



*City Congregation Bar/Bat Mitzvah Program
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Some young Jews seek out alternative bar mitzvahs

by JOANNA CORMAN

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Hannah Nemer's bat mitzvah was still a year away, but already she was feeling reluctant about such a big production.

Based on other Jewish coming-of-age ceremonies she had attended, she worried the ritual would be more an empty performance rather than the spiritual transformation she desired.

But when her mother found Rabbi Jamie Korngold (a.k.a. the "Adventure Rabbi"), who agreed to perform Hannah's bat mitzvah on a Colorado mountain, Hannah knew she would find the spiritual meaning she was looking for.

She celebrated her bat mitzvah two years ago and returned to her Reform temple in a suburb of St. Paul, Minn., where she has immersed herself in congregational life. She attributes the change to the alternative event.

"When I had my bat mitzvah, I really felt like I connected to God," said Hannah, now 15. "I really felt a spiritual connection after that, and it was something that had been missing before. When I came back to temple, I didn't want to lose that feeling."

Traditionally, bar mitzvah (for boys) and bat mitzvah (for girls) ceremonies held in synagogues, where 13-year-olds demonstrate their proficiency in Hebrew and symbolically enter adulthood. A party typically follows. But the ceremonies have become so routine -- and in some communities, so lavish -- that some families worry they have become devoid of meaning.

Teenagers who choose alternative rituals often want something different from the fancy post-ceremony parties that have become the stereotype. American families have been searching for ways to make the rite of passage more meaningful by changing the service, adding a charitable focus, taking it out of the synagogue or forgoing the fancy party, a trend that has been building for at least a decade, Jewish experts say.

Most American Jewish teens have a bat or bar mitzvah, but that universality can rob it of meaning, said Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, author of "Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah."

"It's often the rebels who get us thinking about this anew," Salkin said, "and open our eyes to some of the possibilities."

Yonah Biers-Ariel, a ninth grader from Davis, Calif., created an alternative rite of passage with the help of his parents. While he never attended Hebrew school as a child, he grew up in an observant home. He studied Hebrew in preparation for a bar mitzvah, but as a self-described atheist, the ancient language of Jewish worship just didn't resonate.

"I also thought it lacked a practical purpose," Yonah said.

Saddened that turning 13 might pass without an acknowledgment of its Jewish significance, his parents, Djina Ariel and Matt Biers-Ariel, encouraged him to mark it in a meaningful way. This summer, Yonah, his parents and 9-year-old brother biked the 3,800 miles from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., to deliver an anti-global warming petition to Congress with some 2,000 signatures collected online and along the way. Yonah delivered a speech about the trip to friends and family, accompanied by a slide show.

During the trip, Yonah's parents say he took on leadership roles, helping to plan the daily route, and pushing his father to keep going. "That's when I knew he was a different person in those moments," Matt Biers-Ariel said.

The idea that 13 marks the age of responsibility and maturity is an age-old concept, first appearing in rabbinical teachings compiled in 200 A.D., said Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University. But the term "bar mitzvah" -- one that refers to a coming-of-age ritual -- dates back to the 15th century. It became magnified in places where Jewish life was changing rapidly and parents worried about Judaism's continuity.

Sarna said rabbis have long been trying to make the ceremony more meaningful. In the 1980s, for example, American bar or bat mitzvah children were twinned with their counterparts in the former Soviet Union who couldn't have one.

"That gave great meaning," Sarna said. "Suddenly, people didn't take it for granted."

Ohr Taylor, 13, attends a modern Orthodox synagogue in Sacramento, Calif., where there is no formal bar mitzvah program, but having one is nonetheless expected.

His mother, Michal Kohane, said she told Ohr that he had to give back to his community, and if he wanted a party, he had to lead the planning. To show his gratitude to a mentor who was in intensive care, Ohr chanted his Torah portion at the man's bedside a few months before he died. It was the most meaningful part of the process, Ohr said.

He never did organize his own party.

"I wanted a party," he said, "but it just wasn't something I wanted so much that I wouldn't have a bar mitzvah without it."

At a Humanistic congregation in Manhattan, celebrants are not assigned a Torah portion to chant in Hebrew. Rather, the children of the City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism are paired with a mentor and embark on an intensive course of study for at least two years. It includes researching family history, choosing a role model and examining their own beliefs through a series of papers.

For Molly Rose Avila, who celebrated her bat mitzvah with the congregation in 1999, leading the process and having to articulate her own beliefs made Judaism come alive, she said.

"This was as if I had written my own play," said Avila, now 21. "It validated why my family would be proud of me."