

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
First Sunday after Christmas – December 27, 2015

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 2:41-52

REFLECTION

Bar and bat mitzvah mean, literally, "son and daughter of the commandment." Bat mitzvah is Hebrew, while bar mitzvah, historically a much earlier ceremony, is Aramaic. The word bar is the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew ben (son of). While bar and bat mitzvah are often used to refer to the ceremony, the terms also refer to the child. Thus, a boy is referred to as a "bar mitzvah" and a girl as a "bat mitzvah."

Historically, first bar mitzvah and later bat mitzvah represented a ceremonial recognition that a young person had reached the age when he or she was no longer a minor according to Jewish law and thereby took on new religious privileges and responsibilities of an adult.

For boys, this age was 13, for girls, 12.

— <http://www.reformjudaism.org/bar-and-bat-mitzvah>

Bar Mitzvah

The story of the 12-year-old Jesus being left behind in Jerusalem is one of my favorites for many reasons. It is one of the most realistic stories in the Gospels – one that parents throughout the millennia can relate to. Precocious 12-year-olds are just like this – following their own interests and forgetting to check in with their parents when disappearing. Distracted parents do leave children behind while traveling – and then get mad at the kid when they finally find him. This is family life as I have experienced it.

This event might also be seen as a precursor to the Jewish ritual of Bar or Bat Mitzvah – which wasn't even a ritual until the 2nd or 3rd century C.E. – and didn't become formalized until the 6th century – and didn't even resemble the modern ceremony until the Middle Ages. In spite of the obvious anachronistic interpretation, I'm drawn to the idea that this was Jesus' coming-of-age event – a year early (according to tradition) and in a non-traditional manner (very Jesus).

In ancient times Jewish kids reached adulthood when they entered puberty – generally 13 for boys and 12 for girls. Adulthood meant attaining privileges and taking responsibility for their own spiritual life and following the laws of Torah – basically having enough of a frontal lobe to regulate their own behavior. In those days – with shorter life spans and much more expected of children in terms of their contribution to the household and family business – this actually may have worked for most families. For this I envy them.

As I looked into the tradition of Bar and Bat Mitzvah I found some interesting bits and pieces.

The Hebrew word *aliyah* (literally, "going up") is used as a description of being "called up" to read from the Torah...

Aliyah is also the word used to describe the act of immigration to Israel. In Jewish tradition, as far back as biblical times, going to Israel was always referred to as "going up."

So of course this relates to our story – as Jesus and his family “went up” to Jerusalem – the heart of Israel – on an annual basis. (See verse 42 – “they went up as usual...”)

By the 13th or 14th century, the custom of calling a boy up to the Torah was established as the way of recognizing entry into manhood. The bar mitzvah boy would chant the blessings, all or part of the Torah portion of the week, and/or the haftarah section from the prophetic books.

The boy's father would then recite a special blessing:

Baruch sheptarani mei-onsho shelazeh.

"Blessed is He who has **freed me from responsibility for this boy.**"

[The Jewish Home](http://www.reformjudaism.org/bar-and-bat-mitzvah) (Revised Edition), by Daniel B. Syme
<http://www.reformjudaism.org/bar-and-bat-mitzvah>

Another interpretation of the father's prayer:

...the father of the bar mitzvah gives thanks to God that **he is no longer punished for the child's sins** (Genesis Rabba, Toldot 23:11).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar_and_Bat_Mitzvah

I can imagine Joseph lifting up this prayer with gusto as the family made its way back to the caravan – with one hand gesticulating to the sky and the other gripping Jesus's collar so he couldn't disappear again. This is a prayer I can't wait to say – although I may be waiting until Peter is 25 to really mean it!

And one more thing that I found interesting – is an alternative ritual for modern secular Jews – who may not believe in G-d but still want to celebrate their transition into adulthood:

Instead of reading from the Torah, some Humanist Jews prefer a research paper on a topic in Jewish history to mark their coming of age.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar_and_Bat_Mitzvah

I love that there are alternatives for the Unitarian-type Jews among us!

One of my favorite sources of information about Judaism is a website called Judaism 101. (<http://www.jewfaq.org/index.shtml>) I'm including here a few more juicy details about bar mitzvah from their page that I can't resist sharing – as this really describes a transition in our role as parents as our children reach the teen years:

Under Jewish Law, children are not obligated to **observe the commandments**, although they are encouraged to do so as much as possible to learn the obligations they will have as adults. At the age of 13 (12 for girls), **children become obligated to observe the commandments**. The bar mitzvah ceremony formally, publicly marks the assumption of that obligation, **along with the corresponding right to take part in leading religious services, to count in a minyan** (the minimum number of people needed to perform certain parts of religious services), **to form binding contracts, to testify before religious courts and to marry**.

A Jewish boy automatically becomes a bar mitzvah upon reaching the age of 13 years, and a girl upon reaching the age of 12 years. **No ceremony is needed to confer these rights and obligations**. The popular bar mitzvah ceremony is not required, and does not fulfill any commandment. It is certainly not, as one episode of the Simpsons would have you believe, necessary to have a bar mitzvah in order to be considered a Jew!

...It is important to note that a **bar mitzvah is not the goal of a Jewish education**, nor is it a graduation ceremony marking the end of a person's Jewish education. We are obligated to study Torah throughout our lives. To emphasize this point, some [very wise] rabbis require a bar mitzvah student to **sign an agreement promising to continue Jewish education after the bar mitzvah**.

Sadly, an alarming number of Jewish parents today view the bar or bat mitzvah as the sole purpose of Jewish education, and treat it almost as a **Jewish hazing ritual**: I had to go through it, so you have to go through it, but don't worry, it will all be over soon and you'll never have to think about this stuff again.

Confirmation is a somewhat less widespread coming of age ritual that occurs when a child is 16 or 18. Confirmation was originally developed by the Reform movement, which scorned the idea that a 13-year-old child was an adult. They replaced bar and bat mitzvah with a confirmation ceremony at the age of 16 or 18. However, due to the overwhelming popularity of the bar or bat mitzvah, the Reform movement has revived the practice.

...In some Conservative synagogues, however, the confirmation concept has been adopted as a way to continue a child's Jewish education and involvement for a few more years.

Many people mock the idea that a 12 or 13-year-old child is an adult, claiming that it is an outdated notion based on the needs of an agricultural society. This criticism comes from a misunderstanding of the significance of becoming a bar mitzvah.

Bar mitzvah is not about being a full adult in every sense of the word, ready to marry, go out on your own, earn a living and raise children. The Talmud makes this abundantly clear. In Pirkei Avot, it is said that while **13** is the proper age for fulfillment of the Commandments, **18** is the proper age for marriage and **20** is the proper age for earning a livelihood. Elsewhere in the Talmud, the proper age for marriage is said to be 16-24.

Bar mitzvah is simply the age when a person is held responsible for his actions and minimally qualified to marry. If you compare this to secular law, you will find that it is not so very far from our modern notions of a child's maturity. In Anglo-American common law, a child of the age of 14 is old enough to assume many of the responsibilities of an adult, including minimal **criminal liability**. Under United States law, 14 is the minimum age of **employment** for most occupations (though working hours are limited so as not to interfere with school). In many states, a fourteen-year-old can **marry with parental consent**. Children of any age are permitted to **testify in court**, and children over the age of 14 are permitted to **have significant input into custody decisions in cases of divorce**. Certainly, a 13-year-old child is capable of knowing the **difference between right and wrong** and of being **held responsible for his actions**, and that is all it really means to become a bar mitzvah.

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<http://www.jewfaq.org/barmitz.htm>

The story of Jesus inventing his own bar mitzvah is significant – and was included in Luke's gospel for a reason. There are milestones in life – and the transition into puberty and early adulthood is an important one. Especially now in our modern life – we need rituals to remind us of significant milestones. What are some of the transitional rituals we actually practice in our North American 21st century culture?

- Driver's license

- First Date
- Engagement (for marriage)
- First cell phone, email address, Facebook page
- High School Prom
- Acting debut
- Ordination into ministry
- Installation of a new minister or officers
- Retirement party
- New Year celebrations
- ...
- ...

As we face a brand new year, may we be mindful of our rituals and their meaning. And let's remember to tell our parents where we are so they don't worry about us.

Scripture Reading for Sunday December 27, 2015 – Christmas 1 – Year C

Luke 2:41-52

41 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they **went up** as usual for the festival. 43 When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44 Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'

49 He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' 50 But they did not understand what he said to them.

51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor