to disengage from religious activities in favor of weekend sports and social activities. Of the *b'nai mitzvah* students, girls having gone through bat mitzvah were more likely to volunteer in the Jewish community and attributed more importance to being Jewish than did the bar mitzvah boys (Kosmin 2002, 253).

Although civic leaders often point to the structure of American Hebrew school education for the rise of the bar mitzvah, rabbis and educators alike insist that Jewish education is geared toward wider goals and the bar mitzvah ceremony involves an important (and to some the most important) secular component. In light of the disappointing effects of the bar mitzvah on religious maintenance and coming of age transition, the most common alternative explanation is family socialization and community networking it provides (Davis 1995, 2003; Kennedy 2005; Schoenfeld 1993b). Kosmin's statistics lead him to consider the familial bonding of the bar mitzvah in light of the uncertainty of holding a Jewish wedding in the life cycle of the boy for the continued appeal of the bar mitzvah, despite criticisms of the bar mitzvah by rabbis for undermining their religious purpose and by civic leaders for being too materialistic and competitive. Basing his view on the observation that "for many couples it is the first major family and social event since their own wedding," Kosmin hypothesizes that the bar mitzvah is a developmental milestone for the parents who "must present themselves publicly in relation to their religious tradition to the most significant people in their lives—their family, colleagues, and social network" (2000, 236). There is merit in this argument because of the background of social and economic anxieties for many liberal Jews of on the one hand, appearing integrated into the larger society, and on the other, of validating their commitment to Jewish identity among members of their religious group. Yet a closer look at the ceremony reveals that the ritual portions of the bar mitzvah feature the relationship of the father and son, rather than the whole family.

Related to the question of the bar mitzvah's modern appeal is its historical trajectory since the early twentieth century. Although popular culture may present the bar mitzvah as an ancient Jewish rite, its tradition is of relatively recent origin. Many scholarly observers have editorialized that its rise among the people of the book is remarkable considering there is no mention of the ritual in its sacred texts of Torah or Talmud. The term *bar mitzvah*, or son of the commandment, appears in the Talmud (BM 96a) for a person subject to law, but it does not appear in reference to assuming religious obligations before the fifteenth century (Chill 1979, 315). The scholarly consensus is that as a ceremony it dates to local medieval German practices which diffused to eastern Europe, but there it did not gain the elevated or standardized status now given it in western Europe and America (Abrahams 1958, 32; Marcus 1996, 119-26; Marcus 2004, 82-123; Pollack 1971, 59-62).

The key components of the *derashah*, or interpretive speech, and examination drew significant notice in eighteenth century Italy, and it may be from there that the ritual made some inroads into north African Jewry (Goldberg 2003, 90-91; Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 335-39). Yet in the substantial Jewish communities of Yemen it did not develop at all (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 342-43). It is also noteworthy that in North Africa, religious majority could be reached any time the boy was ready, and among Indian Jews it occurred around five years old (Goldberg 2003, 92). The historical explanation of a German-Italian influence is often accompanied by speculation on the rise of the bar mitzvah rituals as local imitations of Christian confirmation practices, whether out of interests of assimilation or modernization (Marcus 2004, 109-13; Schauss 1950, 120-21). Well into the twentieth century, Judaism's rabbinical annals observed that the bar mitzvah was a fading tradition or one that the rabbis should eradicate because it challenged elite notions of Judaism (Silverman, Morris 1932, 329-31). A leading authority for Orthodox Jewry in North America, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986), for example, publicly declared, "If I had the power, I would abolish the *bar mitzvah* ceremony in this country...It is well known that it has brought no one closer to study or observance" (Sherwin 1990, 150). For notable modern Jewish historians such as Jenna Weissman Joselit, the triumph of the bar mitzvah over this rabbinical resistance is the example *par excellence* of a singular American culture within the wider Jewish world. It demonstrates the ascendancy in the United States of the creative, upwardly aspiring folk interested in accommodating modernity over the elite hegemony of the ancients in the stodgy synagogue (Joselit 1994, 89-118).

Sociological and psychological inquiries have underscored the way the bar mitzvah involves the family and could be used therapeutically to link generations and create community (Davis 1995, 2003; Kennedy 2005; Schoenfeld 1993b). Certainly the bar mitzvah can take on a different character depending on the family dynamic, but the unanswered question remains after examining these findings about the centrality of the father-son relationship despite growing egalitarianism and feminization in Judaism. The sociopsychological interpretations positing a social bonding function are not that much different from the folk view that the bar mitzvah is something that each family wants to make its own while still showing fidelity to tradition. Logically, the bonding is a consequence rather than a source of the ceremony.¹ This folk view has been contrasted, particularly in religious literature, with elite pressures of rabbinical leaders to maintain the bar mitzvah's synagogue function of encouraging participation in the *minyan* (Kosmin 2002, 239-41; Liebman 1973; Schoenfeld 1993a).

The implication of the functionalist analysis is that the bar mitzvah persists because it provides benefits to participants, but the bar mitzvah has raised conflicts in the Jewish community and surveys affirm the tremendous pressures that preparation for the event raises. Folklorists and ethnologists for their part have emphasized the expressive ritual components of the bar mitzvah as a Jewish version of global pubertal ceremonies. The bar mitzvah is cited most commonly in folkloristic textbooks and reference works as a prominent coming-of-age "rite of passage" evident in western industrialized countries (Haskell 1996, 410; McKeever-Furst 1992, 29; Smith, Robert 1972, 165; Spiro 1977). Folklorists and ethnologists

are eager to include this example probably because few public coming-of-age rituals exist in America and Europe to compare to the anthropological haul of so-called primitive puberty initiations that draw attention to themselves as exotic, sexually tinged practices of public transition to adulthood (Raphael 1988; Spiro 1977). The bar mitzvah lacks this sexual undertone, it seems, but it burst on the American scene at a time when industrialized countries were extending childhood and becoming aware of adolescence as a distinct stage of life (Russ 1993). This coincidence is apparent in the connection of the bar mitzvah to rites of passage although a correlation cannot be established because of its pre-modern existence. The bar mitzvah conceptualized as a rite of passage shows folk tradition to be socially functional, presumably needed to mark passage from childhood into adulthood. Jewish educator Jack D. Spiro summarizes this view when he states, "The process itself may consume most of childhood, but the initiation rite is a form of 'cultural compression,' when all that is learned is compressed in the rituals. The compression itself focuses on the new roles that must be assumed by the initiate as he enters into the realm of manhood" (Spiro 1977, 394). For Spiro, this process is common among rites of all societies, but what is distinctive in Jewish culture is "the high degree of emphasis on learning, the paramountcy of knowledge and understanding" (1977, 399). Thus manhood is attained along with Jewish identity, he concludes, through the rite of passage, although he has difficulty reconciling the "long, arduous intellectual process" of preparation with the relatively short "transition" phase on the big day.

A logical problem with the demarcation line for Jewish male passage is the fixed age of thirteen years old. Biblical sources, for instance, cite twenty as a legal adult age and do not prescribe rituals for puberty. One can join the *minyān* without being bar mitzvah and could celebrate bar mitzvah at other ages and localities. Jewish folklorist Hayyim Schauss hypothesizes that thirteen became ritually significant not because of a developmental stage it marked but because "thirteen was a sacred number among the Jews in ancient times" (Schauss 1950, 113). He speculates that the designation of twenty for maturity was a later development, "when a more advanced legal system was in force among Jews" (Schauss 1950, 113). If a sacred number was applied, however, it would probably be eighteen after the mystical numerological equivalent of *chai* (consisting of the Hebrew letters of *het* and *yod*) for "living" (indeed, at bar mitzvahs today, common cash gifts are denominations of eighteen to signify good luck). And in fact, Rabbi Stuart Rosenberg (1923-1990), spiritual leader of Canada's Jews, writing in the influential journal *Religious Education* on the "right age for Bar Mitzvah" advocates for reforming the bar mitzvah tradition by holding it for boys at the age of eighteen (Rosenberg 1965). Other liberal rabbis in the twentieth century tried to replace the bar mitzvah with a confirmation ceremony at fifteen or sixteen, to keep children in Jewish education longer and to align it with an age perceived to be more of a coming-of-age period (as in the popular girls' celebration of "sweet sixteen"), but the efforts have been largely unsuccessful (Joselit 1994, 105-30).

Looking to ancient sources for the entrenchment of thirteen in the Jewish ritual cycle, folklorist Theodor Gaster was concerned that correlation was difficult because neither a pubertal or sacramental rite appears at thirteen in sacred texts.

Its cultural significance, he offered, was in being the traditional age for marriage in the ancient Near East (1980, 68). The *Mishnah*, however, gives the expected age for marriage as eighteen, preceded by stages of study beginning “at five years the age is reached for Scripture, at ten for the study of Mishna, at thirteen for the fulfilment of the commandments, at fifteen for the study of the Talmud, at eighteen for marriage, at twenty for seeking at livelihood....” (Pirkei Avot 5:25; see Hertz 1945, 101-3). In this interpretation, thirteen is the appropriate age for understanding and enacting commandments in an educational life cycle, even though various rabbinical authorities have countered that it is too young (Rosenberg 1965). Rather than viewing a religious significance to the bar mitzvah because of the sacredness of the number, Gaster observed that the bar mitzvah is a custom without meaning; he thought of it in the modern era as an occasion for a party without spiritual or developmental importance. Reflecting a common rabbinical attitude of “elite” Judaism, Gaster in his influential survey of Jewish folklife disparaged the bar mitzvah by concluding, “It confers nothing, imparts nothing, creates nothing; it merely celebrates” (Gaster 1980, 67).

“Merely celebrates”? What about bar mitzvah as rite of passage? Ivan Marcus hypothesizes that “In recent times, as Jews sought to mark the life cycle in ritual ways even in lives not otherwise filled with Torah observance, the bar mitzvah emerged as a rite of passage from Jewish childhood into adolescence and acculturation into the larger secular world, especially in American or Israeli life” (2003, 123). The reference to “rite of passage” declares its function of moving from one stage to another thought to be universally containing a structure of separation, transition, and incorporation by French folklorist Arnold van Gennep in 1908. It should be pointed out that although van Gennep as a scholar of religion knew about the bar mitzvah, the event is totally absent from his foundational book *Rites de Passage*, and in texts such as Gaster’s and the *Encyclopedia Judaica* it is labeled a *ceremony* that is not about transition to adulthood as much as either a celebration of the conclusion of Hebrew education or a display of commitment to Judaism (Gaster 1980, 66-77; Kaplan and Roth 1972). For psychologist Jacob Arlow the bar mitzvah also has educational more than developmental significance. He calls it an “ordeal by recitation,” linking it to nineteenth-century educational tests establishing the authority of the patriarchal synagogue (1951, 357). Spiro agrees, pointing out, “The boy is on trial, perhaps not the kind of trial involved in walking over hot coals. But it is an intellectual trial, no less traumatizing as he stands before relatives and authorities to demonstrate his skill, ability, and knowledge of Torah and Jewish law. ‘It is, in essence, an academic degree’” (1977, 397). Ivan Marcus observes that “there is a culmination in the bar mitzvah as well as a celebration of youth. It often is the end of a Jewish child’s formal Jewish schooling, his or her graduation” (2004, 122). Anthropologist Harvey Goldberg in his comparative survey of Jewish rituals surmises that this association with examination and graduation is grounded in the bar mitzvah’s evolution out of an educational context. In his view, the bar mitzvah displaced the common ritual of entering religious education with one to mark its end. Part of the rationale is that the transition of thirteen is one from elementary school to higher education of *bet-ba-midrash*.

Part of the problem with the bar mitzvah as a rite of passage is how van Gennepe's structural order for moving from one stage to another of separation, transition, and incorporation applies to the event. One would expect much transition in a coming-of-age practice, but the bar mitzvah involves an inordinately long preparation time, typically starting as early as three years old. The bar mitzvah is not separated during the event and is not presented as liminal. The bar mitzvah's central task is to read a Torah portion and provide a speech rather than engaging in an initiatory act with male elders. As an incorporation, as sociologist Judith Davis noted, it struggles to mark a change in status or passage to another stage. Adult privileges outside of congregational life are not granted, and for most children, it is something that parents plan for them. It is therefore in practice a milestone rather than an initiation.

I contend that meanings exist often outside the awareness of the participants that contributed to its spread in folk Judaism since the mid-twentieth century in western Europe and America. My evidence comes from participation in a number of ceremonies, symbolic reading of liturgical texts, a survey of former *b'nai mitzvah*, and a content analysis of *derashah*, the interpretive bar mitzvah speeches the boys make. Using developmental psychology and historical context in the mid-twentieth-century crisis of masculinity, I will provide a folkloristic explanation of why the bar mitzvah rose to its present status. I look at it as an invented milestone tradition that has dealt with father-son conflicts as the boy deals with the uncertain status of his masculinity in a wider modern context.

Identification: Preparation, Fasting, Separation, and Recitation

Let me review the components of the bar mitzvah. Most Jewish educators and synagogue administrators encourage participation in Hebrew School beginning with the Aleph grade coinciding with kindergarten age as preparation for bar mitzvah by being able to read and chant Biblical Hebrew, recite prayers, and participate in congregational life. The bar mitzvah is treated as a culmination of one's education demonstrated by reading from the Torah and a speech. In the days before the bar mitzvah, no special events are planned, although in some communities, the boy may wear tefillin all day, get his hair cut or shaved off, or fast.

The ritual fast for the boy usually occurs on the Yom Kippur before his bar mitzvah, and it is distinguished from the fasting he may do with adults afterward by lasting until *Chatzot* (midday as defined by *Halakhab* or practical Jewish law). Rather than being prescribed in Torah, the transitional fast for the boy before his bar mitzvah on the Day of Atonement arose apparently as a folk custom in the modern period.² It may be based on the examples of the father's obligations to train a Jewish child mentioned in the Talmud, which include partial fasting on Yom Kippur after the age of nine years old (Shulem and Koenigsberg 2007). Yet *Halakhab* calls for fasting as a commandment *after* the bar mitzvah, with special reference to the symbolism of pubic hair growth for maturity: "a boy of thirteen and one day who have brought forth two hairs" is considered adult "with regard to all of the commandments and must complete the fast as an obligation from



Figure 1. Sephardic bar mitzvah ceremony, Brooklyn, New York, 1998. Photograph by Simon J. Bronner.

the Torah, but if they have not brought forth two hairs then they are regarded as minors and complete the fast as a rabbinical obligation only” (Krieger 2006). The significance of the occasion of Yom Kippur for the fast on special occasions is that it symbolizes a death and rebirth, divesting the individual of his or her previous life (Linke 1999, 149). The fast and wearing the white robe traditionally donned on Yom Kippur and burial at the end of life will be reenacted, for example, on the wedding day along with the same confessional prayers that are said on the holiday and at a death bed. The process therefore ritually confronts mortality, which, according to clinical psychologist Stuart Linke, “returns us to our core values and enables us to perceive ourselves more deeply” (1999, 149).

On its surface, the ritual fast before bar mitzvah appears to be preparation for the obligations that the boy will accrue after reaching the age of religious majority. Although fasting on Yom Kippur marks adult practice, the suffering it brings, even for the outcome of atonement, hardly could be considered a motivator to push on with the home stretch of bar mitzvah preparations, unless it is intentionally uncomfortable to metaphorically focus the bar mitzvah as an “ordeal,” as psychologist Jacob Arlow points out (1951, 357). If so, then it is a risky metaphor of pain and hunger to impose, if as Arlow argues, the period before the bar mitzvah “becomes the occasion for rebellion against the parents. The boy, for various reasons, may refuse to participate in the entire process and

may repudiate his parents' authority as represented by the need to go through the Bar Mitzvah initiation" (1951, 356). But a symbolic rationale outside of the awareness of the participants may be at work to explain why it is important in the custom (apparently in defiance of *Halakhic* authority) to fast rather than other *mitzvot* the boy will practice after turning thirteen. One possible connection in religious scholarship is that the sacrifice of fasting is accepted as a purificatory rite and declaration of faith because it is followed by a joyous feast (Farrell 1985). On the high holy day of Yom Kippur, fasting after the New Year is followed by an occasion for a social "breaking the fast," as it is called in North American locales. Occurring during the first Jewish month of *Tishrei* (from the root for "beginning"), the purificatory fast marks a fresh start in the ritual year. Is the comparison being made between the enforced fast before the bar mitzvah, then, and the bar mitzvah in which the immaturity and irresponsibility of childhood are ritually replaced with adult religious obligations, and encouraged by the festive meal?

If so, the comparison seems strained between the deprivation of food in fasting and the central recitation and discourse at the bar mitzvah ceremony. Both actions do have something in common, however, in their arousal of parental attention, and this clue may lead to an explanation of the tradition. My argument hinges on the symbolism of fasting in many religious contexts as the maternal provision of food pointed out by theorists of ritual (Dundes 2002; Farrell 1985, 254). Anthropologist Eileen Farrell, for example, suggests that fasting representing birth or infancy in ritual time "evokes the most primitive wish-fulfillment of all, the moment when the hungry infant regains its mother's breast" (1985, 254). It is symbolically consistent, therefore, that fasting as a reminder of infantile dependence on the mother's sustenance is accompanied by prohibitions on adult male activities of shaving and "seminal pollution" (Trachtenberg 1979, 212). With fasting often occurring during periods of mourning, representing, according to Theodor Gaster, "the state of suspended animation which ensues at the end of a life lease" (1961, 29), it offers a separation from the mother that allows transition and growth. In other words, a previous state or life is being let go and a new one is being embraced. As with other symbolic practices, oral activity is associated with maternal attributes (such as the Jewish folk term *mameloshn* for "mother tongue" or folk language) that leads to patriarchal reading or codification (such as *Pirkei Avot*, literally "chapters of the fathers or patriarchs," or idiomatically as "Ethics of the Fathers," which is a significant tractate of the *Mishnah* composed by male rabbis). At Yom Kippur and other religious occasions where a connection to God is being made, part of that transition is making a transfer from the physical dependence on the mother to spiritual guidance from the father (see Smith, W. Robertson 1907, 51-53). Worshippers in the traditional Jewish liturgy thus speak of God in the central prayer of the *Amida* as "our God and God of our Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Even with revision of liturgies to reflect egalitarianism, the principle holds, as articulated by folklorist Alan Dundes, that "if an infant associates feeling hunger pangs with the coming of an adult parent or parent-surrogate, then the adult who wants a deity to approach must clearly make himself hungry. Moreover, the hungrier he is, the more likely it is that the parent-deity will approach" (2002, 9), and that parent as authority will

likely be patriarchal. Many Midrashic legends underscore the idea that matriarchal intervention brings the patriarchal God closer. A popular narrated example is of the Jewish matriarch Rachel, frequently depicted as the compassionate mother weeping for her captured children, who the *Midrash* recounts arising from her grave and imploring God's clemency for the Israelites driven into captivity. Rachel points out her self-abnegation and thereupon God promises her the restoration of Israel (Rothkoff 1972, 1489). She also shows up in modern wartime legends protecting Israeli male soldiers from terrorist harm in campaigns outside their borders (Wagner 2009).

In line with the symbolism of fasting as separation from the mother to invite the father-deity, the spread of the pre-bar-mitzvah fast begins to make sense. A question that is often posed about the bar mitzvah is how it acts as a coming-of-age ritual if the mother associated with childhood is absent from the supposed rite of passage. The answer is that the separation occurs before the ceremony beginning with the ritual fast, and the transition from physical dependence to spiritual awareness continues into the ritualized haircut and acquisition of *tefillin*. The task of the ceremony on the big day then becomes through reading and discourse to accentuate the role of the father-deity. Still remaining to be resolved is the relationship of the familial father who had been an authority over as well as provider for the boy. It appears that the rabbi and cantor can act as spiritual surrogates for the father who allow the boy to separate from familial paternity. Still complicating this ritualistic scenario connected to traditional cognitive categories held in Judaism is modern awareness of changing gender roles, especially in relation to the boy's understanding of "becoming a man," where intellect in the Jewish ceremony rather than bodily strength is being used as a ritual measure of masculinity.

The ceremony begins with the boy going to the *bimah* (reader's stand) to recite standard blessings over the Torah that would be heard on any occasion the Torah is read. According to Spiro's ethnography of the event, "the boy separates himself from his mother, from his childhood, as he walks to the altar of the synagogue," where he is "wrapped in his 'tallit' and surrounded by the males who will read with him" (1977, 398). Traditionally, women do not wear a *tallit* and do not participate on the *bimah*. The mother is a spectator while the father takes a prominent position at the platform with his son. Unlike preparations for other readings of the Torah, the father recites a short prayer, *Barukh shepetarani meonsbo shel zeh*, after the son's conclusion of the second blessing. This blessing is unique to the bar mitzvah; it is not said for the daughter at the bat mitzvah. The translation is "Blessed be He, Who has now rid (or freed) me from the responsibility or punishment for this one." Rabbinical literature suggests two interpretations from the source of the benediction in the *Midrash* (a compilation of commentaries on the Hebrew Bible) commenting on the phrase, "And the boys grew up" (Gen. 25:27). One is that the father was punished when his son sinned, for he failed to raise him properly, and the other is that the son was punished for the sins of his father (Nulman 1993, 91-92). Whichever interpretation one argues, the common thread is that the opening of the ceremony is thematized in relation to a father-son conflict. Unlike other blessings, the name of God is

omitted from the prayer and the Hebrew word *patoor*, meaning to exempt or rid, conveys a negative connotation of vexation (Arlow 1951, 357).³ With this connotation, Jewish historian Cecil Roth contends, the father's prayer declaring his freedom from responsibility for the boy "was considered an integral part of the celebration, *hardly less than the boy's own participation in the service*" (Roth 1955, 18; emphasis added).

The conflict resolution in the ceremony is for father and son to part ways, and at that moment the boy's teacher steps in to guide the boy in the reading, either the prophetic portion of the week (*haftarah*) or an entire biblical portion—the *sidrah*. Indeed, the father will often stand off at a distance at that point. Afterward the boy presents a speech that interprets a point of Jewish law or interprets the weekly Torah portion (*parshah*). The speech is a narrative that typically follows a tripartite structure: (1) a standard opening of "Today I am a man," followed by an expression of gratitude to parents, especially the father, for having raised and educated the boy; (2) reference to Biblical sources (a favorite in recorded speeches is the sacrifice of Isaac by his father) followed by its application to his own conduct or the society; and (3) a promise of allegiance to the Jewish community, often accompanied with acknowledgment of the role of the religious leaders who helped him to become bar mitzvah (Glazer 1928; Gruberger 1993; Katz 1931). At the conclusion of the speech, it is now common among both Ashkenazic and Sephardic services for children in the audience to throw candies at the boy.

After the service, the parents host a *seudah mitzvah* (festive meal celebrating a commandment), and this has expanded into the bar mitzvah party often held in a rented hall. Despite harsh criticisms of the party such as that voiced by Rabbi Abraham Chill, "The contemporary custom of celebrating the *bar mitzvah* with lavish and ostentatious parties has no basis in Jewish tradition and it is in fact contrary to the spirit if not the letter of Jewish law and morality," the secular celebration has grown and featured various themes geared to the boy's worldly interests (Chill 1993, 317). The party has become tightly controlled by party planners, but an expectation among the bar mitzvah boy's male friends is that some pranking or even hazing will occur to torment the center of attention and provide a test of his toughness. This might include giving the bar mitzvah boy a "wedgie" (lifting his underwear so as to grip his genitals or get stuck between the buttocks) and doctoring his food and drink. The boys may sit with the bar mitzvah on a dais, and frequently they initiate lifting the bar mitzvah on a chair in imitation of a wedding custom for the bride and groom. More sedate and official is the ritual lighting of candles by family members during the party.

Among the Sephardim, the donning of *tefillin* or phylacteries is featured in bar mitzvah practices, and families may hold a separate celebration before the bar mitzvah called *Yom Tefillin*. The tefillin are two cubical leather containers with attached leather straps. One is worn on the head (*shel rosh*) while the other is on the arm (*shel yad*); the thongs for *shel yad* are wrapped seven times around the arm while the straps on *shel rosh* hang loosely behind the head and shoulders like hair strands. The cases hold parchments with four biblical passages, expressing four basic Jewish precepts—the law of tefillin, recognition of God's kingship, the unity of the Creator, and the exodus from Egypt (Roth 1955, 23). Betrothal

is symbolized in the arm thong which is wound three times around the middle finger while reciting “And I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment and in lovingkindness, and in mercy. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the Lord” (Hosea 2, 21-22). In keeping with the laying on of tefillin as a male rite, the Exodus story encased in the tefillin (Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16) opens with the commandment to consecrate to God “every firstborn male” and relates the promise of a “land flowing with milk and honey” promised to “your forefathers” (Exodus 13: 1, 5). Indeed, the text signals a transference from a submissive state of slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt to a liberation with the guidance of Moses to the promised land. The bearded rabbi in the ceremony takes on the role of teacher Moses guiding his flock to be independent (Moses does not enter the land of Israel). The ceremony for *Yom Tefillin* also brings out patriarchal symbolism between father and rabbi in their ritual placement of the tefillin or phylacteries on the boy before he does it himself. Typically, the father puts one of the cases on the boy’s head, representing his education for which he was responsible, and the rabbi works the other case on the child’s arm, representing his action (Roth 1955, 22). The boy may give a speech then as well as on the Sabbath, and the boy is blessed aloud by the congregation. A ritual practice that appears to reinforce the transition from father to teacher as patriarch is the boy walking around the assembly with his new decorated tefillin bag into which congregants would drop silver coins, which are then presented as a gift to the bar mitzvah boy’s teacher (Roth 1955, 22).



Figure 2. Bar mitzvah boy with tefillin accompanied by father and teachers, Brooklyn, New York, 2008. Photograph by Ronnie Habbaz, courtesy of Ronald and Adi Cohen.

The mother is involved usually in making arrangements for the event, and a modern tradition has been for her to weave or present a *tallit* to the bar mitzvah boy. The significance of the *tallit* is that after his thirteenth birthday, it can be worn on the Sabbath in prayer and thus represents his reaching religious majority. It is customary to have a formal photo portrait taken of the bar mitzvah boy in his *tallit* as a keepsake to distribute. The mother's role is what Judith Davis (1995) calls the traditional *balabosta*, translated from the Yiddish as the woman of the house with the implication that she has a managerial role to compensate for her exclusion from the ceremony. Her management has extended to responsibility for the boy's Jewish education, although the bar mitzvah ceremony conveys the frequent fiction that the father has been overseeing the boy's religious training (See Gordon 1959, 58-59). Nonetheless, at the bar mitzvah the father takes center stage with his son, until he is moved aside by the supervising rabbi and cantor.

Annotation: Relation of the Bar Mitzvah to Circumcision, Haircutting, Wedding, and Examination

In its structure and symbolism, the bar mitzvah can be compared to four separate traditions: *bris* (Yiddish; *brit milah* in Hebrew) or circumcision, *upsberin* (Yiddish) or the ritual first haircut, the Jewish wedding, and the final examination or dissertation. The comparison to the *bris* comes up in the discourse of the bar mitzvah because of its coincidence with the boy's birthday, which raises images of circumcision. Typical is a memoir I collected showing that the bar mitzvah was narrated in relation to the *bris*:

I was constantly reminded that the bar mitzvah was the biggest event in my life after my *bris*. Since the bar mitzvah came around my birthday, my mother brought up her memories of the *bris* and how much I've grown. She's always sentimental, you know. My father would make a bad joke about it would be just as painful besides telling me that another thing that's the same is that everyone will want to hold me. I did think it was funny when he said they're not talking about my pecker when they say, "my how you've grown."

More official charting of the Jewish boy's milestones typically involves the bar mitzvah's relation to ritual circumcision. Roth in the mid-twentieth century, for example, declares, "In the traditional Jewish scheme, there were three great festive occasions in a boy's life. There was the eighth day after his birth, when he was introduced into the Covenant of Abraham. There was the day when he was first initiated to study, being taken to synagogue, blessed by the rabbi, and given honey to lick from a slate on which letters of the Hebrew alphabet were written, as a token that the Torah should be sweet to his mouth all the days of his life. And there was the day when he was first considered legally bound to fulfill the obligations of Jewish law and practice, and could be regarded as a Bar Mitzvah, a 'child of precepts'" (1955, 15). With the decline of honey licking to mark the

start of study among modern liberal Jews, more attention has been focused on the continuity in the Jewish life cycle from circumcision to bar mitzvah.

Like the bris, the bar mitzvah is represented as an induction into faith and is prescribed in intervals of time: 8 days for the bris and 13 years for the bar mitzvah. The bris also centrally involves the father-son relationship, for the father gives the child to the *mohel* (Jewish ritual specialist in circumcision) who circumcises the child. Several college students who gave me memoirs of their bar mitzvah mentioned that references to the *bris* were made in pranking by the boy's friends. Connections were made to binding and cutting in the bar mitzvah suit and ritual haircut, often accompanied by checking whether the boy has pubic hair despite the "damage" done by the circumcision.

Jewish advisers Marc-Alain Ouaknin and Françoise-Anne Ménager connect the haircutting to the importance of manhood to a haircutting ritual (*upsberin* in Yiddish and *chalakab* in Hebrew) that many orthodox communities observe for the three-year old boys (2005, 46-48). An educational connection exists because the child is expected for the first time to go to school, where he will learn to read Hebrew. They find similarities between the attention in the haircutting ritual and bar mitzvah (they could extend this comparison to the *bris*) to the trauma of loss and its provision of healing with cultural identity. Both rituals also are replete with reminders of masculinity. The haircut distinguishes the boy from the long hair of the girl. According to Ouaknin and Ménager, the immersion into books is symbolically consistent with the gendering of cutting rituals: "He goes from the maternal language, which is oral, to the paternal language, which is written. Hebrew also links writing to the paternal language in an extraordinary way. The word 'alphabet'—*aleph-bet* in Hebrew—is pronounced *av* and means 'father'" (2005, 48). Further underscoring study as intellectual gain to compensate for physical loss is a traditional gift in both rituals of a honey cake or sweets shaped like letters (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 48). In circumcision, haircutting, and bar mitzvah rituals, the boy acquires a new ceremonial garment. In the haircutting the boy gains a small *tallit* to wear as an undergarment known as *tzitzit* (based on the commandment in Torah to wear fringes at the corners of garments and also meaning "hair"; see Ezekiel 8:3). *Tzitzit* or braided fringes are attached to the boy's *tallit* and are often used in the service to touch the Torah as it is carried around the synagogue.

In addition to the larger *tallit* conspicuously worn over the shoulders at prayer, the *tefillin* adds long strips of leather on the arm and head. The boy usually receives the gift of *tefillin* before the *tallit*; a common time to present the phylacteries is 30 days before the bar mitzvah. This period is related to a monthly cycle in the Jewish lunar calendar and is commonly associated with a mourning period of *shloshim* (from the Hebrew for "thirty."). A mourning period is simulated for the passing of youth, and as in the ritual guidelines after burial, hair of the family mourners cannot be cut until after the mourning period (usually just before the bar mitzvah). "Laying *tefillin*," as the act is called involves a form of binding because leather cases attached to the leather straps contain Torah passages. One that is especially conspicuous is on the forehead with straps hanging down over the shoulders in the manner of hair. Rabbis teaching the laying of *tefillin*



Figure 3. Bar mitzvah studio portrait, New York City, 1961.

will comment on the placement on head and arms as committing intellect and body to fulfillment of commandments. But there is also an important connection to the father-son relationship. The four passages from the Torah on the *tefillin* parchments are teachings the father will address to the child and relate to communicative skills: *Veamarta* for you will say, *Veshinaneta Vedibarta* for you will repeat and you will speak, *Velimadeta* for you will teach (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 161-62). Both *tefillin* and *itzitit* are symbolically cut to show completion by going over the head and removing them after prayer (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 50).

A ceremonial connection to the circumcision at the bar mitzvah is the wimpel (from the German *Wimpel* for “flag” or “sash”), a decorated cloth on



Figure 4. Judy Goldberg holding a wimpel she made for a bris/bar mitzvah, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2009. Photograph by Simon J. Bronner.

which the boy is circumcised and later used as a sash to bind the Sefer Torah.⁴ It might be part of a custom at the age of three when the boy is toilet trained. The father gets an *aliyah* (invitation to the altar) and brings his boy with him to the *bimah* to wrap the wimpel around the Torah. Thought to be of German origin like the bar mitzvah, the decorated wimpel gains significance because it is used to swaddle the baby boy at his *brit milah* and represents the covenant with a patriarchal figure, as the Hebrew blessing recited by the father reminds the gathered group: "Praised by Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by Thy commandments, and hast bidden us to make him enter into the covenant of Abraham our father." The group responds, "As he has entered into the covenant, so may he be introduced to the study of Torah, to the wedding canopy, and to good deeds." Based on this text, wimpels are inscribed in Hebrew with the following message underscoring the patriarchal line: "(Name of child, called) son of (name of father) born under a good constellation on (day of week, date, month, year) may he (or may the Lord let him) grow to Torah, marriage, and good deeds." An artist may illuminate the text with related depictions of a Jewish wedding under the traditional canopy (*huppah*); masculine animals such as the lion of Judah, eagles, and leopards⁵; and a boy holding up a Torah commonly interpreted as a bar mitzvah scene (Eis 1979, 32; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1977, 18-19). One way that the bar mitzvah is thematized in the father-son relationship is in the transfer of the wimpel. After the circumcision, the wimpel belongs to the father, but after the bar mitzvah, possession transfers to the son.

Bar mitzvah (exemplifying the commandment at the *bris* to "grow to Torah") and wedding are connected in the custom of giving the groom an *aliyah* the week before his wedding to re-enact the call to the *bimah* at his bar mitzvah. In a sign of readiness for marriage, the groom often donates his wimpel to his synagogue before the wedding. The covering of the *huppah* is frequently composed of the boy's bar mitzvah *tallit*, and the bride will replace it with a larger *tallit* she has woven or purchased for the groom (Marcus 2003, 117). The transfer of the *tallit* (at a critical part of the ceremony, bride and groom are both covered by the *tallit* to symbolize their unity) and the circling of the bride around the groom indicates readiness for sexual relations. Practices at the bar mitzvah suggest the metaphor of the wedding is used to represent sexual displacement by immersion in books rather than sexual awakening. When the boy is called to the *bimah* at the bar-mitzvah he is identified as the "Bar Mitzvah Groom" and the Torah is the bride to which he is bound. According to Arlow's description, wedding and bar mitzvah are joined in the recitation, because "Throughout his recitation the initiate is observed intently as a young man on trial undergoing a very difficult examination. A sense of compassionate participation grips the audience, especially the boy's mother" (Arlow 1951, 357). The anticipation can be related to anxiety over sexually consummating a marriage; in this case the enactment is displacing the sexuality with potency in touching the Torah with a *yad*, a metal extension in the shape of a finger, and the oral recitation. In the tefillin ceremony described previously, the boy places the *shel yad* on the arm and wraps straps that extend from it around the middle finger while saying verses referring to betrothal. Although thirteen seems young to invoke the metaphor of marriage, Ouaknin and Ménager find

evidence for its enactment as compensation for sexually “losing a part of oneself through the body” (2005, 46). They argue that “boys lose sperm (wet dreams and first masturbation)” at ages that “correspond closely to the time that the losses described above are first sustained” (2005, 46). Further, the ejaculatory praxis of throwing candies at the bar mitzvah boy resembles the showering of the bride and groom after a wedding.

Arguably, access to Torah is unconsciously equated with access to a woman which the father already possesses. Arlow hypothesized that organizing the ordeal as an examination is symbolically important because, in his words, “Failing an examination, together with the humiliation which the student experiences, is often unconsciously equated with being castrated,” and from clinical cases, he argued that examiners are identified with the father image of the oedipal phase (Arlow 1951, 365). To be sure, the bar mitzvah boy is expected to pass the examination by his male elders, but more than any other theme, memoirs mention performance anxiety about successfully completing the reading and speech under the watchful eye of teacher and father. The chanting for the reading is done by rote, and it is all the more challenging because of the absence of vowel aids to pronunciation. As Ouaknin and Ménager point out, “This means that to learn it, one has to accept being part of a tradition. One cannot learn this vowel-less text on one’s own, even if one reads and speaks Hebrew fluently” (2005, 63). The process of tradition they are referring to involves an oral “handing down” of performative practices from male elder to the boy. In this way, the connotation of identity formation at the bar mitzvah is prominent because more than a text is being chanted; tradition as a sustaining process for the group is being enacted—and honored.

A lesson of the boy’s ordeal is that being part of the tradition is difficult and is administered by the synagogue patriarchy rather than the familial one. The following narratives collected from young men who had experienced their bar mitzvah five to eight years before bear out these pervasive themes of performance anxiety and participation in tradition at the bar mitzvah:

I was nervous beyond words. The cantor tried to calm me by telling me it was my special day, but that made me only feel worse. I felt that all eyes were on me and I could never be ready in time. I felt that my voice was going to crack at any moment. It’s different from show and tell in school, because it was so formal and when I was reading, I was dwarfed by these older men who I thought were breathing down my neck.

I think my mother worried about everyone coming and that the party would go well. It was my father who sweated the synagogue part, and I sweated the more he did, even though he didn’t have to say much. That suit bothered me and my friends teased me about my get-up. Older relatives told me they remembered my father’s bar mitzvah that was so wonderful and I felt that I had to live up to that. I think that’s why I pushed to read faster than I should have. I don’t think my sister had as hard a time at her bat mitzvah. There was totally more pressure on me.

I dropped everything as the time got closer so I could concentrate. I would have loved to have postponed it but that date was set. I was into sports and let that slide for the bar mitzvah. The rabbi told me that I would have the support of family to get me through, but I didn't know half these people. I felt that I was singing for strangers, which made me nervous. I think it was definitely worth it after everything, but I was a wreck before.

The tone of these narratives is borne out by Kosmin's survey, which showed that 51 percent of parents reported that the bar mitzvah dominated the life of the family during the year of preparation, but 97 percent still felt that the bar mitzvah "was worth the time and trouble involved" (2002, 235-236). Despite complaints that the bar mitzvah was time consuming and "nerve-racking," only one percent of the *b'nai mitzvah* wrote that it "was not worth the time it took" (2002, 235).

The bar mitzvah treats learning as a masculine attribute because of command of the Torah associated with male leadership and the association of the bearded rabbi with an especially learned man at a time when the boy is concerned with the growth of pubic and facial hair as a sign of masculinity. These images are reinforced by cake-toppers (a cake in the form of a Torah is commonly reported), a host of figurines often given as gifts that depict the tallit-covered, hairless boy at the Torah or *bimah* under the tutelage of a bearded religious figure.⁶ Arlow, however, did not believe the bar mitzvah was effective in resolving oedipal conflicts because of the time lag between sexual maturity and heterosexuality sanctioned by modern society. He suggested that as a result of the failure of the ceremony to ritualize puberty the bar mitzvah boy chooses a number of psychological strategies, including channeling sexual and aggressive energies into study, rejecting the father by renewed submission to an exalted father image of God, or cessation of religious adherence to either join or rebel against his biological father (Arlow 1951, 364-68). Although there is a symbolic replacement of the father in the bar mitzvah, the separation from, and competition for, the mother characteristic of pubertal rituals is not as apparent. What is manifested more than sexual competition is the celebration of the child's precociousness evident in command of the "ordeal by examination."

Instead of independence to another stage, the bar mitzvah presents a paradoxical combination of separation and connection. The reading declares an early autonomy from education even as it joins the individual to a patrilineal tradition. The boy is not integrated into the community as much as he is forced to become self-aware of his own development and aspirations. Following the symbolic communication of the circumcision (*brit milah* is literally the "covenant of the word") of which he was unaware, and possibly the *upsheerin* at which he begins immersion in the alphabet, the bar mitzvah shows his readiness for the world by a performance that draws attention to itself for what Ouaknin and Ménager call "creative combinations and recombinations of letters and words" challenging the linear structure of storytelling (2005, 63). The boy becomes conscious of the attainment of skills that will carry him into adulthood. Rabbis hope that the ancient source of the texts will remind him to commit to the

synagogue, but the praxis of his “reading in bursts” (words bursting out into letters or into groups of letters, making other words and coming together into a new order) and exemption of his father allows him to detach (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 62-63).

Analysis and Explanation: Historical and Social Contexts for Jewish Manly Display

If the bar mitzvah is not effective as a sacramental or pubertal rite, its value as an ethnic commitment is questionable because of the decline of Jewish involvement after the event. If it is not particularly useful for coming of age or revitalizing Jewish identity, and parents complain of its exorbitant expense and material excess, then what explains its spreading popularity during the twentieth century? The Joselit thesis that it became entrenched as a life cycle celebration in which the family’s economic success could be displayed and ethnic identity unhinged from synagogue life in the post-immigrant generation does not readily apply to a different set of social and historical circumstances for Jewish parents with only faint memories of the ghetto experience. And if there are traces of this motivation of status anxiety still apparent in the suburban conspicuous consumption evident in popular-culture portrayals such as *Keeping Up with the Steins* and *Entourage*, then why did the synagogue component not disappear, particularly since prominent American rabbis held a negative or ambivalent attitude toward the bar mitzvah? The psychosexual connections of circumcision, examination, and wedding are strong in the ceremony, suggesting a developmental explanation, but is the ceremony working to resolve oedipal conflicts, considering that the mother plays a peripheral role by most accounts and the separation that occurs is from the father rather than from the mother as described in other coming-of-age processes?

With the rush to find a source in antiquity for the age of thirteen as a Jewish ritual age, it appears that being forgotten is its modern symbolism as the first year of adolescence, or the teen years. The twentieth century, especially the years after World War II, was marked by the rise of teenagers as a separate, often troubled or rebellious age and marketing target. Many factors went into the creation of adolescence particularly within North America and western Europe, including the end of child labor and the rise of the high school in attendance as well as status within popular culture. Wrapped up in the emerging image of the teen in the modern context of compensating for a lack of the provider role is the tough guy image of the adolescent relying on strength, competitiveness, and aggressive heterosexuality in preparation for economic and social independence. This was coupled with the feminized, constricted, suited father of the 1950s vividly spread in iconic images such as the rebellious teen’s father wearing an apron in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and the domestication of the father-businessman in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) (see Cross 2008, 95; see also Cohan 1997; Gilbert 2005; Gordon 1959, 57-64; Osgerby 2001; Young and Young 2004, 30, 184-86). Against this background of changing views of age-based masculinity, the Jewish emphasis on learning as the basis of masculine identity caused conflicts with the dominant society, at least if the goal was to integrate into society. The

Jewish body, as Sander Gilman has pointed out in his study of the European sources for this conflict, was defined as unsuited for military or strenuous work (Gilman 1991; see also Konner 2009, 144-53). Jews were known for brains rather than brawn (Gilman 1996). During the 1950s, Jews were notably absent from many cultural displays of teen masculine power including music, motors, sports, and dance (Kimmel 1996, 277-78). In folk humor, Jews were smart but weak, and many jokes about the bar mitzvah boy underscored his inadequacy as a sexualized man (Ouaknin and Ménager 2005, 55).

If that pressure to show manly traits came from outside of the Jewish community at a time when the bonds of the community began to unravel, from within the community, egalitarian ideas about the bat mitzvah began to take hold in Conservative and Reform wings of Judaism. The time of maturation for girls was defined a year earlier than the boys, adding insult to injury, even though her ceremony was not thematized with any declaration of "Today, I am a woman." In the background of the Jewish boy's maturation is the growth of the image through popular sources of the overprotective mother who inhibits the Jewish boy's maturity and stays with him through adulthood (Antler 2007). One should also not underestimate the psychological impact of Jewish circumcision as another internal conflict among Jews because of the implication that it diminishes sexual aggressiveness and masculine identity (Glick 2005; Mark 2003; Silverman, Eric 2006). Looking historically at bar mitzvah announcements, the theme of the bar mitzvah began to change from a subdued family ceremony of joining congregational life to the public celebration of manhood during the 1950s. It first becomes a theme of television sitcoms in the 1960s, usually representing a Jewish boy's anxiety about either going through the "ordeal by examination" or having missed an opportunity to have one (Pearl and Pearl 1999). Many of the parties had as themes the interests of the boy, such as music, sports, and motors rather than religious subjects, and these interests along with displays of economic power were significant for culturally connecting to a normative, if not precocious hypermasculinity. For example, I asked boys who had gone through the bar mitzvah how they arrived at the themes for their post-ceremony parties. As the following narratives attest, it was a decision that they felt strongly they wanted to control.

If I left it to my parents, I'm sure they would have rented a boring hall and made it look like their wedding. I wanted a teen party and I wanted it to be cool. I was into cars and skateboards, so I got them to put it in an auto museum, which none of my buddies had done, and the centerpieces were dudes on skateboards. I told them that I would do all the traditional stuff for the synagogue if I could have the party that wouldn't embarrass me.

My parents did ask me for ideas about the party, and I'm glad they did. I was worried that they would want too much of a family affair. The ceremony followed the law, and I wanted the party to be something that would be mine. I wanted to let go and impress my

friends. It had to be about sports to save face after all the stuff I took about going through bar mitzvah lessons. There weren't too many Jewish signs, although my parents did want the candle lighting for the relatives. But I had a rock band, so the kids could get into it.

More than a celebration of the completion of the bar mitzvah, the party allowed the boys to show their connection to normative culture, especially to masculine pursuits of sports, recreation, and music. This was especially important because the boys recognized that for the most part, their mothers made the arrangements for the party. With demonstrations of masculinity and maturity being important at the party, the ceremony is remembered in relation to the father's role. The components of the synagogue ceremony emphasizing the boy taking the father's role and the rise in status of the recitation as an "ordeal" were adapted into the declaration, "Today, I am a man." Considering the praxis of the bar mitzvah, one might easily construe this declaration as "Today, I am the father"—and I am better than he was. Competition for ownership of the event is evident in the idea that the successful bar mitzvah reflects on the status of the father, as shown especially in *Keeping Up with the Steins*, in which the materialism of the party conveys the father's male provider role coming into conflict with the boy's identity formation.



Figure 5. Skateboarder centerpiece at bar mitzvah held in auto museum, Hershey, Pennsylvania, 2006. Photograph by Simon J. Bronner.

The early age at which the bar mitzvah occurred added to the ceremony's appeal for announcing the Jewish boy's claim to manliness if not legal maturity.

Into the twenty-first century under the influence of the women's movement, questions of the proper masculine role taken by Jewish boys increased. Reports in books such as *Jew-fitsu: The Hebrew Hands of Fury* by Rabbi Daniel Eliezer and Paul Kupperberg (2008) along with satirical movies such as *The Hebrew Hammer* (2004) expressed a confusion about whether the answer to these questions would be to embrace knowledge as a source of social power or a sign of diminished masculinity. I contend that the bar mitzvah gained importance therefore in what increasingly became seen as the most important phase of modern life and for a group that felt the most conflict in its definition of masculinity. Despite Theodor Gaster's avowal that the bar mitzvah imparts nothing, I find that its symbolism of circumcision, examination, and wedding is joined to modern meanings of masculine maturity. It is imperfect as a ritual of religious commitment, to be sure, but it has persisted and even spread in the modern context, not because of its signal of religious majority or adult obligations, but its negotiation of adolescence for an ethnic group uncertain in American popular culture of its masculine identity and patriarchal continuity.

Implication: Feminization and the Ritual Burden of the Bar Mitzvah

Having made this argument for linking the rise of the bar mitzvah to a crisis of masculinity for assimilating Jews within North America, I see signs today that it is likely to enter a new phase as an invented tradition. Some of the connections to masculinity, for instance, are undermined as the synagogue goes through what has been heralded as feminization, including female rabbis and cantors leading the bar mitzvah (Goldstein 1991; Marder 1996; Seidman 1997). Mothers are taking more of a role, and for my memoir writers concerned for their masculine image, that caused more, rather than less, distress. One compensation that several writers mentioned was taking more control of the party, infusing it with masculine themes and holding it at auto museums, ski slopes, or sports stadiums. Or the party exuded a sense of coolness in representation of a modern fashion and electronics rather than the process of tradition evoking continuity with Jewish identity. One bar mitzvah adviser touched a nerve by showing parents how to highlight their son's hip individuality in step with high style rather than collective tradition associated with sameness by offering *Mitzvah Chic*, subtitled, "How to Host a Meaningful, Fun, Drop-Dead Gorgeous Bar or Bat Mitzvah" (Greenberg 2006).

Some families view holding a bar mitzvah in Israel as a sign of religious devotion, but rather than departing from tradition, it fits into the trope of announcing masculine attributes at a young age because of the image of Israelis as tough Jews. A common post-ceremony activity, for example, is to go to Masada, the historic site where a small number of rebellious Jews held off legions of the Roman Empire. Many of the boys show their vigor by climbing up a steep path to the plateau 1,300 feet high. In addition to this bar mitzvah trip, others show a variety of creative ways to engage the boy with a strenuous and memorable experience. As the boys seek to declare their own identity, the fathers

are frequently involved as the son's pal engaged equally in sports and music, rather than speaking as the authoritarian voice of the elders or sages (see Cross 2008). If the above argument holds up, then as the popular perception of Jewish masculinity changes to the point where it joins normative muscular manliness, then the bar mitzvah will carry less of a ritual burden to show the development of the boy's mettle as well as his mind (see Brod 1988, 2004; Bronner 2005, 34-36). The bar mitzvah is the tradition everyone thinks they know from popular culture as a sign of excess of mass culture generally, although assigned to Jews, but its folk cultural practice reveals an uneasy father-son relationship in a society that creates conflicts for the boy between brains and brawn as he declares at the age of thirteen, "Today, I am a man."

NOTES

1. For the logical problem of social functionalism analyzing consequences rather than causes, see Oring 1976; Bronner 1986, 74-88; Bronner 2006.

2. Evidence for the Yom Kippur fast before the bar mitzvah as a folk custom is found in discussion groups such as *Imamother: Connecting Jewish Mothers* (www.imamother.com). The question of whether to allow children to fast frequently comes up. Among Orthodox members, there is reference made to "the three fasts" (out of seven Jewish fast days) which are ritually done by the bar-mitzvah-to-be: Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement, usually occurring in September or October), Tisha B'Av (usually held in July or August remembering the tragedies of the Jewish people), and Ta'anit Bechorim (the Fast of the Firstborn commemorating the saving of the firstborn in Egypt from plague, observed the day before Passover in March or April). On September 10, 2008, for instance, "1st" from Israel posted this query, "I am looking for the reason/source behind the custom of the fasting the 3 fasts before bar or bat mitzvah. Do only people from certain backgrounds do this, where does this custom come from? Is there a basis for it? I always learned that children under bar/bat mitzvah age should not fast the whole day. Once they are at the age of chinuch, they can be encouraged to fast for a few hours in the morning (and at night 9 av and yom kippur). And then that when they do eat, it should only be what is necessary, not indulging on junk food and continuous snack." I recorded seven replies, none of which proposed any textual sources, and rabbis who were cited in the thread were mixed on whether to follow the custom. Shalhevet from Israel wrote on the same day, "Our rov says not to do it," whereas ChossidMom replied on October 2, 2008, that "My son who will be Bar Mitzvah a couple of weeks after Succos should fast this Yom Kippur, according to the rav," even though he "says it's a bunch of baloney...He said there is absolutely no source for this." The other replies referred to doing it although they did not know the rationale: "we did—but I have no idea why" (greenfire, September 10, 2008); "My father holds by it. He told me the reason but of course I forgot" (flowerpower, September 10, 2008); "I never heard of 3 fasts before, but one I did. My parents always said to fast one fast before also only if you can" (cuteson, September 10, 2008); "I did, as a kid! I grew up in a modern orthodox community, and my whole circle of firends were really machmir on that one. (Then again, we made fasting

into a competition—how long did YOU fast?’ ‘What did you break YOUR fast on,’ etc...) (shininglight, October 2, 2008).

3. The rhetorical use of *patoor* in regard to release from manly obligation is still apparent in modern Hebrew where it refers to an exemption from military duty.

4. Ruth Eis (1979) states that although the sashes are referred to as “Torah binders” in English, “the correct name is *wimpel* (f.), an old German word for cloth or veil, related to the Middle High German *bewimpfen*, to cover, to conceal. Typically, they are made from the cloth which covers the new-born male during the circumcision ceremony (11).

5. Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (1992) trace the frequent presence of lions, leopards, eagles, and deer in ceremonial Jewish objects to the *Mishnah* (Pirke Avot 5:23) which commands, “Be as strong as a leopard, as light as an eagle, as swift as a deer, as brave as a lion to do the will of your Father in heaven” (40).

6. See, for example, the cake toppers at the website *Magic Mud* ([www.magicmud.com/Judaic shots.htm](http://www.magicmud.com/Judaic%20shots.htm)) accessed December 28, 2008. It offers personalized bar mitzvah cake toppers and figurines at the *bimab*. Another site shows a figurine with the bearded rabbi overlooking the bar mitzvah boy, entitled “Bar Mitzvah—Father and Son Figurine” promoted by Liorel Art from Israel: stores.ebay.com/Art_From_Israel_Figurines-Sculptures_WOQQFsubZ2100394.

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