



Bar/Bat Mitzvah Program Featured

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At This Bar Mitzvah, Dylan's The Only Prophet

by Carolyn Slutsky, Staff Writer, July 17, 2009

The sign out front reads “Daniel’s Bar (Mitzvah).” Inside the barn-like club on an industrial stretch in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn, a crowd gathers, one that looks as if it could be waiting for an early Simon and Garfunkel concert or a new band that won’t hit mainstream radio for another six months. Stella Artois and Brooklyn Lager are on tap, but it is before 10 a.m. on a Saturday morning, so guests are drinking coffee and noshing on mini bagels, lox and cream cheese.

The gathering is not, in fact, for a folk show, but for a bar mitzvah of a different kind. Daniel Segan, 14, is about to deliver speeches, sing songs and be feted by his family and friends as a new man through the City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, a community of secular and cultural Jews.

Secular Humanistic Judaism was founded by Rabbi Sherwin Wine in the mid-1960s in suburban Detroit, with the belief that the existence of God cannot be proved and is therefore irrelevant; the movement focuses instead on culture and history as meaningful links to Judaism. While a secular humanist bar mitzvah speaks to the hyper-individualistic experience many Jews favor in 21st-century America, it can also hold significant meaning for the children and their families that, they say, can be lacking in more traditional services, where 12- and 13-year-olds read from a book in a language they often don’t understand.

And in a wider community whose fastest-growing component, according to studies, is the unaffiliated or “Just Jewish,” and where culture is seen as a key portal into Jewish life, secular humanistic Judaism can be a comfortable fit for those seeking a Jewish connection beyond the strictly religious.

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer is the driving force behind City Congregation’s bar mitzvah program. Together with his wife Myrna Baron, executive director of the Center for Cultural Judaism, Rabbi Schweitzer designed the bar mitzvah program to preserve the tradition common in other streams of Judaism while giving young adults a chance to explore their own values and those passed down through their families.

Rabbi Schweitzer and parents who speak about their experiences tread carefully so as not to impugn traditional bar mitzvahs and congregations in asserting how meaningful their own rituals can be.

“My role is that I help welcome people and set the stage for what’s to come, but the student leads,” says Rabbi Schweitzer. “In other congregations they offer a blessing to the students; here the student is a blessing to us.”

Aspects of secular bar mitzvah celebrations are familiarly Jewish, while others feel purely American. Daniel's ceremony opened with "Bim Bam," followed by Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game," sing-along renditions of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's "Teach Your Children" and tunes by Bob Dylan (a Jewish prophet, no?) and Simon and Garfunkel. When Daniel's father, Howard, greeted the group and asked everyone to "shut off all technological stuff," his son got an impish look on his face, and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. Daniel's mentor, Alan Siege, who helped see him through the process, gave him a Yankees cap in Hebrew and a Meshuga Beach Party CD; no one wore yarmulkes.

In addition to the music, students write and deliver papers focused on their family's values, a hero and a role model, and a look at some aspect of cultural Judaism that applies to their lives. Kids have explored klezmer music and Jews and the ice cream business. A girl from an interracial family wrote about black-Jewish relations; a child whose father is a prison warden studied the death penalty. A movie buff, Daniel chose to write and speak about stereotypes of Jews in film; his hero was actor and comic Billy Crystal and his role model journalist Amy Goodman, who attended his ceremony.

Daniel's mother, Paula Solomon, says her family first tried the Ethical Culture Society, but found it lacking in the history and traditions they sought. She says the emphasis on culture and ethnicity drew her family to the City Congregation, and that she has seen Daniel and his older sister Liana mature and grow through their bar mitzvah experiences.

"This is a congregation that infuses the traditional with meaning and it makes sense to us," Solomon says of the 115-family community. "We're not simply repeating Hebrew prayers to a God we may or may not believe in, but we're there for a reason — to affirm our identities as Jews and to pass something onto our children and their children that's meaningful and specific."

Liana, 17, says that unlike some of her friends, she enjoyed her service more than her party. "Judaism isn't just about Torah or the stories we're told," she says. "What we do is learn history from the Israelites to modern Jews and the diaspora, and how Jewish identity is relevant today."

Liana taught in the congregation's school and says she will stay involved in humanistic Judaism, but her brother is not so sure about his future with the Jewish community. He says he would like to step back from Judaism to explore other pieces of himself, to "take what they've taught me and go further independently."

"It's very hard to analyze yourself when you're not really sure who you are," Daniel says, adding that the two-year process of preparing for the bar mitzvah helped him mature and get to know himself and his place in the world. "It challenges your abilities; I think I've grown as a person and this process has helped me do that."

For his recent bar mitzvah, Anne Lieberman's son Jonah Lieberman Flint wrote about Jews and Buddhism, a topic close to the family because Jonah's father is a practicing Buddhist. Lieberman says Buddhism addresses Jonah and his older brother Ethan's spiritual needs, but she wanted to give her boys a Jewish historical and cultural education with a sense of identity. While she felt ill-equipped to do so herself, City Congregation addressed those needs, she says.

"I felt the bar mitzvah was so rich and value-laden, and so many people said it was incredibly meaningful," Lieberman says. "We felt it was in contrast with traditional bar mitzvahs, which are about memorization and performance. This was a deep exploration about identity and values that are really important as you're transitioning to become an adult."

Rabbi Miriam Jerris is community development director at the Society for Humanistic Judaism, based in Farmington Hills, Mich., outside of Detroit. She says there are about 30 communities and some 2,500 households nationally that are formally affiliated with the SHJ and that there's been a slow, steady growth of smaller communities seeking information to help them form their own secular Jewish congregations. She says that humanistic Judaism appeals to people from secular homes, from traditional backgrounds who didn't find meaning in religion, as well as those from other backgrounds, and that she and the SHJ work with them to develop curricula and communities.

"Jews today know they have options, so they look for them," says Rabbi Jerris, who was ordained by the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, the SHJ's academic center. "The strength of the Jewish community is in its pluralism; we need to broaden the tent and embrace as many people as we can to ensure the Jewish future."

As to the bar mitzvah program, which some communities across the country have adopted, she says it is a rigorous intellectual and self-development process.

Steven Bayme, director of contemporary Jewish life at the American Jewish Committee, recognizes that "secular humanism is consonant with the way the modern experience has shattered traditional belief," and that it's only natural for American Jews to undertake experiments in Jewish life.

He says that while Israel has a strong secular Jewish culture, secular identity in the diaspora has typically not worked. "In principle I'm in favor of it because I want Jews to be more Jewish, but in practice I'm skeptical as to whether a secular Jewish model is likely to succeed."

As to secular bar mitzvahs, Bayme says rites of passage are important in giving teenagers a taste of adult responsibility, but a bar mitzvah with no Torah and no affirmation of a deity that revealed himself at Sinai, he feels, is not sustainable.

"Religion has been the preservative of Jewish life in the diaspora," he says. "Secular Jewish life has rarely been sustained over generations."

Rabbi Schweitzer maintains that humanistic Judaism is not a movement of atheism, negatively opposing God. Rather, he says, humanism has a positive definition.

"I believe in humans taking responsibility for our own lives," he says. "One of our messages has been that the world is a very unsafe place in many respects. It's realism — life is often unfair and unjust, and we don't believe in a redeeming afterlife, but rather in finding strength within us and comfort from others to negotiate life. [We ask] how do we get through this together?"

Lieberman says the bar mitzvah experience for her son and her family will last a lifetime. "It was such a transformative experience for my son; I saw him grow up so much through it," says Lieberman. "I was like, wow, I always heard bar mitzvahs were about becoming a man, but it actually happened."