

## A Modest Proposal for Transforming the Bar Mitzvah

By Yosef Adler and Yossi Prager

While communal leaders have periodically sought to curb ostentatious Bar Mitzvah parties, there has been little discussion about the central feature of the Bar Mitzvah ritual in shul, the *keriat haTorah*. The communal silence belies an unfortunate truth—that the cultural norm obliging all Bar Mitzvah boys to read a full *parashah* is pedagogically unwise and can have devastating long-term emotional consequences.

As rabbi and former *gabbai rishon* of a Modern Orthodox shul, we have interacted with a wide range of Bar Mitzvah boys. Some embrace the task of preparing a full *parashah* with gusto and have gone on to become excellent *ba'alei keriah*. Others, less talented in the specific skills required for Torah reading, have nonetheless struggled through and experienced a sense of satisfaction from their achievements—except when the positive emotions have been outweighed by conflict with parents.

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There are, however, children for whom preparing the *parashah* and then reading it publicly is a miserable experience. This could be for a variety of reasons: insufficient motivation, learning differences, poor preparation in elementary school for accurate Hebrew reading or lack of musical inclination or talent. For these children, preparation for Torah reading over the course of a long year consistently highlights their weaknesses, undermining the self-confidence

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and joy that we hope all children will associate with Judaism.

In truth, the downside of requiring all Bar Mitzvah boys to read the Torah is no surprise to parents, some of whom begin worrying about how their children will respond to the experience when their children are ten or eleven, if not younger.

While our greatest concern is for the Bar Mitzvah boy himself, the uneven quality of Bar Mitzvah performances is also a challenge for shuls.

The *Shulchan Aruch* and Rema (*Orach Chaim* 142) clearly state that Torah reading must meet minimal standards, which some Bar Mitzvah boys do not meet. This puts the congregation in the uncomfortable position of either frequently correcting a Bar Mitzvah boy while he is reading—causing public humiliation—or accepting a reading that is far from ideal and may not meet minimal halachic standards.

So long as we expect all Bar Mitzvah boys, notwithstanding their differential skills, to read an entire *parashah*, we remain trapped in this dilemma. In fact, the situation perpetuates itself, as children whose mistakes are not corrected at their Bar Mitzvahs gain confidence in their Torah reading and ask to *layn* (read from the Torah) again in subsequent years.

Must it be this way? Definitely not. There is no halachic requirement that reaching the age of *mitzvot* be accompanied by Torah reading. In many *Chareidi* communities today most Bar Mitzvah boys read only *maftir* and the *haftarah*. Both basic *halachah* and the practice of these communities demonstrate that we are not bound by our current Bar Mitzvah approach.

In fact, current thinking about Jewish education virtually demands that we make a change. More so than in the past, educators today increasingly

appreciate the wisdom of the Gra's interpretation of "*Chanoch lana'ar al pi darko*, Educate a child according to his way," Mishlei 22:6. The Gra argues that all children have innate personality traits, and the educator's task is to ensure that these traits be used in a positive way. For example, an aggressive, even bloodthirsty, boy could either channel his inclinations toward a mitzvah like *brit milah*, a neutral career such as a butcher or (God forbid) murder. The Gra understands the verse in Mishlei as follows: Educators will fail in efforts to change personality traits (which he refers to as a child's *mazal*); rather, good education depends on understanding each child and encouraging him to use his traits productively. Meiri offers a similar interpretation of the verse.

In *Masechet Avodah Zarah* (19a), Rebbe expresses the view, "*Ein adam lomeid Torah ela mimakom shelibo chafetz*, A person only learns from a place his heart desires." As Rashi explains, a student will be unable to focus on one subject in Torah if his true interest is in another.

Taken together, these sources prove what is intuitive to any modern parent: Because children differ in personality and interest, they should be encouraged to undertake different activities. While all must achieve common basic standards of Jewish literacy, children's individual inclinations and talents will draw them in greater measure to different areas of Torah study—*Tanach*, Talmud, *machshavah* (Jewish thought)—and to use different kinds of skills—intellectual, artistic, musical. For this reason, parents and teachers suggest different extracurricular activities and elective classes for different children. Only in the Bar Mitzvah ceremony do we impose upon all children a uniform requirement, even though there is no halachic basis for the practice.

There is a further consideration. Children today are raised in an open, alluring, hedonistic society. None of us can take for granted that our children will follow our religious paths, and we

know that our best chance for success is to create positive associations with *Torah umitzvot*, including participation in shul. With the Bar Mitzvah being each boy's most public and seminal religious life event, we should do all that we can to generate the affirming emotions that will inspire our children to continue to grow in their Torah study and observance.

With all this in mind—the considerable leeway available in shaping the Bar Mitzvah requirements and the flaw in the current approach of requiring each child to read a full *parashah*—we propose the following: All children should be encouraged to undertake a significant mitzvah project in which they invest the kind of time that children now spend preparing for their Torah reading. Torah reading would then become one among many options that might be selected by families, and children who select this option would be expected to meet the high standards described in the *Shulchan Aruch*. Schools should teach Torah reading skills so that all students understand what is involved, even though most will not read an entire *parashah* at their Bar Mitzvahs. (The *ta'amei hamikra* are also valuable aids for understanding the *peshat* [literal meaning] of the Torah.) Students who do not read at their Bar Mitzvahs may nonetheless choose over time to read in school on Mondays and Thursdays or prepare parts of *parshiyot* for a teen minyan.

Other options for Bar Mitzvah projects might involve Torah study (e.g., a *siyum* on a part of *Tanach*, Mishnah or Gemara), *davening* (perhaps an effort to enhance the *tzibbur's* understanding or appreciation of *tefillah*), art (for the shul or yeshivah), *chesed* or *zedakah*. We believe that the impact of the project should be of a public nature and give the child a sense of great satisfaction and inspiration about his achievement. All projects should include a Torah study component to emphasize the centrality of Talmud Torah in our lives.

The project could culminate in a formal *siyum* at the Bar Mitzvah celebration, based on Rav Moshe Feinstein's ruling (*Orach Chaim* 1:157) that the completion of any mitzvah extending over time is worthy of a *siyum*. To permit a *siyum*, the project should lead to a completion of some

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kind, even if the mitzvah involved is not primarily Torah study (e.g., raising funds to purchase an ambulance, building a wheelchair ramp for a *bimah*).

Moving from a system in which all boys read a *parashah* to one that allows greater flexibility and creativity will require rabbinic leadership and, initially, courageous families. We call upon community rabbis and rabbinic associations to proactively explain the halachic options available to families and the benefits of enabling children to tailor their projects to their particular strengths. Given sufficient rabbinic encouragement that all options are equally worthy, there would almost certainly be some families who would be bold enough to break the mold. Over time, additional families would join in, until the culture has shifted and is no longer a default assumption that boys *layn* at their Bar Mitzvahs.

If this proposal sounds radical, it is only because we have not yet applied everything we know about good education to the Bar Mitzvah ritual. We have no doubt that providing greater flexibility and more options, along with rabbinic encouragement for children to aim and achieve high, will result in greater religious enthusiasm and commitment. **JA**