

It will just make me more spiritual

Bar, bat mitzvahs for adults growing

By Jean Gordon

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Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, Mark Fijman took a seat inside his rabbi's office on a recent Sunday for his weekly bar mitzvah class.

But rather than finding himself among a room full of junior high schoolers, Fijman's classmates were all adults.

"I didn't have an opportunity to be bar mitzvahed when I was kid," said the 44-year-old attorney who lives in Madison County. "I view this as an opportunity to get a deeper understanding behind the liturgy and the Torah study."

Normally a Jewish rite of passage for 13-year-old boys, the bar mitzvah ritual marks a believer's religious maturity (girls celebrate a similar ceremony called the bat mitzvah at age 12). But a growing number of Jewish adults who missed out on commemorating this spiritual coming of age choose to celebrate it belatedly.

As local Jews usher in the High Holy Day period of Rosh Hashana beginning Monday and Yom Kippur on Oct. 12, Jackson's Beth Israel Congregation will continue preparing several generations of bar and bat mitzvah candidates.

"My son will have his bar mitzvah next June," said Fijman, a Beth Israel member. "I'll have my bar mitzvah in August following him."

About a dozen men and women are enrolled in the synagogue's adult bar and bat mitzvah class, a yearlong program that teaches Jewish theology, history and tradition.

Bar mitzvah translates as "son of the commandment" (bat mitzvah means "daughter of the commandment"). The term applies when youth become responsible for themselves under Jewish law.

Rabbi Valerie Cohen of Beth Israel Congregation said she started the class because several of the synagogue's adult members showed interest in preparing for their bar or bat mitzvah.

Most of the students in the class are women who grew up before the 1970s when bat mitzvah became common for girls.

"When Reform Judaism stressed the importance of egalitarianism, that was a natural occurrence," Cohen said.

Out of style

Many adult men missed out on their bar mitzvah because the ritual fell out of fashion in some regions of the country in the early- to mid-20th century.

In the Reform Jewish movement, the ceremony had been eclipsed in many cases by a confirmation process, which was based on the model of the Christian catechism.

Jewish confirmation includes boys and girls and was developed to extend a young person's Jewish education later into their teen years.

Confirmations are still held for Jewish youth in the years following their bar or bat mitzvah.

Like the preparation Jewish youth undergo for their bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, adult students study Hebrew and learn other skills needed to analyze a portion of the Torah, which contains the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

During their formal ceremony, the candidates will read a selection from the Torah in Hebrew.

For adults, the ritual goes beyond showcasing new skills. It validates their Jewish identity.

"It will just make me more spiritual," said Ellen Hart, 56, of Jackson, who joined the class because she's always wanted to be a bat mitzvah. "It will be the icing on the cake."

But unlike their juvenile counterparts, the adult students don't expect guests at their bar and bat mitzvah parties to shower them with gifts.

"I just expect well wishes," said Hart, whose 89-year-old father is also considering joining the class.

Foundation

Adult bar and bat mitzvah classes began to gain popularity in the early- to mid-90s, said Lisa D. Grant, a Jewish education professor at Hebrew Union College who has studied the phenomenon.

"Many congregational rabbis began to see the potential for this kind of class to educate more people into how a service works and to empower them to be more active in synagogue life," Grant said. "It's now the mainstay of a lot of adult education offerings."

Grant said the classes appeal to adults because the bar and bat mitzvah ceremony offers a "wonderful sense of completion."

Bar mitzvah student Dr. Harry Kolodney, a 51-year-old Madison dentist, expects his mother to make the trip from Boston to Jackson for his religious ceremony next summer.

"I've been getting on the Internet with other family and people I went to high school with too," said the New York native.

Kolodney said he never celebrated his bar mitzvah because the confirmation ceremony was the preferred rite of passage when he was a teen.

"I kind of felt like I missed out a little bit," he said.

He decided to join Beth Israel's class as his 9- and 11-year-old sons began to approach bar mitzvah age.

But because his sons are being raised Catholic (Kolodney's wife is Catholic), they won't be celebrating this Jewish ritual themselves.

"They can go to my bar mitzvah," Kolodney said.

Though he's attended Jewish worship services his whole life, Kolodney said his bar mitzvah preparation has given him a deeper understanding about Jewish prayer and worship.

"I generally have a lot of interest in comparative religion and other faiths," he said. "It's good to know your own roots as well."

DETAILS

Many people are surprised to find out that becoming bar/bat mitzvah happens automatically when a Jewish boy reaches the age of 13 or a girl 12. The ceremony that today occupies center stage is actually a historical afterthought, with evidence of observance only from sometime between the 14th and 16th centuries.

The typical bar or bat mitzvah takes place during the Sabbath morning service, where the child is called up to say the blessings over the Torah. Children may read from the Torah; chant the haftarah, the weekly prophetic portion; lead some or all of the congregational service; and offer a personal interpretation of the weekly Torah portion, called a d'var Torah.

Source: www.myjewishlearning.com.

HIGH HOLY DAYS

Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) lie within a web of liturgy and customs that extend from the beginning of the preceding Hebrew month of Elul through Yom Kippur.

This period focuses on the process of teshuvah, or repentance, whereby a Jew admits sins, asks for forgiveness and resolves not to repeat the sins.

·Rosh Hashana: Commemorates God's creation of the world. Also the Day of Judgment, when God remembers and judges all human deeds.

The central home ritual consists of a festive meal, and food customs convey several holiday themes. Jews traditionally dip apples into honey. The apple, reminiscent of the fruit of the Garden of Eden, evokes the creation theme. The honey, an ancient symbol of strength and a source of sweetness, embodies wishes for the coming year.

·Yom Kippur: Takes place 10 days after Rosh Hashana. Jewish tradition believes that on this day God places a seal upon the divine decrees affecting each person for the coming year. It is one of the major fasts in Judaism, beginning at sundown and continuing to the following sundown. The idea of atonement includes accepting responsibility for one's actions through prayers of confession. These prayers mention both individual and communal sins and make up a large portion of the prayer services on Yom Kippur.

Source: www.myjewishlearning.com