

ballet, sports, or school, we are an isolated community — minimally three hours from a Jewish center. Victoria attracts Jews who are unlikely to be observant, and a high proportion are intermarried families. By bringing their children to Hebrew school two and three times a week, parents show a strong commitment to the school. However, only a handful of families translate that commitment into further activity on behalf of the school or synagogue community. Involving parents and children in a Jewish life, either at home or in the shul, remains our biggest challenge.

The curriculum includes five hours of instruction each week. We must divide these hours effectively to teach our students and their families the basics of Jewish living — Hebrew language, prayer, ethics, holidays, history, and the place of Israel in Jewish life. Most students, being the only Jewish students in their schools, need the Hebrew school environment to be safe and comfortable. Hebrew school, and as an extension the synagogue, becomes the primary venue of Jewish life for these families. Teachers — who for the most part have had no formal Jewish educational training — are therefore challenged to create an experience that is both educational and community-building. Our children par-

ticipate annually in the National Bible Contest, which offers serious, motivated text study and an opportunity, for those who pass the regional competition, to compete on the national level in Toronto or Montreal. We schedule many all-school programs that integrate the arts and *midrash* into a learning and social environment. We hire teenage assistants, which is costly, because their relationships with the students help them feel part of the community while modeling teen involvement with the synagogue for the children.

Coordinating the Hebrew school could be a never-ending series of frustrating experiences, but it is not so. While our community is small and has limited resources, we offer our students and families an authentic sense of belonging, a school that serves as the hub of a small but thriving Jewish community. One of our bar mitzvah boys said in his *drash* last month: “I only feel completely comfortable when I am with my Jewish friends in the shul.” That is a tribute to the school and congregation.

Leah Levi, who grew up in Victoria, British Columbia, lived in Israel as a member of Kibbutz Gezer for ten years. She has been the Coordinator of Congregation Emanuel's Hebrew School for ten years.

Bar and Bat Mitzvah as Educational Requirements

Stuart Schoenfeld

In 1932, the Rabbinical Assembly reported the results of a questionnaire that asked rabbis whether they supported the introduction of bat mitzvah ceremonies. One rabbi wrote back, “The Bar Mitzvah congregation ceremony is enough of a farce.” These sentiments were far from an isolated opinion. In a pamphlet published by the Women’s League of the United Synagogue, a psychologist elaborated the theme, “[the] celebrations counteract whatever good the synagogue ritual may accomplish.” Similar comments could be found as far back as an 1885 description of a bar mitzvah that noted the father’s conspicuous donation, the inflated cliché-ridden speech, the emphasis on the reception, and the boy’s subsequent refusal to let his tutor teach him how to wear *tefillin*.

These critics were responding to a seeming paradox in American Jewish life during and after the wave of mass migration. On the one hand,

despite heroic efforts to build American Judaism, its institutions reached only a minority of American Jews. Far fewer than half of American Jewish households were synagogue-affiliated. Jewish schools, built mainly on the model of the community Talmud Torah, enrolled under 30 percent of five- to fourteen-year-old children. Of those enrolled, attendance was irregular.

On the other hand, the desire for a synagogue bar mitzvah ceremony followed by a celebration was virtually universal. At a time when pious traditions were lapsing, it seems bar mitzvah answered the need for reassurance about intergenerational continuity. Even if the event was an exit ceremony rather than an initiation, if the child was reciting from memory what he did not understand, if his address was a selection from a book of bar mitzvah speeches, and if tutoring for the bar mitzvah was his entire Jewish education, the occasion mattered. It was an impor-



tant part of American folk Judaism — an ambivalent event, not an insincere one.

Rabbis and educators who were the custodians of Judaism in America saw an opportunity to link the importance of bar mitzvah to their agenda of institution-building, literacy, and commitment. A 1937 editorial in *The Reconstructionist* on confirmation and bar mitzvah read, “In order that these rites may not represent merely the attainment of certain ages, but also the accomplishment of certain minimum education, it would be necessary for the national organizations, such as the United Synagogue of America and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, to set up for their respective constituents standard requirements for *bar mizvah* [sic] and for Confirmation.”

The first body to respond to this challenge was the Chicago Board of Jewish Education. In 1938, it required affiliated congregations to impose “a minimum of three years attendance at a daily Hebrew School of recognized standing” or to present “evidence of the candidate’s fitness,” which would be determined by a test. Other local boards followed.

Eventually, the regulations that mattered were those of the movements within Judaism because they became part of the story of the growth of synagogues in postwar America. Minimum requirements for bar and bat mitzvah ensured the affiliation of a wider, less committed group. By 1958 the congregational school became the dominant form of Jewish education, enrolling over 88 percent of Jewish school students. The percentage of Jewish children enrolled in Jewish education had more than doubled from a decade earlier.

Coerced enrollment produced its own tensions. Nevertheless, Jewish educators clearly preferred to have students under these circumstances than not to have them at all, creating an opportunity for a sustained conversation between synagogue, school, and family.

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