How B’nai Mitzvah Options for People with Disabilities Can Expand Our Thinking About Marking this Rite of Passage More Meaningfully for Everyone

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The B’nai Mitzvah “Minimum”

As a social worker, special education teacher and disabilities inclusion specialist in the Jewish community, I receive many calls each year from parents of children with disabilities who worry their children will not be able to “get” bar or bat mitzvah-ed. Perhaps they are not members of a synagogue and have no idea how to meaningfully mark this rite of passage. Or, if they are members of a synagogue, they are aware of the high bar of expectations which may involve reading from the Torah, chanting the Haftarah, leading the congregation in prayer, and delivering a *devar Torah*. They “know” their children can’t do these things and wonder if there might be other options. As they are about to give up, they call for guidance.

The first thing I do is validate their concerns and frustrations—and suggest they discuss it with their rabbi. I then reassure them that their son will *become* bar mitzvah automatically when they turn 13 years, and their daughters will become bat mitzvah in the same way at age 12. I explain that bar mitzvah is not a verb and that their child won’t “get” or even “have” a bar mitzvah. To further make my point, I playfully take it to the “absurd” and explain that their child’s status will change from Jewish child to adult *even* if they stay in their pajamas, under the covers, on the day they turn 13 on the Hebrew calendar.

Families are incredulous at first. They (usually fathers) reflect on their own experience of preparing for and marking becoming a bar mitzvah—which is oftentimes not a positive memory. They

are convinced that their child needs to publicly recite the Torah blessings, read from the Torah and chant the Haftarah; otherwise, "it doesn't count."

If they still don't believe me, I bring forth the example of girls. I remind them that, not too long ago, women didn't celebrate becoming bat mitzvah, yet they somehow managed to became Jewish adults.

Once they finally buy in to the fact that the status changes automatically, I begin a conversation about creative synagogue options they may have never witnessed before. I encourage them to dream of ways to mark *their* child's special day in a way which is meaningful, special and appropriate—whether they are a person with autism, anxiety and other mental health issues, visual impairments, deafness, are non-speakers or have minimal speech, mobility issues, or deal with learning disabilities.

I encourage them to think about the many options available. There are non-Shabbat morning and non-synagogue options which include making the bar/bat mitzvah on other days of the week, conducting the ceremony at a Jewish summer camp, in a restaurant or in one's own backyard.

Our new book, *A DIFFERENT SPIRIT: Creating Meaningful B'nai Mitzvah for Children with Disabilities*, edited by myself and Ilana Trachtman—the filmmaker who told the story of the bar mitzvah of Lior, a young man with Down Syndrome in her 2008 award-winning film, "Praying with Lior"—includes a range of contributors including clergy, educators, psychologists and people with disabilities (among them a deaf rabbi and an autistic professor of special education). It is designed to help clergy and families navigate creating meaningful and inclusive celebration for everyone.

The book's chapters and essays include inspiration and practical guidance on planning celebrations, managing accommodations and settings, and teaching children with a wide range of disabilities, as well as personal stories and an exploration of the concept of inclusion.

Beyond the "Standard" Shabbat Morning B'nai Mitzvah

One reason most families of children with disabilities cannot imagine their child marking becoming b'nai mitzvah at all is that they have only seen or attended b'nai mitzvah which take place on Shabbat (Saturday) mornings, in the context of a service which is long, formal, packed with attendees and where the bar or bat mitzvah student is expected to "do" a lot of the service.

In most synagogues, the student is expected to learn the complete Haftarah or selections from the Haftarah (weekly prophetic portion), prepare one or several aliyot from the weekly parashah[ja1] (Torah reading) which will be chanted from the scroll (with no vowels, punctation or musical notes) on the actual day, lead parts of the service and write and publicly deliver a *devar Torah.* Young women may prepare to read Torah in a woman's tefillah group, though they more commonly mark their becoming bat mitzvah by learning a text or subject in depth and preparing a *devar Torah* or conducting a *siyyum* (celebratory conclusion) of a biblical or rabbinic book.

This process of preparation is rigorous and challenging for many learners—especially those with a wide range of learning challenges.

For those learning to read Torah, the teacher usually begins by teaching the system of biblical cantillation or "trope," which requires learning a system of musical notation. In general, the key to successful Torah reading is good auditory and visual memories and the ability to decode Hebrew. For students with deficits in any or all of these areas, the learning process can be very challenging.

Even for those who master the learning, public performance—especially in front of a large crowd on a Saturday morning—can also be challenging and intimidating.

Non-Shabbat Morning B'nai Mitzvah Options, Why They Aren't Offered More Often, and the Issue of Equality versus Equity

Synagogues may have understandable reasons for only offering b'nai mitzvah on Saturday mornings. In many communities, this is *the* big day or *only* day for the community to come together.

Some synagogues offer a Shabbat afternoon and havdalah service—which is a relatively short service featuring three short torah readings. While marking b'nai mitzvah at this much shorter, less formal service may be a good option for some learners, some synagogues worry that it is not "fair" to offer this option as this would mean that these students would prepare much less than those celebrating b'nai mitzvah on Shabbat morning.

This raises an important issue of equality versus equity. While it may seem admirable to treat everyone equally or "the same" when it comes to setting expectations for b'nai mitzvah, equity means treating people differently based on their specific needs and circumstances. Equality assumes everyone starts at the same place and equity acknowledges individual differences. B'nai mitzvah options should reflect differences among learners.

Other less stressful, non-Shabbat options for marking bar or bat mitzvah include Mondays and Thursdays (days when the Torah is traditionally read), Rosh Hodesh (the new Jewish month), or holidays (Hanukkah, the middle days of Sukkot, Purim, etc). All of these options also allow for the use of technology (microphones, Power Point, Dynavox augmented speech) and musical accompaniment as there are no Sabbath-observance restrictions on using electronics on these days.

In my 40-plus years of working with families to find suitable options and preparing students and in many cases, officiating such services, and in a lifetime of visiting synagogues of all sizes and denominations around the world, I have seen many creative solutions that were "just right" for each student and family.

Max, a minimally verbal student with autism, marked his bar mitzvah on the Sunday of Sukkot. He did not recite Torah blessings, but spent the service on the bimah, next to the cantor, banging out rhythms on a drum. He was very comfortably dressed in clothes which did not upset his sensory issues. A very small brunch followed in his New York City apartment.

Adam celebrated his bar mitzvah on the Sunday of Hanukkah. The rabbi wisely pointed out that the Torah reading for that day follows a repetitive and predictive pattern; once Adam learned "the pattern," he was able to master the entire Torah reading. A festive brunch followed in the synagogue.

Ruby did not want to mark his bar mitzvah on Shabbat morning in his synagogue. He eventually agreed to read the maftir, the final three lines of the Torah reading. Not having to face the congregation was a big help. He refused to deliver a *devar Torah* as this was too "scary." Instead, he was happy to push "play" on the computer at the Sunday brunch reception, where guests were treated to a very thoughtful 10-minute pre-recorded *devar Torah*.

I have worked with several students who celebrated bar or bat mitzvah on Purim evening—they were able to learn a few verses of the Purim megillah (scroll) which they recited in costume, with all guests clad in costumes as well—this helped keep the day relaxed and festive.

Many years ago, I attended morning minyan in a Manhattan *shul* on a Thursday morning. A 13-year-old boy and his father, new immigrants from Russia and not well-versed in Hebrew, prayers or traditional Jewish practice, came to minyan. The boy was called to the Torah to recite the blessings before and after the reading of the third Torah *aliyah*. The rabbi congratulated him on becoming bar mitzvah. None of the regular minyan goers were expecting to attend a bar mitzvah and therefore did not have candy for showering the boy with their warm wishes—they simply congratulated him with the

singing of “Siman Tov u’Mazal Tov.”

Beyond Alternative Days and Dates: Alternative Venues, Service Formats and Non-Service B’nai Mitzvah

Some synagogues are sensitive to just how intimidating the “big *shul*” can be for some students and may offer a chapel bar/bat mitzvah or, in “extreme cases,” a rabbi’s study bar or bat mitzvah. Many years ago, Corey marked his bar mitzvah with his divorced parents, the rabbi and me in the rabbi’s study. Corey had mental health and behavioral issues, and this was the right venue; while it would not accord with the traditional practice of being called to the Torah in the presence of a minyan, it was the perfect option in his situation.

For other families, out of synagogue b’nai mitzvahs are the best option. They include one’s backyard, a beach or country house, a small conference room at a hotel, restaurant, or out in nature.

Our book shares the story of Lisa, a Jewish Day School student with learning disabilities and anxiety and amazing artistic ability. Lisa marked her becoming a bat mitzvah literally without saying a word.

Lisa spent the year leading up to bat mitzvah studying Jewish texts and illustrating and painting scenes of scenes which she found meaningful. Her art served as interpretation and commentary of her understanding of these stories. The bat mitzvah—held in an art gallery—was an opportunity for her guests to view her art and read her explanations while sipping wine and eating d’oeuvres.

There is an entire chapter in the book “By a Lake or in a Tree: Celebrating in a Camp Setting” which shares the how’s and why’s of holding b’nai mitzvah at a summer camp. This relaxed, outdoor option is perfect for some students and families.

I worked with a family who made b’nai mitzvah for triplets at their beach house—close to where the mother and father spent their childhood summers. Another family rented a Torah and marked their only child’s bar mitzvah in the living room of their large Manhattan apartment, overlooking Central Park. Another family used the large outdoor property of their country house in Western Massachusetts.

More About Why “A Different Spirit” May Be Useful in Creating Meaningful B’nai Mitzvah for Children with Disabilities

When Ilana and I set out to write our book, we imagined a book for families, clergy and teachers which would offer guidance on how to navigate creating meaningful and inclusive celebrations for everyone. The book would provide inspiring essays and practical guidance on planning celebrations, managing accommodations and teaching children with a range of support needs.

The first two essays demonstrate how inclusion elevates and creates a sense of belonging, and how b’nai mitzvah affirms the essential tenet of Judaism of being created in God’s image.

Part I, which has 10 chapters, looks at creating inclusive communities, building supports along the journey, dreaming and imagining and planning, the role of siblings, an essay on invoking the arts in the b’nai mitzvah process, b’nai mitzvah in summer camps, and a very thoughtful dialogue on if/when b’nai mitzvah should be off the table.

Part II offers specific tools to teachers including multi-sensory approaches to teaching Hebrew, using Braille, and teaching students who are deaf and hard of hearing. These latter two chapters are written by people with disabilities including a bat mitzvah student who is blind (along with her mother who is a clergy member), and a chapter by a deaf rabbi and his hearing sister. There are also chapters on learning disabilities and mental health challenges and references to speech impairments and mobility challenges. An essay in this section, "What if I bark on the bimah?" is by Jewish educator and comedian Paula Schuller. She speaks openly and with humor about having Tourette's Syndrome.

A Final Word: Why A Book About B'nai Mitzvah and Disabilities Just Might Revolutionize B'nai Mitzvah for EVERYONE!

The intended audience for our book is the Jewish disabilities community. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, members of other faith communities are finding the book useful—while life cycle events vary, the issues faced by people with disabilities in houses of worship are similar.

We are also finding that parents of non-disabled students are excited that there may be options for marking b'nai mitzvah that they had not considered in the past. Perhaps a less stressful, non-Shabbat morning, outdoor bat mitzvah in nature is just right for their daughter?!

We are all familiar with the history of curb cuts on public sidewalks. They were initially intended for users of wheelchairs and other mobility assist devices. Once the curb cuts were built, parents with strollers and delivery people with carts found them to be useful as well. So with "non-traditional" b'nai mitzvah.

We hope and pray that synagogues and temples will begin by offering non-Shabbat b'nai mitzvahs to students with disabilities, and that they will see the benefit of this offering for all students. Some families will favor Shabbat morning in the main synagogue; others will enjoy Havdalah in the chapel and others will love the Monday, Thursday, Rosh Hodesh or holiday option. There is no downside, since, after all, everyone becomes b'nai mitzvah regardless of what they do to mark it and when they choose to mark it!

[ja1]Italicize?