

It would appear to be axiomatic that the ceremonies and principles of the same religion must be consistent with one another. For if a religion's ceremonies and principles are not mutually consistent, this leads to the incongruous result that the adherents of a religion who subscribe in their principles to one set of beliefs will celebrate a contrary set of beliefs in their ceremonies. Such internal inconsistency within a religion can hardly have productive consequences, producing either a profound conflict within its adherents, or requiring them, in an effort to resolve the inconsistency, to reduce their principles to empty words or their ceremonies to empty actions. It is with this axiomatic requirement of consistency between a religion's ceremonies and principles in mind that the Institute of Creative Judaism has introduced the ceremony of Baal/Baalat Mitzvah, not only for the Reform Jewish Community, but as a paradigm youth ceremony for polydox religions generally. In the following discussion, four youth ceremonies observed at present in the Reform Jewish Community are analyzed: the Bar/Bat Mitzvah; Confession Confirmation; Academic Confirmation; and the newly introduced Baal/Baalat Mitzvah ceremony. In the course of this discussion, the argument is presented that the first two of these ceremonies are inconsistent with an authentically liberal or polydox Reform, and the third is primarily a scholastic exercise. For these reasons, it is proposed that the introduction of the Baal/Baalat Mitzvah ceremony serves a need that at this time is unfulfilled.

To understand the nature of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, we must begin with the covenantal legal system that constitutes the basic structure of rabbinic or (as its contemporary counterpart is termed) Orthodox Judaism. In Orthodox Judaism it is believed that the Israelites at Mount Sinai under the leadership of Moses entered into a covenant with a deity named Yahveh that took the following form. Yahveh would care and provide for the Israelites and their descendants if they in return would obey whatever laws Yahveh commanded them to observe. The laws Yahveh commanded the Israelites to obey are referred to generally as mitzvah (commandment) or mitzvot (commandments). Among these mitzvot are included not only such familiar Orthodox observances as the dietary laws; the laws prohibiting every manner of work on the seventh day; and the laws governing compulsory prayer and purification rites; but the myriads of other rules and regulations that govern Orthodox life as well. Also present among the laws of Orthodoxy, as in most other legal systems, is a general principle that distinguishes between the rights, duties, and responsibilities of minors and those who have attained their majority. Minors are regarded by and large as incapable of fulfilling the laws of the covenant, which are for the most part, therefore, not obligatory upon them. So far as those few regulations are concerned whose observance is required of minors, they are not liable for their misdeeds, and are not held accountable for their sins.

Upon reaching the age of thirteen, according to Orthodox Judaism, a male attains his majority. Although some Orthodox authorities maintain that in addition to the age thirteen, puberty signs must also be present for the male to reach his majority, the requirement of puberty signs is widely disregarded. Moreover, it should be noted that the female in Orthodoxy attains her majority in two steps: partially, when she reaches the age of twelve and a day; and then fully, six months later at the age of twelve and one half.

Upon attaining his majority, the male is obliged to observe all the commandments required by the covenantal law and is, therefore, called a Bar Mitzvah, "son of commandment," that is, a person who is obliged to observe all the laws or mitzvot that according to orthodoxy were commanded by the deity to Moses. Similarly, a female who attains her majority, to whom the name Bat Mitzvah, "daughter of commandment," has recently been given, (by analogy to Bar Mitzvah,) is required to obey the commandments obligatory upon women. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah is under religious law an adult, and is held liable for misdeeds and accountable for sins.

The point should be emphasized that a person becomes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah upon the basis of reaching a prescribed chronological age (or, as noted earlier, age and the presence of puberty signs.) No ceremony makes or can make a person a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and the widely held notion that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony makes a person a Bar/Bat Mitzvah is entirely erroneous. An even more fundamental misconception is the belief that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony makes a person Jewish. (Among the different views regarding what makes a person "Jewish," none holds that it is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony.) Also included among the current myths that surround the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony is the notion that it somehow makes a person, if not "Jewish," at least "more authentically Jewish"; or, increasingly widespread, the belief that there are scholastic requirements that must be met to become a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, such as a minimum knowledge of Hebrew. The plain fact is that a male Jew, according to Orthodox law, becomes a Bar Mitzvah automatically upon reaching the age of thirteen; and a female becomes a Bat Mitzvah automatically at the age of twelve and one half. This attainment of religious majority is analogous to the situation in American law where persons reach their legal majority automatically at age eighteen, and no ceremony is, of course, involved or required.

If a person is just as much a Bar/Bat Mitzvah whether he or she has a ceremony or not, what is the ceremony's purpose? Aside from providing the family with a festive occasion celebrating a youngster's reaching his or her religious majority, the ceremony, which takes place in public, simply informs the community that the person has reached the age of religious maturity. The unessential nature of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony is shown by the fact that the concept of religious majority or Bar Mitzvah existed in rabbinic Judaism for over a thousand years before we find any trace of a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, which seems to have emerged originally in Germany in the fourteenth century. The appearance of the Bat Mitzvah only in the last decade or so speaks for itself.

The inconsistency of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony with authentic Reform Judaism is apparent upon consideration of two points. First, Reform Judaism, as a liberal religion, has no religious law at all, let alone a legal system that distinguishes between a person's religious minority and majority. Accordingly, there cannot be a Bar/Bat Mitzvah in Reform because it has no law that distinguishes between a person's religious minority and majority. This being the case, how can there be a ceremony in Reform celebrating a person becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah when there is no such entity in Reform as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah? Second, the concept of Bar/Bat Mitzvah entails the obligation of a person to obey such laws as the dietary regulations mentioned above, which the Orthodox Jew claims are command-

ments revealed by the deity. Accordingly, the very notion of Bar/Bat Mitzvah presupposes a concept of revealed obligatory legal commandments. Yet the rejection of obligatory legal commandments is a fundamental principle of every liberal religious community, including Reform. There can be no liberalism, that is, freedom, in a religious community that claims for itself possession of an authoritative, binding law commanded by the deity, and in which the individual member is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, a person who is obligated to obey that law.

Still, one might agree that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is inappropriate for an authentic Reform, and yet maintain that the new youth ceremony of Baal/Baalat Mitzvah is unnecessary seeing that the Reform Community already possesses the Confirmation rite. In responding to this objection, the point must first be made that there are two different forms of Confirmation celebrated in Reform. One may be termed, "Confession Confirmation"; the other, "Academic Confirmation." The two forms of Confirmation are in substance quite different from one another, yet, as the following analysis shows, neither presents a case against the introduction of the Baal/Baalat Mitzvah ceremony.

The Confession Confirmation, developed originally in Europe in the early nineteenth century from a Protestant Christian ceremony, was not intended as a distinctively Reform ceremony. On the contrary, it was used in its early period in Europe by Orthodox Jews as well as by Jewish reformers. At that time only males were confirmed, and the confirmation was held on the afternoon of the day on which their Bar Mitzvah ceremonies took place. Although females are included in the present day version of the Confession Confirmation, its nature and purpose have remained otherwise the same. Essentially, the Confession Confirmation is based upon the pentateuchal story of the Sinaitic revelation as understood by Orthodox Judaism. (In Reform Jewish scholarship, as in critical biblical scholarship generally, no credible evidence has ever been presented that the story of the Sinaitic revelation is true.) According to the Pentateuch, the Israelites at Sinai pledged themselves to obey the covenantal law commanded by the deity Yahveh. The Confession Confirmation seeks to provide an occasion for the reconfirmation of this pledge. In the same way that the Israelites, according to the story, accepted the obligation of obeying the covenantal law, so are the confirmands asked to make a public confession of their ancestral faith and pledge acceptance of the law. Owing to the relationship between the Confession Confirmation's reenactment of Sinai and the festival of Shevuot (Pentecost) when, according to tradition, the revelation at Sinai occurred, celebration of the Confirmation was eventually moved to Shevuot.

The Confession Confirmation is as inconsistent with the principles of an authentic Reform as is the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Not only is there no evidence from Reform scholarship that such a revelation has ever occurred, but the covenantal law supposedly commanded at this revelation has been rejected by the Reform Community both explicitly and in its practice. Surely it is meaningless for a Reform Confirmation ceremony to ask of its young people that they pledge themselves to obey a covenantal law that the Reform community has rejected in principle and practice. Moreover, a Confirmation rite that requires a liberal religionist to accept a set of beliefs as dogmas violates the basic freedom that every member of a polydox religious

community possesses as a basic right. In view of its inconsistencies with the principles of an authentic Reform Judaism, the Confession Confirmation is not competent to serve as a youth ceremony for the Reform Community.

The Academic Confirmation is an offshoot of the Confession Confirmation, and was developed by some congregations in the more liberalized atmosphere of American Reform. The Academic Confirmation is essentially graduation from a religious school and is tantamount to an academic exercise. The Confirmation requires no confession of faith or commitment to an ancestral covenant, only that the confirmand shall have completed certain studies. The Academic Confirmation does not infringe upon the personal religious freedom of the confirmand, and is, therefore, appropriate to Reform Judaism. On the other hand, the Academic Confirmation does not relate to the need for a Baal/Baalat Mitzvah ceremony in Reform since the two serve entirely different functions. The Academic Confirmation is a scholastic exercise, whereas the Baal/Baalat Mitzvah ceremony celebrates an existential event.

The existential event that the Baal/Baalat Mitzvah ceremony celebrates is the entrance of the human person during the period of adolescence upon a journey of personal development that realizes the inherent human desires for self-authority. In infancy and childhood, a person is dependent upon parents and other authority figures for ultimate decisions and guidance. Thus infancy and childhood may be described as periods in which we think and act in obedience to commandments that are laid down for us by others. Adolescence brings a time when we gradually assume authority over ourselves, or, in other terms, a time when we ourselves determine the commandments that we will follow. We then become Baale Mitzvah, "masters of the commandments that govern our lives." There is within the human person an intrinsic psychic destiny calling to the goal of ultimate self-authority, but this destiny can be affirmed only in a polydoxy, a religion of freedom. This is the reason why the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the Confession Confirmation discussed above are so profoundly inconsistent with an authentic liberal Judaism. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah says that persons do not have the moral right to be their own ultimate self-authorities, for there is a covenantal law they must obey. Similarly, the Confession Confirmation, which asks for a profession of faith in the Sinaitic covenant, denies the human movement to ultimate self-authority. In the Baal/Baalat Mitzvah ceremony, however, the opposite is the case. A Baal/Baalat Mitzvah is defined as a person who is ultimate master of the commandments that govern his or her life. The English word "autonomous" exactly describes a Baal/Baalat Mitzvah. In the Baal/Baalat Mitzvah ceremony, the intrinsic psychic destiny of ultimate self-authority is affirmed; and the resources of family and community are pledged in a covenant of freedom and mutual responsibility to bring the young person to autonomy, the highest state of human fulfillment and dignity.

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