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DIFFERENTIATED BNAI MITZVAH

by Eitan Gutin

At times I feel as if, instead of being in the Jewish education business, or even the God business, I am in the *B'nai Mitzvah* business.

I am responsible for "lifelong learning" at the congregation where I work. If something educational is happening in the synagogue involving anyone from birth to death, I have a hand in it. Given the range of ages and venues in which I work, including weekly *parasha* classes, the Hebrew school, youth groups, and cultural arts, it is amazing how often a child's preparation for her *Bat Mitzvah* is the center of the conversation. It comes out in conversations with 7th graders who cannot wait for their journey to end and in the anxiety I hear from parents of four-year-olds, nine years before the event will take place.

The Bar Mitzvah as Standardized Test

"Race to Nowhere" is an excellent documentary that has been shown around the U.S. in the past year. It sets out to identify the many ways in which the current system in America's schools simultaneously fails to achieve its educational goals, while imposing unhealthy amounts of stress on the nation's children. Towards the end of the film, there is a section on what happens during the educational process that is centered on standardized tests:

1. The test is so important that students feel stress well before the test is administered. In the case of national exams such as the SAT or ACT, that stress can begin years in advance for both parents and children.
2. Due to the cumulative nature of each test, students often "cram" in the short time before the test in order to be prepared.
3. Due to both the stress and the temporary nature of information that is learned through last minute cramming, the students are unlikely to have an interest in revisiting the material in the future.

According to the documentary, one of the results of this process is that a surprisingly high percentage -- nearly one-third -- of students with high scores in math or in English have to take remedial courses in that subject upon entering the higher education system in California.

I can only speak from my experiences in the Conservative Movement when I say that the *Bar Mitzvah* experience in our congregations is frighteningly similar to standardized testing in high schools - and ultimately produces similar results. Each synagogue has a standard set of items that a student must check off as he/she goes through the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* process. Specified

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number of years in formal Jewish education? Check. *Mitzvah* project? Check. Prepared to read required amount of *Torah* plus *haftorah*? Check.

Many of our students stress about their *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* for at least a year, spend hours with a tutor and listening to mp3s, find themselves cramming towards the end, and for what? To do, at a minimum, exactly what every other child in the synagogue has done before them, and what every child will do after. We even use the same language for certain *Bnai Mitzvah* that we do in testing. If a student, for whatever reason, is unable to prepare the standard amount, we make an "accommodation" for her and her family (usually to avoid embarrassment).

For some of our students, the progression described above is perfectly meaningful. They not only love preparing for their *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*, but they also can't wait to get up on the *bimah* and do more in the future. For the majority, however, this process is a conclusion. They don't get up on the *bimah* again to lead services or read *Torah* unless something inspires them to do so, or if they choose to do so as part of their own child's *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*.

Differentiated Bnai Mitzvah

In order to make the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* experience one that is meaningful and that the student is interested in building upon in the future, we need to de-standardize what it means to go through this moment in the Jewish life cycle. These are some of the changes that I am going to be proposing in my own congregation in order to achieve this goal:

- *From one-size-fits-all to a menu of opportunities.* I know plenty of adults who know how to read *Torah*, but it not really their "thing." However, offer the same adults the opportunity to lead *Psukei D'zimrah* and they jump at the opportunity. If there is no standard way for adult Jews to participate in the community, there is no need for the transition to adulthood to have standard achievements either. Each synagogue should have a menu with different sections.

+ *Section A* is labeled "*Torah*," with choices that include reading *Torah*, but also choices that involve teaching *Torah*, such as giving a *Dvar Torah* in front of the congregation, writing a *Torah* play for the first graders in the Hebrew School, teaching a session of the synagogue's *parashat hashavua* class, or even spending a month blogging about attempting to follow one ethical teaching of the *parasha* for the month leading up to the celebration.

+ *Section B* is ritual. This is where the student selects which rituals she will use to demonstrate his/her transformation from observer of Jewish communal practices to participant. Each *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* should be able to choose for himself or herself how much or how little ritual he/she wants to be involved in. In addition, a student should be able to choose between personal and public rituals so this part of the menu can include making *minyán* and/or putting on *tefillin* in the Sunday *minyán* for the two months before and after he/she becomes a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*.

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+ *Section C* is the easiest, because we already apply a menu style approach to *mitzvah* and *tzedakah* projects. Even here, though, there could be a greater variety of choices. We should avoid restrictions that limit our students to one type of experience or another.

- *Create more milestones in our education programs.* One contributing factor to the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* being viewed as a culmination is a lack of other important Jewish milestones both before and after the experience. Where I work, we are restructuring our program so that the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* moment can both stand on its own and be part of a larger progression. Currently, the milestone of becoming a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* is in the same year as graduating from Hebrew School, with the next milestone not coming unless the student completes our education programs through the 10th grade. Over the next two years, we are adding milestones at the end of the 2nd and 8th grade years as well, and will be graduating students from our Hebrew School at the end of 6th grade, months before the first student reaches Jewish adulthood. We are making the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* the beginning of a new chapter, instead of the conclusion to the previous one.
- *Reduce the importance of becoming a Bat Mitzvah.* With hindsight, I think it can be argued that when we took the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* from just being called to the *Torah* and turned it into the milestone it has become, we sowed the seeds for the challenges we face today. By making this single moment a strict cutoff in a binary system between child and adult, nothing and everything, we lose out on many opportunities for our students to have meaningful experiences when they are ready for them. Our students should be invited to be a part of the community as soon as they are ready. Eight-year-olds can create *mitzvah* projects; ten-year-olds should be reading from the *Torah* and leading *Kabbalat Shabbat*; twelve-year-olds can teach *Torah*. The more we spread out these experiences, the more meaningful each becomes as it is given its own moment in time.

If we are to strengthen the Jewish community of the future through the vehicle of Jewish education, I believe that we have to make a renewal of the *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* experience part of the process. In to do so, we need to identify the weaknesses of the current system, rethink the role of the *Bnai Mitzvah* process in synagogue education, make sure that the experience itself is meaningful for every child who walks through our doors, and transform the experience from a milestone in a vacuum to just one of the many meaningful moments that we experience through Jewish life.

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