

Ksharim



Lesson 35

Childhood



1. Outline

- a. Circumcision
- b. Pidyon Haben
- c. Halakeh
- d. Kabbalat Hatorah
- e. Bar/bat mitzvah
- f. Army enlistment

2. Introduction

Israelis who define themselves as "chiloni" (non-religious) nevertheless choose to undergo traditional Jewish lifecycle events, circumcising their sons, celebrating bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies and weddings, and burying their dead according to traditional practice. Some of this participation is enforced by Israeli law (more on that in the lessons on marriage and death), but the rituals of childhood are entered into voluntarily (at least by the parents...). While the circumcision ceremony has remained largely identical to the traditional one, the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony has evolved and changed – perhaps because it is a relative newcomer on the scene. Other ceremonies contain different mixes of tradition and new invention.

In terms of the Israel connection in life cycle observances in the Diaspora, the liturgy of the brit, and of bar/bat mitzvah, does not contain explicit references to Israel or the hope of return. However, *pidyon haben* is wholly bound up with preserving the role of the *kohanim* and thus serves as a reminder of the Temple and its centrality.

3. Lesson goals

- a. Knowledge of current practices and dilemmas of childhood lifecycle events in Israel
- b. Awareness of the role of *pidyon haben* as a link to the Temple cult and the hope of restoration
- c. Knowledge about the evolution of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony in Israel
- d. Reflection on the meaning of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony

4. Expanded outline

Jews in Israel define themselves across a spectrum of religious belief and observance. According to a recent study²¹, Israeli Jews define themselves:

Definition	Percentage
Ultra-Orthodox ("charedi")	5%
Religious ("dati")	12%
Traditional ("masorti")	35%
Non-religious ("chiloni")	43%
Anti-religious	5%

On the other hand, when participants in the survey were asked about the importance in which they held Jewish lifecycle rituals, it turned out that a majority of Israeli Jews hold most of these rituals to be "very important". The percentages have fallen slightly over the past decade, except for those pertaining to bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, which have actually become important to a larger percent of the population.

Percentage of those who answered it was "very important" to have:	1991	1999
Brit in a religious ceremony	74%	70%
Bar mitzvah in synagogue	63%	66%
Bat mitzvah in synagogue	46%	47%
Wedding led by a Rabbi	69%	64%
Religious funeral service	70%	66%

Below is a short description of several childhood rites of passage in Israel, going into more detail on the bar/bat mitzvah:

a. Circumcision (*Brit*)

Boys in Israel are almost invariably circumcised, for the usual religious and cultural reasons (this applies to Muslim and Druze males too), and also because parents are afraid of stigmatizing their sons in a society in which circumcision is the norm (army shower-rooms are cited as a prime situation of potential embarrassment). However, in the last few years a tiny but vocal minority has started actively advocating against circumcision, and in 1998 one organization petitioned the High Court of Justice to outlaw circumcision, alleging that it contradicts the Basic Law of Human Dignity and Freedom (1992). The petition was turned down, but in such a way that similar petitions may be submitted in the future. While Jewish practices such as ritual slaughter and circumcision have been adjudicated in courts of various countries recently, the

²¹ Beliefs, Tradition and Values of Jews in Israel, 2000, funded by the Avichai Foundation, carried out by http://www.avi-the Guttman Center of the Israeli Institute of Democracy, available in Hebrew at chai.org/Static/Binaries/Publications/guttman_0.pdf

possibility of a ruling by the High Court of Israel against the basic Jewish ritual of circumcision boggles the mind...

b. Redeeming of the Firstborn (*Pidyon Ha'Ben*)

This ceremony is explained in the bible:

"God said to Moses: Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal." (Exodus 13, 2)

And in a commandment to the priests:

"But you must redeem every firstborn son...When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five *shekels* of silver, according to the sanctuary *shekel*, which weighs twenty *gerahs*." (Numbers 18, 15-16)

The ceremony is one of the few instances in which descendants of the priests (*kohanim*), descendants of Aharon, are still sought out today to fulfill a special role. In the ceremony, a *kohen* symbolically accepts 5 coins of a certain value (although other valuables may be used, it is customary in Israel to use specially minted coins, made for this purpose by the Israel Government Coins and Medals Corporation) to redeem the firstborn son. While in general *kohanim* live ordinary lives since the Temple was destroyed, from time to time these odd reminders crop up, reminiscent of their once-important role - *Kohanim* are called to bless the congregation in synagogue on some special days, and they are held to more stringent laws of purity (they may not enter graveyards, and cannot marry divorcees). This in spite of the fact that after the destruction (and indeed even in the preceding years) the priestly elite was gradually replaced by an elite distinguished not by birth but by talent – specifically in studying the Torah.

Are these distinctions just an anachronism, or yet another way in which we (symbolically?) yearn for the rebuilding of the Temple and the renewal of its rituals?

c. *Halakeh*

Many ultra-orthodox families do not cut their sons' hair until they are 3 years old, and then do it ceremonially on *Lag Ba'Omer* near Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's grave in Meron, near Safed. This ceremony is called *halakeh*. The gravesite and surroundings are visited on *Lag Ba'Omer* by hundreds of thousands of people, who camp out for several days, slaughter and barbecue sheep brought for the purpose, pray and petition on the grave of the Rabbi. See, for example,

http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/3857/edition_id/69/format/html/displaystory.html

or for a more academic presentation:

http://www.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/010503_Upshern.html

d. Receiving the Torah (*Kabalat HaTorah*)

For students in 2nd grade, schools often organize a ceremony to celebrate their beginning steps to study the Torah. Students often spend some time preparing for this event, in the classroom and outside it, meeting a scribe (*sofer stam*) who explains and

demonstrates his craft, and studying some biblical stories. This preparation process culminates in a ceremony (sometimes loosely modeled after the receiving of the torah at Mount Sinai) in which each child receives his/her own copy of *Bereshit*, which will be used from now on in the classroom. In some schools, parents are involved in preparing a special cover for the book, embroidered or decorated according to the skills and interest of the individual parents.

e. Bar Mitzvah

The bar mitzvah ceremony has undergone a series of transformations since its inception. While the age of 13 (for boys – 12 for girls) has been recognized since the time of the Mishnah as the age in which Jewish boys become obligated to fulfill the commandments, the formalization of the bar mitzvah ceremony was apparently a gradual process. In contrast to rites of passage in African or Indian tribes, where boys were called upon to prove their prowess in hunting and survival skills, the "initiation rite" for Jewish boys consisted of the boy showing his ability to read from the Torah. In Reform congregations, the bar mitzvah ceremony was often superseded by the confirmation ceremony, which marked the culmination of a child's formal Jewish education.

In Israel, many non-religious families chose (and choose today) to retain the traditional ceremony, even though the ceremony marks a solitary departure from the family tradition of non-participation in synagogue life, instead of an embarkation upon a lifetime of synagogue participation.

True to their general attitude of evolving traditional Jewish customs to take on new meanings, the kibbutz movement created different incarnations of the bar mitzvah ceremony. Since reading Torah was not a meaningful ceremony for kibbutz children, a different initiation ceremony was designed. Source #1 tells of such a ceremony.

How is the kibbutz ceremony described different from the traditional one? How is it similar? Would you adopt some of the changes made in the kibbutz?

The author mentions the disconnection from religious significance, and the transformation of the individual celebrations to a celebration by the group, true to the collectivist aspirations of the kibbutz. The author does not even mention the fact that the kibbutz ceremony makes no distinction between boys and girls. The traditional Jewish custom of initiating the boy into Torah-reading is replaced by initiation into other realms – secular studies, group life, knowledge of other forms of Jewish life. Source #2 lists other examples of tasks proposed in different kibbutzim.

What can be learned about the lives of kibbutz children from the tasks they were set for their bar mitzvah? If you were to design a list of bar/bat mitzvah tasks for children of your community, what would be the same? What tasks would you omit? What tasks would you add? Do the differences stem from different values, different emphases on the same values, or differences in surrounding lifestyle and culture? Is the ceremony

more reminiscent of the traditional ceremony, which marks the start of a life of obligation, or of the Reform confirmation ceremony, which marks the end of formal Jewish education? What do you think the Bar Mitzvah celebration in your community should symbolize?

Some important values that educators sought to instill in kibbutz children were (in no particular order):

- Connectedness to Jewish history
- Importance of study
- Work ethic
- Social responsibility
- Awareness of other lifestyles
- Commitment to the (armed, if necessary) defense of the kibbutz and the State
- Responsibility for younger children
- Filial duties

With the gradual decline of the kibbutz way of life, ceremonies like these have been replaced in most kibbutzim with more traditional, synagogue-based ceremonies.

Bar Mitzvah at the Western Wall

Many families in Israel (and indeed from abroad) choose to celebrate their sons' bar mitzvah at a ceremony at the Western Wall. At any time during Monday and Thursday mornings, when a Torah portion is read during the *Shacharit* service, one sees many groups of men standing in the men's section of the Wall plaza, huddled around a table on which a Torah scroll is laid, accompanying their boy in his first fumbling attempts to put on *tefillin*, and listening to him reading from the Torah. Women participants sometimes climb on chairs in the women's section, craning their necks to watch from afar. Some ethnic groups provide a colorful spectacle, dressing in traditional costumes and escorting the boy with singing, dancing and the playing of traditional instruments as he approaches the plaza. The ceremony is often concluded with toasts and blessings, and in recent years it has become customary for the family and guests to tour the "Western Wall tunnels" adjacent to the plaza.

What are the pros and cons of the Western Wall bar mitzvah ceremony?

Pros

- The Wall is considered the holiest place in Israel (for Jews, that is)
- The Wall is one of the most powerful symbols of our connection to the past, and our connection to *Eretz Yisrael*
- The simultaneous reading from the Torah of so many bar mitzvah boys, of so many traditions and cultures, also strongly symbolizes our connection to the Jewish people, in all its many-colored varieties

Cons

- While the close family of the bar mitzvah will surely travel from the ends of the earth to participate, the larger community will not, and therefore the boy and the family will be celebrating this rite of passage disconnected from their natural community
- The Western Wall is run by strictly Orthodox rules, so girls who wish to read from the Torah will have to use the "Southern Wall" area, set apart for egalitarian services
- Women of the family will be able to participate in the ceremony only from afar

Some Diaspora families choose to hold a bar or bat mitzvah in Israel, not at the Wall but at a synagogue (of the denomination of their choice) or historical site (like Zippori or Metsada). This can, on the one hand, be a powerful experience for the child and the family, and clearly helps build a strong relationship with Israel; on the other hand, it suffers from one of the "cons" of the Wall ceremony - the distance from family and community in most cases. There are travel agents who specialize in family bar/bat mitzvah tours.

Other modes of celebration

Bat mitzvah's have also begun to be explored in Israel. While traditionally the ceremony did not exist for girls, the need for a ceremony parallel to the bar mitzvah began to be felt in many communities – in Orthodox communities, as awareness to women's issues rose to the fore, and in non-religious circles, as children who were accustomed to equality in all areas suddenly confronted inequality in this domain. While some non-religious Israeli families celebrate bat mitzvah's in egalitarian Conservative and Reform synagogues, others, both religious and non-, explore new ways to mark the day, in study, ritual, or ceremony. Yet sadly, for some families (even those who would celebrate a bar mitzvah in a religious setting) a bat mitzvah is celebrated with a large party or a family trip abroad, with no religious or ideological overtones.

In schools, students in the 7th grade (in which many turn 12/13) customarily are required to embark upon a project to explore their family history, in what is called a "Roots project." Students interview grandparents, collect documents, certificates, maps and pictures, research and produce a family tree. Often parents also become involved, and family discussions ensue.

In addition to the ways described above, people are adding a variety of new ways to celebrate children's coming of age. Some families organize a hike on the "Israel trail" – an 850-km-long trail that crosses Israel from north to south, traversing many of the most well-known trails in the country, crossing different terrains, passing through villages inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups and religions. Non-religious organizations fostering a "Judaism as culture" viewpoint organize parent-child seminars, focusing on the meaning of coming of age in today's modern society. One

girl, an ardent dancer, was joined by her friends in dancing their interpretation of the Scroll of Ruth in the ancient amphitheatre in Zippori, on her 12th birthday close to Shavuot. As Israeli society becomes more individualistic, more new ways are invented, but as shown in the survey, a majority of Jews in Israel are choosing (sometimes in addition to other ways of marking the event) to celebrate their child's bar/bat mitzvah the traditional way.

Interesting to think about: should we in the Diaspora Jewish community seek to insert into the bar/bat mitzvah liturgy some ritual emphasizing connection to Israel? Perhaps on the order of the custom of "twinning" from the days of the Soviet Jewry struggle...

Should we encourage our families to take their bar/bat mitzvah celebrations to Israel?

f. Army enlistment

The rite of passage in Israel, which catapults tender high-school graduates into instant adulthood, is enlistment in the army. Kids have some contact with the army through the last years of high school, as they are summoned for physical and psychological tests to decide where they will be posted. Often, the day of enlistment is known months in advance, but it is frequently shifted back and forth according to mysterious "army needs." When the day finally arrives, the new enlistee is brought by his proud and apprehensive parents to the appointed base, last-minute pictures are taken, and the kid joins the throng. When he comes home on his first furlough, hair shorn, awkwardly wearing an ill-fitting uniform, it is clear that a threshold has been crossed. Still, with the advent of cellular phones and changing perspectives on the age of adulthood, soldiers nowadays are still regarded, in some ways, as children. In some sense, the army has always extended the period of dependency – join the army and you can postpone most of your decisions for another 2-3 years, as you are provided with food, shelter, a small income and a purpose in life for the duration, the army acting "*in loco parentis*." Today, army and parents "share custody." Army commanders will give out their numbers to parents, who don't hesitate to call and inquire if their son is eating and sleeping properly; soldiers enlist parents' help in negotiating with difficult officers; parents agonize over the effect soldiers' duties have on their tender souls; retired soldiers in their 20's express remorse over things they've done in army service, excusing themselves for "being only children at the time." As in the rest of the Western world, kids in Israel are postponing their adulthood until later in life.

5. Looking back on the journey we have described, from birth to adulthood in Israel – what are the similarities and differences to the parallel journey experienced by youngsters in your community?

Sources

1. Bar-what? Yossi Amir, Kibbutz Mizra, 1964

It is customary in Israel today, in non-religious circles too, to hold a Bar-Mitzvah party for 13-year-olds. This trend, like any other, has quickly become popular among groups whose connections to religion are extremely weak, but who fulfill this commandment with great devotion. I do not wish to describe in detail these "festivals", that are held in rented halls with invited guests and festive meals and so on, when the young star of the party does not yet truly understand all the tumult around him. Moreover, most of the celebrants have no connection to Jewish tradition. The child learns the *haftarah* and the laying of *tefillin* out of a necessity connected to the celebration, and the day after the celebration he truly "lays down" the *tefillin* in a closet and the whole religious aspect is quickly forgotten.

Some say that the bar mitzvah ceremony is catching on in the non-religious public around us as they grasp at crumbs of a tradition which they do not keep or carry out, and so they see the fulfillment of this *mitzvah* as a sop to unity. Others say, that this disease is rooted in sociological rules and the structure of society in Israel, and that this celebration of bar mitzvah is a status symbol that cannot be missed, etc, etc.

Whatever the reason, the question must be asked – what have we to do with this? Bar-what (son of what) is a son of ours when he reaches the age of 13? Do we say of him, as the believing (truly religious) father says – "Blessed is he who has freed me from the responsibility for his sins" – we are not "rid of their responsibility" even after their army service, if it is even possible to speak of it in these terms.

Even so, I do not think we can close our eyes to habits and customs that penetrate us from outside. There have been luxurious bar mitzvah parties here, which were followed by unnecessary talk and gossip. Do our children need such festivals at such a young age? (Do their parents)? But, as I said, we must not say – "this does not suit us" – and therefore ignore the problem; we will not celebrate, and thus solve the issue.

In the attempt to find a solution more fitting to our mentality and way of life, we followed a slightly different path in this celebration. Actually, we brushed aside the "main motives" of this celebration, which are: the exact date of each child, and also the religious element. We said: let us celebrate together, the whole group, not a bar mitzvah celebration but a celebration of the group! A celebration that symbolizes our passage from the young children's houses to the youth houses – to the kibbutz educational institution. A celebration that will mark the yoke of more serious studies, the yoke of work and of social activities of a different form than those we were accustomed to. A celebration in which each child, or group of children, will receive a task which he must perform from start to finish; A celebration in which the children will go out to know the lives of children their age in other places; a celebration in which they will prepare a large party for themselves and their parents. In a sentence – a celebration in which they prove that they can and want to take an active part in the youth group which they have just joined.

The "celebration of the group" which we celebrated last Shabbat in the Tomer group was held according to these principles. The group focused on this enterprise for 5-6 weeks. The children received in advance a list of tasks, which included: lectures about different topics, models of subjects which they were studying (a model of the Second Temple, a model of a water wheel), and visual educational aids like "the times table according to different bases", a humidity meter and a map of the national water carrier. The children took upon themselves the preparation of a large party (choir, dancing, music, skit) and also embarked upon a two-day trip in the neighboring settlements. On Motzei Shabbat the parents and children, along with other guests, congregated and in a pleasant and friendly atmosphere celebrated, each child receiving a present from the educational institution – according to his choice.

I do not think this is the best or most appropriate way to celebrate this occasion; there may be other variations and emphases, different from the ones we chose, but it is clear to me, that if we want to achieve some form of celebration that is suitable to our lives, then the starting-point, at least, must be that which we embarked from.

2. List of suggested "bar mitzvah tasks", kibbutzim in the 50s and 60s

1. A night of guard duty in the kibbutz
2. First-aid course
3. A trip to the city without adult accompaniment, for the fulfillment of some task
4. A visit to a neighboring kibbutz to get to know the lives of children there
5. Writing an essay on a topic related to literature, society or the kibbutz
6. Weeding a flower bed with the whole group
7. Travel to a youth group in a slum area
8. "Robinson Crusoe" day – a day's survival in a natural area
9. A day's work in the kibbutz
10. A study project on a topic related to the history of our people, in Israel or abroad.
11. Learning to milk a cow, harness a horse, plow a field
12. Biology research project
13. Familiarizing oneself with a weapon
14. Preparing a present for parents
15. Preparing an activity for younger children in the kibbutz
16. Preparing an activity for children in a new immigrants camp