

[January 07 article for Megillah]

Bar & Bat Mitzvah – The Beginning of Your Jewish Life

You know the story – it seems that a synagogue is infested with mice and repeated attempts at conventional solutions don't seem to be working. Exasperated the staff turns to the rabbi for advice. He says "let me handle it" and after a week all the mice are gone! "Rabbi, how did you do it?" the amazed staff asks. "Simple," he replies, "I just Bar Mitzvahed the whole group and I knew we'd never see them again."

Tell this story to your rabbi and Jewish Educator friends and they will wince even as they smile. The flight of post B'nai Mitzvah students is a painful fact of life for everyone in the Jewish world. Any of you who have studied Judaism as an adult know how one cannot but barely scratch the surface and begin to appreciate the depth of Judaism by the ripe old age of 13. Yet this is the age when many parents give into the pleas of their children and end their Jewish education.

This is perfectly perverse. If you think about all the things said and done at the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, you will realize that this age is so special because it is the *beginning* (and not the end) of the young person's serious, adult Jewish life. In our Torah School, it is the age that the student can continue to explore his or her Jewish identity in our unique Teen Connection program, conceived and implemented by our wonderful volunteer principal, Julia Newman. After a few years of study, the student is ready for an in depth study program with your rabbi leading to Confirmation, a ceremony in which the teen confirms his or her acceptance of Jewish responsibilities. With luck, this leads to continuing involvement in Jewish Youth Groups, and a Jewish life at college and in adult life.

All of the above is the reason why we insist that your child be a student at Temple Ner Ami or other synagogue Torah School for a considerable length of time to be eligible for Bar or Bat Mitzvah – and that you, their parents, be members of the congregation. You know, we could stuff the prayers and chanting into any reasonably intelligent child within just a few months so that he or she could parrot them back at their ceremony. But this would defeat the purpose of their being part of a true Jewish community. This is why I am so opposed to "Bar/Bat Mitzvah Factories" which simply educate children without requiring their or their families participation in Jewish life. In the final analysis, they only serve to undermine the central point of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as the beginning of a serious Jewish life.

As we begin 2007, I wish you and everyone you love health, happiness, love and prosperity. But most of all, I wish you spiritual depth and the energy, resources, time and curiosity to help it grow and deepen.

Rabbi Mike Lotker