

Bradley Bernstein  
Folklore Final

איך שטיי אייך דער שוועל

**Standing on the Threshold: Towards a Folkloric Approach to the American Bar**

**Mitzvah Performance**

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**Final Essay**

**The Final Act: Exit Bar Mitzvah boy *bimah* left**

A story is told of a pulpit rabbi fresh from rabbinical school. Among other challenges he encounters in his new post, he is faced with a problem which his years of Talmudic scholarship leave him ill-prepared: his synagogue is infested with mice. Poisons, exterminators and other efforts to rid the building of the rodents are all in vain. Like any other *talmid hokhom* in a moment of desperation, he turns to his rebbe for advice. "Rebbe," he asks, "I have this problem with mice in my *shul*. I've tried everything, but nothing works. What should I do?"

"I too have had to deal with mice," the rebbe answers in an assuring tone. "Let me tell you what I did." Stroking his beard, the teacher continues matter-of-factly, "I made all the mice Bar Mitzvah. Not one of them ever came back."

For the American Jew, the humor of this anecdote relies on a simple point of fact: Bar Mitzvah is the moment in the Jewish lifecycle where the child is likely to make his last appearance in the synagogue, thus ending his formal Jewish education. Rather than deepening his ties and commitment upon reaching full membership in '*klal yisrael*' the American Bar Mitzvah is more likely to see in this moment a convenient exit from Jewish life altogether. On this appointed day he will do what is expected of him, and henceforth will be excused from any further Jewish obligation.

**Rav Feinstein revisited: American Bar Mitzvah as Tragedy or Comedy?**

This overwhelming exodus away from Jewish observance after the Bar Mitzvah has at times earned the institution more detractors than supporters in the religious world. Outraged at the weakening of Jewish religious commitment that immediately followed

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Bar Mitzvah rituals, the late *halakhik* authority, Moshe Feinstein declared: “If I had the power, I would abolish the Bar Mitzvah ceremony in this country.” (qtd. in Sherwin 53)<sup>1</sup>

A strident proponent of strict *halakhik* observance, Feinstein, had good reason to denounce the threat of Bar Mitzvah as a ceremony that “has brought no one closer to study and observance.” (qtd. in Sherwin 53)<sup>2</sup>

Examined closely, we see that Feinstein’s issue is not with the institution of Bar Mitzvah itself, but with its significance for American Jewry. If Bar Mitzvah had the opposite effect of intensifying rather than attenuating Jewish commitment then Feinstein would have voiced no opposition to the institution. More precisely, it is the kind of Jewish-ness promoted and performed at the American Bar Mitzvah which prompted Feinstein’s disapproval. Opposing the particular form of Jewish identity on display at the post-war American Bar Mitzvah, Feinstein, as this essay will demonstrate, held a highly traditional understanding of Bar Mitzvah – a ritualized performance of an ideal “Jewish-ness” embodying a community’s highest aspirations for its succeeding generations. Elaborate receptions where the affirmation of future devotion and observance are eclipsed even by floral centerpieces, the American Bar Mitzvah was likely for Feinstein more a celebration of American immigrant prosperity than *yiddishkeit*.

Seeing children articulate promises to contribute to Jewish life which they subsequently fail to fulfill, Feinstein, the stalwart of Orthodoxy, was probably even more outraged by the parents’ greater investment in catering than in the their child’s religious education. Though Feinstein could only see the rampant materialism, we cannot deny that a statement of Jewish commitment, however weak and unfulfilled, but still pleasing to the

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<sup>1</sup> Moshe Feinstein, *Iggrot Mosheh, Orach Hayyim* #104 (Hebrew). New York: Gross and Weiss, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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parents' ears, is still articulated at the American Bar Mitzvah during the one ritual which seems to have never gone out of fashion – the speech.

### **Lip Service and Lip Sync': A History of *Drashot* Unfulfilled**

Lest we think that this performance of a “Jewish-ness” that will later be abandoned is only a recent phenomenon, Schoenfeld reminds us that this discord between the piety of the *drasha* and the reality of decreased observance was equally present in early immigrant Bar Mitzvah celebrations at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even outside observers of the immigrant Jewish community marveled at the attention focused on a ceremony of religious affirmation for children who would, henceforth, forsake the synagogue for “uptown places of amusement” (Schoenfeld, 69). In a world where commitment to ritual was deteriorating among the young, 'American' generation as well as their immigrant parents, it is easy to imagine how a ceremony affirming devotion to the Jewish people and its faith would appear paradoxical, at the least. Commenting on the discord between the values 'performed' during the American Bar Mitzvah and the reality of declining observance among the immigrant population, Schoenfeld highlights the greater value attributed to the performance rather than the genuine act of commitment:

[I]n the period of mass migration at the turn of the century, standards of Jewish education were low, expectations were low, and teenaged boys who lived in conformity with the mitzvot were very rare. Nevertheless, the bar mitzvah was considered an important event. The folk values gave higher - sometimes exclusive – priority to a successful performance than to understanding, even at the basic level, or to behavioral commitment (Schoenfeld, 69)

### **The Long Folk Tradition of Bar Mitzvah Performance**

Though Schoenfeld asserts, with solid grounds, that the American immigrant Bar Mitzvah was a performance rather than an act of Jewish commitment, he wrongfully assumes that this "folk" interpretation of the passage into Jewish adulthood was a specifically American innovation without precedent. We certainly cannot dispute

Schoenfeld's claim that the publication of collections of model Bar Mitzvah speeches from 1907 to 1954 indicates the collective "folk" desire for a particular kind of performance of Jewish competence from their ostensibly ignorant Jewish children. That Jewish-American thirteen year-old boys memorized the speeches to be recited on command for the gratification of their parents' generation, does not mean (as Schoenfeld would have use believe) that their more learned and God-fearing European ancestors were not similarly guided in their *drashot* two centuries earlier.

In fact, we can trace this "folk" tendency of staging and scripting the *drasha* back far beyond the immigrant Lower East Side to rabbinic decrees issued in Germany in the eighteenth century. As much as Schoenfeld would like to convince us that North American Jews, in contrast with their European forbearers, were the first to require the assistance with their *drashot* that these books provided, Rivikind provides ample evidence that the child who produced his own learned *drasha* has historically been the exception, not the rule (Rivkind, 41-2)<sup>3</sup>. Though the need for a manual of pre-fabricated *drashot* may have been a purely American twentieth century phenomenon, the practice of teachers preparing speeches for their students was common even in *di alte heym*.

Nor do we have any reason to believe that the *drasha* was any less a performance of Jewish scholarship idealized performed and scripted by older generations in eighteenth century Europe than in twentieth century New York. Citing a decree issued by the community of Furth in 1768 that orphan children be offered free preparation in their bar mitzvah speeches, Rivikind highlights the glaring disparity between the classes which surfaced in the varying quality of their *drashot*: The affluent children who could afford the best teachers were fortunate to deliver learned discourses, while the poor paled in

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<sup>3</sup> "לרוב התלמידים סדרו רבותיהם את הדרשות לבר-מצוה, וזה היה אחד מן התפקידים בפרשת ההכנה והעזר לחג".

comparison<sup>4</sup>. While the decree is motivated by a need to redress a socio-economic imbalance, it is also driven by a perception of the *drasha* as such a significant expression of communal aspirations to warrant a rabbinic edict concerning the proper preparation even of orphans in this performance. We must be careful here to emphasize that the edict does *not* state that orphan children be trained to achieve a level of Jewish scholarship befitting a full, adult member of the community. On the contrary, the concern is only that this scholarship be publicly performed by all children on the day of Bar Mitzvah to the satisfaction of the community. Whether the orphan's scholarship was truly commensurate with the performance he delivered does not seem to have been as much a cause for concern as his *ability to mimic this scholarship* at the age of thirteen and one day.

Now, when children more often than not fail to realize the commitment they convey in their speeches or to continue down the path of Jewish learning which permeates their remarks, the *drasha* is obviously no more than a script. But despite the higher tendency to live according to the principles and sustain the learning to which their *drashot* paid tribute, the bar Mitzvah boy in 18<sup>th</sup> century Furth, as the above decree proves, was also delivering a staged performance. If the "traditional" *drasha* was an impressive feat of hair-splitting *pilpul*, it was more often a reflection of the ideal performance of Jewish commitment maintained by the "traditional" world than the child's actual mastery of the sacred text.

#### **Bar Mitzvah as Folklore not *din torah***

Lest we harbor some romantic image of the Bar Mitzvah *drasha* as an ancient scholarly custom of which the current Bar Mitzvah speech is a cheap distortion, Rivkind reminds us that it is a practice which can be dated back no further than the sixteenth

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<sup>4</sup> The text of the decree is as follows: "והמלמד מחיב ללמוד ליתום דרשה בחנם"

Understood from this folkloric perspective, even the memorized, recycled *drasha* which bears no traces of the child's learning assumes a heightened significance as the expression of folk aspirations at a given time and place. As much as we might bemoan the extravagant celebrations which have become synonymous with Bar and Bat Mitzvah in recent years, we cannot deny that these events are not, to some extent, reflections of folk consciousness. For beneath the balloons, DJ's, and candle-lighting ceremony, there lies an important statement of Jewish identity not on the part of the child, but on the part of the adult Jewish community. Though we are free to criticize the superficiality of the event as an inauthentic distortion of a purer more meaningful rite, we must not allow this falsely rooted nostalgia to limit our folkloric appreciation of the ceremony and ritual. If theme parties and videographers have become a common feature at the Bar Mitzvah reception, then let us understand them for what they signify – a folk innovation inspired by the a variety of contextual forces.

### **The Conceit of Adulthood**

Not only is the Bar Mitzvah a threshold moment in the same sense as the wedding, or the night preceding *bris mila*, but it provides the older generation with the unique opportunity to manipulate the boy who is technically still an impressionable child as he plays the convincing role of adult. Standing on the *bimah*, or by the festive table, the thirteen year-old mouths the words he has been trained to repeat for his parents' satisfaction. He will pay homage to mother, father, teachers and other adults while promising his allegiance of his own free will as a full member of *klal yisroel*. Were he not bar mitzvah, his promises would appear empty; after all, a child is not responsible for his own behavior in Jewish consciousness. But at thirteen, his declaration is ostensibly

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speech #3 in the Hebrew Publishing collection, the 1946 discourse focuses on the scriptural passages contained in the *batim* of the *tefilin*. Unlike the model speech, however, the Baltimore *drasha* sees the commandment to love God as much more than adoration:

אידישקייט (sic) האט גרויסע גרויסע פֿאַדערונגען פֿון אַן איד. אין דער קריאת שמע איינע פֿון די פֿיר פרשיות אין די תפלין און אין דער פרשה פֿון דער מזוזה זאָגן מיר צווישן אַנדערע ואהבתה את ד' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך – לערנען מיר די תכמינו ז"ל אַז בכל נפשך מיינט אפילו נוטל את נפשך, דאָס הייסט אַז אַן איד דאַרף זיך מקריב זיין פֿאַר אידישקייט, מוסר נפש על קידוש השם.

Without the details that might allow us to gain a more comprehensive image of the social and cultural context that inspired the speech's content, it is difficult to identify the exact source of this allusion to martyrdom in the name of faith. But even with this fragmentary knowledge, the folklorist can still survey the broader social and cultural landscape behind the *drasha* to glean all possible influences. One telling detail provided by the informant is the speech writer's European origin. Avoiding the Americanism's and Germanism's we find all too often in the model speeches, this "old-time Maskil" writes a clear, European Yiddish rich with Hebraisms. Uncorrupted linguistically by American influence, the author still, on some level of consciousness, identifies with his European roots. We can safely assume that as a Jew living in America in 1946, still writing and thinking as a European, the author would have no doubt been indelibly touched by the still recent decimation of European Jewish life. Perhaps more than the American-born Jew, this Maskil would have found in the bar mitzvah *drasha* an opportunity to express his own particular ideal of Jewish survival and commitment. Where the American would have been satisfied to simply hear the boy articulate his love of God and the Jewish

people, the European still trying to come to grips with the recent catastrophe may have not been satisfied with anything less than a tribute to the martyrdom of the six million.

This possible memorial to the supreme act of Jewish faith is not the only distinctive feature of this 1946 *drasha*. As much as the *drasha* reflects backward, casting the death of European Jewry as a sanctification of God's name, it also looks forward to a redemptive moment. Repeating almost word for word the closing remarks found in many of the speeches in the 1935 Hebrew Publishing edition, the 1946 speech concludes with a prayer for God's mercy and sustenance along with a return to Zion. The reference to the Holy Land which we find repeated in the closing sentence of the 1935 speeches is conspicuously absent from all of the *drashot* printed in the preceding Hebrew Publishing edition in 1928. But while the 1935 speeches couch this proto-Zionistic message in vaguely religious terms, the 1946 *drasha* articulates the end of the exile in language that is more clearly political and nationalistic in the modern sense. To fully appreciate this distinction, let us compare the final sentence from the 1935 speech entitled "די באדייטונג" "with the closing lines from our 1946 *drasha*:

איך ווינטש אייך צו זען נחת פֿון אייערע קינדער מיר אַלע זאָלן זען דעם גליק פֿון אונדזער פֿאָלק

אויף אונדזער הייליקן לאַנד (1935)

זאָל זיך שוין דער באַרימהערציגען פֿאָטער אין הימעל מרחם זיין אויף פֿאָלק ישראל און זאָלן מיר

אַלע דערלעבן צו דער גאולת ישראל אין ארץ ישראל (1946)

Though arguably a minor distinction in diction that can be attributed to the author's preference for Hebraisms, the use and repetition of *ישראל* in the 1946 version deserves closer attention. Given the strong martyrdom motif already established earlier in the *drasha*, it is difficult not to understand this more explicit reference to the Land of

Israel as a deliberate plea for the immediate establishment of a Jewish nation in its ancient geographic home by all available means. With the specter of the Holocaust still vivid in his recent memory and the founding of the Jewish state more a political necessity than a messianic fantasy, the Jew (European or American) in 1946 could hardly have made such a statement simply out of religious sentiment. Moreover, looking back at even earlier speeches published in 1928, we see that the *drashot* reflect a trend of increasing nationalism. Whereas the 1928 speeches contain no call for the ingathering of the exiles whatsoever, the 1935 edition includes a more subtle and vaguely messianic allusion. The 1946 *drasha*, then, clearly represents a radical new stage of more decisive and dire political nationalism.

### **Conclusion**

This Zionistic trend is only one of many external forces whose impact on Jewish communal consciousness comes to light in a folkloric analysis of the ordinary Bar Mitzvah speech. Even with the few details our informant provided, we were still able to sketch the speech's social and cultural context well enough to identify the potentially formative influences. Using the Hebrew Publishing Company model speeches as a basis for comparison, we could also delineate certain stylistic, linguistic and thematic features distinguishing the 1946 speech as a product of a unique historical moment. With still more contextual information, and a wider range of speeches to serve as comparative data, we would most definitely glean from the *drasha* an even sharper and more nuanced image of the aspirations of the broader Jewish community on that spring morning in 1946.

To engage in this analysis, however, we must first disabuse ourselves of our unfounded perception of the American Bar Mitzvah as a gaudy spectacle that only

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distorts the “real” or “authentic” ceremony of old. As we have demonstrated, the ritualized Bar Mitzvah, has always been a performance of Jewish-ness which, like the other observances that constitute what Loewenstein calls the “little tradition”, has always been shaped by a variety of external forces. In the case of the Bar Mitzvah *drasha* particularly, it appears that the most powerful and formative influence has been the collective vision of future Jewish commitment in the heart and mind of the Jewish parent of a maturing child who will now at thirteen begin to form her own identity. From this perspective, the Bar Mitzvah *drasha* has more in common with the genre of women’s *tekhinas* than the Jewish homiletical tradition. Just as the Jewish wife and mother stands by the Shabbat or *havdala* candle beseeching her creator not only for a blessed week but also for future redemption for *klal yisrael*, so does the Bar Mitzvah boy stand before his parents and community, assuring them that his future will see the realization of their greatest hopes.

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