

City Congregation Bar/Bat Mitzvah Program Featured

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More City Bar Mitzvahs Hold the Religion

By Laura Tillman

Louie Claesson's bar mitzvah, held at an Orange, N.J., jazz club, had many of the usual touches: The band, Super Chunky Extra Funky, played Beatles covers; relatives gave speeches and performed songs composed for the occasion; and his mother presented a movie of Louie's life. One thing was notably absent, though: a visit to a synagogue to read from the Torah.



Rachel Gerber lights candles during her bat mitzvah ceremony at Caroline's on Broadway on June 11. At right is Rabbi Peter Schweitzer of the City Congregation; Rachel's father and mother are to her left and right. Photo by Norman DeShong

The event included none of the spiritual rituals that have traditionally defined the rite of passage into adulthood for young Jews. There were no prayers, no rabbi and no mention of God.

A small but growing number of families are opting for secular bar mitzvahs, taking the occasion to celebrate personal growth and Jewish culture instead of Jewish faith. Although such celebrations are derided by some religious leaders as little more than birthday parties, participants say they are a thoughtful alternative for those who do not subscribe to religious beliefs.

While secular bar mitzvahs veer away from traditional religious elements, they also tend to forgo the over-the-top celebrations that have become a subject of criticism by Jewish leaders. "I think a bar mitzvah party that has a six-course meal and a large band, and doesn't have a spiritual piece except that the food is kosher, is not as holy as one that is trimmed down and includes community service," said Rabbi Kenneth Brander, dean of the Center for the Jewish Future at Yeshiva University in New York.

The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Manhattan is leading a nationwide movement to create meaningful secular services for Jewish teenagers. Marge Greenberg, whose daughter Rachel Gerber recently completed City Congregation's 18-month bat mitzvah program, says it's no accident that parties for participants tend to be small.

"The part that comes beforehand is the important part. The celebration is just the culmination of the study," Ms. Greenberg said. "The party is incidental. It's like a social occasion. It's just not the point."

The idea is slowly gaining acceptance, though some rabbis have different views.

"The concept of a 'secular bar mitzvah' is of course a bit of an oxymoron since 'bar mitzvah' means 'one who is commanded by God,'" said Daniel Nevins of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. "Without the religious part it is just a birthday party."

Secular bar mitzvahs continue centuries-old traditions: The emotions and themes common at bar mitzvahs—family history, maturity and hard-won pride—are all present, proponents say. "This is part of the contemporary world," said Shuly Rabin Schwartz, a professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary. "In an odd sort of way the nontraditional ceremonies are affirming the value of the tradition. They're saying something should happen at this stage. They're trying to figure out something meaningful for individuals in that community."

At City Congregation, bar mitzvah candidates spend up to two years preparing for their big day. Students in the program write essays on topics such as family history, community service and role models, and complete a project on a topic in Jewish culture. (One recent project's title was "Holy Carp: Gefilte Fish, Judaism and Me.")

"It's not Judaism lite," says Rabbi Peter Schweitzer of the City Congregation. He has conducted the bar mitzvah training for more than 50 students.

Although the New York area is leading the trend, more than 20 other Humanistic congregations around the country have nonreligious bar mitzvah programs, according to Rabbi Miriam Jerris, director of outreach for the Society for Humanistic Judaism, based in Farmington Hills, Mich.

The Workmen's Circle, a secular Jewish congregation, also has a small nonreligious bar mitzvah program through its Jewish school in Midtown. Students in this program, which began 10 years ago, perform their bar mitzvah ceremony as a group each spring.

Standing behind a Star of David-bedecked podium at Caroline's on Broadway last month, Rachel Gerber of the City Congregation presented her project on the Marx Brothers, which she worked on for more than a year with the help of a New York University film professor, Jack Lechner. At nine pages long, it was her fourth speech of the ceremony.

Mr. Lechner said he joined the City Congregation because he'd like his own daughter to participate in the bat mitzvah program someday.

"There are a lot of ways for people to be a little Jewish in New York," Mr. Lechner said. "You can go to a Barney Greengrass and be a little Jewish. You can go to a Woody Allen movie and be a little Jewish. Frankly, in New York, you can walk down the street and be a little Jewish. But this is a way to be a little more Jewish."

**Find out more about the City Congregation's Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah Program.
Call 212-213-1002 or email info@citycongregation.org**

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