Spiritual Dimensions of Bar/bat Mitzvah Ceremonies for Jewish Children with Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract: The celebration of life-cycle events that transcend everyday living are one of the experiences that engender spirituality. In the Jewish religion a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is the rite of passage from childhood towards adulthood. Twenty-one youngsters with moderate and severe disabilities who attend two special education schools in Israel participated in group bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. Children were observed during the six-month learning process and at the ceremony itself. Parents and school staff were interviewed as well. This study describes spiritual dimensions of the bar/bat mitzvah experience that were identified and shows that the youngsters could both express their own spirituality and impact the spirituality of others.

Spirituality is a multidimensional construct that is not easily defined. Scott (1997 as cited in Hill et al., 2000) found over forty definitions in social-scientific journals. The term "spiritual" is often used in modern discourse in place of words such as "moving" or "worthwhile." Hill et al. object to this usage and contend that spirituality needs to involve considerations of the sacred, which they in turn define as "persons, objects, principles or concepts that transcend the self" (p. 64). This reflects an "ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos — with our own souls, with one another with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive" (Palmer (1998–1999, p. 6). Myers and Myers (1999) identify this as a quality of being fully human.

Spirituality is about acquiring and living by a vision of the "good life." The source of values that can guide our lives can be found in "religious traditions, cultural heritages (which can include literature, the arts, politics, etc.) or in caring communities" (Alexander, 2001, p. 6). There has been a growing interest in spirituality among educators (Halford, 1998-99; Kessler, 1998-99; Trousdale, 2001; Myers & Myers, 1999) and in professions such as nursing (Greenstreet, 1999), social work (Miller, 2001) and occupational therapy (Egan & De-Laat, 1997).

Alexander (2001) has identified three conceptions of spirituality: subjective, collective, and objective spiritualities. Subjective spirituality focuses on the inner self and our own identities. Collective spirituality looks at fellowship, shared commitment and memory. And the objective looks for meaning beyond ourselves and toward the transcendent.

Quality of life has become an organizing concept for guiding work with persons with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities and is now conceptualized similarly for persons with or without disabilities (Reiter, 1999). Spiritual dimensions can be found in these models. Schalock’s (1996) Quality of Life Model considered spirituality as one of the exemplary indicators of the core dimension of emotional well-being. In this model, spirituality is acknowledged but not given a central position. The model developed by the Quality of Life Research Unit at the Centre for Health Promotion (CHP) of the University of Toronto (Renwick & Brown, 1996; Renwick, Brown, & Raphael, 2000) treats spirituality as a much more significant domain. The CHP conceptual approach views itself as influenced by the humanistic-existential tradition. This tradition led to the incorporation of three...
themes — being, belonging, and becoming — as the essential quality of life domains. The CHP approach then delineates nine subdomains and one of the subdomains of “being” is the spiritual domain. The model defines spirituality as a complex, essential dimension of life that is experienced as good and fulfilling. It encompasses having moral and ethical values, celebrating significant life events and transcending daily life experiences. It gives life a sense of purpose and meaning and is usually accompanied by feelings of peace, comfort, harmony, and hope for the future. Religious traditions are often but not always the source of personal spirituality, and there are other sources as well (Renwick et al., 2000). The spiritual domain is characterized by a “sense of connectedness.” This can occur at a variety of levels: with oneself, with others, with nature, or in relation to a higher power. These three levels echo the conceptual framework of spirituality outlined by Alexander (2001) and summarized above.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition that individuals with developmental disabilities can be spiritual people, that they can have religious faith, and that they can experience a sense of belonging to a group (Luckasson et al., 1992; Hoeksema, 1995). Rebecca, as described by Oliver Sacks, suffered from numerous handicaps and incapacities including sensorimotor impairments and limited intelligence. Yet she spiritually felt herself to be a “full and complete being” (1985, p. 171). She loved the various Jewish rituals, such as lighting candles and attending synagogue, and she understood the prayers, rites, and symbols of the synagogue. When her grandmother, with whom she lived, died, she found comfort in the mourning rites of “sitting shiva” and her religious community accorded her the same status as any other bereaved person and supported her in her time of need.

Webb-Mitchell (1994) conducted two long-term, in-depth studies that focused on the religious and spiritual experiences of persons with disabilities. The first was an ethnographic study of a Christian religious community populated by both persons with developmental disabilities and nondisabled people (L’Arche Lambeth, in London), and the second was a study of youngsters with disabilities from all religious backgrounds at the Devereux Hospital and Children’s Center in Florida. Fawcett (2001) has been using meditative methodologies (silent sitting, visualization, guided imagery) to nurture spiritual growth and awareness in children with complex learning difficulties. She recently introduced walking meditation within the structure of a labyrinth as a methodology as well.

The celebration of life-cycle events that transcend everyday living are one of the experiences that engender spirituality. Van Gennep first coined the term “rites of passage” (1908/1960) for rituals that marked all types of transitions experienced by individuals and groups during their development. The rituals or ceremonies (the outward presentation of the solemn moments) at these points in time serve to facilitate the transitions. From a societal point of view, one of the significant rites of passage is the initiation into tribal membership and adulthood at puberty (Kimball, 1965). Van der Hart (1983) stresses how in puberty rites that have a strong religious character, the members of the society experience their entire world as being consecrated again, and as a result the perpetuation and well-being of the group is ensured. The community context of the rite of passage is a critical part of the process and is necessary to foster a sense of belonging (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993).

Bar mitzvahs, the equivalent of the Jewish rite of passage into adulthood, can be said to carry some elements of the initiation ceremony. The ceremony takes place at a specific time and in a specific place. It takes place when the boy is thirteen and at the synagogue. This assures the presence of the adult members of the community the child is about to join. The ceremony involves the use of the Torah scroll, the community’s most sacred treasure. The act of reciting the blessings prior to and following the reading of the section of the Torah is the central ritual, the act that represents the change in the child’s status. In modern society, the rite of passage has been extended to include girls as well as boys (bat mitzvah) and The Conservative Movement (known as the Masorti Movement in Israel) encourages girls to participate in the synagogue ritual as well.

The bar/bat mitzvah is viewed today as cel-
ebrating one’s passage toward maturity, rather than adulthood itself. The tasks are difficult enough so that youngsters can experience a real sense of success and accomplishment. Ze- 
gans and Zegans (1979) interviewed boys who reported an enhanced sense of their own worth and importance to other people and a connection with other Jews both past and present. In telephone surveys conducted with four hundred families, both parents and youngsters described this rite of passage as a significant event in their lives both during the year following the ceremony and when contacted again four years later (Kosmin & Key- sar, 2000). Other researchers concluded that the bar mitzvah provided an opportunity for family growth and transformation (Davis, 1987; Schoenfeld, 1990).

The issue of the celebration of bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies for youngsters with developmental disabilities is a complex one. Jewish legal culture seems to reflect a contradictory blend of sensitivity and insensitivity towards those with disabilities (Marx, 1992). In classi- cal Jewish tradition, the obligation to perform commandments endows the individual with dignity. Thus, exemptions or disqualifications from the responsibility of fulfilling various commandments can be seen as an assault on the esteem of the personhood of the individ- ual with a disability. Exemptions were given globally to the mentally handicapped and to the deaf (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashanah, 29A). Over time, some sources indi- cated greater openness to including persons with disabilities, although these sources were often challenged by more conservative views that argued for the status quo.

Beyond the legal rulings, the issue is very much one of social acceptability. In Israel to- day, while children of Orthodox families with mild impairments may often have bar mitz- vahs, this is not always the case for children with more severe disabilities. Unlike their counterparts who have children without dis- abilities, secular parents often do not even consider the possibility of having traditional bar mitzvah ceremonies for their children with disabilities.

By contrast, the Committees on Laws and Standards of the Conservative Movement in Israel issued a responsum permitting children with mental retardation to be called to the Torah (Hammer, 1992). In essence, the Con- servative Movement has stated that those with disabilities are to be accorded equal status with regard to religious rituals. But, in order for these youngsters to be able to exercise their rights, it becomes necessary to provide the necessary support services.

The need for these support services was the catalyst for establishing a program that would offer preparation for bar mitzvah to children with developmental disabilities in Israel. The program, founded in 1995, has been imple- mented in special education schools through- out the country and is offered to families on an optional basis. The Conservative Move- ment contends that while religious practices should not be foisted on anyone, they should be part of the choices offered to individuals with disabilities. The program has served chil- dren with a wide range of disabilities (chil- dren with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism, and deafness) and family religious ori- entations (secular, traditional, and Ortho- dox). The program includes both Judaic en- richment and preparation for the ceremony itself. The teaching is done primarily in small groups and the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony it- self is usually held for the entire group with each child being called to the Torah individ- ually to recite the appropriate blessings. The ceremony has both elements that are defined and prescribed and elements that are impro- vised as determined by the unique needs of the group. This is the first study to explore the significance of a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony for youngsters with moderate and severe de- velopmental disabilities and their parents.

Method

The present research was based on qualitative methodology. Indeed, of the few studies that exist about the impact of a bar/bat mitzvah experience on children without disabilities, most have been qualitative in nature (Davis, 1987; Schoenfeld, 1990; Zegans & Zegans, 1979). Particularly relevant to this study have been qualitative methods used to investigate the perspectives of families of children with disabilities. These studies examined issues such as the positive impact of having a child with intellectual disabilities (Stainton & Besser, 1998), inclusive education (Grove &
Fisher, 1999), and transition from school to adult life (Hanley-Maxwell, Whitney-Thomas, & Pogoloff, 1995).

Qualitative methods are especially useful for exploratory research where there is little known about the phenomenon of interest. The current study was explorative in nature as well, in that it dealt with the impact of a normative lifecycle event that had never been studied in this population. Because of the study’s exploratory nature and because it deals most directly with the meaning people attach to a particular event in their lives, qualitative methods were deemed the most appropriate ones to employ.

Participants

Out of the seventeen schools that participated in the bar/bat mitzvah program during the 1999–2000 academic year, two were chosen for intensive study. The two schools were selected because of the relatively large size of the groups. Ten children attended Shalom, a school for children with moderate mental retardation, and eleven attended Hadar, a school primarily for children with cerebral palsy. Informants included the children in the program, their parents, and members of the staff of the schools. (All names of schools, children and parents are pseudonyms).

Data Collection

Primary methods of obtaining information from the children were through weekly observations during the six-month learning process, observation at the ceremony itself, and interviews during the week following the ceremony. Ceremonies were videotaped in order to allow repeated viewing. Because the children have somewhat limited verbal abilities, descriptive field notes of their actions and body language were of importance as well.

In addition, semi-structured interviews, lasting between 1 and 2 hours, were conducted by the researcher with parents in their homes, both prior to the learning process and one to two months after the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. Interviews were also held with school principals, homeroom teachers and classroom aides, as these staff members had intensive interaction with both children and families and were therefore likely to be key informants.

Results

Although the study identified several dimensions of the bar/bat mitzvah experience, this article focuses on the spiritual dimensions of that experience and concentrates mainly on data from the observations of and interviews with the children. The bar/bat mitzvah experience has led to expressions of spirituality on all three of the levels described in the literature on spirituality.

Subjective Spirituality

During the learning process, the youngsters had been urged to look inward and identify their best selves and to express these insights in personal prayers that were incorporated into the service in addition to the conventional prayers. Children began by reciting the traditional six word opening formula for all blessings (Praised are You, Adonai our God) and added their own personal endings.

The process by which the children composed these prayers was fascinating and reflected a high degree of internalization. Some of the youngsters took a long time to think about it. Some needed help from friends in the group. All took it seriously, and it was also clear when they reached the wording that satisfied them personally. The teacher encouraged the group to think about their strengths and talents. The following conversation was recorded in observation notes.

Teacher: What is something you do well?
Matan: I fix things.
Teacher: Can you put that into the blessing?
Matan: “Praised are You, Adonai our God that I can fix things.”
Esther: He has golden hands.
Matan: (grins): That’s what they say about me.
Teacher: Would you like to use that expression in your blessing?
Matan: Yes.
Teacher: OK — “Praised are You, Adonai our God who gave me ‘golden hands’.”
Matan: (looking very pleased) repeats the blessing.

Matan never once forgot what blessing he had written, was able to say it at the rehearsals, at the service itself, and when visited several weeks afterward.

For David, reaching the final wording was a long process. David began by thanking God that he can do everything perfectly. The teacher prodded a bit — “Is that true? Can anyone be perfect?” David replied, “Not really.” David then turned to the group. The children suggested that he “bakes good cookies” and “enjoys eating.” David wasn’t satisfied. He then suggested that he “walks well and rides on a tractor.” There was a moment of silence because motor activities are extremely difficult for David. It was unclear whether he was being facetious or expressing an inner desire. The teacher pressed on and asked him once again what he was good at. This time he replied that he thanked God for allowing him to laugh and for “giving me a sense of humor.” At this point he finally appeared satisfied. He too had no trouble recalling the blessing from then on.

The fact that the children were able to learn their prayers by heart almost effortlessly, and remember them weeks after the ceremony indicated that these were indeed their own personal prayers. Sessions devoted to this process piqued their interest and cooperation. The idea of thanking God via the blessings seems to have been internalized by the children, and youngsters expressed thoughts and sentiments that were of importance and significance to them.

Learning new concepts and skills provided an opportunity to attain a sense of achievement. Children from secular homes had little exposure to the ritual objects related to prayer, to the concept of prayer, or to the synagogue itself. The children now recognized and were familiar with these objects and had learned a few basic prayers. Parents related to the impact the ceremony had on the self-image of their youngsters. Orah’s parents recognized “a sense of confidence in their daughter that is not usually present.” “Orah knew what she was doing and exuded this as she walked up to the Torah.” Guy’s mother felt that “Guy saw the ceremony as a chance to prove to himself that he is capable.” Several children had older brothers who had bar mitzvah ceremonies. Parents commented that their sons could now identify better with these older siblings. Many of the children were aware of their appearance as well. Some took great care in selecting clothing for the ceremony. Many purchased new outfits for the occasion. Several spent a good deal of time in front of the mirror and were pleased with the outcome.

The ceremony provided an opportunity to publicly recognize these achievements. Sheer magnitude of the celebration — a decorated synagogue, presence of all family members, the large audience, gifts, the presence of the mayor, and specially prepared prayerbooks, etc. — all testified to the importance of the event.

Alexander (2001) lists a number of desired outcomes of a spiritual curriculum. These include understanding that one matters, that what one thinks is significant, and that one can make a difference. The bar/bat mitzvah curriculum emphasized ethical commandments and youngsters were given the opportunity to choose and to perform these commandments. Commandments chosen included: visiting the sick, honoring elderly persons, and giving charity. The group then discussed their experience of performing these commandments, shared personal reactions, and drew conclusions. Salkin (1992) contends that commandments “create a sense of human and spiritual competence in the person who does them” (p. 52). Krystal (1998–99) examined the effect of participation in service projects, and he too found that these enhanced self-esteem and were an empowering, spiritually fulfilling experience. Recognition that one has the capacity to choose to do good is an important part of one’s sense of self.

A sense of empowerment evolves when persons acquire skills or information, have opportunity to use their abilities, and sense that change has occurred as a result of their own actions (Egan & DeLaat, 1997). This is closely akin to the first level of spirituality, which has been described as the sense of connectedness with one’s self. This sense of empowerment was evident in various aspects of the bar/bat mitzvah experience.
Collective Spirituality

The second strand of spirituality described in literature is the sense of connectedness to others and the sense of community. The bar/bat mitzvah experience created a sense of group and belonging on several levels. Children studied together as a group over the course of the year in preparation for the ceremony with much emphasis placed on formation of a group identity. Many parents stressed the sense of togetherness they felt the children had. “No one had to do this alone.” There was a feeling that they were there “to support each other and share the experience.” Orah’s father even mused: “I wish there were more life events and experiences that the group could share together.” Ari’s mother was pleased that the ceremony had “helped create a close feeling among the children in the class.” Thus the first level was the cohesiveness of the group of children who studied together and celebrated in a common ceremony.

A second level is the family of each child. Children were eager to invite guests to the ceremony, and indeed parents generally invited close family members to participate. Parents were invited to stand beside their youngsters as they were called up to the Torah and some of the grandparents chose to join them as well. This gave families an opportunity to “celebrate together as a family,” with the bar/bat mitzvah youngster being the center of attention. Children were pleased that their relatives were there. When asked weeks later, they were able to say exactly who had attended the ceremony. Aryeh’s positive experience at the bar mitzvah ceremony centered on his biological father’s presence at the service in addition to his stepfather. This was the first time his father had ever participated in a school event and Aryeh spent the morning introducing him to all his teachers.

The next level of community that was created by the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony was that of all the families of the youngsters. The sense of one large extended family. Orah’s parents expressed this sentiment clearly: “We were not alone but were sharing a life event with other families who could understand and empathize with all the emotions we are feeling.”

Several parents addressed the issue of the sense of acceptance by the larger community that they felt as a result of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. They described the atmosphere in the synagogue as one of warmth, respect, and tolerance. This found expression in the patience shown waiting for children to speak, in not insisting on perfection. If someone “got stuck” they were helped to go on, no one made a “big deal” out of it. The message was, “You are fine the way you are. We are not measuring you or judging you.”

Parents felt that they and their children were “allowed to be part of society and have the same experiences that other children have.” This sense of being “like everyone else” was important to them. Naomi’s mother was moved and commented: “The fact that others care about us is helpful emotionally and that it fills a gap I often feel.” The Alons who are fairly recent immigrants to Israel from the Ukraine described how their daughter, like most children with disabilities, had been mostly hidden at home and how “exhilarating it was to feel part of society.” Orah’s father related: “I had a feeling of pleasure when I attended my niece’s bat mitzvah and recalled that my daughter had been capable of celebrating her bat mitzvah as well.” Thus, having the opportunity to participate in normative life events and being accepted by the community contributes to one’s sense of belonging to the community.

In addition, several parents commented on the effect that the ceremony had on the guests. They felt that the guests had learned an important lesson as well. The guests “saw that these children can do what other children do” and “learned to understand and value them more.” Members of the congregation and other guests who were present were indeed moved by the experience. They found it one of the most meaningful and uplifting services they had ever attended, and they too felt a new sense of community. The feeling of inclusiveness resulting from the respect and the opportunity to share in the values, symbols, and rituals of the community offered to those with differing abilities created an energizing sense of interconnectedness for all who were present.

Finally, the sense of group and belonging extends backward in time as well. Bar mitzvahs naturally evoke a sense of continuity with Jews
in previous generations. Parents and grandparents who were remembering their own ceremonies and those of their relatives experienced this sense of belonging that transcends time. One of the persons who described this sensation most clearly was Yonatan, Dan’s father who was chosen to speak on behalf of the families. Diverting from his prepared remarks, Yonatan acknowledged: “Although I didn’t expect it, I did indeed feel moved this morning. I felt a tremor when I placed the prayer shawl that I wore at my own bar mitzvah on the shoulders of my own son. I felt, I assume the same way my father felt when he stood in the synagogue next to and he stood by proudly, that’s how I stood by proudly next to Dan.” The wine cup Dan received as a gift was placed on the shelf next to the wine cup Yonatan had inherited from his grandfather. What was most striking was that now Dan was clearly accepted as part of the chain as well. The sense of immortality, or being connected to one’s own particular ancestors and to the entire Jewish people, is evoked at bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies the world over and at the ceremonies described here as well.

**Objective Spirituality**

The third level of spirituality is a sense of connectedness that goes beyond and transcends one’s self and others. This is probably the most difficult strand to identify and describe. The difficulty, I would venture, stems from the fact that the conceptions we have of God, or of a higher power, or a creator, etc., are very personal ones, and teachers are fearful of foisting their own views on the children. The learning process emphasized introducing the children to various religious objects and rituals, allowing them to experience and react to them. A number of prayers were taught with emphasis on teaching blessings as a way of expressing awe at the world and at things beyond ourselves. The teachers, having done their part, in a sense “stepped back” so that the ways the children reacted at the ceremony could be their own personal expressions and reactions. The ceremony incorporates all the symbols of the sacred, the very ritual objects the children had studied about. These symbols are concrete and vivid and are touched and manipulated by the participants.

In a paper on relational consciousness presented at the Second International Conference on Children’s Spirituality, Reimer (2001) stated, “Relational consciousness implicates language as a medium for relatedness.” Relational consciousness, a term coined by Nye, concerns how a child perceives his/her connection to people, including themselves and to God. In the discussion that ensued Reimer acknowledged that nonverbal communication could be a medium for relatedness as well. In the case of youngsters with developmental disabilities, verbal communication is often limited, so the issue of nonverbal expressions of relational consciousness and particularly connectedness to the transcendent is of particular importance. Although one can describe the youngsters’ nonverbal reactions with words such as “beaming faces,” “shining eyes,” “swaying bodies,” “intensive feeling,” and “exuberance,” language is perhaps not the best medium for describing the ceremony. The videotape is perhaps a medium more powerful for conveying the experience to the outsider. Jewish tradition often extols reaching a high level of “kavannah” in prayer. *Kavannah* has been translated as intentionalness, inwardness, or sacred intention (Salkin, 1992). Gertel (2001) has translated *kavannah* as total immersion, which seems to me to be an appropriate description of the experience of some of the youngsters at the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony.

**Discussion**

Evidence that children with moderate and severe disabilities can express their spirituality and can impact the spirituality of others is one of key findings of this research. It reflects the fact that an environmental context was created that allowed this experience to take place, without the “advance knowledge” of what the effect might be.

The celebration of rites of passage is not only for the initiates themselves, but also for the renewal of the entire community (Sullwold, 1988). As a once-in-a-lifetime rite of passage, a bar/bat mitzvah transcends daily life experiences and provides a sense of meaning. The ritual of bar mitzvah, as in the case of all rituals, relies less on intellect and verbalizations and more on metaphors and symbolic
acts to achieve its emotional impact on those participating (Roberts, 1988). The boys in the Zegans and Zegans (1979) study sensed that the ritual magic centered around the Torah as did a group of women who celebrated their bat mitzvah in midlife (Schoenfeld, 1992). As one watched the youngsters and sensed their intensity and total immersion in the moment, one felt that many experienced a sense of transcendence. This in turn made the ceremony a unique transcendent experience for others who were present. This is perhaps the real meaning of the word “kadosh” (sacred) used by several parents and guests to describe the ceremony. As Eliade (1958) emphasized, a rite of initiation “reveals the sacredness of human life and of the world” (p. 19).

This study focused on the significance of a Jewish life-cycle event and ritual. It points to the importance of examining the significance of rituals and ceremonies found in other religions and cultures for persons with disabilities. This research showed that children could benefit from and enjoy religious education and can participate in rituals shared by others in their society. Needs of children with developmental disabilities are often so overwhelming that areas such as religious education and participating in life-cycle rituals can easily be neglected. Yet this study clearly shows the positive impact of such education and experiences on the youngsters and their parents. Although this study dealt specifically with Jewish religious education and a Jewish rite of passage, these same implications exist for youngsters of all backgrounds.

References


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