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More Bar than Mitzvah: Anxieties over Bar Mitzvah Receptions in Postwar America

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“The way things are going, the inauguration of the first Jewish president of the United States is going to be a let-down for the man,” joked a member of Great Neck, New York’s Temple Beth El in 1961. “The ceremony probably won’t be able to stand comparison with his Bar Mitzvah.”¹ This lighthearted jab at Bar Mitzvah parties represented just one example of a general current of anxiety surrounding the increased extravagance of Jewish life-cycle celebrations in the years after World War II. Throughout the postwar period, Jewish intellectuals, journalists, and especially clergy derided Bar Mitzvah receptions that, in the words of one Long Island rabbi, “stressed the ‘bar’ more than the ‘mitzvah.’”²

These critics’ concerns over opulent receptions intertwined with their worries over American Jews’ increased affluence in the postwar years. They considered consumer patterns to be a reflection of morals and ethics, and they did not feel that showy life-cycle celebrations exhibited what they believed to be proper Jewish values, such as education, social justice, and solidarity with worldwide Jewry. Indeed, the same leaders who lambasted Jews for their extravagant life-cycle celebrations often applauded when Jews lavished their wealth on expensive trips to Israel, on religious books, on Jewish charities, or on their local synagogue’s building fund. For these critics, extravagant receptions proved that the abundance of America, rather than enabling American Jews to perpetuate the best elements of Jewish culture, served rather to cheapen and degrade Jewish values and Jewish heritage. In the years after World War II, the Bar Mitzvah ritual served as a lightning rod for debates over the fate of Jewish life within an atmosphere of American affluence.

The Bar Mitzvah ritual was first formalized by Jews living in the German Empire in the sixteenth century. At age thirteen, boys were thought to have reached religious maturity. They marked their new position by publicly reading from the Torah or *Haftorah* [prophetic writings] for the first time and, beginning in the seventeenth century, delivering a speech that demonstrated their religious knowledge. As a Bar Mitzvah, or a “son of the commandment,” the boys would then be responsible to perform the full array of religious rituals, which included wearing ritual garments such as *tefillin* [phylacteries] during times of prayer and joining a *minyan* [prayer quorum] three times a day.

The record of how this ritual spread into Eastern Europe and the Sephardic world remains unclear, but probably that expansion did not happen until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³

By the time that Eastern European Jews began to migrate en masse to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, the Bar Mitzvah had become a firmly established ritual. But whereas in Eastern Europe the immediate family might have embellished the Bar Mitzvah observance with a light repast, Jewish immigrants in America transformed the Bar Mitzvah party into a gala event. In the years before World War I, the families of American Bar Mitzvah boys would host luncheons for guests at their homes. By the 1920s, it became popular among those who could afford it to invite friends and family to Bar Mitzvah “affairs,” complete with a banquet and orchestra, at catering halls and hotels.⁴ For American Jews, a party following the service had become part and parcel of the Bar Mitzvah milestone.

The years after World War II drastically changed the economic profile of American Jews. Most had moved up from their working-class or modest middle-class backgrounds into a lifestyle of solid, middle-class affluence.⁵ Along with this upward mobility came an increasing number of Jews eager to celebrate the Bar Mitzvah milestone with great fanfare. During the decades after World War II, observers reported Bar Mitzvah parties featuring six-course meals, sculptures of the Bar Mitzvah boy made of ice and chopped liver, baseball- and luau-themed decorations, dancing girls, comedians, and elaborate Torah-shaped cakes upon which relatives of the Bar Mitzvah solemnly lit candles.⁶

The growth of extravagant Bar Mitzvahs during the postwar era emerged as a prominent theme in the Jewish press during the decades after World War II. In the pages of *The Reconstructionist* in 1960, Stanley Meisler compared his own Bar Mitzvah reception, “a buffet dinner on a paper plate eaten at a small East Bronx apartment,” to that of his younger brother’s celebration, which featured showgirls, a comedian, and a sit-down dinner at a Broadway nightclub. And while Stanley’s Bar Mitzvah gifts had amounted to a mere \$125, the younger Meisler collected \$1,200 in checks and savings bonds. The author attributed this celebratory escalation to the greater income enjoyed by his family’s social circle in the fourteen years since he had celebrated his own Bar Mitzvah milestone, while his tongue-in-cheek language revealed his own ambivalence over the merits of this transformation.⁷

Wielding a lighthearted tone that did little to mask their serious concerns about the rising extravagance of the receptions, comic writers often found humor in the differences between pre- and postwar Bar Mitzvah celebrations. In the pages of his temple’s literary magazine, an author writing under the

name of A. Begelman poked fun at how an informal day of ritual celebrations had been transformed into a lavish, decorous affair:

Time was when Bar Mitzvah was only a big day not THE big day. You learned to read [from the Torah], you went to shul [synagogue] on that big Shabbos [Sabbath], dovvened [prayed] well enough and watched your friends jump for the candy that your mother and her friends threw down from the women's section upstairs. Later there was a Kiddush [a light meal with sanctified wine], some schnapps [liquor], sponge cake, herring. Then you went home and the family and friends came in for a good, long party at which you saw what loot the company was good for – the fountain pen, of course, a tallis [prayer shawl] maybe from the frummer [more pious] wing of the family, and a dollar from this one and that one that mama quickly put aside for necessities; after all, who had money to throw away then?

So times have changed. The religious part of the Bar Mitzvah hangs on—for sentimental reasons, at least. But nobody has a Bar Mitzvah at home unless he's an atheist, perhaps. You need a hall. People dress up. There are the before-meal drinks, cocktail knishes and caviar on crackers. There are 100 guests for a small affair.⁸

With his contrasting depictions of pre- and postwar Bar Mitzvah celebrations, this writer conveyed his impression of how drastically the ritual had been transformed in the interim. His somewhat nostalgic portrayal of the older Bar Mitzvah, laced with Yiddish words and religious symbols, recalled modest celebrations based largely at the synagogue and the boy's home. His description of the postwar Bar Mitzvah, which with the exception of the “cocktail knish” included little Jewish imagery, portrayed a formal event that lacked the warmth, charm, and Jewish flavor of the older celebration. Bar Mitzvah parties had gained in opulence but lost their authenticity.

In much stronger language, postwar rabbis soundly condemned Bar Mitzvah receptions. Debates over these parties loomed particularly large in the Reform movement, where the shapers of classical Reform had tried to eliminate the Bar Mitzvah ceremony altogether and replace it with the Confirmation observance. In the view of the nineteenth century leaders of Reform, Confirmation, a ritual that annually honored a cohort of teenagers who completed a course in religious education, improved upon Bar Mitzvah in a number of ways. First, the service honored the accomplishments of both boys and girls while the Bar Mitzvah celebrated only boys, and so Confirmation felt more in tune with the Reform movement's policy of equality between the sexes. Secondly, many Reform leaders felt that thirteen-year-old boys lacked the maturity to be initiated as full, adult participants in Jewish religious life and contended that Confirmation, which focused on older teenagers between the

ages of fourteen and sixteen, more effectively served this purpose. Finally, the Bar Mitzvah celebrated a boy's facility with Hebrew language, and the shapers of Reform had de-emphasized the use of Hebrew for ritual purposes. The Confirmation ceremony, they believed, represented a more modern and appropriate approach to Judaism.⁹

By the postwar era, however, the Bar Mitzvah celebration had become common practice even among Reform Jews. According to a survey conducted by the movement's National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, 92 percent of Reform temples celebrated Bar Mitzvah in 1953, while a poll taken in 1960 reported that 96.4 percent of Reform congregations commemorated the event. The Reform movement's adoption of the Bar Mitzvah ritual, instituted by the demands of the laity rather than by the recommendations of the clergy, caused consternation among many Reform rabbis. As the invention of a Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls nullified complaints regarding the non-egalitarianism of the Bar Mitzvah ritual, and as the Reform movement began to incorporate more Hebrew language into its services, condemnation of lavish Bar Mitzvah receptions became a primary concern for those rabbis who opposed incorporating the ritual into Reform Jewish practice. One such rabbi, Joshua Trachtenberg of Teaneck, New Jersey's Temple Emeth, told *Time* magazine in 1959 that the superficiality of the Bar Mitzvah ritual typified the inherent dangers of the Reform movement's return to ritualism. He characterized Bar Mitzvah as an "empty ceremonial" followed by a reception that displayed "the conspicuous waste which is the hallmark of such celebrations."¹⁰

The preponderance of opulent receptions became an issue once again in the early 1960s as Reform clergy debated the growing popularity of Bat Mitzvah, a ceremony for girls that paralleled Bar Mitzvah. Many Reform rabbis urged their colleagues to include the Bat Mitzvah ritual on the grounds that anything else would be inconsistent with the Reform movement's stance on equality between the sexes. Other Reform rabbis felt, however, that the inclusion of Bat Mitzvah would only serve to multiply the "social evils" associated with the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. As Rabbi Harold Silver explained in 1962, "Just when the rabbis believe that they have stemmed the tide somewhat in our movement today regarding the toning down of these wild Bar Mitzvah celebrations, the grim spectre of having to wage religious battle all over again with parents and their *daughters* is just more than the average rabbinical heart can take."¹¹

Though they had never promoted the practice of Confirmation as a replacement for Bar Mitzvah, rabbis of the Conservative and Orthodox movements joined their Reform colleagues in their frustration with lavish Bar

Mitzvah receptions. In 1961, for instance, Conservative Rabbi Elias Charry derided the Bar Mitzvah gathering as “an elaborate and costly birthday party at which the chief celebrants are the adults and the poor Bar Mitzvah boy is the real victim.” Charry went so far as to suggest that his movement de-emphasize or even exchange Bar Mitzvah in favor of an initiation rite geared toward sixteen-year-olds. That same year, Modern Orthodox Rabbi Leonard Gewirtz argued that American Jews had reduced Bar Mitzvah to “an occasion to show off their wealth, often with a general disregard for Jewish religious practice.” Gewirtz believed, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that opulent Bar Mitzvahs would inevitably lead to a decline in Orthodox observance.¹²

In rare cases, congregational leaders placed strict limits on Bar Mitzvah parties or banned the rite altogether. The rules of the Hillcrest Jewish Center of Queens, a Conservative institution, stipulated that the public celebrations following a Bar or Bat Mitzvah had to be limited to the barest essentials. And Congregation Solel, an experimental Reform synagogue on Chicago’s North Shore, prohibited Bar Mitzvahs entirely. “After a two year study of this popular ritual, we decided it did more harm than good to the child, the school, and the congregation,” their rabbi explained.¹³

In this climate of unease over Bar Mitzvah parties, both the Conservative and Reform movements adopted standards for synagogue decorum that implored their members to tone down their receptions. The Conservative movement’s standards for synagogue practice, adopted by the biennial convention of the United Synagogue in 1955, gently, and somewhat vaguely, reminded constituents that the receptions following Bar Mitzvahs and weddings should be considered a *seudah shel mitzvah*, or a religiously commanded meal, and must therefore be in accord with the religious spirit surrounding the event.¹⁴ The Reform movement made a far stronger statement against Bar Mitzvah receptions in 1964, when the Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted a report that lambasted the “steady and alarming deterioration in the character of the Bar Mitzvah ‘affair.’” The report urged members of the Reform movement to exhibit simplicity and restraint in their Bar Mitzvah receptions, warning them that the “extravagant consumption, the conspicuous waste, and the crudity” of these parties “were rapidly becoming a public Jewish scandal.”¹⁵

In characterizing the preponderance of lavish Bar Mitzvahs as a “public Jewish scandal,” these rabbis revealed their concern that these receptions tarnished the reputation of Jews in American society. And in fact, during the postwar years, the opulence of Bar Mitzvah parties emerged as a topic of general, sometimes contemptuous interest in the public discourse.

The national postwar press began to feature Bar Mitzvahs in 1952, when

Life published “*Life* Goes to a Bar Mitzvah,” a feature article highlighting the reception of Carl Jay Bodek, the son of a wealthy Philadelphia contractor. The article dutifully mentioned Carl’s recitation from the Torah but devoted its most detailed and ebullient coverage to the “lavish party” that followed the service. Underneath photographs of Carl cutting his Torah-topped Bar Mitzvah cake and dancing with his father and rabbi, the magazine gleefully reported that the party, which “was held in large tents erected on Bodek’s seven-acre estate,” employed the services of three orchestras and a string quartet, eighteen waiters, and four Pinkerton detectives to “guard the 310 guests’ furs and jewels.” *Life* also published a photograph of Carl surrounded by the presents he received, including “seven suitcases, four toilet sets, a set of gold clubs and a traditional present, a gold watch.” That a popular magazine like *Life* would publish descriptions of a Bar Mitzvah reception that seemed extravagant even by postwar standards contributed to fears that these large parties could potentially contribute to antisemitic stereotypes of Jewish wealth, greed, and vulgarity.¹⁶

Herman Wouk’s 1955 description of a Bar Mitzvah reception in his best-selling novel *Marjorie Morningstar* added to public interest in the celebration. Wouk detailed the elaborate catering flourishes at Marjorie’s brother’s Bar Mitzvah banquet, a party that included “the flower-decked ballroom, the spacious dance floor, the waiters in blue mess jackets, the murmuring orchestra behind potted palms, the fine linen and silver on the tables, [and] the camellias by each lady’s plate.” The climactic moment of the party occurred when the Bar Mitzvah boy entered the ballroom, accompanied by a flaming cauldron of brandy sauce that the headwaiter poured on top of each guest’s grapefruit. Wouk enlisted one of his characters, department-store owner Mr. Goldstone, to mock the waste of money that this showiness represented. “Caterers, restaurants, great angle they got,” said Mr. Goldstone. “Anything they can set fire to they charge ten times as much. Set fire to a twenty-cent flapjack, crepes suzette for two dollars. Maybe we could use it in our store, Mary. Sell a pair of flaming shoes, fifty dollars instead of five dollars.”¹⁷

Assailed by critics who felt that Wouk’s rendering of a Bar Mitzvah viciously ridiculed the habits of American Jewry, Wouk defended his description in *This is My God* (1959), a book that explained his own religious beliefs and practices:

In my novel, *Marjorie Morningstar*, I did my best to portray a Bar-Mitzva with accuracy and with affection. I thought I succeeded pretty well, but for my pains I encountered the most bitter and violent objections from some fellow Jews. I had, they asserted, made a sacred occasion seem comical. . . . We Jews are a people of great natural gusto. In the

freedom of the United States, where for the first time in centuries we have known equality of opportunity, we have made of the Bar-Mitzvah a blazing costly jubilee. I do not see anything wrong with that. The American coming-out party is not too different.¹⁸

The criticism Wouk received for his portrayal of an opulent Bar Mitzvah pointed to the great unease American Jews felt over the consumption and display associated with Bar Mitzvah parties. Though the postwar years saw a marked decrease in American antisemitism, many Jews continued to feel threatened by negative publicity. They could not, as did Wouk, view Bar Mitzvah as the benign, Jewish counterpart of the American coming-out party. To have such a showy Jewish celebration featured in a best-selling book widely read by non-Jewish Americans made many American Jews feel self-conscious and even angry with Wouk for exposing a contentious issue. To wit, upon reading that Wouk did not see any problem with American Bar Mitzvahs becoming a “blazing costly jubilee,” Union of America Hebrew Congregation (UAHC) President Maurice N. Eisendrath acidly responded, “he wouldn’t.”¹⁹

Two years after the release of *Marjorie Morningstar*, Bar Mitzvahs entered the public arena once again during a 1957 New York State Supreme Court case. The case involved the parents of a twelve-year-old boy who sought to pay for their son’s Bar Mitzvah reception with the \$600 that he had been awarded in a personal-injury lawsuit. Since their son was a minor, the courts had the power to decide whether or not to release the child’s funds for this purpose. Justice Hofstadter, who presided over the case, seized the opportunity to make a public statement on what he felt to be the abuses of Bar Mitzvah celebration. “The Bar Mitzvah ceremony is a solemnization of a boy’s becoming a ‘son of the commandment’ and should encourage him in the path of righteousness. It was never intended to be a vehicle for mere entertainment and display. . . . It would be more fitting if the funds were utilized to initiate or continue his education in faith and morals,” Hofstadter stated. Though the court finally allowed the parents to use \$200 of their son’s award to pay for the party, the ruling represented an unmistakable, public condemnation of lavish Bar Mitzvah celebrations. This court case, discussed in synagogue bulletins and studies of Jewish communal life during the late 1950s, contributed to the notion that Bar Mitzvah receptions had become a public disgrace.²⁰

Fearing that the growth of Bar Mitzvahs might sully the reputation of American Jewry, rabbis used their pulpits to try to convince their congregants to reconsider their aesthetic choices. In 1950, Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn warned his congregants that Bar Mitzvah receptions that employed outlandish or off-color entertainment both demeaned the religious ritual and offered a negative impression of Judaism and Jewish life:

I have sat on occasion at Bar Mitzvah luncheons and dinners . . . where the songs and jokes I heard made me blush. And after 31 months in the United States Marine Corps, I don't blush easily. . . . I have listened to lyrics and observed behavior which, believe me, would be far more appropriate at the opening of a new burlesque house than to the most important religious occasion in the first 13 years of a boy's life! On one occasion right here in this congregation when a Christian minister who knew the family well was invited as a guest to the Bar Mitzvah service and luncheon, I was so ashamed for him during the lunch that with my food only half consumed I took him out for a walk to relieve our common embarrassment.

In this sermon, Gittelson conjured up a scenario that may have struck a chord with many postwar American Jews. On the one hand, during the postwar era, Jews enjoyed greater acceptance among their non-Jewish neighbors than in the previous decades. Many enjoyed cordial and friendly relationships with their non-Jewish colleagues and neighbors, and they invited non-Jews to their Bar Mitzvah receptions. However, American Jews' sense of belonging and approval still felt quite new and tenuous. Gittelson acknowledged this tension by reminding his congregants that the non-Jews at their parties would be making judgments about Jews and Judaism based on their impressions of Bar Mitzvah receptions. He tried to convince his congregants that their Bar Mitzvahs could alienate their non-Jewish friends and perhaps even endanger their newfound acceptance in America. He begged them, therefore, to hold a "warm, gracious, appropriate, dignified, decent party . . . at which anyone you know, Gentile or Jew, can drop in unannounced from beginning to end and you can look him in the eye and say 'today is the happiest day of my life, my boy read from the Torah today.'"²¹

Not only did rabbis express their disapproval over the content of Bar Mitzvah parties, but they also suspected that American Jews valued the receptions more than the religious aspects of the ritual. As one rabbi wrote in a 1956 article for *American Judaism*, "we offset the value of the Bar Mitzvah if we forget that the social aspect is supposed to be a minor way of celebrating its religious significance, not vice versa."²²

The suspicion that the social aspects of Bar Mitzvah had eclipsed its religious significance plagued not only religious leaders but also scholars such as sociologist Will Herberg. In his classic study *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955), Herberg argued that within the "triple melting pot" of American religious life, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews were equally guilty of exploiting their faith to advance their social needs rather than to worship God. In the case of Jews, he contended, Bar Mitzvah represented a prime example of a religious ritual that, in its postwar, American incarnation, had come to serve an entirely secular

purpose. “Bar Mitzvah is usually nothing but a lavish and expensive party, with the religious aspect reduced to insignificance, if not altogether ignored,” he wrote. As proof of this assertion, he cited the “typical Bar Mitzvah invitation” that announced the date and location of the reception, only to add “in tiny type in the corner: ‘Religious Services at 10:30 a.m.’” For Herberg, this secularization of Jewish religious practice confirmed, for better or for worse, that Jews had become fully ensconced into American society.²³

For critics of postwar Bar Mitzvah receptions, these parties had eclipsed the spiritual dimension of the service and distorted authentic religious practice. Rabbis grew irate, for instance, when rituals invented by bandleaders and caterers began to take on religious significance for the celebrants. Long Island’s Rabbi Harold Saperstein expressed his astonishment when a congregant asked him for religious guidance in deciding which relatives should light the candles of the Bar Mitzvah cake. The rabbi complained, “She couldn’t understand when I told her that lighting candles at a Bar Mitzvah reception was not part of any Jewish tradition but a gimmick introduced by caterers.”²⁴ He found himself even more disturbed when he witnessed a ceremony in which a small girl carried a *tallis* [prayer shawl] into the banquet hall, which the parents then placed on the shoulders of the Bar Mitzvah boy. This ceremony, he felt, exploited Jewish symbols for the entertainment of the guests, “as though there had been no Bar Mitzvah [in the synagogue] and this [performance] made the experience holy.”²⁵ As new rituals like the candle-lighting ceremony began to take on religious meaning for postwar American Jews, their rabbis feared that these recently invented rituals would detract from the older, rabbinically sanctioned Bar Mitzvah practices. Instead of accepting these new rituals as legitimate aspects of the Bar Mitzvah observance, many rabbis dismissed them as inauthentic, perhaps even dangerous, intrusions into the Bar Mitzvah ritual.

Though a scholar rather than a rabbi, Yeshiva University historian Abraham G. Duker argued forcefully that the Bar Mitzvah rituals invented by caterers had a deleterious impact on postwar Jewish life. “The trend in this area is towards increasing extravaganza, and as a by-product, also increasing costs,” Duker wrote in 1950. He contended that these for-profit rituals had a “disastrous” effect on poorer Jews, who felt compelled to participate in them for social and religious reasons even when they could not afford to pay for them easily. For Duker, allowing profit-earning businesses to invent Jewish ritual made it difficult for working-class Jews to be involved in Jewish life.²⁶

A telling letter printed in *American Judaism* seemed to echo Duker’s concern that some American Jews, viewing the reception as an integral aspect of the Bar Mitzvah experience, felt compelled to pay for extravagances that

they could not afford. Appearing among a series of comments debating the value of the Bar Mitzvah ritual, this letter, signed by one Mrs. R. Abrams, inquired, "In all the discussion about Bar Mitzvah, hasn't anyone something to say about the financial burden? We wanted a Bar Mitzvah for our son, but changed our mind because we couldn't afford it. Isn't the religious value of the ceremony offset when it becomes so difficult to pay for?" While many postwar synagogues did require a modest fee for Bar Mitzvah instruction, the costs surrounding the synagogical aspects of the ritual fell well within the budgets of most postwar American Jews. But for the many American Jews who lived in an increasingly affluent community, expensive receptions had become an integral aspect of the milestone. Mrs. Abrams and her family, unable to pay for the party, preferred to forgo the Bar Mitzvah altogether.²⁷

Rather than expressing concern over the less-affluent Jews who could not afford to pay for elaborate Bar Mitzvah parties, however, most religious leaders focused their critiques on those newly affluent Jews who, they felt, were particularly susceptible to spending needless amounts of money on gaudy affairs. Rabbi Erwin L. Herman, director of regional activities for the UAHC, directed his vitriol towards Bar Mitzvah caterers, whom he accused of taking advantage of newly wealthy American Jews. He lambasted the caterer as "the shepherd who leads us with uncomplaining conformity down the road of social acceptance. We have been good sheep—and like good sheep, we have been clipped. Enough! It is time to state without equivocation that we have had it, and to admit that we have been had, in the process." Herman contended that American Jews, who had only recently come to enjoy the benefits of secure, professional incomes, felt particular pressure to prove their financial status through conspicuous display. In Herman's formulation, caterers exploitatively preyed upon American Jews' insecurity with their newfound wealth. He encouraged American Jews and their leaders to resist their offerings.²⁸

As postwar Jews adjusted to their new economic status, their religious leaders enjoined them to use their money in a way they deemed consistent with Jewish ethics and values. These rabbis feared that Bar Mitzvah parties reflected social self-aggrandizing rather than what they considered to be more proper Jewish values, such as charity, education, or a commitment to the larger Jewish community. Chicago's Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, for instance, argued that the Bar Mitzvah party actually contradicted the ethical ideals that the synagogue hoped to transmit to its youth. "In school we try to inculcate the power to discriminate between what is important and what is trivial, between the good and the merely glittering," he wrote in his temple bulletin. "Then comes the Bar Mitzvah party which so often neutralizes all that the school

has attempted to teach, and influences the child to believe that ostentation is better than modesty, and that money spent on elaborate entertainment is better than money spent on books or charity to the synagogue.” For rabbis like Eisenstein, teaching American Jews how to properly use their wealth constituted an important part of their religious education.²⁹

As religious leaders sought to educate their constituents about how to use their money appropriately, they assigned relative worth to various expenditures. Many deemed elaborate Bar Mitzvah parties to be a frivolous expense, preferring instead that Jews use their resources on what they felt were more worthy causes. Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn, for instance, suggested to his congregants that it would be more in keeping with Jewish values to forgo the large Bar Mitzvah reception and spend the money on a contribution to the synagogue. As he told his congregants during a 1950 sermon, “I can think of no better way to reinforce the real religious emphases of your son’s Bar Mitzvah . . . than by taking the additional money you might have spent for a public spectacle and giving it in honor of the Bar Mitzvah to your Congregation’s building fund.”³⁰

Similarly, Rabbi Edgar Siskin of Glencoe, Illinois, used the issue of Bar Mitzvah as a springboard upon which to discuss ethical economic values. In his Rosh Hashanah sermon in 1963, he implored parents of Bar Mitzvah–aged youth to resist their children’s requests for opulent Bar Mitzvah receptions when so many worthy charities were in desperate need of funds. “Individual parents must have the gumption to stand up for decent moral values and tell their children, No!” he exclaimed. Instead, Siskin urged parents and their children to donate to humanitarian and religious causes such as peace and civil rights, aid to Israel and their local synagogue, and providing sustenance for the impoverished Jews of the Middle East and Eastern Europe.³¹

Increasingly during the postwar years, many American Jews did try to insert more meaning into their Bar Mitzvah celebrations by incorporating the State of Israel into the event. Some celebrants traveled to Israel in addition to, or in lieu of, a reception. Others joined the Jewish Agency’s “National Bar Mitzvah Club,” launched in 1962, which enlisted Bar and Bat Mitzvah youth into a three-year educational course before taking them on a study tour of Israel at the age of sixteen.³²

The editors of *The Reconstructionist* applauded the trend of including Israel into the Bar Mitzvah rite. In 1963, they congratulated New York Senator Jacob Javits on taking his son to Israel on the occasion of his Bar Mitzvah, expressing their hope that this would become a model for other Bar Mitzvah celebrations. “Considering what some *bar mitzvah* parties cost these days, the trip would be a bargain,” they gushed. “And consider the difference to the

boy: instead of being exposed to the eating, drinking and dancing, which have nothing whatever to do with his entrance into the household of Israel, he would find himself upon the soil where the words he chants echoed millennia ago.” In suggesting that Bar Mitzvah be celebrated with a trip to Israel rather than a party, the editors of *The Reconstructionist* joined the chorus of religious leaders who disparaged the content of Bar Mitzvah celebrations rather than the actual expense. After all, travel to the Middle East required a financial investment at least as large as the costs of a large party. For these leaders, it was not Jewish affluence itself but the ways that American Jews had chosen to use their newfound affluence that provoked anxiety. They hoped that Jews would choose to invest their wealth in causes that they judged worthy, such as the State of Israel, rather than in Bar Mitzvah receptions, which struck them as a frivolous waste.³³

For the leaders of postwar Jewry, lavish Bar Mitzvah receptions emerged as a touchstone for far-reaching anxieties that extended well beyond the boundaries of synagogue catering halls. On the one hand, postwar rabbis feared that the extravagance of Jewish life-cycle celebrations would trigger anti-Jewish stereotypes of Jewish greed and vulgarity and compromise the acceptance that American Jews had just begun to enjoy in the United States. Secondly, they worried about cultural loss among American Jews. They believed that the practices of Bar Mitzvahs, many of which had been developed by catering halls, would eclipse what these leaders thought of as more-authentic Jewish practices. Finally, these critics expressed concern over the ethics of American Jews who spent vast sums of money on large and expensive parties when, at least in their opinion, their resources should have been put to better use.

Concerns about marginality, cultural loss, and the allocation of communal resources tortured the leadership of American Jewry in the decades after World War II. On the one hand, as American Jews, they were experiencing unprecedented, and very new, levels of affluence and acceptance. At the same time, they were keenly aware that many Jews around the world did not share their happy situation. They mourned the losses of the Holocaust, supported the struggle of survivors who were trying to rebuild their lives, and followed the plight of displaced Jews in the Middle East and around the world. Hovering uncomfortably between these two poles of triumph and unspeakable loss, American Jewish leaders felt an enormous sense of responsibility to provide cultural and financial leadership for the rest of the Jewish world. They worried when they saw American Jews behave in ways that could jeopardize their new feeling of security. They worried when they saw American Jews spend money on parties when their resources might be

called upon at any moment to support victims of anti-Jewish violence or to ease a crisis in Israel. Any prevailing custom that struck them as inauthentic made them wonder whether American Jews were capable of sustaining Jewish culture in a post-Holocaust world.

Anxiety over the rapid accumulation of wealth experienced by many American Jews during the postwar years underlay the critique of Jewish Bar Mitzvahs. Many Jewish leaders saw these extravagant parties as proof positive that American Jews used their good fortune to degrade and cheapen Jewish life rather than to enhance its finest qualities. In their writings and sermons, they tried to teach American Jews how to use their resources differently. For these critics, the way American Jews celebrated life-cycle events connected directly to the viability of Jewish life in America and around the world.

NOTES

¹ A. Begelman, "The Modern Bar Mitzvah," *Man about Town: The Literary Magazine of the Temple Beth El Men's Club* 11:3 (December 1961): 5.

² Papers of Rabbi Harold Saperstein, American Jewish Archives, ms. 718, box 6, folder 3, Kol Nidre Sermon, 1960.

³ Ivan G. Marcus, *The Jewish Life Cycle: Rites of Passage from Biblical to Modern Times* (Seattle: University of Washington Press: 2004), 82-105.

⁴ Jenna Weisman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 90-94.

⁵ A study among American college graduates in 1947, for instance, revealed that more Jews than non-Jews earned their living as professionals, proprietors, managers, and officials, though fewer of their parents had enjoyed these high-income occupations. This survey attested both to the rapid upward mobility of postwar American Jews as well as to their relative economic growth compared with Americans of other backgrounds. Cited in Nathan Glazer, "The American Jew and the Attainment of Middle-Class Rank: Some Trends and Explanations," in *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group* (ed. Marshall Sklare; Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958), 141.

⁶ For instance, see Rabbi Erwin L. Herman's "Bar Mitzvah A La Carte," *American Judaism* 11:4 (Summer 1962): 4-5. The article describes a number of particularly fanciful Bar Mitzvah receptions that he attended, including a party with a three-ringed circus, complete with a live elephant, as well as a party in which the caterer released a slew of parakeets.

⁷ Stanley Meisler, "Big Bar Mitzvah," *The Reconstructionist* 26:2 (4 March 1960): 21-24.

⁸ A. Begelman, "The Modern Bar Mitzvah," *Man about Town: The Literary Magazine of the Temple Beth El Men's Club* 11:3 (December 1961): 5, 33.

⁹ Roland B. Gittelsohn, "Bar Mitzvah in Reform Judaism," *American Judaism* 6:1 (September 1956): 14-16.

¹⁰ "How Much Religious Education Do You Want for Your Children: Brotherhood Section," *American Judaism* 3:1 (September 1953): 23-24; Benjamin Efron and Alvan

D. Rubin, "The Reality of Bar Mitzvah," *CCAR Journal* 8:3:31 (October 1960): 31-33; "Rabbi's Report," *Time* (13 July 1959).

¹¹ Rabbi Harold Silver, "Today I am a Woman," *CCAR Journal* 9:4:36 (January 1962); for a history of how Bat Mitzvah developed in the United States, see Paula Hyman, "The Introduction of Bat Mitzvah in Conservative Judaism in Postwar America," *YIVO Annual* 19 (ed. Deborah Dash Moore; Evanston: Northwestern University Press and YIVO Institute for Jewish History, 1990), 133-46; and Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America," *Women and American Judaism* (eds. Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna; Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 223-34.

¹² Elias Charry, "Ben Torah: Bar Mitzvah at Sixteen," *Conservative Judaism* 16:1 (Fall 1961): 52-55; Leonard B. Gewirtz, *The Authentic Jew and His Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1961), 83. For a study of how Jewish Orthodoxy managed to thrive, rather than decline, in situations of postwar abundance, see Etan Diamond, *And I Will Dwell in their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹³ Morris Freedman, "New Jewish Community in Formation," *Commentary* 19:1 (January 1955): 37; Arnold Jacob Wolf, "Experimental Synagogue in Suburbia," *The Reconstructionist* 26:7 (13 May 1960): 16.

¹⁴ "United Synagogue of America Standards for Synagogue Practice," printed in *Conservative Judaism* 10:4 (Summer 1956): 22-25.

¹⁵ "Report of Committee on Guide for Synagogue Decorum," 75th Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (1964), *CCAR Yearbook* 74 (Philadelphia: Press of Maurice Jacobs, 1965), 60.

¹⁶ "Life Goes to a Bar Mitzvah," *Life* (13 October 1952): 170-72.

¹⁷ Herman Wouk, *Marjorie Morningstar* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955); cited from later printing (New York: Signet, 1957) 93-95.

¹⁸ Herman Wouk, *This is My God* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 142-43.

¹⁹ Maurice N. Eisendrath, "Paean of Praise, Wouk Style," *American Judaism* 9:3 (1960): 6.

²⁰ "Schindler v. Deeves," *New York Law Journal* (19 September 1957), quoted in "Bar Mitzvah and the Courts," *The Bulletin: Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester* 10:4 (December 1957-January 1958). Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester Collection, ms. 728, box 5, folder 1, American Jewish Archives; also cited in Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, (Boston: Beacon, 1959), 205.

²¹ Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn papers, ms. 704, box 35, folder 5, "Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation," sermon delivered on March 24, 1950, American Jewish Archives.

²² Roland B. Gittelsohn, "Bar Mitzvah in Reform Judaism," *American Judaism* 6:1 (September 1956): 15.

²³ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 196, 208. On the growing secularization of American religions, see chapter 11, "Religion in America in the Perspective of Faith," 254-81.

²⁴ Papers of Harold Saperstein, ms. 718, "New Approaches to Judaism," sermon delivered on May 31, 1957, box 3, folder 1, American Jewish Archives; "What is Jewish Tradition?," sermon delivered on Sukkos 1963, box 3, folder 4, American Jewish Archives.

²⁵ Papers of Harold Saperstein, ms. 718, "The Need for Jewish Dignity," sermon delivered on January 4, 1963, box 3, folder 4, American Jewish Archives.

²⁶ Abraham G. Duker, "Emerging Culture Patterns in American Jewish Life," *The Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 39:4 (June 1950): 383.

²⁷ Mrs. R. Abrams, "High Cost of Bar Mitzvah," *American Judaism* 6:4 (April 1957): 7.

²⁸ Rabbi Erwin I. Herman, *American Judaism* 11:4 (Summer 1962): 4-5.

²⁹ Cited in Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), 205.

³⁰ Rabbi Roland Gittelson papers, ms. 704, box 5, folder 35, "Sermon: Bar Mitzvah for My Son?" delivered on March 24, 1950, American Jewish Archives.

³¹ Papers of Rabbi Edgar Siskin, ms. 64, box 2 folder 4, "Fathers and Sons," Rosh Hashanah Sermon, delivered on September 19, 1963, American Jewish Archives.

³² *The American Jewish Year Book* lists the National Bar Mitzvah Club in its 1964 directory as an organization that "seeks to enhance meaning of the Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies; to further Jewish education; and to develop personal identification with Israel through a three year program which culminates in a summer study-tour of Israel." *American Jewish Year Book* 65 (1964): 372.

³³ "A Pattern for Jewish Boys Everywhere," *The Reconstructionist* 28:19 (25 January 1963): 4-5.

