B’nai Mitzvah Ritual for Adolescents with Disabilities

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Adapting B’nai Mitzvah ritual is hard because we have strong normative expectations.
“All they have to do to be bar/bat mitzvah is wake up on their 13th birthday."
Really?

• If so, why do bat and bar mitzvah ceremonies make sense for anyone?

• Why do adult women who were denied the opportunity as children seek it out as adults?
B’nai mitzvah ritual does important things
Puberty is a big deal

• Changing bodies.
• New experiences.
• New social and academic demands.
• Growing emotional and cognitive maturity.
• Developmentally crucial separation from parents.
Emerging Jewish Adulthood

- Jewish context for overwhelming transition.
- Shifting Jewish status.
- Move towards mature Judaism.
- Acting as an adult in some respects.
Some Acts of Jewish Adulthood

- Leading prayers that children can’t lead; leyning, etc.

- Giving a d’var Torah that adults will listen to.

- Defeating Hitler by making it to bat mitzvah/not intermarrying/intending to have Jewish children eventually.

- Being allowed to decide whether or not to keep going to religious school.

- Being old enough to annoy rabbis and cantors by having a party that they consider inappropriate.
It’s hard to be a Jew

- Our religion is beautiful and it is also very demanding.
- We carry generational trauma, and still deal with antisemitism.
- Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual helps children learn how to bear adult Jewish burdens.
Some of what we typically ask

• We expect 12-13 year olds to speak and sing publicly, in front of important people in their live.

• At an age in which most kids experience changing bodies and intense self-consciousness.

• Even if they don’t know Hebrew.

• Even if they’ve never studied music before. Even if they’re untalented and uninterested.

• This is a really intense thing to ask of kids. And they do it, routinely.

• This is made possible by a large body of knowledge of teaching methods for this material.

• We have a lot of methods that work — and the capacity to develop more.
Some of what we typically offer

• Respect for Jewish competence and accomplishment.

• Support in developing maturity.

• Affirmation of significance in the Jewish community.

• Celebration of who they are at an age at which others find them difficult, and at which they may not like themselves very much.

• A framework for the changing parent-child relationship.

• An attentive audience that they earned.

• Jewish adolescents with disabilities need these things too.
Emerging adulthood as a disabled Jew

• Jewish adolescents with disabilities have the same need for transition ritual as nondisabled peers.

• The details of how this is done are sometimes different, for a number of reasons.

• One reason is that adolescents with disabilities are experiencing different social realities than their nondisabled peers.
Puberty with a disability
Disabilities can become apparent

- Middle school makes new demands.
- Kids who were able to cope with the academic demands of elementary school sometimes face barriers in middle school.
- Increased social demands for conformity.
- Increased expectation of self care skills, which some kids may not be able to acquire.
Disabilities triggered or magnified by puberty

- Hormonal changes can cause new problems.
- Medication may stop working.
- New seizure disorders.
- Growing larger can complicate things.
- New or worsened mental health problems.
- Menstrual problems or migraines.
Not growing out of disability

- When kids are younger, it’s often possible to imagine that they will grow out of it.
- Or that therapy can cure them.
- Or that their impairments won’t matter so much when they’re older.
- Puberty is often when it becomes apparent that they will stay disabled.
- We need to create ritual that can make it clear that they are *still becoming adults*. 
Puberty in kids with disabilities is often treated as meaningless

- “Mental age”.
- Treated as incapable of developing sexual and romantic attraction.
- No transition of physical and emotional boundaries.
- Enmeshment.
This is particularly complicated for LGBTQ disabled kids.
Solidarity in B’nai Mitzvah ritual

• Kids with disabilities have to fight for their adulthood.

• We need to be on their side.

• We need to create substantive transition ritual with room for disability.
Can your community imagine this child as an adult?

• Are they part of “Jewish continuity”?

• Are there adults like them in the community?

• Are they treated like adults?

• (If you say “special needs”, the next word people think is “kids”).

• What message is their bat or bar mitzvah sending about their adulthood?
Trying to ‘make it meaningful’ can undermine solidarity.

• It already means something!

• “Making it meaningful” implies that there isn’t anything meaningful happening.

• B’nai mitzvah ritual is a Jewish response to an inherently meaningful life transition.

• We don’t need to make it meaningful. We need to engage with the meaning.
Ritual that feels meaningful can mean the wrong thing
Feeling moved — and going to the wrong place
B’nai mitzvah can feel like pretending.

- That a disabled child’s puberty has significance.
- That a disabled child is really moving towards Jewish adulthood.
- That their maturity is worth celebrating.
- That anything of real ritual significance is happening.
All of those things are true, but they are not always believed.
People often feel moved by their willingness to pretend.

- People think that the child’s puberty isn’t really meaningful and that they will never really be an adult.

- And that therefore this isn’t a real bar/bat mitzvah.

- But that it’s laudable to pretend that it is, and to ‘give them an experience of feeling included’.
Idealized pretending is degrading to the kid.

- Socially valued community members get the ritual experience of feeling moved by their inclusivity.
- Disabled kids get treated as ritual objects rather than ritual actors.
- They get the message that their maturity is not worth celebrating.
- And that they will never be regarded as real adults.
Honest ritual

- Keeping mind that something inherently significant is happening to the person you are working with.
- They are going through puberty.
- Their adulthood is emerging.
- This is an inherently meaningful event.
- Bar/Bat mitzvah effects an important transition.
- Adolescents with disabilities need ritual that is both effective and honest.
Effective transition ritual

• Ritual must be effective as well as honest.

• Effective ritual does real things.

• An effective bar or bat mitzvah process and ceremony changes those involved.

• (And the relationships between those involved).
Don’t focus on the spiritual needs of the parents

- As with b’nai mitzvah for typically developing kids, it can’t be exclusively about what parents want.
- When b’nai mitzvah is all about the parents, developmentally necessary separation is undermined.
- Kids with disabilities are not their parents; they need to be recognized as separate people.
- Involving parents is appropriate and necessary; focusing on parents is counterproductive.
Include barukh sh’patarani

• בורק שסיירני מעונשו של זה

• “Blessed is the one who has exempted me from this one’s punishment”

• Something significant is happening — ritualizing the move towards adult responsibility.

• Ritual act of separation matters, especially for disabled kids.
Talk to them directly
What if they can’t talk?

• Talk to them directly anyway.

• Learn about their communication methods.

• A presentation about communication and showing respect to those with communication disabilities: http://www.uctv.tv/shows/When-Listening-is-Complicated-Skills-for-Honoring-the-Individual-Perspectives-of-Every-Person-with-Disabilities-32191
Age appropriate physical and emotional boundaries

• Remember that disability doesn’t erase puberty.

• Don’t touch them in ways that would normally be considered inappropriate at their age.

• Don’t do things that would normally be considered inappropriate with an adolescent of the opposite gender.

• (Even if they initiate it.)

• Be thoughtful about what you do and don’t discuss with their parents.
Treat them as obligated
Rabbi Yosef [who was blind] said: At first, I said that if someone said that the halakha agrees with Rabbi Yehuda (who says that a blind person is exempt from mitzvot), I would throw a feast for the rabbis! Because I am not obligated and yet I observe.

Now that I have heard the opinion of Rabbi Haninah that one who is commanded and performs is greater than one who is not commended and performs — on the contrary, if someone tells me that the halakha is not like Rabbi Yehuda I will throw a feast for the rabbis!
Don’t start by dropping requirements

• Err on the side of assuming there’s a way to make it work.

• Look for effective teaching methods.

• Look for ways to adapt ritual elements rather than eliminate them.

• Spend significant time thinking about options before concluding that requirements should be dropped.
B’nai Mitzvah ritual should involve doing hard things

- Having a disability doesn’t make it easier to be a Jew.

- Jewish children with disabilities grow up to bear heavy Jewish burdens as adults.

- They have the same need for ritual that can prepare them for the difficulty of being a Jewish adult.
Don’t expect them to work 10 times harder than everyone else.

• We ask a very nearly unreasonable amount of effort from 11 and 12 year olds as it is.

• Working ten times harder than that won’t help them learn to bear adult burdens. It will burn them out.

• Time and energy spent working much harder than everyone else has to come from somewhere.
What if a kid can’t or shouldn’t do all of the usual things?

- Some things require speech.
- Some things require vision.
- Some things require literacy.
Being obligated doesn’t always mean doing everything yourself.

- Most of us don’t lead prayers all the time.
- Other people do it for us.
- Teach the concept of shlichut.
- Involve them in deciding who and how someone will do the obligatory things on their behalf.
- Relying on someone else is different from being exempt.
Find something real that they can do.

- The existing ritual has many parts.
- Most people can do some part of it in a real way.
- (New forms of participation can be created too, but it’s harder to pull off.)
- Celebrate accomplishment.
- Don’t fake it.
Do something that would be obviously inappropriate for a young child

- If Bar/Bat mitzvah looks the same as a siddur ceremony for elementary school, that’s a problem.

- Adolescents with disabilities are not little children.

- They need significant ritual responsibilities that recognize their maturity.

- (Eg: Carrying the Torah is significant because there are consequences if you drop it.)
Watch your tone

- When disability is involved, it’s easy to slip into saccharine modes.

- Feeling awkward can lead to making cutesy jokes.

- That is not the message you want to send.

- Don’t be this guy. Perform respect instead.
Don’t call the paper

• A kid in a community having a bar or bat mitzvah should be normal, not newsworthy.

• News articles shift focus away from the bar/bat mitzvah kid.

• Warm fuzzy stories about a community’s inspiring inclusivity undermine the purpose of the ritual.
Don’t make them look cute.

- Respect maturity.
- Don’t talk baby talk.
- Don’t call them cutesy things like “a smart cookie” or “adorable”.
- Don’t mock their desire for respect.
- No one wants to look adorable and cute when they’re just emerging as an adult.
Honest celebration of accomplishment.

• Talk about what they did, and your respect for their accomplishments.

• Be honest. Don’t exaggerate or say over the top things about trivial actions.

• (It’s also generally best to steer clear of “you’re so inspiring”. Having a bar or bat mitzvah should be normal.)

• Adolescents with disabilities can do things worth celebrating.
Avoid inappropriate eye contact with the congregation.

• While your student is leading prayers or giving a d’var Torah, the congregation should be listening to them.

• Model appropriate behavior by looking at your student.

• If you give a blessing or speech to your student, look at them while you’re doing it.

• Don’t distract the congregation with inappropriate eye contact.
Pay attention to the message the music is sending.

- Music sets a mood.
- Music sets emphasis.
- Music sends a message about what is worth taking seriously.
- If you are a musician, use your skills to figure out whether the music is sending the right message. If you are not, consider asking a musician for feedback.
Learn from adults with disabilities

- Seeing adults with disabilities shows you that adulthood and disability are compatible.

- This is countercultural, and does not happen by itself even for disability advocates.

- Listen to adults with physical, intellectual, sensory, learning, and other disabilities.
A useful book: *Caring Liturgies*

- Susan Marie Smith

- Very useful book on customizing rituals in effective ways.

- From a Christian perspective, but much of it transfers
Matan Jewish Disability Acceptance and Inclusion Pledge

• I acknowledge that ability, disability and humanity coexist, and I pledge to see my students as they are.

• I will not look past their disabilities; I will seek to understand. I will not overlook their abilities; I will seek to support them effectively.

• I will not ignore the humanity of my students; I will remember that they have individual interests and a perspective of their own and that they were each created in the image of God.
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