“What if I Drop the Torah?”: Tensions and Resolutions in Accomplishing B’nai Mitzvah Rituals

By

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Over the twentieth century, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the Jewish rite-of-passage that takes place at age thirteen (or twelve for girls in Orthodox communities), has reshaped and transformed the American synagogue, the nature of the Jewish life-cycle, the lives of individual American Jewish families, and the content and meaning of the event itself. In America, the ritual has become a central symbol of Jewish continuity both for individual Jews and for the Jewish community as a whole. Whether the student manages a flawless performance or struggles through with whispered help, the ritual works. Parents and grandparents are amazed and awed, friends and relatives are moved to tears, and the students stands a little taller and prouder. This happens with such regularity that it is common to trivialize or mock the event. In truth, it is risky to expect a (possibly recalcitrant) thirteen-year-old to publicly represent both the core values of Judaism and his family's honor; it is sociologically remarkable that virtually all children achieve that goal.

Precisely because the stakes are so high and because the event can fail in so many ways, synagogues invest substantial effort in preparation and enactment. The ritual influences the content of Jewish education, how Jewish professionals allocate their energy, and the nature of the central religious service itself. At the same time, individual families spend considerable time, money, and effort in preparing for and enacting both event and celebration following. This book results from my study of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in congregations in the San Francisco Bay Area, undertaken with the goal of understanding what Bar/Bat Mitzvah does to and for families and congregations. The research included extensive interviews and observations, which provide an analysis of the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in Jewish life—an analysis that overturns common assumptions about the event.

Underlying the project is an understanding that the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in American life begins with the “Bar Mitzvah Bargain.” In the early to mid-twentieth century, Jewish leaders understood Bar Mitzvah as, at best, a distraction from “real” Judaism (many leaders, particularly at the denominational level, still see it this way). When attempts to discredit the Bar Mitzvah failed to stem its popularity, religious leaders used that very popularity to strike a bargain: rabbis would formally sanction the ceremony with their presence in return for time to educate the children religiously. Leaders used the Bar Mitzvah as the means to inculcate Jewish belief and practice, with the hope that this
attachment would continue beyond the event. It was this “Bar Mitzvah bargain” that resulted in the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in congregational Jewish life.

In managing the ritual, rabbis, teachers, and families negotiate a set of the tensions inherent in the “Bar Mitzvah Bargain” and Bar/Bat Mitzvah’s role in the Jewish American imagination and in congregational life. Understood this way, Bar/Bat Mitzvah becomes a means to understand how both families and Jewish professional leadership negotiate American and Jewish values and behavior in the face of changing cultural norms. This problem is hardly unique to Jews, but is an example of how rituals act both to maintain tradition and enable that tradition to respond to broader cultural shifts, as the congregation acts as the field on which religious leadership and lay participants negotiate religious belief and practice.

I conducted my research in the San Francisco Bay Area, which is characterized by liberal politics, determined inclusivity and pluralism, and the assertion of diversity. While the fifth or sixth largest Jewish community in the United States, historically this region has been Jewishly diffuse and acculturated. Today, Bay Area Jews have an intermarriage rate of over 50% and a congregational affiliation rate of around 22% or less. At the same time, the region supports a rich Jewish cultural life that includes several Jewish Film Festivals, an active adult learning program, and a number of Bay-Area wide arts, religious, and sports events. As a result, the Bay Area is an extremely fruitful place to consider how minority groups and religions adapt to an increasingly pluralistic and diverse environment.

Through interviews with congregational leaders across 60% of Bay Area congregations and observations and further interviews at five representative congregations, I gathered data from many perspectives on Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and performance, as well as on its effect on the congregation and family. From this material, I found four areas of concern that are inherent in the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in American Jewish life. These are not problems that can be solved, but rather productive tensions that, howsoever negotiated by leaders and laity, are ever-present. They include: creating an authentic ritual, assuring competence during preparation and performance, negotiating boundaries to participation, balancing needs of family and congregation, and developing connection and future continuity.

Creating a sense of reality is the existential problem at the heart of rituals which are, by definition, symbolic acts and rely on shared beliefs about meaning and consequences. In many ways, Bar/Bat Mitzvah is defined by shared expectations of content. Yet rabbis, parents, and students often have different goals for and ascribe different meanings to Bar/Bat Mitzvah. All congregations negotiate these different perspectives as they strive to create and communicate authenticity. This chapter argues that BBM takes on four different meanings—a change of status from Jewish child to Jewish adult; a claim to Jewish identity and consequent affiliation with the Jewish people; the performance of a difficult Jewish task; and a celebration of the child and event—each of which are addressed in the ritual itself.

Howsoever Bar/Bat Mitzvah is understood by students, parents, or rabbis and teachers, the ritual includes a performance and making sure that performance is enacted
with some modicum of competence matters. Thus, this is the area of greatest concern and the area into which everyone puts the most effort. That effort begins with curricular decisions within supplementary schools, continues with training for the event itself, may include family education, and concludes with managing the public face of the ritual to achieve a competent performance.

Legitimate participants are necessary for an authentic ritual. Over the past several decades, the increase in intermarried families joining congregations and increased desire for egalitarian religious practice have resulted in pressure to include non-Jews (in liberal congregations) and girls (in Orthodox congregations). Congregations determine who can participate and in what capacity, as they balance the desire for inclusiveness with the desire to maintain traditional boundaries.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah service is both a peak event in the life of an individual family and (sometimes) the time for congregational worship. Different congregations strike the balance between public service and private event in different ways, denominational norms and the size of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort being the factors that most affect that balance.

Together these tensions form a rubric that can be used to examine the relationship between change and stability in both ritual and community. That is, changes to the ritual affect the community; changes to community and culture are reflected in the ritual.
To Dave, for everything.
# Table of Contents

Preface ........................................................................................................................................... 3

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... 7

Chapter One .................................................................................................................................... 7

Chapter Two ................................................................................................................................... 21

Chapter Three .............................................................................................................................. 47

Chapter Four ............................................................................................................................... 67

Chapter Five ............................................................................................................................... 95

Chapter Six .................................................................................................................................... 114

Chapter Seven ............................................................................................................................. 136

References .................................................................................................................................... 147

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................... 150

Appendix A: Methodology ........................................................................................................... 165

Appendix B: Interview Schedules ............................................................................................... 179
Preface

This dissertation began with my own experience in raising a family within a small Jewish community. When we married in 1980, my husband and I became part of the increasing percent of Jews married to non-Jews, a trend that began in the late 1970s and has continued to the present. He affiliates with no religion but willingly agreed to support me in keeping a Jewish home and raising Jewish children. I took on all Jewish practice, from welcoming Shabbat on Friday evening to leading Passover Seders.

We joined Congregation Beth Emek, located at the eastern edge of the San Francisco Bay Area, in 1981, shortly after moving to the area. At that time, the synagogue was small and struggling, but over the intervening decades it has grown to a middle-sized synagogue of around 250 families. Like every congregation, it is proud of its unique population and history: it was founded in the 1950s with a membership drawn almost exclusively from two local national laboratories. And, as is also common, it is quite representative of Bay Area Judaism. It is relatively isolated, with the nearest synagogues being around 15 to 20 miles away. Thus, while it affiliates with the Reform movement, it accommodates members with a broad range of knowledge and practice. It prides itself on its warmth, on its strong lay participation, on the amount of Hebrew used in services, and on high expectations for BBM students. These are, as it turns out, common traits in many medium-sized Reform or similar congregations.

I served on its Board of Directors in many roles, each of which gave me a different view of what synagogues do and how they function: how they are financed, how members are recruited and retained (or not), how different factions within the congregation interact, and how children’s education is planned and enacted. Through these positions, I learned to be a community leader, with the broad goal of creating and maintaining Jewish community in a Jewish space.

In each capacity, my personal Jewish practice, knowledge, and needs were not at issue—nor were those of any single individual. Rather, the role of leader required me to ask questions of community welfare: Why does this program or service or class matter? How does it build community or spiritual connection to God or Jewish knowledge? Who is likely to attend and how much effort should be expended in developing greater attendance? For example, the Education Committee struggled with the question of whether to focus on conversational or liturgical Hebrew, a tension that continues in religious schools today. The committee debated ways to manage Jewish learning and classroom cohesiveness as religious school competed with secular and family activities. The Religious Practices Committee debated ways to balance the minimal Shabbat morning service and long-standing Torah study group with an increasing number of BBM services.

The way the Religious Practices Committee developed a kashrut policy illustrates how community leaders balance a variety of personal practices to create a community standard. Kashrut is the dietary set of rules that dictates how and what Jews may eat. Most simply, it is a system that forbids the mixing of milk and meat products in the same meal as well as eating certain foods entirely. Orthodox and Conservative congregations must observe kashrut in the synagogue to remain within their respective denominations; Reform or similar types of congregations make individual decisions about stringently to observe kashrut. Within the past several decades, in accordance with increasing levels of practice
across the Reform movement, many congregations adopted some level of kashrut. In Beth Emek’s case, the subject was first addressed in the late 1980s.

The congregation then, as now, included members whose personal level of kashrut ran the gamut. The Religious Practices committee wanted both to assure those who kept kosher that they could eat in their Jewish communal space but also avoid alienating either those without knowledge of kashrut or those without the desire to keep kosher. Neither a policy that allowed pepperoni pizza (meat and milk together, along with pork, which is a forbidden meat) nor a policy that insisted on two sets of dishes (one for milk; the other for meat) would fit the diverse communal needs. In the end, the committee decided allow no meat, limiting communal meals to those including milk or parve (neutral) foods. This policy simplified community meals and allowed both liberal and strict individual to eat together.

The evolution of Beth Emek’s kashrut policy is an example of how communal policy comes to be, but, given the topic of the book, also raises the question of why I chose kashrut as the example. The answer is simple: kashrut was seen as a community problem; BBM was not. Rather, the ritual was a taken-for-granted part of congregational life and viewed as a family’s individual choice. In the 1980s and 1990s, the place of BBM in the congregation, preparation for the service, and the content of the service itself were taken for granted and thus, unlike with kashrut, there was no need to negotiate a BBM policy. It was in this environment that my daughters prepared for their Bat Mitzvahs.

Just as Beth Emek’s approach to Jewish life and BBM is typical, so is my personal and family experience of the ritual. The fact that we are an intermarried family had consequences for the service: we had to consider how the non-Jewish family members could be included without making a mockery of the service. As our daughters learned the material, they developed opinions about the service, which resulted in an individualized (and, in our case, more extensive than the norm) service. Each daughter had a different set of issues around both service and party to manage. And the weekend events surrounding the service had to be planned, which meant, among other things, handling difficult relatives with different needs within the larger context of family and friends. There is a reason that BBM consumes so much emotion on the part of each family: every parent has these three responsibilities to fulfill.

Because of the small size of congregation and BBM cohort, each daughter chose a service date without needing to negotiate with others in her cohort. Each looked at the portions themselves to choose material that “spoke” to her. Each led the entire service and chose to include additional material. As there was no regular Saturday service, these additions and individualization went without comment. As we prepared for the service, we asked others to participate: teachers and friends from the congregation, as well as non-Jewish friends. Including my non-Jewish husband and his relatives required some discussion—what would be appropriate, given that Bat Mitzvah is a Jewish ritual and he was not Jewish? In the end, he and I each spoke to our daughters, he stood with his hands on my shoulders as the Torah was passed, and he read the English translation for part of the Torah reading.

Each daughter struggled with different problems during preparation. The elder had learning and authority issues but very much wanted to succeed and did so. Hers was the first Bat Mitzvah of a generation and many family members attended from out of town. The younger learned easily, but did not connect to Judaism through prayer. She was conflicted about the event, but ultimately decided to go through with it both because of family—she
could not have faced her beloved great-grandmother otherwise—and because of peer pressure—the rest of her class was going through the process and she would have felt less of a Jew had she not performed the ritual. In many ways, her Bat Mitzvah, more than her sister’s, shows how individual family circumstance matters. In the two years between the events, some family members became ill and could not travel and a few months prior to the Bat Mitzvah, her great-grandfather died. In our greater family history, her Bat Mitzvah forever remains an event tinged with sadness as well as joy.

So as a parent and family member, my daughters’ Bat Mitzvahs were overwhelmingly personal events in preparation, performance, and celebration. Here too, we were typical. Our daughters’ different responses, our individual engagement with synagogue practice and community, and the issues with extended family are all areas with which each individual family has to contend. Further, while leadership controls the events within the synagogue (to whatever extent they are individualized or standardized), there is no such control over the vicissitudes of family life.

At the same time my daughters were preparing for Bat Mitzvah, I had begun work as a BBM tutor. While cantors, who take on training at large congregations, have formal training within denominations, BBM tutors vary substantially in their training, with many—like me—being self-taught. I learned Biblical Hebrew over a period of years by attending classes at Lehrhaus Judaica, the Bay Area-wide adult school, as well as through books and self-study. I learned the melodies for chanting both Torah and Haftarah by playing them on the piano repeatedly. Then, over a period of a year, I chanted Torah monthly until I was comfortable doing so. With these few skills, I began to tutor students.

While my role as community leader gave me the perspective of the community and my role as parent gave me the perspective of how the event affects the family, tutoring brought a third dimension to the process—that of the relationship between text, teacher, and student over a period of time. In many ways this relationship is like that of a music teacher or individual coach, in that an expert in a subject is teaching a student individually. In that sense, each teacher begins with where the student is, which a particular subject—in this case, the texts—and a goal. Students came to me with different abilities in Hebrew, different musical abilities, different interests. Finding ways to engage each was a challenge. Sometimes this meant baking challah with them while learning Torah, other times it was a matter of telling Jewish stories to answer difficult questions. At the same time, the body of knowledge had to be mastered by the deadline. What was constant was the development of competence and pride in each one, the level of seriousness with which they ended the challenge, the nervousness in almost every case, and the pride the students took in their performance. In almost every case, it was a remarkable transformation from trepidation to the realization of competence.

Thus, in each of my three roles, I saw BBM from a different perspective, had different goals for and responsibilities toward the event, and gave the event a different meaning. As a community member, I was concerned with the effect of the ritual on the community and so, when Rabbi Eric Yoffie said at the 1999 URJ Biennial that “the Shabbat morning bar or bat mitzvah…in most cases has alienated the uninvited, young and old, and appropriated the worship service as a private affair of the bar mitzvah family. This is far from a simple matter. For many Reform Jews, the rite of bar mitzvah is the single most significant religious event in their lives, and we should be respectful of its impact. Still, Judaism is a collective enterprise, not a private pursuit, and we must be troubled by the
prospect that a family celebration is displacing Shabbat morning communal prayer,” I took
his words to heart.

As a parent, I was concerned with my family's individual event: ensuring that the
needs of child as well as those of extended family and friends were met. And each
individual moment was powerful. When I stood in front of the guests at our older
daughter’s Bat Mitzvah, I felt surrounded by all the communities of which we were a part
and felt their love and support. It is a feeling that is with me still. When I stood with my
younger daughter as my grandmother placed my grandfather’s tallit on her shoulders, my
heart overflowed with both joy and sorrow—joy at the continuity of generation, heartbreak
at the loss in our family. BBM provides these powerful moments for families—moments
that are particular to each family.

As a tutor, I was concerned with the student and the service alone: attempting to
forge a connection between text and student while ensuring that the student was prepared
for the day itself. I took delight in those moments when a student asked a particularly
insightful question, mastered a piece of text, or otherwise showed a spark of the Jewish
adult he or she could become.

However, as my personal story shows, BBM does not only affect the individual—it
profoundly influences the communities in which they take place. At the same time, those
communities shape both individual experience and the event itself. Lay and professional
leaders see BBM as an event to be integrated into community life. Each family becomes
absorbed by its individual needs, goals, and resultant narrative. And teachers and students
are concerned with the specifics of preparing for and enacting the ritual. Each role—parent
or child, rabbi or teacher or congregant—has a different goal for BBM and a different
understanding of its meaning. How do these different groups negotiate the issues that
arise? And, indeed, what are those issues? In other words, how does the congregation
shape the ritual and its participants and how, in turn, do the ritual and its participants
shape the congregation? My goal in this research was to understand how that negotiation
takes place and this book is the result.
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In looking back over the past decade and more, I find myself more grateful than I can say for the support of family and friends, colleagues and mentors as I ever so slowly made my way through developing, researching, and writing this dissertation. Nevertheless, these words represent a small piece of that appreciation.

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David Hollinger stepped in as my outside dissertation chair. I am most appreciative of his patience and kindness, as well as the perspective he brings. The dissertation relies on material specific to American Judaism. Having an historical perspective from outside the Jewish community has allowed me to be confident that I am communicating to a broad audience.

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I offer special thanks to all who gave of their time and effort to talk with me, to allow me to observe and be part of their religious lives. Their generosity provided me with a vast quantity of data. I am also grateful to my research assistants, who provided help from beginning to end: David Reder, Alina Goldenberg, Kate Morar, Cora Tobin, Crissy Chung, and especially Kendra Nervik. Much of this work was made possible by the Berman Foundation Dissertation Fellowship and, again, I am more grateful than I can say.

I have saved my family, friends, and community for the end. I came to graduate work with half-grown children, with a full life in my community and my own congregation. Throughout the process, I have tried to balance that full life with my academic work. While never easy, the support and encouragement from friends and family has made it possible. Here's to all the folks who make up Congregation Beth Emek, to Karen Holtz, Miriam Miller,
and Valerie Jonas, to Aziza and Leo Mara, to Phyllis Lasche, Steve Hatchett, Jim Green, and Molly Bang, to Melissa Reading and John Castor.

My entire mishpocha—from my great-grandparents and grandparents who emigrated here in the early twentieth century, to my far-flung family, to my parents, Barbara and Leon Keer, to my siblings and their families: Jackie and Steve, Harold, Amy, Adam, Sam, and Jacob, and Michael, Cindy, Corinne, and Erika—has made me who am I. My grandmother, of blessed memory, held all our dreams and wishes. She would have loved to read this dissertation—I wish she could have.

My children finished high school and college while I was in graduate school. Miranda married Daniel and together they have Lily and Rory. Deborah traveled around the world and is writing her first novel. They have supported me, mocked me, cheered me on and cheered me up and are the very best children any mother could want.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my beloved husband, Dave, who has encouraged me at every step of the way. His confidence in my ability enabled me to find it myself. His humor, kindness, respect, and love sustain me every day and I am blessed to share my life with him.

Chapter One

It’s not Duddy Kravitz’ Bar Mitzvah Anymore: Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the Twenty-First Century

Twelve-year old Ari’s hair covered his eyes, while his waistband sagged around his hips. He slouched and turned away during conversation, eyes and emotions shuttered. That should not be surprising—he is the child of a difficult divorce, with parents who love him but despise each other. Ari lives with his father and step-mother, who are active participants in their Conservative Jewish synagogue, attending services regularly as a family and celebrating Shabbat and holidays with friends. He has attended religious school regularly, if not enthusiastically, for two days a week since kindergarten.

Through religious school and service attendance, Ari has acquired rudimentary Hebrew skills—the ability to decode the language, along with some basic liturgical vocabulary. Attending Shabbat services—albeit reluctantly—meant that Ari was comfortable with the service structure. This background gave him the basic knowledge to begin preparing for his Bar Mitzvah service. Bar Mitzvah training began around six months before his thirteenth birthday, when he began to meet weekly with the cantor to review the prayers he would lead and to master the texts he would chant during the Bar Mitzvah service. He worked to learn fifteen verses from the weekly portion of Torah (Five Books of Moses) and the Haftarah (related selections from the Prophets) and also met with the rabbi to develop a Bar Mitzvah talk that interpreted the texts. Throughout the process, Ari resisted learning more than the minimum amount, insisting that the whole process was stupid and meaningless. Nevertheless, planning moved forward: his parents sent out
invitations to the event and reception following, his step-mother drove him to
and from lessons, and after much prodding, he wrote his d’var Torah.

Despite all the teeth-gnashing and eye-rolling, on the day of the event, a
different reality emerged as both participants and observers collaborated to
enact a successful ritual. With hair brushed back and suit pants neatly buckled
at his waist, Ari filled the role of community leader with adult decorum and
poise. He led the prayers and chanted the texts with aplomb, read his speech
with volume and conviction, and accepted his parents’ loving words and his
rabbi’s counsel for the future with relative grace. The adults, too, enacted their
parts in the ritual successfully. Ari’s divorced parents treated each other with
polite respect and teared up with pride as Ari read from Torah, while the
attendees stood or sat, chanted in unison or responsively, as required by the
liturgy.

The ritual did not act as a panacea that changed either Ari’s personality
or the family dynamics: at the celebration that evening, his shirttail covered his
sagging pants. Nevertheless, for one crucial moment, the boy had demonstrated
adult leadership; his parents had each demonstrated care for their child that
superseded their difference; and kin on the one hand and congregants on the
other had affirmed the reality and continuity of community and of Judaism
itself.

Despite the challenges of preparation, Ari’s Bar Mitzvah was a success, upholding
his family’s honor and symbolically representing the Jewish future to family, friends, and
congregation. He is not alone. Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the Jewish rite-of-passage for boys and girls
respectively, that takes place at age thirteen (or, in Orthodox communities, at twelve for
girls), is a central symbol of Jewish continuity both for individual Jews and for the
American Jewish community as a whole. In almost every case, whether the student
manages a flawless performance or struggles through with whispered help, the ritual
works. Parents and grandparents are amazed and awed, friends and relatives are moved to
tears, and the students stands a little taller and prouder. This happens with such regularity
that it is common to minimize, trivialize, or mock the event. In truth, it is risky to expect a
possibly recalcitrant thirteen-year-old to publicly represent both the core values of Judaism
and his family’s honor; it is sociologically remarkable that virtually all children achieve that
goal.

Precisely because the stakes are so high and because the event can fail in so many
ways, congregations invest substantial effort in preparation and enactment. Bar/Bat
Mitzvah influences the content of Jewish education, the way Jewish professionals allocate
their time, and the nature of the central religious service itself. Students learn Hebrew and
liturgy in religious school, which includes—sometimes to the exclusion of other subjects—
teaching the Hebrew and prayers necessary for accomplishing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual.
Rabbis and cantors or tutors work with students individually as they learn the specific texts
and develop their Bar/Bat Mitzvah talks, tasks that consume substantial time and energy
on all parts. Given the high stakes of the event itself, there can be substantial conflict in
accomplishing the ritual—as happened in Ari’s case. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah service affects
the congregation as well. In Reform settings, where few congregants attend Saturday
morning services, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service often appears to be a private event which
only invited guests attend. In Orthodox and Conservative settings, Saturday morning is the
main congregational service and thus the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual can seem to compete with that service. As is the norm at his synagogue, Ari led the entire Bar Mitzvah service, with family members and friends participating by chanting some of the texts.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah also changes family life. Families spend considerable time, money, and effort in preparing and enacting of both the event and the celebration following. Understandably, the celebration or Bar/Bat Mitzvah party has received more than its share of attention, often negative and generally deriding its excess.1

At the same time that Bar/Bat Mitzvah has reshaped and transformed synagogue life and Jewish congregational practice, the ritual itself has responded to cultural shifts. The content of the ritual has changed: students often lead more of the service, chant longer sections of text, and/or deliver longer and more elaborate talks than even in the relatively recent past. The people participating have changed: both egalitarian expectations for girls’ participation and increasing numbers of intermarried families in liberal synagogues have resulted in the need to include previously excluded groups. And over the course of the twentieth century the meaning of the event has changed as well: Judaism is perceived as a matter of choice by many families, which results in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual becoming a formal symbol of that choice.

Because of its importance, Bar/Bat Mitzvah provides a particularly good lens through which to explore not only how American Jews negotiate and experience changes in religious practice and belief. Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals are peculiarly individual and yet take place in a community setting. As peak events in family life each ritual brings together a group of people specific to the individual family. This personal community (which overlaps to a greater or lesser degree with the congregation) then acts as witness to the ritual, ideally investing it with deep personal meaning that could include family history, individual achievement, dominant Jewish symbols and values, and American values. Through this process, the public ritual itself is affected: what happens in one Bar/Bat Mitzvah can be appropriated, reinterpreted, or rejected by other families or by the congregational leadership, so that the personal elements of Bar/Bat Mitzvah are infused with public meaning and the public elements of Bar/Bat Mitzvah are invested with personal meaning.

While obviously of interest to Jews, Bar/Bat Mitzvah—because of its place in congregations and its importance for individuals and community—serves as a site by which to examine how change occurs in religion. It is within congregations that religion is lived and it is here that the different interests of congregants and religious leaders complement or compete, ultimately resulting in religious continuity and change. Because rituals make real the sacred beliefs of a community through words, actions, and objects, they offer a way to observe how these interactions take place. Rites of passage are some of the most potent rituals for communities: as they move members of a given society from one status to another, they symbolically reassure members that the group will endure.2

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1 Because parties are largely outside of the congregation’s purview, they are discussed only peripherally in this work. I do want to note the parallel between the responsibilities of the students with regard to the service and those of the parents with regard to the party. Both children and their parents work to demonstrate new skills and/or status: the student formally commits to a new degree of Jewish responsibility (however enacted in the future), while the parent demonstrates successful parenting of a Jewish child.

2 While the introduction clearly follows the work of Geertz, Weber, and Van Gennep, a fuller discussion of the literature upon which this work relies follows below.
However, all rituals—and rites of passage, in particular—are fragile, even dangerous. While a successful ritual reaffirms the community, a failed ritual diminishes it. Thus, not only must those who perform a ritual be prepared to do so correctly, but also those who witness the ritual must be prepared to rescue it should it appear ready to fail. Through playing their parts, both performers and witnesses are strengthened as individuals and as part of their community, while the sense of community itself is reinforced.

The role of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the congregation provides one potent example of inherent tensions that shape the ritual, the participants, and the institution. These tensions include: managing different meanings of the ritual, balancing the process of Jewish practice and knowledge with the need for competent performance, including previously excluded groups while maintaining the Jewish integrity of the ritual, and negotiating the public and private aspects of the service. While the tensions themselves result from the central place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in American Judaism and Jewish congregational life, how each is negotiated within a given congregation depends on the form of the ritual, the congregational culture, and the expectations of the different participants. These interactions result in patterns of preparation and enactment. Just describing these patterns contributes to understanding American Jewish practice in the twenty-first century. However, unlike the tensions, these patterns are neither inevitable nor inherent, but change according to the needs of the participants. Therefore, the heart of this work is an analysis of these tensions.

This chapter continues with a discussion of the definitions of religion and religious ritual, drawn from sociology and anthropology, on which the research relies. I then turn to an explanation of how the American Bar/Bat Mitzvah developed to meet the needs of a particular people at a particular time and place. Understanding that context explains why it continues to hold such a powerful place in American Judaism. I chose to examine the ritual within a particular region: the San Francisco Bay Area. The chapter continues with a brief discussion the research rationale and methodology; a full account of the project’s development and execution can be found in Appendix A. I conclude with a summary of the chapters following.

Religion, Ritual, and Rites of Passage

There are almost as many definitions of religion and ritual as there are students of religion and so a brief orientation to my understanding of the terms is in order. Because I am looking both at religious systems as well as at the individual interactions that take place within those systems, my work relies on several different strands of theory. At the most basic level, Durkheim’s definition of religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, [1912] 1995, p. 44) speaks to the systemic nature of religion, encompassing the institution, the people, and sacred ritual practice and belief. This definition is particularly useful for religions that, like Judaism, are
primarily expressed through acts of practice rather than statements of belief.³ Geertz’s definition of religion as establishing “powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men...and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 89-123) also speaks to the role of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the Jewish imagination as a time that creates these moods and motivations.

Unlike with religion and ritual, there is little argument about how to define rites-of-passage. Van Gennep’s classic The Rites of Passage supplies the definition of the three elements of rites of passage: “preliminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world postliminal rites, as well the discussion of initiation rites (Van Gennep, 1960 [1908], pp. 21, 65-115). Bar/Bat Mitzvah begins with training, includes a ceremony that has the possibility of failure, and concludes with a celebration marking the change of status.⁴ In contemporary America, the celebration—with all its possibility for over-the-top parties—has captured the American imagination, but in congregations and for families, it is the training and the ceremony that are most significant, with the Torah central to the ritual.

Building on Van Gennep, Turner’s The Forest of Symbols introduces the concept of the “dominant symbol” (The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual, 1967, pp. 28-29, 50-55). In many ways similar to Durkheim’s understanding of “totem,” dominant symbols encompass core values, morals, and practices and condense these central and sometimes contradictory elements of a society into one symbol evoking deep emotion. The Torah, which plays a central role in Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Jewish ritual more generally, is this dominant symbol in Judaism, representing key Jewish narratives and the values and practices that structure a relationship with God and the Jewish people.⁵ It is not surprising that sits at the heart of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual.

Making the Bar Mitzvah Bargain: The Evolution of an American Jewish Ritual

Bar/Bat Mitzvah, particularly in America, is a ritual that percolated up from the laity and forced itself on the religious professionals. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was already a central event in the lives of the American Jewish folk, although its form was simpler then than now. In one common pattern, a modest ritual took place on a weekday, when the Bar Mitzvah boy would put on tefillin (phylacteries) and a prayer shawl, read three verses from the Torah scroll as well as a section from the Prophets, and deliver a memorized commentary to the congregation. His father would recite a blessing that released him from ritual responsibility for his son. This short ceremony was followed by a more or less elaborate reception (Fishbane, 1995a, pp. 157-8). Modest as this was, some Jewish leadership resisted and scoffed at this ritual, labeling it a cliché-driven exercise of conspicuous consumption.

³ Religions are, of course, comprised of both practice and belief. Judaism is largely expressed through practice, but the Shema, the primary statement of allegiance and faith. Christianity is largely expressed through belief, however the transmutation of wafer and wine into bone and blood is a belief expressed through action.
⁴ Depending on the community, that formal change of status may or may not have real consequences, a subject discussed in the conclusion.
⁵ Chapter Two, “Context and Characters,” discusses the place of Torah in Judaism and in Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual.
Nonetheless, Bar Mitzvah has remained central in the lives of American Jews. There are a number of reasons for this, perhaps most obviously because throughout the mid-20th century it was successfully integrated into synagogue life. However, I believe it became and remains important because, like other successful Jewish rituals, it bridges the gap between Jewish and American values.

Successful American Jewish rituals, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah is no exception, share five attributes. They serve a political function that sets boundaries that define the community; use nostalgia to connect one generation to another, giving individual stories and history deeper meaning; claim legitimacy by connecting to Jewish history and tradition; make an appeal to an ultimate authority, whether that be God or individual choice; and provide symbolic explanation that translates Jewish belief and practice into the American lexicon (Eisen, 1998, pp. 259-61). These general attributes manifest in particular ways for each ritual; below I show how they are expressed in Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah service sets boundaries in two ways. First, the language (Hebrew or English), structure, and performance of the service indicate who is included—or not. Second, rules around who may or may not participate in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service itself set another kind of boundary. The first issue is part of the larger question of denominational norms and I discuss that in Chapter Two, “Context and Characters;” the second issue is the subject of Chapter Five, “What are You Doing on the Bimah?”

I maintain below that asserting loyalty to the Jewish people is an integral part of how the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual developed. The service itself contains moments—for example, passing the Torah from grandparent to parent to child—in which loyalty to Judaism and to family continuity is made clear. Similarly, both through use of traditional texts and language (in some cases) and through leading extensive sections of liturgy (which is itself a claim to tradition), the ritual takes on legitimacy and authenticity. These issues are discussed in Chapter Two, “Context and Characters,” and Chapter Three, “Variations on a Theme.”

Both the appeal to ultimate authority and symbolic explanation (or interpretation) are at the heart of Bar/Bat Mitzvah’s importance in Jewish life, as both concern reconciling and interpreting American with Jewish values. Judaism assumes a strong duty to a people, a history, and a practice, which may or may not explicitly include God. By contrast, American values elevate the individual and the individual’s right, even obligation, to make choices that lead to a unique self. The central challenge for American Jews and Judaism has been to reconcile these two contradictory sets of values. Bar Mitzvah is one way American Judaism has managed that resolution.

As with other immigrants to America in the early twentieth century, Jews confronted the question of adapting to American life, facing pressure to demonstrate economic success through material means, to assimilate into the American cultural “melting pot,” and to adopt an American value system that placed both voluntary affiliation and self-creation at its heart. Although surrounded by Jewish ethnic culture, these immigrants faced an existential crisis with regard to their American children: “Will my child be a Jew? How can I ensure that my child doesn’t break the ‘chain of tradition’?” The Bar Mitzvah helped answer that question: the celebration demonstrated material success,

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6 Arnold Eisen’s body of work analyzes this subject extensively.
while the ritual itself, including the speech, demonstrated formal loyalty to the Jewish people.

Learning to choose is part of child-rearing: responsible parents teach their children to make good choices, and through making those choices, children learn to create their adult selves. Yet with that freedom comes the possibility that the child’s choices may contradict the parent’s values and choices (as with the banker parent whose child become a performance artist). It is not enough for parents to teach their children to make choices; truly successful parents teach their children to make choices that also reflect parental values and choices (e.g.: (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989), (Giddens, 1991), (Fischer, 2010)).

Following this logic, a successful American Jewish parent was, and still is, one who raises a child who can demonstrate both a freely chosen sense of self-identity and affiliation with Judaism and the Jewish people. This tension, typical of American Judaism more generally, was expressed by one student as follows: “I don’t think my parents and me talked about what it [Bar Mitzvah] means, but I know that they really wanted me to do this and they did give me a choice—that I could or I couldn’t and I made the choice that I wanted to—I made that choice.” What this student understood from his parents was that this Jewish ritual mattered to them—and also part of the ritual was his ability to choose correctly. It is hardly surprising that he “chose” to do what mattered to them.

Students demonstrate this “chosen” identification by reading Judaism’s central texts and delivering a speech that establishes allegiance to Jewish continuity. In this way, the ritual enabled and enables families to bridge the gap between Jewish and American worldviews, to explain and justify Judaism, and to cap the process of raising a child who was both Jewish and American. In addition, the party following the ceremony indicated another, more obvious, form of success: that of the immigrant who makes good.

The Jewish religious elite had—and, we shall see, still have—a different perspective. By inclination, by training and/or by role, this group, particularly rabbis and educators, was more immersed in the Jewish world, resisted American norms to a greater or lesser degree, and through teaching and interpreting Judaism to the laity, attempted to ensure the reproduction of Jewish belief and practice. The existential questions the elite struggled with were not only those of an individual family, but those of preserving both religion and people: “What is the best way maintain an authentic Judaism in America?” and “Will Judaism continue to exist in America?” For the leaders, Bar Mitzvah was, at best, a distraction from “real” Judaism and, at worst, because preparation was minimal and concentrated on specific training for the event, destructive to authentic Jewish continuity. Leadership saw the same actions—reading from the text and reciting a speech—that symbolized continuity to families as a hollow display of ersatz Judaism. When attempts to discredit the Bar Mitzvah failed to stem its popularity, religious leaders used that popularity to strike a bargain: rabbis would formally sanction the ceremony with their presence in return for time to educate the children religiously. This bargain was stated explicitly by a Jewish educator in the mid-twentieth century:

Bar Mitzvah represents a powerful motivation, a goal which children and their parents readily understand, and will work to attain. Recognizing the value of this motivation, increasing numbers of Jewish educators and rabbis have sought to direct Bar Mitzvah preparation from mere coaching for a performance, to education for living as American Jews ...(Judah Pilch in Engelman 1951, quoted in (Schoenfeld, 1986))
From this perspective, the Bar Mitzvah was the means to inculcating Jewish belief and practice, with the hope that it would continue beyond the event. The rabbis in the twentieth century accomplished their goal: they did successfully use the Bar Mitzvah as a lever to increase the number of children engaged in formal Jewish education, as Schoenfeld (1986), discusses at length. From the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century, the number of children receiving formal Jewish education doubled from about 25% to more than 50%, with almost 90% of these children enrolled in the synagogues' schools, rather than in community schools or preparing with private tutors. Congregational requirements for having a Bar Mitzvah typically included three years of religious training, understanding of some Hebrew, the ability to read prayers and follow the service, some knowledge of Jewish customs and practice, and an introduction to Jewish history (Levitats, 1949).

The existential need that led to the Bar Mitzvah bargain had very concrete consequences for all parties. The content of Jewish education became shaped, in part, by the specific requirements of Bar Mitzvah. Synagogue design often reflected the need for a space to host Bar/Bat Mitzvah parties. The Saturday morning service could change to a greater or lesser degree, thus affecting both religious practice and congregants. Rabbis, cantors, or other professional leadership engaged in preparing children for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, taking time from other activities.

For families, by contrast, the event itself was the primary goal of the Bar Mitzvah bargain. Regardless of how much or little of the service the child actually led, the ritual highlighted the child as a symbol both of Jewish continuity and also, as demonstrated by the child's achievements, of successful parenting. With this framing, broader Jewish education became, in the crudest terms, simply the means to that end. The reality is more complicated. Parents wanted their children to acquire general knowledge of Judaism, but the details of what this meant and how to accomplish it remained vague, particularly in comparison to the very specific knowledge necessary to lead a service: Hebrew and liturgy. Furthermore, Jewish education competed and competes with secular activities. In the end, children spent between four and eight hours a week in religious school—less time than desired by the leadership, but more time than many families would have liked.

The "Bar Mitzvah Bargain" continues to structure the interactions between people, ritual, and the congregation itself. There has been surprising consistency in some areas (for example, the curriculum has remained relatively constant) throughout the 20th and into the 21st century, but there have also been substantial changes. Some, such as a more egalitarian ritual, resulted from changes to the surrounding culture that affected American Judaism. Others, such as the inclusion of non-Jewish parents in the service, resulted from demographic changes within the American Jewish community. However, the Bar Mitzvah Bargain and the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in Jewish life results in several inherent tensions that all congregations negotiate. Following an introduction to the research design and resulting data, I introduce the four tensions that comprise the heart of this work.

**Immersing in Bay Area Judaism**

Often the best way to approach the general is through the specific and so it is here. In developing this research, I chose a particular location—the San Francisco Bay Area—in which to gather data through interview and observation. No region can claim to be truly
representative of American Judaism. The population and percentage of Jews affect the resources and variety of practice, regional Jewish history and surrounding culture affect attitudes towards Judaism and the nature of Jewish practice, all of which lead to distinct regional characteristics. So why choose to study Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the San Francisco Bay Area? And, given that choice, how universal or specific are my findings likely to be?

With around 215,000 Jews (Sheskin, 2013), the Bay Area is around the fifth largest Jewish community in the United States. Unlike in many other cities, the Jewish population has historically been diffuse and acculturated (Kahn & Dollinger, 2003). Bay Area Jews have an intermarriage rate of between 50 and 60% and a congregational affiliation rate of 22%. There are fewer than 100 synagogues in the region, a fact which enables the entire region to serve as a data set. These congregations are skewed toward liberal denominations, with a lower percentage of Orthodox congregations and higher percentage of Renewal congregations than in either New York or Los Angeles, the two regions with the largest Jewish population in the US. At the same time, the region supports a rich Jewish cultural life that includes several Jewish Film Festivals, an active adult learning program, and a number of Bay-Area wide arts, religious, and sports events. These characteristics make the Bay Area an extremely fruitful place to consider different ways that minority groups and religions adapt to an increasingly pluralistic and diverse milieu. In what follows, I argue that the tensions that characterize the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in congregational life can also describe the process of religious change more generally. In this sense, while what I find is specific to a religion and a region, the tensions are more universal.

My research is composed of two distinct strands: interviews with leaders of Bay Area synagogues and observations and interviews at five representative congregations. Bay Area synagogues were identified using the Jewish Federation Resource Guide, which collects and distributes information on all synagogues within the region. My criteria for inclusion was simple: all congregations within the region that fit the American congregational model and had Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals. This excluded congregations serving specific populations (for example, the elderly or young singles) or those with particular missions (for example, Jewish meditation). It also excluded Chabad groups, as these are organized as hierarchical franchises led by individuals or couples, not as congregations with lay governance, as well as professional leadership. This resulted in somewhat over 70 congregations across seven denominations, ranging in size from fewer than 50 members to over 2,000. Around 60% of the possible congregations participated in one or more interviews, which provided an overview of Bar/Bat Mitzvah from the leadership’s perspective. The chart details denomination and participation in the interviews:

By size alone, New York would fill that description, but precisely because of its unusual size and history, it cannot represent the diverse experiences of Western, mid-Western, or Southern Jews.

This figure has recently been challenged and revised sharply downward (Saxe 2013), however that methodology has been questioned and so I continue to use the figure above.

With around 1.5 million Jews, the New York city region has by far the largest Jewish population in the US, followed by Los Angeles (519,000), Chicago (292,000), and Broward FL (241,000). The Bay Area, Washington DC, and Philadelphia all have Jewish populations of around 215,000.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denominations</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Congregation size</th>
<th>Total that fit parameters</th>
<th>Total participating</th>
<th>Proportion participating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>&lt;100-2500</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>~1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>&lt;100-700</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent or Unaffiliated</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>&lt;100-300</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>~1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>&lt;100-250</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewal</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>&lt;100-300</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructionist</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanistic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>94</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>42</strong></td>
<td><strong>3/5</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At each congregation, I requested interviews with rabbis, education directors, and administrators or executive directors. Each role provided a different set of information about Bar/Bat Mitzvah and its place in the congregation. Rabbis provided information about the nature of Shabbat services with and without Bar/Bat Mitzvah, their philosophy and understanding about these services, and preparation for the event. Education directors discussed the content and composition of religious school, as well as the effect of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation on the curriculum. Administrators gave demographic information and stood as proxies for the congregants. All interviewees were asked to give their perception of the congregation’s response to Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the overall context and culture of the congregation.

From this pool, I chose five representative synagogues at which to observe services, classes, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation, as well as to interview congregants, parents and Bar/Bat Mitzvah students, and tutors. This enabled me to understand the families’ perspectives, to consider both preparation for and enactment of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and to compare the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service to an ordinary Shabbat service. Four of these congregations represent the most frequent size and largest number of congregations in the Bay Area. Their memberships range between 200 and 400 families, with Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohorts of between ten and twenty-five students and they represent Conservative, Orthodox, Reform denominations, as well as non-affiliated or independent congregations. In addition, I chose one very large Reform congregation, with a membership of well over 1000 families, and a cohort of around 80 students. This model is important not only because of the number of people and students represented (this one congregation alone trains almost as many students are the other four put together), but also because managing the training for a large cohort and accommodating more than one Bar/Bat Mitzvah every week changes the nature of preparation, the engagement of families, and the effect on the

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10 These individuals varied greatly in their ability to reflect the congregation’s attitudes. While I expected them to be a bridge between congregants and leadership, that was rarely the case. Thus, most simply provided demographic information.

11 The immediate question that results is: what about the very small congregation? Here, too, size offers possibilities and constraints. I was able to talk with several rabbis of very small congregations and these interviews provided information on how small size affects the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and enactment. I determined that the benefits of adding an additional congregation were outweighed by disadvantages of adding an additional congregation to observe.
institution. The congregations chosen also represented different sub-regions of the Bay Area, from Silicon Valley to San Francisco to Oakland.

At each congregation, I observed Shabbat services (totaling 36), tutoring sessions (totaling 16), and religious school classes (totaling 15), while also drawing on content from websites, Bar/Bat Mitzvah booklets, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah speeches such as the one Ari delivered. Between the two parts of the study, I conducted a total of 218 interviews. These included 42 rabbis, 33 education directors, 36 administrative/executive directors (depending on congregation size). Within the congregations, I also interviewed 28 families (Bar/Bat Mitzvah and parent or parents, totaling 78 people). Twenty-nine additional interviews with lay leadership, tutors and teachers, and congregants at each of the five congregations fleshed out these areas.

The result was a balance between in-depth observation and a survey of leadership. The different perspectives yield a description of patterns of practice across the Bay Area, providing information about supplementary school curricula, preparation for and participation in Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals, and information about Shabbat services more generally. These descriptions form the stuff of my analysis.

What Follows
The Bar Mitzvah Bargain discussed above underlies the relationships between three interacting constituents: the congregation, the ritual, and the participants. Chapter Two, “Context and Characters,” introduces these elements in that order. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the American religious and congregational context, then describes each of the five congregations at which I observed, which represent much of the denominational variation in American Judaism. In the Bay Area, Bar/Bat Mitzvah services take place as part of the regular Shabbat (Sabbath) morning services. The chapter continues with an orientation to that liturgy in order to show how the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service retains and strengthens the symbolism of these regular services. The three groups of participants: parents, rabbis and teachers, and the students themselves—each have different sets of responsibilities and their roles. Chapter Two concludes by discussing these roles and the resulting perspectives.

The place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in American Jewish life affects the participants, the congregation, and the ritual, resulting in several inherent tensions, four of which I discuss in Chapters Three through Six.

Chapter Three, “Variations on a Theme,” examines how the roles of the different participants—parents, rabbis and tutors, and the students themselves—lead to four different interpretations of the ritual's meaning: a change of status from child to Jewish adult; an assertion of belonging to the Jewish people and Jewish identity; a demonstration of both status change and Jewish identity through performing a difficult Jewish task; and a celebration of the child and his/her accomplishment. These different meanings are expressed symbolically within the ritual itself. As the participants negotiate these meanings, the ritual changes and these changes in turn affect the participants’ understanding of its meanings.

Chapter Four, “Getting it Right: Process or Performance?,” examines the tension between the necessary goal of assuring a capable performance and inculcating the beliefs and practices that the performance represents—or focusing on the process of “doing Judaism.” While all parties agree that both performance and process are necessary,
focusing on one can come at the expense of the other. I examine the three places in which this tension occurs: congregational religious schools are responsible for teaching basic skills, Bar/Bat Mitzvah training is responsible for teaching material for the students’ individual rituals, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, during which the students enact what they have learned. The first section looks at the effect of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation on Jewish supplementary schools and their curricula. Jewish educators are well aware of tension between providing basic Jewish knowledge and preparing students for Bar/Bat Mitzvah training and often respond by minimizing the latter. However, conflict can result when students are not prepared for eventual training and so this section looks at the different choices teachers and education directors make with regard to Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Students typically learn the specific material for their rituals with tutors and develop their talks with rabbis. The second section examines how these individual relationships balance the tension between developing skills necessary to chant or interpret texts with the need for a smooth performance of the ritual. No matter how well or poorly prepared for the ritual, rabbis and tutors are responsible for assuring a performance that seems competent—both for the sake of the ritual and for the sake of the student. At the same time, the student is—at least formally—not performing, but leading a congregation in worship. I explore the tension between these two goals in the third and final section of Chapter Four.

Chapter Five, “What are THEY Doing on the Bimah?” considers how congregations determine who can participate and in what capacity, as they balance the desire for inclusiveness with the desire to maintain traditional boundaries. A ritual enacted by a participant without legitimacy has, at best, no meaning and, at worst, verges on blasphemy. Part of maintaining the ritual’s authenticity requires those legitimate participants. However, over the past several decades, the increase in intermarried families joining congregations and increased desire for egalitarian religious practice have resulted in pressure to include non-Jews (in liberal congregations) and girls (in Orthodox congregations). This chapter describes the tension between the desire to be inclusive of community members and the desire to protect the authentic nature of the ritual.

Chapter Six, “Who Owns the Bimah, Anyway?” discusses the tension that results from integrating a peak event in the life of an individual family with the accepted time for congregational worship. This tension is further complicated by two denominational approaches to worship. In the traditional model, the primary congregational service takes place Saturday morning. In this case, leadership works to integrate the peak event of the BBM ritual into the regular Shabbat morning service. In the contemporary model, the primary congregational service takes place on Friday night and Saturday morning is turned over to the BBM service. In this case, simply problematizing the lack of congregant attendance becomes key. Thus, there are two different situations, both of which are further

12 Full-day Jewish schools teach this material as well, however none in the Bay Area are affiliated with congregations. There are distinct problems between families whose children attend day school and congregations in which the Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals take place. These problems arise when students learning their individual material and I discuss them briefly there.

13 While the Bay Area’s culture of pluralism leads most interviewees to accept a variety of solutions, that verbal respect may hide some strong feelings. The mother of one Bat Mitzvah student reported that a Chabad (Orthodox) rabbi, in an unguarded moment, said that her daughter’s reading Torah had no more validity than a pig’s reading Torah. While apparently disrespectful to the girl, his point was simply that there was no religious meaning to either act.
shaped by the number of Bar/Bat Mitzvah students in each year’s cohort and the
denominational service norms determining the shape of the negotiation.

In the Conclusion, I turn to the broader issues this study raises. Much analysis of
contemporary religion focuses on three areas: how belief is characterized and enacted
across religions and the religious spectrum, how congregations are constituted and what
composes congregational life, and how internal and external forces shape the congregation.
While Max Weber wrote of the competing interests of priests and laities, few scholars have
examined how these tensions play out in 21st century families and their congregations. In
particular, few studies have examined either how specific practices connect families to
congregations or how the needs of these families both complement and compete with the
needs of congregations and religious leaders.

The tensions discussed in Chapters Three through Six are specific to Bar/Bat
Mitzvah, but the interactions between congregation, participants, and ritual can be applied
to religious organizations more generally. Rituals take the sacred beliefs of a community
and, through investing meaning in words, actions, and objects, make these beliefs real, thus
reproducing the social and moral underpinnings of that community. In doing so, rituals
strengthen the sense of community, or cohesiveness, that draws community members
together. Rites of passage are some of the most potent rituals for communities, as they
move members of a given society from one status to another, thus symbolically ensuring
that the society survives to the next generation. In so doing, such rituals formally enact and
affirm those elements that are most important for the given society's identity and
reproduction.

American religion creates sites where people can invest public rituals with personal
meaning, as well as infuse personal rituals or symbols with public meaning. The Bar/Bat
Mitzvah is peculiarly individual and yet takes place in a community setting. Bar/Bat
Mitzvah are often peak events in the life of families and each Bar/Bat Mitzvah brings
together a group of people specific to that family. This group, which may or may not be
considered a community, acts as witness to the ritual, which then acquires meaning in the
lives of the individuals. These meanings can include family history, individual achievement,
dominant Jewish symbols and values, and American values, all of which can invest the
public ritual with deep personal meaning. Through this process, the public ritual itself is
affected: rituals can be appropriated, reinterpreted, or rejected by leaders or other
community members. This book provides a model by which to think about the interplay
between ritual as both personal and public.
Chapter Two

Context and Characters: Congregations, Ritual, and Participants

The tensions discussed in the following chapters shape and are shaped by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah itself, the congregational culture and composition, and the actions and attitudes of the participants: rabbis and tutors, parents and students. This chapter serves to introduce these three constituents, each of which contributes to shaping the tensions described in the chapters following. Chapter Three, “Variations on a Theme,” explores how the viewpoints that result from the different roles of the participants lead to different—and sometimes conflicting—understandings of the meaning of the ritual, which in turn shapes its content and execution. Chapter Four, “Process or Performance?” explores how the expectations for ritual content and participation set by the participants then shape preparation, training, and enactment. Chapter Five, “What are THEY doing on the Bimah?,” examines how the surrounding context affects congregational composition and the expectations of different congregants for inclusion, the ritual, simply by virtue of being a Jewish rite of passage, requires some limits to that inclusion. Chapter Six, “Whose Bimah is it, Anyway?,” examines the negotiation between congregational culture, participants, and ritual that shape the balance between private peak event and public worship service.

I begin by discussing the contexts that shape congregations and congregants: American religious practices, American Judaism, and the Bay Area ethos. With this background, I introduce the five congregations at which I observed, describing their demographic profiles and cultures, along with their diverse approaches to Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and ritual.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual is different from many other rites of passage (such as baptisms and funerals) which are distinct rituals unrelated to regular worship. By contrast, this rite of passage literally places the child in the role of leader of the congregation in a variation of the weekly Shabbat service. This second section begins by describing the weekly Shabbat (Sabbath) service and its two principal styles: traditional and contemporary. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual is built on the weekly service, but with important differences that result from both the age of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the peak nature of the ritual as rite of passage.

That ritual is created and enacted by people, each of whom has a different role; in the third section, I outline the roles and responsibilities of the parents, the rabbis and teachers, and the students themselves.14 Understanding what each role entails and the life experience, knowledge, and perspective that shape these roles is necessary in order to understand the different meanings each stakeholder attributes to the ritual.

From American Religion to American Judaism

American religious congregations share several characteristics (Chaves, 2005 p. 2). First, they are composed of two groups: lay and professional. Lay members choose to join

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14 A fourth group, the congregants not involved in preparation and enactment, will be discussed in Chapter Six, “Whose Bimah is it, Anyway?” These congregants have distinctly different goals and needs which are not directly related to preparation and enactment.
congregations with more or less knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the religion and with more or less comfort with the culture and customs of a given congregation.\textsuperscript{15} While congregations vary in how much, the American model assumes some degree of lay governance. Professionals lead the congregations, provide expert knowledge, and establish the overall approach to congregational life. Second, congregations gather at regular and (usually) predictable times and places to engage in communal activities. Some activities (for example, Christmas or Yom Kippur services) engage virtually all members, some engage only a persistent few, but, by definition, they are communal, not individual. Third, congregational activities fall into three categories: education, religious practice, and social. Educational activities act to reproduce the religion both for adults and children and in formal and informal modes. These activities include classes for children, adult choir practice, or the construction of an altar-cloth for a reading table. Religious practice may include regular services in the congregation’s building, but also home practice that relates to and deepens religious practice. Other activities act to build or maintain relationships among members. These can be purely social in nature, but can also include elements of education or practice (for example, choir can be both a reproductive and a social activity). Still others move outside the congregation and are ways to engage with non-congregants in cooperative activities or in proselytizing (Ammerman, 2005).

Synagogues—Jewish congregations—share these characteristics. As in other types of American congregations, families and individuals choose to join and participate or not, while lay leaders provide governance. Rabbis, like ministers, lead services and give sermons.\textsuperscript{16} Many synagogue websites present a full calendar that includes services and holiday celebrations, education for children and adults, and activities that include everything from singing to social action in the wider community. This model of congregational life both matches the American congregational model and is a good match for the traditional functions of the synagogue as a place where Jews gather to pray, learn, and socialize.\textsuperscript{17}

These similarities mask an important difference: the synagogue is a particularly Jewish space in which Jewish identity and peoplehood is expressed. It is tribal in ways that few Christian congregations are.\textsuperscript{18} Synagogues demonstrate this through use of Hebrew, through referring to a common past and future, through invoking connections to the greater Jewish people, and through encouraging individual modes of Jewish identity. Each

\textsuperscript{15} Although voluntary association is, of course, a distinctive characteristic of American society and American religion more generally, it is a better fit for some religions—Protestantism—than for others, of which Judaism is one. This mismatch between the dominant American value of “choosing” and the Jewish assumption of being “chosen” has, arguably, been responsible for the development of a distinctive American Judaism (as Eisen (1983), has argued convincingly).

\textsuperscript{16} Congregants often lead services in Orthodox and Conservative synagogues, however, responsibility for content and performance rests with each congregation’s rabbi.

\textsuperscript{17} There is an extensive literature on the development of the American synagogue throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In particular, this summary relies on (Sarna, 1986), (Sarna, 2004), (Wertheimer, 1995), and (Raphael, 2011). Additional literatures discuss each denomination’s history. These include: (Meyer, 1988), (Wertheimer, 2000), and (Gurock, 2009). In addition, each denomination hosts a website that provides Jewish material from a denominational perspective. These primary sources include: (Orthodox Union), (ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal), (Union for Reform Judaism), and (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism).

\textsuperscript{18} This is based on comparisons between synagogue and church websites presented by Munro and Nervik at the ASA, August 2013.
of these elements symbolically reminds Jews of the connection to people and history.\textsuperscript{19} The synagogue is also the place where Jewish communal life is enacted and shaped, where children are educated, and where life-cycle events are observed. Joining a synagogue, is largely a matter of financial commitment, predicated on the assumption that members be Jewish by birth or conversion (or, in the case of a family, that at least one parent be Jewish).\textsuperscript{20} Unlike in a true tribal society, American Jews choose to join congregations or not. The synagogue is thus both a Jewish space in a non-Jewish world and also a group that Jews may or may not choose to join. As a result, the congregation—the people who inhabit the synagogue—are caught between maintaining that space as Jewish and being open and inclusive in order to attract and compete for members.

Synagogues are shaped by a number of attributes—demographics, socioeconomic status, and location among them—but two stand out: size and denominational affiliation.\textsuperscript{21} Congregational size affects resources, both monetary and human, as well as the degree of bureaucracy necessary for the institution to function, while the size of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort determines the ritual’s effect on the congregation and the ability of the congregation to individualize Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and ritual.\textsuperscript{22} Denominations set expectations for relationship to authority—whether ascribed to God or tradition—or individual choice, to Jewish practice, and to the Jewish people. Denominational leadership sets policy, publishes prayerbooks, or siddurim, that shape the way the liturgy is enacted (whether by leaders or Bar/Bat Mitzvah student), trains Jewish professionals, and develops educational material for both children and adults.\textsuperscript{23} While each congregation is different, these policy and practice norms underlie congregational life.

**Different Approaches to American Judaism: Five Representative Congregations**

American Judaism has developed through attempting to reconcile two contradictory value systems. Judaism is an ethnic religion with group boundaries defined primarily by heritage. The resulting Jewish people are viewed as chosen by God for a special relationship that includes a set of obligations or commandments. This sense of “chosenness” sits in contrast to the particularly American expression of rationalism and individualism that characterizes modernity and leads to the assumption that all people

\begin{itemize}
  \item A case can be made that the key elements of Bar/Bat Mitzvah mirror those of the synagogue, replicating in time what synagogues do in space. The elements that define the space—identification with the Jewish people, linking present with past and future, and encouraging individual interpretation of central Jewish beliefs and practices—also define the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual, as students learn Hebrew, make statements of connection to past and future, and are encouraged to give voice to their individual interpretations of Jewish texts and values.
  \item The specific rules around Jewishness vary between and within denominations. I discuss this subject briefly in Chapter Five, “What are THEY doing on the Bimah?” which discusses limits to participation in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Despite the variation, almost all synagogues expect that Jewish heritage, whether by birth or conversion, will constitute some part of membership.
  \item Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Judaism fit the definition of denomination being “a large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy” (2014), however Jews use denomination, movement, and branch interchangeably, with the latter two being most common. In this work, I will use all three.
  \item I discuss size both in describing Beth Jeshurun below and in Chapter Six, “Whose Bimah is it, Anyway?”
  \item While the rise post-denominational Judaism is a matter of ongoing research and debate, even non-affiliated congregations define themselves in terms of denominations (Sales, 2011)
\end{itemize}
have the right to make choices and, in so doing, create themselves (Eisen, 1983). Different approaches to negotiating this contradiction resulted in the development of the three primary branches of Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. These movements originated in nineteenth century Germany, however, the interaction between American and Jewish values and cultures has shaped all three movements in distinctively American ways. During the twentieth century other approaches to Judaism have developed: Reconstructionist, Renewal, Humanist, and a “post-denominational” or independent approach. In the Bay Area, the three primary denominations, along with the independent approach, predominate.

These different approaches to Judaism have consequences for congregational practice. A modern Orthodox congregation will no longer be considered orthodox if men and women sit together in services. A Conservative congregation must keep a kosher kitchen to remain part of the Conservative movement. Reform congregations may differ in approach to keeping kosher, but must allow egalitarian worship. Whether a congregation’s relationship to a given movement is tight or loose, that movement’s directives shape congregational practice, including liturgical content and presentation. Though all Jewish prayer shares a common set of rubrics, how those are realized and interpreted varies from movement to movement as well. And, although the nature of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and training is similar across denominations, affiliation shapes each congregation’s approach to liturgy, texts, and interpretation.

In this section, I introduce the five representative congregations at which I observed. Each congregation is unique: shaped by region and location within that region, by past history and current demographics, by income and by internal politics. In choosing these congregations, I focused on the shared characteristics of size and denomination, using material from interviews with leadership and recent scholarship on congregations (Raphael, 2011) to gauge how representative each was with regard to both denominational philosophy and practice. To preserve confidentiality, names and details have been changed. For each congregation, I begin with an overview of the denomination each exemplifies, then describe relevant characteristics—religious, educational, and social programming, governance and the relationship between lay and professional leadership, the education program, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and enactment—in order to give a clear picture of the type of congregation represented.

Reform Sukkat Shalom: Making Choices

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24 The history, theology, and philosophy of both Modern Judaism and American Judaism are fields of study in themselves. However, Rethinking Modern Judaism (Eisen, 1999) still provides the best summary of how American Judaism developed and the underlying theological and philosophical issues that shaped that development.

25 The Bay Area includes congregations affiliated with the smaller denominations as well: Jewish Renewal, as its name implies, attempts to renew and universalize Jewish practice through new approaches, particularly mystical and meditative practices taken from Eastern religions. There are eight of these congregations in the Bay Area, several of which are fairly large (around 400 members). Had time allowed, I would have included this type of congregation in the study. Reconstructionist Judaism, following Mordecai Kaplan, rejects the concept of being chosen altogether, seeing Judaism primarily as a culture or civilization. There are four of these congregations in the Bay Area, with memberships under 150. Humanist Judaism sees Judaism as a people, not a religion and explicitly rejects the concept of a deity. There are three of these congregations in the Bay Area, with membership under 100 each.
American Reform Judaism incorporates individual choice into its structure, seeing Jewish law as a reservoir of fundamental practices and beliefs with which individual Jews choose to engage or ignore. In the latter part of the twentieth century, following a more general cultural trend, Reform Judaism adopted principles that encouraged more engagement with Jewish learning and practice. However, these practices are not a matter of obligation, but of choice, with each Jew adopting those practices which are individually meaningful, and each congregation determining what level of traditional adherence is appropriate in its services. This has resulted in a complex, pluralist approach summed up in the introduction to recent prayerbook, Mishkan T'filah (Tent of Prayer). “The challenge of a single liturgy is to be not only multi-vocal, but poly-vocal – to invite full participation at once, without conflicting with the keva [fixed] text. Jewish prayer invites interpretation; the left hand material was selected both for metaphor and theological diversity. The choices were informed by the themes of Reform Judaism and Life: social justice, feminism, Zionism, distinctiveness, human challenges” (Frishman, 2007, p. ix).

Written to explain the prayerbook, the quote speaks to the Reform approach to Judaism more generally: choosing words such as “invite” to reflect choice, offering multiple interpretations, and including secular as well as traditional Jewish sources. Although this approach assumes a range of practice and belief from fully engaged to minimal and all Reform congregations have members who choose to engage in intensive Jewish practice, rabbis described their congregants as minimally observant.

There are about 30 Reform congregations in the Bay Area with membership ranging from under 100 to around 2,500 families. These congregations are distinct in two ways. First, intermarriage rates range from 40-70% overall, with those rates even higher in families with young children. Second, the pluralistic and voluntaristic approach described above extends to congregational governance. While rabbis are the congregational leaders, decisions—including those regarding religious practice—are more likely to be shared with lay leadership than in Conservative or Orthodox congregations.

With a membership of about 300 families and a typical Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort of twenty-five students each year, Sukkat Shalom is typical of medium-sized Reform congregations. The congregation is led by Rabbi Doron, its founding rabbi. With many years of service, his voice and presence carries much weight, particularly with regard to religious services. A staff of around six (including Rabbi Doron, as well as the education director and cantor) oversees the supplementary school, adult education, different types of Shabbat religious services, and other types of programs. Volunteer committees take on governance (finance, facilities, communication) and plan social action, religious, and educational activities.

The congregation’s primary Shabbat service takes place on Friday evening. On Saturday mornings with no Bar/Bat Mitzvah, services take place informally in the library, attended by between ten and twenty regular attendees. This changes dramatically when there is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Then services take place in the ample sanctuary, with attendees including largely—but not exclusively—invited guests. These guests rarely participate, despite encouragement from the cantor.

Students from kindergarten through seventh grade (and Bar/Bat Mitzvah) attend supplementary religious school on Sundays and one weekday for a total of four and half hours and includes both Hebrew and Jewish studies, with the older grades more focused on Bar/Bat Mitzvah skills and values.
Bar/Bat Mitzvah students lead about half of the service, read twelve to fifteen verses of the weekly Torah portion, chant four or five verses from the associated Haftarah (a section of the Prophets), and discuss the Torah portion in a brief speech.26 Students begin to learn this material about six months prior to the day, first meeting weekly with Cantor Waldman meeting to solidify their parts in the service and learn Haftarah, then adding meetings with Rabbi Doron to learn Torah and develop the Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk. Bar/Bat Mitzvah families also meet together three times during the year to discuss parental roles with regard to BBM. Finally, students have the option of participating in a program that encourages individual students to try out different types of Jewish practice: learning about personal Jewish history, doing charity, and practicing ritual behavior.

Orthodox Adat Yitzhak: Encouraging Torah Judaism

Both Reform and Orthodox Judaism assume a unique relationship between Jews and God as defined by Torah, however Orthodox Judaism begins with the absolute authority of Jewish law, as interpreted through history in rabbinic texts to create a complex set of rules called halakhah.27 While Orthodox Jews account for a little more than one-tenth of the Jewish population in the US, their synagogue affiliation is much higher than that of Jews who identify with more liberal denominations, accounting for around twenty percent of those who belong to congregations.28 Unlike Reform Judaism, which exists as one denomination with seminaries, a publishing house, and a governing body, Orthodox Judaism encompasses a wide range of belief and behavior, from the ultra-Orthodox Jews who claim to reject modernity completely to the Modern Orthodox who, like Reform and Conservative Jews, attempt to reconcile modernity with Judaism, from Jews whose origins are in Eastern Europe to those whose origins are Syria, Iran, or Spain. However, modern Orthodoxy, accounts for somewhat more than two-thirds of this branch of Judaism and, like Reform negotiates with the secular, although it structures engagement with the secular world around Jewish practice.29

Relative to other parts of the country, the Bay Area’s Orthodox population is small, consisting of 18 Orthodox congregations, which range in size from under 50 to around 200,

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26 While most congregations expect students to chant Torah, Rabbi Doron feels that the chanting inhibits an understanding of what the text means and so his students read, rather than chant, from the Torah.

27 To account for the complicated set of rules that comprise rabbinic Judaism, during the first centuries of the Common Era, the meaning of Torah was expanded beyond the Hebrew Bible to encompass both Written Law (the Hebrew Bible) and Oral Law, which included rabbinic and later writings and commentary. Orthodox Judaism says God gave the whole Torah, both Written and Oral, to the Jews and so they are bound to follow the resulting laws or break that covenant.


29 For example, one Orthodox congregant described one Friday evening which coincided with July 4. Since Sabbath begins at sundown, the observance of an American holiday and a Jewish holiday coincided. She described celebrating both the evening meal and the fireworks with a group of nearby friends. To do this, her family brought their potluck contribution in the early afternoon, then walked to the neighbor’s home instead of driving.
with 10 falling into the parameters of this study. Although both Sephardic and Karaite congregations exist, most identify as modern Orthodox.

In theory, Orthodox practice dictates the shape of everyday life, from food to clothing to observance, practices that include observing the dietary laws of kashrut, emphasizing observance of Shabbat and holidays, and distinct gender roles. Because of its encompassing nature, it requires a community of close neighbors to reinforce and support practice, a difficult proposition in the Jewishly dilute Bay Area. As a result, Bay Area Orthodox congregations include families who do necessarily observe Orthodox practice, but affiliate because of an attachment to the rabbi, to the nature of the community, or because they enjoy the nature of a stricter practice.

With a membership of about 200 families and a Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort of about twelve students each year, Adat Yitzhak is representative of the Bay Area’s Modern Orthodox congregations. In addition to the charismatic and energetic Rabbi Teitlebaum, there are two assistants who help lead and teach, and an administrator. The synagogue houses a large preschool and there is an active adult education program but, because most Orthodox families send their children to Jewish day schools, there is no supplementary school. As at Sukkat Shalom, volunteer committees take on governance (finance, facilities, communication) and plan social and social action activities. However, Rabbi Teitlebaum is solely responsible for religious practices and educational decisions.

Adat Yitzhak’s primary Shabbat service takes place on Saturday morning, with a typical attendance of 120 or more. Orthodox Judaism assigns distinctly different roles to men and women, which has implications for service participation. Services at Adat Yitzhak are largely lay-led by men only and men and women sit separately during religious services. The service is highly participatory, with both men and women reciting the prayers and following the texts.

Rabbi Teitlebaum individualizes Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and participation, leading to a wide variation in what students do. However, most chant some Torah and all of the Haftarah, which they learn this material from an approved tutor. Most students also give a speech on the Torah portion or a lesson on a specific topic (for example, the role of the priestly class—Cohens and Levis—in contemporary Judaism). Students study with Rabbi Teitlebaum or his wife (in the case of girls) for several months to prepare these speech. When a Bar Mitzvah takes place, there is little change in the service content or participation. A Bat Mitzvah, on the other hand, does not take place during the main service. The complications that result are discussed in Chapter Five, “What are THEY doing on the Bimah?”

Conservative B’nai Aaron: Claiming the Center

While Reform Judaism integrates Judaism into American mainstream culture, and Orthodox Judaism emphasizes Jewish practice and belief, the Conservative movement balances the two systems, arguing that while Jews are chosen, Judaism exists at each moment within differing historical contexts and these contexts provide some flexibility in

30 “Appendix A: Methodology” discusses categories of Bay Area Orthodox congregations and compares that Bay Area and national populations.
31 This excludes Chabad institutions, which do not fall within the parameters of this work, as they are not structured as congregations, but as missionary organizations.
32 Families of children who do not attend day school are responsible for preparing their children for Bar/Bat Mitzvah training.
Jewish practice. Conservative Jewish practice sometimes looks like Reform practice; sometimes like Orthodox. For example, both Reform and Conservative Judaism embrace egalitarian practice, but both Orthodox and Conservative Judaism reject “equilineal” heritage. In other respects—use of Hebrew, strict observance of dietary laws and Sabbath restrictions, Conservative congregations tend to be half-way between Reform and Orthodox, encouraging stricter observance than does Reform, but allowing more lenient observance than do the Orthodox.

There are 15 Conservative synagogues in the Bay Area, representing about 20% of the congregations (as compared to 23% nationally), and they range in size from 300 to 700 member families. B’nai Aaron is a Conservative congregation comprised of around 400 families and with a Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort averaging 20 students each year. A staff of around six (including two rabbis, the education director, and a rabbinic assistant who also serves as Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor) oversees the supplementary school, adult education, different types of Shabbat religious services, and other types of programs. A large volunteer board governs the congregation. The congregation is led by two rabbis—Rabbi Rosen, the senior rabbi who has served the congregation for more than two decades, and Rabbi Josephson, a young rabbi who appeals to younger families. While the congregation is proud of its outreach to young adults and young families, older families or couples still predominate.

The primary Shabbat service takes place on Saturday morning and, as at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, is largely lay-led, although the service leaders here are both men and women. The rabbis alternate in introducing the Torah and Haftarah reading, and, toward the conclusion of service one or the other delivers a d’var Torah, or commentary on the Torah portion. Around 120 people attend each Saturday morning. As at Adat Yitzhak, the congregation participates actively in the service, and most age groups are represented, including small children.

Students at B’nai Aaron study for six months prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service with the congregation’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor, who is responsible for all preparation except for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk. Here, unlike at most congregations, the rabbis do not work with students individually, but teach difficult topics (such as the Jewish response to death) that are covered in the seventh grade curriculum. Student develop their Bar/Bat Mitzvah talks with the assistance of congregational mentors who meet with the students several times. In addition to the speech, the student and mentor are given the opportunity to develop an ongoing relationship. For the ritual, Bar/Bat Mitzvah students are expected to lead some sections of the Shabbat morning service, chant around fifteen verses of the Torah portion and all of the Haftarah, introduce both Torah and Haftarah, and deliver a brief Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk. In many congregations, this speech replaces that usually given by the rabbi, but at B’nai Aaron, the rabbi prepares and gives a speech as well, so that the student displays his or her learning, but the congregation can also hear a more mature interpretation of the texts.

Independent Or Hadash: Enacting Jewish Pluralism

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33 As discussed in the introduction, this is the idea that Judaism can be transmitted through either father or mother, not through mother alone.
34 This has not been borne out in practice. Families which are close to one of the mentors remain close; families which are not do not become close.
Finally, independent congregations draw their practices from all movements, encouraging members to “take practices from the full spectrum of Jewish tradition, and look for the challenge of building their own traditions within the broadest parameters of traditional Judaism.” Although these congregations incorporate elements from different denominations, they emphasize the responsibility of the individual to develop a personal Jewish practice, which—both theologically and practically—results in these congregations being most similar to Reform in observance and congregants. There are twelve independent congregations in the Bay Area, representing about 16% of the total (as compared to 5% nationally) and membership ranges from 100-400 families. As one might expect, without denominational guidelines, these congregations tend to be more idiosyncratic than affiliated congregations, which made choosing a “typical” congregation difficult. The congregation I chose, Or Hadash, is typical of independent congregations in the way that it takes from different strands of Judaism, but also has a Bar/Bat Mitzvah program that is more intensive than the typical Bar/Bat Mitzvah program and explicitly includes parents in this preparation.

Or Hadash has a membership of around 300 families with a typical Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort of 25 students each year. Led by Rabbi Melmed, a rabbi who incorporates Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox practice, the congregation prides itself on its high level of participation in all aspects of congregational life.

Most congregants who attend services do so on Friday night, but Rabbi Melmed holds weekly Torah study and some of the congregants who attend also stay for Shabbat morning services. The rabbi encourages lay leadership and congregants often chant Torah or lead portions of the service, a practice more common in Conservative or Orthodox congregations.

Rabbi Melmed has invested much time and effort on developing an intensive Bar/Bat Mitzvah program, which requires substantial effort from both parents and student. Students must attend regular services and keep a service journal, individualize the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, write a booklet that interprets the Hebrew texts read, as well as translate a prayer, and write a separate speech that introduces a discussion the student leads. Families are required to attend an eight-session family class that not only prepares the whole family for Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but also includes more general information about Jewish values and practice. During the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service itself, students lead most of the service, chant around twenty lines of Torah and all of the Haftarah, and deliver the speech which leads into the aforementioned discussion.

Large Beth Jeshurun: Judaism on a Large Scale

The four congregations above represent differences in denominational practice. Reform Beth Jeshurun represents the effect of size. Congregational size (and institutional size more generally) affects the nature of rules, relationships, access to leadership, and institutional bureaucracy. While it was not possible, due to time constraints, to observe at a very small congregation, interviews made clear that these congregations tended to be more idiosyncratic in practice, engage a higher proportion of congregants (although a lower total number), and encourage more personal relationships with the leaders. By contrast, very

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35 This quote encloses a compilation/summary taken from the websites of several different independent Jewish congregations, all of which have similar philosophies to this paraphrase.
large congregations have no choice but to develop policies, schedules, and lines of authority to keep track of different needs and activities.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and enactment is a particularly sharp example of how these large congregations negotiate the needs of a large population. While all congregations must manage Bar/Bat Mitzvah logistics, these problems are more pressing in large congregations. In very small congregations, ongoing personal relationships mean that students’ progress can be tracked informally and organically. However, as overall size and number of Bar/Bat Mitzvah students increases, both competing needs of different populations increases, while the ability to track students’ progress becomes more difficult.

In these large congregations, the professional leadership is responsible for organizing and tracking students’ progress. On one hand, this can result in smooth performances; on the other, families can feel like, as one parent said, “cogs in a machine.” There are six or seven (depending on where the line is drawn) very large Reform congregations in the Bay Area, each of which has developed extensive and varied programs for Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. From these, I chose Beth Jeshurun, a very large Reform congregation with a membership of well over 1,000 families and a Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort of about 80 students a year, equal to the combined total of the other four congregations discussed. It is served by several rabbis of different ages and with different styles, skills, and responsibilities, along with a large and expert staff. Decisions are made by the staff, with input from the board, although the large pool of congregants also can generate and enact new ideas.

As at most Reform congregations, Beth Jeshurun’s primary Shabbat services take place on Friday night. With substantial resources, the congregation offers several services to serve different interests: in addition to the ongoing "contemporary" service, the congregation offers special services for young families and young adults.

Saturday morning services are filled largely, but not exclusively, with Bar/Bat Mitzvah family and guests. Here, because there are more students than weeks in the year, the congregation faces the problem of allocating space. Some large congregations solve this problem with Bar/Bat Mitzvah in which two (or more) students share the time and space. Beth Jeshurun has enough space to hold two services and so, on many Saturday mornings, there are two (or even three) Shabbat services taking place.

Like Or Hadash, Beth Jeshurun has an elaborate Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation program. This begins eighteen months prior to the day and includes family classes that explain parts of the service, short classes to learn essential prayers, and eight sessions with one of the rabbis to work on an extensive speech, as well as an introduction to both Torah and Haftarah readings. Students are expected to chant around twelve verses of Torah and a few from Haftarah, lead one or two central prayers, and deliver their speech.

Each of these congregations represents a different approach to Jewish life in general and Bar/Bat Mitzvah in particular. However, all must answer similar questions: How are students prepared? What is the content of the ritual? How are the boundaries around participation drawn? How do the different goals of the ritual and Shabbat morning service complement or conflict with each other? The ways that congregations answer these questions depends on these different approaches.

**From Weekly Service to Peak Event: Constructing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ritual**
Most rites of passage consist of rituals distinct from the regular religious practice, but Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual explicitly incorporates (or is incorporated by) that regular practice. While coming-of-age rituals in other religions emphasize the new adult status, they do not focus on mastering and leading the regular service. Nor do other Jewish rites-of-passage incorporate the service to this degree; all have separate rituals. By contrast, Bar/Bat Mitzvah emphasizes the individual Jew’s ability, responsibility, and right to lead the service. The result—that on this day a child leads the community in prayer—is a powerful and profoundly democratizing event. But a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, precisely because it is a rite-of-passage, is not simply a community religious service but at once more—a peak event—and less—a service led by a teen. In the following chapters I look at how congregations manage the resulting tensions. Here, I show the relationship between the two services, so the context for what Bar/Bat Mitzvah students do becomes clear.

In principle, a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual can take place during any service during which Torah is read. As a matter of practice, almost all Bay Area rituals take place as part of the Shabbat morning service, with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student assuming all or part of an adult leader’s responsibilities. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual has the potential to change the nature of the weekly service (or vice versa), a subject explored in depth in Chapter Six, “Whose Bimah is it, Anyway?”

More generally, the relationship between weekly service and life-cycle ritual underlies the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the congregation and explicating that relationship is the purpose of this section. I begin by discussing the nature of the Shabbat morning service and how different denominations enact its liturgy, textual readings, and interpretation of those texts. All denominations share similarities in structure and essential content, but these are expressed in two quite different modes that I label traditional and contemporary. Using that liturgical background, I turn to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service itself, showing how it derives from the Shabbat morning liturgy, keeping some central elements, modifying others, and inserting still others.

The Shabbat Morning Liturgy and D’var Torah (Interpretation of the Torah Portion)

Like Muslim and Catholic prayer, Jewish prayer is highly structured. Whether recited on a weekday or Shabbat, in the morning or evening, it repeats the same sections, with minor variations that depend on time of day and day of the week. On Shabbat, this

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36 Some can be incorporated into a service—for example, a bris or baby-naming might take place within the service, but might also take place at the family’s home. Marriage and death are acknowledged within a prayer service, but weddings and funerals are never part of that service.

37 More explicitly, Bar/Bar Mitzvah’s literal meaning, Son/Daughter of the Commandments means that the child assumes responsibility for these commandments. The mitzvah, or commandment of reciting the blessings before and after reading Torah has come to act as a synecdoche for all mitzvot. To say these blessings, the Torah needs to be read, which happens during Torah services on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. (There are exceptions to this; in some Orthodox communities, wearing tefillin is the symbolic mitzvah, but even in these communities, that observance may be accompanied or followed by chanting the Torah blessings.)

38 Rabbis discussed other options, but all concluded that families rejected Bar/Bat Mitzvah events that took place on Mondays or Thursdays as not special enough, while rabbis rejected the Saturday afternoon service as “inauthentic.”

39 For example, every service includes a prayer in praise of creation, the wording of which varies depending on time of day. In the morning, this prayer lauds the creation of light, in the evening, it lauds the approach of evening.
daily service changes to incorporate the distinctive qualities of the Sabbath: the weekly Torah reading and accompanying Haftarah (reading from the Prophets) are chanted and explained, and a brief additional (Musaf) section concludes the service. Afternoon services (typically held only in Orthodox congregations) include a brief selection from the next week’s Torah portion. Regardless of presentation style and interpretation, the Shabbat morning service consists of four sections common across denominations, as well as the aforementioned Musaf service.

The liturgical structure is captured in the siddur, or prayerbook. The liturgy within these books has been developed over the course of several centuries. Over the past century, the rabbinical wings of different denominations have developed variations on these prayerbooks that include the Hebrew, English translations and (increasingly) transliteration, and interpretations from different sources. In addition, some congregations, particularly independent, draw on a variety of sources to create their own siddurs, as was the case at Or Hadash. Comparing these books shows both the common thread running through Jewish liturgy, but also how the authors of each book engage with and interpret Judaism in the American context.

Conservative and Orthodox congregations both follow the traditional model, in which the congregation’s primary service takes place Saturday morning. Services last for most of the morning and are almost entirely davened in Hebrew, with each of the four sections taken as a unit, so that the service leader is responsible for leading a complete set of prayers, rather than one or two. Congregations following this model chant the complete set of weekly texts (as opposed to an excerpt), and explanation and interpretations generally discuss issues raised by the weekly portion. Orthodox rabbis use traditional commentaries to explicate the text and relate it to current issues, while Conservative rabbis may bring in other sources as well. In these congregations, it is common (although not universal) for congregants to lead the service and chant Torah; the rabbi’s primary role is to teach.

The largest distinction between the traditional model and the contemporary model, followed by Reform and similar congregations, is in the timing of the primary service. In congregations following the contemporary model, these services take place on Friday night.

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40 This section relies on the prayerbooks, or siddurim, of the different denominations, as well as the original siddur developed by Or Hadash, under Rabbi Melmed’s guidance. These include: (Frishman, 2007), (Hammer, 2003), (Harlow, 1985), (Leiber, 2001), (The Koren Siddur, 2011), and (Scherman, 2003). In addition, there is a large literature discussing Jewish prayer from both academic and instructional perspectives. The following works have informed this discussion: (Elbogen, 1993), (Idelsohn, 1932), (Hammer, 1994), and (Reif, 1995).

41 These are a section of preliminary prayers, two sub-sections that recapitulate Jews relationship to God, the Torah service, and brief concluding prayers.

42 In “Setting boundaries; building bridges: Liturgy as Interpretation,” a talk given at the 2012 SSSR, I explore this topic, examining the different ways that Modern Orthodox and Reform prayerbooks attempt to present complex material in order to engage attendees and bridge the gap between American and Jewish values.

43 Davening refers to the style of prayer in which each individual chants the prayers, some silently and some out loud, at his or her own pace, often accompanied by rhythmic rocking back and forth or side to side. The service leader is responsible for keeping the congregation together, which is done. To do this, the leader chants the initial line of each prayer aloud, quietly and quickly reads the middle, and then chants the final line aloud. This requires considerable skill on the part of both leader and congregants.
Relatively few congregants attend Saturday morning services and in some congregations, these services take place only for Bar/Bat Mitzvah services.\(^{44}\)

The contemporary model includes the same four sections that comprise the service as does the traditional model. However, within that structure, some prayers have been eliminated from the liturgy, while others have been abridged or modified. Additional English texts offer a variety of perspectives on the Hebrew prayers: both literal and interpretive translations, additional reading from Jewish and secular source, and interpretations that filter Jewish values and practices through the lens of dominant American culture. In this model, the four sections are not necessarily treated as units led by one leader, but as individual prayers. Services are usually led by a rabbi, often accompanied by a cantor, rather than by congregants. Where attendees at traditional services daven, attendees at contemporary services read responsively, chant together, or sing accompanied by instrumental music.

Although both traditional and contemporary models share the same structure and central prayers, attendees who are used to one style or the other may notice only the differences. A Jew who is used to the traditional service may feel that a contemporary service is nothing more than “Judaism-lite.” On the other hand, a Jew who is used to the contemporary service may feel that a traditional service is nothing more than rote repetition. Despite these differences in presentation, all services, whether traditional or contemporary, follow the same liturgy, with the climax of the Shabbat morning service being the section when the Torah is read, commonly called the Torah service.

The Torah is viewed as a sacred representation of Jewish narrative, history, and relationship to God, encapsulating the fundamental narratives, values, and practices of Judaism in a handwritten scroll. Reading from and hearing the words from the scroll are incumbent on Jews as a sacred obligation, and all denominations consider reading from the scroll to be necessary to the integrity of the Shabbat service. The Torah service symbolically recreates God’s giving the Torah to the Jewish people. As such, it is a physical, sensory experience that includes movement and touch, sight and sound.

The d’var Torah (literally “word of Torah”), a talk that discusses the text, is a related focus of the service. These talks most often address questions the text raises, link the meanings of the ancient text to concerns of American Jews, or use the text as a way to exhort listeners to action.

Each of these parts: leading different prayers or sections of the service, chanting Torah and Haftarah, and delivering a modified d’var Torah have been incorporated into the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual, so that in many ways the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service is simply another iteration of a Shabbat morning service. Even in congregations where the only Shabbat morning service is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the ritual takes the form of the Shabbat service. However, because it is a rite-of-passage, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service also adds special moments or modifies some elements that acknowledge that purpose. In the next section, I look at the relationship between weekly service and Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual.

Shabbat Morning service to Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual

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\(^{44}\) In 2007, The URJ, the leadership of the Reform movement, put forward the Shabbat Initiative, an attempt to move the primary Shabbat service to Saturday morning. During my research, only a few Reform congregations were attempting to make the switch; most were continuing as before.
Despite the integration of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service into Shabbat morning services, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a rite-of-passage and, whether part of a traditional or contemporary Shabbat service, every Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual contains moments that deviate from that service, often incorporating family members or personal statements by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and/or parents. These might include:

- parents (or other relative) presenting a prayer shawl, or tallit, to their child;
- parents and grandparents handing the Torah from one generation to the next;
- parents giving a speech or blessing to their child;
- parents releasing the child from their (religious) responsibility;
- students thanking guests for being present, teachers and rabbis for teaching them, and parents for support;
- congregational representatives presenting gifts to the student
- rabbis’ speaking to or blessing the child.

These moments are important, both because they matter to the family, but also because their presentation affects the tone of the service. Both topics are discussed in later chapters; here I simply note their presence as elements that differentiate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service from the Shabbat service.

Although they mark the service as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual, these moments are not its essence, which is defined by what the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student does. In almost all circumstances, these tasks include chanting the blessings for taking the Torah out of the ark, reading and interpreting Torah, tasks that date from the early development of the ritual and symbolically demonstrate the students’ new adult status within the Jewish community (Marcus, 2005). Over the latter half of the twentieth century, the extent of service participation and the amount of Torah chanted by Bar/Bat Mitzvah students has increased.45 As with the regular Shabbat morning service, expectations for Bar/Bat Mitzvah students are similar across denominations—students chant Torah and Haftarah, 46 lead one or more prayers, and deliver a talk on the Torah portion—but their enactment reflects different approaches to Judaism more generally.

Congregations following the traditional model consider themselves bound to greater or lesser degree by Jewish law and so expect the service structure to dictate what students do. For example, students minimally chant the three or four verses that end the weekly Torah portion and lead into the Hafarah. The weekly portion is divided into seven sections and students who chant additional verses must add a complete section, rather than, as would be the case with the contemporary model, simply adding a few extra verses. Similarly, many students lead the ending section of the section. Students who lead more prayers must prepare an entire additional section, rather than adding one or two individual prayers.

By contrast, congregations that follow the contemporary model encourage an individual approach to Judaism (albeit one rooted in Jewish tradition). Thus, students are

45 There is no good explanation for this increase, although I would speculate that it results from increased anxiety from both folk and elite regarding diminishing Jewish practice and identity.
46 In the past few years, I have had reports of some congregations omitting Haftarah as an expectation. This change speaks to the moving target nature of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. While the event remains central, the ritual’s content reflects responses to the larger tensions.
encouraged to choose a set of verses from Torah (ranging from 12-25) and Haftarah (ranging from 6-12) that speak to them in some way. Through choosing the section read, some rabbis say, the student comes to own the text and by extension, Jewish identity.\footnote{I discuss this subject in Chapter Four, “Process or Performance?”} Congregations following the \textit{contemporary} model vary more in the prayers they expect students to lead. Some expect the student to lead the entire service; others expect only one or two important prayers.\footnote{For examples, most expect students to recite the “Shema,” Judaism’s defining prayer.}

Whether following \textit{contemporary} or \textit{traditional} models, rabbis and tutors spoke in similar ways about encouraging students to take ownership of the material and engaging students through individual expression. The \textit{contemporary} model encouraged this individuality, as the rabbi of a large Reform congregation describes:

> We meet with the kids nine months in advance. [We ask them] some questions like: "What are three main parts of the Torah portion that interest you and why? Which one part would you choose to talk about? What interests you about it? What thoughts do you have about it?" I have them read the Torah portion with their parents and pick their twelve verses and talk about what that means.

But it is not only the \textit{contemporary} model that encourages students to own Jewish tradition through making choices. Orthodox Rabbi Teitlebaum describes his philosophy as follows:

> I explain to families [that their] child becomes a Bat or Bar Mitzvah by waking up on their twelfth or thirteenth birthday respectively. What are we going to do to make this transition into adulthood meaningful? That’s when we talk: Here are different things that can be done during services, here are different things that could be done teaching Torah, and let’s look at it like a buffet… I want them to take into account two things: their interests, and what they’re going to keep doing through their lives.

Rabbi Teitlebaum carefully preserves his understanding of the service’s integrity, yet his philosophy quite closely mirrors that of the Reform rabbi with regard to forming Jewish identity through making Jewish choices. The Reform rabbi seems to offer more choices, but these too are within a carefully defined service structure; it is simply a structure into which a particular set of choices has been incorporated. A similar balance between fixed structure and free choice takes place in developing both \textit{d’var Torah} and Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk. While teachers share the desire for their students to think, use logic, reason, and (sometimes) Jewish sources to develop an original speech, how this is put into practice differs between the two models.

\textit{From \textit{D’var Torah} to Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk}

Across all congregations, Bar/Bat Mitzvah students give talks that largely mimic the standard “\textit{d’var Torah}” of the conventional service, analyzing the text and often quoting commentaries or other texts to draw some moral lesson for the present. Yet, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk differs from the adult \textit{d’var Torah} as well. Students often use personal anecdotes featuring school or sports as ways to relate the Torah portion to their lives, use the talk to formally commit to Jewish continuity or refer to their new status, and discuss
their “mitzvah projects.” As is appropriate at a life-cycle ritual—but not a congregational service—students have long lists of people to thank for their accomplishment. Rabbis had remarkably strong and divided feelings about the place of the thank you list. Some rabbis insisted that students must include them to acknowledge those who helped them reach the event. Other rabbis (from all denominations) distinguished between the private and public faces of the event, saying that thank yous should take place at the party or at the end of services. As one Conservative rabbi said, “There are no thank yous here. I explain to the child: you’re introducing the Torah reading, background and introduction for what we’re about to read. Thank yous are for the end of services.” This division points out the tension between the student’s role as adult service leader and celebrant of a peak event.

While Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Shabbat services roughly follow either the traditional and contemporary patterns of their synagogues, the style and length of Bar/Bat Mitzvah talks are surprisingly diverse, representing individual rabbis’ personal expectations for their students, rather than denominational norms.

For example, Rabbi Doron of Sukkat Shalom expects short speeches from his students: “I always tell them it’s not a long sermon, it’s just three paragraphs long. The first paragraph they take something of interest to them, either from their Haftarah or their Torah portion, and they describe it in their own words. The second paragraph, they have to relate it to themselves in some way. The third paragraph is thanking everybody. So it’s just a simple drash.”

Other rabbis require more complex speeches. Another Reform rabbi expects his students to use the speech “to learn, to teach, and to share a part of themselves. It’s usually between four and eight pages double-spaced, fourteen-point type. They work on that with me. Some kids completely do it on their own, some kids need a lot of help….it’s a big writing project for them and it’s really how I connect with the kids.”

While style and length vary with rabbis’ individual opinions, how the text is interpreted follows distinct denominational patterns in both d’var Torah and Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk. Congregations following the traditional model tend to reference the Jewish corpus of texts and draw conclusions based more on communal obligation. Congregations following the contemporary model incorporate secular texts and experience, in addition to Jewish source material, and draw conclusions that are more individual. The following comparison between talks given at an Orthodox and a Reform congregation illustrate the differences.

Ethan’s family are members of Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, while Jeffrey’s family attends Reform Beth Jeshurun. Ethan met with Rabbi Teitlebaum every other week for the three months preceding his Bar Mitzvah to develop his talk, while Jeffrey met with Rabbi Young, one of the congregation’s four rabbis, for eight sessions, a similar amount of time. Both rabbis expect substantial work and thought from students that result in talks that summarize the text, expound on a question the text raises, then relate that question to their lives. However, both sources and thought process show denominational differences. Orthodox Ethan uses Hebrew rather than English names when referring to Biblical characters, cites only customary Jewish sources as commentaries. Reform Jeffrey uses more

49 These are social action or charity projects taken on by students to broaden the scope of “adulthood.” All congregations encouraged students to engage in some activity; only in a few cases were these projects discussed as part of the speech.
English, and his interpretation assumes personal choice rather than obligation to God as the overriding value, as comparing their two conclusions shows.

Ethan says that: “Being a Bar Mitzvah means a lot of the obvious things about becoming an adult in a community. But honestly, what it means most to me, is that I can be needed and then I can fulfill that need...[to be] the last piece of the puzzle and hop in and fill that blank. I also look at my Bar Mitzvah as a base of a ladder so that I can climb higher in knowledge and might.” This conclusion reflects the more intensive Orthodox practice and obligation, where daily services do require a certain number of adult men. It also reflects the belief (stressed by rabbis and teachers) that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is not an end in itself.

For Ethan, Bar Mitzvah can summarized as obligation to the community and Judaism. Not so for Jeffrey, who discusses a different kind of responsibility in his conclusion. His portion includes the episode of the Golden Calf and in his speech, Jeffrey described the nature of Moses’ leadership, concluding that Moses had taken responsibility for his own decisions and was a model for Jeffrey in the future. Jeffrey uses this lesson to conclude:

If I have learned anything from my Torah portion, it is that in order to be able to make the right decisions you have to know whether you are a leader or a follower. And if a leader, what type of leader you are. You can be somebody who makes decision for the benefit of yourself, or someone who makes decisions for the best interest of others. This can sometimes mean that you take the more difficult route—up the mountain—and maybe twice!

Unlike Ethan, Jeffrey does not mention community obligation, but draws a lesson from the text that speaks to his individual behavior in the future. Though these speeches share similar forms and discuss similar types of questions, the different interpretations—here expressed by Ethan as responsibility to participate in Jewish community practice and by Jeffrey as a responsibility “to make the right decisions”—show similar types of difference between contemporary and traditional models as do the services. However, for both models, the connection between the congregational service and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual is clear.

While the weekly service is—by its nature—routine, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual requires substantial preparation. Each of the different participants has a different role; it is through their interactions that the tensions are negotiated. The next section turns from ritual to the people enacting that ritual.

Roles and Responsibilities: Rabbis and Teachers, Students and Parents

The considerable amount of work necessary to accomplish the Bar/Bat Mitzvah event—which includes preparation, ritual, and celebration following—is often taken for granted. Each of the participants plays a different part and has a different perspective of the ritual. In this section, I describe the responsibilities and the challenges of the different roles, which lead to different perspectives regarding the ritual. While all participants have a stake in ensuring the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is successful, the student’s role in accomplishing the
ritual is different from the parents’ role and both of these differ from that of rabbi or tutor.  

Rabbis bear overall responsibility for the congregation, interpret denominational policy, and place the congregation in relationship to the secular world. Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and enactment is only one part of these responsibilities, although not unimportant: rabbis are expected to ensure that each Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual is enacted smoothly and competently. While all rabbis delegate some amount of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process to education directors and tutors, they bear final responsibility both for the ritual and its effect on the congregation. Students are expected to absorb and relate to the material as guided by leadership. They are hardly blank slates, coming to the process with attitudes, knowledge, and aptitudes that shape their response. While the student is the focus of the ritual and the rabbis and teachers ensure that it will happen, it is the parents’ role that is pivotal in determining both whether a Bar/Bat Mitzvah event will take place, how children are managed, and what kind of major family event takes place. Because of their key role as the initiators and final decision-makers in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah event, I begin this section by discussing their role in some depth, then turn to rabbis and teachers, and lastly the students themselves.

Parents: Managing the Child; Planning an Event

Parents are the keystone of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. They—not leadership and not their children—make the final decisions about if and when to join a congregation. They set the overall tenor for family practice of Judaism, determining whether to attend Shabbat services or play soccer, whether to eat or abstain from shrimp, and how to observe which Jewish holidays. In addition to establishing the relationship to Judaism and Jewish practice, they choose whether to join a congregation and in what ways they will participate in congregational life. These relationships are often complicated. Parents have different childhood experiences of Judaism—or, in the case of a non-Jewish parent—no experience at all. Parental backgrounds lead to different and sometimes conflicting attitudes toward their family’s Jewish practice, which may also differ from attitudes toward congregation, leadership, and other members. Because of the key role parents play in both initiating Bar/Bat Mitzvah and ensuring it occurs in each family, I spend some time discussing the responsibilities they have in common and the three most important factors determining how they approach and fulfill these roles.

Whatever the family dynamics, once parents commit to joining a congregation and ensuring their child has a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, they invest substantial time, money, and effort—not only in the year of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but for several years preceding.

50 While rabbis have a broader purview than do teachers, because the teachers’ concerns are a subset of rabbis’ concerns, I include them in the section.
51 Congregants constitute a final set of actors, but because their concerns are largely limited to the public or private nature of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, I discuss them in Chapter Six, “Whose Bimah is it, Anyway?”
52 Parents’ role in their children’s Jewish education is discussed extensively in Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice (Wertheimer, 2007). In particular, Kress (2007) looks at the different attitudes parents bring to their children’s supplementary school education and the effect these attitudes have on their children.
53 The Bar Mitzvah Bargain assumes that parents join congregations only when they must and leave immediately following their last child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah. There is some evidence to support this (Wertheimer, 2007), but while there is certainly a correlation between Bar/Bat Mitzvah and families’ leaving congregations, the reasons for that correlation are complicated, a subject discussed in the Conclusion.
Congregations have not inconsequential expectations. Most require that families be members for two to five years prior to Bar/Bat Mitzvah, an expensive proposition, so that the children can learn basic Hebrew and about Judaism and, ideally, so that families can be integrated into Jewish community life. During this time, children attend supplementary religious school twice or three times a week during the school year. In the Bay Area, few can walk to synagogue, so parents must arrange transportation, often carpooling. Students are assigned Hebrew homework and parents may be expected to monitor it (if they have the ability). And finally, many congregations expect parents to attend family education programs.

In the year of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, these responsibilities intensify. In addition to religious school, parents drive children to lessons with tutors or meetings with rabbis to develop the talk. They supervise the mitzvah project and monitor the child as he or she practices. These tasks can be enacted with more or less consistency (every rabbi described the family that regularly missed tutoring sessions) and with more or less conflict (parents and children both rolled their eyes when describing arguments over practicing), but however done, they are the parents’ responsibility.

In some sense, both schlepping and monitoring children are part of what parents do. Taking children to Hebrew school is not so different from taking them to soccer practice or violin lessons. Monitoring Hebrew homework or planning a Purim party are not so different from checking math problems or helping with the school picnic. Nevertheless, particularly in the Bay Area where affiliation rates are low, choosing to affiliate and participate speaks to the importance of Judaism (however enacted) to these parents. The nature of the ritual itself, as a peak event for families, raises the stress associated with responsibility well beyond that of monitoring piano practice.

Finally, parents are responsible for the celebration following the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Although these parties were not included in my research (as they are individual family celebrations not controlled by the congregation), parents discussed stress of the celebrations in most interviews. Where their children were responsible for enacting the ritual with competence, the parents faced a similarly daunting task in ensuring both the comfort of their guests and the party’s success. Their responsibilities includes everything from the guest list to accommodations, from managing different needs of family and friends to planning the number and type of events surrounding the ritual. Further, while congregations control and structure preparation for and enactment of the ritual, few provide guidelines or rationale for the party, leaving parents to rely on congregational culture, other families’ shared experiences, and the copious material available online.

While parental responsibilities are similar across denominations, how they enact those responsibilities is shaped by three factors: individual family circumstances, which might include divorce, a child’s learning challenges, or competing activities and interests; the parents’ relationship to and knowledge of Judaism, as individuals and as families; and the parents’ connection to the congregation, again as individuals and as a family. These

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54 Joining a synagogue generally requires two things: being Jewish or being connected to someone Jewish (that is, often non-Jewish spouses are included in an intermarried family’s membership) and willingness to support the congregation through dues or pledge. The percent of income families pay is similar to that expected by churches, but because it is a prerequisite, it can be a sore spot for many Jews.
factors are not surprising but also rarely examined in a systematic way. Most often, both families and leadership simply manage any given situation.

Individual family circumstances, the first factor, sets the context for available time and energy to devote to Jewish learning and practice. Parents and rabbis alike highlighted three issues that most affect the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and enactment: students’ extra-curricular activities (most commonly sports, but families also mentioned dance, music, and theater), students’ special emotional or learning needs, and divorce.

Extra-curricular activities compete for time and attention with Jewish activities in general and Bar/Bat Mitzvah training in particular. The families I interviewed, like most Jewish American families, cultivate their children’s individual skills and abilities (Lareau, 2003). For these parents, Jewish practice and education compete with other activities: sports, and soccer in particular, are ubiquitous across the Bay Area and these teams cut children who miss practice or games. One of Reform Beth Jeshurun’s rabbis commented on the problem: “The challenge with Saturday morning services in the modern era is that the god of youth soccer is a powerful and vengeful god.”

Though fewer students enroll in dance, music, and drama, these programs have similar participation requirements. Many education directors and some rabbis commented on an inability to enforce religious and educational participation requirements. One father noted the conflict between Jewish practice and other activities: “I think we were supposed to go to eighteen services [as part of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation]—and I enjoy going—but it was always hard to get the kids to go because they had their soccer and other Saturday stuff.”

Ironically, these activities also affect students’ Bar/Bat Mitzvah: examples from sports, school, and friends make their way into the students’ speeches.

Students’ psychological or physical problems affect the nature of preparation, the service itself, and the meaning that the event has for families. In a cohort of twenty, it is not uncommon for three or four to face some kind of challenge. These structure family life with extra demands on time, emotional resources. Parents often advocate for them with congregations, which can result in special programs or tutoring.

For example, one family adopted a daughter from Russia with learning and emotional issues that challenged her family and her tutor. The girl began tutoring some months earlier than the norm to allow time for both types of issues to be resolved, as they ultimately were: “She started out very anxious about her ability to learn Hebrew, work with her tutor. They had some friction in the past, but it bloomed into a gorgeous friendship. And she needed more tutoring, but then she blossomed. She gained confidence, and...wanted to do more.”

Divorce results in still other complications. Rabbis and divorced parents (four of whom I interviewed) alike described two significant problems. Divorce often makes Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation more difficult because children in these families often missed religious school and tutoring lessons. This is a particular problem when one parent chooses not to bring the children to religious school. In these cases, the child can miss as much as half the sessions, with obvious consequences for learning.

Problems also arise around the event itself, as old or new issues between the parents play out with heightened emotion. One tutor described a particularly acrimonious situation and its resolution: “Dina came in crying one day because her father wasn’t going

55 This is reference to Feinstein (2003).
to invite her non-Jewish mother to come to her Bat Mitzvah. It turned out to be pay-back for the mother who hadn’t brought the children to religious school. But it really hurt Dina to think that her mother wouldn’t be there. I don’t know what the rabbi did, but in the end, Dina’s mother did show up. Dina’s relief was so great!”

In this case, the rancor between the parents breached the symbolic front of the family, with congregational leadership acting to repair it so that the event that the child imagined could proceed. While this was a particularly extreme example, many rabbis mentioned how the difficulty of managing conflict between parents during this time of heightened emotion.

In general, rabbis, teachers, and tutors are the ones who manage problems that result from missed lessons, students who need special attention, and hostile parents. Two common threads link these issues: each limits students’ exposure to the congregation and Jewish education and practice there and each can affect the performance of the ritual itself. The first issue is part of Chapter Four, “Process or Performance?” while the second is discussed in Chapter Three, “Variations on a Theme.”

A second factor in determining approach to Bar/Bat Mitzvah is the family’s and each parent’s approach to Judaism. Each parent brings past history and knowledge of Judaism to the family; in addition, the family approach to Judaism is not simply an average of these individual approaches, but a matter of negotiation between parents. Further, Judaism itself is multi-faceted, thus even when two parents have strong Jewish feelings and knowledge, they can express them very differently: one person might focus on Jewish practice and text study, another on the cultural dimension of art, music, and food, and a third on historical connections.

This was the case for Judy and Josh Small, members of independent Or Hadash: Josh had no interest in Jewish practice, but read extensively about Jewish history; Judy found great meaning in Jewish practice and community as ways to express more universal ethics: “[Judaism] gives you a code of ethics to live by and to be involved in your community and to help people...I think helping to make the world a better place is the most important thing in the end.”

Jacob, their son, took these different approaches and blended them: “I believe that Jewish ethics are the best...Judaism is not just a religion, but is also a culture and that it’s very important to be part of that culture.” While Jacob had absorbed both parents’ attitudes, the family practice was established by Judy’s sensibilities, with Josh participating as necessary.

While each parent brings a different approach to Judaism, intermarriage is a special case which I discuss this at some length in Chapter Five, “What are THEY doing on the Bimah?” Like the Jewish parent, the non-Jewish parent brings personal history and attitudes toward Judaism and religion in general. These are then integrated into family life, just as with two Jewish parents. According to the rabbis and education directors interviewed, while intermarriage complicated the ritual itself (due to the need to include non-Jews in a Jewish ritual), intermarriage itself was not a factor in determining the nature of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation, rather, whether intermarried or not, a family’s level of engagement in the process mattered most.

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56 Fishman (2001) discusses this pattern, in which the primary parent, usually the woman, sets the standard for family religious practice.
The third factor affecting the parents’ role is the nature of the family’s and each parent’s connection to the congregation. That relationship begins when parents join the congregation, often for their children’s Jewish education or support in raising Jewish children. This was by no means the only reason; parents also gave their personal relationship with the rabbi, comfort with denominational practice, location and convenience, past family history, community feeling, and the congregation’s social action goals as reasons for joining. Families join as units, but each parent (and child) develops an individual sense of connection—or not—based on different areas of engagement and interest.

Some of these are particular to individuals or individual families. For example, Gabriel Orlansky said: “I stay principally because of the rabbi...our social circle is outside the congregation. I like the religious observance. The kids’ education is good, but if my rabbi moved to another shul down the street, I’d probably follow him. If he stayed and everyone else left; I’d stay.”

By contrast, the Moses family, members at Beth Jeshurun, the large Reform congregation, says: “We stick around because of the sense of community we feel. We just had our twentieth wedding anniversary. I contacted one of the rabbis and I just said, we don’t want a big party, we just want some sort of blessing or something, and he...gave such a beautiful tribute to us...it just made me feel, wow, we really are part of this temple.” In this case, the rabbi acted as the representative of the congregation, so that the family felt connected to the community, rather than directly to the rabbi.

These larger relationships affect the resources—both knowledge and assistance—that families can draw on as they plan and enact the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. A child raised in a family that knows the rabbi well, is engaged in leadership (for example, has a board or committee position), and participates in congregational activities regularly will likely have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah event with a larger congregational attendance, more support in planning food and festivities, and more Jewish knowledge on which draw than a child raised in a family with minimal engagement. Though each family is likely to consider its event a success, the planning process, the service, and the number and type of attendees will differ substantially.

The examples above also point out one important aspect of the parents’ relationship to the congregation: how this relationship shapes their experience of planning and enacting the event. Families join congregations and maintain their membership for different reasons, but having a connection to others in the congregation turns out to have concrete consequences for the parental role of arranging luncheons and parties. Thus, a family with an individual relationship with a rabbi and little integration into the congregational community will have fewer resources to draw on than the reverse. Rabbis are responsible only for content and delivery of the service; the rabbi’s role does not include event logistics. As a result, family concerns outside the service may not be addressed—as was the case for the Black family above, which managed the expected luncheon and party largely with help from relatives.

Even when congregations have extensive Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation programs, as at Beth Jeshurun and Or Hadash, parents can feel alone in the process. Beth Jeshurun’s extensive Bar/Bat Mitzvah program teaches parents and children about prayer and study and ideally connects families with the congregational entity. While the intent is to meet each family’s individual schedule, the effect can be isolating, as Gail Aronson reflects:
“Sometimes I felt like—are we just another number? Or is there a personal thing going on here? In the end I did feel that there was. And the rabbi is very busy, very busy, but we would have liked her to stay a little more in touch.”

By contrast, at Or Hadash, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program requires families to support each other in planning and enacting the service and the lunch following. Regardless of a family’s personal connection to the institution or leadership, that requirement means that for this period of time, the cohort of Bar/Bat Mitzvah families worked together. One father expressed his gratitude for having other parents set up and clean up the Bar/Bat Mitzvah luncheon: “You don’t understand until you’re actually having your own and you realize that this is really an amazing gift that these people have for you.”

These three factors—individual family circumstances, relationship to Judaism, and connection to the congregation and leadership—all shape the context in which parents accomplish their role. Within that context, they manage their children’s preparation for Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and plan and enact the celebrations surrounding the event. Although their children are the focus of the ritual, parents are the ones who initiate the process and support their children as they progress through the different steps along the way. As they are immersed in the individual nature of the event, it is not surprising that often, that focus is orthogonal to that of the rabbis and teachers, who necessarily take a broader view.

Rabbis and Teachers: Preparing Students; Managing the Congregation

Rabbis, education directors, teachers, and tutors are the experts who interpret and teach Judaism, uphold standards of Jewish practice, and determine levels of competence—that is, they determine what is learned, how it is learned, and who may enact it. Each has a different sphere of influence: rabbis are responsible for the congregation, education directors for the school, teachers for a class, and tutors for individual students. While families prepare for an individual peak event, leaders see the ritual as a repeated event with discernible patterns and structure. This gives them both experience and expertise that nervous families expect, but may also lead to them forgetting the individual perspective. The differences between the goals and viewpoints of families and leaders (especially rabbis) results in some of the inherent tensions discussed in the following chapters. Here, as with the parents, I simply lay out the responsibilities of the different teachers.

Rabbis are, by definition, leaders of congregations. As part of fulfilling that role, they embody Judaism and Jewish practice to the congregation and set the tone and direction for the congregation. This includes interpreting denominational policy for the congregation (instituting change from the top down), addressing the needs of different groups within the congregation (instituting change from the bottom up), and balancing the needs of different congregational groups. Managing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual is one piece of the whole. Rabbis determine the importance of the ritual within the congregation, Bar/Bat Mitzvah prerequisites, the nature of the service and who participates, and the role of the congregation.57 They may delegate pieces of the process (as, for example, entrusting the school curriculum to education directors), but the responsibility ultimately rests with them.

In addition to determining the place and scope of the ritual, rabbis engage with families and students. Most work with students to develop their talks, although approach

57 For example, in the Bay Area, Saturday evening Bar/Bat Mitzvahs simply do not take place, a matter determined and enforced by the rabbis.
and time spent with students (and sometimes families) varies substantially. For examples, Rabbi Joseph, at Conservative B’nai Aaron, spends little one-on-one time with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student and family: “[The Bar/Bat Mitzvah students] typically meet with me at the end, and I review the product [the speech developed with a mentor from the congregation] and chat with them a little bit and answer questions. But I also go in and teach two units in the sixth and seventh grade so I’m not like a remote stranger to them.”

By contrast, at large Reform Beth Jeshurun, leadership—including rabbis, cantors, and educators—determined that the rabbis would spend substantial time with students. But even here each of the four rabbis take different approaches to the ritual. Some believe the ability to lead services is fundamental: “I’m not as interested [as are the other rabbis] in the kids learning so much Torah. I think it’s nice but it doesn’t give them much Jewish knowledge after it. I would like to see the kids more actively engaged in actually leading the entire Shabbat morning service.”

Others want to ensure the ability to understand and interpret texts: “They are conversing with sacred Torah and Torah study. It’s a pretty amazing accomplishment.”

The rabbi’s role is broadest in scope and carries most responsibility for both congregation and ritual. Education directors are next in both breadth and responsibility for the successful enactment of the ritual.

In all but Orthodox congregations (where most children attend day school), education directors manage the supplementary religious school, which teach students in grades kindergarten through seventh grade, usually including Bar/Bat Mitzvah, with “Hebrew High” programs (either for one or many congregations) continuing in the following year. They are responsible for creating and carrying out school curricula, finding and supervising teachers for both Hebrew and Jewish studies, and managing the needs of individual students. While school curricula rarely state explicit connections to Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation, the fact that the ritual requires specific knowledge means that education directors must include it or be held responsible for the students’ lack of preparedness. This is no hypothetical issue—at two of the observed congregations, there was ongoing conflict around students’ lack of readiness to begin Bar/Bat Mitzvah training. Publishers of Jewish educational material take Bar/Bat Mitzvah into account, with graded Hebrew books that specifically incorporate liturgy.

Still, material specific to Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation is not always part of the religious school program. Some large congregations have separate programs and coordinators (as does Beth Jeshurun). Some congregations include family preparation within the religious school curriculum; some emphatically do not. As a result, the education director’s role with regard to Bar/Bat Mitzvah varies from complete responsibility for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program to coordinating with rabbis and Bar/Bat Mitzvah administrators. In either case, as with the rabbis, Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and enactment is only part of their role.

In most congregations, these programs end following seventh grade, with some students continuing to community or congregational Jewish high school programs. There are exceptions. For example, religious school at Or Hadash extends through eighth grade in an attempt to decouple Bar/Bat Mitzvah from religious school.

Because of the overlap between Bar/Bat Mitzvah and basic service knowledge—that is, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a regular service so prayers learned are, at least in theory, used more generally than at the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. In practice, there is a direct connection between prayers learned and prayers performed.
Teachers, tutors and/or cantors have even narrower roles: they are responsible for transmitting specific information (in the case of teachers) and ensure that students know Bar/Bat Mitzvah material and can enact it competently (in the case of tutors) roles. Like the other professionals, they are usually responsible for a number of students, providing them with a relatively broad perspective on the nature of the event.

What all these professionals share is that broad perspective in which Bar/Bat Mitzvah are regular events (however meaningful and individualized) in the life of a congregation, events that are managed with care and attention, but not treated as the unique, peak events that they are for families.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Students: Representing the Family

While the parents are the driving force behind joining a congregation, ensuring that their children get to and from religious school and then Bar/Bat Mitzvah lessons, and making sure the event and celebration take place, students are the focus of the event. They stand up in front of their family and friends and chant without a hitch—or with repeated prompting. They assume the mantle of adulthood for at least a moment, even if, as one mother said, “the next day they go back to being thirteen and they still have the dumb thirteen-year-old stuff that you have deal with.” Few children—even the most recalcitrant—truly want to embarrass his or her parents or appear foolish in front of people who have come to witness a significant ritual, so it is not surprising that their primary concern is getting it right.  

“I was worried,” said one girl, “about being pressured by everyone there, and messing up in front of everyone because there were like 300 people there and all my friends were there. It would have been embarrassing.”

The students’ role is the easiest to define: students are responsible for learning a given quantity of material and enacting it competently. As with many rites-of-passage, the ritual does not confer expertise, but simply initiates the student into a new status. In so doing, it affects the community as much or more than the student.

Though the students’ role is easy to define, that does not mean it is easy to fulfill, that students are empty vessels into which teachers and parents pour material, or that it is without conflict. In Chapter Four, “Process or Performance?,” I look at the problems students face as they work to master the material: understanding Hebrew, overcoming performance anxiety, and questioning the ritual itself. In learning the material, students are both filling an expected role—enacting a commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people—and doing so as an “adult,” responsible for his or her decisions. Students with divorced parents or children with one non-Jewish parent can also face issues of loyalty to one or the other parent. So, while the students’ role is clearly defined, fulfilling that role often raises difficult issues.

A System of Mutually Interacting Constituents

Because of Bar/Bat Mitzvah’s significant role in American Jewish life, it has changed and continues to change Jewish congregations, affecting demographics, programming,
worship, and education. At the same time, congregations—shaped by the American context, the different needs of their participants, and the changing face of Judaism itself, shape different aspects of the ritual: form of preparation, content of the ritual, and overall meaning. The different roles of the participants result in different perspectives of the ritual and its meaning. Through their interactions and relationships, these participants shape the ritual and the congregation. Each constituent—congregation, ritual, and participants—shapes and is shaped by the others. These relationships fall into the tensions inherent in the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the congregation with which all congregations struggle to balance: different meanings, process and performance, including the excluded and preserving Jewish ritual, and public worship with private ritual. I turn to these tensions in the following chapters.
Chapter Three

Variations on a Theme: Negotiating Different Meanings

The Bar Mitzvah was a disaster. Nimrod refused to study and, as weeks went by, unlearned verses piled up. His mother yelled at him, which only increased his resistance. The rabbi discussed postponing or even cancelling the service. Nimrod’s mother refused. She insisted that the Bar Mitzvah was necessary; without it her son would never feel truly Jewish. The rabbi conceded and cut the number of lines of text he would read.

Too soon the day arrived. Nimrod appeared with a new haircut, a new suit, and new prayer shawl, which his mother, who had hardly spoken a civil word to him for six months, presented with tears and words of love. He did not miraculously gain competence, but stumbled through the prayers with the rabbi’s help. When it came time for chanting Torah, he chanted the few verses he knew, then hesitated. His tutor quietly fed him each phrase, which he repeated until he completed his allotted number. His speech was short and disjointed.

And then, mercifully, it was over. Nimrod’s mother embraced him and offered her congratulations with palpable joy and pride as the tutor and rabbi looked at each other with great relief.

Nimrod’s performance is apparently a classic example of the American Bar/Bat Mitzvah’s negative stereotype: an unwilling child who has been compelled to memorize and recite meaningless Hebrew makes a mockery of an already empty ritual. Yet what appeared to be hypocrisy to the rabbi and tutor brought Nimrod’s mother to tears of joy. For her, all that mattered for the success of the Bar Mitzvah was that her son stand up in front of witnesses and, in so doing, become an adult member of the Jewish people.

Nimrod’s Bar Mitzvah complicates the story presented in the first chapter, which argued that Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual bridges the gap between American and Jewish values by allowing American Jewish parents to show they have raised children who are both American and Jewish. While that story provides a general explanation for the persistence of the ritual, every powerful ritual has multiple meanings assigned to it and Bar/Bat Mitzvah is no different.

In this case, Nimrod was given no choice; in fact, quite the reverse. By insisting that, regardless of competence or desire, he enact the service, his mother symbolically claimed the ritual as a moment of Jewish identity: Bar Mitzvah as a sign of belonging, willy-nilly, to a particular people. Regardless of how well or poorly Nimrod performed, enacting the ritual was all that mattered.

Understanding the ritual to be a sign of Jewish identity and peoplehood is only one of its several meanings. For educator Rachel Stern, Bar/Bat Mitzvah represents moral growth and a ritual that takes place without evidence of good character and moral virtue is a sham:
Perhaps part of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation should be letters of recommendation, in which the recommenders needed to answer some pointed questions about the student’s behavior and character. These recommendations could come from teachers, peers, community members. We could ask the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidates to answer questions in an essay that describes their character and intentions. (2013)

For Rabbi Tsafi Lev, it should mark full adult maturity and therefore be undertaken by an adult rather than by a new teenager:

*If we’re not going to deal with kids’ physical and psychic development at Bar Mitzvah, we might be wise to wait until the next, more politically correct milestone, maybe getting a driver’s license, or high school graduation. And if we want to hold onto the golden “today you are a man” line, might I suggest waiting till age 25.* (2011)

While Stern, Lev, and other Jewish professionals differ in the type of qualifications necessary to undertake the ritual, their interpretations assume that the ritual should include accomplishment, whether that be good moral conduct, mature actions, or Jewish knowledge, and thus, while the status may happen with the turning of the calendar, an authentic Bar/Bat Mitzvah includes learning and doing something Jewish. That is, the purpose and meaning of Bar/Bat Mitzvah is the means to a greater Jewish end.

Significant rituals give rise to different and contradictory meanings, often held by the same individuals (Turner, 1967), so it is not surprising that is the case for Bar/Bat Mitzvah as well. If a child simply becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah upon turning thirteen (or twelve for girls in Orthodox practice), expectations for preparation and performance of the ritual become less important than the simple acknowledgement of the change of status. On the other hand, if it represents moral behavior, maturity, and Jewish knowledge, proper preparation becomes important and the ritual itself will incorporate these goals. In either case, the ritual’s efficacy depends on its ability to express those multiple meanings to and for the participants who, as in the case of Nimrod’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah, may not agree. In this chapter, I look at the four central meanings attributed to the ritual and show how they are understood and negotiated by the different stakeholders through the content and enactment of the ritual itself.

First and most literally, Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a status change that occurs when a child turns thirteen (or twelve for Orthodox practice). The child does not have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but becomes one. Unlike passing the bar or driver’s test, this status does not depend on competence or competition, but simply on age and being a Jew. Second, Bar/Bat Mitzvah is that formal moment when the child chooses to affirm a Jewish identity publicly, often incorporating the characteristic American value of self-definition through choice. While parents often explicitly offer their children a choice, some parents—like Nimrod’s mother—insist on their child’s formal enactment. However, even in these cases, struggling with choice is part of the process (as, for example, Nimrod chose the verses he read). Third, Bar/Bat Mitzvah represents the successful accomplishment of a difficult Jewish task. That task can be framed as one of developing Jewish skills, of Jewish learning, or more universally, as developing discipline and values. Within this category of meaning,

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62 See also discussion of the characteristics of American Jewish rituals in Chapter One, “Today I am a NOT a Man.”
determining which of these skills should be highlighted and to what degree can be a matter of debate. Fourth and finally, the ritual is a moment for family, friends, and sometimes the community to celebrate the child’s accomplishments and new status.

All the stakeholders—parents, rabbis and education directors, and students—expressed variations of these different meanings, but in different ways, at different times, and with different weights. In Nimrod’s case, for example, the rabbi spoke about Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a matter of choice, while his mother spoke of it as a change of status. However, this rabbi and others also explained Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a change of status with the service simply marking that change. These different meanings are often taken for granted and shift depending on circumstance and person, resulting in conflict or confusion, as the vignette above demonstrates. Although Nimrod’s rabbi and mother might agree that the ritual is a change of status expressed through competent performance, they did not agree on the relative importance of the two meanings or how to accomplish the ritual itself. As stakeholders negotiate these different meanings, they learn from each other, develop more complex understandings of meaning, and change the ritual itself. It is through that negotiation and expression of different meanings that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah becomes real for the participants.

The story of Julia Orlansky’s Bat Mitzvah illustrates how, even within one family, all these meanings are shared, negotiated, and emphasized by different family members.

“A Tremendous Family Milestone”

It was a tremendous family milestone. The family milestones are: we got married, my son was born, he had his bris, my daughter was born, my next daughter was born, my son had his Bar Mitzvah, and now Julia has her Bat Mitzvah. For my family, the most awesome seven days of my life: those were them. Gabriel Orlansky

Gabriel and Aziza Orlansky and their children belong to Conservative B’nai Aaron. As they discussed the Bat Mitzvah of their daughter Julia, they demonstrate how, even in an engaged family with a rich Jewish family life—both parents are fluent in Hebrew and knowledgeable about Jewish practice and history—family members have very different ideas of what the ritual means and how it should be expressed.

Gabriel grew up in an observant American Jewish family and continues to find his primary connection to Judaism through regular practice and learning. When asked to explain why he wanted his daughter to enact her Bat Mitzvah, he spoke quickly and with conviction: he had clearly considered the question before:

What was important was not only that my children were passing the same test as everybody else, but also that each of them was doing the work necessary to reach this rite of passage and having the pride of achievement that comes with it. So they were faced with: “this looks really big; I don’t know if I can do it,” and then they did it and they did it really well. It was important for them to own the results, so they knew: “I didn’t do this because my mom did it or because my brother did it, but I did it and I did it with the Jews.”

And it had to have substance. It wasn’t just “Baruch Ata...thanks for coming,” it had to have the work, it had to involve things she didn’t know how to do before, and it had to involve extended family. They should show
up and take part. For me, part of it was Sunday morning minyan that Daniel [Julia’s older brother] led and that we all came to.

For Gabriel, the ritual’s meaning came from identifying with the Jewish people, working hard to acquire and demonstrate Jewish knowledge, and having community (in this case, immediate and extended family) participate in the event—which Gabriel extended to include Sunday morning participation. Like many parents, Gabriel did not directly mention change of status, although that is assumed in the ritual itself.

Aziza has a complicated relationship with Judaism and her responses, though in some ways similar to Gabriel’s, reflect this. She grew up in Gibraltar in an Orthodox family with Moroccan roots where the gendered nature of Orthodoxy, particularly in that time and at that place, excluded girls from religious practice and study. While she has little interest in participating in synagogue observance, she felt strongly that Julia should be able to experience what she had been denied:

In Morocco and Israel you don’t do Bat Mitzvah. The only thing you do for girls is a party, .... like, ‘Okay, let’s do something for the girls so they don’t feel bad that the boy has all this big attention and he’s a boy and more important than the girls.’ So it was very important to do Bat Mitzvah for Julia exactly like we did for Daniel [Julia’s older brother] because boys and girls have same abilities, right? So this is the first reason. And the second one was that I like the idea that she needs to take responsibility; she needs to decide: ‘this is what I need to do and I need to accomplish it and I need to work hard to make it the way I’m supposed to do it.’

Like Gabriel, Aziza understands Bat Mitzvah as a defining moment for Jewish identity that is marked by the accomplishment of a difficult task. Like many women I interviewed who did not enact Bat Mitzvah rituals, Aziza also sees her daughter’s Bat Mitzvah as a moment for rectifying gender inequity within Judaism. Jewish identity is not sufficient if that means only identifying as a “lesser” Jew; rather, the ritual is a moment that demonstrates that Jewish girls are equal to Jewish boys.

While Gabriel expresses his Jewish identity in synagogue religious observance, Aziza expresses hers through food, language, and holiday celebrations:

I think you need to listen to your heart and see what the Bat Mitzvah really wants. Because this is her time, this is her party. But not to go all the way, some of the stuff she wants but she doesn’t know what’s involved, so it’s not the right choice. Julia is a very unique person and I decided to do what is good for me, for her family, and for Julia.

I enjoyed it so much because it was so creative. We had a Moroccan style tent for the henna ceremony and decorated with teapots from Turkey and Arab countries and rugs and beautiful fabrics. And the music, which was special for the henna ceremony. It was just beautiful.

For Aziza, as for Gabriel, including community in the ritual was important. However, where Gabriel focused on how family and friends participated in services on Saturday and Sunday, Aziza focused almost entirely on the party, which she believed expressed and celebrated her daughter’s unique qualities and cultural heritage. At the same time, Aziza believes that giving Julia a choice to express herself is important, although that expression may be more symbolic than real: though the day was “Julia’s time,” Aziza does not give her
Gabriel and Aziza come to Julia’s Bat Mitzvah with a fully formed understanding of both Judaism and the ritual’s place in their Jewish life. Julia does not. Her understanding of what it means is still developing and her opinions are formed in the context of family and congregation. Perhaps surprisingly, few parents discussed their views of the ritual with their children and the Orlanskys fell into this category: Julia said that her view of Bar/Bat Mitzvah was shaped by observing her older brother’s experience and from her teachers. She was told that: “Bat Mitzvah was when you become an official Jewish adult and actually have to start participating and stuff.” Congregations often taught this understanding of Bar/Bat Mitzvah as change of status to Jewish adult responsibility, apparently to respond to the common perception that it confers actual adulthood on a thirteen-year-old. Many of the students interviewed wrestled with this meaning, as did Julia:

[I think it means] becoming more responsible and understanding more about the religion. I learned a lot more and knew more about it, so I could think, ‘Oh yeah, this means that and we say that prayer because we want to thank God for this thing.’ It was an interesting learning experience, but not a ‘I’ll just sit back and watch people do it’ experience—you have to work for it. Being Bat Mitzvah is putting together all the pieces and actually doing them.

Unlike her mother, Julia has been raised in an egalitarian congregation where women regularly and without comment lead services and chant Torah. With her family’s regular participation in services, it is not surprising that, like her father, she takes that egalitarian practice for granted and she finds meaning in religious practice and participating in Jewish learning. By contrast, Aziza described a childhood in which she helped prepare the family home for Shabbat and holidays through cooking and decorating. In her adult life, despite her strong feminism, it is the cultural expression of Judaism that still means the most to her.

Julia’s Bat Mitzvah encompassed many meanings for each participant. Aziza and Gabriel shared the natural pride and delight in their daughter’s accomplishment. Both had similar ideas about what mattered: serious Jewish learning and teaching; an increased sense of Jewish identity; community inclusion and participation. Julia herself, through formal teaching and informal experience, shared these understandings, but was also concerned about what the increased responsibility meant. Despite sharing these meanings, each family member found a different way to express them. For Gabriel, it was in how she enacted the ritual; for Aziza, it was the celebration following; and for Julia, a new sense of knowledge and responsibility. These multiple meanings continue to shape the ritual and give it power.

**Bar/Bat Mitzvah as Change of Status: Assuming New Responsibilities**

When asked what makes a successful Bat Mitzvah, Shoshana, a Bat Mitzvah student from Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, replied: “Don’t mess up! I mean, you can mess up. Really,
there’s no successful or non-successful, all you do is wake up and you’re Bat Mitzvah, congratulations.”

This is a telling statement: Shoshana first expressed the unsurprising concern of almost every student that they will “mess up” through not knowing the material. But she had been told the “correct” answer: that Bat Mitzvah is a matter of age, rather than performance, and quickly corrected her first impulse. She was not alone; most of the students interviewed were worried about performing competently, but also understood that Bar/Bat Mitzvah was supposed to mean a change of status, a definition they told me their teachers and rabbis, rather than their parents, had explained. While it is a simple definition, changes of status usually come with changes in responsibilities and roles: marriage leads to new roles and relationships; turning eighteen leads to new responsibilities. Bar/Bat Mitzvah is different in that, except in Orthodox Judaism, few congregations assume these new responsibilities will be regularly enacted. Nevertheless, students across the denominational spectrum worked hard to understand and interpret the explanation their rabbis gave. They incorporated the idea that some kind of change that should occur, then identified that change as an increased sense of responsibility for themselves and their own behavior. As Denise Shore, of Reform Sukkat Shalom put it (emphasis added):

It’s going to symbolize you being an adult in your synagogue. The Rabbi said that I’m going to have to start taking on more responsibilities, help my family out more, help my friends out more.

When other kids turn thirteen, they don’t really realize how much they’re growing up and that you take on more responsibilities. But a Bat Mitzvah shows you that.

In this understanding, Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a moment in time to take stock and recognize that becoming an adult is a process. Students were well aware that “Jewish adulthood” did not mean the same thing as turning twenty-one. One student captured this feeling by saying: “I’m responsible, and not responsible at the same time. Like, the training wheels came off but I only have one training wheel left. The other falls off when I turn eighteen.”

Most expressed these responsibilities in general terms. Bill Wolfson, from Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, was one of the few to discuss specific Jewish responsibilities and even he combined them more general adult behavior: “Now I’ve become more involved in the community. I put my tefillin [phylacteries] on every day. I’ll get to help my brothers and sisters, teach them and help get them ready for their time.”

Finally, for many students, the new status and the effort put into preparing for the ritual overlapped. Without the intense preparation and without the ritual itself, the larger message of becoming adult would not have had the same power. Again Denise Shore speaks to the issue:

When I started, I didn’t really think it was a big deal. But as I [got] closer to my Bat Mitzvah, I realized, ‘Wow, this really is a big deal. If it wasn’t a big deal I wouldn’t be taking this much time to prepare for it.’ And I realized that after this, people are going to expect more of me. I’m going to need to be more mature, I’m going to need to help out more, and be more responsible.
For Denise and others, simply saying that they had become adults was not sufficient. It was through the effort of preparing for and performing the ritual that she felt the significance of that expected new maturity.

Although parents rarely began by talking about this definition, as their children wrestled with it, so did they. A father from independent Or Hadash commented on his daughter’s interview: “It’s interesting that she focuses on the “now you’re an adult” because I don’t recall ever using those words with her.” However, as he talked, he began to reflect on his own understanding: “Now you’re a ‘Jewish adult,’ meaning that now…you’re responsible for your actions officially. You’ve inched towards that when you were younger and now there’s an official demarcation. There’s no mistake about it, it was publicly announced, right? It was in front of lots of people. Now you can be officially counted in a minyan.”

As this father worked toward his own understanding of Bar/Bat Mitzvah as change of status, he incorporated age, public statement, and a new Jewish responsibility in his understanding. While this father’s musing were sparked by his daughter’s comments, others noticed differences in their relationship with their children and in their children’s behavior. For example, Jim and Georgia, members of Reform Sukkat Shalom, saw their formerly disengaged son, Kevin, in a new way:

Georgia: I have a little bit of a different feeling when I go to temple with him now. He’s a participant, he knows the prayers better than I do. I have a different expectation of him, not that he’s fully involved, but when he’s there he knows what he’s doing. And I think he does.

Jim: That’s probably true. It’s like he’s now a young man in the eyes of the temple.

Georgia: He’s not the kid who just sits in the back and never wants to be part of anything. I think he is more comfortable with himself and more comfortable when he’s at synagogue and he can recite the prayers.

Jim and Georgia reflected on the change in Kevin’s Jewish knowledge and on his exhibiting greater maturity, but also the change in the way other members viewed him and his participation.

Pirkei Avot, a traditional Jewish text of aphorisms, includes a list of ages with accompanying status changes, most of which are dormant. As discussed in Chapter One, Bar/Bat Mitzvah became important in American Jewish life because it filled a need. Understanding it as a change of status provides a necessary rationale, but is not sufficient to support the weight the ritual carries in American Jewish life. That foundational definition can be used to allay performance anxiety (as with Shoshana), can be reinterpreted to give it a more generalized understanding of responsibility, or may simply be necessary for other meanings to feel real (i.e., no one would consider a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual enacted by, say, an eleven-year-old, no matter how competent, to be authentic).

**From Generation to Generation: Carrying Tradition Forward**

There’s a wisdom in a demarcation and in making it a public one. Now you’re a Jewish adult, meaning that now there’s an official demarcation and you’re responsible for your actions officially. There’s no mistake about it, it was publicly announced, right? *Parent from independent Or Hadash*

While the age of 13 provides an opening, becoming part of the Jewish people and taking on a Jewish identity is at the heart of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The Bar Mitzvah Bargain
discussed in Chapter One arises from the desire for Jews and Judaism to continue into the future. For parents, this continuity is about raising children who will continue to be Jews; for leadership, it is about assuring that the Jewish community endures. Parents, educators, and rabbis all spoke about Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a means of connecting to Jewish peoplehood and strengthening Jewish identity.

A Reform rabbi from large congregation was quite direct in making the connection: “I want [the students] to see this service not as a performance but as...a wonderful way of affirming their Jewish identity and Jewish commitment.”

For Jim, of Sukkat Shalom, the ritual was not simply a means of affirming an existing identity, but a necessary symbol for future Jewish identity: “If he didn’t get Bar Mitzvahed, I would have felt like I robbed him of the chance of at least going through the rite of passage as being Jewish.”

Not only does Bar/Bat Mitzvah connect students to the Jewish people now and in the future, but also to the past. Jim’s wife, Georgia saw it as a powerful connection to family history: “My mother spoke loud and clear in my head....my grandmother and my mother were just coming through me.”

Many of the students related to the family connection in particular. For example, Bat Mitzvah student from Conservative B’nai Aaron said a successful ritual included: “People being there with you. Your family and people you care about being with you when you become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah,” while a boy from independent Or Hadash said that the best moment of the day was: “hanging out with my relatives.”

While many parents voiced concerns about Jewish identity and peoplehood, parents of girls in particular felt strongly that Bat Mitzvah meant their daughters could become a “full” members of the Jewish people. As with Aziza’s experience, many mothers had not taken part in a Bat Mitzvah ritual as children and, although some had not missed it as children, in retrospect, these felt a critical piece of Jewish knowledge and identity was lacking.

One mother, a member of Conservative B’nai Aaron, reflected on how her childhood experience led her to expect that her daughter would have her Bat Mitzvah: “I could have had one...but I think that I just wasn’t enamored of religious school, and what it meant but there was always a piece of me that regretted not having done that. It was important for me that she could prove to herself that she’s capable of going through that process and achieving something.”

In the 1980s, Bat Mitzvah rituals were common, but not necessarily expected within Conservative Judaism (unlike Bar Mitzvah rituals). Thus, as a girl, this mother was offered a choice without understanding the consequences. The consequences of that decision, as well as changing expectations within Conservative Judaism, meant that enacting the ritual was taken for granted by the daughter, but that daughter’s enactment increased her mother’s own sense of Jewish connection.

On the other hand, a mother from a Reform congregation found that preparation for her daughter’s Bat Mitzvah led to alienation: “When it came time for the preparation for my own daughter, I felt a little bit of the otherness of what it must feel like to be a non-Jewish parent going through this with your child...I think it’s interesting for me, it brought up a certain, it was like, ‘I’m part of this tribe,’ but there is an otherness about me within this tribe.”
These mothers (and some fathers) experienced their daughters’ Bat Mitzvahs as being as much about preventing a negative feeling—being “not Jewish enough”—as it is about developing a positive sense of belonging to a people and ownership of the full range of practice.

Many parents saw simply performing the ritual as sufficient. However, in many most Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals, particularly in contemporary-style congregations, there moments that formally connect the student to an adult Jewish identity publicly. It is in these moments—some initiated by parents and some by leadership—that the tension between understanding that identity as an individual family connection or as a connection to Jewish people and history understandings appears. For parents, these moments often include presenting a tallit to their child and passing the Torah through the generations. Leadership is more likely to find ways to include assertions of loyalty in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk or elsewhere in the service.

For example, at Sukkat Shalom, Rabbi Doron works with Bar/Bat Mitzvah students on a short speech about Torah, but emphasizes another piece of writing, the student’s “bond to the Torah.”

Every kid starts with the same sentence: “This is my bond to the Torah.” Their connection or pledge to the Torah, past, present and future.

They write something about what their memories were when they first saw a Torah...Then they talk about what they know is in the Torah now, and then I also ask them: “Why would we read the Torah over and over again every year?” That plants the seed in their mind, but it also gives them a chance to say: “Yes, when I was five years old, I understood Abraham on a very childish level, now I understand Abraham, and in the future when I look at it again, I’ll see other dimensions.”

Then I ask them to think back to what they’ve learned over the years...And I ask: “Which of those areas of study would you like to return to in the future?”

I think it’s a powerful moment for the families to see their kid making a public pledge.

Students memorize this piece of writing and recite it while holding the Torah. Both the process of explicitly making a connection between the student’s past, present, and future and the act of saying the words aloud to a group of witnesses increase their importance to the student, in this case, linking Jewish identity with Torah. One student understood this connection very literally: “Becoming an adult in the Jewish community, you really have to understand yourself and how you’re connected to your Jewish identity. I think through your Torah portion you can really understand that.”

While Rabbi Doron separates the “bond to Torah” from the Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk on the Torah portion, other rabbis often include the personal connection in the talk, as does this Orthodox rabbi: “There’s usually three sections to the speech: there’s a theme of the Torah portion or Haftarah, and its connection to the day. The middle section would be ‘what being Bar Bat Mitzvah means to me as an individual,’ and I have them spend time

64 These connections are complicated by the growing number of intermarried families, in which the student and family negotiate the student’s accepting a Jewish identity without rejecting a non-Jewish parent, a subject discussed in “Chapter Five: What are They Doing on the Bimah?”
writing it themselves. The third section is the acknowledgement, thank-yous and the recollection of childhood leading up to this point.”

Whether as part of the talk or as a separate moment, rabbis often ensure students explicitly state their connection to Judaism and the Jewish people, symbolically taking on Jewish identity. By contrast, rituals that have evolved through folk custom—specifically when parents present their child with a tallit and when the Torah is passed through the generations—largely use symbolic gestures. Both of these moments are common only in the contemporary-style congregations; Orthodox Jews and congregations more commonly present man with a tallit prior to marriage, and the traditional model format has fewer options for inserting additions. In both cases, these moments largely connect the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student to family, rather than to the Jewish people. While this serves an individual family’s needs, it does not address the larger concern of leadership—to build a connection to the Jewish people—and so, in some congregations, rabbis have moved the tallit presentation to a private space (for example, the rabbi’s office) and eliminated passing the Torah altogether.

This can lead to conflict; passing the Torah, in particular, has become an expected moment within the service. Another approach, taken by Or Hadash and a few other congregations, modifies the Torah passing to include a broader perspective, as this example from Talia’s Bat Mitzvah shows:

As the Torah service began, Rabbi Melmed assembled parents and grandparents in front of the Ark. Holding the Torah, he recited the opening sentences of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) that establish the authority of the leaders of the early Rabbinic period:

“Moses received Torah at Sinai and passed it on to Joshua and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets passed it on the Men of the Great Assembly.”

As he completed the quote, Rabbi Melmed handed the Torah to one of Talia’s grandfathers. The Torah was passed from one family member to the next until Talia’s father placed it in her arms, as Rabbi Melmed declared: “And they to the grandparents and to the parents and to the sons and the daughters up to this very day.”

With these words, he completed the historical chain between the early rabbis and the present. As he finished, Talia—the representative of that next generation—stepped forward to lead the congregation in the Sh’mah, the one line sentence that encapsulates Jewish theology.

The Torah encapsulates all of Judaism so it is not surprising that in most contemporary-style congregations, the physical act of “passing the Torah” from grandparent to parent to child has become a moment that symbolically connects one generation of a Jewish family to the next, with the implicit statement that the child holding the Torah also holds the family’s Jewish future. However, by adding the words of the early rabbis to this custom, Rabbi Melmed includes the entire Jewish people, thus providing a wider Jewish context and history for the moment. This addition bridges the gap between connecting to family and to Jewish history and people, the two groups mentioned most by both leadership and family. This is a reasonable solution: as adults, most Bar/Bat Mitzvah students remain connected to family and some form of Jewish identity. However, this leaves no place for the congregation, the institution in which students and their families
have acquired Jewish knowledge. Recognizing this gap, some congregations have
developed programs that attempt to connect Bar/Bat Mitzvah students to the
congregational community. At large Reform Beth Jeshurun, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student
presents a book on Bar/Bat Mitzvah to the sixth grader who will have the portion next
year, while the eighth grader who had the portion the previous year presents a basic Jewish
text. At independent Or Hadash, Bar/Bat Mitzvah students return to read Torah for the
congregation in the months following their Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. However, one
particularly good example of working building a sense of inclusion in community takes
place at a very small Renewal congregation.

With under one hundred members and only a handful of Bar/Bat Mitzvah students
each year, this congregation holds services every other week. The congregation looks
forward to the few Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, for which the rabbi has created a moment
that demonstrates community support. The cantor “asks everyone to stand up and get close
to the bema, shoulder to shoulder ... and make a web, so there’s a big circle around the
Bar/Bat Mitzvah. There’s a communal blessing that we sing and we ask the young person to
look around and take in the love that they’re seeing and tuck it away for times they’ll need
that support. ... That’s the moment when people start crying.”

While this example is particular to a small congregation, as with large Beth Jeshurun
or medium-sized Or Hadash, the goal is the same: connecting to the congregational
community through Judaism.

While everyone agrees that connecting the Jewish people and taking on Jewish
identity is important, it was striking that few agreed on what Jewish identity itself means.
For some, it was ethics and doing good deeds; for others, Torah and practice; for others, it
was knowledge and intellect. However, everyone understood that, while Bar/Bat Mitzvah
occurred at a particular age and represented taking on Jewish identity (whatever that
might be), it was characterized by demonstrating some degree of competency.

**Demonstrating Mastery and Character**

The Bar-Mitzvah ceremony should serve as a certification of the fact
that the child is eligible to enter the adult Jewish community as a person who
knows and feels what it means to be a Jew. It is for this reason that Jewish
educators have within the past decade sought to promulgate minimum
requirements for the Bar-Mitzvah ceremony.... (Levitats, 1949, p. 154)

Over the course of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century, Jewish
leadership has worked to associate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah with some degree of Jewish
knowledge and practice. This fits in well with Van Gennep’s description of a rite of passage
(1960 [1908]), giving weight to the ritual. So, while all agree that Bar/Bat Mitzvah happens
at a particular age and that (ideally) it builds Jewish identity and binds students more
closely to the Jewish people, the competent accomplishment of a difficult Jewish task is
way to demonstrate that affiliation and identity. Yet Judaism is multifaceted and defining
“a difficult Jewish task” similarly complicated. It can represent the developing spiritual
relationship between student and God, whether through observing Jewish law or through a

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65 As I discuss in Chapter Four, “Process or Performance?,” rabbis and Jewish educators agree on the subjects
that make up Jewish education, but pull out different strands of that knowledge to emphasize during the
Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual.
less tangible connection. It can demonstrate engagement with Jewish practice and learning, linked to Jewish past and present. It can be a method by which to develop discipline and a set of skills that can be either universal or specifically Jewish. Finally, it can express a developing moral sensibility and character, often framed in universal language, toward other people, living things, and the world.

Both liberal and Orthodox rabbis spoke of the competent enactment as representing a connection to God. However, Rabbi Teitlebaum from Orthodox Adat Yitzhak emphasized Jewish law, given by God and therefore binding on Jews: “The child needs to be able to successfully do whatever they’re doing in a way that fulfills their obligations—if the child cannot say their blessing or read Torah properly, it would be a problem because everyone is depending on this person to say the blessing and read Torah properly.” From Rabbi Teitlebaum’s perspective, the purpose of competence is for the student to fulfill the sacred communal obligations: both saying the blessings and reading Torah are commandments that, when done incorrectly, invalidate the sacred nature of the action.66 The connection to God is deeply buried here, but underlies the point of the action.

Rabbis from more liberal denominations made more direct connections to God with less emphasis on God’s commandments. For example, the rabbi of a large Reform congregation wants his students to learn that: “the Torah can be made relevant. This is not a performance. The way in which they lead the service with dignity, they are helping the congregation draw closer to God, and sharing their words of Torah.” In both cases, the rabbis are making an “appeal to authority” (Eisen, 1998, p. 260), however the strength of that authority differs between denominations.67

Other rabbis see interpreting Torah as a means to demonstrate Jewish identity and build Jewish skills for the future, although there is little agreement on which skills are most fundamental.

At Reform Beth Jeshurun, one rabbi wanted to see students “more involved in the service.” He said: “I’m not as interested in the kids learning so much Torah, I think it’s nice but it doesn’t give them much Jewish knowledge after it. I would like to see the kids more actively engaged…and…confident in leading Shabbat morning service. Because right now all they’re doing is leading the V’ahavta.” For this rabbi, leading Jewish prayers, as opposed to engaging with Jewish texts, leads to Jewish engagement and continued Jewish identity in the future.

Other rabbis—similarly concerned with developing Jewish skills—emphasized a connection to reading or interpreting Torah as a way to understand the world and themselves. The rabbi of a Conservative congregation wanted his students “to see in Torah a way of beginning to think about and answer some of the questions that they’re dealing with in their own life and…see for themselves both the moral responsibility they have both spiritually and to the world around them and the tremendous agency that they have

66 More accurately, Jews are commanded to hear Torah, thus the reader has the greater responsibility of chanting correctly so that others can fulfill that commandment. The degree of accuracy can vary, as is discussed in more detail in t
67 “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority” (Chaves, 1994) and “Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation” (Chaves & Gorski, 2002) both speak to the changes in the way Americans think about ultimate authority of God (and religious authority). The difference in the way liberal and Orthodox rabbis reference God and God’s authority exemplify these changes.
toward that world. So Torah becomes a way of uncovering for themselves what that agency could look like and who they are as people.”

For this rabbi and others, learning to interpret and use Torah to understand the world is at the heart of being Jewish. Moral behavior, interpretation of the text, and Jewish knowledge are all are integral to Torah and, so, difficult to tease apart. This can be seen in contemporary model congregations as well. At independent Or Hadash, students learn to question and interpret the texts, then include the attendees in further exploration. Students begin their work with Rabbi Melmed by developing a list of questions raised by Torah and Haftarah. The text, the questions, and answers are compiled into booklets for attendees to use at the service. This takes substantial effort and learning on the part of students and their families. Rabbi Melmed then works with the student to develop one of these questions into the talk. He describes the template for these talks as follows:

The d’var Torah begins with a question. Then they tell the story of the portion that leads to their question. They have asked their mom and dad and siblings and grandparents [to answer the question] and they respond to those answers. Then they throw it out to the congregation. That’s the standard form. I like this: by the time they come up to the bema, they’ve had so many conversations about what they’re doing and what’s in their d’var Torah...by the time they get to the rehearsal the parents and the siblings know a whole lot.

The intensive approach to asking and answering questions and to drawing on the knowledge of others, both in preparation and in the service implicitly and explicitly connects the student to Jewish history and commentaries and to a traditional approach to texts that goes back and forth through time. At the same time, he includes family and modern sources in this discussion, so that—as with his approach to passing Torah—contemporary Jews are situated in Jewish history and learning.

Rabbis also expected students to take the material seriously. One Conservative rabbi noted that he would not allow a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual for a student who “showed disregard for teachers and learning. There’s no perfunctory Bar/Bat Mitzvah. We would not allow an insincere celebration.”

For this rabbi, diligent and respectful preparation shows respect for the ritual and its role as a symbol of Jewish commitment. If the ritual is a symbolic declaration of allegiance, then taking that commitment lightly undermines the declaration and ritual itself.

Rabbi Melmed of independent Or Hadash stated this most strongly: “I won’t allow a Bar Mitzvah if they don’t do what they’re supposed to do. I’ve called two families in all these 13 years and said: ‘Your child hasn’t been to services enough, and we’re going to have to reschedule.’ They freaked—they didn’t think we were serious. So they found another congregation to have an instant Bar Mitzvah...If you’ve got rules, you’ve got to use them, otherwise you might as well not have them.”

It is rare for rabbis to refuse outright to allow the ritual to take place: fear of alienating both parent and child from Judaism and Jewish people—as well as the congregation—overrides the concern for the ritual. The fact that synagogues are financed through paying a yearly pledge (or dues) that can run into several thousand dollars leads to the common perception is that synagogues are unwilling to challenge families for
that, no matter how difficult, the event happens, as this rabbi from a large Reform congregation describes: “There were couple times where we debated long and hard as to whether we could go through with it. In the end, the student pulled himself together and did go through with it.”

While rabbis are concerned that students develop Jewish skills that will contribute to future Jewish participation and identity, they also recognize that preparing for Bar/Bat Mitzvah develops a set of skills that can be applied to other subjects. Some rabbis made an explicit connection between Jewish and secular learning. Rabbi Melmed notes: “They all develop a great sense of poise at the bema...[Later on] parents say their teachers don’t know how...[the students] can understand texts and ask the text questions and feel confident exploring different aspects. I’ll tell them that’s what I’m trying to do. It’s the first time they’re giving a text a close reading.”

Both parents and students recognize the generalizability of these skills as well. It is not surprising that a boy from Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, where Bar Mitzvah does mark the beginning of adult Jewish responsibilities, noted that: “I’ve started showing up to shul more, and being a community member rather than being seen as a child...I’ve stepped up a lot of the rules.” However, he also sees the preparation and event as changing him in more general ways: “I think it also changed my life in other ways: how I look at my life and how I can say that I achieved something. I think I can achieve other things if I really try. I think it gives me a boost of confidence.”

Building the skills of analysis, discipline, and presentation is an indirect result of preparing for the ritual. More directly, leadership ties the Bar/Bat Mitzvah to moral behavior, with almost all congregations expect that students will participate in a “mitzvah project,” defined as some form of social action. Beth Jeshurun is an example of a congregation with an elaborate introduction to social action: students are expected to participate in several types of projects that include: helping in a congregational garden plot, the fruits of which are donated to food kitchens, serving in those food kitchens, and caring for Jewish cemeteries. Whether framed using Hebrew words and Jewish references (for example, the “pe’ah garden” refers to the commandment to leave corners of a field of grain for the poor to glean) or more universal English words for similar values, these projects are intended to build character—the very traits that Stern references above. Despite their ubiquity, they enter into the service itself only peripherally, as—in some congregations—a section of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk.

Within the service, students are trained for and demonstrate competence in ritual practice: prayers, texts, and talk. That competence is important so the student can enact the service in the moment, signal the potential for future Jewish practice and identity, and demonstrate a set of general skills. Achieving this competence is, not surprisingly, the primary concern of almost all students. While teachers and parents work to ensure students are prepared and feel supported, the pressure is quite intense, as Julia Orlansky reflects: “[I was worried about] messing up, because my Haftarah was two and a half pages long, or forgetting how to do something. When I’m nervous, my voice shakes...I was
worried about being pressured by everyone there...because there were like 300 people there and all my friends were there.”

Students also understood the performance as representing the hard work of preparation and a serious attitude. One of Julia’s classmates said: “If people watching feel like the person who was the Bar or Bat Mitzvah worked really hard until this day, and they took what they were doing seriously, even if they didn’t do a lot or their voice wasn’t perfect. If they practiced a lot and they knew what they were doing, I think that’s a success.”

As they do with other meanings, students attempt to make sense of what the performance itself means. Shoshana, the girl whose immediate response to the meaning of the ritual was “Don’t mess up!”, exemplifies this split. While she understands that she simply becomes a Bat Mitzvah on her 12th birthday, she also knows that the performance means something and “messing up”—as she believes she did—means the ritual missed something important. (This was not the case for Nimrod, for whom the performance was simply not the point.) Acquiring and displaying knowledge and content is important, but has risks—as Chapter Four, “Process or Performance?” explores.

Whatever the content of the ritual, whether it be Jewish knowledge, character, or something else, another critical component of the service is celebrating the child’s accomplishment with community, whether that community is family and friends, the congregation, or both.

**Rejoicing with Community, Celebrating the Child**

I don’t like to think of Bar Mitzvah as succeeding or failing because I think everyone succeeds.... I think that no matter how good or bad you do— it’s not success or failure—it’s having the people around you and celebrating with other people that makes it special. *Boy from Orthodox Adat Yitzhak*

As do other life-cycle events, Bar/Bat Mitzvah connects participants with a community that invokes the past and future. So, although Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a change of status and confirms Jewish identity through enactment of a central Jewish task, community—however defined—witnesses and affirms both new status and place within some understanding of Jewish life. While all stakeholders understood and largely agreed on the first three meanings of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, there was not such agreement here. The root of this difference lies in the different perspectives of parents and leadership. Families (particularly the parents) see the ritual as the “peak event” that Gabriel and Aziza Orlansky described above, a moment when their child takes their place in family tradition—as passing the Torah demonstrates in very physical form. In addition, many parents see this as a time to reflect publicly on their child’s new phase of life (whether that be new Jewish responsibility or puberty). Thus, more than two-thirds of the parents interviewed understood the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as being “A time to celebrate the child and build his or her self-esteem,” and around half saw it as “A statement on the part of family about continuing Judaism in the next generation.”

Rabbis and education directors, the other hand, typically understand the ritual as a means to further the education and continuity of the Jewish people. Many present the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, in the words of one Reform education director, as: “a Jewish journey, and

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69 See Appendix B for detailed schedules. Parents were asked how strongly they agreed with a set of possible meanings for Bar/Bat Mitzvah. In addition, they were asked what the ritual meant to them.
the Bar or Bat Mitzvah is not a stop sign/red light. It’s just another passage, a taking stock point as we move into the next dimension.” When viewed this way, celebrating the child and individual family is a distraction from the overall flow of Jewish life. Yet the very act of preparing the students creates a contradiction: religious school preparation and training inculcates a sense of Jewish identity and prepares the student for that “difficult Jewish task.”. In so doing—by educating families in the “right” way to have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah—congregations also implicitly or explicitly establish the importance of the ritual. Whether the impulse comes directly from the families or is indirectly a part of preparation, celebrating the student and the event is a contested and yet necessary part of the ritual. Yet the very act of preparing the students creates a contradiction: religious school preparation and training inculcates a sense of Jewish identity and prepares the student for that “difficult Jewish task.”. In so doing—by educating families in the “right” way to have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah—congregations also implicitly or explicitly establish the importance of the ritual. Whether the impulse comes directly from the families or is indirectly a part of preparation, celebrating the student and the event is a contested and yet necessary part of the ritual. In this section, I look at the one area that is particularly contested—the parents’ speeches to their children. Despite the fact that all parties have a similar understanding of what Bar/Bat Mitzvah means, the fact that families and leadership approach this common goal with different perspectives, responsibilities, and knowledge leads to conflict that ultimately shapes the form and meaning of the ritual itself.

Early rabbinic writings include a blessing that is still recited in Orthodox congregations: “Blessed is the One who has relieved me from the responsibility due to this one.” (Genesis Rabbah 63:10) The blessing refers to the fact that a parent (father) is responsible for his child’s behavior and any rules that child breaks would result in the father being punished. When a child reaches thirteen, he becomes responsible for his own actions and would receive any punishment that resulted from violating Jewish law. This both marks the change of status and also reflects the changing relationship between parent and child, something made explicit in modern speeches from parents to children. In Orthodox congregations, that parental address takes place following the service, during the luncheon. Parents address their children during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service in almost all contemporary model congregations and many Conservative congregations.

The content of the speeches reflects individual family structure and dynamics, knowledge of and attachment to different aspects of Judaism, and congregational culture and community. They have some or all of several purposes: to celebrate the child by reflecting past accomplishments, strengths, and virtues; to connect the child to Jewish

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70 I discuss the larger issues of the relationship between the congregational Shabbat service and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual in Chapter Six, “Whose Bimah is it, Anyway?”

71 I would be remiss if I did not mention the famous—or infamous—party as the primary means of celebrating the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student. Because, for the most part, these take place outside the auspices of the congregation, they were not included in this study. Nevertheless, as noted in Chapter Two, they consume substantial amount of the parents’ time and effort. For most parents, the party is necessary to celebrate the child, but not sufficient—a party without the ritual is simply another birthday party. As one Reform parent put it: “The party is the least of it. We had big exciting parties [following the services], but that’s not why we did it. We can have big exciting parties without that.”

72 The word translated here as “responsibility,” literally means “punishment.”

73 I am by no means trying to draw a direct connection between the blessing and the speeches; liberal Judaism in general has rejected it as uncomfortably harsh (although, as with other traditional practices, it is being reinterpreted and reclaimed in a few congregations). I simply want to point out that publicly noting the change in family relationships takes place, albeit in a different form.

74 Most Orthodox congregations allow few, if any, interruptions to the regular service and parental speeches can be considered an interruption.
identity, family, and people; to bridge the gap between the Jewish and American values; and to provide a charge or blessing for the child's future.

It is not uncommon for parents to use the ritual as a moment to praise their children. Parents often describe family values and activities or their child's particular strengths. Some focus on academic brilliance: “We know that you have worked very hard for this day, the same way you worked very hard in school, to get straight As in your honors classes and to learn to play the violin. We don't need to tell you that you are a gifted writer, an excellent math student, and a very good Chinese speaker—your teachers have already made that clear.” Others detail elements of the child's sterling character: “From the moment you arrived...you captivated my heart completely... first with your adorable face, then with your charm,...and then with your kindness, sensitivity, generosity, polite manners and thoughtfulness.” Whatever the specific focus, it is difficult to imagine that parents of incipient teenagers believe that their children are the amazing beings presented in these speeches. Rather, parents may see these speeches as evidence of their love for their child.

Leadership and those not related to the student have a different perspective, as the former leader of the Reform movement reflected:

Rabbis, cantors, educators and presidents all told me how painful it is to sit in a service where the child is the star and the theme is “Steven Schwartz, King for a Day” or, “Sarah Goldstein, Queen for a Day.”

Inevitably, this leads to speeches in which every boy or girl is smarter than Einstein, a better soccer play than Mia Hamm, more of a computer whiz than Bill Gates and more of an activist than Bono. (Yoffie, 2007)

The speeches quoted above certainly are—whether deliberately or not—competitive and child-centered. However, speeches can also speak to the parents' new vision of their child, a vision enabled by the new role their child assumes—if only for the day. What parents intend to say, what they do say, and how those words are perceived do not necessarily coincide.

The parents' speeches may also build on other meanings of the ritual by making connections to Jewish identity and people or using Jewish themes to make contemporary points. Thus a parent from independent Or Hadash wrote:

You've begun a wonderful process—this 'downloading' of our People's perspective. Do not shackle your endeavors with thoughts of 'What can a bunch of people who lived so long ago possibly teach me?'; but rather, view them as guides along your path....Wrestle with them—as you do with God, and with even the concept of God—for by doing so you will find yourself stronger than ever, and will (re)discover yourself in the process.

This parent is quite knowledgeable and his words reflect the traditional Jewish learning style that makes no distinction between one period and another and common ways to understand the Jewish relationship with God. It is also a distinctly liberal approach, assuming that Jewish tradition offers guidance, rather than commandment. However framed, this kind of connection is one that leadership would encourage.

More often, many of these speeches mention Judaism only peripherally, but focus on the students' future growth in more American terms. In the first two speeches quoted, for example, the parents did not speak about their children's
Jewish accomplishments, but about knowledge of Chinese (rather than Hebrew) and a common morality. In emphasizing these secular accomplishments, parents give the Jewish ritual a more universal meaning. As parents discuss their hopes for their children, they often frame them in secular terms:

My hope for you is that you move through life as gracefully as you move on the field or in the snow coming down a bump run at Alpine or Squaw. And that you keep on bombing down hills. And that you keep on discovering and creating new moves. And that, when you fall, you remember to roll as only you can; and that you remember this moment that we have now.

The analogy to skiing is both specific to a family activity and, indirectly, identifies the family with a high socioeconomic status. The values—grace, accomplishment through speed, creativity, and recovery—are both American and individualistic, with only the briefest mention of the ritual and the presence of others. There is nothing that identifies it as being part of a Jewish ritual.

On the other hand, a parent from independent Or Hadash refers to the Torah portion his daughter has just read and interpreted, using that to link Torah and Judaism to his hopes for her future:

Today’s Torah reading was, without a doubt, the hardest parashah I’ve ever had the pleasure of reading. As we stood side-by-side—with me recounting God’s words to Abraham as he was instructed to take his only child, whom he loved, and offer him up as a sacrifice, and you, our only child, whom we love, replying “but Father, where is the lamb for the offering?”—it sent chills up my spine….Your mother and I, like so many before us, chose to bind you to our tradition, so that you might make it your own, and find within it a unique way of seeing the world and navigating its narrow straits.

This parent begins with a crucial moment in Judaism’s narrative, and uses it to offer direction for the future. As a liberal and intermarried Jew, he connects the choice he and his wife made to raise a Jewish daughter to Abraham’s choice, using Torah connect the particularly American circumstance of intermarried families raising Jewish children and the American value of voluntary affiliation to arrive at a Jewish conclusion.

Liberal Jews are not alone in connecting Jewish and American values. An Orthodox mother, offered a blessing at the Kiddush luncheon that, after referencing her daughter’s work for a food bank, hoped she would: “continue [to value] both aspects of water—helping provide physical sustenance for those who lack and growing spiritually by drinking of the water of the Torah.”

Parents typically use the opportunity to reflect on their individual child; rabbis are concerned with limiting length, with Jewish connections, and with speaking to, rather than about, the student. Whatever the eventual content of the speech, in most cases, parents receive little education in how to prepare them. Students are the focus of the ritual and so congregations put much effort into preparing them to speak and act appropriately. The Bar Mitzvah bargain of the mid-twentieth century included preparing students—and that

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75 This is comparable to Eisen’s discussion of how Passover’s theme of freedom from slavery has been linked to the American value of freedom (1998).
preparation is expected. The same cannot be said for parental education: there are few norms around what and how to prepare for the ritual and thus there in wide variation in what congregations do with and for parents, including expectations for content and length of their speech. Rabbis use several different methods to educate parents in preparing speeches that fit these criteria.

The most subtle policy simply places the speech at a time that ideally dictates length and content. For example, one rabbi noted that: “We moved the speech to when the Torah is passed down because the kid is holding it and if they have any sense, they'll make it shorter. Also it’s more of a religious moment, so we get more emphasis on Jewish values.”

This indirect approach assumes that parents have some context and experience—that is, that they will understand that holding the Torah points to a short speech that includes Jewish content because the Torah weighs a lot and represents Judaism. However, many parents need these instructions made plain.

Therefore, many congregations provide directions that detail both length and content. These can include instruction sheets, templates, and examples posted on websites or group and individual instruction. For example, after years of frustration, one rabbi developed an explicit set of directions detailing both word limits and content: “The worst parents embarrass their child....by telling some event that you never wanted them to share...Now they do their 400 words with us. I think in general the feedback is overwhelmingly positive from the people that show up at these b’nai mitzvah and from the parents. Over time, this has been the most difficult part of the experience for me. What parents will do... Sometimes, by the way, it’s also the most moving.”

At another large Reform congregation, in addition to a website that provides templates and examples, Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation includes a family retreat for all families, as well as an elective class, attended by about half the families. The rabbi explained: “We talk a lot throughout the year about the blessings. And they email them back and forth so they’re really in the form of the blessing.”

Calling the speech a “blessing” or a “charge” enables rabbis reframe it so that parents focus on their hopes for their child’s future, rather than cataloging children’s present virtues. For example, one parent from Beth Jeshurun wrote:

Like the people who worshiped the Golden Calf, your failures won’t be someone else’s fault. You will have to take responsibility for your decisions. But at the same time you will get the credit for your achievements....May you continue to explore and experience new things and places by wandering down paths you have not traveled...May you always be able to look in the mirror and smile at what you see....May your dreams and goals be as big as this sanctuary.

This speech is a good example of how the Jewish narrative of the Golden Calf is used to make the universal point of taking responsibility for one’s own actions—as adults (should) do—while also including the family values of exploring the world and trying new experiences.

This example also speaks to the way the speech can reconcile the different approaches of parents and rabbis. This speech connects the child to Judaism and Jewish identity—a basic concern of leadership (and also of most parents)—through language specific to both family and child. In this way, the child is both acknowledged and celebrated within a communal context.
Conclusion

How Bar/Bat Mitzvah is imagined and understood determines the nature of preparation, the content and direction of the service, and its meaning for the students and their families. If it means the child is seen an adult and that occurs with the turn of the calendar, not the performance of a ritual, then the focus might be on minimizing the ritual and emphasizing new responsibilities (as is imagined in some liberal congregations and enacted in some Orthodox congregations). If the ritual is largely about connecting one generation to another through establishing Jewish identity, then congregations or families may insist that symbolic words and actions be inserted in the ritual. In addition, preparation may include activities that are intended to build a connection to the Jewish people. If the ritual is imagined as an important Jewish task, then preparation will include activities and material that attempt to teach that knowledge and build character, while the service will include opportunities for the student to display that knowledge and character. Finally, if the ritual celebrates the student, then the service will contain opportunities for that celebration.

These different understandings are not mutually exclusive, although the different stakeholders placed greater or lesser emphasis on each, with leadership primarily emphasizing Jewish identity and knowledge, students emphasizing the status change and performance of the ritual (that is, performance of Jewish knowledge), and parents emphasizing Jewish identity and celebration of their child, often (but not always) accompanied by celebrating the new Jewish status. Differing emphasis or understanding can be resolved by incorporating or broadening the ritual to accommodate different meanings—as did Rabbi Melmed with the Torah passing. Where there is substantial disagreement, as with the speeches, rabbis, in their role as congregational leaders, attempt to manage that difference through direction and education.

If a ritual is to be effective, it needs to create and convey a sense of authenticity that results from accurately reflecting its different meanings. Managing the parental speeches offers one example of how different understandings of “Bar/Bat Mitzvah as celebration” are managed with greater or lesser conflict. The chapters that follow take on the larger tensions that result from giving shape to the different meanings.

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76 Limiting the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual to simply reciting a blessing upon reading Torah was suggested at one Reform congregation, discussed in Chapter Six, “Whose Bimah is it, Anyway?”
Chapter Four

Performance or Process: Learning and Doing Judaism

Children and their families go through...an “assembly line” that produces Jews schooled in little more than “pediatric Judaism,” an immature understanding of the faith, its values and spirituality. Most students deliver a short speech about the meaning of the Torah passage they were assigned to read, but they never really learn to understand or speak Hebrew, only to decode the text. (Goodstein, 2013)

This quote, from a New York Times article on “The B’nai Mitzvah Revolution,” a program implemented by the Reform movement to solve perceived problems with the ritual, exemplifies one common belief about Bar/Bat Mitzvah: that it is a performance without meaning in which students simply recite Hebrew and speeches by rote. As the previous chapter showed, the reality is somewhat more complicated: even a BBM that appears to have little content may fulfill other expectations and meanings for the family.

However, whatever other meanings the ritual holds, both the Shabbat service and the expectations of a peak life-cycle event require a competent enactment, defined as one that is close to free of error and embarrassment. At the same time, Bar/Bat Mitzvah is, by definition, the age when a Jewish child becomes responsible for adult Jewish behavior and participation—a status which assumes some knowledge of Judaism and Jewish practice. Both a competent performance and basic Jewish knowledge are necessary for the ritual: performance without basic knowledge makes for the hollow event decried by the leaders, while a halting performance (however knowledgeable the student) breaks the mood necessary for successful ritual observance and prevents both Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual and Shabbat service from “feeling real.”

From the time students enter religious school until the ritual has been completed, attempting to fulfill both goals results in tension between the process of inculcating Judaism and the successful performance of the ritual. Whether taught in a full day school or a congregational supplementary school, rabbis and education directors balance the content of the Jewish studies curricula to include teaching both basic Jewish knowledge and specific skills that will enable students to enter Bar/Bat Mitzvah training. During preparation for the ritual, rabbis and tutors balance the desire to teach students skills they can apply broadly to Jewish practice and the need to ensure that students acquire the general skills necessary to lead services, chant texts, and interpret Torah so they can perform competently. Finally, rabbis assist the student in accomplishing the one-time public ritual.

77 The program, Reform Judaism’s B’nai Mitzvah Revolution, is “a joint project of the Union for Reform Judaism’s Campaign for Youth Engagement and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion’s Rhea Hirsch School of Education and its Experiment in Congregational Education. We aim to empower synagogues to return depth and meaning to Jewish learning and reduce the staggering rates of post-b’nai mitzvah dropout. We believe that a root cause of these challenges is the perception that b’nai mitzvah celebrations are like graduation ceremonies.” (2013)
performance but also lead the congregational service so that others can worship. This chapter examines how the tension between process and performance is expressed at each of these three points.

The director of a religious school or a teacher in that school, responsible for students at different ages and in different grades, faces a different set of problems from a tutor who works with one individual child at a time, while the rabbi, managing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service itself, faces still another set of problems. This chapter takes each of these situations in turn, examining the factors that affect how the tension manifests in the relationships between the participants. In the process students and their families are changed through fulfilling congregations’ requirements, while congregations are shaped by their need to prepare these families.

**Supplementary School: Teaching the Basics**

I joined the year that Leah went into kindergarten. I was definitely looking for a congregation because I knew I couldn’t do the do-it-yourself Jewish education that my parents did. [Or Hadash] had a parent-child program that met loosely every other week...It was enormously welcoming and wonderful experience for me. I found people that I liked, I found a community that was supportive, I found education that I enjoyed—all those things. *Mother belonging to Independent Or Hadash*

Congregations with supplementary religious school require families to join synagogues and students to attend religious school for between two and four years prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. While most families attending Orthodox congregations, many attending Conservative congregations, and a few attending Reform congregations send their children to Jewish day schools, these schools serve regions, rather than individual congregations, and so are not part of this study. However, they affect congregations and congregants in two ways. First, most children of families which belong to Orthodox congregations attend day schools. As a result, Orthodox congregations often have little or no supplementary education, which places students who do not attend day school at a disadvantage. Second, some congregations (especially Conservative) have a large percentage of students who attend day school. Integrating these students and their families into congregational culture is a challenge for congregations, but again, this is a subject that falls outside the scope of this work.

A few students who belong to congregations may be taught individually from beginning to end. This model occurs in congregations with few Bar/Bat Mitzvah students, which therefore cannot support a school. In these cases, the rabbi worked with each individual student for around two years, with no clear transition from basic Jewish education to Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation.

When I asked education directors to state their overall goals for their schools, their answers fell into these three categories. The question came up indirectly in interviewing families with similar results. See also (Prell, 2007), who found similar results in interviewing parents in Philadelphia.
through the school year (around 30 weeks). In the early grades, students learn Jewish studies for a few hours a week; in third or fourth grade, another few hours are added for learning Hebrew. In that limited time, curricula covers several core topics: time-bound practices (Shabbat, holidays, life-cycle events); values (including ethics and Tikkun Olam (social action)); texts and liturgy; Jewish history, including Israel; the nature of prayer and God; and last, but far from least, knowledge of Hebrew, particularly as it applies to liturgy and Torah. These topics have remained central to the curricula through time and across the different denominations, as these examples show:

(a) Understanding of the Hebrew language...
(b) Ability to read the prayers with a reasonable degree of fluency ....
(c) Understanding of the customs and ceremonies of Jewish life.
(d) Knowledge and understanding of the major events, personalities and movements of Jewish history..... *Chicago Jewish community's 1938 standards for Bar Mitzvah (Communal Regulation of Bar Mitzvah, 1949 p. 155)*

The five big ideas that we want kids to look at in every year are God, Torah, Am Yisrael [peoplehood], Eretz Yisrael [land of Israel], and Tikkun Olam [repairing the world/social action]. Then they also do a Hebrew component, and they do Jewish holidays.

Education directors face the difficult problems of teaching demanding and complex material, managing sometimes inadequate teachers, and holding classes at inconvenient times. Supplementary schools teach a broad range of complex subjects to children, any one of which has generated an entire literature for adult. Teachers are hired on a very part-time basis and often lack formal teachers’ education, which makes teaching substantially more difficult. Students attend these schools after school or on weekends, when students are tired or when other activities compete for their attention. Many of the subjects taught—history, language, and theology (however rudimentary)—require the same academic skills as do secular academics, and thus compete for students’ intellectual attention. However, success or failure in secular subjects has the real consequences of grades. With the exception of Hebrew, there are few or no external consequences for not knowing, for example, that the names of the three patriarchs are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In addition to teaching content, leadership of these schools works to create spaces in which children feel a sense of Jewish identity and community. At large Reform Beth Jeshurun, for example, over 400 students from kindergarten through seventh grade attend a variety of different programs throughout the week. According to education director Hannah Firestone, it is “a very experiential program with art, music, drama, games... It’s not a traditional, academic, tables and chairs and books and pencils and learning history kind

Both teaching methods and language describing the overarching goals have changed to reflect contemporary language and issues, as this example from a Reform congregation shows: “My goal is for children to love the Jewish side of themselves. Because they come from intermarried backgrounds...embracing Judaism as a religion and a culture in a very positive and wonderful way is how Judaism continues.” This quote reflects the recent reality that children choose to be Jewish and that schools need to make a compelling case for that choice.

Day schools share this common subject matter, although they teach it in greater depth. For example, the website for Oakland Hebrew Day School lists the subject areas for each grade as: Hebrew, Jewish Life [holidays and home practice], Text Study, Prayer, Middot [ethics], Am Yisrael [Israel as a people and place].
of program.” In keeping with this goal, pictures of Israel and Judica, large print Hebrew prayers, and Jewish sayings written in Hebrew calligraphy hang on classroom walls and line the halls. Students chatter to each other as they run through the halls; it is a place in which students are at ease.

However, immersion in Jewish life through experiential learning requires a different approach to learning than does learning and analyzing specific and often complex content and ideas. While less of an issue in the early grades, older students in later grades are often expected to learn and discuss complicated material.

The following example of a seventh grade class of Beth Jeshurun includes Hebrew, prayer, and theology. The session focused on the Amidah, a set of prayers central to every service. Understanding prayer is not easy, even for adults, so it is particularly challenging subject matter.

Kendra, the teacher and a college student majoring in Jewish Studies, found it difficult to engage the class. After several attempts to elicit responses from the class, she gave up and simply explained the meaning of the set of prayers: “First, it reminds God...that we come from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...Then it does three things: ...praises God, asks God for stuff, and thanks God...” Kendra’s explanation was sufficient to spark a wide-ranging discussion that encompassed the revelation of the Koran and scientific evidence for the ten plagues. Kendra used that moment to summarize the another moment of revelation—the story of Moses and the burning bush—and bring the class back to the prayer that began the discussion, saying: “God uses Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to identify and justify Himself to Moses. When we talk about our ancestors, we’re kind of kissing up to God. How do you feel about God doing the same thing to Moses?”

An informed discussion on prayer in general and this set of prayers in particular requires knowledge of how key Jewish narratives and relationships are repeated in different contexts, an understanding of how prayer has been conceptualized, and some theology. Kendra simplified all three of these complicated topics to engage the students; in doing so, context was unavoidably lost—as the digressions show.

The second half of the class turned to the Hebrew vocabulary from the prayers discussed. Kendra expected students to be able to read and translate individual words, but only half could do so and then translate correctly; the others sounded out the Hebrew haltingly, mixing up both consonants and vowels. This was noticeably frustrating for the students, who began squirming and shuffling feet. Kendra repeatedly called them to order, but to little avail.

Kendra’s class included students with different levels of Hebrew knowledge and engagement. As a college student, she had little experience either in teaching to different levels or in classroom management. As a result, students at all levels fidgeted and acted inattentive. During my interviews with the BBM students, somewhat more than half commented that they disliked supplementary school. Rory’s comments illustrate these problems.

Rory had attended Beth Jeshurun since preschool and enjoyed the early grades, when Hebrew was casually added into class: “Second and third grade were the best because [the teacher] taught us a whole bunch of really cool Hebrew words.” However, in fifth grade, there was an influx of children without that background. The time and energy they required resulted in Rory feeling unjustly ignored: “They should have focused on helping the kids that had been there since preschool because we had been working for it,
and then these people came in and they took all the time to help them.” In the end, his parents found a Hebrew tutor who reengaged Rory in the process. His Bar Mitzvah ended up being the thing he liked best about being Jewish: “I felt like I had been building for it for so long, my entire life, and it finally happened and it was really right.”

Both Rory’s story and the example of the seventh grade class illustrate the problems faced by these supplementary schools. These schools are charged with teaching basic Jewish knowledge and practice to students from families with different levels of motivation and knowledge. While there is broad agreement about the subject matter, there is little consistency about how that material is communicated: some is easily transmitted through experiential programming, other requires structure and analysis. To this already difficult context, schools face the need to prepare students for Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Part of the motivation for the aforementioned B’nai Mitzvah Revolution stems from a desire to reduce the effect of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah on the school curriculum: “We share with many synagogues a growing unease about…the fact that b’nai mitzvah preparation has, in many cases, supplanted other goals of synagogue educational endeavors.” (2013)

This implies that there is a clear distinction between knowledge necessary for Bar/Bat Mitzvah and other Jewish knowledge. The reality is a bit murkier.

In the example above, the prayer that Kendra’s class discussed was not one that students led during their Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, thus learning it served a more general goal of Jewish competence. The topics discussed in that class—relationship to God, Jewish narrative, the function of prayer—are arguably important topics for Jews to understand, whether or not a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual takes place. Similarly, although education directors face hard choices as they determine what type of Hebrew should be taught, Hebrew is an important component of Jewish identity, and all schools at least introduce students to the subject, most often through teaching prayerbook and Biblical Hebrew.

Jewish educators often linked the focus on liturgical Hebrew to Bar/Bat Mitzvah. At Conservative B’na’i Aaron, for example, one of the teachers with a strong connection to Israel explicitly commented on the relationship: “If Bar or Bat Mitzvah was not a factor, we would scale back on the amount of t’fillot [prayers] we teach, so we could devote more time to conversational Hebrew.” Other teachers had different opinions: one felt Hebrew was the most important subject because knowing it gives the opportunity to study Torah, another felt that most students would experience Judaism religiously and therefore, liturgical Hebrew was most important. The relationship between subject matter needed for Bar/Bat Mitzvah and that needed for Jewish literacy more generally is complicated. Nevertheless, many teachers and educators commented on the teaching constraints that, particularly for students in the later grades, resulted from acquiring Hebrew skills needed for the ritual.

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82 A common language is widely understood to be as an important indicator of both group cohesion and boundary distinction, both as a means to define nations and to define groups more generally. See, for example, “Ethnic Groups,” (Weber, [1922] 1996).

83 Hebrew is typically categorized as Biblical, Rabbinic, Medieval, and Modern, and while vocabulary and grammar are similar, they are not identical. It is difficult to teach conversational Hebrew alongside liturgical (a combination of Biblical and Rabbinic) Hebrew—although textbooks and teachers try.

84 The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual is built on one facet of an informed Jewish life: regular prayer using Hebrew. So while the ritual can overshadow other uses of Hebrew, the regular Shabbat service does underlie the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.
Those skills include the ability to read (that is, simply decode) Hebrew, to lead and follow some or all of the Shabbat liturgy, to use appropriate sources to develop a speech, and sometimes to chant the different Torah and Haftarah melodies. Congregations vary in their expectations for each area—many of the students at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak could translate the Hebrew, while as the above example shows, some students at Beth Jeshurun had difficulty simply sounding out words. Without that foundational knowledge, students will have difficulty mastering the material specific to the ritual. As Bar/Bat Mitzvah approaches, school work to evaluate students’ Hebrew ability and knowledge to ensure they are prepared for training. These are almost always structured by Hebrew programs produced by denominational or independent presses.

For example, Behrman House, a non-denominational publisher of Jewish and Hebrew textbooks, lists several different Hebrew curricula in its catalog, with four different programs focusing on prayers and liturgy and two on modern Hebrew (Beh13pp. 96-113). The former (and preferred type in the Bay Area) lead students through Hebrew vocabulary and grammar using prayer and liturgy, while also including exercises intended to spark discussion around the meanings of these prayers. These programs include homework exercises and methods for evaluating students’ progress (increasingly including online tools).

In one typical program, Hebrew Through Prayer 1, fourth or fifth grade students who have learned to decode Hebrew the previous year, are introduced to the themes and meanings of several blessings and prayers, the first few prayers of the Shabbat morning service, and several important grammatical concepts (roots and the uses of prefixes and suffixes) and basic vocabulary (Trager, 1996). The explicit content and resulting need for evaluation differ substantially from more experiential Jewish studies programs. Further, evaluation results in a de facto hierarchy of learning: when students are evaluated on their ability to recite Hebrew prayers (a necessary part of performance), that recitation becomes, at least in the students’ eyes, more important than either understanding the roots of the Hebrew words or the meanings of the prayers.

An education director at a large Reform congregation described the differences between goals of teachers, parents, and students: “For me, [the goal is] to keep the kids engaged in Jewish learning and experiencing living Jewishly, seeing the world through a Jewish lens. However, … many parents have a goal for their children to become B’nai Mitzvah. As for the students, … some say, ‘I want to have a Bar Mitzvah,’ and some say, ‘I want to learn Hebrew because I want to go to Israel.’” While some students enjoyed

85 Almost all congregations expected students to chant (rather than read) these texts during the ritual. In some schools students were expected to learn the melodies as part of the regular curriculum, in others, learning the melodies was incorporated into Bar/Bat Mitzvah training, and in a few, students simply memorized the melody for their specific text.

86 Without this minimal skill, students cannot successfully proceed to the next stage of preparation for the event itself. Unprepared students, in principle but rarely in practice, might find their Bar/Bat Mitzvah service delayed (as mentioned in the previous chapter). This was the case for one family, which subsequently withdrew from this project. (That withdrawal points to limitations with the research: understanding how the problem arose and how—or if—it was resolved would have been a useful addition to my research, but too painful, perhaps for the family.) More commonly, students with poor Hebrew skills receive additional Hebrew tutoring, as was the case for several of my interviewees.

87 The balance of prayerbook to modern Hebrew in the catalog speaks to the greater demand for the prayerbook Hebrew.
Hebrew, many found it challenging and even daunting. Teachers and education directors struggled to determine which type of Hebrew to teach and to what depth, while also evaluating students’ skills. Parents simply expected their children to master these skills. If students completed Hebrew school without having mastered these skills (particularly Hebrew skills) due to an individual problem (often related to broader learning or emotional issues), individual solutions in the form of additional tutoring often remedied the problem. However, when parents see this as weakness of the congregation program, overt conflict can result, as was the case at two congregations at which I observed.

At independent Or Hadash, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program, including some Hebrew preparation, took places outside of the school curriculum, a philosophical decision that separated the goals of religious education and those of the ritual. While separating “process” from “performance” seemed theoretically plausible, in practice it had not worked well. As one lay leader described: “The kids are coming and they’re not ready….They’re there for their rehearsal on Thursday before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah and they’re not ready, and that’s way too late to be able to do anything about it. That’s the worst case scenario, the best case scenario is that the kids are able to read but aren’t familiar enough with the prayers, and so they have...to backtrack and learn their prayers [with the tutors].”

Because the Hebrew program did not focus on Bar/Bat Mitzvah skills, students learned much of this material with tutors. Changes were being made during the time I observed: the Hebrew program had begun to include teaching the chanting melodies for Torah and Haftarah, to align Hebrew content more closely with Bar/Bat Mitzvah skills and content, and to evaluate students’ prayer skills more frequently. At this congregation, despite the conflict, the lay leaders, rabbi, and education director all worked together to remedy the problem through adding more content to the school program and evaluating students more frequently. This was not the case at a second congregation with similar problems. There the situation was not resolved, and the congregation ultimately replaced the education director.88

These two examples point out clearly the real consequences that result when congregations do not address performance needs. There is broad agreement across the different groups of participants that supplementary schools’ overall goals should be to foster Jewish identity and build comfort with basic Jewish knowledge—goals well served by experiential, process-based learning. However, the skills necessary for the ritual itself require evaluation and performance. There can be serious ramifications when students fail to master these skills adequately, while, as both students and rabbis noted, mastery carries rewards above and beyond the ritual itself.

Preparing students and parents: the Bar/Bat Mitzvah year

Preparation and training begins anywhere from six months to two years prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual. It always includes preparing the individual student, a subject I discuss in the following section, and often includes classes for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort and/or their parents that address the parents’ questions and concerns and the context in which Bar/Bat Mitzvah takes place, which I discuss in this section. While there is general

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88 While I will not discuss this issue in depth here, I do want to note the role of Bar/Bat Mitzvah parents as an interest group. When these parents were dissatisfied, that dissatisfaction led to action—remediation in one case, replacement in the other.
agreement regarding core topics covered in religious school and the content of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual, there is no such agreement with regard to these family programs. Rather, these programs are largely shaped by rabbis’ and education directors’ individual philosophies, their attitudes toward Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and the perceived needs of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah families. Some programs are focused specifically on the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual: placing it in a Jewish context and/or providing specific information about the parental responsibilities of managing guests and celebrations. Other programs, particularly in contemporary congregations, teach general Jewish knowledge and skills (in the same way as when, in the early to mid-twentieth century, the congregational Bar Mitzvah event was made contingent on more general Jewish knowledge) and attempt shape the attitudes of both parents and children toward Bar/Bat Mitzvah. For example, one rabbi of an independent congregation described teaching the blessing, recited in Orthodox congregations but rarely in others, that praises God for releasing the father from being punished on account of his son. Regardless of form, like the school curricula, these programs are shaped by the tension of teaching children and family practical skills to ensure a smooth performance and teaching the deeper Jewish context for the future.

In some congregations, particularly those where students attend day schools, these programs may not exist. This was the case at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak where planning for the ritual depended on the individual skills, knowledge, and network of each family. In theory, this approach implicitly minimizes the place of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the life of the congregation, but may also make it more difficult for leadership to supervise and shape the event. Thus, another Orthodox congregation had recently instituted a Bar/Bat Mitzvah program to ensure that families approached the ritual with some standard knowledge.

In other congregations, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program comprised the seventh grade curriculum. This was the case at large Reform Beth Jeshurun. There, a complicated Bar/Bat Mitzvah program addressed topics of general Jewish knowledge within the framework of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. For example, families were required to attend a set of six Saturday morning classes that introduced them to important prayers and underlying concepts of prayer, peoplehood, and practice more generally. Although these lessons take place within the context of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation, the ritual is not the focus and rarely mentioned. While the skills necessary to perform Bar/Bat Mitzvah affect the content of the school curriculum, here the opposite occurs: preparation for the specific event provides an opening to teach general topics.

Most commonly, special Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs take place concurrently with the supplementary school program. Some congregations held only a few classes, others required participation in intensive family or student programs. While there is not time to fully explore the range of these programs, a few examples show the variation. One large Reform congregation has the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort gather all the money that would be spent on gifts. They individually research charities and make their cases to the group.

Finally, depending on how activities are structured, programs can encourage building community cohesion for families, students, or both. This is an important goal for retaining families: in congregations that actively structured ways for families to build relationships, parents were more likely to remain. I discuss this in greater depth in the Conclusion.

In other words, the son is now responsible for his own adult (Jewish) actions. Through history and in current times, since this is almost always limited to the Orthodox community, the gendered usage remains.

The congregation attended the service regardless, but the preparation was individual.
finally deciding on how to allocate funds. While not specific to Bar/Bat Mitzvah, this activity fits in with the Reform movement’s emphasis on social justice. Several congregations plan weekend retreats which are intended as intensive education and bonding experiences. A number of congregations use these classes to address specific problems, most notably the parents’ speeches to their children. Whatever form the class takes, the underlying tension between performance—as with the form of the parents’ speech—and process—how that speech is developed (or not) in a Jewish context—remains. This example from independent Or Hadash’s family program shows in more detail how these programs balance teaching general Jewish knowledge with developing competence for the service itself.

The session’s goal was to show how Jews create and teach knowledge from one generation to the next—a subject that has both general and specific relevance. Most of Rabbi Melmed’s congregants have little knowledge of either the scope of Jewish texts or the methods by which scholars of one period use and comment on the scholarship of previous generations. This final session introduced families to that general knowledge. At the same time, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual is about passing tradition from one generation to another and so the subject has relevance for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah families. The two-hour session was divided into four parts: one taught how Jews choose and pass on which Jewish values, the second, through a game of “Telephone,” demonstrated the difficulties inherent in oral transmission, the third gave examples of Jewish debating techniques, and the final exercise turned to the practical issues of how Jews, as communities and as individuals, determine modes of Jewish practice.

The following description of the first exercise shows how Rabbi Melmed uses the lens of Bar/Bat Mitzvah to frame the general goal of increasing Jewish knowledge.

Families began by choosing two mottos that represented their own values—one from rabbinic texts (including Rabbi Melmed’s favorites) and one from a compilation of other families’ favorite sayings. Rabbi Melmed then explained: “Jewish thought and debate didn’t end with when the Bible was canonized….Around 200 CE, the rabbis put together the Mishnah….[which] means ‘repetition.’ So what are you going to repeat? They shared what they knew: Everyone asked everyone else: ‘what do you do? What happens if…?’ ....Even now, that’s what rabbis do—someone asks a new question, then a rabbi will apply what he knows.”

Having located the exercise in Jewish tradition, Rabbi Melmed asked Joel, one of the students, to explain one of the sayings his family chose.

Joel responded: “Laugh and live longer.” Rabbi Melmed asked which family had contributed the saying. Joel’s parents frantically flipped through the booklet of family sayings to answer the question, which gave the rabbi the chance to teach points: how to cite others’ work and the reason for citing.

He instructed the group: “Remember to say ‘b’shem omri so-and-so’—“in the name of the person” who said it. Everyone repeat that.”

The group echoed, “B’shem omri.”

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92 For example: “Chew with your mouth closed;” “People are more important than things;” “Don’t find problems, find solutions;” “No whining!” “Don’t give up. You can change the world by being like water on a rock—drop by drop.”
Rabbi Melmed continued: “That’s their immortality. That’s what keeps them alive. When you are adults, you will be quoting each other and keeping each other alive that way.”

While Rabbi Melmed had been talking, Joel and his parents had found the quote. Joel repeated the quote correctly: “We like: ‘Laugh and live longer,’ uh, b’shem omri the Stern family, because we like to have fun.”

Through using Jewish texts along with family sayings, Rabbi Melmed integrates Jewish past and present into what families are already doing. In this way he interprets what families do anyway—create their own culture—through a Jewish lens. He then ties their family actions and experiences back to the moment in Jewish history that defined Rabbinic Judaism, thus linking each family to that heritage. This is similar to the vignette that began the last chapter, in which the family moment of passing the Torah through generations is linked back to these same Rabbis.

While this session used the Bar/Bat Mitzvah to frame general Jewish skills and knowledge, other sessions taught practical skills for performing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. For example, in one session students and their parents progressed through a set of stations, each enabling students and parents to practice a specific skill: how to put on a prayer shawl properly with the appropriate blessing, how to find the correct place in the Torah and say the blessing correctly, how to pass the Torah safely and carefully from one person to the next. Each station addressed a different area where a gap in knowledge would stand out, potentially embarrassing the individual and damaging the ritual itself.

This example is apparently about ensuring a smooth performance. Even here, however, the skills necessary for that performance are also necessary for adult Jewish competence. In this way, both performance and process are served. While the issues of performance and process that underlie the school also underlie these Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs, the kind of tension that results is quite different. In these programs, the two issues complement each other, while in the school, the content necessary for the performance often conflicts with teaching general knowledge. In the next section, which looks at individual training, the two goals are once again in conflict.

Training for the Service: Mastering the Texts, Developing the Talk

Six months to a year prior to the ritual, students begin individual tutoring to learn their Torah and Haftarah material and to review and rehearse the service, particularly those prayers they will lead. Then, somewhere between three and six months prior, students begin working with rabbis to develop their talks. The expected content guides these lessons as well. As discussed in Chapter Two, Bar/Bat Mitzvah speeches follow the pattern of the adult divrei Torah—a summary of the text, a problem or question raised by the text, and an interpretation of that text—to which students add a discussion of new status. This common pattern directs the development of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah speeches. Similarly, the service—whether regular Shabbat or Bar/Bat Mitzvah—requires correct chanting and Hebrew pronunciation, which then shapes the content of the tutoring sessions.

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93 About eighty percent of the time, rabbis worked with students. The other twenty percent varied, from congregant mentors to group classes to parents. Here I focus only on rabbis, as this is the normative pattern.
These private lessons have much in common with other kinds of tutoring—music lessons or sports coaches, for example—in which a teacher with expert knowledge in a given field works with students individual students, ideally taking into account their skills, knowledge, and tastes to guide them to a greater understanding of and competence with the material. Through learning the subject matter, the teacher ideally develops a relationship with the student and through that mentoring, guides the student to both love and be competent in the given subject. This ideal student-teacher relationship is the stuff of stories and dedications in which successful students credit former teachers for inspiring them to continue. Based on the passion with which most rabbis and all tutors discussed working with students, that ideal is what these teachers strive for. At the same time, as with other subjects, a performance—in this case, a peak ritual—structures the lessons. And unlike with other subjects, the time spent with either rabbi or tutor ends after that ritual. So, while individual training bears much in common with other forms of tutoring, the finite duration and focus on the performance can change the approach.

These performance requirements of correct chanting of the specific texts and interpretation of a specific text are in tension with the larger ideals of rabbis and tutors to develop a relationship with the student and inspire them Jewishly. Tutors and rabbis are constrained in doing so by the skills and interests with which a student enters training and available time, which is then mediated by the teacher’s own interests and abilities. In this section, I examine the process by which rabbis working with students on their talks and for tutors working with them on texts mediate that tension. In both case, these teachers take available time, expected content, and individual variation of the students into account. However, because of differences in the type of material, the tension between performance and process manifests differently. To illustrate that, I begin with one family’s perspective, then turn to the two types of tutoring.

Coming from behind: Adam Miller’s story

Harvey and Karen Miller belong to independent Or Hadash, where their son Adam had attended religious school since kindergarten. Or Hadash expects students to master a substantial amount of Hebrew prayers and texts, in addition to preparing an explanatory booklet, developing a talk, and leading a discussion based on that talk. As the Millers began to think about Adam’s Bar Mitzvah, they were unpleasantly surprised to discover Adam’s Hebrew was not adequate to begin tutoring at the usual six months prior, but that he would need extra work to catch up. They chose one of the several independent tutors, Gilbert Gershman, to teach Adam.

Harvey described the first few months: “We started nine months before instead of six months, when we learned that Adam never really learned Hebrew in the three or four years...Gilbert just went back to the basics like flash cards and showing him how to read, but Hebrew is not the kind of thing that comes easily to him. We’d pick him up after tutoring and we’d get eye rolls... and sometimes tears.”

Adam met with Gilbert for an hour twice a week for the first few months, then, as his skills progressed, began meeting weekly. He describes the process and his progress as follows: “I learned how to speak slowly, but still get the Hebrew solid... I learned a lot of trope. I learned to read without the vowels from the Torah. I also learned the Haftarah and how to memorize: going little by little, repeating words and then going further...Gilbert really knew my learning process and... when I should be done, so he planned out my whole calendar....”
From Adam’s perspective, preparing the texts, while difficult, was made easier by through learning the mechanics that would enable him to perform competently mattered most: knowing how to recite the Hebrew, understanding how to memorize, and learning the chanting schema. Further, Gilbert’s ability to organize the material reassured Adam that he could master the material. Despite his difficulties, both Adam and his father thought learning these texts was central to the ritual, although for different reasons. Donald Miller thought that commitment, rather than content, was the point: “Committing that you’re going to do something, in a language that you don’t really speak, is a silly task to ask someone to do, but going through the process and saying that you’re going to do this unnatural task and doing it with good spirit is a good learning experience.”

Like his father, Adam, thought the lessons mattered, but that the text did as well: “I had been studying for nine months and it’s a two hour service, so...I feel like, I’ve been working this hard for nine months – it should last for nine months,” but he had also gained a sense that the words themselves mattered: “I think it was important for people to hear what came out of the Torah word for word, so I did a little translation.”

However, regardless of how Gilbert approached the material, in the end Adam had to perform the ritual competently, which he did, as he recounted with some pride: “I think it went really well. I only remember messing up one small time, and my tutor fixed me, he whispered it to me, so I fixed it right away.”

Developing the talk was a rather different and, in many ways, easier task than learning the texts. A few months prior to the service, Adam met with Rabbi Melmed for three hour-long sessions during which he choose the question on which his talk and the subsequent discussion would focus: “When do you think you have a connection with God?” During the meetings, the rabbi provided background material which Adam then discussed with his parents. Adam remembers the process this way: “Rabbi Melmed goes pretty fast...He is really intelligent and he knows all about the commentary of the books and he knows all about the history of every topic my Torah portion went into. The notes were kind of hard to write, but they were worth it because of the commentary... My final d’var Torah was really good and I was really proud of it. I feel like I got my ideas into it.”

Like Adam, most students are interested in discussing these challenging questions (more than one adult described them as “little lawyers,”) and very willing to have others listen to their opinions. Further, while the texts they are expected to analyze can be difficult to understand, they are in English. Students do vary in how knowledgeable and motivated they are, but these characteristics are not as significant in determining the length and complexity of the talks as the rabbis’ perspective. So, as discussed in Chapter Two, Rabbi Doron expected three paragraphs, only one of which interpreted the text, while the rabbis at Reform Beth Jeshurun and Rabbi Teitlebaum of Orthodox Adat Yitzhak both expected substantial analysis of the text. Despite these differences in length and complexity, the form of the d’var Torah that structures the Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk, as well as the expectation that each student will develop their own thoughts on a chosen topic meant that this part of the ritual provides an opportunity for deeper exploration of both content and meaning.

I began with Adam and his family to show how the decisions that rabbis and tutors make in order to balance required ritual content with a deeper understanding of Jewish learning (both content and method) affect the families. Next, I turn to how these decisions are made and how they play out in the lessons themselves, looking first at rabbis working on talks, then at tutors working on texts.
Rabbis and Students: Developing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Talk

In around 80 percent of Bay Area congregations, rabbis work with students to develop their talks. It is through these individual meetings to analyze and interpret specific texts that rabbis try to communicate their vision of Judaism and Jewish identity to students. Most rabbis feel strongly about how these relationships—as brief as they are—can change students’ views of the ritual, Judaism, or their relationship with the world. Rabbis told stories about the student who regularly returns to lead services, the student who brilliantly analyzed a difficult text, or a student who became inspired to do good.

For example, the rabbi of a small Reform congregation related proudly the story of a student who began his lessons weak in Hebrew and disengaged from the process, but was transformed through his meetings, becoming so enthusiastic that he could not wait for his weekly meetings with the rabbi.

One day, the student said: “Hey look, I think we got a problem. If the Bar Mitzvah service is too close to my birthday, it’s going to cut my presents in half.” The rabbi responded, “You need to understand that it’s not about presents,” and told him of another student who had asked that all her gift money be given to a charity of her choosing.

Intrigued, the student asked: “I don’t know about kids, but I was reading that polar bears may be an endangered species. What about polar bears?...Could I ask people to donate for that?”

The rabbi willingly agreed, then added: “Let’s take a look at the Torah portion and see if we can figure out any way to link what’s in your portion to something that has to do with the care of animals and people on the planet.”

This story has a mythic flavor to it, with the narrative implying that both rabbi’s influence and the ritual itself have transformative power. There is no good way to measure the effect these meetings have on students either in short or long-term. However, the spark of understanding and (perhaps) change in the student happens often enough to excite the rabbis I interviewed. As they recalled childhood or recent experiences of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, both adults and children mentioned relationships with their rabbis—sometimes positively and sometimes not. So while there is broad agreement that these meetings matter, the question of what happens in the meetings, how change (or the possibility of change) is facilitated remains.

The two examples below are apparently a study in contrasts: Rabbi Doron is a Reform rabbi working with a student with little Jewish knowledge, Rabbi Teitlebaum is an Orthodox rabbi working with a student with a much deeper grasp of Hebrew and Jewish texts. Rabbi Doron expected a short talk based on the student’s own response to the text, Rabbi Teitlebaum, a much longer exposition supported by Jewish sources. These two examples do show how different expectations on the rabbis’ parts and different knowledge and practice on the students’ parts lead to different results, not a particularly surprising result. However, these obvious differences mask the similarities in the way both rabbis work to elicit student interpretation of the text, leading to an individual reading of the material.

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94 Many parents expect to develop a relationship with the rabbi; when this doesn’t occur or (as in the case of one family from Beth Jeshurun) when that relationship ends at the conclusion of the BAR/BAT MITZVAH, that disappointment can affect their relationship with the congregation.
Rabbi Doron of Reform Sukkat Shalom meets with each student ten times (substantially more than the more common three to five times). In this time, he helps them translate the Torah text they will read, develop the talk, and works with them on an individual statement of Jewish commitment called the “bond to Torah.” He strives for: “a positive emotional experience. I want them to have a sense that they’re going to go on...I use the yod [pointer for reading Torah] as the central symbol of the service, implying a grasp and a competency of what they’re doing, but the goal is really more for the family, to have a sense of respect for their growing teenager.” Thus, he sees himself as mediating the students’ move to a more adult place in family and world. In these meetings, as the following session with Denise Shore shows, he balances text and ideas throughout.

In one of their first meetings, Denise chose to read and interpret the moment in Numbers when God causes Aaron’s staff to sprout, blossom, and produce almonds overnight as a sign of Aaron’s leadership. As she has learned to translate and recite the text, she has been thinking about what this miraculous event means. This lesson begins as Rabbi Doron reads her draft carefully, correcting facts, making structural suggestions, then turning to interpretation as he asks why the staff blooms. Hesitantly, she replies: “Because God wants to show that Aaron is the one who’s in charge...”

“Good, but tell me more about what happens.”

She tells the story in a few words, ending with the description of Aaron’s staff: “First there was a bud, then there was a flower, then an almond. So that shows that Aaron deserves his high position.”

Rabbi Doron presses her to make a connection between the text and her own life: “You have to talk about three stages...something like: ‘My Bat Mitzvah happened in three stages.’ Why is the first stage like a flower?”

“Because it’s pretty. I didn’t think about the hard work—it was just pretty to think about,” she says, then continues: “The bud is next—it has a hard shell, and isn’t pretty—that’s the hard work. You have sit and do the hard stuff to get to the next stage.”

“And the end is the almond?” asks Rabbi Doron.

“Yeah, the last stage is the almond...Maybe the almond is what I’ve been working for all this time and now I get to pop it into my mouth.”

Through this gentle prompting, he ensures accuracy and clarity, then makes sure she links that text with her life. In keeping with both his philosophy of a simple talk and the knowledge base of his population, his primary goal is not to bring other commentary, whether Jewish or secular, into the discussion, but to engage the student in relating to the text itself.

While Rabbi Doron’s expectations for student mastery are quite different from those of Rabbi Teitlebaum, both rabbis strive to build that relationship. Rabbi Teitlebaum describes his philosophy as:

Not uniform by design. I explain to families that whatever they’ve seen others do should not be their concern. Their child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah by waking up on their twelfth or thirteenth birthday respectively. What are we going to do to make this transition into adulthood meaningful? That’s when we talk...I want them to take into account two things: their interests, and what they’re going to keep doing through their lives.
With this flexibility, some students choose to give Bar/Bat Mitzvah speeches of the “d’var Torah” model, others give lesson on topics of personal interest. These can vary from describing the laws of Purim to explaining laws related to building a sukkah (hut for the holiday of Sukkot), or the laws of the Cohanim, a traditional division within Judaism that marks the ancient priestly class. Bill Wolfson is a Cohan and so chose to study those laws. In one early session, Rabbi Teitlebaum and Bill begin studying the Shulchan Aruch, a 16th century compilation of rabbinic law written in a kind of shorthand that assumes a high level of background knowledge. This lesson is largely devoted to filling in those gaps.

During the first part of the lesson, Bill reads and translates, while the rabbi explains the rather opaque text. A few exchanges illustrate this:

Bill reads the Hebrew and translates: “As it is written: ‘You will make him holy. Rabbis receive the tradition, for everything this holy, to open [Torah reading] first.’”

Rabbi Teitlebaum explains, saying that the principle of being first to read Torah generalizes to other situations in which Cohans are given the first opportunity. Bill continues: “but with regard to Torah reading in Shul, the sages made a rule “darchei noam” to encourage peace.”

Again Rabbi Teitlebaum explains: “This means that you can’t give away the spot; the Torah reading has to be in that order. Why? Because if Cohanim could give it away, people would fight over it. What happens if there isn’t a Cohan? Then we can give it away, for example, to a scholar. However, you can’t give it to a Levi [another priestly division] because they get the second spot.”

During this section, both Bill and the rabbi are completely focused on the text, Bill working to translate accurately, the rabbi to provide clear interpretation of these very specific practices that will directly affect Bill following his Bar Mitzvah. As the lesson draws to a conclusion, they move to the computer, where Rabbi Teitlebaum asks Bill to review the material. As he does so, the two discuss different ways to apply the rules in specific cases, commentary that also enters into the notes.

The differences between content, underlying student knowledge, and rabbi’s goals are substantial. Bill is mastering detailed material that he will explain (without personal interpretation) and then, as an adult Jew, utilize, while Denise is using broad metaphors to connect Jewish narrative to her own life. Bill’s knowledge of Jewish writing and ability to read and translate Hebrew enables him to engage with material that Denise does not even know exists. However, in both cases, the rabbis are working to build a deeper sense of the material with which the student is engaged. There is no question that the final product matters, but it is the process of getting there that matters to both student and rabbi.

Tutors and Students: Language, Melody, and Performance

Like rabbis, tutors work with students in order because of their own passion for transmitting Judaism through engagement with Judaism. For rabbis, that engagement happens through textual interpretation; for tutors, it happens through teaching the texts and chanting. However, while the talks can be tailored to the students’ abilities and

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95 The place of Cohanim within Judaism varies by denomination, with Orthodox Judaism both acknowledging and observing the distinction. Becoming Bar Mitzvah is particularly meaningful for Bill, as he will be subject to both rights and privileges of this status.
interests, the texts are less malleable: students most often have at an assumed number of verses and prayers to master and then perform. Contemporary and traditional congregations follow different patterns of prayer; students in contemporary congregations need to know or learn the required prayers and melodies, while students in traditional congregations need to know or learn those patterns. Both Torah and Haftarah are chanted, using different melodies. While Haftarah reading includes vowel and melody notations, Torah is always chanted from the Torah scroll, which includes only the calligraphed consonants.

As Adam’s father and others noted, simply enacting—or performing—the difficult and unfamiliar material, irrespective of its content and meaning, has its own value. While assuring a competent performance is necessary, in the process of achieving that goal, tutors aim to establish a relationship between student and text. Nevertheless, however much tutors want to discuss the larger issues, the needs of the performance itself dictate the content of the tutoring. How that content is communicated depends on the knowledge a student has, the interests of the teacher, and the time available for the lessons, as the examples below show. The first two vignettes compare similar approaches across different models of Shabbat services: the first from Orthodox Adat Yitzhak which follows the traditional model; the second from independent Or Hadash, following the contemporary model. In both cases, the students are well-prepared, the lessons, at around an hour each, are quite long, and both tutors are passionate about their different approaches to the material. The third vignette illustrate a very different approach: that of large Reform Beth Jeshurun, in which the relationship between tutor and student is briefer, more standardized, and results in an emphasis on performance. The final vignette illustrates the reverse: when an emphasis on process results in too little time to prepare for the performance.

At Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, Simcha Solomon is one of several independent tutors. Like many of these tutors, he holds a day job, but tutors a few students both as a service to the congregation and to pass on his love for studying and interpreting Jewish texts. One of these students was Bill, who we met earlier in this chapter, working on his talk with Rabbi Teitlebaum. Bill entered tutoring with the ability to translate Hebrew with moderate skill. Because his family attends services regularly, he has learned the prayers mimetically. Because he chose to chant the entire Torah portion, he began working with Simcha a year before his Bar Mitzvah, meeting weekly for an hour.

Bill had chosen to chant the entire Torah portion (Genesis 44:18-47:26), which discusses Joseph’s reunion with his brothers after they have come to Egypt to beg for

96 Adam’s father, perhaps hyperbolically, called the preparation “silly.” While this was an unusually harsh assessment, many parents and rabbis found as much value in the skills learned as in the material. For example, in addition to discussing his goals for students’ relationship to Judaism, Rabbi Melmed also commented: “They all develop a great sense of poise at the bema. I get this from parents later on. They say their teachers don’t know how they work so well, where they can...ask the text questions and feel confident exploring different aspects of it. I’ll tell them that’s what I’m trying to do.”

97 This is a similar schedule to Michael and Gilbert’s schedule. The difference in the two families’ responses has to do with what each student was learning (Michael was relearning basic material, while Bill was using those basics to learn more) and what each family expected (Michael simply wanted to perform the material, while Bill wanted to study the meaning of the texts).
In this session, which took place about a month before the Bar Mitzvah, Bill had completed the Torah and begun work on the Haftarah, taken from Ezekiel. As Simcha introduced this new material, he split the lesson between learning the text and discussing its meaning. The text discusses the reunion of the Northern and Southern kingdoms.

Simcha began by chanting a verse and confirming that Bill could repeat it accurately, then moved on to translation and interpretation: “And you, O mortal, take a tablet and write on it, ‘Of Judah and the Israelites associated with him;’ and take another tablet and write on it, ‘Of Joseph—the stick of Ephraim—and all the House of Israel associated with him,’” then asked Bill to explain the connection between Torah and Haftarah. Bill says that in both cases there is a reunion between estranged parties.

While Bill’s response showed that he understood the obvious relationship between the texts, Simcha continued with background information from the traditional interpretation of the text, which is not evident from the words themselves: “The Haftarot have a general sense of movement from one prophet to the next. They have a sad side—we’ve been beaten down—but the hopeful side is bringing people back together...”

This pattern of chanting and translating text alternating with interpretation continued throughout the lesson, with the interpretation from an Orthodox perspective. At the end of the hour, they had completed the Haftarah reading and Simcha summed up the interpretation: “We saw three dualities: Sadness in the destruction of the Beit haMikdash and happiness in the joining of the two halves of one people. Then there is the duality in God, between “Elohim” and “Adonai,” or King and Master. And finally the promise of a covenant with Yaacov’s children of peace (shalom) and land (Olam).”

Throughout the lesson Simcha confirmed that Bill could perform the words and melody accurately. This took little time, enabling Simcha first to confirm that Bill understood the plain meaning of the text from the Orthodox perspective and then to extend that basic understanding into symbolic connections and meanings. Both Bill and Simcha are part of a community where common words and phrases from the text evoke a particular Jewish narrative. With this shared knowledge and culture, Simcha was able to move quickly through his interpretation with Bill’s understanding and participation. All these factors—Bill’s knowledge as he began tutoring, their common culture, the length of each lesson, and duration of the tutoring process—enabled Simcha to spend the bulk of each lesson on interpretation, rather than repetition. Joshua Goldenberg, one of the tutors at independent Or Hadash, faces a different set of challenges—that of filling the gap between high performance expectations and minimal knowledge—and focuses on a different aspect of the texts—the nature of the chant as opposed to the interpretation of the text.

At both Adat Yitzhak and Or Hadash, students choose from a number of independent tutors, each with a different style. At Adat Yitzhak, Rabbi Teitlebaum informally approves

98 Rabbi Teitlebaum allows flexibility in the material students choose to master, however this much Torah read by one individual is unusual. The norm is for several adult men to read each week.
99 The First Temple, destroyed in 586 BCE.
the tutors; at Or Hadash, Rabbi Melmed provides a guide for tutors that includes detailed instructions on the type of texts tutors are to use.100

At Or Hadash, students usually chant twenty verses of Torah, the entire Haftarah, and around two-thirds of the Shabbat morning service. This is a relatively large amount of material to master.101 As in many congregations following the contemporary model, most families and students know less and about Judaism and are less engaged in Jewish practice than those at congregations following the traditional model. At Or Hadash, this creates a gap between expectations for Bar/Bat Mitzvah and family’s Jewish knowledge. Intensive tutoring is one way this gap is filled, so Joshua’s lessons, like Simcha’s, last for 45 minutes to an hour, with tutoring beginning six months to a year before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Joshua also mixes interpretation and learning, but the students he teaches were raised to question authority, so his approach is not traditional: “I say to them that it’s okay to say this material really sucks, you can say that and nobody is going to shoot you down for that… The challenge is that it’s all very rich material, but finding that richness is a little more of a challenge in some portions.”

However, where Simcha teaches textual interpretation, Joshua is a musician and focuses on how the music of the chant adds meaning to the text. Both in religious school classes and in tutoring, he encourages his students to treat the tropes as malleable, giving them permission to play:

I want them...to go back a thousand years and be there with the Ben-Ashers when they were designing this system... to take an English text, put tropes on it and make sense of it...[in class] somebody will put in merchas and tipchas and come up with something pedestrian. I’ll ask “Where is the real interest in this text? What can we do?” Someone else says, “Oh yeah, let’s put a pazer.”102 It’s surprising...they have a good instinct for what goes together.

Joshua’s ability as both musician and performer informs his tutoring, but does his interest in the text’s meaning. I observed him work with Shoshana at one of the last meetings before her Bat Mitzvah, which was to take place on the first day of the fall festival of Sukkot. That holiday celebrates the harvest bounty and reflects the seasonal shift to pray for rain and the Haftarah, Zechariah 14:1-21, reflects this latter theme.

While not able to translate the text, Shoshana was a capable student, comfortable with both melody and Hebrew. Nevertheless, she began the lesson with some trepidation: she had only practiced the Haftarah three times and was not at all sure she would be ready to chant it the following week. Joshua responds to her anxiety: “If it seems like a struggle, our instinct is to go faster. The best thing to do is to slow down and give the words some space. I do that reading Torah. Sometimes I have to wait for the word to come...If I have to give you a few prompts, that would be fine.”

100 While many contemporary congregations rely on photocopies or booklets put out by denominations, Rabbi Melmed wants the texts placed in context. Part of his work with families includes ensuring that families own and can navigate key Jewish texts: a Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), a Chumash (Torah by weekly portion with associated Haftarah and commentary), and a Tikkun (Torah by weekly portion with and without vowels).

101 Other congregations may expect more in one area but not as much in another—for example, leading the entire service, but only chanting a few verses of Haftarah. Few require as much in all areas.

102 Mercha and tipcha are common symbols that represent groups of just a few notes; pazer is unusual and represents several measures of melody. Thus, placing a pazer on a word will emphasize it.
Here Joshua gave practical advice about the performance, both reassuring her and reminding her that he would be there to support her during the ritual. He continued with information that enabled Shoshana to organize the material: “The text is most important. If you can’t get all that right, get the consonants. The vowels can change a bit, depending on meaning, but the trope [melody] is to serve the words.”

This advice informed much of the lesson, as the two worked through the Hebrew line by line. Then, in the last few minutes, Shoshana noticed a few verses that have been incorporated into the Shabbat liturgy, at which point she and Joshua began to discuss the meaning of the text, placing it in historical context.

Both Bill and Shoshana have lessons that are long enough to enable them to explore the text, albeit in different ways: the former looked more broadly at themes that rely on and reinforce the traditional Orthodox approach to texts, while the latter considered the more academic question of how and why the Biblical text was incorporated into the prayerbook. A very different kind of lesson takes place at Beth Jeshurun, where tutoring is integrated as part of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation program.

Most Bar/Bat Mitzvah students enter the tutoring program after a six-session program to ensure that their Hebrew reading (decoding) skills are adequate. They study with a member of the staff (either cantor or cantorial soloist) for six months of weekly twenty minute lessons, learning twelve to eighteen verses of Torah and four to six verses of Haftarah. Students are not expected to know much Hebrew, although the more knowledgeable students are familiar with some key root words and rudimentary grammar. Tutors use a color coding system to teach students to chant correctly, however unlike either Bill or Shoshana, students at Beth Jeshurun do not learn the trope markings themselves. With less time in each lesson and less knowledgeable students, tutors—by necessity—focus on performance.

This can be seen in the following session, in which Mira meets with Judith, whose Bat Mitzvah is to take place three months later.

Beth Jeshurun, with around 80 Bar/Bat Mitzvah students each year, has a very structured Bar/Bat Mitzvah program and tutoring fits into that: tutoring sessions are scheduled during religious school and take place in the synagogue library, where glass doors reduce the intimacy of the individual lessons. To ensure that all students have the necessary material, Beth Jeshurun supplies students with bright notebooks (to reduce chance of loss) containing everything from schedules to photocopies of the texts.

Judith is one of the few students at Beth Jeshurun who attends Jewish day school and thus has more knowledge of the Hebrew than most. As a result, the lessons—designed for students with less knowledge—are relatively easy for her. Despite having missed the previous week, she has used audiofiles to master the requisite three verses, with which the lesson begins. Using an enlarged photocopy of the text, liberally highlighted to identify the different melody groups, she chanted confidently, missing only one word.

103 Unlike many congregations (including both Adat Yitzhak and Or Hadash), Beth Jeshurun has no additional fees for tutoring, which is integrated into the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. The education director explained with some pride: “The majority of our students never get an outside tutor... and we don’t charge an extra B’nai Mitzvah fee. So obviously there is a philosophical statement there.”

104 This stands in contrast to expectations at either Or Hadash or Adat Yitzhak. The sheer number of students requires more routinization than at either of the other congregations.
They moved to the next set of verses, which Mira color-coded and labeled, as Judith practiced fitting melody and words together. With five minutes remaining, Mira checked Judith’s prayers. Judith recited them accurately but very quietly, so Mira asked her to stand, saying: “You need to be louder. The sound isn’t good in the sanctuary, so you’ll have to belt it out to be heard.” Judith complied, standing and chanting the three prayers loudly. Mira had just enough time to write the next week’s assignment in Judith’s binder book, before it was time for the next student.

The contrast between the two types of tutoring experiences is striking. While fluent in Hebrew, Mira’s passion is the music of the service. This knowledge enters into the lesson as she focused on performing the melodies of the text. Judith knew more Hebrew than the typical Beth Jeshurun student which enabled her to read the text comfortably and easily. Unlike either Bill at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak or Shoshana at independent Or Hadash, she had not been taught the melody system (although she had begun to figure it out on her own). Thus, where Bill and Shoshana could combine melody and text on their own, Judith could not. Further, while Mira moved through material quickly, most of the lesson was devoted to chanting the Hebrew correctly: there simply was not enough time to either translate or interpret the text. In addition, Simcha and Joshua worked with only a few students at a time and controlled the communication with parents. Mira moved from student to student, while communication happened through the notes kept in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah notebook or with the administrative staff as intermediaries. The shorter lesson, the total number of students, and the need to teach basic material constrained how much time could be spent on either relationship between student and tutor or student and text.

In the preceding examples, tutors struck different balances between process and performance, but in all three cases, the student was prepared for the ritual. What happens when focusing on process results in inadequate preparation for the performance? This was the case for Henry Eisenheim, from Or Hadash. Due to learning problems and inclination, Henry had weak Hebrew skills and began Hebrew tutoring a year and a half before his Bar Mitzvah. Both he and his tutor enjoyed discussing the moral issues raised by his Torah portion and often these discussions would consume much of the lesson. A few months before his Bar Mitzvah, it was necessary for him to switch tutors. Henry’s mother, Linda, reflects on the experience: “I don’t think Henry was as far along as he should have been when [the original tutor left]....In the end we had to cut lines for Alex’s Haftarah...I would have liked the tutor to be proactive about where we should be at certain points...The rehearsal on Thursday was very rocky, and Friday was a very stressful because we didn’t know how it was going to go. It went well, but it was stressful.”

Henry too, found the experience difficult and imagines how it could be different: “If I’m going to read Torah again, I want to know what I’m reading about a month and a half ahead of time...because I don’t want to be in a situation where I’m pressured...We had so many fights in our household based on that.”

The difference between Henry’s experience and that of Adam Miller, who introduced this section, illustrates how important preparing for the performance itself is—and how

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105 The choice not to teach this was based on balancing other congregational priorities (in this case, a very involved social action program) as well as students’ and families’ other commitments.

106 The switch had been planned due to the tutor’s other commitments; it was unrelated to Adam’s progress or relationship with the tutor.
that preparation affects the student. Both boys left religious school with relatively weak Hebrew skills that resulted in extra tutoring. However, while Henry was left scrambling during the week prior to his Bar Mitzvah, as Adam’s Bar Mitzvah approached he felt more, not less, confident, as his mother reflected: “He was a moth for nine months, miserable, and then a few weeks before, you could see him become this amazing butterfly. He went from being miserable and not knowing anything, and all of the sudden he just sort of got it.”

Each of the four vignettes focuses on performance differently. While Judith’s Bat Mitzvah date was three months away, Mira spent much of the lesson coaching her on presentation. By contrast, although Bill’s Bar Mitzvah was only a month away, the issue of performance never arose. Shoshana’s Bat Mitzvah was imminent. She raised the issue, and Joshua placed his individual advice for Shoshana within the broader context of leading the service, making it clear that performance continues to be an issue for every service leader. Finally, Henry’s Bar Mitzvah preparation shows what happens when process overshadows performance.

Whether students are adequately prepared or not, the day of the ritual inevitably arrives, students perform a ritual that has the dual function of demonstrating their mastery of the material—that is, performing—and facilitating worship for others—that is, enabling process. Before and during the service itself rabbis and tutors play a key role in balancing these two goals and in ensuring (where possible) that the ritual is performed smoothly. How that takes place is the subject of the next section.

The Big Day: Managing the Performance

The evening before her Bat Mitzvah at Conservative B’nai Aaron, Julia Orlansky remembered thinking, “It’s going to be okay.” And, like almost all Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, it was:

“When I got up I was just thinking, ‘Yay, I get to wear that really cute skirt I picked out.’ But when I got there, I didn’t feel it was my day until I got on the bimah and there were 300 eyes staring at me.

Then it was...talking to people about what I went through and educating people like my friends who didn’t know about Judaism....It was presenting everything I’d worked on for months and months.

Julia is most aware of the performance, that is, presenting competently the material she has worked to master over months. However, at B’nai Aaron, she is also leading a regular Shabbat service and it is the dual nature of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service as both a regular Shabbat service and a peak event that underlies this work. Chapter Two described the relationship between the two services, while Chapter Six will examine how cohort size and service norms lead to a service becoming more of private family event or a public community service. This section, too, takes that duality into account. However, both process and performance require at least the appearance of competence and so leadership works to ensure competence from participants and attendees. This section examines the methods by which leadership attempts to both forestall problems and rescue the ritual when problems arise with the tension between the service as process or performance

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107 It would be difficult to draw general conclusions from the limited number of observations I made. However, I will speculate that at Beth Jeshurun, lessons focus on performance simply by default: there is not enough time or knowledge to engage in more substantive discussion.
emerging as part of that overall goal. There are three groups, each with different needs and problems: the Bar/Bat Mitzvah students themselves, other participants, and the attendees. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah students are, of course, the focus of the ritual and the putative leaders of the service. However, they are inexperienced in this role—that is, after all, part of what the ritual represents—and so leaders work to manage potential problems before and during the service. Leaders know who, other than the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student, will participate in the service. They can act to educate these participants but have substantially less control over them than they do over the students. Finally the attendees, particularly guests, may have little familiarity with service etiquette and there is no means by which the congregation can educate them. Thus leadership attempts to educate and manage this group without disrupting the service itself. For all three groups, professional leadership—tutors, cantors, and rabbis—work to control lay behavior and participation. This implies that the leaders themselves are competent. Before turning to the three groups of lay participants, a few words about the leaders themselves are in order.

The role of rabbi as arbiter of Jewish practice is central to the congregation: the rabbi embodies “correct” Jewish practice. The role, by definition, assumes a level of competence and confers the power of legitimate authority on them. As a result, a leader who breaches that assumption by behaving outside congregational norms results in problems that are difficult to resolve: because of the rabbi’s role as leader, challenging that role also damages the ritual. Much of my data relies on interviews with leaders, who—for obvious reasons—did not describe any of these events and so, while I want to note the problem, it only entered this project peripherally: two parents described unpleasant incidents with rabbis at their own Bar Mitzvah services. Nevertheless, I would be remiss if I did not note that this section assumes the rabbis are competent with regard to ritual. Given that assumption, rabbis—but also tutors and cantors—have different concerns and use different techniques to manage students, service participants, and attendees.

On the Bimah: The Bar/Bat Mitzvah student

It kind of just went by and boom! I was done. I didn’t really realize it was my Bar Mitzvah. I just…sang with them [the congregation] like it was a regular service. When I got up, it felt like me leading the service in third and fourth grade. When I read Torah I felt exhilarated and I felt some adrenalin, but nothing crazy…Leading the discussion was my favorite and was what I remember most. Bar Mitzvah student, independent Or Hadash

Tutors prepare students to lead prayers and chant texts and rabbis direct their speeches, but the ritual still consists of a few hours during which things can go wrong. The question isn’t so much: “what might go wrong?” but: “how do the leaders prepare for problems and rescue the ritual when problems do arise?” Joel’s comments reflect the feelings of most of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah students I interviewed: the students play their parts with some exhilaration, and when it’s over they are surprised that it has gone by so quickly. When participants, especially the students, know and are comfortable with their roles, as Joel and his family were, the day flows by apparently without incident. Either Joel

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108 The rabbi’s role as leader is central, interesting, and complicated. That discussion falls well outside the scope of this work, however it is important to understand how the rabbi shapes the service itself. I will also note that a few congregations form without rabbis, although it is not uncommon for these congregations to hire a rabbi as they grow.
did not notice or took for granted that the rabbi and his tutor stood by unobtrusively during the service to ensure that both his performance and the service proceeded smoothly. When Joel read from Torah, his tutor corrected his pronunciation several times. As Joel led the prayers, Rabbi Melmed added his voice as necessary to ensure the prayers were clear and audible to the congregation. While Joel guided the congregational discussion about his Torah portion, Rabbi Melmed stepped in from time to time to repeat comments from attendees or clarify an answer.

In the movement through preparation and enactment, the balance between process and performance shifts: enacting the ritual is primarily about a successful performance, particularly for the student. The shift from process to performance can be seen in the rehearsals. These have a dual purpose: they both help the student prepare for the upcoming role as service leader and alert the tutors and rabbis to places where the student may need help. Both aspects can be seen Mindy Simon’s rehearsal. Shelley Weinberg had tutored Mindy for over a year, as she struggled to learn the material; and even a few days before the ritual, she still lacked confidence. The purpose of the rehearsal was to instill that confidence, but also to alert Shelley to those places where Mindy would likely falter.

A few days before her Bat Mitzvah, Mindy met with Shelley for the final rehearsal. Like many students at Conservative B’nai Aaron, Mindy began by leading the opening prayers of the Torah service, but lost her place almost immediately. Her face crumpled, but before she had time to cry, Shelley insisted she try again: “Come on! Sing it out to the back wall!”

Mindy had more success the second time, as Shelley sang along with her in an undertone. As they continued through the choreography of the service, Mindy’s voice grew louder and more confident.

When they reached the Torah reading itself, Shelley spent several minutes on choreography, before Mindy practiced reading from the Torah scroll. Her reading was still shaky, so they repeated this twice. This allowed Shelley to mark the places where she would likely need to prompt Mindy.

They continued to the Haftarah, which Mindy chanted flawlessly and with complete concentration, concluding with a huge grin.

This fairly typical rehearsal of a willing, but not particularly gifted, student shows how much effort goes into protecting the ritual and the participants. First, Shelley made the details of the service explicit, describing placement, choreography, and even when to drink some water. Second, the rehearsal enabled Mindy to experience the event ahead of time and imagine herself in an unfamiliar role of congregational leader. Third, the rehearsal revealed weak spots in Mindy’s prayers and Torah. Shelley both encouraged her so that she gained confidence as the rehearsal went on, but also assisted her through the rough patches by prompting her or singing along. In doing so, Shelley practiced for her own role in the service: ensuring that her student could enact the ritual successfully. All three of these goals helped to assure a smooth enactment. During the service, Mindy appeared poised and confident, though Shelley prompted her where necessary.

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109 Leading the service as performance is not only something that affects students; several rabbis in contemporary-model congregations commented on carving out times in which they were members of the congregation, rather than service leaders.
Joel, Mindy, and other students represent the usual case: students are prepared to some reasonable degree and enact the service with more or less help from their teachers. But sometimes there are unavoidable problems, with illness, injury, or weather being the most common. These circumstances are (usually) managed in one way or another. The student who faints is revived; the student who has the flu takes aspirin, sips chicken soup and pulls through before collapsing; the student with a broken arm asks a sibling to help carry the Torah around the sanctuary. While memorable, these incidents say nothing about the student’s knowledge or ability to enact the ritual, but simply pass into family and congregational lore.

Of greater concern for both student and ritual are problems that result from error, inexperience, or ignorance—that is, problems that are (or judged to be) within the participants’ control. With these kinds of problems, things can go very wrong. In the next example, the student felt uncertain of the material, and unlike in Mindy’s case, was not prepared for the choreography of performance:

I just couldn’t do the whole Hebrew thing, because I wasn’t very fluent. I tried to read the English, but it was different, and I read really fast and I wasn’t sure what to do. [My tutor] never told me how many seconds to count and I didn’t realize she wasn’t up with me until I turned around, and she’s sitting on the bench! And someone else started [the prayer] for me! It was really horrible.  

From an adult perspective, this mistake was just a minor glitch and, in fact, both parents where quite proud of their daughter’s accomplishment. Yet the student’s sense of humiliation was palpable even several months after the event and illustrates why leadership places such importance on preparing for the performance aspect of the ritual.

While protecting the student from embarrassment is critical, leadership balances that with protecting the integrity of the ritual process itself. This can be seen in how rabbis handle correcting mistakes in chanting from Torah. Whether at regular or Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, the person chanting the Torah performs the important role of enabling attendees to hear the sacred text chanted accurately. In many congregations, when a reader hesitates or makes a mistake, the gabbai (reading assistant) corrects the reader, as Joshua described to Shoshana above. In other congregations, the child’s performance can take priority over that ritual requirement, as one Reform rabbi explained to me. When a student mispronounces a word, the rabbi whispers the correct pronunciation under his breath: “So long as the word is pronounced correctly by someone, that’s okay. But I don’t like to rattle the kids and it’s embarrassing for them.”

When the student is not adequately prepared with regard to material, performance skills (e.g., vocal projection), or choreography or when the student is not guided through the ritual, both performance and process suffer—or, more to the point, the student suffers along with the attendees. But when the ritual is compromised, again both process and performance suffer. The extensive

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110 For example, one rabbi described waiting on tenterhooks until a seriously ill student’s fever subsided just a day before the event.

111 While students ranged in how they felt about their services, both in enactment and effect, this is the only case where the student felt she was an example of a “not successful” ritual.

112 Whether attendees or students understand the Hebrew is another question. The answer is that some do and some don’t.
preparation before and facilitation during the event enables leadership to steer a course between these two extremes.

*Parents, Grandparents, and Family Friends: Visitors to the Bimah*

In all congregations, Bar/Bat Mitzvah families honor important friends and family members by assigning them parts in the service. While rabbis and tutors can prepare Bar/Bat Mitzvah students and their families for the ritual, they have much less control over how well these honorees know their parts. Participants may or may not have adequate knowledge of Jewish practice, denominational norms, or congregational customs. Where congregations follow the traditional model, the safeguards already in place to guide those less familiar with practice suffice (albeit enacted with somewhat more vigilance). As a matter of course, these congregations may have another person, in addition to the *gabbai* (reading assistant), assigned to assist participants in their roles, telling them when to open the Ark, where to stand on the bema, or when to step down again. These instructions take place as a matter of course and usually ensure that the service proceeds smoothly. At the same time, the very routine that ensures service flow can be more easily disrupted by guests.

At congregations following the contemporary model (in which Saturday morning services are most likely Bar/Bat Mitzvah services), safeguards are less likely to be part of the regular service and special Bar/Bat Mitzvah moments are more likely to take place. Two common areas where rabbis safeguard the ritual are when the Torah is passed through the generations and during the blessings on reading Torah.

When the Torah is passed from one person to the next, there is some chance it will be dropped. This is not an idle concern: when asked whether his congregation included this moment in the services, another rabbi said emphatically: “No, I don’t do that. I was at a congregation where someone dropped the Torah. I won’t do it!” Another approach is that of Rabbi Melmed, who insists that parents and their children practice passing the Torah, giving precise instructions for which shoulder to place it on as it is passed to the next person and where to place which hand. Other rabbis never hand the Torah to the participants, but have them touch or hug it, while rabbi maintains control.

A second area of concern is when the person called to the Torah for an aliyah skips or misreads a line. In all Orthodox, most Conservative, and some Reform congregations, one of the leaders would prompt the participant to correct the mistake: the sanctity of the moment is trumps the performance and the correction is a matter of course. In other congregations, the mistake is ignored, so long as it does prevent the person from completing the blessing. One rabbi solves the problem by using it to contrast with the student’s more polished efforts, a solution that emphasizes the ritual as performance.

Whether at a congregation following the contemporary or traditional model, this is the area to which leadership devotes the least time. These participants are, for the most part, outside the control of the leadership and their momentary participation rarely has a

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113 These honors include opening and closing the Ark that contains the Torah, reciting English or Hebrew texts, raising and/or dressing the Torah, and reciting blessings before and after Torah reading.
114 As one congregation, the Ark is located at the top of a flight of stairs. During the Torah service, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student often carries the Torah through the congregation. At this congregation, the student receives the Torah only after a rabbi has carried it down the stairs.
serious effect on the service. By contrast, the behavior of the attendees throughout the service can affect the nature of the service more substantially.

“Silence Your Cell Phones, Please”: Managing the Guests

Attendees both witness the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and, ideally, follow and participate in the service, so that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student fulfills the role of service leader and teacher, as opposed to performer. Both performer and service leader use similar skills, but the service leader is leading an actively participating group; the performer is exhibiting skills before an audience. The distinction for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student is subtle; the expectations of the attendees are quite different. A congregation is expected to know liturgy, etiquette, and culture and participate appropriately; an audience is expected to observe and applaud.

In addition to the different roles, the composition of the attendees creates another set of problems. Bar/Bat Mitzvah families invite friends and relatives, some of whom may not be Jewish and, if Jewish, may not be knowledgeable. One typical list of invitees included: “Friends from school. I do a lot of sports, so all my friends from sports. Friends from synagogue. Family friends, family.” The variation in knowledge between a soccer teammate, for whom the Bar/Bat Mitzvah may be the first Jewish service attended, and the proud Jewish grandparent can be substantial. Further, while the teammate may not know how to participate, it is the grandparent who is more likely to treat the service as a performance and, in so doing, breach synagogue etiquette.

Leaders use different methods to manage problems of participation and etiquette. Both these areas affect the ritual. In the first case, the ritual is part of the Shabbat morning service. If that service becomes a performance (“a solo act,” as some rabbis call it), it changes the ritual in ways that can—particularly to the leadership, although necessarily to the family—feel inauthentic. In the second case, a breach of etiquette—for example, when the attendees treat the Torah reading as a performance and burst into applause at its conclusion—damages the ritual, but not, perhaps, as much as the rabbi who then chastises the congregation, further disrupting the service and embarrassing well-intentioned visitors.

Congregations handle the first problem, that of participation, through providing resources for guests, through individual help, and through explicit encouragement from the leaders. For example, Conservative B’nai Aaron provided small booklets which transliterated the most common Hebrew prayers. In addition, several people greeted attendees as they entered, made sure they had the necessary texts and then monitored guests through the service, stepping to orient those unfamiliar with the prayerbooks. Similarly, Orthodox Adat Yitzhak provides prayerbooks in English-Hebrew, Russian-Hebrew, and linear translation. And, while there are not formal greeters, member of the congregation watch for newcomers to ensure they are following the service comfortably. In both cases, these are congregations for which Saturday morning is the primary service, with a base of regular attendees who both support the service and congregational customs, and also recognize newcomers.

At Reform and similar congregations, leaders often explicitly introduce the service. For example, one cantor reminds the attendees to sing: “If you don’t know the words, sing la-la-la. If you don’t know the melody, sing louder!” while at Sukkat Shalom, Rabbi Doron, as part of his welcome, explains that the prayerbooks read from right to left and that indented English text is intended to be read by everyone. These attempts to encourage
participation are not often successful; both having a culture of congregant participation or having the primary Shabbat service take place on Shabbat morning are, not surprisingly, better predictors of attendee participation than encouragement from leadership.

Leadership can have better luck with managing etiquette. Some etiquette problems result from simple misbehavior: the difficulty that young teenagers have sitting still, particularly in a group. This problem is not limited to children and teenagers. At Adat Yitzhak, children regularly run in and out of services, while adults often engage in quiet conversation during the service. However, just prior one Bat Mitzvah student’s talk, the room had become so noisy that Rabbi Teitlebaum gently called the congregation to order, reminding the chatting adults that the girl had worked long and hard and deserved their attention.

Other problems result from ignorance of custom; for example, taking photographs during a service or clapping following the speech. Virtually all congregations in the Bay Area prohibit these actions, as they indicate performance, rather than participation in worship. At one Reform congregation, I witnessed an elderly woman pull out her cell phone to click a picture of the Bar Mitzvah student as he read his portion. The rabbi attempted to catch her eye, but could not, and so quietly but distinctly asked her to put the phone away. While she complied quickly, her face reddened in embarrassment, which other attendees felt as well. Here, the ritual was given priority over the individual’s desire to record the performance.

As with providing transliterations, some congregations address etiquette in written form, as does Adat Yitzhak’s “Newcomer’s Guide” (also available on their website), where introduction addresses both participation and etiquette issues:

This is a brief guide that is designed to take the place of the informed (and sometimes talkative) friend who might be sitting next to you....Note that page announcements are fairly rare (as they are regarded as an interruption of the services), but the Rabbi and Gabbi (administrator of services) will do their best to keep you on the correct page... No electronics, cell phones, or cameras are allowed in the synagogue on Shabbat.

Other congregations inform attendees at the beginning of the service, although the very act of pointing out the rules moves the service toward performance. Or Hadash has taken the unusual tack of including a prayer at the beginning of the service that addresses “forbidden” activities. It is described as a prayer “for disabling cellphones and not using gum or cameras during the service” and, after the traditional opening formula, concludes by asking God “to preserve the quiet and dedicate a ‘Sanctuary from Paparazzi.’” In using the tradition form to create a new blessing and linking that blessing to a specific set of prohibited behaviors, Rabbi Melmed has defined the problem, given the prohibition an external authority, and integrated that prohibition into the service so that it becomes part of the regular process.

The balance between process and performance is nowhere clearer than with the attendees. Many are present only to witness the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual—that is, the performance. Managing both aspects becomes particularly critical in the moment.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has covered three different aspects of the same issue: how congregations balance the tension between Judaism as expressed through the process of
learning Jewish knowledge and enacting Jewish ritual for its own sake and the need to prepare students for a performance. The content for which the student is responsible is, along with other elements of the service, determined in some measure by the meanings of the ritual to the different participants. That content and those meanings then determine what the student is responsible for preparing and enacting. In the broadest sense, preparation can include learning and enacting basic Jewish knowledge during supplementary religious school or extensive BBM programs for students and their families, but also includes preparation for each individual student’s ritual. The tension extends to the event itself, as leaders attempt to ensure that the performance enacts a service within the context of a life-cycle ritual.

Assuring that competent performance is the greatest concern of both parents and students, for obvious reasons: regardless of how engaged or disengaged from congregation or Jewish life, the consequences of embarrassment can linger, as Shoshana’s example above illustrates. Thus, protecting both student and ritual become important—but also can be the source of conflict between parents and teachers in religious school, between students, parents, and tutors during BBM training, and, consequently, can result in stress during the ritual itself. Thus, it is here that great effort is expended by all parties to address these needs.
What are THEY doing on the Bimah?:
Setting Boundaries around Bar/Bat Mitzvah Participation

This chapter begins with the moment when the Torah is passed through the generations and illustrates how rabbis make decisions that balance inclusion in the service with maintaining religious and community boundaries.

At the beginning of the Torah service of Deborah Berkowitz’ Bat Mitzvah, Rabbi Doron asks her parents, Jake and Christine, as well as Jake’s parents, to join Deborah on the bimah. He hands the Torah to Jake’s parents; they pass it to Jake, who gives it to Christine to place in Deborah’s arms. After Deborah has carried the Torah through the attendees, she readies herself to chant five short sections from the weekly parsha, a typical amount for students at Sukkat Shalom.

Family and friends recite the first three sets of blessing before and after reading Torah and read English translations when Deborah has finished chanting each section in Hebrew. Then Rabbi Doron asks Jacob and Christine to come forward, saying, “We call Yaacov ben Herzl v’Leah, accompanied by Christine Berkowitz, for the fourth aliyah.” Jacob recites the blessing, while Christine stands beside him. Deborah chants from Torah, then Christine reads the English translation, after which Jacob recites the blessing following. Jacob and Christine remain on the bimah as Deborah is called for her first aliyah. As she completes the final reading and blessing, her parents hug her with pride and delight.

This moment goes by so smoothly that it is difficult to notice how Rabbi Doron has resolved—for this congregation at this time—three questions regarding who is permitted to participate in the service and in what capacity. First, and most taken for granted in liberal American Jewish congregations, Deborah’s Bat Mitzvah looks precisely like the Bar Mitzvahs of her male classmates. In non-Orthodox congregations this is the norm. However, even in these congregations, egalitarian practice dates back only several decades, while the Orthodox community is currently struggling with balancing traditional gender roles with egalitarian norms.

Second, Deborah’s father is Jewish and her mother is non-Jewish, and Deborah is being raised as a Jew. According to Reform movement rulings, this makes her a Jew. Conservative and Orthodox movements have a different definition: a Jew as the child of a Jewish mother, irrespective of how the child is raised. In the latter case, without formal conversion, Deborah would not be considered Jewish and would not be allowed to take part in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service.

Third, Christine is not Jewish, but she is part of a Jewish family, the mother of the Bat Mitzvah student, and a participant in congregational life. In determining how or if she participates in the Bat Mitzvah service, Rabbi Doron balances her status as a non-Jew with her role as a parent of Jew. He explicitly acknowledges Christine’s part in raising a Jewish leader.

115 In all cases, individuals can convert to Judaism, although there is little agreement between movements on which conversions are valid.
child by having her pass the Torah to her daughter. On the other hand, the blessing upon reading Torah includes a phrase that is specifically said by Jews, but has no meaning for non-Jews, so only Jake recites this blessing alone (although Christine participates by reading the translation). Rabbi Doron also is mindful of Christine’s (non-Jewish) parents, who are not community members and have not actively raised a Jewish child, but are Deborah’s grandparents. In the case, there is no role for them in the Torah service, but later in the service, they read a section of English from the prayerbook.

The differences between the two issues are clear. Intermarriage introduces the non-Jew—whether that non-Jew be parent or other relative—into a Jewish ritual. On the other hand, there is no question that Orthodox Jewish girls are Jewish; the question is: what religious roles can these girls fulfill? Despite the apparent differences between the two issues, rabbis and families struggle with the same underlying tension: that of reconciling the desire to be included in the service with the need to maintain coherent religious boundaries. In the end, congregational leaders, largely rabbis, find ways to allow girls in Orthodoxy and non-Jews in Reform congregations some, but not full, participation in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. This chapter looks at how rabbis make these decisions, asking: How do rabbis and lay leaders do the cultural work of reconstructing or defending the boundaries of “Jewish”? How do they balance the strictures of Jewish law, the desires of the individual family, and the expectations of other congregants? Where in the service do the boundary issues arise and what decisions are made about who is inside and who is outside, about who may participate and how? What are the meanings and consequences of these decisions to leaders, to families, and to congregants?

All groups wrestle with the fundamental problem of setting and maintaining group boundaries, so the importance of resolving these issues here should not be underestimated. Because boundaries and roles are determined by rules tied to group history and context, to particular values and beliefs, and to symbolic group narratives, when these boundaries are challenged—whether by changing norms (as happened to spur egalitarian practice) or by changing membership (as happened with intermarriage)—so the group’s self-definition.

Examples of these changes surround us, with different consequences for the group and for individuals within these groups: rather than choosing one race or ethnicity, individuals filling out the census can now check multiple boxes; rather than a mass entirely in Latin, Vatican II encouraged mass to be recited in the vernacular; and rather than marriage being defined as between a man and woman, it is currently being redefined as between two people, regardless of gender. Implicitly or explicitly, rituals in general and life-cycle rituals in particular reaffirm these boundaries and the group itself. Situations that challenge who is in and who is out, and lead to reevaluating rules that define boundaries—as both non-Jewish and egalitarian participation do—present existential challenges not only to the ritual’s meaning, but also to the group and group values. Thus getting these boundaries right matters to all concerned.

Changing societal expectations of gender roles on the one hand and rising intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews on the other challenge those boundaries. These changes have raised questions of who is a Jew, how non-Jews can participate, and in what

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116 This fundamental issue underlies much of sociological theory: Simmel and Weber address the general topic; while more recently Barth and Schneider have added to this understanding. Within sociology of religion, Stark and Finke (2000) examine different ways American congregations address the issue.
capacity women (and girls) can lead the service. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, pressure for gender equality within religious life led to changes throughout Judaism. In non-Orthodox congregations, egalitarian practice is the norm: girls have the same responsibilities as do boys and the differences that rabbis noted largely had to do with different average rates of maturity. Not so in the Orthodox congregations. There, rabbis continue to take different approaches to accommodate changing roles for women on the Bima—a subject that particularly affects Bat Mitzvah. However, because there are few intermarried families in Orthodox congregations, rabbis face little pressure to change congregational rules. On the other hand, Reform and, to a lesser degree, Conservative congregations see increasing numbers of intermarried families joining and both these denominations have had to find ways to negotiate the problems of defining who is Jewish and what is the role of the non-Jewish parent.

These changes reconcile general cultural shifts with Jewish practice, but also call into question group beliefs and narratives. If men have specific religious obligations imposed by Jewish law—that is, by God—then allowing women to participate equally can be seen to challenge the relationship between God and Jew. Similarly, if Jews have specific obligations imposed by Jewish law, allowing non-Jews to participate also challenges that particular relationship. And if Judaism is passed from mother to child, then expanding that definition changes the definition of Jewishness from one that is above all ethnic/racial to one that relies more on practice and/or belief.

While denominations set broad policy regarding these issues, rabbis are responsible for enacting them. For example, the Reform ruling on intermarriage (1983) did not discuss either how the new policy would be enacted or what consequences—including the role of the non-Jew in the congregation—would result. Similarly, while Orthodoxy holds to different roles for each gender, these do not account for changing cultural expectations, as congregants have grown to expect some acknowledgment of their daughter within the service. With intermarriage, rabbis are faced with interpreting general policy; with gender roles, rabbis reconcile denominational strictures and family expectations. These decisions do not rest with rabbis and families alone. Other congregants have expectations of both rabbi and service, so a decision that pushes the boundaries too far—for example, allowing a non-Jew to wear a tallit—may result in outraged congregants. Thus, as rabbis set limits around who may participate in Bar/Bat Mitzvah services and in what role, they balance

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117 The literature on gender in Judaism is extensive. It includes seminal works that define issues within Judaism such as Blu Greenberg’s *Women and Orthodoxy* (1981) and Plaskow’s *Standing Again at Sinai* (1991); historical contrasts and situating of Jewish gender roles (*Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, 1993) and (*Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 1997). The roles of women within Judaism fit into a more general consideration of gender within the religious context as discussed by, for example, both Mahmood (*Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 2005) and Gallagher (*Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, 2003) provide ways of considering gender in Muslim and Christian religious context.

118 One common approach argues for an essentialist view of Jewish men and women, each with separate but equal spheres of influence and power, as in Aiken’s *To Be a Jewish Woman* (1992). A more complete view of different approaches to women in the synagogue can be found in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (Grossman & Haut, 1992).

119 Both *Structural Change, Jewish Identity, and Interfaith Marriages of American Jews* (Tobin G. A., 1990) and *Rabbis Talk about Intermarriage* (Tobin & Simon, 1999) discuss rabbis’ approaches to intermarriage. This subject is very much a moving target, so attitudes have very likely shifted toward inclusivity.
denominational guidelines, the congregation’s sensibilities, the family’s expectations and/or needs, and their own philosophies. That is, in this case, the ritual is shaped by the different expectations and needs of the participants in tension with the denominational policy as enacted within the congregation.

Although the two issues raise similar questions, there are substantial differences between them. Non-Jewish parents who raise Jewish children do not claim to be part of the Jewish people. Thus, rabbis and congregations negotiate how best to include someone who is not formally part of the group in a ritual traditionally reserved for group members, that is, this is primarily a question of group boundaries. On the other hand, Orthodox Jewish girls are, of course, Jewish. Here, rabbis struggle with reconciling the different gender roles with a strict interpretation of Jewish law. In order to give each situation due consideration, I consider them separately.

**Interracial Marriage in Contemporary American Judaism**

Until the latter part of the 20th century, the rate of Jewish intermarriage was quite low, and most Jews who married non-Jews left the community. Both leadership and laity considered children Jewish mothers, but not if only the father was Jewish. Without Jewish heritage through the mother (or by formal conversion), Jewish practice was beside the point.

In the 1970s, the number of Jews marrying non-Jews began to grow from just a few percent to the current rate of around 50% (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2010). The rabbinic arm of the Reform movement responded by declaring that “the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent” and with a second and no less radical change: that Jewishness could not be transmitted by heritage alone, but required “appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people.” These “public and formal acts” included several life-cycle rituals, Bar/Bat Mitzvah among them (Committee on Patrilineal Descent, 1983). Since the adoption of the resolution, the North American Reform movement has actively encouraged intermarried families to join congregations, while their congregations have found ways to integrate non-Jews into congregational life. Enabling or limiting non-Jewish participation in religious activities generally and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service in particular is part of this larger concern for Reform congregations.

Both Orthodox and Conservative Judaism adhere to the matrilineal definition of a Jew. However, Conservative congregations have also encouraged intermarried families to join, although less actively and with more ambivalence than is the case at Reform congregations, as Rabbi Josephson of Conservative B’nai Aaron’s describes:

> We are starting to tell people, ‘hey, this is a new Conservative movement. If you marry somebody who isn’t Jewish and we couldn’t officiate at your wedding and IF you want to raise Jewish children but the partner didn’t convert—we are happy to try to help as much as we can.

Rabbi Josephson’s statement reflects ambivalence that remains within the Conservative movement. On the one hand, rabbis and others reject intermarriage on principle and refuse to officiate at the weddings; on the other hand, they recognize the current reality of intermarriage. The statement is an example of attempting to balance boundaries to community with inclusion, yet it also reflects an uncertainty about the place of these families in the congregation.
Orthodox Judaism strongly discourages intermarriage and, not surprisingly, few intermarried Jews affiliate with these congregations. Even so, all participating Orthodox congregations including one or two intermarried families and thus face issues that result. For example, in discussing the characteristics of people who attend Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, Rabbi Teitlebaum explained: “A majority tend to be on a path where they are actively engaging their Judaism or else they wouldn’t join an Orthodox synagogue. Others are here for a social family reason – I grew up in the synagogue. But far more likely: ‘I am not Orthodox in practice or belief, but I’m enjoying the sense of learning and community.’”

While all, including some Christians, are welcome to attend, only those who are Jewish according to Jewish law (halakah) may join the congregation. “Sometimes we have someone halakhically Jewish married to someone who isn’t, so the halakhically Jewish member joins, and the non-halakhically Jewish member comes along.” That is, at Adat Yitzhak, individuals with non-Jewish mothers or who have had non-Orthodox conversions would not be considered full members.

Congregational demographics, not surprisingly, reflect these different approaches to non-Jews in the congregation. Reform congregations’ intermarriage rates ranged from 30% to 70%; Conservative congregations’ rates range from 5% to 15%; while there only a handful of intermarried families in even the most liberal and welcoming Orthodox congregations. Different denominational stances regarding non-Jews in religious ritual result in different percentages of intermarried Jews, the effect of which are very different congregational contexts in which leaders made decisions about when, how, and which individuals could participate in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. With that introduction, I turn to how rabbis decide what words non-Jews on the bimah may say, what objects they can use, and which actions they may perform.

As intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews increased throughout the 20th century, the debate around its effect on the future of American Judaism has both intensified and changed. For much of the 20th century, intermarriage represented Jewish assimilation and disappearance, however until the 1960s, the percentage of intermarriages was small. Sklare first heralded the changes to come, predicting that the low 7.2% intermarriage rate would soar as third and fourth generation Jews married (Sklare, 1964). During this decade, social scientists, rabbis, and Jewish educators all dissected the issue. However, it was not until the 1980’s that the changes resulting from intermarriage began to be studied in detail, notably by Mayer, whose sociological analyses moved the discussion around intermarriage’s effect on Jewish continuity from a focus on heritage alone to the nature of practice. Mayer, along with Goldscheider, Phillips, and Cohen, bring both quantitative and qualitative tools to the debate over whether intermarriage represents the salvation or downfall of American Judaism. As

120 According to the 2013 Comparisons of Jewish Communities, this is the case nationally as well.
122 See, for example: Egon Mayer *Love and Tradition: Marriage between Jews and Christians.* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), *Children of Intermarriage,* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1982), and *A Demographic Revolution in American Jewry,* (Ann Arbor: Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies,
intermarriage has become increasingly normalized, the next generation of researchers has examined the reality of what happens in intermarriages themselves. Fishman has written generally on the subject, as well as analyzing the effect of gender on intermarriage. Through her history of intermarried Jewish women over the course of the 20th century, McGinity (2009) shows the continuity of the issues around intermarriage: the tension between individualism and particularism, as well as the desire on the part of intermarried women to remain Jewish despite—or along with—their intermarriages. Like McGinity, Thompson (2014) questions some of the assumptions surrounding intermarriage. Using ethnography and interviews, Thompson examines how individuals negotiate Jewish identity and practice within marriages and through interactions with institutions. Her distinction between “universal individualist” and “ethnic familialist” approaches taken by individuals are echoed in my findings within congregations.

Setting Limits around the Shabbat Service: the non-Jew on the Bimah

Whether a rabbi chooses to share that authority, ultimately decisions about content of and participation in Shabbat and Bar/Bat Mitzvah services rest with him or her. Rabbis begin by making rules around who can do what in the regular Shabbat services. These rules may be modified in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service to account for the special role of the non-Jewish parent. In both cases, the rabbi, sometimes with the guidance of a lay religious practices committee, balances the need to protect the Jewishness of the rituals with the desire to include community members.

At one extreme, the rabbi of a very small Orthodox congregation set very strict limits on participation. This rabbi allows intermarried Jews to participate only minimally and the non-Jewish partner not at all, saying: “We want them to realize their situation is not perfect. If the spouse can convert...that’s good. [And] we want to stay a role model. Orthodoxy as a whole has a very low intermarriage rate...So while we encourage everyone to come, we discourage intermarriage.” Intermarriage falls into a category that includes other offenses against Jewish law: “We wouldn’t give an aliyah to someone...who wouldn’t give a get [divorce document], any serious public breaking of Jewish law.... [On the] East coast where the standards are higher, if you transgress the Sabbath they wouldn’t give you an aliyah.” For this rabbi, Jewish law is absolute, as immutable as gravity: “We [Orthodox Jews] really view Jewish law as a reality and not just they’re nice things or persuasive or easy.” Thus, regardless of his relationship with either Jews or non-Jews, the rules remain fixed.


At the other extreme, the rabbi of a small, independent congregation describes one of most lenient policies, saying: “I’m really for Isaiah: ‘my house shall be a house for all peoples.” She illustrated her philosophy with the story of a Bar Mitzvah family in which the supportive and active non-Jewish step-father asked that his non-Jewish children (the Bar Mitzvah’s step-siblings) participate in the aliyah as part of the whole family. More strictly observant family members objected and the step-father’s children did not participate, but from the rabbi’s perspective: “I didn’t mind if a non-Jewish person stood up there, so long as there was someone Jewish in that group who was going to say the blessing.”

Whether firm or flexible, rabbis drew boundaries around who says what words in what language, who uses what ritual objects, and who performs what actions when.

Rabbis limited language and words to Jews in two ways: both in those who led and/or recited Hebrew, whether leading prayers or reading sacred texts, as well as in who was allowed to recite prayers incumbent on Jews alone. While no rabbi explicitly stated that Hebrew was being treated as a sacred language, only in one exceptional case (see below) did a non-Jew lead a Hebrew prayer. I should note that some rabbis distinguished between leading and participating: a number of Reform rabbis noted with pride that some of their non-Jewish congregants chant the Hebrew prayers along with (and as fluently as) their Jewish families.

Congregations following the traditional model differed in how they implicitly defined leadership from those following the contemporary model. In the contemporary model, prayers were treated independently, and while only Jews led central prayers, interpretive reading or translations might be substituted for less central prayers. These readings could then be assigned to non-Jewish friends and relatives during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual. By contrast, because the traditional model treats sections of the services as units to be led by a single person without interruption, this option was not possible practically or theologically.

As noted above, in virtually every congregation, rabbis set a key boundary around blessings that included “asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav vitsivanu…” (Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us…) with the rationale being simply that the words being spoken must have meaning for the person speaking them. Non-Jews, by definition, are not bound by obligations incumbent on Jews, therefore speaking these words that imply obligation is a misrepresentation of the non-Jew’s status. This boundary was stretched in some congregations, with rabbis saying that so long a Jew represented the congregation, non-Jews could be present. So, for example, a non-Jewish spouse could stand next to a Jewish spouse reciting an aliyah.

Rabbis also limited who was allowed to handle or wear specifically Jewish objects, in particular, wearing a tallit or holding the Torah. The same rationale that applied to the blessings also relates to ritual objects: boundaries are drawn around objects that are sacred to Jews or that represent the special relationship between Jews and God on Jews and what is open to all attendees. Thus prayerbooks and Hebrew Bibles are expected to be used by all attendees and every congregation made them available. By contrast, all congregations reserved the tallit for Jews alone. Because the knotted fringes represent

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124 This boundary was marked only in the public venue of the synagogue. Within family home observance, it was routinely ignored. Non-Jewish mothers routinely played the role of Jewish mother, including performing Jewish ritual as needed.
commandments, as with reciting the blessings above, there is no meaning to a non-Jew wearing this symbolic garment.

Finally, rabbis set limits around ritual actions and here too, they shared a rationale. Many of the actions that rabbis limit take place during the Torah service: opening the Ark, carrying the Torah through the congregation in procession, unwrapping and wrapping the Torah before and after the Torah reading, and lifting the Torah following the Torah reading. Most liberal congregations allow non-Jews to open the Ark and some allow non-Jews to wrap and unwrap the Torah. However, few (if any) allow non-Jews to carry the Torah through the congregation or to lift it following the Torah reading. The rationale appears to be same as in the previous examples: the closer the action puts the actor to the Torah and the more the actor represents the Jewish community, the more likely it will be reserved for Jews. So long as that rationale is clear—as with the blessing specific to Jews—the boundary is also clear. However, some of these actions are less easily categorized: Does the person holding the Torah while the Haftarah is read represent the Jewish community or not? What about the person opening the Ark? As a result there is more variation who is allowed to do what. For example, one Conservative congregation allows non-Jews to hold the Torah while the Haftarah is read, while some Reform congregations do not.

Whatever the specific decision, rabbis followed, with greater or lesser intentionality, three principles—although the interpretation of these principles varied. First, only Jews were allowed to say words, handle objects, or perform actions that are incumbent on Jews but not non-Jews. Second, only Jews were allowed to act in a leadership capacity. Non-Jews could be included in the service in ways that, depending on each rabbi’s interpretation, did not violate these two principles. However, these general principles can be bent when the non-Jew is a participating member of the congregation and the parent of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It is to that situation I now turn.

**Inclusion and participation: the non-Jew in the congregation**

Whatever Jewish knowledge the non-Jewish partner brings to the marriage, through formal learning or past experience with friends, he or she enters without being a Jew, effectively lacking a tribal membership card. As with Jews, non-Jewish partners also bring personal history and experience of their childhood religions (if any), as well as attitudes toward religion itself. Eight of the families interviewed were intermarried, with most of those in the Reform or independent congregations. I was able to interview seven non-Jewish parents (five mothers and two fathers) raised in very different cultures, nationalities, and/or religions: African-American, Japanese Shino, Iraqi, Catholic, and Protestant. In each case, families had committed to raising Jewish children, but still incorporated some aspects the non-Jewish parents’ culture.

For example, Mitsuke Hershel is Japanese, raised with some Shinto training. As with Aziza Orlansky, she found little meaning in organized religious practice, but supported Michael in raising their daughter, Emily. Mitsuke, like the other non-Jewish mothers I interviewed, took her family role seriously. At the same time, the family incorporates Japanese art and culture into home life, and Emily attended Japanese school along with religious school. As Emily studied for her Bat Mitzvah, Mitsuke was responsible for managing the children’s Jewish education, Emily’s preparation for Bat Mitzvah, as well as planning much of the party. Despite this, she discussed her growing knowledge of Judaism with some interest and pride.
The Bar/Bat Mitzvah experiences of all these students reflect the Jewish values and practices of their home life, expressed in the language and experience of a thirteen-year-old. In each case, the experience of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah was shaped by the cultural tools with which these students entered the process. Where parents differed in their approach, the students reflected parts of each parents’ interests and attitudes in their discussion. This should not be surprising—students are explicitly being taught the material and being told by all adults that the material they are learning and the event they are preparing for are important.

In the three most liberal congregations at which I observed, around half of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah services I attended were for children of intermarried families, as was one of the Conservative Bat Mitzvahs, while the Orthodox congregation made no special arrangements for intermarriage as the issue comes up so rarely. To provide context about intermarried families in the congregation, I return to Reform Sukkat Shalom and the Berkowitz family. Deborah’s B’nai Mitzvah cohort of 24 includes 11 intermarried families of whom Berkowitzes are relatively typical. Jacob is Jewish; Christine is not. When they married, they agreed—at Jacob’s request—that their children would be raised as Jews. Throughout their marriage, they have observed major holidays and Jacob passed on stories from his youth. Jacob, Christine, and their three children settled in the Bay Area just a few years ago and only then found a congregation that suited Jake’s Jewish sensibilities as well as Christine’s comfort as a non-Jew. In Christine’s words: “We really did more research when we moved here and visited more Reform synagogues and it was just kind of a feel of welcoming…And from my point of view, being a non-Jewish member, feeling like I was still part of the community and a member.”

Christine’s path to engagement in congregational life is common. At first she lacked confidence, feeling: “I don’t really know this terminology, I need to become more familiar with certain routines and traditions….I felt the need to observe because I wasn’t familiar with some of the customs and was cautious about…saying something that would make me really stand out…but I found people to be very open.” Over time, she became more involved, particularly volunteering for holiday celebrations and as a classroom parent. Their older son’s Bar Mitzvah and Deborah’s Bat Mitzvah affected her sense of being a mother raising Jewish children: “It was a very moving, beautiful experience…an acknowledgement that they wanted to be part of the Jewish community…There was an obvious, a real spiritual change for them, which was wonderful.”

Of the 28 families who participated in this research, eight were intermarried, with six attending Reform or similarly liberal congregations, one a Conservative congregation, and one an Orthodox congregation. All the congregations—whatever their affiliation—allowed, accepted, or welcomed the participation of non-Jews in social and educational programs. At Sukkat Shalom, non-Jews took part in services and holiday celebrations, in classes, and in social action activities. Jake describes his family’s participation as follows: “Attending services is one thing that we do and feel very comfortable with. I think the kids feel very comfortable, as does Christine…[in addition to volunteering in religious school] I think Christine participated in one of the adult education classes.

As their children prepared for Bar/Bat Mitzvah, these non-Jewish parents understood their role as one of support for their Jewish child—that is, of being a supportive outsider, rather than an entitled insider. Christine said: “I don’t read Hebrew and I don’t really understand what the prayers are about. I’m kind of learning as she’s learning, so my
biggest concern was: ‘How can I truly support her and guide her through this process when this is all new to me too?’”

Similarly, the Aldrichs belong to large Reform B’nai Jeshurun. John, the non-Jewish father of Rebekah, was concerned that he would not know “what was going to be required of [him] as a parent during the whole process.” To educate himself, John attended several Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, which gave him both confidence and perspective: “I saw kids who really knew their stuff and...kids who went through the motions...and you could see the difference. And Rebekah...totally did a great job and knew her stuff and her having one parent who's not Jewish, I thought was kind of going to rub off on the whole process and it didn’t.”

Neither John nor Christine felt entitled to participate in services, but both felt an obligation to support their Jewish families and took pride in their children’s accomplishment. Neither expressed an expectation that they would or should take part in the service itself—although both did. According to rabbis, these concerns are expressed by the Jewish parents, who sometimes argue for full inclusion of all members of their family, whether Jewish or not.

Rabbi Josephson, of Conservative B’nai Aaron, explains how he talks to intermarried families in which the Jewish partner requests that the non-Jewish spouse be allowed an aliyah, something no congregation allows: “If they [the non-Jewish partners] are going to stand there and say the aliyah, they didn’t make that choice [to be Jewish], so it doesn’t make any ritual sense. That’s something almost all non-Jews get, but most of the Jews in the intermarried situation become upset about.”

Being part of a community is the single most important reason participating families say they remain in their congregations and parents, whether Jewish or not, participate in congregational life, most commonly (as did Christine) through helping in the religious school, but also through attending religious and social events. Even at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak this is the case. Daphne Schechter, the non-Jewish partner in an intermarriage, studies with Rabbi Teitlebaum, volunteers in the gift shop, and takes classes. In addition, she enjoys “the social activities, because they helps me to deepen my relationships with people, and that’s really important to me.” When Daphne, Christine, or John attend services, bake challah, or attend a congregational dinner, they are not overtly singled out as non-Jews. However, the situation changes during religious rituals in general and during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service in particular. While rabbis establish rules that apply to all services, because Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a life-cycle event that has an explicit role for parents, it presents distinct challenges. There rabbis face the question of how and where to draw lines between rituals that, as with the aliyah (blessing on reading from Torah), are specific for Jews while still including individuals who, while not Jewish, have participated in Jewish community and family life. I turn to how they negotiate that issue next.

**Non-Jewish family, friends, and parents in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Service**

Generally we have Jews role-model rituals that only Jews are commanded to do. A non-Jewish father might hold the Kiddush cup but the

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125 In fact, some Bay Area congregations don’t ask this question directly when families join. When I asked what percent of the congregation was intermarried, some administrators could not answer the question, saying the question is not asked when people join. Typically rabbis and education directors can get this knowledge through asking about parents’ childhood, but it is not necessarily made public.
child, both because of Hebrew background and because the child is Jewish, would lead the prayer. A non-Jewish mother would lead the introductory reading but the daughter or son would light the candle. During a Torah service, Jews would dress and carry the Torah, non-Jews would be able to open and close the ark. There’s an English reading that’s clearly an alternative to the Torah blessing for the non-Jewish parent in the new Reform prayerbook...And that is something that might be nice to introduce in the future. 

Rabbi of a large Reform congregation

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, particularly as enacted in Reform and other liberal congregations, can include moments for family participation. Some are part of the usual service, most notably being called to the Torah, and so Shabbat service rules apply. Others are extra-liturgical and offer relatively neutral ways to include non-Jews. Rabbis effectively divide non-Jewish participation into two categories: the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child’s parent and other family and/or friends. While most of this section considers the role of the non-Jewish parent in the service, rabbis also find places for non-Jewish relatives and I consider this category first. Whether Jewish or not, Bar/Bat Mitzvah families acknowledge and honor friends and less closely related relatives through less central roles in the service. While the lines drawn for Shabbat services mark the ways Jewish relations can be honored, rabbis often create parts for non-Jewish friends and relatives. For example, in the vignette from Deborah’s Bat Mitzvah above, Jake’s (Jewish) parents passed the Torah to Jake and Christine, both of whom had contributed to Deborah’s Jewish upbringing. Christine’s parents were not part of that chain and did not participate. However, to include them in their granddaughter’s ritual, her father read an English poem on gratitude.

While the philosophy is similar to that at Sukkat Shalom, Conservative B’nai Aaron draws the boundaries more strictly. Here Rabbi Rosen, the senior rabbi, explains how he manages non-Jewish relatives:

Lately we’ve been getting people with non-Jewish relatives, asking: “What can they do, Rabbi?” What has satisfied people so far is to let them help out at the door. They can give out the programs, they can greet people. So far everybody has said “Oh that’s a good solution, Rabbi, thank you.” I really feel that there is an important boundary there.

Allowing non-Jews to greet guests and act as ushers provides a role for family members without encroaching on the boundary of the service. This boundary is somewhat higher than at many Conservative congregations, where rabbis find some roles within the service itself. For example, one rabbi allows non-Jews to read the set of prayers for country, peace, and Israel. She gave the following example: “We had a congregant who had a friend who was a Bedouin from Israel, so let me tell you, her Hebrew was fluent! I found it amazing – here was someone who had fought in the Israeli Army and...wow!”

The issue in both Reform and Conservative congregations is the same: finding roles for non-Jewish guests and extended kin while not encroaching on the particularly Jewish elements of the service. Even within the same denomination, rabbis draw this line in different places, although they are all creating or filling relatively minor roles. Determining boundaries for parents who are part of the congregational community is more difficult. There are several possible moments for parents in liberal congregations: presenting the tallit, giving a speech, passing the Torah, and being called to Torah. Of these, the former two
are primarily parental (rather than Jewish) roles, so in neither Reform nor Conservative congregations do these moments present a problem for including the non-Jewish parent. The latter two moments also symbolize passing Judaism from one generation to the next, that is, from Jew to Jew. In deciding how or if non-Jewish parents can participate, rabbis balance the role of the non-Jewish parent in raising a Jewish child with the Jewish character of the moment.

At Sukkat Shalom, Rabbi Doron is quite clear about why he includes non-Jewish parents in passing the Torah: “Usually when we pass the Torah down the generations, I give the Torah to the mother or father, and I involve the non-Jewish parent, I say that they’re as much a part of that chain of generations as the Jewish parent.” When Christine holds the Torah, her role within this specific Jewish community is made real. This is a typical solution for Reform and other liberal congregations.

On the other hand, one Conservative rabbi explained why he does not allow the non-Jewish parent to participate: “[Passing the Torah is] an option, but it’s incredibly awkward if there’s a non-Jewish parent. They’re not up there [on the bimah] for that. Most of the non-Jewish parents choose not to do it…. [There’s] awkwardness with the non-Jew – it kind of puts it in their face, so I discourage it, but a few people still do it.” For this Conservative rabbi, including non-Jewish spouses in passing the Torah crosses a line. At the same time, he wants to respect the individual. Avoiding the problem entirely by not doing the Torah transfer solves the dilemma.

Rabbis draw stricter boundaries around who recites the blessings before and after Torah, for reasons discussed above. Parents commonly are given the penultimate aliyah, with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child receiving the final one, so that they are present as the child symbolically becomes Bar/Bat Mitzvah. As a result, in liberal congregations, parental and the Jewish roles overlap, with rabbis finding different ways to include the non-Jewish spouse.

Some Conservative and most (if not all) Reform congregations call multiple people for each aliyah, distinguishing Jews from non-Jews by careful wording. This is the case at Sukkat Shalom, where Rabbi Doron calls forward Jake using his Hebrew name and adds “accompanied by Christine Berkowitz.” This distinction is subtle, but the attentive listener would note that Christine has no Hebrew name and does not say the blessing (although she does read the English translation) and therefore conclude that, although included, she is not Jewish. Both actions—finding ways to include the non-Jew but also to signal that the inclusion is partial—matter and are noted by the community in ways that can confuse or clarify relationships.126

Other liberal rabbis take similar approaches to participation. For example, one Reform rabbi says: “We have an English blessing we have [the non-Jewish parents] do. Sometimes they do the aliyah anyway. It happens, we explain it and all that, but it just happens.” In this case, the non-Jewish parent is given an “appropriate” reading. Nevertheless, some of these parents are caught up in the ritual moment and follow along.

As rabbis find ways to incorporate non-Jews who have helped raise Jewish children into a quintessentially Jewish service, they—and the families—are breaking historically new ground. All rabbis attempted to find an acceptable and respectful place for a non-Jew

126 For example, in one case, a non-Jewish father had not understood that the tallit was reserved for Jews. When he donned one at his son’s Bar Mitzvah, several congregants then asked when he had converted.
that did not violate their understanding of Jewish boundaries. Negotiating the place of the non-Jew in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a problem shared by all rabbis in the Bay Area. A similar type of problem is faced only by a few congregations and their rabbis: negotiating the limits of practice around the Orthodox Bat Mitzvah.

A Role for Women: Making the Orthodox Bat Mitzvah

In the case of including the non-Jew on the bimah, rabbis balanced the need to acknowledge the supportive non-Jew with the need to preserve Jewish boundaries, drawing lines such that non-Jews did not lead the community in Hebrew prayer or say words that would assume Jewish obligation. In that case, the primary issue concerned membership in the Jewish people conferring the right to enact Jewish practice authentically. The Orthodox Bat Mitzvah is a response to a similar issue of who has the right to enact Jewish practice authentically, but in this case, the boundary is not drawn between Jew and non-Jew, but between Jews who have been assigned different roles in enacting Judaism.

Judaism is hardly unique as a religion that developed with strict and separate gender roles. Particularly since the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, attention to gender has shaped and continues to shape Jewish practice and life. During these decades, all denominations except Orthodox adopted a formal policy of egalitarian practice, with Reform Judaism including women in prayer co-equal with men and ordaining the first woman rabbi in the US in 1972, while Conservative Judaism followed suit in 1985. Enacting these general policies resulted in any number of large and small issues at the congregational level, including questions about matters as diverse as language, dress, and authority. However, while complicated, these questions rarely result in discussions regarding rules about Bar/Bat Mitzvah participation.127

In these non-Orthodox congregations, men and women sit together, rather than on separate sides of the congregation. Both men and women may lead services and read Torah. This formal indifference to gender extends to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah students as well. Few rabbis acknowledge differences between boys and girls, except to note that girls tend to be more mature in their approach to learning. In a typical comment, a Conservative rabbi says: “Boys are just as serious about the learning, but in a group setting, they goof off a lot more. So they probably feel the same way about the learning, but the manifestation of their interest is radically different. I don’t see any differences when I see them one-on-one.” Boys and girls are expected to learn similar amounts of material and to enact the service in similar ways. So, while there are differences, egalitarianism has been normalized to the point that all parties have common expectations for boys and girls both with regard to preparation and for the service.

Not so in Orthodox Judaism. Because Orthodox Judaism places obligation to Jewish law—or God—higher than personal choice, rabbis cannot simply replace gender distinctions with egalitarian practice: these boundaries are central to their view of the religions itself. Yet, particularly in modern Orthodox settings in which congregants live secular lives, egalitarian expectations have found their way into Jewish practice. In particular, families expect their Bar/Bat Mitzvah children to lead some of the service, to read from Torah (including being called to Torah) and Haftarah, and to deliver a

127 Vinick and Reinharz (2012) provide anecdotal accounts of Bar Mitzvahs in different times and places that add depth to an understanding of the ritual.
speech. Reading Torah has come to have particular importance and resonance, whether the child be male or female. Thus, finding ways for girls to fulfill the normative shape of the Bat Mitzvah is important to families of girls and, as with the non-Jew in Shabbat services, rabbis make decisions about how and when women can participate in Shabbat service.

In what follows, I am using only the results from the Bay Area congregations, which are almost entirely Modern Orthodox. As with intermarriage and the non-Jew on the bimah, this hardly exhausts the issue, but my goal is not to provide a comprehensive list of the variations, but to look at how Bay Area rabbis approach the problem and the consequences for the families.

When men are present, they are obliged to lead the service, an obligation that applies to prayer and text reading, but not necessarily to interpretation. Thus, in many Orthodox congregations, a woman may give a d’var Torah or other speech to a mixed group, even though she cannot lead services or read Torah in that same mixed group. One solution has been to create worship groups composed only of women. Some Orthodox congregations choose to have a women-only Bat Mitzvah take place on Saturday morning, parallel to the men’s service, effectively dividing the congregation. Another approach is that taken at Adat Yitzhak, in which girls lead an early afternoon service. In this case, services for boys and for girls are quite different. Before turning to a description of the services, I should describe the congregation.

**Adat Yitzhak: Balancing Women’s roles and Jewish Law**

As with many Bay Area Orthodox congregations, Adat Yitzhak has two distinct segments: those who are Orthodox in practice and therefore affiliate with the congregation because it is Orthodox and those who, whatever their home practice, belong because of the rabbi, the supportive culture, or the kind of practice and learning the congregation provides. Thus, the membership is diverse, encompassing Reform, Reconstructionist, atheist, Conservative as well as Orthodox Jews. Rita Cohen’s attachment to the congregation is representative:

> We really, really like Adat Yitzhak... There are Orthodox, there are non-observant people. The Orthodox can’t have a shul without the non-observant because they need each other. Not only that but we can’t have the kind of shul we have without the Orthodox. So because we need each other, we’re very respectful to each other...and it makes for a very healthy, moderation for each....The group is better than any individual; Each person rises when engaged with people at Adat Yitzhak. That’s my experience of it, and I find that really remarkable and wonderful.

While none of the families interviewed had been raised as Orthodox Jews, all had grown to appreciate Orthodox practice, although they varied in personal observance. Of necessity, then, part of the rabbi’s role included balancing the different expectations of the groups within the congregation with his own understanding of God’s rules and the needs of the each individual. He does so by setting firm boundaries for Jewish practice within the synagogue walls while accepting with (apparent) equanimity differences in individual family practice.

These strict boundaries come into play most regularly during Shabbat services. Services are regularly well-attended; Rabbi Teitlebaum says that he sees every congregant at services at least once a month. During my observations, attendance rarely dipped below 150, with about two-thirds of those being men. As at other modern Orthodox congregations
in the Bay Area, men and women at Adat Yitzhak sit on different sides of a chest-high divider where each group can easily see the other, and communicate if desired. The service is led by male congregants in sections. Similarly, several men take turns reading the complete Torah portion and Haftarah. While the rabbi might take a turn in leading or reading, his primary role is to introduce each section of Torah with a brief explanation and a few words of interpretation, then deliver a longer d’var Torah following the service’s conclusion.

While only men led the services, both men and women followed along actively in both prayerbook and Hebrew Bible. At the same time, both men and women entered and exited the room and engaged in (usually brief) side conversations. So, while women do not lead these services, they are nevertheless engaged in the service content.\footnote{I do not want to leave the impression that either gender accepted these distinctions uncritically. Many of the non-Orthodox women I spoke with, both informally at the lunches and more formally in interviews worked in the secular world, where they expected egalitarian treatment. Some had become more observant under the influence of both congregation and rabbi, and were conflicted about the role of women; others had chosen to give up a more active practice of Jewish prayer to participate more fully in the cultural life of the congregation. Either way, these women worked hard to reconcile the egalitarian and gendered parts of their lives.}

Managing the role of women in the service is by no means limited to the Bat Mitzvah. As the Torah is carried through the congregation prior to and following being read, Jews touch the covering with prayerbook or tallit which is then kissed. Orthodox congregations negotiate this in different ways. Part of the service includes carrying the Torah through the congregation so that attendees might touch it. At Adat Yitzhak, while women do not carry the Torah, the rabbi makes sure that it passes alongside the divider so that women can reach across to touch it. In more conservative Orthodox congregations, women do not touch it; in more liberal Orthodox congregations, men pass the Torah to a woman who carries it through the woman’s side before returning it to the men.

Rabbi Teitlebaum strives to maintain a sense of wholeness for the Shabbat service, whether there is a Bar Mitzvah, a Bat Mitzvah, or any other life-cycle event taking place. Therefore, little changes during a Bar Mitzvah service: “The way we do our services has a very specific structure and format that goes back a few thousand years, so if [a Bar Mitzvah family wants] to incorporate a poem or something like that, we can do that easily around the time of the presentation or at Kiddush, at lunch, but during the service itself...the service is what the service is, and we’re going to stay with that.”

Lay leaders, male relatives and friends, and the boy himself all participate through the end of the service, the only difference from the usual Shabbat service being that many participants have a connection to the family. At the end of the service, the boy typically delivers a speech of some length. This is followed by an extended lunch, after which the congregation gathers for the afternoon service.

The Bat Mitzvah is quite different, as Sarah Levy’s day illustrates:

\textit{On a Saturday morning in March, twelve-year-old Sarah Levy is ready for her Bat Mitzvah service, which begins with a traditional Shabbat morning service led by male members of the congregation, including Sarah’s father and older brother. As the service concludes, Rabbi Teitlebaum calls Sarah forward to deliver a shi’ur, a lesson lasting about thirty minutes, during which she}
describes the laws of building the sukkah (a temporary hut build for the holiday of Sukkot). When she concludes, Rabbi Teitlebaum adds a few words of praise, and the congregation adjourns for Kiddush lunch, following which minhah, the afternoon service, will take place. This service includes a brief Torah reading that previews the following week’s Torah portion—in this case, the first thirteen verses of the book of Leviticus. Because Sarah will lead this women only service (with the exception of Sarah’s father and grandfather who stand in the rear), the rabbi gathers all the men in a small, side chapel to allow women access to the main sanctuary.

Sarah’s classmates and other women spread out on both sides of the mehitzah, the low wall that usually separates men from women, while Sarah takes her place next to the rabbi’s wife and Sarah’s tutor, Dinah, and begins the service. She leads the prayers with excited competence, omitting those prayers for which a minyan (10 adult men) is required. When it is time to read the thirteen verses of Torah from the upcoming week’s portion, she and Dinah simply uncover the Torah, without the usual procession around the room. Dinah calls Sarah’s friend first, then Sarah’s mother, then Sarah herself before each of the three readings. Each recites a blessing that does not include a reference to obligation: Sarah’s action is considered voluntary, not obligatory.

Following the readings, Sarah and Dinah return the Torah to the Ark, and Sarah leads the last few prayers, with loud and enthusiastic participation from her friends. At the conclusion of both services, men and women come together in the sanctuary. Sarah’s father hugs her, and her accomplishment is described to the rabbi and the other men.

Rabbi Teitlebaum’s rationale for this model balances the authority of Jewish law, his concern for the community, and expectations of families, as he explains: “Because women in our community don’t read Torah for men, [a morning Bat Mitzvah service] would mean splitting our community into a women’s service and men’s service right at the moment when we are all together. The majority of girls have done a minhah [afternoon] service…”

While Sarah was delighted with her Bat Mitzvah service, this model does not satisfy all families with girls, particularly those members who are not privately Orthodox. Some of these families want their daughters to read Torah in an egalitarian manner. Rabbi Teitlebaum cannot allow this within the synagogue. However, when the family desires, he prepares the girls for the ritual and enables the family to hold the service outside the synagogue. This is another way to set boundaries, in this case, defined by space, not role. In doing so, the rabbi is able to maintain a place where the authority of Jewish law holds, while still supporting his congregants. Further, Shabbat morning services are, as Rabbi Teitlebaum pointed out, the time the congregation comes together. An off-site Bat Mitzvah that draws from the community results in splitting the congregation for that day. Nevertheless, both from the rabbi’s and the family’s perspective, an off-site venue enabled the family to meet their individual needs, without compromising the rabbi’s beliefs or the congregation’s expectations.

Rabbi Teitlebaum also works to broaden the definition of Bar/Bat Mitzvah beyond the service itself. This is not uncommon: as discussed previously, most rabbis focus on Bar and Bat Mitzvah as representative of more extensive Jewish learning and practice. However, in this case, that more extensive approach also provides a way for Rabbi
Teitlebaum to provide other, more halakhically acceptable ways for families to think about Bat Mitzvah. “I explain to families at the onset that whatever they’ve seen others do should not be their concern. The way that their child becomes a bar or bat mitzvah is by waking up on their twelfth or thirteenth birthday respectively. What are we going to do to make this transition into adulthood meaningful? [I want them to] look at it like a buffet. Here’s a list of options for you – let’s work with them and figure what will speak to you…I want them to take into account two things: their interests, and what’s they’re going to keep doing through their lives.”

The most common model for boys is that familiar model: “Boys do some bit of Torah reading, [and] opt to read some Haftarah, depends on the education of the child. Many choose to lead services. Boys are more oriented that way.”

Most of the girls follow the model described above. In addition, many of the girls and some of the boys, take on mitzvah projects, which vary from learning about and practicing blessings before food to elements of Shabbat practice to visiting the elderly and sick children or collecting for the poor. Again, these projects are a common part of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation, but can take on greater significance for the girls. Natalya Ruben’s mother, Marcia, explains her goals for her daughter: “I really wanted her to understand the importance of doing chassidish activities, even though they weren’t fun. Different people express different aspects of their Judaism differently, but this is what I wanted, as her mother, to give to her.”

Natalya enjoyed the preparation as well: “I liked that I got total option over what I wanted to learn. I could learn the parsha [weekly portion], I could learn Mishnah [early commentary]...I wanted to learn something related to my Bat Mitzvah and my birthday, and we researched Sukkot...I could do anything I wanted, and that seemed really cool. I chose to do a book, and I’m glad I did.”

The process meant a lot to her: “I never really had to do a project that really affected me before. Every project I’ve done was for school, and it’s never been something where you get judged on it. It was also on my own time, it wasn’t homework. My drash, if I didn’t do a good job on it, I would be presenting it to my whole community. I wanted to do well on it. I also liked making my book. I was proud of it.”

Natalya did not feel her Bat Mitzvah service had gone particularly well: “I got through it, but I was thinking, ‘yeah, this isn’t really working,’” however neither she nor Marcia focused on the day itself. Rather, Marcia was happy that they had spent time working together on community projects, while Natalya was most pleased with research that resulted in her own book. For this family, the fact that the service was not at the center of the entire event gave them more freedom to explore other aspects of Judaism. In theory, this is also true for the boys, but here the difference between being obligated and having the choice matters: the boys expressed more concern over their performance than did the girls.

While the minhah service is an option that some girls are happy with, that was not the case with Sasha Weinberg. “I don’t like that I’m not allowed to read from the Torah. I was a girl, so my guy family besides my immediate family like my dad and my brother, they could not hear me. They come from New York and they could not hear me, they could only hear my speech. But I practiced all my other stuff and they could not hear it. I was a girl, and that was why and I think that’s wrong because I’m a feminist.”
Both Sasha and Natalya had similar preparation and similar services, but very different responses. In both families, leading a Bat Mitzvah service was an assumed part of Jewish life, as Marcia says: “It was a non-issue. That’s what you do. It’s a community norm. And she wanted it.” In determining the boundaries for women’s participation in the service, Rabbi Teitlebaum takes these differences into account with varying degrees of success. In doing so, he is guided first by Jewish law (as interpreted by Orthodoxy) and then by his concern for congregants. The boundaries he sets are thus both rigid and non-judgmental: neither his nor his congregants’ personal feelings are the point; the rules are determined by God and his job is to interpret and follow them. As a result, while unwavering in his approach to Judaism, he is unfailing sympathetic to his congregants and passionate about teaching all students, whatever their personal practice. And, by attempting with limited success to shift the meaning of Bar or Bat Mitzvah from the service to the age itself, he minimizes the importance of the service itself.

Nevertheless, as the cases of Natalya and Sasha show, girls and their families have different responses to the rabbis’ decisions, with that response depending on each family’s approach to Judaism, to feminism, and to Orthodox practice more generally. However they respond, these girls approach the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as an insider, with the right to accept or critique particular Jewish practice.

Comparisons and conclusions

These two situations—non-Jews on the bimah and girls on the bimah—both require rabbis to balance inclusion of a previously excluded group with Jewish law and/or traditional group boundaries, and the comparison enables us to see the critical points shared across denominations. For both these situations, rabbis generally follow two key principles: only those obligated (whether that be all adult Jews or adult Jewish men) may say prayers that include words of Jewish obligation or take the role of leading the Jewish community in prayer or text. Whether Jews believe (as do Reform Jews) that enacting these commandments is a matter of individual choice or whether they believe (as do Orthodox Jews) that it is incumbent on Jews to follow these God-given commandments, virtually all rabbis express the belief that these are particular to the Jewish people. Similarly, leading services and reading texts are seen by all as incumbent on members of the Jewish community—a non-Jewish leader of a Jewish service makes little sense.

The decisions that rabbis make follow from their interpretations of these two principles. In liberal communities, the definition of a Jew includes children of one Jewish parent of either gender; in Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, only children of Jewish mothers or converts are Jews. In the latter case, rabbis work hard to ensure children of Jewish fathers are formally converted at an early age to avoid questions near Bar/Bat Mitzvah age. However, in both cases, the child is considered a legitimate member of the community and able to lead. Similarly, while congregations differ in how non-Jewish parents (and non-Jewish relatives more generally) can participate, all rabbis work to acknowledge the role of these parents in a Jewish family, while still respecting the key boundaries.

In the same way, because of the way Orthodoxy understands Jewish law and its construction of gender, Orthodox rabbis work to acknowledge women in both Jewish life and in religious services. This has led to separate services for men and women and different words to state the voluntary assumption of a commandment. Here, as with non-Jews, the boundaries are around who is or is not obligated to perform particular
commandments and who may or may not lead a Jewish congregation in prayer. But this also points out the differences: these girls are Jews and some of them, as exemplified by Sasha, not only understand their place in Judaism to be identical to that of men, but also feel that they have the right—by virtue of being Jewish—to insist on that place.

By looking at how rabbis negotiate the limits of participation in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, some conclusions with regard to how ritual in general and Bar/Bat Mitzvah in particular changes. First, denominational policy in concert with broader cultural norms shape the institution and institutional practice that are the context in which these decisions are made. Without the increased intermarriage and without the Reform ruling on patrilineal descent, this issue would not exist or would have a very different shape. Shifting gender roles in Judaism were influenced by and developed with shifting gender roles in dominant society.

Second, these larger cultural shifts affect people who both want to maintain Judaism and also be included in ways that, for traditional Judaism, seem transgressive. These contradictions are mediated in synagogues by leaders who are not only representatives of Jewish tradition (however interpreted), but also have relationships with their congregants. Thus, as intermarriage becomes normalized in liberal American congregations, new categories are being created that acknowledge the non-Jewish member of the Jewish community. Public worship is the place where inclusion is most difficult and it is here that limits are most difficult to navigate.

Third, this negotiation around the content and enactment of the ritual itself has resulted in a rough consensus has developed that draws boundaries marked by Hebrew (in most cases), by importance of the prayer (in Reform Judaism) or unit of the service (in Conservative Judaism), and by prayers the allude to obligation or chosenness. This consensus speaks to a fundamental center of Jewish identity marked by language and obligation/peoplehood.
Whose Bema is it, Anyway?: Public Shabbat Service or Private Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ritual

In his 2007 Biennial speech, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, then-president of the Union of Reform Congregations called on Reform movement professional and lay leaders these leaders to “revitalize Shabbat.” As part of that charge, he spoke about Bar/Bat Mitzvah as follows: Bar mitzvah is the occasion, symbolically at least, when a young person joins an adult community of Jews. But you cannot join what does not exist. A regular community of worshippers, who would be best suited to mentor the child, is not even present. At the average bar mitzvah what you almost always get is a one-time assemblage of well-wishers with nothing in common but an invitation. And worst of all: Absent a knowledgeable congregation, worship of God gives way to worship of the child—and self-serving worship is a contradiction in terms.

Rabbi Yoffie describes one kind of Bar/Bat Mitzvah service—the series of private events that occur weekly in large Reform congregations—from the leadership’s perspective. That description evokes a mythic past where “a long, long time ago in a place far, far away, the shul was a community, and when the child—the boy, I suppose—became old enough, he joined that community.” In doing so, it problematizes the private aspect of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. When Rabbi Yoffie calls the attendees at a Bar/Bat Mitzvah service as “a one-time assemblage of well-wishers with nothing in common but an invitation,” he reflects the perspective of the rabbi who officiates at these services. Where Bar/Bat Mitzvah services take place weekly, rabbis do meet a new set of friends and family each week and, not surprisingly, feel little or no connection to these one-time guests. However, these guests are hardly a “one-time assemblage” to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah families. Rather, they represent an individual family’s web of relationships of which the congregational community is one group with greater or lesser importance to the family.

Rabbi Yoffie’s remarks reflect the experience of congregations that follow the contemporary model of Shabbat observance, in which the congregation’s primary Shabbat service takes place on Friday night, with congregational Saturday morning services (when they are held) lightly attended. This results in a space for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service which becomes, de facto, a private event. To create a “regular community of worshippers” that would welcome the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student, these long-standing cultural patterns would first have to shift.

There is another model for Shabbat services that already exists: in Conservative and Orthodox congregations that follow the traditional model, the primary Shabbat service

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129 Martin Miller, minyan participant at Kol Ehad, a large Reform congregation.
130 Without exception, families described their guests as “friends and relatives,” generally in a patient, but slightly incredulous tone, as if to say: “Who else would we invite?”
131 Contemporary and traditional models of Shabbat observance are discussed in Chapter Two, “Context and Characters.”
takes place Saturday morning. In these congregations, congregants expect consistent services led by knowledgeable lay leaders or clergy. Bar/Bat Mitzvah services bring additional people to the congregation, introduce young leaders with unpredictable levels of confidence and skill, and change the usual dynamic of the service. When Bar/Bat Mitzvah services occur infrequently, they provide moments of interest and excitement. When they take place frequently, they can feel like intrusions into community worship. While Reform and similar congregations face the problem of including community into a private event, the problem for Conservative and Orthodox congregations attempt to balance community worship with the individual ritual.\(^{132}\)

For both these models, leaders and non-participants commonly blame the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual for problems that result from the inherent tension between a peak event and a regular service. This chapter examines the institutional characteristics and participant relationships, the two components of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah system that determine the balance between public and private aspects of the service. Because the two different models—contemporary and traditional—structure the nature of the tension, I treat each separately.

I argue here that institutional characteristics—denomination, size, and culture—are the primary factors that structure the public and private aspects of Shabbat morning. Denominational norms largely determine whether a congregation follows a traditional model (as do Conservative and Orthodox) or a contemporary model (as do Reform, Independent, and others), which then determines the nature of the tension between public and private. In the traditional model, the congregational Shabbat service acts to bring the community together and reinforce Jewish values and community through consistent ritual practice in familiar and usual ways. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah service uses this same service to enact a peak moment in an individual family’s life—a moment that, for the family at least, is emphatically not usual. The combination of these two similar services produces an inherent tension between the consistent weekly services for regular attendees and the “peak experience” for each individual Bar/Bat Mitzvah family. In the contemporary model, the BBM and the congregation’s Shabbat service are separate. Here the tension is between the different groups, each with different understandings of the place of BBM in the congregation and could be considered part of the different meanings attributed to the ritual, in that, for some, part of an authentic ritual results from who witnesses that ritual. Even though the tension between public and private manifests in different ways, both traditional and contemporary approaches share a common understanding of regular Shabbat services and peak BBM services and so I discuss them together.

Regardless of model, a very large or very small BBM cohort size affects the place of BBM in the congregation. The effect of a few rituals each year can leave the regular service (whether traditional or contemporary) unaffected. The effect of one or more rituals every

\(^{132}\) Conservative and Orthodox congregations share the problem of balancing the two different goals of a single service, but their approaches are somewhat different. Conservative congregations are more likely to have large cohorts which result in many Shabbat mornings being affected, while Orthodox congregations have smaller cohorts, but are more constrained by rabbis’ interpretations of Jewish law. The resulting tension is similar, however, and so I discuss them together.
week strongly shapes the nature of the service. While congregations deal small or large numbers as a matter of course, few reflect on the implications of cohort size.¹³³

These two dimensions—denomination and size—are characteristics integral to each institution and function like independent variables, structuring what is possible. Within these constraints, the congregational culture determines attitudes toward both ritual and regular services. Thus, for example, a congregation with an active lay participation will face different challenges than one with a minyan (small group regulars) service that runs concurrently with a BBM service. A congregation with a tradition of supporting Bar/Bat Mitzvah families will experience these services differently from one for which the ritual is endured or ignored.

Relationships between the participants—families, other congregants, and the leadership (largely rabbis)—further determine the balance between public and private aspects. Families’ expectations for the ritual are shaped by the congregation, but also by other experiences of BBM.¹³⁴ Other congregants may value the regular service, the minyan (small group) service, or various secular activities. As congregational leaders, rabbis have the most authority to effect change and mediate not only between the different groups, but also choose when or how to enact denominational policy. The balance between public and private aspects of the resulting service is thus structured by institutional characteristics and the needs of and relationships between the different participants.

**Integrating Shabbat Services and Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ritual: the Traditional Model**

This description from the rabbi of a large Conservative congregation is typical of the differences between Friday and Saturday services in the traditional model. At this congregation, Friday evening services often had different themes to encourage attendance: one week there was music, another week was targeted for families of young children. While these draw 50 to 100 people, weeks with no programming “tend to draw a minyan [ten adult Jews] at best.”

By contrast, Saturday morning, even without programming drew far more attendees: “Saturday tends to be more uniform. Our typical non-simcha Saturday morning attendance tends to be between 150 and 200 people....We tend to have a very traditional lay-led participatory service, so there’s a lot of singing, we do full Torah reading...The associate rabbi and I will...announce pages and we’ll do teaching and explanation throughout the service. With some regularity we have lay people who give drashot or talks. We’re part of a rotation of Torah and Haftarah readers, but nine of us do it with greater regularity than anyone else.”

In the Bay Area, congregations in the traditional model share characteristics with regard to when services take place, who leads and attends services, and meals following.¹³⁵ Friday services are brief, and conclude in time for attendees to head home for dinner.

¹³³ For example, Sukkat Shalom was preparing for a cohort of 40 students. Both rabbi and education director discussed the problems that would result from needing to prepare twice as many students as usual. Neither discussed the effect that twice as many Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals would have on the regular minyan service.

¹³⁴ Families regularly compared their experiences to those they had observed at other congregations both in the Bay Area and elsewhere.

¹³⁵ My discussion draws on both interviews and observations at Conservative B’nai Aaron and Orthodox Adat Yitzhak. Unless specifically noted, descriptions characterize the traditional type, rather than the individual congregation.
These services may provide time for experimentation and programming with additional music, opportunities to eat together, or participate with children. However, neither clergy nor congregation are most invested in these services. That place falls to Saturday morning services, which is when the congregational community comes together both to worship and to connect with each other.

At Conservative B’nai Aaron and Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, the regular Shabbat morning services included a range of ages and family groupings. Attendees averaged around 120 each week at B’nai Aaron and 150 at Adat Yitzhak. At both congregations, different ages, from children to elders, were represented. At B’nai Aaron, one corner of the sanctuary was set aside for young children and their parents. At many of the services, children under Bar/Bat Mitzvah age sat together, as did a group of teenagers. Similarly, at Adat Yitzhak, children of all ages entered and left the service to play outside or in the halls. Both men and women in the sanctuary ranged from early teens to elderly, with more men than women in attendance.

Both these congregations made the distinction between regular attendees and visitors. At Conservative B’nai Aaron, ushers stand by the door of the sanctuary to pass out both prayerbooks and Chumashim and greet attendees. During the service, they circulate through the rows to help newcomers navigate the service or answer questions. At Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, one or another of the regular attendees on the women’s side welcomed me and periodically checked that I was following along throughout the service. Following community services, these congregations (and others in this model) typically hosted a luncheon following the service that was explicitly open to all attendees. On most Shabbats, these lunches were simple—including, for example, soup, bread, various salads, and cookies served on disposable plates). When Bar/Bat Mitzvah or other celebratory event (anniversary, baby-naming, pre-wedding blessings, Jewish holiday) took place, the lunches often became quite elaborate in choice of food and the manner it is served.

With only a few exceptions, the congregation “owned” the services both in content and execution. Each congregation had some set of customs for enacting the service that was taken for granted by regular attendees: specific melodies that never changed—or that were known moments where for individuals could choose melodies or style; prayers performed in one way or another; individuals with specific roles.

In most of these congregations, lay leaders ran the entire service and chanted Torah and Haftarah. While rabbis participated in leading services as part of the regular rotation, they usually prayed with the congregation or walked through the congregation to quietly greet both congregants and visitors, with their primary role being to teach the weekly portion through summary and d’var Torah. At Conservative B’nai Aaron, Rabbi Joseph

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136 The numbers of regular attendees are similar, however B’nai Aaron has two to three times the membership of Adat Yitzhak, so the percentage of regular attendees is substantially less.

137 This varies somewhat by congregation. At one Orthodox congregation, I slipped in and out without any contact whatsoever.

138 A couple of examples: At one service, I turned ahead in the prayerbook, anticipating the next section. An usher, thinking I was lost, tried to return me to the correct page. At a Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, another usher spent several minutes explaining one of the prayers to a non-Jewish guest.

139 For example, the opening section of prayer at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak was always led by an elderly man with a distinctive accent. I recognized this role was a place of honor, but was frustrated because he was difficult to understand. Over time, I grew used to his accent and found myself looking forward to this section.
introduced both Torah and Haftarah with a brief summary. Similarly, but with a bit more depth, Rabbi Teitlebaum, at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, introduced each section being read with both summary and lesson that could be derived from the reading. In each case, these rabbis then gave lengthy discussions of the weekly reading. Their presentation and use of material varied, but in both cases, congregants listened and commented on these talks. This distinction between the roles of teacher and service leader is quite clear in these congregations.

Regular attendance, active lay participation in these services, and eating together all reinforce individuals’ connection to community and Judaism (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When Bar/Bat Mitzvah services occur, they can alter these dynamics substantially both with regard to attendance and enactment.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah services change the composition of the attendees and, with that change, both the goal of the service and the nature of community. Guests attend because of their connection to the family rather than their connection to the congregation. These guests may not be familiar with the service or not know congregational melodies and customs or not. In either case, their presence raises the question of how much explanation of Jewish or congregational practice is necessary.

In addition, with many additional guests, paying attention to visitors becomes more difficult, a problem that occurs with other life-cycle events as well. Following the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, the luncheon can change to be more formal and include substantial numbers of guests. These meals are when congregants talk and eat with each other informally, so that change can affect the feeling following the service.

Both content and enactment of the service can change when a Bar/Bat Mitzvah takes place. Roles previously filled by lay leaders or the rabbi—leading prayers, chanting texts, and/or giving the d’var Torah—are filled to a greater or lesser degree by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student and family. This changes the mood of the service, which acquires, at least in part, the sense of meaning and risk that accompanies a rite of passage, as well as who participates in the service. The rabbi’s d’var Torah, which draws on expert knowledge and experience, may be replaced or supplemented by a Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech that, no matter how carefully prepared and thoughtfully written, still relies on a thirteen-year-old’s knowledge and experience. Bar/Bat Mitzvah students also lead portions of the service that are led by congregants during other weeks. And Bar/Bat Mitzvah services include some number of additions to the service, whether these be as simple as the rabbi’s words of welcome to the guests or as elaborate as, in some Conservative congregations, passing the Torah through the generations.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah service thus includes two very different types of events with contradictory goals—one strives to be special, the other to be usual—and rabbis and

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140The only time I was not greeted at Adat Yitzhak was at a service during which an aufruf (brief pre-wedding moment blessing the couple) took place. Many attendees were clearly wedding guests, leading me to believe that the regular attendees assumed I, too, was a guest. This incident points out the difference between a service with guests of an individual family (which are assumed to be that family’s responsibility) and a service with no reason for guests. In the former case, guests are treated as the family’s responsibility; in the latter case, they are the congregation’s collective responsibility.

141Chapter Four, “Process or Performance?” discusses the need for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student to be competent. This situation is not quite the same, having to do with who can be chosen to lead. If every week is taken up by Bar/Bat Mitzvah students leading the whole service, congregants cannot participate.
congregations respond differently to the resulting tension. At one end of the spectrum, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service and the regular service remain separate, with congregants avoiding services when a Bar/Bat Mitzvah takes place. This is the case at Conservative Am Hayim, with around 600 member families and a Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort that varies from 20-50 and results in around 20 Bar/Bat Mitzvah services each year. Most weeks, somewhat more than 100 people attend services, with congregants leading services and reading Torah. Bar/Bat Mitzvah services include two students, so that the number of congregational services affected is minimized. However, when Bar/Bat Mitzvah service do take place, the effect on the congregation is substantial. Any Bar/Bat Mitzvah service results in additional people attending the service, but at Am Hayim, the number of extra guests doubles, further diluting the regular community of worshippers. The result, according to Rabbi Weinberg, is that “there are many congregants who do not come to shul...When there is B’nai Mitzvah, it sometimes seems like everyone in the congregation is a guest of the B’nai Mitzvah, and there are a small number of congregants who are actually participating in the person.”

In addition, with two Bar/Bat Mitzvah students, each of whom is expected to fulfill the usual Bar/Bat Mitzvah expectations, congregants have less opportunity to participate. Rabbis always lead the opening prayers, then students have the option of leading the next section. However, to increase opportunities for congregational participation, Rabbi Weinberg says: “We’re going to try to phase that out... [so that] a congregant would do Shacharit. Occasionally it will be the brother of the Bar Mitzvah kid or a relative, but generally it’s just a congregant.” That is the only opportunity for congregational participation: “One kid will lead the Torah service and the other will lead Musaf. Both kids read Torah, both kids have an Aliyah to the Torah, they read Haftarah and we just split it down the middle, and one of the kids reads the Haftarah blessings, and both kids give a drash.”

The only area where the congregation views the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service positively is the luncheon and even here, according to the executive director, the feeling is mixed: “Truly, I think people look forward to a slightly more elaborate kiddush [luncheon], but our regulars are irked by the disruption of regular services.”

At Am Hayim, the number of guests simply overwhelmed the number of regular attendees, changing the balance between congregation and guests substantially. With few members attending the Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, it would be difficult to convince a substantial enough number to attend and effect a change in that balance. More commonly, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service is attended by both congregants and guests although the number of congregants may drop somewhat and the percentage certainly changes.

At another Conservative congregation, the rabbi described the difference between the two types of services as follows: “The absolute number of congregants does not change, but total number of people does. So there are usually about 200, then there are usually about 100 more there for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. There have been times recently where our attendance is up and the people invite more, so at a peak, we’ve had 360 people here for Shabbat services.” Regardless of the change in attendance when a Bar/Bat Mitzvah took place, he said that the service retained a congregational feel—although not always: “There are moments where it doesn’t feel the same. This past Shabbat was one of them and it was really hard.” In this case, the loss of congregational feeling did not occur frequently;
should that loss become the norm, so that congregants regularly felt services were “really hard,” it is likely congregational attendance would drop at Bar/Bat Mitzvah services.

Different rabbis and congregations address the change in the composition of attendees in different ways. At one Orthodox congregation, attendance can rise from 150 to 250 people at a Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, many of whom, according to the rabbi, “have not been in a traditional setting before.” As a result, while the service itself doesn’t change, typically the rabbi will briefly assist guests in making their way through the service: “[The congregation] has its melodies, we usually do them. We announce more pages, we do more basic explanation, just one line: ‘This is the silent meditation, which is followed by a repetition.’” These one-sentence notes on the service, mentioned by a number of rabbis, orient guests, but can also disrupt the service movement. To manage this, some congregations make explanatory booklets available for visitors and guests. At Conservative B’nai Aaron, one of these booklets includes transliterations of basic prayers, along with brief explanations of choreography and meaning. As a result, Rabbi Joseph spends little time orienting guests to the service.

Individual differences between families create another set of problems, as this Conservative rabbi describes: “You got 75 people coming from Israel and Monsey, all saying ‘my service is different…we don’t do imahot.’ That’s a fight, a terrible fight. But I’m trying to accommodate the needs of the family at that moment, along with those of the congregation. We’ll leave a pause so that they [the congregation] can say the mothers…142 On the other hand, I could have an intermarriage and all of a sudden I’ve got the Episcopal High Church there. I’m going to try to accommodate the needs of the family. It totally changes the nature of the congregation. And I’m not one of those who says: ‘we do what we do and you plug into this.’” While many of the rabbis discussed ways to balance the congregation’s and Bar/Bat Mitzvah family’s needs, this rabbi makes no bones about placing the needs of the family first.

Affecting the composition of the attendees is difficult. No congregation limits the number of guests Bar/Bat Mitzvah families can invite and rabbis cannot require that congregants attend.143 However, rabbis are explicitly responsible for the service itself and thus can and do enact rules regarding the nature of and participation in the service itself. There are three areas where this matters: Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech as opposed to rabbi’s d’var Torah; additions to the service; and congregational versus lay participation. The first area speaks to the role of expert leader and teacher being replaced by an inexperienced student, the second to changing the regular nature of the service, and the third to who can participate.

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142 The prayer to which he refers singles out the three Jewish forefathers. Within the past few decades, liberal denominations have added the Jewish foremothers (the “imahot”), which is not accepted by Orthodox Judaism. When Orthodox relatives (from Monsey or Israel) attend a Conservative Bar Mitzvah (most will not attend a liberal Bat Mitzvah), they will be offended. Thus, the rabbi must decide between offending the family and guests or offending the congregation. His solution is to leave a pause, so that individuals can choose to insert the mothers or not.

143 Here different denominational orientations matter. Orthodox congregations, which have the highest sense of obligation to God and/or Jewish practice, have the largest and most consistent attendance (although even here not all members attend weekly); Conservative less so. (Reform and similar types of congregations are discussed separately, as the patterns of attendance differ substantially.)
At Conservative and Orthodox congregations, the d’var Torah is the rabbi’s primary responsibility during these usual services. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech is a central part of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual and deliberately modeled on the d’var Torah, with speeches sharing a similar structure, although they vary in length, depth of thought, and use of additional sources. While they demonstrate the student’s symbolic mastery of a particular type of Jewish learning, these students—no matter how prepared—are still thirteen and their words reflect that age and level of experience. For regular congregants who value the rabbi’s words, when that d’var Torah is replaced by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech, it removes an important part of the usual service.

At some congregations, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech is the central teaching moment for the congregation. It can be brief, as at Conservative Am Hayim where students “usually sum up the Torah portion in a paragraph, and then they raise a question or make a point, they make it personal.” It can be lengthy and complex, as at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, students give lengthy speeches of up to half an hour that include citations from Jewish texts. In both these cases, rabbis let the Bar/Bat Mitzvah students remain central, although at both congregations, the rabbis respond briefly to the speeches with an adult perspective.

B’nai Aaron takes another approach. Regardless of whether there is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah or not, following the Torah service, one or the other of the rabbis presents on a topic drawn from the portion, using printed sheets of reference material drawn from current and historical Jewish sources, and concluding by asking the congregation several questions, so that they are be drawn into the topic. When the service includes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the student presents a relatively short talk of under ten minutes in length during the Torah service. Both weekly consistency of the d’var Torah and its inclusive format contribute to keeping this a congregational service.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah services also differ from congregational services by including moments that mark the service as a rite of passage. These may include parents or grandparents presenting a tallit to the child, a rabbi’s welcome to attendees that states implicitly or explicitly that the purpose of the service is the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, families passing the Torah through the generations, additional readings assigned to relatives, the parents’ and/or rabbi’s words to the child, and leadership presenting congregational gifts to the child. The first three moments are uncommon in this model, but common in the Reform model; some combination of the others occurs in most congregations of both models. Not surprisingly, the sheer number of these special moments, the amount of time each takes, and the content itself serve to define the service as primarily Bar/Bat Mitzvah or primarily congregational. Number matters because each moment points out the service as a rite of passage focused on the child, thus changing the feeling of the service and distracting worshippers from the flow of the regular service. The greater the number of moments, the more opportunity for distraction. Similarly, a moment that lasts more than a few minutes, as at the congregation where three different board members presented three separate gifts, each accompanied by congratulatory words. Perhaps most important is content: opening remarks that explicitly welcome guests to “Joshua’s Bar Mitzvah” without mentioning regular attendees implies that the Bar Mitzvah is the purpose of the service. A parental speech that focuses on the child’s secular activities without mentioning Judaism not only diminishes the point of the ritual itself, but also the congregational service itself.

Finally, who participates in the service matters. In the contemporary model, where congregations are largely lay-led, rabbis work to balance the role of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah
student with that of the congregation. At B’nai Aaron, for example, while much of the service is assigned to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family, the congregation reserves some portions of the service for lay leaders and congregants — specifically Shacharit (the section of prayer beginning the formal service), at least two aliyyot, and often some of the Torah reading. Rabbi Joseph says: “[At] my first shul we had a real issue with the regulars tending to stay away when there was a Bar Mitzvah—this does not happen with us. I think that the fact that we prevented the Bar Mitzvah from just taking over everything definitely helped...We’ve made a conscious effort to get across that the Bar Mitzvah is participating in the community, it’s not the Bar Mitzvah for the families.” By saving some portions of the service for lay participation, congregants are included, albeit not as fully as when no Bar/Bat Mitzvah event takes place.

Whether the balance both groups depend, of course, both on the individual congregation’s sense of ownership for Shabbat morning services, on individual rabbis’ view of the correct balance between the services, and on the rabbis’ authority and resulting ability to effect change. In congregations, almost entirely Conservative and Orthodox, that follow the traditional model for Shabbat morning services, rabbis work to integrate and balance two very different services that take place in same space, with largely the same liturgy, and with many of the same people, but with very different goals. This model structures the choices available to the rabbi and congregation: neither Conservative nor Orthodox congregations have shifted to Friday evening as the primary service, nor is that likely.144

Finding the Community on Saturday morning: the Contemporary Model

Reform and other congregations that follow the contemporary model face a different expression of the public-private tension. In these congregations, the primary congregational service takes place on Friday evening. On Saturday morning, some congregations hold an extended Torah study that might or might not include services. Some hold small lay-led services of fifteen to twenty people, largely older adults. Some hold services only when a Bar/Bat Mitzvah takes place. A few have regular services. Thus there is substantially more variation, particularly with regard to Saturday morning. However, in the example following, the rabbi describes a reasonably typical example of Shabbat services and attendance at a large Reform congregation:

The first Friday of each month is a family service with a religious school grade participating, so we get a lot more people because the parents come with the kids and the classes have thirty kids. The third Friday night is called a “Mizmor Shir,” which is a musical service with instruments – drum, clarinet, guitar – and we’ll get more than on a regular service...The second Friday night is a regular service and so are the fourth and fifth—we get anywhere from 75 to 100 people...

Most Saturday mornings there are services, and only a few congregants attend. Once a month we have a Shabbat minyan; it used to be called an alternative service. That’s with a cantorial soloist, three or four musical instruments, it is lay-led and it meets at the same time as our regular

144 The example of Am Hayim is more likely, in which the Shabbat morning service remains primary, but regular members simply do not attend when Bar/Bat Mitzvah events take place.
service in another room. Around 50 people come that, but on a Shabbat morning with no Bar/Bat Mitzvah service and no minyan service, we will get maybe 25 people at services. I'd say we have anywhere from 40 to 50 B’nai Mitzvah a year, so there may only be a couple services each year where there’s not a Bar/Bat Mitzvah and where the minyan doesn’t meet.

Work patterns of the early twentieth century were, at least in part, responsible for Friday evening becoming the primary service for Reform congregations (Sarna, 2004, p. 194). In these and other congregations with the contemporary model, services take place following Friday dinner, with Saturday morning services minimally attended, leaving space for the relatively private Bar/Bat Mitzvah services typically attended by invited guests.

Over the course of the twentieth century, work patterns changed so that (in theory, at least) most work a Monday to Friday schedule. However, the established pattern remains, reinforced by familiarity, by the place of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service in congregational life, and by competition from secular activities.

Nevertheless, whether as a result of denominational switching from traditional to conservative congregations, personal preference, or rabbinic pressure, many congregations in the contemporary model have established small Shabbat morning service groups. In addition, over the past decade or more, Reform denominational leadership has called for establishing new patterns of Shabbat worship, with the intent of increasing attendance, knowledge, and participation at both Friday evening and Saturday morning services (Yoffie, 1999) (Yoffie, 2007). Several different approaches have developed.

Some congregations hold Shabbat services only for Bar/Bat Mitzvah events, as in this example from a small Reform congregation: “We only have Saturday morning services when there is a Bar or Bat Mitzvah...The Bar or Bat Mitzvah is there on the Friday night as well and they help do that service...as well.” These congregations are often relatively small (this congregation has around 130 families) and so the pool from which to draw is limited. Even Friday night services at this congregation draw relatively few numbers, from 25-40 individuals, while the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Saturday morning service can draw up to 100 people. Depending on congregational custom, where Shabbat morning services take place only in the case of infrequent Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, those services can act to draw the congregation together in celebration of the event.

Another pattern consists of informal Shabbat services, often called minyan services, which may or may not be accompanied by Torah study. These services may be led by rabbis or by lay leaders, and are replaced by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. This is the case at Reform Sukkat Shalom. There are about 25 Bar/Bat Mitzvah or class services during the year. On the remaining Saturday mornings, 10-30 people gather for a combined Torah study and service led by the rabbi and cantor separately or together. Rabbi Doron describes the experience and his goals: “It’s much more intimate [than Friday services]. People are sort of sitting in a couple of semicircles, sometimes there’s more Torah study than a Torah service. We use [the minyan] as an opportunity to actually teach about the liturgy as we go along....When the cantor leads it by herself, it’s more liturgy-oriented, and when I lead it it’s a little more Torah-oriented and discussion-oriented...The hidden agenda for those morning minyans is that at least a subset of that group will attend the Bar and Bat

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145 A minyan is a minimum of ten Jewish adults (or men, in Orthodox Judaism), so the implication is that these have few attendees.
Mitzvahs after they make Saturday mornings a part of their ritual week...About a half a
dozen now attend Bar and Bat Mitzvahs at least occasionally.”

In this pattern, a small group forms a community with its own set of customs and
with its own demographic: older adults who attend out of individual interest. This
characterized the attendance at Sukkat Shalom where, save for one parent-child pair from
the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort, attending at Rabbi Doron’s behest, other attendees were in
their fifties and older and attended as individuals, rather than with other family members.
While some of these individuals may enjoy the Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, others are not
interested in either the formality or the private nature of these services.

A third pattern, occurring principally in larger congregations, consists of concurrent
services—one of which is the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service—in order to meet the needs of
different constituencies. One typical schedule from a large Reform congregation included
two services on Shabbat morning, one a lay-led Minyan meeting weekly in the small chapel
with 10 to 20 people attending. The main service, takes place in the sanctuary with
anywhere from 100 to 400 people attending. Most often this is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah service,
and, while a few congregants attend, most people are guests of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family;
on weeks with no Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, there may be 100 or so attending. Like the
minyan service at Sukkat Shalom, these minyan services are attended largely by older
adults, usually as individuals. These individuals constitute what Rabbi Yoffie called a
“regular community of worshippers” and leadership may attempt to incorporate them into
the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service with very mixed results.

In the contemporary model, tension is created by leadership’s desire for change,
both with regard to the place of Shabbat in the lives of the laity and with regard to the
meaning and enactment of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual. As discussed in “Variations on a
Theme,” one view of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, particularly expressed by leadership, is of an empty
ritual without Jewish content or meaning. In the mid-twentieth century, rabbis and
educators made substantial changes regarding expectations for students’ Jewish education
and their role in the service. However, changes in students’ education and ritual had little
bearing on the congregational culture of attending Friday night services.

It is not surprising that desire for change came from leadership, as the cantor’s
description of Saturday morning at one large Reform congregation shows. There, the
weekly Bar/Bat Mitzvah services often includes two students, each with 150 to 200 guests,
making for an ever-changing population with only the leadership—and occasionally a few
congregants—constant from week to week. The sense of a private event comes through to
visitors as well: “My saddest moment was my first year here when I had this couple whose
wedding I was doing and they just wanted to hear me lead services. At the time there was
an usher’s bench by the door and they just sat there, watched the service, and left right
afterwards. I said to them later, ‘It was so nice to see you, but I wish you’d come in a little
more.’ They said, ‘Oh, we just felt so bad, because we weren’t invited.’”

The policy articulated by Rabbi Yoffie calls on congregational leadership both
develop a congregational culture of Shabbat morning attendance and create Bar/Bat

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146 This is unusually high attendance for this pattern, however fits with the individual culture of this
congregation. More common numbers are from 10-50 people attending.
Mitzvah events that are integrated with that congregational service. This is easier said than done as the case of Reform Sha’arei Hesed, a large congregation with a membership of around 700 families and a Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort of around 60 illustrates. Sha’arei Hesed follows the model of concurrent services: most Saturdays, the congregation holds two services: the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service which takes place in the primary sanctuary, with one of the two rabbis and the cantor officiating. A minyan service that is largely lay-led, with support from the rabbis takes place concurrently in the synagogue library.

Over the past several years, Rabbi Segal has introduced changes to the structure of Saturday morning services, meeting with some resistance at each point. Prior to her tenure, the congregation allowed both Saturday morning and Saturday afternoon Bar/Bat Mitzvah services. With the large cohort, this enabled each student to have an individual service. However, the afternoon service lacked characteristics that, from at least the rabbis’ perspective, gave it necessary meaning. When Rabbi Segal eliminated the afternoon service, she chose—as is common in large congregations—to have two students share the service. It was not an easy change: “Introducing doubles was a major trauma, so what the kids do is meant to be as similar as possible: everybody gets to do everything. The biggest impact was on the number of honors for family members. Even though we increased them, there is a limit. But now that we’ve been doing it this way for a number of years, people are more accepting. The kids seem to really like it because they have a buddy. The parents have been more of a problem.”

As at Am Hayim, around 200-250 people attend these double Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, with almost all of the attendees being guests. However, because congregants (up to 250) attend on Friday evening, with a small number of regulars (between 15 and 30) attending the Saturday minyan service, the conflict between regular attendees and Bar/Bat Mitzvah families that characterizes the traditional model does not exist here. In this typical contemporary model, different groups each fulfill individual goals: the private BBM ritual, the small minyan service, and the largest group: those who are not present at all. Rabbi Segal’s primary goal is to increase congregational attendance at Saturday morning services. The lack of attendance is a broader cultural problem affected by, but not limited to, the BBM ritual, in that, while the Jewish elite sees Shabbat morning services as central to Jewish practice, the Jewish folk do not (as the “Shabbat Initiative” exemplifies).

It was in this context that Sha’arei Hesed’s leadership—lay and rabbinical—began discussions about increasing attendance at Saturday morning services. To do so, Rabbi Segal began by introducing community Shabbat morning services several times during the year: “We have rescued some Saturday mornings from the Bar Mitzvah calendar…We’re trying to make a big fuss about them in order to make people think they can come to services on Shabbat morning. For example, in July we’re going to a park and doing something outside. People…don’t have the habit [of attending on Saturday] anymore. If we

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147 While the Reform leadership has articulated this as a problem and pressed for solutions, similar types of congregations face the same issues, although they may or may not see them as problems.
148 In addition, once a month there is a “tot Shabbat” service for families with small children so that on some Saturday mornings, three different services each with a different constituency may take place at the same time.
149 While Rabbi Segal gave several reasons, the most important one and the one most often mentioned by other rabbis when discussing this time was fact that these services led directly to the celebration, resulting in service and celebration being conflated.
can get people to think of always coming, then maybe we could have a big enough group [for Saturday morning services].” This “event” Shabbat service is intended to appeal to families with children, but also those who have little experience with services. By surrounding the service with music and an informal environment, Rabbi Segal hopes to make the morning service interesting and exciting to those unfamiliar with Shabbat morning services.

The needs of those who attend the lay-led service are different. This service is described on the congregation’s website as “informal lay-led services held in the Library, where the roles of lay leader, lay cantor, Torah reader, Haftarah reader, and drash-giver rotate on a volunteer sign-up basis. It’s a friendly, supportive and participatory service where we can practice our Judaism while we pray together.” As is common with these groups, the members of the minyan value their particular practice and its customs. While formally welcoming, both unspoken customs and high level of participation can be intimidating: “Some people are afraid that they don’t know enough and if they go, they’ll be asked to do something.”

At the same time, these customs bind the members together so that combining this service with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service would be difficult: “Some people want me to cancel the minyan because it’s divisive. But I don’t think those people would come to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service every week and I don’t think they should be forced to come. Also, I don’t think that even if all thirty sat in the first two rows it would change things. Until you have enough people—which to me is fifty to seven-five people—to change the feeling in the sanctuary—people who are going to come regularly, who are going to sing loud, who are going to know what’s going on—then it’s only in a mythic sort of way that you can make the Bar Mitzvah a congregational service. Right now the overwhelming number of guests don’t participate that way even if they come from local congregations.”

Here, Rabbi Segal points out how diluting the minyan group would affect the connections within that group, but also points out the importance of numbers to effect change in the BBM service itself.

In addition some lay leaders would like to change the BBM ritual through limiting students’ participation to a simple aliyah. Rabbi Segal recognizes the significance of the ritual, pointing out: “That’s what they want now that their kids are grown. When they’re asked about their most meaningful Jewish moment, they answer that it was when their kids had B’nai Mitzvah and did everything. So I don’t think people are clear within themselves: what they want for others isn’t what they want for themselves.”

This example illustrates the kind of the challenges that exist within the institution when congregations attempt to make substantial changes. The impetus for making Shabbat morning the primary denominational service originated as denominational policy, taken up by lay and professional leadership. But in attempting to implement these changes, leadership faces different groups within the congregation who see no reason to change. New programs, such as the Community Shabbat, that attempt to change the attitudes and behavior of the participants show one approach to changing culture. Another is changing the nature of the ritual. Independent Or Hadash has developed a Bar/Bat Mitzvah service that, in theory at least, relies on the attendees’ participation.

The congregation’s religious practice falls somewhere between Conservative and Reform as does the model for Shabbat attendance. While Saturday morning is more lightly attended than Friday night (with Friday night attendance between 40 and 100 and
Saturday morning services between 25 and 40), it still attracts a regular attendance, many
of whom attend the Bar/Bat Mitzvah services as well. Or Hadash has developed a culture of
participation: once a month, services are entirely lay-led, which encourages this regular
attendance.

As in the contemporary model, Bar/Bat Mitzvah services are led by the rabbi and
student. However, as at some traditional services, congregants and members of the
Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort participate in the Torah service with aliyahs and with Torah
reading. In addition, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech is structured as a discussion around a
question raised and introduced by the student. This question evolves from discussions with
Rabbi Melmed in which students and their families raise questions about the texts. While
most of these questions become part of a booklet, Rabbi Melmed and the student choose
one question which becomes the heart of the speech. The student then asks that question of
others—parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, as well as Rabbi Melmed. They develop
the speech from these responses, as well as their own. Their speeches summarize the
section of Torah that generated the question, present and discuss the question using the
answers they received and their own thoughts, and then offer to the attendees for
discussion. This structure can engage any attendee, whether familiar with this custom or
new to the congregation, whether old or young, whether knowledgeable or not.

Nevertheless, much of the time, congregants provided the model for guests, so that the first
few responses came from regular attendees and from the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort, with
guests following the lead as the discussion proceeded.\textsuperscript{150}

There is no question that the primary congregational Shabbat service at Or Hadash
takes place on Friday night. The congregation is demographically young, with the bulk of
the congregation comprised of families with children in school. As is a common conflict,
these families often have competing secular activities Saturday morning. Thus, regular
attendees tend to be older and drawn from a relatively small pool. Nevertheless, both the
culture of high participation, similar to that in congregations following the traditional
model of services, and customs that informally require congregant participation result in a
model that, while still contemporary, leans toward traditional in congregant attendance.

The traditional and the contemporary models for service attendance are largely
based in denominational practice. Throughout the discussion, I have referred to cohort
size. In the next section, I examine the effect of size explicitly.

\textbf{Six or Sixty: The Effect of Size on the Shabbat Service}

Rural Congregation Gan Emek, an independent congregation with a membership of
around 80 families, holds between two and four Bar/Bat Mitzvah services a year. Rabbi
Yarden serves as the part-time rabbi, leading services two Friday evening services each
month and integrating eight to ten Saturday morning “learning” services into the religious
school program (for a total of about a dozen Shabbat morning services each year). Rabbi
Yarden teaches the Bar/Bat Mitzvah students individually, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family
participates in planning the service, while the event includes both congregational

\textsuperscript{150} In addition, this is an interesting way for the students to display competence. They manage the
discussions, first repeating the question, then responding to it. Rabbi Melmed stands by ready to intervene if
necessary—sometimes to correct a misstatement or add to student’s response, but (most commonly) to
reassure or assist a student who needs support.
community and other guests. These are both highly individualized rituals and include both family and congregation in the event. Rabbi Yardena comments: “Bar/Bat Mitzvah have always been a big deal in this congregation. Everyone is always invited and a lot of people turn out. So it’s a very supportive communal atmosphere.”

At Gan Emek, as is typical of very small congregations, Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals are relatively infrequent and thus each event offers a moment for the congregation to join together around symbolic Jewish values, peoplehood, and the hope for the Jewish future. This community excitement is in contrast to attitudes found in congregations with large cohorts of 40 students and more, regardless of whether they take a traditional or a contemporary approach to Shabbat services. Thus, at Conservative Am Hayim, with cohorts of 40-60 students, congregants who want to and expect to engage in regular Shabbat worship feel displaced when a Bar/Bat Mitzvah takes place. At Reform Sha’arei Hesed, with a similar-sized Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort, the minyan attendees feel no need to be present at the weekly Bar/Bat Mitzvah services; their community is the minyan itself.

Regardless of denomination, numbers matter. Neither congregational nor cohort size can be ignored: congregation size dictates available resources, as well as congregant needs, while cohort size dictates how often Bar/Bat Mitzvah services take place. Infrequent Bar/Bat Mitzvah services in a small congregation retain a sense of excitement, and people know who can be relied on to help or not; who will attend and why or why not. In large congregations, the reverse is true: weekly Bar/Bat Mitzvah services are routine and, because of size, one group of congregants may not know another group. Thus, there is no expectation that these strangers who share a congregation need attend each other’s events.

While this seems obvious, in most congregations, size is assumed and congregational leadership simply manages the specific problems that result, rather than considering how size shapes possibilities (as the example of Sukkat Shalom above demonstrates). This chapter’s opening quote exemplifies this: while never explicitly stated, Yoffie’s speech clearly assumes a particular cohort size—large—and that assumption shapes his comments. But this is not Rabbi Yardena’s norm: at tiny Gan Emek, it seems normal for Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals to be moments when the whole community can join together to make a Jewish time and space for all. Similarly, it seems natural for Rabbi Weinberg at large Conservative Am Hayim to understand the frequent double Bar/Bat Mitzvah services (which can be attended by over 200 guests) in tension with—and in danger of overshadowing—the “ordinary” Shabbat service. Whatever other factors affect the BBM ritual, congregational services are strongly affected by the number of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, so understanding that affect is what this section discusses.

In the Bay Area, cohort size falls into three categories: under 10, from 10-30, and 30 and up. Thirteen congregations had cohorts of under 10 students and these congregations

\[151\] The consequences of size extend beyond the service itself. There are consequences for group cohesion and a communal experience (should the congregation make this part of preparation). A cohort of three students will act more as three separate individuals, while a cohort of 80 may be so large that, as at Beth Jeshurun, it is split into smaller groups. Size also dictates how individualized or routinized the process is. With only a few students, preparing for and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah itself can be an individual experience; while managing a large cohort is much easier if preparation and enactment is similar across the cohort. Both of these subjects are beyond the scope of this dissertation, although they will be taken up in future work.
ranged in size from 80 to 200 families. Another 15 congregations had cohorts of 10 to 28 and six of those had 20 or more students in the cohort. These congregations ranged in size from 150 to 625 families. Finally, nine congregations had cohorts of over 40 students, with two to three having cohorts of over 60 students. These congregations ranged in size from 300 to 2400 families. Thus, congregation and cohort size only roughly match: there are no small congregations with very large cohorts, nor very large congregations with small cohorts, but apart from those extremes, there is quite a bit of variation.

Small congregations like Gan Emek tend to be more idiosyncratic: these rabbis have more flexibility to engage with congregants and, as at Gan Emek, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah services tend to be individualized, both in preparation and enactment. Shabbat services at these congregations were more variable in general, so that, given demographics these services acted as community event that bring the congregation together and affirm the Jewish community, the family, and the student. As the service leader of another small congregation said about Bar/Bat Mitzvah: “People really show up. It’s radically different than in other congregations I’ve been part of where it’s like: ‘Oh, not another one!’ Members who know the family well and members who don’t know them so well all show up and they get the oneg set up. It’s a major big deal.”

By contrast, congregations with large Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohorts find a new leader on the bema every week. This is the case whether that congregation has a traditional or contemporary approach to Shabbat services, however, in the Bay Area, the contemporary approach is by far most common, as almost all large congregations and large Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohorts are Reform. The effect of size, in which a different student (or two) becomes Bar/Bat Mitzvah every week, is amplified by the effect of denomination, in which Friday night services remain the primary congregational service. In these congregations, the different perspectives of leadership and Bar/Bat Mitzvah family perspectives are sharpened: each family continues to see their child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah service as a peak family event, while every week the leadership sees a “congregation” that is comprised of a new set of Bar/Bat Mitzvah family and guests. These services tend to be more routinized, both so that congregations can track the progress of students and families, but also to minimize competition between students.

In both these cases, size of cohort becomes the overriding factor in the effect of Bar/Bat Mitzvah on the service. However, where the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort is between 10 and 30 students, the culture of the congregation and the influence of the rabbi shape the relationship between the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and congregational service.

Size is the most inflexible dimension. At the high end, no Bay Area congregation is willing to limit the number of students in their programs; at the low end, no congregation was actively recruiting extra students. While presented as examples of different models, the issues faced by Conservative Am Hayim and Reform Sha’arei Hesed are driven by size as well: in both cases, the rabbis instituted shared services for the students to ensure some

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152 Many of these congregations had wide variation in size of Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort, with numbers ranging from 3 to 12 each year. (Spacing of children seems to matter here: if families join when their first child enters and children are spaced two or so years apart, then a large cohort will be followed by a small cohort by a large cohort. This is more apparent in small congregations, but also shows in large congregations, where a cohort of 60 might be succeeded by one of 40 and then one of 60 again.)

153 There are no large Orthodox congregations and only a couple Conservative congregations in the Bay Area.

154 There was an odd gap in cohort size between 30 and 40 students.
Shabbat mornings without rituals. Negotiations around size are guided by culture, as well as the rabbi’s individual preferences, so I discuss these below.

**The effect of congregational culture**

Within general denominational guidelines, congregations develop individual cultures shaped by history, demographics, and location. These factors affect not only the atmosphere of the congregation, but also the approach to the Shabbat service, so that apparently similar congregations develop different attitudes toward both Shabbat services and Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals. For example, two large urban congregations, both with Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohorts of around 15 and mostly older populations, experience Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals very differently.

In the first case, the rabbi expressed frustration with a congregational culture that was unwilling to change to accommodate Bar/Bat Mitzvah: “Within my congregation there’s incredible differences [between congregants] and there’s resistance. But if we don’t serve these kids and these families better, there won’t be a congregation to have.” By contrast, at the second congregation, the rabbi saw the congregation welcoming the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student. “Fortunately, I don’t have a situation in which the regulars don’t come if there is a Bar Bat Mitzvah. In fact, we expect the kids to be here four to six times before their Bar or Bat Mitzvah with their parents. They come to Torah study, Shabbat service, and therefore some of them are adopted by some of the regulars. They [the regulars] are really excited to see little So-and-so, whom they’ve gotten to know over the last few months... It’s the ideal, it doesn’t always happen.”

Congregations describe themselves in different ways. Independent Or Hadash, like a number of other congregations, describes itself as “participatory.” This approach applies to services, but also to other programs and events. Bar/Bat Mitzvah services fit into this approach: cohort families help each other with their services and the congregation participates in Bar/Bat Mitzvah services at a relatively high rate. One large congregation identifies itself as “innovative.” This congregation regularly experiments with new educational and religious programs, thus changing service models is easier here than at a congregation that defines itself by a particular tradition.

Congregational culture sets the general tone toward Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but also includes more specific customs for both Bar/Bat Mitzvah and congregational services. At Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, for example, everyone understands that the opening prayers of the service will be led by one elderly man, whether or not a Bar Mitzvah is scheduled. Without his participation, something important would be lost. Similarly, congregations have particular customs with regard to Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals. For example, at some congregations, attendees throw candy at the student to celebrate the event. When this was eliminated from one congregation’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, families protested.

In both cases, these established patterns are difficult to change. For example, the cantor at one large Reform congregation talked about families “revolting” when leadership decided to eliminate individual booklets in order to minimize the private nature of the

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155 The primary Shabbat service at Or Hadash takes place on Friday night, so Saturday morning attendance by congregants is low by Conservative or Orthodox standards, but high relative to other congregations following the contemporary model.
Bar/Bat Mitzvah. In making the change, the booklets were phased out by family, so that younger children would have the same experience as their siblings. Nevertheless, conflict did not end until all siblings had completed their Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. These kind of changes are intentional and based in the knowledge and mind-set of the congregational leadership, whether that decision be made by rabbi (or rabbis) alone or by lay and professional leadership and are resisted by congregants whose expectations are shaped by previous experience, congregational lore, and individual perspective.

Shifting congregational demographics impose other kinds of cultural changes. While a large spike in cohort size (as at Sukkat Shalom) can results in more Bar/Bat Mitzvah services and affect other services and programs, the opposite problem can take place when congregations shrink. At one small Reform congregation, the rabbi described how the Saturday morning minyan dissolved over time: “We only have Saturday morning services when there is a Bar or Bat Mitzvah....We used to have one Saturday a month, Torah studies and Shabbat morning service. People just stopped coming to the service...the numbers kept dwindling mostly because it was soccer parents who were involved would get involved and they would get involved with their kid’s soccer stuff. But we have not been able to sustain a Saturday morning service, and I think we ought to do it.” The result at both congregations is that, simply due to demographic changes, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service becomes primary.

Whether part of the regular Shabbat service or the BBM rituals, specific customs—a point at which the congregation joins for a melody, a pattern of participation, language of one prayer or another—all contribute to creating a mood of authenticity and so changing them can—and does—create conflict. Both changes and conflict are most often introduced or mediated by the leadership, specifically the rabbi or rabbis.

The Rabbi as Mediator

Rabbis are most likely to manage the problems that arise with regard to Bar/Bat Mitzvah and congregational services. In this, they are responsible both for negotiating different needs or conflicts. However, they also have individual approaches to Bar/Bat Mitzvah itself and its place in congregational life. As the religious leader, the rabbi is uniquely responsible for both congregational and Bar/Bat Mitzvah services. Whether rabbis facilitate or lead services, rabbis make decisions about the service that mark it as Bar/Bat Mitzvah or congregational. For examples, one Conservative rabbi describes the differences between the two services as follows:

We have a large number of regulars who come Shabbat after Shabbat [so we try] to maintain some sort of consistency from week to week, so the experience of the Bar Mitzvah is celebratory, but doesn’t feel like the Bar Mitzvah is owning or taking over the service. Parents don’t speak, which I have mixed feelings about, but it’s one way of maintaining consistency; the president makes a presentation to the kid, and one of the rabbis make a presentation to the kid...I tend to do more Torah commentary on a Bar Mitzvah weekend, by the time the kid talks and I talk, it’s just a long time in

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156 As it happened, eliminating the booklets did not affect the service at all, as both large cohort size and a culture of Friday night attendance were more important factors in determining who attended the Bar/Bat Mitzvah services: primarily family and guests.
one place...I would say that a Bar Mitzvah is as different as an aufruf or a baby-naming. There’s a simcha and a celebration going on, but the energy is to create the feeling of a community celebrating, rather than a narcissistic feel.

In this case, the shape of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service had been developed before this rabbi arrived, he was responsible for maintaining the balance between regular attendees and Bar/Bat Mitzvah family and did so by including enough special ritual to acknowledge the Bar/Bat Mitzvah while eliminating other moments, such as the parents’ speeches. A small Renewal congregation, where Bar/Bat Mitzvah services are (as at Gan Emek) community events, took another approach, as the cantor described:

The rabbi takes] them under his tallit and he’ll have whatever his private teaching or message is...Then we ask everyone to stand up and get close to the bema, shoulder to shoulder, and make a web around the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Then there’s a communal blessing that we sing and we ask the young person to look around and take in the love that they’re seeing and tuck it away for times they’ll need that support. For a lot of kids, standing up and doing things and expecting people to have harsh reactions is easier than taking in all of that love and support. That’s the moment when people start crying.

Here, the rabbi has the flexibility to introduce moments that are idiosyncratic, developed by this particular rabbi for this particular congregation. The “congregational web” works because it is not weekly, that is, the small cohort size contributes to a successful enactment and because Renewal Judaism encourages an experimental approach. While size and denomination enabled this moment to take place, that it happened was the rabbi’s doing.

A third approach is taken by Orthodox Rabbi Teitlebaum, who says: “We don’t go out of our way to change things. I might go out my way to explain more, we’re talking 60 seconds more, maybe two minutes over the course of the service, like the mechanics.” Rabbi Teitlebaum feels bound to follow Jewish law regarding services, but even with Orthodoxy, there is variation. Another Orthodox rabbi institutes a number of changes: welcoming the family, parental speeches, and including parents and grandparents when the Torah is carried through the congregation. For both rabbis, Jewish law is primary, however their interpretations of how to enact that law in services differs.

While rabbis enact the services, they also mediate the conflicts that arise between congregants and Bar/Bat Mitzvah families, but also conflicts in which they are a party. Their dual role as participant and leader can make this interesting. Rabbis in congregations that defined themselves as liberal and/or participatory, shared that decision-making with lay leadership, although ultimately, how much or little those committees decided was at the rabbi’s discretion, albeit modulated by congregational culture.\footnote{This is, of course, more complicated. While rabbis are the congregational leaders, congregations also hire and fire rabbis. Rabbis whose views diverge too much from the congregational practice or culture can create irresolvable conflict. At two congregations in the larger sample, interviewees described high levels of conflict between congregants and rabbi and, while the evidence is anecdotal, those rabbis are no longer at their respective congregations.}
This can take place with congregation and rabbi in concert, as happened at Reform Sukkat Shalom, where congregation and rabbi grew together. The following quote from one of the congregation’s founders describes the difficulty of negotiating different visions of the service as those visions were enacted in the details of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service:

You have people bringing their own lay history...and you have the Rabbi that comes in and knows what he wants and what he’s done. The lay leadership will bend to what the Rabbi wants to do, and that’s basically what happened here.

Every single aspect of everything had to be decided: Whether or not we would have one kid having a Bar Mitzvah. Could we have Kabbalat Shabbat Bar Mitzvahs, or are we only going to have Shabbat morning Bar Mitzvahs? Would we want to Bar Mitzvah to be part of the community’s experience or is this something just special for the Bar and Bat Mitzvah? If we decide we wanted it to be a community experience, how do we make it more of a community experience where regular congregants would come to the Shabbat service and not just the relatives and friends of the kid being Bar Mitzvahed?...There was a lot of tension between what lay leadership had ideas about and what the Rabbi had ideas about.

From the congregation’s beginnings, Rabbi Doron and lay leadership worked mutually and intentionally to establish the policies around Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and service. In the intervening decades, the congregation matured, Jewish practice changed, and while the lay leadership has remained involved, Rabbi Doron’s leadership has become more solid, so that he has assumed responsibility for changes. There, while he acknowledged that a one-time spike in Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort size from mid-twenties to over 40 would be challenging, he saw the challenges primarily as preparation problems, rather than challenges to the balance between congregational and Bar/Bat Mitzvah services. And, in fact, while a number of interviewees were concerned with Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation (particularly with regard to Hebrew), none discussed changes to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service itself.

Like Sukkat Shalom, Independent Or Hadash began with a group of congregants who found a compatible rabbi. Rabbi Melmed came to Or Hadash with his own vision of Bar/Bat Mitzvah: intensive preparation by student and family, activities that require members of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort to rely on other member and include congregant participation, and control of the program resting with the rabbi. When a rabbi has strong opinions, they are rarely challenged and, for the most part, the congregation accepts the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program with some pride and without contesting either expectations or enactment.

However, conflict around an apparently minor element of the service shows the limits of rabbinic leadership. The congregation remains independent as a considered choice: its goal is to create a pluralistic Judaism in one congregation. Rabbi Melmed, who was educated at both Reform and Conservative institutions, has the knowledge to enact that. That pluralistic model necessitates an active religious practices committee and the willingness to negotiate issues. One such issue, mentioned by most interviewees, concerned the acceptable use of photography on the day of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service. This provides an example of how different needs of congregants, family, and rabbi around the event of Bar/Bat Mitzvah are negotiated.
Shabbat services are rarely, if ever, photographed. However, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service is also a rite of passage and these often are photographed. In Conservative and Orthodox congregations, formal photographs take place during the rehearsal. In Reform and similar congregations, while the service may not be photographed, photography may take place before or following the service. At Or Hadash, families wanted this latter option: taking pictures before or after the service. Rabbi Melmed’s personal religious practice does not include being photographed on Shabbat and he was opposed to photography in the synagogue on Shabbat more generally. Thus, the issue of photographing a special day with participants—including the rabbi—was in conflict with the nature of the day itself and in particular, with Rabbi Melmed’s personal practice. The issue was discussed at length: families wanted pictures with the rabbi; the rabbi had no intention of allowing his personal practice (or anyone else’s) to be compromised. Ultimately a compromise was reached: any photographs with the rabbi would take place prior to Shabbat and photographs taken on the day itself needed the permission of those being photographed. This solution was arrived at through negotiating different religious practices and resulted in a pluralistic religious approach that respected individual religious practice, but also the different needs of both regular attendees and Bar/Bat Mitzvah families. Further, while Rabbi Melmed is a strong leader, with most of the interviewees speaking of his leadership as a primary reason for joining the congregation, in this case, compromising enabled him to enact the primary congregational values of participation and religious pluralism. It is also noteworthy that this conflict did not arise around the extensive preparation, nor around execution of the service itself: interviewees explicitly or implicitly ceded that responsibility to Rabbi Melmed. Rather, the conflict concerned balancing individual family needs with those of other congregants all within the congregational culture.

In both these cases, rabbis and congregants negotiated, with rabbis having expert knowledge and authority, but within the constraints of congregational culture. As a new rabbi in a new congregation, Rabbi Doron worked with these founding members to develop the culture and that included developing a Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. A quarter-century later, Rabbi Doron’s leadership has strengthened so that he makes the religious decisions. Rabbi Melmed began his leadership with a fully-formed Bar/Bat Mitzvah program, but found the pluralistic culture required negotiation of other issues.

By contrast, at Orthodox Adat Yitzhak, there is no religious practices committee and no negotiation. Rather, Rabbi Teitlebaum sees his role as interpreting Jewish law, which is given by God and therefore not subject to negotiation. His interpretation of Jewish law applies within the synagogue walls and to those who choose to follow his rulings outside those walls. Individuals who attend and/or join Adat Yitzhak make personal religious choices (including, for example, going elsewhere for a Bat Mitzvah), but these choices are not a matter of negotiation with the rabbi, nor do they affect Jewish practice within the synagogue itself.

Maintaining Status Quo or Effecting Change

I began this chapter with Rabbi Yoffie’s call for changing the nature of the Reform Shabbat morning service, a change that would, he argued, begin with Bar/Bat Mitzvah services. From the denominational standpoint, this is both an easy and an obvious

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158 This is separate from why they remained—there the community and congregational culture were primary influences.
statement to make. Services, regardless of religion and denomination, a primary venue for reinforcing the religious community though communal words and actions. Inasmuch as Bar/Bat Mitzvah overshadows this role, it can be perceived as a threat. However, as this chapter has shown, both rituals—Shabbat service and BBM service—are shaped by the institutional characteristics of the congregation: denominational norms, cohort size, and congregational culture. The needs and behavior of the different groups and the relationship between these groups are mediated by the rabbi and it is through this mediation that the public and private aspects of the two services are balanced in one way or another.
Chapter Seven

Conclusion: From Bar/Bat Mitzvah to Ritual System

Over the twentieth century, Bar/Bat Mitzvah emerged as the central ritual within American Judaism. In reconciling American and Jewish values, it has reshaped the American synagogue, the nature of the Jewish life-cycle, the lives of individual American Jewish families, and the event itself. In so doing, it has acted to mediate the balance between continuity and change within American Judaism. While Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a central ritual in American Judaism, the place of ritual in negotiating the balance between continuity and change is hardly limited to Bar/Bat Mitzvah or to American Judaism. Rather, this particular case illustrates how rituals both maintain tradition and incorporate broader cultural shifts, as well as how the congregation becomes the field on which leaders and laity negotiate meaning.

In this conclusion, I turn to that general case, proposing a system by which to understand how this negotiation takes place. The system is composed of three constituents: participants, each with a different role and perspective, who interact within the context of an institution that is shaped by history and culture, through the content and enactment of the ritual. The system is in no way linear, but can be understood as a set of tensions in which a change to one constituent affects the others. Their responses to this change, in turn, affect the original constituent. This conclusion moves from the example of a particular Jewish rite-of-passage to the broader issues of American Judaism and to tensions facing congregations, leaders, and laity within American congregational life, providing a model by which to think about the interplay between ritual as both personal and public. I begin by discussing the constituent parts, turn to the different meanings rituals can assume, then look at how ritual shapes performance. From there, I move to how the institutional norms and community shape inclusion, thus changing the ritual and to how community norms shape participation. Finally, I turn to a subject alluded to throughout: the reproduction and continuity of community.

Parts of a System: Ritual, Participants, and Organization

I have argued that the power of the American Bar/Bat Mitzvah lies in its ability to offer hope for the Jewish future in a peculiarly American way: allowing students to enact the American value of voluntary association through asserting an affiliation with Judaism and the Jewish people. Families can thus bridge the gap between Jewish and American worldviews, interpret Judaism within the American context, and cap the process of raising a child who is both Jewish and American. The minimal observance of the early twentieth century resulted in a minimal ritual that simply affirmed ethnic affiliation, rather than ongoing practice. This largely symbolic event was not sufficient for Jewish leadership, for whom Bar Mitzvah meant the ability to participate knowledgeably in Jewish communal life, thus enabling Judaism to continue into the future. From these competing viewpoints, the American Bar Mitzvah ritual developed: rabbis formally sanctioned the ceremony with their presence in return for time to educate the children religiously. Families saw the ritual as gaining legitimacy from the presence of the leaders; those leaders used the Bar Mitzvah as the means to inculcate Jewish belief and practice, with the hope that this attachment
would continue beyond the event. This Bar Mitzvah Bargain between leaders and laity still underlies the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in American Jewish life.

The Bar Mitzvah Bargain begins with the ritual itself, a ritual that results from its ability to interpret between American and Jewish values and practices. Bar Mitzvah is hardly unique in filling this need; religious ritual develops through this process of interpretation and appropriation. Hanukkah, with its multiple meanings of miracle, of military victory, and of resisting assimilation, developed at a different time and place but from the same need for interpretation. The American Jewish embrace of Passover is another example, in which Jewish freedom from Egyptian slavery is conflated with the American value of individual freedom (Eisen, 1998). So too, with the development of the Christmas tree from pagan to Christian symbol (and perhaps back again) or with conceptions of God, as interpreted in contemporary Protestant sermons (Witten, 1993).

All of these rituals mediate between dominant and minority cultures through interpretation, appropriation, or other means and so bridge an important gap for the participants. However, rituals develop through interactions between people who ascribe these multiple meanings to them. The different roles and experiences of the participants shape their understanding of the ritual. In the case of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, parents largely understood it as an important life-cycle event that confirmed their child’s Jewish identity. Their perspective and understanding of the event was shaped by personal history, parental and familial roles, and relationship to Judaism and congregation. Both for parents and their children, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah was personal, albeit in a communal context, where that community might or might not include congregants. The role of leader of the Jewish community results in a more general perspective of the congregation, but also a deeper understanding of Jewish history and practice. So, while many leaders discussed the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a peak event for the family, their perspective, shaped by past education and current role, was to minimize the effect of a peak event on a regular service and to frame the event within a wider context of Jewish practice.

The different perspectives of laity and leaders are, again, neither limited to the case of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, nor to Jewish ritual alone, but shape American Judaism at every level—and, in fact, shape the nature of congregations and religious practice more generally. Indeed, the development of the two styles of Shabbat service—traditional and contemporary—emerged from wrestling with the challenges of modernity. While the traditional service makes an appeal to authenticity through distinguishing itself as different from the American service norms, the contemporary service appropriates those norms—using instruments and styles common in the secular world. This is, of course, precisely what contemporary churches do as well: Christian rock serves a similar purpose in mediating between popular and religious culture (see, for example, (Howard, et al., 1999), (Stowe, 2011)).

These kinds of changes often begin with the laity and are given authority and shape by leaders.\(^{159}\) So, with regard to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, leaders and laity take

\(^{159}\) For example, comparing changes in both prayerbooks, used in congregations regularly, and Passover Haggadahs (the book that structures the Passover ritual) show how leadership has responded to laity over time. Examining how the Reform prayerbook has changed over the course of the 20\(^{th}\) century shows changes in approach to Hebrew, to practice, and to inclusion. Similar changes can be seen in the Orthodox prayerbooks, albeit with different results.
different views on who is—or should be—included in the service, on what subjects can be discussed within community, and what the essential community practice should be. These different perspectives affect the public or private elements that make up the service, who is included in the service and in what role, the approach taken to preparation and enactment, and the meaning of the ritual itself. Similarly, the ritual is incorporated into the Saturday morning service, thus effectively building in tension between ritual and service, a relationship largely taken for granted by the stakeholders.

Neither people nor ritual exist in a vacuum. The ritual takes place within a congregation that is shaped by surrounding culture, by denomination, by size, and by its own history and culture. These factors determine what is possible with respect to the ritual. A congregation with fifty Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals each year faces a different set of challenges from those of a congregation with four. Denominational expectations structure, among other things, who may participate in the service. Both internal and surrounding culture provide contexts that make it harder or easier to effect change. Again, these factors are hardly limited to the case of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but determine much of congregational life. More generally, these factors also determine the nature of a minority community. While there are commonalities across North American Judaism, place matters a great deal, both within a region and between regions.

While each of these constituents has been examined, neither with respect to Bar/Bat Mitzvah nor more generally have they been linked into a system. Throughout this research, I have remained surprised by how rarely these constituents were considered as pieces of a whole. This is not to say that participants are not aware of these different constituents: leaders regularly work to manage the problems that arise from two services with competing goals or the strains of accommodating a Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort of unusual size. However, they are (most often) reacting to a specific problems without considering the mutual interactions between participants, institution, and ritual.

The interactions between the participants—parents, children, leaders, and (sometimes) congregants—result in the set of inherent tensions, negotiated between participants and structured by the fundamental characteristics of the congregation and the ritual. These tensions—variations in meaning, process and performance, inclusion and setting boundaries, and balancing public and private rituals—can be used to understand not only Bar/Bat Mitzvah but also more general questions that face the American Jewish community and the role of ritual in American congregations.

The American Jewish community is a minority that understands itself as both religion and people. While its problems are unique—as are any group’s—its dual identity means that it shares common ground with other American religions and with other minority groups. Thus, the tensions that result from the relationship between Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual, participants, and congregation provide a structure by which think about how change and reproduction take place in American Judaism, American religious life, and American minority communities, by showing how ritual both maintains minority communities in a pluralistic milieu and also mediates inevitable change.

**Negotiating Different Meanings Between Participants**

The objects, actions, and words that make up a ritual are pointless without meaning being attributed to them. Thus, as with any ritual, assuring a sense of authenticity and meaning is at the heart of Bar/Bat Mitzvah and all participants have a stake in ensuring
that the service enacts in a symbolically meaningful way those interpretations they hold most dear. This, in turn, determines the nature of the ritual. More generally, because ritual enacts key symbols and narratives, those essential meaning becomes important in determining where to put effort. This was the subject of Chapter Three, “Variations on a Theme,” which argues that Bar/Bat Mitzvah takes on four different meanings: a change of status from Jewish child to Jewish adult; a claim to Jewish identity and consequent affiliation with the Jewish people; the performance of a difficult Jewish task; and a celebration of the child and event.

These four interpretations arise from the perspectives of the different participants and are shaped by experience and roles. They can be mutually reinforcing or divisive, depending on the relationships between the participants. There is broad agreement that Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a change of status, although less agreement on how or if that change of status is enacted.\(^1\)\(^6\) There is also general agreement, although less explicitly expressed, that Bar/Bat Mitzvah represents a way to affirm Jewish identity, although how students claim that identity varies: passing the Torah is one common moment; formally declaring loyalty to the Jewish people is another. There is also common agreement that the status change is marked through performing a quintessentially Jewish act: reading and interpreting Torah—although how much and what kind of content varies. Finally, because of its role as a peak event for families, it becomes a celebration of completing the ritual or—often—simply of the student. This is the interpretation that resulted in the most conflict and required the most negotiation between parents and leadership.

The ideal Bar/Bat Mitzvah, as described by different participants, includes all of these meanings: it is a change of status marked by assuming adult Jewish identity through enacting important Jewish actions witnessed and then celebrated by family and community (sometimes including the congregation). Yet this ideal ritual is, in reality, difficult to achieve as the participants’ different perspectives lead to emphasizing one meaning over another. Thus, at Reform Sha’arei Hesed, where some congregants wanted the ritual to become a brief moment in the service that primarily acknowledged change of status, Rabbi Segal reminded them of other meanings that such a brief moment could not address.

Celebrating the child and the accomplishment is one of the defining elements of a rite of passage; the other three can be expressed most generally as the three attributes of group (and religious) affiliation: belonging, behavior, and belief. It is not possible to take on adult Jewish responsibilities without being part of the Jewish people; Bar/Bat Mitzvah as change of status implies belonging to the group. Particularly within the American context, the individual chooses to accept that responsibility, as demonstrated by publicly claiming that identity. Both change of status and claim to identity define belonging that is then enacted through behavior and belief. Chanting Jewish texts and leading prayer exemplifies symbolically important Jewish behavior, while the Bar/Bat Mitzvah talk shows the ability to interpret texts Jewishly—that is, to demonstrate a Jewish mode of thought (or the integration of Jewish and American thought). Both change of status and affiliation with the Jewish people are examples of belonging; reading and interpreting Torah demonstrate behavior and belief. When viewed as an example of this general definition, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual can be seen as a microcosm of the debate over the key characteristics of the

\(^{16}\) For example, in an Orthodox community, that change of status results in new responsibilities; in a Reform community, change of status may have little effect.
American Jewish community: Jewish status as determined by heritage; identifying with the cultural aspects of Judaism; and Judaism as expressed by varying degrees of practice or belief. As with the meaning of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, understanding how the different meanings of defining who is Jewish and what that means depends on understanding the role and perspective of the individual—a seemingly obvious point, but one that is often missed.

**Inculcating Judaism; Demonstrating Proficiency**

Whether the symbolic meaning of Bar/Bat Mitzvah is primarily change of status, Jewish affiliation, or demonstration of competence, the ritual will include some indication of proficiency. How (or if) that proficiency is attained is the subject of “Getting it Right: Process or Performance?” which discusses the tension between developing specific skills that enable the student to perform the ritual competently and inculcating a more general understanding of the process of “doing Judaism.” That chapter considered the three key points where this tension arises: while students learn in congregational supplementary schools, while they undergo individual training for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals, and while they enact what they have learned. At each stage, there is an element of balancing the process of engaged practice with preparing for a performance.

The ritual has had a central role in shaping the direction of modern American Judaism. In order to reproduce Judaism—to ensure more than symbolic ethnicity—the Jewish community, as does any minority culture, has had to find ways to teach and to engage in practice. Bar/Bat Mitzvah provided the means to that end—a perspective still held by many educators. That entry point enabled schools to develop and teach a core set of beliefs and practices that are taught at different levels and in different ways. At the same time, education directors want to create a safe and communal space where students will feel at home in being Jewish. In this case, the larger lesson is that what makes up Judaism is not Jewish identity, but a very clear set of subjects, each of which is, in fact, part of what makes a people. These subjects comprise: a language, a set of rituals that structure time through days, weeks, years, and life course; a history and narrative of a people; and a set of core principles.

So, from the beginning of the Bar Mitzvah Bargain, the ritual shaped the content of the school—with students expected to master basic Jewish knowledge in order to confer a sense of authenticity (at least in the eyes of the leaders) upon the ritual. The ritual spurred the development of supplementary schools, which included curricula of subjects that, in effect, defined essential Jewish knowledge. However, as students were expected to participate more fully in the service (up to and including leading it), supplementary schools needed to prepare students more fully. Teaching for only a few hours a week, education directors and teachers within supplementary schools face the problem of determining the key topics for Jewish knowledge and balancing these with the skills necessary for leading a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. There is a rich literature about the problems of teaching within the supplementary school, but very little of it discusses the fundamental tension—or the really impossible task—of both inculcating general knowledge and ensuring that Bar/Bat Mitzvah students are prepared to begin training for the ritual.

While the expectations for the ritual have, in some measure, determined the nature of the supplementary school, it also affects the preparation for the ritual as different expectations of meaning determine what is taught. A congregation in which the leaders choose to emphasize social action will develop a different set of expectations from one in
which textual study and analysis is emphasized. Tutors, too, emphasize different elements of the texts and liturgy in teaching the material to be performed. In this way, the different meanings of the ritual are given shape.

Finally, the ritual itself demonstrates adult competence through performance. The leaders manage this through monitoring the student and the congregation. At every stage, the ritual's content and the need—both from congregation's and student's perspective—for a competent performance result in tension between families, whose primary concern is that performance, and leaders, whose primary concern is inculcating Judaism more broadly.

The expectations around the ritual determine the needs of preparation and training. This has shaped the curriculum of the congregational school (for example). This has very wide implications. First, Bar/Bat Mitzvah has affected the nature of Jewish education first through setting expectations that students will attend school and gain some knowledge of Jewish beliefs and practice and then through a curriculum that, through necessity, includes teaching necessary tools for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual. This is an area that have received much attention within the field of Jewish education, however, the effect on American Judaism as a whole remains to be explored. Second, Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals are based on regular Shabbat services and almost all include similar required elements: leading prayers and chanting and interpreting texts. I have argued that there is a cultural logic that leads to the centrality of these elements. However, the reverse can be said as well: as these elements are taught, they assume increased importance for students (as with the student from Beth Jeshurun who was moved by holding the Torah—after she had been provided an example of another student’s experience) and, perhaps, within American Judaism more widely.

Considering the tensions that are negotiated in the process of ensuring competence throughout the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process provides a model for thinking about what constitutes necessary knowledge not only for the ritual, but in considered the central areas of competency within Judaism. Knowledge and practice are central to societal reproduction more generally: a vague sense of identity leads to a symbolic identity without content—the “green beer” phenomenon. Passing on both knowledge and practice requires inculcating both a formal set of skills and the cultural attitudes that provide the framework for these skills (Berger, et al., 1959), which are then used within the society. Ideally, developing skills and attitudes is mutually reinforcing. This is never entirely possible: limited time and resources result in trade-offs at every stage and for every society.

**Expanding the Community; Preserving Ritual Sanctity**

“What are THEY Doing on the Bimah?” considers how congregations balance the desire for inclusiveness with the desire to maintain traditional boundaries, as they determine who can participate in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service and in what capacity. A ritual enacted by a participant without legitimacy has no meaning. Part of maintaining the ritual’s authenticity requires those legitimate participants. Over the past several decades, a desire to include two previously excluded groups has resulted in changes to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual. Throughout the course of the 20th century, increasing egalitarianism throughout American institutions has resulted in pressure to include girls in Bat Mitzvah rituals identical to Bar Mitzvah rituals, a practice that is now routine in all but Orthodox congregations. In Orthodox congregations, rabbis struggle to include girls in a Bat Mitzvah
ritual, while still observing Jewish law. In a similar way, an increase in intermarried families joining liberal congregations has resulted in pressure to acknowledge non-Jewish family members during the ritual, while still maintaining Jewish boundaries. While the situations are apparently different, in both cases, leaders are attempting to respect both the sanctity of the ritual and the individual’s connection to community and to Judaism.

In this case, changes in the surrounding culture—the inclusion of non-Jews into community and an expectation of egalitarian treatment—resulted in changes within the laity’s expectations. Leaders, whatever their personal opinions, were forced to confront the effects of the changes and their responses had direct consequences for congregational composition. These changes, in turn, compelled leadership to find places for non-Jewish parents in Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, to explain a Jewish ritual to visitors (while not disrupting its flow), and to find roles for Jewish girls in Orthodox settings. These changes are not necessarily accepted easily or comfortably as they can challenge expected religious norms of practice, yet over time they have become accepted.

This specific instance can be generalized as follows: cultural changes lead to changes to the community which then result in the need to reconcile the needs of the changed population with community practices. Within Judaism more broadly, these same cultural changes affect the question of “Who is a Jew?” a debate is enacted in both congregational communal life and in ritual through finding ways to be both particularistic and inclusive, both gender-specific and egalitarian.

A personal anecdote illustrates the nature of the debate. While travelling to Israel, I found myself sitting next to an Orthodox rabbi, debating the question of who is a Jew. In his mind, the only criterion that mattered was that the individual had either been born of a Jewish mother or had converted according to Orthodox standards. I described intermarried families who engaged in Jewish practice (albeit in a liberal manner), arguing that enacting Judaism was equally as important as Jewish status by birth. He was completely unmoved, as was I. However, the positions that each of us defended are similar to the meanings of Bar/Bat Mitzvah: is being Jewish primarily a matter of birth, a status conferred by the “right” parent, or is it primarily a matter of behavior and belief, an association that occurs through individual choice and accomplishment? As with Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the “ideal” Jew can demonstrate all of the above. While there is general agreement around the multiple meanings of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, with different parties negotiating how to represent these meanings, no such agreement exists with regard to Jewish standing.

Balancing Public and Private Space in Communities

The size of the community and the denominational affiliation structure what is possible within a community. “Who Owns the Bimah, Anyway?” discusses the tension that results from integrating a peak event in the life of an individual family with regular weekly congregational worship. Contemporary model congregations find it challenging to attract congregants to a Saturday morning service, which leads to the service becoming a de facto private event. Traditional-model congregations, in which the primary Shabbat service takes place on Saturday morning, find the striking the balance between private event and public

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161 However, denomination matters in the case of conversion. Since Orthodox rabbis will not accept non-Orthodox conversion, this means that the “wrong” type of conversion can lead to rejection by Orthodox Jews.
service difficult to negotiate. These two situations result in different approaches. In the first case, without changing the congregational culture, the ritual will remain a private event. In the second case, balancing the needs of two populations with different expectations becomes the leadership’s challenge. In both cases, however, the sheer number of Bar/Bat Mitzvah students in each year’s cohort determines possibilities for change.

Negotiating between public service and private Bar/Bat Mitzvah event can take up substantial effort in congregational life. This is a particularly sharp example of how time and space is negotiated more generally, which has a bearing both on how organizations think about resource distribution and on the nature of a shared communal experience as opposed to an event for an individual’s community. As the place of congregations in American Jewish life is called into question, understanding the relationship between community and individual becomes crucial.

**Connecting to the Congregation; Connecting to the Future**

As I concluded my observation of a rowdy sixth grade class, the teacher and congregation’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor pulled me aside to ask, “How are we doing?” Underlying the question, which I heard echoed throughout the course of my observations, were the concerns that this work has explored: “Are we teaching our students enough?” “Are we meeting the needs of our congregants?” “Does the ritual mean anything real?” Underlying these questions was the issue of a Jewish future: “Does Bar/Bat Mitzvah act to further Jewish continuity?” However expressed, the anxiety underlying these questions speaks to the desire to get the process right: to make sure the ritual is meaningful, the students competent, the community engaged, and the right people are included appropriately. But the reason for getting it all right is the future: ensuring that families remain engaged and, as their children grow up, they retain a Jewish identity, howsoever that was enacted in the future.

I have argued that Bar/Bat Mitzvah retains its power for Jewish families because it symbolically promises that there will be a Jewish future. It is more difficult to answer the question of whether or how it makes that connection. Previous research is inconclusive: on the one hand, Wertheimer (2007) argues that families leave congregations following Bar/Bat Mitzvah; on the other, Kosmin and Keysar (2000) and (2004) show that students who have taken part in Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals do develop stronger Jewish identities. However, these studies do not address how congregations might act to facilitate connection nor what factors within either congregations or families might alienate individuals. This work has explored the preparation and performance of the ritual and the role of Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a factor in connecting or dividing congregational communities entered into my questions. However, because I did not conduct a longitudinal study, answers to the effect of Bar/Bat Mitzvah over time are necessarily speculative.

In each interview, I asked about future participation. Interviews with rabbis included questions about post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs and rates of student participation in these programs, while interviews with families included questions about how what they expected to do Jewishly in the future (both within the congregation and as individuals).

Congregations provide several ways for students to continue participating in the congregation. Jewish education programs for Across the Bay Area, there are that bring students from different congregations together weekly. These programs serve students in
eighth grade through high school, meet weekly for a few hours, and often include weekend retreats. Participation in these programs varies from 20% to 80% of each Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort, which serve a dual function: to enable students to learn Jewish studies at a more mature level and to provide time for socializing. Congregations can also bring students together more informally through youth groups which have social programming. It was not clear from the interviews how many students participated in these programs.

Congregations frequently offer individual ways for youth to participate. Education directors often build spots for teenage assistants, called madrichim, into their programs. While only a few students from each cohort can fill these spots, those who fill these spots relearn past material through teaching. Another way post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students participate is through participating in services. Some congregations invite or expect students to read their Torah portion on the anniversary of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah, to read other portions, or to act as a service leader (usually in traditional-style congregations). These efforts are largely individual and—with the exception of Orthodox boys—limited to only a few students in each cohort.

Thus, post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students can choose from programs that range from educational to social, from communal to individual, from teaching to prayer. However, unlike attending supplementary school, students are only rarely required to participate in any of these programs; it is a matter of individual (or family) choice and priorities. Regardless of the range of programs offered, the question remains: “Given that post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah participation is optional, what encourages students and families to participate?” Responses from students, parents, and rabbis lead me to the preliminary conclusion that it is not the number of available options that matters, but rather the amount of time and effort congregations spend in creating long-lasting connections and community for the students and their parents. That is, when congregations invest time, money, and energy in developing programs that create connections within the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cohort and (often) their parents and when these programs extend across the Bar/Bat Mitzvah year, participation in congregational life is more likely to be sustained. When these programs do not exist, families make choices that are guided by individual family circumstances: families that are deeply engaged in Jewish life will continue to be; families less engaged will remain so.

Throughout this book, continuity and identity have emerged as themes throughout this book. In Chapter Three, “Variations on a Theme,” continuity emerges as part of the connection to Jewish identity and people. In Chapter Four, “Process or Performance?” family education and cohort activities are often included in preparation. Many of these activities and programs are focused on connecting the individual student and family to another person or group. In one example of this kind of program, students meet with, interview, and give a place in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service to a congregational elder. Another program connects students with adults who teach them a chosen skill. A more

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162 For example, one program, Midrasha in Berkeley, describes its mission as engaging: “Jewish teens in exploring their identity as Jews through social, educational, and experiential programming. Through weekly classes, tri-annual retreats, and social action projects, East Bay teens in grades 8 through 12 strengthen their ties with their heritage and their community.” (2012)

163 Only three Orthodox boys participated in this project, making any generalizations impossible.

164 While some congregations ask students to sign contracts that promise they will continue in one program or another following Bar/Bat Mitzvah, in fact, they have no means by which to enforce attendance.
symbolic example takes place at Beth Jeshurun where there are roles within the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual for students from a grade above and a grade below. These examples share a focus on relationships between individuals, depending on that bond to create individual connections.

Even where congregations have intensive family preparation programs, these do not necessarily translate into developing connections between students and families. Both independent Or Hadash and Reform Beth Jeshurun have intensive family preparation programs. However, although they appear similar in level of commitment, Beth Jeshurun structures its programs so that each family chooses from an array of activities, with little or no development of a community. As a result, there is little opportunity for either parents or students to develop a sense of community around the shared experience.

By contrast, the lengthy family education program at Or Hadash is structured so that each family is given the responsibility for a different task, which ensures that they work together. Chapter Three, “Variations on a Theme,” describes a session in which families discuss each other’s mottos. The explicit point of the exercise is to teach how Jewish knowledge is passed on through time and between people. However, the exercise has implicit goals as well. Each family contributes their mottoes to the group. Individual families have to decide who they are as a family and how they want to present themselves. Two families work together to collect and then organize the material into handouts—one of the tasks that families take on. Finally, the collected mottoes are used by others not only as a way to experience Jewish learning, but also as a way for families to find out about each other. Through these kind of activities and through working together to assist with providing the Bar/Bat Mitzvah year itself, families are expected to work together to provide the luncheon following the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, parents and often students, develop connections to the congregation—at least during the year. By structuring the program so that families must work together to achieve mutual goals, they not only build cohesion, but also develop a pool of knowledge which enables them to solve problems common to Bar/Bat Mitzvah planning. This program does not formally extend into the years following Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but parents were uniformly enthusiastic, with many indicating that they expected the bonds formed during that year to last.

A different path toward making connections took place in a program developed by one large Reform congregation, in which the students pool their gift money, then research, choose, and donate to different charitable causes. As with the program at Or Hadash, this is a carefully structured program in which each member of the group is responsible to the others to reach a common, collective goal. The education director attributed the fact that 80% of the students entered the post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah program in the year following their Bar/Bat Mitzvah to the close bonds formed through this program.

Establishing connections with others in the community mattered for future affiliation. Although families joined congregations for a variety of reasons including the rabbi, their children’s education, and the specific denomination, the single most important

165 Beth Jeshurun has a very large yearly cohort, which is split into sections. However, these sections only rarely meet together.
166 However, without some organized activity, maintaining these connections is by no means certain.
167 While a causal relationship would be difficult to demonstrate, the logic of realistic conflict theory underlies both this program and that at Or Hadash (Sherif, et al., 1961 [1954]) and makes that argument plausible.
reason that families remained members was connection to community. This point was
driven home not only with across all interviews, whether with leadership across all
congregations or with members of the five congregations at which I observed.

The Relationship Between Bar/Bat Mitzvah and American Judaism

The 19th-century writer, Ahad Ha-Am said: “More than the Jews have kept the
Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews.” That is, through Shabbat practice, values and
narratives and shared connections are reinforced and kept vital. In the same way, I would
argue that “As much as American Jews have created Bar Mitzvah, Bar Mitzvah has created
the American Jews.” It is a rite of passage that occurs simply by existing and by standing up,
but still includes the expectation that it will be done with some competence. From its
beginnings as a folk ritual, it has served to bridge the gap between American central value
of self-creation through free choice and the foundational Jewish belief of being a people
chosen by God (for example: (Fischer, 2010), (Giddens, 1991), (Tobin, et al., 1989), (Eisen,
1983), (Eisen, 1998)). However, it was the Bar Mitzvah bargain (Schoenfeld, 1993), that led
to current relationship between congregation, participants, and ritual. Beyond that, it
provides a focal point for American Jews and American Judaism that shapes both Jews and
Judaism in important ways.

As families join congregations, often with the intent of educating children, that very
act of affiliation implies some level of commitment. At a minimum, it costs money to join; it
takes time to schlep children to religious school. Whether a family joins a congregation
specifically to “get the Bar/Bat Mitzvah” or for other reasons, the act of affiliation leads to
education; as Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a normative part of that education, the ritual itself acts to
shape an understanding of what Judaism is supposed to be. And, as more than one student
noted, the act of preparing for Bar/Bat Mitzvah caused them to understand that the ritual
was important.

That understanding has an effect on American Judaism itself, contributing to the
sense that Judaism is expressed through synagogue practice, albeit a practice more ignored
than observed. The tension between Jews as a people—or Judaism as an ethnicity—and
Judaism as a religion, in the model of other American religions, has been well documented.
The content of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual, with its emphasis on liturgy and text, gives
weight to Judaism as a religion—although the elements of peoplehood and identity are not
unimportant.

The skills needed to enact the ritual dictate at least some of the content taught in
supplementary schools. Thus, religious schools teach liturgical Hebrew and prayers by
necessity, but cannot focus on Jewish history or conversational Hebrew to the same
degree.168

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168 I would expect education directors to argue with me on this point. As discussed in “Getting it Right,”
religious school content includes Jewish history, values, Torah, and practices (from daily to life-cycle). My
point is simply based on time spent on material. When fully half the time is devoted to Hebrew and that
Hebrew is liturgical, teachers necessarily spend less time on other subjects.
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Appendix A: Methodology

For an event that consumes as much time, energy, and imagination as does Bar/Bat Mitzvah, surprisingly little is known about it. There is a rough sense of what constitutes the ritual and how students are prepared for it, but this assumed knowledge is at best imprecise and at worst simply wrong. Two examples illustrate the problem. For the first case, reading Torah is an expected part of all Bar/Bat Mitzvah services (sometimes excluding the Orthodox Bat Mitzvah). However, the amount that a student chants varies from 3 verses to the entire weekly portion; no one knows who does how much and why. For the second case, many assume the students are performing a rote act of performance with little real content. While both service content and preparation for the service vary, the reality is more complex—as this research shows. Part of my goal, therefore, was to fill the information gap by simply describing the landscape of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and event. However, the specific elements of that landscape shift over time and place, so my larger goal was provide a way to think about what shapes this landscape by identifying and describing the interactions between the ritual, the congregation as an institution, and the different stakeholders.

Two avenues of investigation enabled me to accomplish both goals. A broad survey of congregational leaders that included rabbis, education directors, and administrators provided information about specific patterns of preparation and enactment, as well as an understanding of how professional leadership understands the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the congregation and its role in Jewish life. The more in-depth method of interviews and observations at representative congregations enabled me to understand the nature of interactions around Bar/Bat Mitzvah and how these interactions affected individuals, congregation, and the ritual itself. The combination of specific descriptive data and information showing the meaning of and effect on the different parties provided a way to understand how the different parties negotiated the resulting tensions.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals usually take place in congregations; congregations usually belong to denominations (nationally, five percent are unaffiliated). There are distinct denominational differences in content and enactment of services; there are also distinct regional differences in US Jewish communities. Describing both regional and denomination differences would not have been a manageable project. I chose to examine one region—the San Francisco Bay Area—in great detail and across denominations. In the next section, I discuss my rationale for choosing this approach and the Bay Area in particular. In the following two sections, I discuss the two parts of the project: the broad leadership survey and intensive observations at five congregations. I conclude with possibilities for future research.

San Francisco Bay Area as a research site

As defined by the San Francisco Jewish Federation, the Jewish Bay Area covers an area that extends north to Ukiah, south to Monterey, and east to Antioch. Like the Washington DC, Philadelphia, and Boston areas, it has a population of around 215,000 Jews (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2013). Since its beginnings, dating back to the California Gold Rush, it
has had a history of acculturation and diffusion (Kahn, et al., 2003), as well as the distinct lack of ethnic enclaves that shaped Jewish communities like those in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Bay Area intermarriage is somewhat higher than the national norms, with rates of 55-60% as compared to 48% nationally. Synagogue affiliation, with a rate of 21-22%, is notably lower than that national average of 40%.\(^{169}\) At the same time, the region supports an active Jewish cultural life that includes many Jewish film festivals, street fairs, Jewish day schools, centers for specific types of Jewish learning (meditation, for example), a region-wide adult education program (Lehrhaus Judaica), and synagogues of various sizes and denominations.

High intermarriage rates strongly affect the composition of liberal Bay Area congregations. While the numbers of intermarried families in Conservative and Orthodox families are similar in both US and Bay Area (5-15% in Conservative synagogues; 3-5% in Orthodox synagogues), they are very different in Reform and similar congregations.\(^{170}\) In these congregations 40-70% of the membership is intermarried, as opposed to 26% nationally.

The percentages of synagogues identifying with different denominations also differs from the US average. Excluding congregations that serve specific populations (for example, the elderly or young singles), those with particular missions (for example, Jewish meditation), as well as Chabad groups, as these are organized as hierarchical franchises led by individuals or couples, are 73 congregations categorized in Table 1 by denomination, with total number, percent of total, sizes of each (as self-reported), and membership, using both member units and individuals:\(^{171}\)

**Table 1: Bay Area Congregations, numbers and Sizes**

<table>
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<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Size in member units</th>
<th>Total Family/Individual (x2.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>80-2500</td>
<td>15,000/37,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>300 to 700</td>
<td>6,200/15,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>100-400</td>
<td>1,600/4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>50-250</td>
<td>1,000/3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>50-400</td>
<td>500/1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructionist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&lt; 100</td>
<td>200/400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>&lt; 100</td>
<td>100/200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>24,600/61,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{169}\) My calculations show a higher affiliation rate of 29%, but see below for caveats.

\(^{170}\) The US percentages for intermarried families rates are 12% in Conservative synagogues, 5% in Orthodox synagogues.

\(^{171}\) This was determined as follows: using the 2009 Federation Resource to generate a list of congregations and information listed, minimally including denomination, address, phone, email, and (usually) website. Number of congregation families was determined by asking administrators of responding congregations, then multiplying by the percentages (adjusted for known outliers); number of individuals used numbers given by administrators. This resulted in about 2.5 individuals per family. This is lower than the number used in the 2010 US Religion Census Appendix H, however still results in a higher percent of affiliated families than found in the 2013 Comparisons of Jewish Communities. While there are several possible reasons for these discrepancies (optimistic reporting from administrators, for example), for my purposes, the rough numbers suffice.
This is substantially different from the US percentages. Table 2 shows the comparison. Only the percentage of Conservative congregations is similar to the national average, while there are far more Reform, Independent, and Renewal congregations and far fewer Orthodox congregations.

Table 2: Comparison of Bay Area and US Congregational Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>% Bay Area</th>
<th>% National (Cohen, 2006)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructionist</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All others (Renewal &amp; Humanist)</td>
<td>5.5, 2.7 (8.2)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, compared to the US as a whole, the Bay Area has a smaller percentage of Jews who join synagogues. These synagogues are more liberal and within those synagogues—particularly for younger families—the intermarriage rate is higher. Given these differences, what justifies my decision to investigate such an unusual place? The fact is that there is no single region in the US that embodies typical American Jewish practice, thus choosing any one region to represent the whole is problematic. Thus, a study based in New York would capture the largest, densest, and most Orthodox (by percentage) Jewish community, but it would be no more representative the variety of Jewish practice, belief, and identity than is the Bay Area. Similarly, a study based in Albuquerque would capture the life of a relatively small and isolated Jewish community, with its particular set of challenges. While none of these cases can represent the whole, each shows different constructions of Jewish communities in different environments: from large to small, from concentrated to diffuse, from more to less religiously liberal. Understanding the full range is useful not only for the Jewish community, but as means of understanding the interactions of other minority communities in different environments.

By this reasoning, one response to the question of “why the Bay Area?” is “why not?” However, the Bay Area has two particular advantages as a site. First, given the number of Jews and synagogues, it is theoretically possible to conduct a complete census of Bay Area Jewish congregations—that is, to describe completely the Jewish congregational landscape of the Bay Area. Understanding Bar/Bat Mitzvah across a complete region provides the opportunity to understand how different variables—notably size and denomination—shape the ritual within the context of a particular regional culture. Thus, for example, while denominational differences can be seen in the enactment of the service, almost with exception, Bar/Bat Mitzvah services take place on Saturday morning; Saturday afternoon services have been eliminated.

Second, trends in both the American religious landscape (Putnam 2010, FACT 2010) and the American Jewish landscape (FACT 2010, Kosmin and Keysar 2013) show increasingly levels of individualization and secularization nationally.¹⁷² Thus, ¹⁷² Kosmin and Keysar use the terms “secular” and “secularization,” both of which bear substantial baggage in sociology. I would argue that “cultural” better describes the phenomenon, which is matched in the Bay Area by the numerous cultural activities discussed above.
understanding the nature of a community in which religious pluralism and individualism is and has been the cultural norm may point to the future of American Judaism more generally, particularly with regard to congregational life.

For example, precisely because synagogue affiliation is not the norm, choosing to affiliate requires some self-justification, both with regard to time and money. Further, both lay and professional leaders of these synagogues are well aware of the difficulties recruiting new members. In some synagogues, this results in substantial efforts to make the case for joining. High rates of intermarriage introduce another issue that is likely to affect congregations in increasing numbers: how does the congregation remain both distinctively Jewish and inclusive of the non-Jewish participants in congregational life? Thus, the Bay Area is both a particular space that can be described quite completely and also a possible model for Jewish continuity in the increasingly pluralist and secular 21st century American religious milieu. More generally, the approach of this particular minority group illustrates the tension between distinctiveness and inclusiveness faced by every minority community—religious or ethnic—in a pluralistic society.

At least some of the patterns of preparation and performance are likely to be specific to the Bay Area. For example, because of the degree of intermarriage in Bay Area synagogues, non-Jews may be more integrated into congregational life than in (some) other regions. However, without data from these other regions, there is no way of comparing these different specific practices, a fact which points to the limitations of the research design.

The alternative to examining one region which includes a variety of sizes and denominations would have been to compare practices of one denomination in two or more regions. This design would have captured some regional differences, but resulted in a far less complete picture of the ritual. By examining the range of denominations, I have established a set of questions that can be used in other communities and across the denominational spectrum, as well as a set of regional practices that can be used for comparison. The specific patterns change over time but the tensions that shape those patterns remain and, as I argue in the dissertation, are inherent in the place of the ritual in American Judaism more generally. While specific resolutions to these tensions will vary over time and place—as, for example, the rules about what a non-Jew can do on the bimah have changed over the past 20 years—every congregation, whether located in New York, Albuquerque, or the Bay Area, faces the question of who can participate in what way during the service.

From congregational websites to interviews: the leadership survey

The leadership interviews were intended to gather information on the relationship between Bar/Bat Mitzvah and congregation from the standpoint of those responsible for developing and administering Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs. To do this, I planned to interview individuals filling three key roles (rabbi, education director, and administrator)
at each congregation. The project proceeded first by identifying and gathering basic data on the pool of congregations, then identifying the individuals to be interviewed. At the same time, I developed and pilot-tested the set of interview questions. Each congregation and interviewee was contacted several times. Finally, interviews were conducted over the phone, recorded, and transcribed. In what follows, I discuss each of these steps in some detail.

The initial list of synagogues was taken directly from the Bay Area Resource Guide. As a publication of the San Francisco Jewish Federation, it collects and organizes denominational lists by sub-region, including (minimally) basic contact information. Through a combination of examining websites, then calling to confirm that information, my research apprentices and I first eliminated all congregations that did not fit the profile described in the previous section. In the process, we also gathered website information in three categories: introductory statements, information about services, and descriptions of children’s education. This information gives a sense for how the congregation—in the person of whomever wrote the text—understands the overall congregational goal, the range of services, and the nature of the education program.

Using the information collected, I attempted—with only partial success—to contact each person. We sent letters through the postal service or by email, then followed up with several phone calls and an additional email as necessary. The individual responses are detailed in Table 3, and indicate a response rate of somewhat over half (57%) with roughly proportional denominational representation.

The vast majority of those not interviewed simply did not respond. Based on the minimal information listed on their websites, some of these (about 10) appear to be very small congregations and are presumably short on human resources. A few congregation leaders did respond, but simply declined to participate due to time constraints. In some cases, individuals expressed a willingness to participate, but did not follow through.

Not all the participating congregations had individuals filling all three roles. Orthodox synagogues, where it is the norm for children to attend full day school rather than supplementary school, rarely have education directors and so this role was missing for all of them. Small congregations often had only one person filling two or more of these roles; in these cases, I asked all questions of that person. Finally, some individuals within participating congregations either did not respond or declined to be interviewed either on the grounds of discomfort (some administrators) or lack of time (some rabbis and educators). The set of interviews that results is not the census I intended to conduct, but rather a survey that is relatively representative with regard to denomination, location (including urban, suburban, and rural, with representation from different sub-regions within the Bay Area), and size.

Table 3: Number of leadership respondents by denomination:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denominations (number of synagogues)</th>
<th>Rabbi</th>
<th>Educator</th>
<th>Admin</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative (12)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

175 One is listed in Table 3. In that case, I interviewed the principal of the day school to get an Orthodox educator’s perspective on the event.
Each of the three roles contributes a different perspective on Bar/Bat Mitzvah and has a particular set of responsibilities and knowledge. Rabbis are responsible for overall congregational leadership, particularly with regard to religious services and education, including the Bar/Bat Mitzvah event. Education directors are responsible for developing and implementing religious school curricula, which most often includes the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. Even when it does not, religious school programs include teaching material that is prerequisite for Bar/Bat Mitzvah training. Administrators/executive directors are responsible for basic congregational information, but also can have a more informal relationship with congregants and provide (so I thought) an ear on the ground. In what follows, I describe how the interview schedules were developed and delivered, first discussing sets of questions common to the different types of interviews, then turning to specific areas of expertise.\footnote{Interview schedules appear in Appendix B.}

I asked two sets of questions of all interviewees. The first set asked about congregational culture, including questions about demography and Jewish practice of congregants, priorities and strengths of the congregation, and about decision-making processes and strategies around conflict resolution. While many questions were developed from information gathered from congregational websites, the question on decision-making was loosely based on Edgell Becker’s models of conflict in congregational life (1999).

The second set concerned the place of Bar/Bat Mitzvah in congregational life. The central set of questions here provided a list of meanings attributed to Bar/Bat Mitzvah from different sources: congregational and informational websites, books for Bar/Bat Mitzvah families for Jewish educators, and for the general public, and common statements. For each statement, the respondent was asked which statements were heard most commonly in the congregation, that is, these respondents were asked to serve as proxies for the congregants. The answers are, of course, highly subjective. However, they serve two useful functions: they provide a sense of what the leadership believes about the congregation’s view of Bar/Bat Mitzvah and, more concretely, these answers can be compared those given by congregants, lay leaders, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah parents to get a sense of how accurately leaders reflect their congregants’ perspectives.\footnote{I discuss relevant questions in the dissertation. Leadership and congregant answers were relatively similar, although there was certainly some variation, depending on topic and congregation. In particular, education directors were much more positive about their schools than were the students. On the other hand, rabbis’ answers matched congregants’ answers quite well in most areas.}

I asked rabbis three sets of questions specific to their role. The first set of questions established the normative context for observing Shabbat, that is, these questions concerned services when no Bar/Bat Mitzvah took place. Therefore, I asked questions regarding content and style of services on both Friday night and Saturday morning, attendance and demography at each, and practice and rule around participating in the service. The second

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Independent (5)</th>
<th>Orthodox (5)</th>
<th>Reconstructionist (1)</th>
<th>Reform (17)</th>
<th>Renewal (2)</th>
<th>Total (42)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

177
set repeated these questions for services when a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual was included, in
order to understand what changes were made to service, to attendance, and what
additional ritual elements were added (for example, passing the Torah through the
generations). The third set concerned preparation for and results of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah
service. I asked questions about the nature of preparation, rabbis’ goals for the ritual, and
issues that might come up during the service.

To assure that the questions for all sections (both common and specific) were both
clear and complete, I conducted three pilot interviews with rabbis in New Jersey, the
Detroit area, and the Chicago area, each of whom critiqued the questions. In addition,
Shawn Landres, then of Synagogue 3000, kindly offered comments and critiques of the
questions.

I followed a similar process with the education director interview schedule. In
addition to the common questions of congregational culture and attitudes toward Bar/Bat
Mitzvah, I asked two sets of questions. As responsibility for Bar/Bat Mitzvah often spans
the roles of rabbi and education director, one set of questions largely repeated those asked
of the rabbi. A second set addressed the content of and attitudes toward the supplementary
school program. This set included questions of scheduling and curriculum, attendance
requirements, and demography. To understand attitudes toward the program, I asked a set
of questions about priorities. For these questions, I asked the educator to speak for him or
herself, then serve as proxies for three other groups: parents, children, and congregants not
involved in the school.

Depending on size, congregations employ either administrators or executive
directors. In either case, this is the person who is responsible for the administrator work of
the congregation and is often the face of the congregation. I expected the individuals filling
this role to serve as a proxy for the congregants themselves, as well as providing basic
demographic information. In fact, while all were able to do the latter, it was more difficult
for them to serve as proxies for the congregation. In some cases, this was due to personality
and perception of role. In other cases, particularly when the congregation employed an
executive director, other employees filled that role.

For both education director and administrator, because many questions had already
been vetted in the pilot interviews for the rabbi’s interview schedule and many others were
matters of fact, I conducted only one pilot interview each.

Due to the location of many of the congregations, telephone interviews allowed for
greatest participation and, for consistency, all interviews were conducted this way. Length
of each interview was determined both by the nature of the questions and constraints on
the respondents’ time: from one hour for rabbis to 45 minutes for education directors to
half an hour for administrators. For example, rabbis are responsible for the greatest share
of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and enactment. Their time is also the most constrained.
Thus, while longer interviews would have allowed me to gather more information, they
would also have reduced the number of rabbis willing to participate. Both questions and
interviews were designed to balance information and participation.

**Five Representative Congregations: Observations and Interviews**

The heart of this project depended on observing and interviewing at five
representative congregations. By choosing to observe at five congregations, rather than
becoming a participant observer in one congregation, I traded more intimate and complete
knowledge of one specific congregation for the ability to compare several congregations
that differed in denomination and size. However, since my goal was to describe the variety and breadth of practice, this was not a difficult decision to make. In fact, it was more difficult to limit the scope of my observations to only five congregations. Initially, I intended to include large and small congregations of representative denominations, which could have resulted in as many as eight congregations. When it was clear this was not feasible, I chose four congregations of the most common size, between 200 and 500 families, and largest denominational categories (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and independent) which enabled me to compare practices across denominations. In addition, I chose one very large Reform congregation, as the effect of size is substantial, both in terms of numbers of students, routinization of those students, and effect on Shabbat services more generally. With reluctance, I omitted observing at a Renewal congregation and a small congregation, each of which would have added additional variation.

After eliminating congregations that were atypical due to unusual demographics (for example, congregations located in Berkeley with its unusually high educational level) or conflict, I spent some time attending services around the Bay Area and chose two or three congregations of each type from different locations in the Bay Area. In each case, I first contacted the rabbi to ask for permission to observe and interview. All five of my first choices agreed, although the process for getting permission varied. In three cases, the rabbi simply agreed and allowed me to contact others using his name; in two cases, my participation was taken to congregation boards and approved by them. Approval, in all cases, did not assure participation, rather it meant that I could approach teachers, congregants, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah students with leadership sanction. In what follows, I first discuss observations, then the distribution of interview participants, and then the interview questions.

At all congregations, I attended Shabbat morning services, some of which included Bar/Bat Mitzvah and some of which did not. I observed religious school classes and tutoring sessions. I interviewed tutors, teachers, congregants, and families. I collected Bar/Bat Mitzvah handbooks, individual Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs, as well as parent and student speeches. However, while all rabbis were willing have their congregations participate in the research, my access to observations and ability to find individuals in each category who were willing to be interviewed varied.

Anyone is welcome to attend any Shabbat service, so I could and did attend Shabbat services weekly, rotating through the congregations while taking account of when Bar/Bat Mitzvah services took place. My ability to observe in classrooms depended on the willingness of both education directors and individual teachers. Nevertheless, I was able to observe several times at each congregation (excepting the Orthodox congregation, which does not have supplementary school). Both tutoring and d’var Torah meetings required the agreement of both teacher (rabbi, mentor, or tutor) and Bar/Bat Mitzvah family and student. These were difficult to arrange and so there are substantially fewer.

Despite these limitations, clear patterns emerged in the following areas. First, for all congregations, I gained a good sense for each congregation’s patterns of Shabbat service enactment with and without Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Similarly, I was able to observe the different organization and culture at each religious school, as well as observing representative

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178 For example, on one occasion, I faced an angry teacher who had not been notified by her education director that I would be observing.
classes in relevant grades (6 and 7). At both Independent Or Hadash and large Reform Beth Jeshurun, I was able to see how theory and practice came together for both parents and children in observing family education programs. Finally, I observed similarities across denominations in how tutors communicated texts to students—as well as important differences at Beth Jeshurun—and as well as differences in both approach and content regarding rabbis’ approaches to the divrei Torah. Table 4 summarized the range of these different observations.

Table 4: Observations at different congregations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and Denomination</th>
<th>Service w/out Bar/Bat Mitzvah</th>
<th>Service w/ Bar/Bat Mitzvah</th>
<th>Religious school</th>
<th>Tutoring</th>
<th>speech</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth Jeshurun (large Reform)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukkat Shalom (Reform)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or Hadash (independent)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B’nai Aaron (Conservative)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adat Yitzhak (Orthodox)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Each service, with or without Bar/Bat Mitzvah, took five hours (approximately 9 AM-2 PM). Tutoring observations lasted around an hour, but varied from 20 minutes to 1 ½ hours. Religious school sessions lasted around 3 hours each and included two to three classes of different lengths. D’var Torah meetings varied from 30 minutes to more than an hour.

2. This congregation had no supplementary school program however, as part of Shabbat programming, younger students had an informal program during services conducted by a rabbinic intern.

3. This congregation used mentors from the congregation to develop the students’ divrei Torah. I was unable to find both mentor and student who were willing to be observed together.

Unlike the relatively high response rate of the leadership interviews, congregant interviews were far more difficult to accomplish, particularly with regard to Bar/Bat Mitzvah families in some congregations. In retrospect, I realize that asking respondents why they chose to participate would have provided some of the answer (although not all; people are famously bad at determining their own motives). Despite this lack, I can offer some possible explanations.

First, Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals are part of the professional leadership’s responsibilities. Rabbis and education directors, but also tutors and (some) teachers, are invested in preparation and enactment, which would lead to greater interest in reflecting on the process and contributing to understanding of that process. By contrast, Bar/Bat Mitzvah affects families for a limited period of time and, they are responsible for only one event per child, rather than for maintaining the system of producing Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals. These means they are less invested in understanding that system at the same time they are trying to navigate a difficult and (for many) new experience. It is not surprising that many chose not to add one more responsibility, particularly one that may seem to have little bearing on their lives—or, as one family explained to me, one that, would actually increase anxiety due to the additional stress of being observed.

However, equally as important, I believe, was who acted as liaison between the families and me and how potential participants were introduced to the project. At
Independent Or Hadash, with the highest participation, the rabbi strongly and actively supported the project. He introduced me and the project to the entire cohort and encouraged families to participate, as a sign-up sheet circulated. By contrast, Rabbi Doron, at Reform Sukkat Shalom, willingly agreed to support the project, however did not participate actively in encouraging people to sign up. As at Sukkat Shalom, I was introduced to the cohort, but by the education director who lacked the leadership standing of the rabbi. In this case, only a few families signed up. At the three other congregations, education directors and rabbis gave me lists of people to contact by email and by phone. There is no way to know whether different locations, different congregational cultures, different individual circumstances, or some combination of all of the above accounted for the differences. Nevertheless, substantial research in social psychology supports the likelihood that, in part, the appeal of a respected leader and in person appeal accounted for some of the difference.

What characterizes those who did volunteer and how do they differ from those who did not? First of all, in almost every case, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student was part of making the decision. Some of these students were extremely excited about being interviewed; others did so at their parents’ behest. When the student initiated the interview, the reason seemed to be the desire to tell their story and reinforce the reality of the event. That is, in some way, the interview itself contributed to the significance of the ritual. This was true not only for students, but also for some parents who were eager to share their unique stories. When parents initiated the interviews, they were more likely to want to make a contribution either to the congregation or to the Jewish community or both. Other parents used the opportunity to talk about difficult issues. In one brief snowball, three interviews resulted from one: as I interviewed one family, a friend walked in and became interested, then referred me to a third person. In other words, participation happened deliberately and by chance, for those deeply engaged in Jewish life and those who were engaged for the moment. In all cases, I believe that the event had touched families enough that they wanted to continue thinking and talking about it. That is, this population is likely skewed to reflect the views of those who care about and were touched by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual and who were comfortable in an interview situation.

Lay leader and congregant participation varied substantially from congregation to congregation. The two congregations with the strongest community participation and strongest rabbinic presence had the greater number of participants, both as lay leaders and as congregants. In some congregations, lay leaders work with professional leadership to develop educational programs. Thus, I believed that interviewing these lay leaders would show how Bar/Bat Mitzvah affected congregational life more generally. Congregants who attend services but have no children in Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs provided another view of Bar/Bat Mitzvah services effect on the congregational service. This was the area of greatest difference between congregations: each congregation had a different approach to both lay leadership and congregants’ response to Bar/Bat Mitzvah. In addition, each

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179 During the interviews with leadership, it became clear that there was some conflict around the education director with regard to preparation. In the year following my observation, her contract was not renewed. Thus, her introduction may have influenced participation negatively.

180 The variety was truly remarkable, in fact.

181 I don’t mean to say that Bar/Bat Mitzvah mattered less to those who did not participate—I have no evidence for that—only that in some way, it mattered to those who participated.
congregation’s culture led to greater or lesser participation. For example, lay leaders do not participate in either religious school or service decisions at large Reform Beth Jeshurun; these are handled by the large professional staff. On the other hand, a monthly lay-led minyan takes place alongside the weekly Bar/Bat Mitzvah services and several attendees agreed to interviews, which added to an understanding of attitudes toward the congregation, but little regarding Bar/Bat Mitzvah. By contrast, at independent Or Hadash with its culture of high lay participation and engagement, both lay leaders and congregants were willing to participate and quite forthcoming. In fact, this congregation stands out for an unusual level of participation.

Initially, I intended to interview both teachers and tutors: the former in order to understand the interaction between classroom and Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation; the latter to observe the tutoring process. However, the school observations made clear that, while the school does prepare students to begin Bar/Bat Mitzvah training, teachers largely implement programs decided by the education directors, rabbis, and (sometimes) lay leadership. The few teacher interviews confirmed this: teachers are largely concerned with the details of teaching, irrespective of the subject matter. By contrast, Bar/Bat Mitzvah training, both speech development and tutoring, is central to the ritual and to the goals of the professional leadership. Thus I made sure that I interviewed tutors (several, if possible) from each congregation to understand their goals, their methods, and the content of each lesson.

Table 5: Interviews at different congregations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregation Name and Denomination</th>
<th>Interview Categories</th>
<th>Rabbis</th>
<th>Educ Dir.</th>
<th>Admins</th>
<th>Tutors or Cantors</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Lay Leaders &amp; Congs</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Bar/Bat Mitzvah students</th>
<th>Total</th>
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1. This individual was the director of a Jewish day school, as noted above.
2. Rabbis, Education Directors, and Administrators are also included in the totals above.

The interview schedules for these participants fell into three groups. Tutors, cantors, and teachers were grouped with other professional leadership and asked questions related to their roles as well as questions about Bar/Bat Mitzvah and congregational context. As with the education directors, they were asked to act as proxies for parents and students with regard to the content. These questions were developed to be similar to those asked of the education director, but focused on each particular role.

Lay leaders, congregants, and parents were grouped together as non-professionals. These groups share a voluntary approach to congregational life: each person can
Congregants were asked about current engagement in congregation, as well as questions about Bar/Bat Mitzvah and congregational context. Lay leaders answered these same questions, in addition to a brief set of questions regarding their specific role in the congregation. Parents answered the basic questions as well, with the addition of an extensive section on their experience of their child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah. This last included questions regarding training, immediate preparation, and response to the day itself. For all these respondents, I posited a relationship between childhood experience of Judaism and Bar/Bat Mitzvah and current Jewish practice and attitudes toward Bar/Bat Mitzvah and therefore asked a set of questions regarding their childhood. While the answers were extremely interesting and worth exploring in their own right, the relationship between childhood and adult experience of Judaism and Bar/Bat Mitzvah more specifically is, at best, indirect and complex. While I generated many of the questions asked of the professional leadership, I consulted previous studies of Jewish practice (jewishdatabank.org, Cohen and Eisen 1999) to assure that I was asking the standard questions used within the Jewish community. I modified these questions to be general subject prompts (for example: “What Jewish holidays do you observe?” rather than listing the holidays), so that the initial response would be from the respondents. Following that initial response, I asked about specific practices in order to confirm the answer.

The final category was, of course, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah students themselves. This interview schedule differed from the others in that I assumed that the students were engaged with the school and preparation and not with the larger congregational context. As with their parents, I asked about their home and congregational Jewish engagement, including home practice, religious school experience, and other engagement in congregational and Jewish life. I continued with questions regarding Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and their experience of the day itself, concluding with their expectations for future Jewish engagement. Much more than the adults, students varied in their ability and willingness to answer. Some were fully as articulate as any adult; others gave brief answers and had difficulty expanding on them. This is not surprising; while adults are familiar with interviews, few children are. In fact, I was more surprised at the number of students who answered comfortably and completely.

In addition to observations and interviews, congregations supplied their guidebooklets for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process (as available), teachers provided worksheets from lessons observed, I collected Bar/Bat Mitzvah service programs, and families provided me with copies of parent and student speeches. Of this content, both sets of speeches provided the most interesting and relevant data. Parent speeches provided a sense of how parents viewed the day and their role with regard to both Judaism and their child; student speeches showed different ways rabbis viewed both the speech itself and relationship to Judaism.

**Limitations**

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182 This could also apply to tutors and teachers, most of whom were very part-time. However, teachers and tutors are paid, which creates a different type of relationship with the congregation and the work.
183 While I did not formally request demographic information regarding age and economic status, in almost every case, occupation and education emerged during the interviews. That information, along with observation of location of homes, places most of these families in high income brackets, where the "concerted cultivation" approach to childrearing (Lareau 2003) would result in this type of interaction.
While the research generated a substantial quantity of data, that does not mean that all areas are covered equally, as I've alluded to above. Limitations fall into three categories.

First, simply due to finite time and resources, I set parameters that excluded areas that would have provided more information. These include what aspects of BBM I studied, as well as the region. Above, I explained the reasons I chose to study one region and this particular region. However, a comparison of different regions would provide a better understanding of specific practices and the ways the tensions discussed in the dissertation manifest in differently in different regions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are regional differences in these practices (particularly with regard to parties, but also with levels of competence). Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that the tensions stand, while the specific practices that result from negotiating the tensions will vary. This is the case even within the Bay Area; understanding what that variation is elsewhere would be a useful comparison.

I also chose to limit my observations to the interaction with the congregation, that is to examine only preparation and enactment. This eliminated looking at the parties, no small benefit from my perspective. However, as interviews with families make clear, parties are an integral part of the families’ experience. Since I argue that part of the meaning for the family comes from the fact that it is a peak event, observing firsthand how the ritual and the celebration interact in the life of the family would have given a more complete understanding of the whole ritual from the family's perspective.184

It was not until the research was almost complete that I realized the ubiquity of the “Mitzvah project,” and so did not adequately observe this. I do not believe this changed the overall results, but it adds a dimension to both preparation and meaning. These projects, in which the student does some kind of charity work, sometimes structured, sometimes not, are both universal and without any consistency: some congregations structure them, some do not; some consider them central to preparation, some do not. As with the celebrations, they are not central to the ritual itself, however, they are another way that participants—whether leaders or families—make meaning out of the ritual. More data on these programs would have helped show if and how they bridge the gap between universal “doing good” and specific “Jewish commandment.”

A final area excluded from the research concerned observing what happens in the years following the ritual. While I asked my interviewees about Jewish connections and practice following BBM, this was not the focus of the research. As discussed in the conclusion, congregations invest much time, resources, and energy in the BBM, but comparatively little following. But while there is some research on students’ engagement in Judaism in the years following BBM (Kosmin, et al., 2000), the role of the congregation in continuing to engage these students is not well-understood.

Second, my initial proposal and eventual results diverged.Originally, I intended to examine how BBM acted to unite or divide congregations—that is, to understand connection and community. Thus, my interview questions targeted these areas. This was one resulting tension, but was overshadowed by the four covered in the dissertation. As a

184 I will note that, in my role as congregant, family member, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor, I have attended more of these events than I can count, so I believe I have a general understanding of these celebrations. Nevertheless, that does not substitute for observations at the five representative congregations.
result, my questions on the tensions that did emerge were less thorough than I would have liked. Thus, there are areas—for example, the range of practice in the Orthodox Bat Mitzvah—that are less complete than ideal. Again, I do not believe this affects the overall conclusion with regard to tensions and the BBM system, but the patterns discussed may not represent all forms of negotiation.

Third, the nature of the participation was not random. In particular, the Orthodox community is very small in the Bay Area and many of the congregations rely on non-Orthodox Jews to survive. In regions with larger Orthodox communities that can be less pluralistic in approach, patterns of practice are likely to be different and I can imagine the tensions themselves being less present (for example, the public-private tension may manifest quite differently).

As noted above, different groups were more or less motivated to respond and, particularly with regard to families, leads me to view these results with caution. The families who were willing to be interviewed were those who were willing to commit an evening to talking about Jewish topics. While families varied in how engaged they were in Jewish life, all had some interest in and commitment to Judaism. I was not able to observe the truly non-engaged: those families of legend who are truly unengaged in any form of Jewish life and, following the BBM, never darken the synagogue doors. Understanding this group is important—programs like the Reform Movement’s “B’nai Mitzvah Revolution,” which set out to “fix” the BBM, are largely designed to target these families—and so that missing data is significant and likely skews an understanding of meaning toward that of leadership. To capture this group would require a different kind of research design: observing at one congregation over a long period of time. In this way, even those families who attend infrequently could be observed.
Appendix B: Interview Schedules

I interviewed a total of 218 people who filled different roles and had different backgrounds. The interview questions accounted for both background and role, which resulted in thirteen different interview schedules. For the survey of all Bay Area congregations, three schedules sufficed for interview schedules generated for rabbi, education director, and administrator/executive director. I call these the survey respondents. The five congregations at which I observed included a broader range of interviewees. In addition to the three schedules above, I generated schedules for parents, BBM students, religious school teachers, BBM tutors, lay leadership, and other congregants. I call these the individual respondents. In addition to asking parents, lay leaders, and other congregants about their current congregational experience, I also asked about their childhood experiences. These adults may or may not have been raised as Jews and may or may not have belonged to a congregation (Jewish or otherwise) while growing up. There were four possible childhood categories and thus four variations for these schedules.

Rather than simply listing the different schedules, it is more useful to think about who was asked what questions. Each schedules included both sets of questions asked of all respondents (excepting the BBM students) and sets of questions specific to each role. For example, rabbis answered the same questions about the congregational context that other adults answered but they were the only group asked about structure and attendance at Shabbat services. I group the sets of questions in that manner: first listing those questions asked of all respondents, then those asked of the survey respondents (rabbis, education directors, and administrators), then those asked of the different groups of individual respondents.

Questions of congregational context and culture: asked of all adults

This section addresses congregational demographics, priorities, and methods for decision-making and conflict resolution. I asked all adults these questions, with two different sets of instructions. I asked survey respondents to serve as proxies for the congregation with regard to questions 1 and 2. Because individual respondents were congregants, I asked them to give their personal views.

An additional note: only lay leaders (with few exceptions) responded to questions 3 and 5 regarding decision making and conflict resolution; others declined to answer, saying they simply didn’t know.

1. People remain members of congregations for many reasons. Which of the following reasons for remaining members do you hear a lot, sometimes, or never:
   a. Attachment to the professional staff—rabbi, or cantor, for example.
   b. Religious observance or study

185 The discussion of how these questions were arrived at can be found in Appendix A: Methodology.
c. Children’s education
d. Friends and community
e. Responsibility to past and future—generation to generation.
f. Other?

2. Into which one or two of the following areas does your congregation expect to put the most energy in the near future?
   a. Developing an intimate community
   b. Educating children
   c. Continuing Jewish education for adults
   d. Prayer and text study
   e. Engaging in social action and justice
   f. Other?

3. I am going to read a set of problems commonly faced by congregations. For each one, can you tell me how your congregation would go about solving the problem?
   a. The Torah covers are old, but still in good condition. Some congregants want to buy new covers. How does the decision to buy or not get made?
   b. The religious school has too many children for one session. How do you decide what to do?
   c. Membership has decreased over the past three years. How do you decide what to do to increase membership?
   d. Some congregants want a new and different kind of Shabbat service that will change the nature and attendance of Shabbat services in some way (for example, a small group may want to have a more traditional service—or less traditional). Who decides whether this can take place?

4. What one word or phrase would you use to describe your congregation? That is, what makes your congregation distinct?

5. Conflict is a part of congregational life in general. Can you tell me if there are any major conflicts or issues in your congregation right now? With that in mind, what approach does your congregation take to either resolve conflict or prevent it from occurring?

6. Is there anything else that you think I should know about your congregation?

**Effect of Bar or Bat Mitzvah on congregation: asked of all adults**

This section asks respondents about congregants’ views of BBM. I asked survey respondents to serve as proxies for the congregation with regard to questions 1, while individual respondents answered for themselves.

1. I’m going to read you some common ways that Bar or Bat Mitzvah have been described in the Jewish community and popular media. As I read each, please tell me whether you hear this kind of comment from congregants a lot, sometimes, or hardly ever:
   a. A time to celebrate the child and build his or her self-esteem.
   b. A time for the congregation to welcome a new Jewish adult.
   c. A disruption of regular services either by a private event or by a non-expert leader.
   d. The chance to have a big and exciting party.
e. A statement on the part of family about continuing Judaism in the next generation.
f. A ritual that marks transition to Jewish adulthood and taking on observance of the commandments.
g. Something else entirely?

2. In some congregations, there is concern that Bar or Bat Mitzvah services and celebrations are becoming ostentatious or competitive. Is this a concern at your congregation? If so, what issues or areas are of particular concern?

3. In some congregations, there are discussions about changing the way the synagogue handles Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Are there such discussions here? If so, what issues are being discussed?

Specific Information asked of Survey Respondents

In addition to the sets of questions about congregational context and BBM questions, administrator/executive directors, education directors, and rabbis also answered sets of questions regarding their areas of expertise.

Executive Director or Administrator

Administrators/executive directors (the title and responsibilities vary by size of congregation) were asked questions of demographics. These interviews lasted from 20-45 minutes.

1. Congregations count members both as households and as individuals. I’d like know the size of your congregation in both ways.
   a. Can you tell me about how many households are members?
   b. About how many individuals would you say belonged to the congregation?

2. About how much of your congregation consists of
   a. young families?
   b. Older couples?
   c. Young singles?
   d. Elderly?

3. In thinking about your congregants, do you think that congregants are fairly similar to one another or fairly different from one another:
   a. Age
   b. Income
   c. Observance
   d. Is there another characteristic for which members of your congregation seem unusually similar or dissimilar to each other?

4. What are the three most common zip codes in which your members live?

5. Intermarriage changes some congregational dynamics, particularly around Bar or Bat Mitzvah, so it is important to know what proportion of your congregation is intermarried. About what proportion of the congregational households would you estimate are intermarried?
   a. Just a few
   b. About a quarter
c. About a third
d. Half or more
6. Who may join your congregation? [e.g., intermarried, non-Jewish spouses, non-Jews in general]
7. How does your congregation expect members give support in either time or money?

Education Directors

Education directors’ interviews included two sections specific to their role. The first section addressed the supplementary school program, with the intent of understanding what was taught and how directly BBM preparation entered into that education. The second section addressed the BBM program itself. These respondents were also asked the context questions above. These interviews took from 45 minutes-1 ½ hours to complete.

Section I: Questions about the religious school:

1. Could you describe your education program?
   a. How many days/week and hours/session do Hebrew and religious school run?
   b. Does the schedule differ by age of child participating?
   c. What ages/grades does it serve?
   d. What subjects are covered in the curriculum and at what grades?
2. Is there a cost to attend religious school?
3. Does a family have to be a congregant to attend religious school?
4. How many students are enrolled in the religious school from kindergarten through seventh grade?
   a. If there are special programs (family education, chavurot), how many are enrolled here?
5. Intermarriage changes some of congregational dynamics, particularly around the school and Bar or Bat Mitzvah, so I like to know what proportion of the congregational households would you estimate are intermarried. Would you estimate it to be:
   a. Just a few?
   b. About a quarter?
   c. About a third?
   d. Half or more?
6. About what percentage of last year’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah class would you estimate was from an intermarried family?
7. What proportion of the congregation’s children attend a Jewish day school?
8. How many Bar or Bat Mitzvah take place in a typical year? How many took place last year?
9. I’m interested in how different groups in the congregation understand religious school. I understand that is simply your opinion, but that is an informed point of view and so important.
   a. What one element of Jewish life is most important to include in the religious school curriculum?
      i. What is your opinion?
ii. What do you think the students would say?,
iii. What do you think their parents would say?
iv. What do you think a congregant without children in religious school would say?

b. What would be the most important goal of the religious school?
   i. What is your opinion?
   ii. What do you think the students would say?,
   iii. What do you think their parents would say?
   iv. What do you think a congregant without children in religious school would say?

c. What makes you most proud when you think of your religious school?
   i. What is your opinion?
   ii. What do you think the students would say?,
   iii. What do you think their parents would say?
   iv. What do you think a congregant without children in religious school would say?

10. Is there anything that you would consider essential for someone to know about your religious school?

11. Some congregations have active family education programs that involve the whole family in Jewish education. Do you do that?

Section II: Bar or Bat Mitzvah Preparation

12. In order to formally observe the passage to Bar or Bat Mitzvah, many congregations expect families to abide by some conditions. Can you tell me which of the following might apply to your congregation?
   a. The family must be members of the congregation. If so, for how many years
      prior to Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
   b. The child must attend supplementary religious school. If so, for how many
      years?
   c. The child must attend Shabbat services. If so, how many? Do they have to
      attend in years preceding Bar or Bat Mitzvah year?
   d. Other activities or expectations? [Mitzvah project, family retreat, family
      chavurah or other program, experimenting with ritual, volunteering with
      congregation, volunteering with community]

13. Are there exceptions to these conditions?
   a. If so, under what circumstances would a family or student be exempted?
   b. Are there alternative ways to meet the conditions? [for example, by private
      tutoring]

14. Can you tell me about the congregation’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah program?
   a. When does it begin?
   b. What kinds of activities does it include (in addition to the ones above?
   c. How would you describe the philosophy behind the program?

15. Is the Bar or Bat Mitzvah program modified in any way for children who attend day
    school? If so, how?

16. What would you like students in the Bar or Bat Mitzvah program take away with
    them?
Preparation for Bar or Bat Mitzvah often involves several people helping in different ways. Different people might (or might not) help Bar or Bat Mitzvah learn prayers, trope, and Torah and Haftarah, or develop the content of the speech. What are the specifics of this preparation? (For example: “the rabbi works with the student for x sessions of ½ hour each to develop an understanding of the elements within the portion/parsha that the student wants to explore; a tutor meets with the student for y sessions over the course of z months, and so on.”)

a. Who helps to prepare Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
b. What does each person do with the child?
c. Over what period of time do they work with the child and for how long a session?

18. Is there a cost associated with the preparation?

19. Do you spend time with each family, either as individuals or as a group? If so, how much time do you spend and what topics or issues do you discuss?

20. What would you most like Bar or Bat Mitzvah to gain from the Bar or Bat Mitzvah experience?

21. How do Bar or Bat Mitzvah participate in Jewish observance, education, or teaching following Bar or Bat Mitzvah?

22. What makes you most proud when you think of your Bar or Bat Mitzvah program?

Rabbis

Rabbis’ interviews included three sections specific to their role. The first section addressed religious services, both on Shabbat and other times to understand normal congregation practice. The second section asked about size of and expectations for the BBM class, as well as the changes that take place during a BBM service. The third section asked about preparation for the BBM service. Finally, in addition to the context questions asked of all adults, I also repeated questions 3, 5, and 6 of the administrator’s questionnaire. These interviews took from 1-1 ½ hours to complete.

Section I: Services

1. I’d like to know a bit about your main Friday night service:
   a. How many attend?
   b. Who leads these services? [Rabbi? Cantor? Lay leaders?]
   c. Some congregations vary the style of Friday night services through the month, or have multiple services that appeal to different groups. Does your congregation do this?
      i. If so, what is the style of each? To whom they might appeal? [for example: “short, lots of music, appeals to young families”]
      ii. If not, how would you describe the atmosphere or mood of a typical Friday night service? [types of possible answers: sedate, joyful, traditional, meditative…]

2. I have similar questions about your main Saturday morning service.
   a. How many attend?
   b. Who leads these services? [Rabbi? Cantor? Lay leaders?]
c. Do Saturday morning services vary in style or tone or does your congregation have multiple services?
   i. If so, what is the style of each? To whom they might appeal? [for example: “short, lots of music, appeals to young families”]
   ii. If not, how would you describe the atmosphere or mood of a typical Saturday morning service? [types of possible answers: sedate, joyful, traditional, meditative...]

3. It is common for congregations to honor attendees by inviting them to participate in services. How does your congregation make decisions about the following honors or times to participate:
   a. Lighting candles on Friday night, if this is done at your congregation?
   b. Opening the Ark?
   c. Reading Torah or Haftarah?
   d. Being called for an aliyah
   e. Lifting or dressing the Torah?
   f. Any other opportunities that I’ve missed?
   g. Are there any rules that limit or describe who is allowed to participate? [for example: congregant/non-congregant; Jew/non-Jew]

4. Do you hold other weekly services?
   a. When are they and who leads them?
      i. How many attend?

5. If you could change the current arrangement of services, how would you do so?

   Section II: Bar or Bat Mitzvah Services

6. How many children will become Bar or Bat Mitzvah this year? What is a typical number?

7. What are Bar or Bat Mitzvah expected to do during the service?
   a. What prayers, if any, do they lead?
   b. What is the minimum amount of Torah and Haftarah they learn?
      i. What is the average amount they learn?
      ii. Do they chant or read?
   c. How much variation is there between children?
   d. Are they expected to give a drash and, if so, what do you expect them to cover?

8. While most congregations stress the similarities between Bar and Bat Mitzvah, there may be some differences between Bar and Bat Mitzvah and between boys and girls.
   a. Do Bar and Bat Mitzvah take place at the same or different ages?
   b. Does the congregation have different expectations for what each will do during the service?
   c. Do boys and girls respond differently to the material they are expected to master?

9. Congregations approach Bar or Bat Mitzvah in many different ways. Which of these best describes your congregation's approach?
   a. Shabbat services take place weekly and, while Bar or Bat Mitzvah are part of that service, the service doesn’t change very much.
b. There is a regular Shabbat minyan as well as a Shabbat service which is led, at least in part, by Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

c. Shabbat services only happen to mark the occasion of Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

d. There are weekly Shabbat services, but they are different, either in content or nature of the congregants when Bar or Bat Mitzvah take place.

e. Bar or Bat Mitzvah take place on days and times other than Shabbat morning. [which? Friday night, Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon, Monday, Thursday, Rosh Chodesh]

f. Other possibilities?

10. Some congregations have rules about how the families of Bar or Bat Mitzvah may participate in the service. In some congregations, for example, Bar or Bat Mitzvah families assign the honors, in others the congregation does. When Bar or Bat Mitzvah are part of the service, how are decisions made about:

a. Who lights candles on Friday evening, if that is your custom?

b. Who opens the Ark?

c. Who reads Torah and Haftarah? How much?

d. Who is called up for an aliyah?

e. Who is expected to lift or dress the Torah?

f. Is there any other places in the service where people other than the service leaders are allowed or encouraged to participate?

g. Are there any rules that limit or describe who is allowed to participate? [for example: congregant/non-congregant; Jew/non-Jew]

11. Which of these traditions does your congregation include in Bar or Bat Mitzvah services?

a. a special welcome to guests of the family

b. presenting a tallit to the child

c. parent speeches to child

d. parent reciting the blessing that relieves them of responsibility for the child

e. passing the Torah from generation to generation

f. congregation’s presentation of gifts or certificate to the child

g. booklets or programs that explain the service in the context of a particular child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah

h. Rabbi’s words or blessing for the child. If so, what kind of a blessing?

12. Some congregations have informal customs, such as particular melodies, that everyone in the congregation knows and responds to. If your congregation has such customs, can you tell me whether they change when Bar or Bat Mitzvah occur, and if so, how?

13. Are there any circumstances where you would refuse to allow a Bar or Bat Mitzvah to take place at your congregation?

14. Here are a couple of possible points of discussion around Bar or Bat Mitzvah:

a. A Bar Mitzvah is scheduled for a Saturday in May. A congregant is getting married the next day and has asked to have the aufruf that morning. What is your response?

b. The parent of a Bar Mitzvah wants a close relative to participate in the service by singing a song that, while in Hebrew, is not part of the liturgy. What is your response?
15. During services that include Bar or Bat Mitzvah what proportion of the attendees are congregants? How does this change when no Bar or Bat Mitzvah are part of the service?

16. What would you consider a successful Bar or Bat Mitzvah?

   **Section III: Bar or Bat Mitzvah Preparation**

17. In order to formally observe the passage to Bar or Bat Mitzvah, many congregations expect families to abide by some conditions. Can you tell me which of the following might apply to your congregation?
   
   a. The family must be members of the congregation. If so, for how many years prior to Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
   
   b. The child must attend supplementary religious school. If so, for how many years?
   
   c. The child must attend Shabbat services. If so, how many? Do they have to attend in years preceding Bar or Bat Mitzvah year?
   
   d. Other activities or expectations? [Mitzvah project, family retreat, family chavurah or other program, experimenting with ritual, volunteering with congregation, volunteering with community]

18. Are there exceptions to these conditions?
   
   a. If so, under what circumstances would a family or student be exempted?
   
   b. Are there alternative ways to meet the conditions? [Tutoring, day school]

19. Preparation for Bar or Bat Mitzvah often involves several people helping in different ways. [learning prayers, chanting or not, learning Torah and Haftarah, working on the speech. One part of the answer might be: “the rabbi works with the student for six sessions of ½ hour each to develop an understanding of the elements within the portion/parsha that the student wants to explore.”]
   
   a. Who helps to prepare Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
   
   b. What does each person do with the child?
   
   c. Over what period of time do they work with the child and for how long a session?
   
   d. Is there a cost associated with the preparation?

20. When you work with or teach Bar or Bat Mitzvah students, what would you most like that child to learn from you?

21. Do you spend time with each family? If so, how much time do you spend and what topics or issues do you discuss?

**Specific Information asked of Individual Respondents**

As with the survey respondents, parents and children, tutors and teachers, lay leaders and other congregants were each asked about areas for which they had specific knowledge. With the exception of the BBM students, these respondents also answered the congregational context and BBM questions above. In addition, to understand each individual’s current Jewish context, I asked all adults about their congregational engagement, personal and family engagement in Judaism, and engagement in non-congregational Jewish activities. That section follows:
Current Experience of Congregational Life

1) When and why did you join the congregation?

2) People remain members of congregations for many reasons. With which of the following reasons do you most identify?
   a) Attachment to the professional staff—rabbis, or cantor, for example.
   b) Religious observance or study
   c) Children’s education
   d) Friends and community
   e) Social action
   f) Other?

3) Into which one or two of the following areas would you like to see your congregation put the most energy in the near future? Into which of these areas would you put the most effort?
   a) Developing an intimate community
   b) Educating children
   c) Continuing Jewish education for adults
   d) Prayer and text study
   e) Engaging in social action and justice
   f) Other?

4) What one word or phrase would you use to describe your congregation? That is, what makes your congregation distinct?

5) Conflict is a part of congregational life in general. How does your congregation go about resolving conflicts?

6) What activities do you participate in at synagogue?

7) How comfortable do you feel at each of these activities? (very, somewhat, not really)
   a) With the activity?
   b) With the other people participating?
   c) With the leaders of the activity?

8) What Jewish community activities do you participate in that are not related to the congregation? (film festival, baseball games, etc.)

9) How comfortable do you feel at each of these activities? (very, somewhat, not)
   a) With the activity?
   b) With the other people participating?
   c) With the leaders?

10) What Jewish holidays do you observe?
    a) Where do you observe them?
    b) How comfortable do you feel observing these holidays? (very, somewhat, not)

11) What kinds of Jewish activities does your family do at home?

12) What percentage of your friends are Jewish?

13) Have you been to Israel? If so, how many times and for how long?

14) What non-Jewish holidays do you observe?

15) What do you think is the most important thing about being Jewish?

16) What do you like most and least about being Jewish?

Families: Parents and Students
I met with families, most often in their homes, at their convenience and taking into account the student’s comfort level with being interviewed. Parents typically chose to be interviewed together about the BBM and their current engagement with the congregation. They were typically interviewed separately about their childhood (and in some cases, this section was omitted due to time constraints). About half the BBM chose to be interviewed alone, the other half with parents present. Parent interviews about the present lasted from 30-1 ½ hours; the parent interview lasted from 15-45 minutes; and students’ interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour.

**Bar or Bat Mitzvah Student**

I asked the students questions about their lived experience of Judaism, their preparation for BBM, their experience of the event itself, and their expectations for the future.

Section I: Experience of Judaism at home and in the congregation

1) What do you do at home that makes you feel Jewish?
   a) For holidays?
   b) For Shabbat?
   c) Other times?
2) What do you think is the most important thing about being Jewish?
3) What do you like best about being Jewish?
4) What do you like least about being Jewish?
5) How often do you come to synagogue?
   a) What kinds of things do you do there? (e.g., services, youth group, programs, classes)
   b) What do you expect to do at the synagogue after becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
   c) Do you feel like you are an important part of the congregation? (Very strongly, somewhat, a little, not much.)
      i) Why?
6) What is do you like best about belonging to this congregation?
7) What do you like least about belonging to this congregation?
8) Tell me about what you do in religious school and Hebrew school.
   a) What is the program like?
   b) What are the teachers like?
   c) What are the other students like?
   d) What do you like about it?
   e) What would you change about it?

Section II: Preparation for Bar or Bat Mitzvah

9) How did you prepare for your Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
   a) Who did you have lessons with?
   b) How did you study between lessons?
   c) What did you like about it?
   d) What would you change about it?
10) What have your parents told you about becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
11) What have your teachers and rabbi told you about becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah
12) What do you think becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah means?
13) What, if anything, worried you most about your Bar or Bat Mitzvah service before the day?
14) What, if anything, excited you about becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
15) Can you tell me what the week before your Bar or Bat Mitzvah was like?
   a) How did you prepare?
   b) Who did you meet with?
   c) How did you feel?
   d) What other preparations were happening?
16) Who did you invite to your Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Why?

Section III: The day itself and beyond

17) Describe the day of your Bar or Bat Mitzvah.
   a) What did you do?
   b) How did you feel as the day went along?
18) What was the best part of the day?
19) What was the worst part of the day?
20) What do you think makes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah a success?
   a) Can you give an example of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah that went really well?
   b) How about one that didn’t go well?
21) Do you think becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah changed you? If so, how? If not, why not?
22) How will what you do as a Jew, either at home or in your congregation, change now that you have become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
Bar or Bat Mitzvah Parent

In addition to the sections common to adult interviews above (congregational context and current engagement in Judaism), I asked parents about their experience of the BBM preparation and event, then asked each individual about childhood experience of either Judaism or other religion. My goal was to understand the religious context (or lack thereof) that informs—to a greater or lesser degree—their adult approach to Judaism and BBM. I have included only the “grew up Jewish; family belonged to a congregation.” The other forms use similar questions modified for non-Jews and/or those who did not belong to a congregation.

Experience of Child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah

1) What reasons did you have for your child becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Did those reasons change as your child went through the training and service?
2) What kinds of questions, concerns, or issues (positive or negative) came up as you have prepared for Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
3) What did you most want to communicate to your child about becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Do you feel you were able to do so?
4) Who did you invite to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah service and why?
5) What role did congregants, other than the Bar or Bat Mitzvah class and parents, play in the service?
6) As your child prepared for becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah, did you expect the process to change your child?
   a) If so, how?
   b) Do you think you were correct? If not, what was different than you expected?
7) Do you think your child’s becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah will change your family?
   a) If so, how?
8) Do you think your child’s becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah will change your family’s relationship to your congregation?
   a) If so, how?
9) What do you feel constitutes a “successful” Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
10) Can you give an example of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah that went really well?
11) How about one that didn’t go well?
12) Can you describe the week before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
   a) What kinds of preparations took place?
   b) Who was responsible for them?
   c) What kinds of thoughts and emotions did you have?
13) Describe the day of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.
   a) What did you do?
   b) What did your child do?
   c) How did you feel as the day went along?
   d) What was the best part of the day?
   e) What was the worst part of the day?
14) Is there anything else you think I should know?
   Childhood Experience (asked of each individual parent)
   15) Growing up, what did your family do at home that made you feel Jewish?
a) For holidays?
b) For Shabbat?
c) Other times?

16) What kind of congregation did your family attend when you were a child?
   a) Denomination
   b) Size
   c) In what region of the US was it located? (or if not in US, where?)
   d) Were there other congregations—of any denomination—nearby?

17) As a child, how often did you go to synagogue, either for services or programs?

18) In what kind of activities did you participate? (E.g., services, youth group, programs, education)

19) Did you feel like you were important to the congregation life? Very strongly, somewhat, a little, not much. What made you feel this way?

20) What did you like best about belonging to your childhood congregation?

21) What did you like least about belonging to that congregation?

22) Did you attend religious school as a child?
   a) If so, can you tell me about the program.
   b) What was the curriculum like?
   c) Who taught the classes?
   d) How did the students get along with each other?
   e) What did you like about it?
   f) What would you have changed about it?

23) Did you become Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
   a) If so, how did you prepare for the event?
   b) Who did you have lessons with?
   c) How did you study between lessons?
   d) What did you like about it?
   e) What would you have change about it?

24) Who did you invite to your Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Why?

25) What did you worry about most before your Bar or Bat Mitzvah service?
   a) What were you most excited about?

26) As a child, what did becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah mean to you?
   a) How about now?

27) As a child, how would you have defined a successful Bar or Bat Mitzvah?
   a) How about now?

28) Did your attendance and participation in congregational life change after you became Bar or Bat Mitzvah? If so, how?

29) If not, you did not have/become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, what, if anything, did the lack of the event mean to you? How do you feel about it now?

Other individuals: Lay Leaders, Tutors and teachers, other congregants

These individuals answered many of the same questions as those above. Lay leaders and other congregants responded to the sections on Bar/Bat Mitzvah’s effect on the congregation, on congregational context, and on their personal engagement with congregational life. In addition, lay leaders were asked about their leadership roles and
responsibilities (see below), while other congregants were asked about their childhood experiences of Judaism. Teachers and tutors responded to the sections on Bar/Bat Mitzvah’s effect on the congregation, on congregational context, and answered a set of questions related to their role.

Questions for Lay Leaders

1) When and why did you join the congregation?
2) What is your current leadership position and what was the path you took to get there?
3) What are your responsibilities in that role?
4) What are your goals for your term of office?
5) What do you like or dislike about this role?

Questions for Tutor or Cantor on Bar/Bat Mitzvah Preparation

1. Could you tell me what classes, if any, you teach?
2. What is your role, if any, in regular religious services?
3. How do you work with or prepare Bar or Bat Mitzvah candidates for Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Specifically:
   a. What areas or subjects do you cover (for example: prayers, trope, translation, interpretation, rehearsals)?
   b. How do you organize and communicate that material?
4. Are there variations or exceptions in what you teach or how you approach the material or students?
5. Which area or subject do you consider most important to teach (or for the kids to learn) and why?
   a. What do you think parents would respond?
   b. What do you think the kids themselves would answer?
6. What is your overall goal for each individual student?
   a. What do you think parents would respond?
   b. What do you think the students themselves would answer?
7. In thinking about your students, do you notice any differences in their engagement or understanding of the material related to whether they are:
   a. boys or girls?
   b. the children of intermarried or inmarried parents?
   c. the children of parents who are engaged in Judaism or not engaged?
   d. some other area of difference entirely?
8. When do you consider working with the student to be successful? (Or...what is a successful Bar or Bat Mitzvah?)
   a. When would you consider the process to have been less than successful?
   b. How do you think students would answer this?
   c. How about parents?
9. Are you satisfied with the preparation process? If so, what do you think are the reasons it works? If not, what would you change?

Questions for teachers
1. Can you describe your class:
   a. Which grades and subjects do you teach and with what schedule?
   b. How many students are in your class(es)?
2. What do you do with your students? Specifically:
   a. What areas or subjects do you cover?
   b. How do you organize and communicate that material?
3. Are there exceptions in what you teach or how you approach the material or students?
4. Which area or subject do you consider most important to teach (or for the students to learn) and why?
   a. What do you think parents would respond?
   b. What do you think the students themselves would answer?
5. What is your overall goal for the class as a whole and for each individual student?
   a. What do you think parents would respond?
   b. What do you think the students themselves would answer?
6. Specific material (for example, particular prayers) may be taught so that a Bar or Bat Mitzvah will know them. However, they may also be taught because they are part of basic Jewish knowledge. In thinking about your curriculum, how is it shaped by knowledge required for B’nai Mitzvah? In other words, how would it differ if Bar or Bat Mitzvah was not a factor in Jewish education?
7. In thinking about your students, do you notice any differences in their engagement or understanding of the material related to whether they are:
   a. boys or girls?
   b. the children of intermarried or inmarried parents?
   c. the children of parents who are engaged in Judaism or not engaged?
   d. some other area of difference entirely?
8. When do you consider working with the student to be successful? (Or...what is a successful process?)
   a. When would you consider the process to have been less than successful?
   b. How do you think students would answer this?
   c. How about parents?
9. Are you satisfied with your class process? If so, what do you think are the reasons it works? If not, what would you change?