Significance of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ceremony for Parents of Jewish Children With Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract
In the Jewish religion, a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is the rite of passage from childhood towards adulthood. Twenty-one youngsters who attended two special education schools in Israel participated in group bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. Parents were interviewed both before the learning process and after the ceremony. Findings showed that the bar/bat mitzvah experience was a positive multidimensional one. Dimensions identified were bar/bat mitzvah as a transition, a normative, and a religious experience; an event leading to a sense of connectedness; an opportunity for the enhancement of self-image; and a peak life experience.

Much of the research that exists on families with children who have disabilities has concentrated on the initial adjustment of these families to the birth of their child and on the first decade of the child’s life (Beckman, 1996; Hagestad, 1987). Less attention has been paid to the way families with children who have disabilities function at later stages in life (Turnbull, Summers, & Brotherson, 1986), although that is changing as researchers are beginning to look at issues of transition to adulthood (Zetlin & Morrison, 1998). The need to expand the research to additional periods during the life span is crucial.

Researchers focusing on families with children who have disabilities have noted that the frustrations and gratifications of caregiving are not uniform throughout the lifespan. Transition points in the family’s life are seen as points in time that contribute to higher levels of family stress (Glidden & Zetlin, 1992; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986; Wikler, 1986). A related factor is the extent to which the role of the parent is either normative or “off-cycle.” Thus, for example, caregiving is a normative role for all families with young children but becomes an off-cycle role when the child reaches adulthood. Many researchers who have studied families at certain specific points in time, such as at high school graduation, have reported a rekindled sense of loss at these transition periods (Black, Molaison, & Smull, 1990; Konanc & Warren, 1984; Minnes, 1998). In their study of families with a child who had mental retardation, Wikler, Wasow, and Hatfield (1981) found that the child’s 21st birthday was a stressful event, second only to the initial diagnosis of mental retardation. Furthermore, social workers tend to underestimate the stressful impact of this event. Wikler et al. attributed the stress on these occasions to the heightened awareness of the limits of one’s child.

An alternative hypothesis is that developmental transitions and stressful events are opportunities for personal and psychological growth rather than necessarily having a negative impact on the family (Seligman & Darling, 1989; Seltzer, 1992). Turnbull et al. (1986) identified the fundamental life-cycle issue for families with children who have disabilities as learning to adjust constructively to change of both a normative and a nonnormative nature as well as to the chronicity of conditions that do not change. McCubbin and Patterson (1983) proposed that the family definition and meaning of an event, delineated as the C factor in their model, plays an important role in dealing with the intensity of the crisis. Family efforts to redefine the situation as an opportunity for growth or to endow it with special meaning assist in facilitating coping and encourage the family unit to carry on with its fundamental tasks of promoting members’...
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social and emotional development. The family can be helped to “look favorably on transition without minimizing or denying reality” (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983, p. 18).

In recent years, there has also been an increase of interest in the role that religion plays in the lives of people with developmental disabilities and their families. Researchers have examined the role of religious beliefs and religious organizations as sources of support and coping resources for these families (Fewell, 1986; Skinner, Correa, Skinner, & Bailey, 2001; Weisner, Beizer, & Stolze, 1991). Further, the question of how to educate children with disabilities in the religious community has been raised with greater frequency (Collins, Epstein, Reiss, & Lowe, 2001).

There has also been growing recognition that individuals with developmental disabilities can themselves be spiritual people, have religious faith, and experience a sense of belonging to a group (Gaventa & Coulter, 2002; Koeksema, 1995; Webb-Mitchell, 1994). Quality of life models for persons with disabilities often encompass the spiritual domain as well (Remwick, Brown, & Raphael, 2000; Schalock, 1996).

The term rites of passage was first coined by Van Gennep (1908/1960) for rituals that marked all types of transitions experienced by individuals and groups during their development. The rituals or ceremonies (the outward presentation of the solemn moments) at these points in time serve to facilitate the transitions. From a societal point of view, one of the significant rites of passage is the initiation into tribal membership and adulthood at puberty (Kimball, 1965). Van der Hart (1983) stressed how in puberty rites that have a strong religious character, the members of the society experience their entire world as being consecrated again and, as a result, the perpetuation and well-being of the group is ensured. The community context of the rite of passage is a critical part of the process and is necessary to foster a sense of belonging (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993).

Bar mitzvahs, the Jewish rite of passage into adulthood, can be said to carry some elements of the initiation ceremony. The ceremony takes place at a specific time and in a specific place. It takes place when the boy is 13 and at the synagogue. This assures the presence of the adult members of the community the child is about to join. The ceremony involves the use of the Torah scroll, the community’s most sacred treasure. The act of reciting the blessings prior to and following the reading of the section of the Torah is the central ritual, the act that represents the change in the child’s status. In modern society, the rite of passage has been extended to include girls as well as boys (bat mitzvah) and the Conservative Movement (known as the Masorti Movement in Israel) encourages girls to participate in the synagogue ritual as well.

The bar/bat mitzvah is viewed by many today as celebrating one’s passage toward maturity rather than adulthood itself. The tasks are difficult enough so that youngsters can experience a real sense of success and accomplishment. Zegans and Zegans (1979) interviewed boys who reported an enhanced sense of their own worth and importance to other people and a connection with other Jews both past and present. Kosmin and Keysar (2000) conducted telephone surveys with 400 families and found that both parents and youngsters described this rite of passage as a significant event in their lives both during the year following the ceremony and when contacted again 4 years later. Other researchers have concluded that the bar mitzvah provided an opportunity for family growth and transformation (Davis, 1987; Schoenfeld, 1990).

The issue of the celebration of bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies for youngsters with developmental disabilities is a complex one. Jewish legal culture seems to reflect a contradictory blend of sensitivity and insensitivity towards those with disabilities (Marx, 1992). In classical Jewish tradition, the obligation to perform commandments endows the individual with dignity. Thus, exemptions or disqualifications from the responsibility of fulfilling various commandments can be seen as an assault on the esteem of the personhood of the individual with a disability. Exemptions were given globally to the mentally handicapped and to the deaf (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashanah, 29A). Over time, some sources indicated greater openness to including persons with disabilities, although these sources were often challenged by more conservative views containing arguments for the status quo.

Beyond the legal rulings, the issue is very much one of social acceptability. In Israel today, although children of Orthodox families with mild impairments may often have bar mitzvahs, this is not always the case for children of Orthodox families with more severe disabilities. Most of the families of children with disabilities are not “affiliated” with synagogues or congregations. This, however, is typical of Israeli society in general and is different than
existing affiliation norms in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Nonetheless, whereas many secular families in Israel approach local synagogues when their sons reach age 13 and have traditional bar mitzvah ceremonies for them, many secular parents of children with disabilities do not even consider this possibility.

By contrast, the Committees on Laws and Standards of the Conservative Movement in Israel issued a responsum permitting children with mental retardation to be called to the Torah (Hammer, 1992). In essence, the Conservative Movement has stated that those with disabilities are to be accorded equal status with regard to this religious ritual. In order for these youngsters to be able to exercise their rights, however, it becomes necessary to provide the necessary support services.

The need for these support services was the catalyst for establishing a program in Israel that would offer preparation for bar mitzvah to children with developmental disabilities. The program, founded in 1995, has been implemented in special education schools throughout the country and is offered to families on an optional basis. The Conservative Movement contends that although religious practices should not be foisted on anyone, they should be part of the choices offered to individuals with disabilities. The program has served children with a wide range of disabilities (mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism, and deafness) and family religious orientations (secular, traditional, and Orthodox). The program includes both Judaic enrichment and preparation for the ceremony itself. The teaching is done primarily in small groups and the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony itself is usually held for the entire group, with each child being called up individually to recite the appropriate blessings prior to the reading from the Torah scroll. The ceremony has both elements that are defined and prescribed and elements that are improvised as determined by the unique needs of the group.

We designed this exploratory study to examine a normative life cycle event, a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony for children with moderate and severe developmental disabilities. Our aim was to uncover the significance of the ceremony for parents and youngsters. We deal here with the significance for the parents; investigation with the youngsters themselves is presented elsewhere (Vogel & Reiter, 2003).

Method

Participants

Participants were parents of children who attended 2 of the 17 schools that took part in the bar/bat mitzvah program during the 1999-2000 academic year. The schools were chosen on the basis of the relatively large size of the group of youngsters and the type of disability of the school population. Ten children (7 boys, 3 girls) attended Shalom, a school for children with moderate mental retardation, and 11 (5 boys, 6 girls) attended Hadar, a school primarily for children with cerebral palsy and mental retardation. (All names of schools, children, and parents are pseudonyms). Thirty parents participated in the preliminary interviews (20 mothers, 10 fathers); 29 were interviewed following the ceremony (18 mothers, 11 fathers). Five families described themselves as having an orthodox religious orientation, 6 were traditional, and 10 labeled themselves as secular.

Data Collection

Qualitative research methods are especially useful for exploratory research where there is little known about the phenomenon of interest and when examining the meaning people attach to a particular event in their lives (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Our primary research tool was in-depth interviewing. We developed the interview protocols based on the literature reviewed, the research questions posed, and pilot interviews conducted with 3 families whose children had previously participated in the program. In these open pilot interviews (conducted prior to the start of this study), parents tended to raise topics that were unrelated to the bar/bat mitzvah experience but were clearly issues that they were struggling with at the time. Therefore, the decision was made to conduct semistructured interviews that would be focused on the bar mitzvah experience. These interviews, which lasted between 3 and 4 hours, were conducted by the researchers with the parents in their home. The first was conducted prior to the start of the learning process and the second took place 1 to 2 months after the bar/bat mitzvah. The second interview was purposely delayed so that the parents would have some perspective on the ceremony. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Observations at parent meetings and at the ceremony itself as well as analysis of artifacts that were available (several parents prepared written...
texts that they shared with the children and guests, picture albums, letters, etc.) were used to reinforce what was learned from the analysis of the interviews.

Data Analysis

We used qualitative data analysis, which Bogdan and Biklen (1992) described as “the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them” (p. 153). Content analysis and coding techniques were used to analyze the interview transcripts and the observation notes. The coding categories were generated by considering both the topics raised in the interview protocols (prefigured focus) and by reading each interview and noting tentative categories that emerged (emergent focus). Quotations and examples that related to each category were highlighted as well. As each additional interview was read, the list was expanded to include any additional categories. All the tentative categories were then listed, and each interview was reread and recoded according to these categories. Finally, the data were organized according to category. This was done in order to allow for comparison of each category across all the interviews. Following these stages, the themes that surfaced were determined and the narrative was written.

The coding of the interviews led to the identification of six dimensions of the significance of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony as perceived by the parents, namely, bar/bat mitzvah as a (a) transition experience, (b) a normative experience, (c) a religious experience, (d) an experience leading to a sense of connectedness, (d) enhancement of self-image as a result of the bar/bat mitzvah, and (e) as a peak life experience.

Findings

Parents’ reactions to the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony were overwhelmingly positive. Many described the ceremony as “moving” and “impressive.” They expressed a high level of satisfaction with both the ceremony and the learning process that preceded it. The findings are presented along the six dimensions that were identified and listed above.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Transition Experience

One of the central themes of bar/bat mitzvah is that of maturation. Although in modern society, the change in a youngster’s status is not a dramatic one, the connotation of the concept “bar/bat mitzvah” is still one of growing up. Parents of adolescents with disabilities are not always attuned to changes in their youngsters (Zetlin & Morrison, 1998). It was, therefore, interesting to try and ascertain whether parents of children experiencing a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony were aware of such changes and whether they related these changes to the bar/bat mitzvah experience.

Parents were asked whether they sensed any changes in their children during this period in their lives. Four parents described physical changes, such as changes in bodies and voices, development of breasts, and increased food consumption. Many more parents gave examples of changes they noticed in their child’s behavior. Several saw their children as more independent. Dan had “begun to stay home alone for short periods of time and is no longer interested in going on outings with us.” Several girls were more helpful at home. David’s parents reported a “change in the type of television programs he watched and the music he listened to.” Channah had begun to “talk about having a boy friend” and Guy “has started to talk about girls.” Aryeh’s mother reported that “he doesn’t allow himself to be hugged as often.” Esther no longer slept in the same room as her parents. Orah and Ari had both slept away from home for the first time in their lives without their parents.

Parents also reported changes in their own behavior and expectations. They spoke of trying to give youngsters more jobs and responsibilities at home. Omer’s parents said they “raised the level of our demands and attempted not to talk to him like to a small child.” Naomi’s mother felt that she “could sometimes talk to my daughter as if she were an adult.” Three families specifically mentioned using the phrase “now you have had your bar/bat mitzvah” occasionally when making these demands on their children.

Although several of the examples cited above seem to be major changes (sleeping away from home for the first time, sleeping in one’s own room), many are less dramatic. The parents were attuned to even these small changes and saw them as indications of growth and development, despite the fact that it was clear to them that their child had not become independent. It is also possible that going through a bar/bat mitzvah experience helped parents become sensitive to these changes because
of the associations of the concept of bar/bat mitzvah that are prevalent in the culture.

The second question concerned whether parents attributed any of these changes to the bar/bat mitzvah experience. It was clear that no one saw changes taking place overnight as a result of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. However, about half of the parents interviewed indicated that they felt that the process had influenced the development of their child over the course of the year. Aryeh's mother stated:

My son had an experience that made the connection between bar mitzvah and growing up. This connection didn't come from me, it's not something we spoke about at home. It came from the process of the ceremony or the preparations that took place.

"All transitions are difficult for parents like us, all the more so, reaching the age of bar/bat mitzvah." This was one of the first reactions of Amnon, Orah's father, during the interview held a few weeks after the ceremony. Wikler (1986) reported that families of older children with mental retardation have periods of increased levels of stress. The two periods she identified were the transition to adolescence (age 11 to 15) and young adulthood (20 to 21). Wikler hypothesized that stress is due to the discrepancy between cultural expectations and reality and a heightened awareness of the limits of one's child. In applying the hypothesis to Jewish culture, the first period of transition reaches its height with the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony.

During the interviews parents were asked about their motivation for participating in the program. Many parents described their motivation in passive terms: "The school chose, not us"; "The whole class is participating, so we agreed." It seems to us that this was an indication of some of the ambivalence they were feeling. These parents were using an avoidance strategy in order to cope. They preferred not to deal with the issue of bar/bat mitzvah themselves but rather to allow the school to handle the issue for them. Similarly, many did not involve themselves in the learning process, either in following the content of the classes or in practicing the prayers recited at the ceremony with their youngsters.

Gilad, a student at the Shalom school, had turned 13 in September, and there had been no family celebration of the event. During the interview, one sensed that the parents were uneasy about this. Although the Steins reported having debated what to do about Gilad's bar mitzvah, this had never gone beyond the thinking stage (no synagogue was contacted, no arrangements made, no party planned). When asked whether she saw a difference between a birthday at age 13 and other ages, Shoshi, Gilad's mother, replied:

The truth? Age 13 means nothing, perhaps because we haven't celebrated a bar mitzvah. Of course, I imagined it differently but we are busy, busy dealing with the daily struggles that it really doesn't matter right now if he is 13, or 14, or 10. Age doesn't play a role, it is not very significant.

Over the course of the year, Gilad expressed growing interest in the classes and in the ceremony itself. At home, he spoke about the lessons, practiced his part, and insisted that his entire extended family attend the ceremony. The Steins followed Gilad's lead. Siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins attended. The Steins also held a celebration for the extended family in a restaurant during the week following the synagogue ceremony. Thus, although they had initially ignored Gilad's 13th birthday, at the end of the year they were able to participate in a synagogue service and a family party that were both meaningful and comfortable for them.

**Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Normative Experience**

The sense of celebrating “like everyone else” emerged in this research as one of the key themes of the bar/bat mitzvah experience. This was reflected in the opening remarks of the principal of the Shalom school at the ceremony:

Bar mitzvah is a tradition that belongs to an ancient people and Jewish youngsters your age all over the world participate in this rite of passage. Your participation in this ritual signifies that you are a link in a long chain and are just like all other Jewish children.

Parents felt that they and their children were “allowed to be part of society and have the same experiences that other children have.” Orah's father related: "I had a feeling of pleasure when I attended my niece’s bat mitzvah and recalled that my own daughter had been capable of celebrating her bat mitzvah as well."

Indeed, celebrating a bar/bat mitzvah is one of the few normative rites of passage in which children with developmental disabilities can participate during their teenage years. In Israeli society, other milestones have taken on some of the aspects of rites of passage. These include graduation from junior high school and high school, attaining a drivers' license, and—of particular importance in Israel—receiving one's first draft notice as well as ac-
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Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Religious Experience

Many of the children had little prior exposure to the ritual objects that are related to prayer, to the concept of prayer, or to the synagogue itself. Parents reported that the children now recognized and were familiar with these objects and had learned a few basic prayers. For example, this was the first time Uri had ever been in a synagogue, and his parents felt this “was a positive experience for him.” David’s parents thought this knowledge had “filled a gap in his background.” David now “had an experience with religion, encountered the Torah scrolls, phylacteries (worn during daily prayer), a rabbi, a cantor, etc.” Children from homes with a more Orthodox religious orientation had an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and to play the role of the expert. The process strengthened the connection between home and school.

Two of the families interviewed were recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union who emphasized the importance of knowing about one’s roots. One of the reasons they had come to live in Israel had been to allow their children to learn about their Jewish roots, something they felt they themselves were missing.

A number of parents reacted to the religious significance of the event. One father spoke of the “holiness” he sensed that morning. Orah’s parents commented on the “privilege of being called up to the Torah.” Omer’s parents saw the ceremony as “an expression of the most beautiful aspects of religion.” Three families mentioned that this ceremony enabled them to have a religious celebration of their youngster’s bar/bat mitzvah that would otherwise not have taken place.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah as an Experience Leading to a Sense of Connectedness

The bar/bat mitzvah created a sense of group and belonging on several levels. The children studied together as a group over the course of the year in preparation for the ceremony, with much emphasis placed on the formation of a group identity. Many parents stressed the sense of togetherness they felt the children had. “No one had to do this alone.” There was a feeling that they were there “to support each other and share the experience.” Orah’s father even mused: “I wish there would be more life events and experiences that the group could share together.” Thus, the first level was the cohesiveness of the group of children who studied together and celebrated in a common ceremony.

A second level was the family of each child. Parents generally invited close family members to the ceremony and were invited to stand beside their youngsters as they were called up to the stage to recite the blessings over the Torah. Some of the grandparents chose to join them as well. This gave the families an opportunity to “celebrate together as a family,” with the bar/bat mitzvah youngster being the center of attention. Ilan’s father described how “I wore the same tie that I wore to my elder son’s bar mitzvah 3 years ago.” Aryeh’s positive experience at the bar mitzvah ceremony revolved around his biological father’s presence at the service (in addition to his stepfather). This was the first time his father had ever participated in a school event or met Aryeh’s teachers.

The next level of community created by the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony was that of all the families of the youngsters. The sense was of one large extended family. Orah’s parents expressed this sentiment clearly: “We were not alone but were sharing a life event with other families who could understand and empathize with all the emotions we are feeling.”

Several parents addressed the issue of the sense of acceptance by the larger community that they felt as a result of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. They described the atmosphere in the synagogue as one of “warmth, respect, and tolerance.” This found expression in the patience the congregation showed while waiting for children to speak, in not insisting...
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on perfection. If someone “got stuck,” they were helped to go on, no one made a “big deal” out of it. Naomi’s mother was moved and commented: “The fact that others care is helpful emotionally and it fills a gap I often feel.” Mrs. Yefet felt as if “we, the families of children with disabilities belong, and are not flung aside.” The Alon family, recent immigrants to Israel from the Ukraine, described how their daughter, like most children with disabilities, had been mostly hidden at home and how “exhilarating it is to feel part of society.” Thus, having the opportunity to participate in normative life events and being accepted by the community contributes to one’s sense of belonging to the community.

In addition, several parents commented on the effect that the ceremony had on the guests. They felt that the guests had “learned an important lesson as well.” The guests saw that “these children can do what other children do and learned to understand and value them more.” Members of the congregation and other invited guests who were present were indeed moved by the experience. Many attended synagogue regularly, yet they too were struck by a sense of sacredness. They found it “one of the most meaningful and uplifting services they had ever attended,” and they too felt “a new sense of community.” Thus, the sense of belonging that was created was indeed two-directional.

Finally, the sense of group and belonging extends backward in time as well. Bar mitzvahs naturally evoke a sense of continuity with Jews in previous generations. Parents and grandparents who were remembering their own ceremonies and those of their relatives experienced this sense of belonging that transcends time. One of the persons who described this sensation most clearly was Yonatan, Dan’s father, who was chosen to speak on behalf of the families. During the preliminary interview, Yonatan had maintained: “As secular Israelis my wife and I don’t feel the religious need for a ceremony.” Diverting from his prepared remarks during the ceremony, Yonatan acknowledged:

Although I didn’t expect it, I did indeed feel moved this morning. I felt a tremor when I placed the prayer shawl that I wore at my own bar mitzvah on the shoulders of my own son. I felt the same sense of pride my father felt at my bar mitzvah.

The wine cup Dan received as a gift was placed on the shelf next to the wine cup Yonatan had inherited from his grandfather. What was most striking was that now Dan was clearly accepted as part of the chain as well. The sense of immortality, or being connected to one’s own particular ancestors and to the entire Jewish people, is evoked at bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies the world over and at the ceremonies described here as well.

Enhancement of Self-Image as a Result of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Experience

Parents related to the impact the ceremony had on their child’s self-image. Orah’s parents recognized “a sense of confidence in their daughter that is not usually present... Orah knew what she was doing and exuded this as she walked up to the Torah.” Guy’s mother felt that “Guy saw the ceremony as a chance to prove to himself that he is capable.” The Cohens felt that “the bar mitzvah had provided Batsheva with an opportunity to feel good about herself.” This in itself was an important contribution in their eyes. Several children had older brothers who had bar mitzvah ceremonies. Parents commented that their sons could now identify better with these older siblings.

The parents also reported that the children were aware of their appearance. They described the great care the children took in selecting clothing for the ceremony. Many purchased new outfits for the occasion. Several spent a good deal of time in front of the mirror and were pleased with the outcome.

Learning new concepts and skills provided an opportunity to attain a sense of achievement. The learning process emphasized the youngsters’ awareness of their ability to perform ethical commandments. A sense of empowerment evolves when persons acquire skills or information, have the opportunity to use their abilities, and sense that change has occurred as a result of their own actions (Egan & DeLaat, 1997).

The ceremony provided an opportunity to publicly recognize these achievements. The sheer magnitude of the celebration—a decorated synagogue, presence of all family members, the large audience, gifts, the presence of the mayor, and specially prepared prayerbooks—all testified to the importance of the event.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Peak Life Experience

Many parents remarked that this would be a lifetime memory for the children and themselves. One father declared: “My motivation for having Uri participate is that I want him to remember this event.” Peak experiences and pleasurable memories
can contribute to the well-being of both the child and the family. As Yonatan, Dan’s father put it:

The bar mitzvah gave us pleasure, a small amount of pleasure. There are so many moments of hard work, of disappointment, and here we had a few moments of pleasure. One needs to know how to capture this pleasure, value it and use it to fuel the soul for the coming year of work, until the next moment of pleasure.

The Hoffmans also felt this would be “a pleasurable memory for them as a family,” and the Alons stressed that they would: “remember this festive day for their entire lives.” Orah’s parents described the day as a moment of “light at the end of a tunnel.” Parents took many photographs of the event. Several videotaped the ceremony themselves. Each family received a videotape of the ceremony during the follow-up interview. It could not have been a more appreciated gift. Photographs and videotapes offer the opportunity of keeping the memory alive. Dan’s family had brought their own video camera to the ceremony. The cassette they showed when interviewed after the ceremony included three family events: the wedding of one of the daughters, Dan’s bar mitzvah ceremony, and the circumcision of the first grandchild. It was clear that the bar mitzvah was equal to the family’s other memorable life-cycle events. Many of the families had placed the gift given to the youngsters (silver-plated candlesticks or a wine cup) in a prominent, public place in their home. This, too, will serve as a reminder of the bar/bat mitzvah.

Discussion and Implications

In this exploratory study we examined a stage in the life cycle of families of children with developmental disabilities that has received relatively little attention. Similarly, the significance of a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony for parents of children with moderate and severe developmental disabilities has not been studied in depth. A number of issues, such as how a significant event in the life of a child with disabilities becomes transformative for the child and family, the role of religion and spirituality in the development of persons with disabilities, the tensions and hopes of parents raising children with disabilities, and the impact of participating in normative life experiences, were raised. Each of these issues could serve as the focal point for future research.

Our findings show that parents of youngsters with moderate and severe developmental disabilities could view the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony as a marking and that they can conceive of change and progress in their children. Paradoxically, although the societal norms surrounding bar/bat mitzvah are contributing factors to the stress and sense of ambivalence that arises, the ceremony itself can serve a proactive role in diminishing the increased level of stress that occurs during this period. Quinn, Newfield, and Protinsky (1985) suggested that we can view such a rite as an “intervention event of significance” (p. 110).

This research shows that children can benefit from and enjoy religious education and can participate in rituals shared by others in their society. The needs of children with developmental disabilities are often so overwhelming that an area such as religious education can easily be neglected. Yet this study clearly shows the positive impact of such education and experiences. Results suggest the need to include children in other community experiences as well. Although in this study we dealt specifically with Jewish religious education and a Jewish rite of passage, these same implications exist for youngsters of all backgrounds. Examination of the significance of rituals and ceremonies found in other religions and cultures is recommended.

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