



*Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students*

**“What My Bar Mitzvah Means to Me”**

**by Jack Cohen**

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As a member of The City Congregation for nine years, I’ve gone to more of this kind of bar mitzvah than any other. Beginning at the age of six, I went to many ceremonies with my sister when she was getting ready for her bat mitzvah, as well as those of her and my KidSchool classmates.

My best memories are of the food – they featured lots of my favorite dishes and my open-bar drink of choice – the Shirley Temple. I wasn’t really aware of how much work went into a bar or bat mitzvah until I saw Abigail go through hers. I began to worry whether I could write essays that were as good as hers. I didn’t talk about it, but my mom remembers sensing this dread in me. She says she decided then to talk as little as possible about my bar mitzvah so I wouldn’t become anxious. She knew I could do it, even if I didn’t feel that way.

Her plan worked because I found the first step – the family history – wasn’t so scary. It was a lot of work to bring the stories together and get the family tree straight, but it was interesting to learn more about my family. Writing the values paper was a lot harder because I had to put into words ideas I had never examined. I also found structuring an essay very difficult.

Writing is still hard but, as my mom and dad are always saying, writing is re-writing and I’ve gotten more comfortable with that. I got a lot of help with the writing from my mentor Nancy Cohen, Rabbi Peter, Isabel Kaplan and my family.

Happily, my bar mitzvah involved many other things I enjoy – cooking, debating, art. I made lots of gefilte fish with my mom and shared it with my classmates, my neighbors and guests at Nancy’s Passover Seder as well as with my family. I debated the pros and cons of gefilte fish and other Jewish topics with my friends at KidSchool and my middle school. I spent many happy hours researching images (and creating some) related to gefilte fish and then many more crafting them for use in my PowerPoint presentation.

Two notable high points in my bar mitzvah experience were conversations about my major project that I had with Rabbi Peter and with the food writer Matthew Goodman.

Rabbi Peter listened to me talk about my interest in food and asked me thoughtful questions about my family’s Jewish food traditions. We discovered that with the Jewish half of my family living outside of the northeast U.S., my experience with traditional Jewish foods is non-traditional. Thirteen years of High Holidays and Passover food prepared by Bubbe and served at her table? No – but my family has sampled widely New York’s rich offering of delis and restaurants and my mom has enthusiastically prepared her fair share of latkes, kasha and varnishkes and gefilte fish. Don’t get me wrong: there are strong associations with Jewish food in my family – my Great-Grandmother Sophie’s love of her mother’s gribbenes, for example, and Grandpa Stan’s fondness for corned beef on rye – but mine can only be called diffuse.

Coming from no particular Jewish food tradition, where would my gefilte fish journey end? I didn't know until I got the chance to talk to Mathew Goodman. As we talked about the long and rich history that Jews have with fish and gefilte fish in particular, it occurred to me that I was participating in equally ancient Jewish traditions – questioning the status quo and adapting to my circumstances. Isn't it more traditional to change gefilte fish than it is to keep preparing it the same way? Couldn't I devise a recipe that used more easily accessible fish and was above all delicious? This mission gave me the rush of enthusiasm and energy I needed to finish the project.

My experience with bar mitzvahs is very different from my dad's. His bar mitzvah took place in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1973. Preparation for the service at a conservative synagogue involved learning his haf torah, mostly by listening to a recording in Hebrew.

A more meaningful part of his Jewish education was his participation in a youth group before, during and after his bar mitzvah.

At the time, the Jewish community in Phoenix was small but big things were going on for Jews around the world. Israel was fighting a war for its existence and Jews in the Soviet Union were trying to escape decades of persecution.

I asked my dad why, when his family wasn't very observant, he had a bar mitzvah at all. He said one influence was an episode of the 1960s television show *The Dick Van Dyke Show* he'd seen, where the character played by Morrie Amsterdam was acting mysterious and sneaking around until it's finally revealed that he was secretly preparing for the bar mitzvah he was unable to have 40 years earlier. My dad didn't want to face decades of regret. He knew, as a teenager, that foregoing that part of his Jewish heritage would be a decision that would always haunt him.

He's pleased and proud that I am undertaking this difficult endeavor; it's one that he believes has deepened my Jewish experience.

I've already thanked a few people for their help in preparation for this day, but there are a few more.

Thank you Mom and Dad, for helping me with every part of my bar mitzvah and for always pushing me to the limit. Thanks to Peter and Isabel for their help in preparing this ceremony, and to Aram Rubenstein-Gillis for providing the music.

Thank you Abigail, for always cheering me on when I worried about my essays and how my gefilte fish would turn out.

Thank you Peter Mones, for your suggestions of books and people to consult about gefilte fish and for always following up. Similarly, thank you to researcher Jesse Cohen for helping me sift through the YIVO Institute's rich archive of photos and historical accounts about the fishing industry and Jewish cuisine.

Thanks to my friend Ben Vock for never failing to challenge my ideas about Judaism and everything else; your perspective has widened mine and I'm glad we can always agree to disagree.

I'd like to thank several teachers: my Kid School teachers Daniel Levin and Rick Barinbaum, for asking probing questions and for listening to me talk endlessly about gefilte fish, and John Mercado from Elysian Charter School for his instruction and advice about PowerPoint presentations.

Thanks as well to Ken Freedman for letting me use the projector that belongs to my favorite radio station -- Jersey City's own WFMU.

Here's a very special thanks to my Great Aunt Marcia for the brief family history with photographs that she prepared for me as well as the additional gefilte-fish-specific family stories she told me.

Last but not least, thank you to all of the people here today, for coming from as far away as Florida, Arizona, and Pennsylvania. Thank you for the special effort you made to be here today.