

CELEBRATION AND NEGOTIATION

Working With Separated, Divorced, and Remarried Families Approaching Bar/Bat Mitzvah Celebrations

ANN HARTMAN, MAJCS, MSW
Council for the Jewish Elderly, Chicago, Illinois

SALLY WEBER, LCSW
Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles, California

AND
RABBI STEWART VOGEL
Temple Aliyah, Woodland Hills, California

The synagogue, in cooperation with Jewish family service agencies, can provide families with workable models for the complicated decision-making process that they must undergo as they approach their children's Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations. In the program described in this article, such difficult issues as the wording of invitations and synagogue publicity, who has to attend, finances, whether to hold separate celebrations, and assigning synagogue honors were addressed in workshops co-facilitated by a rabbi and social worker.

The phone rings, and a voice on the other end says: "Rabbi, please help me. My son's Bar Mitzvah is going to be in your synagogue, and my ex-wife won't let me participate. Shouldn't I be involved? Doesn't Jewish law say children should honor their mother and their father? How can this be allowed?"

Unfortunately, this and similar telephone calls have become more common over the past decade. Although Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies are traditionally times of great joy and celebration, planning the elaborate ceremonies and celebrations can place a strain on any family. The child may be placed in the middle and the beauty and tradition of the *simcha* lost amidst the pain and conflict of family dynamics. This strain may be particularly strong in families in which there has been a separation, divorce, or remarriage.

The results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) quantified what we already knew from our own observations to be true; namely, that Jewish families come in all shapes and sizes. Currently, only 17% of our families represent what we

once, and still often, considered to be "normal" — two born-Jewish parents, in a first marriage, with two children. Today's Bar/Bat Mitzvah child may have parents who are married, separated, divorced, or remarried; be in the custody of one or both of his or her parents with varying amounts of visitation rights; or have parents who live in the same or different cities and belong to the same or different synagogues.

These complex families must deal with increasingly complex issues, especially around the celebration of life-cycle events. This article is not intended to provide answers about how to celebrate a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, for each family will need to seek those answers for itself. Rather, it is meant to serve as a framework for discussing these issues, based on experiences with a program called "Celebration and Negotiation: Working with Divorced and Remarried Families Approaching Bar/Bat Mitzvah Celebrations." This pilot program was created at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California in conjunction with Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles; its working title was "How To Get The Battle Off the Bima." Both titles are appropriate, and

both are based on this clear and unequivocal premise: If our families are provided with workable models for approaching the myriad of issues and decisions they face as they prepare for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, they will be able to negotiate those issues that might otherwise tear the celebration apart. Furthermore, as some of the issues that arise may result from family conflicts not related to divorce, this discussion may be of use for all families approaching Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparations.

One additional assumption is encompassed within this approach: The issue of the changing Jewish family is not an isolated one for the individual affected household. Rather, it is a challenge to the community as a whole and to the synagogue community in particular. As long as the Jewish community continues to deal with families other than the "normal" 17% as aberrations, there will be no way to include these families meaningfully in Jewish communal life. There is an enormous need for community education and for new approaches that provide for the inclusion of diverse members of the community in Jewish ritual life. Such terms as "broken families" and "intact families" need to be re-explored in light of the current status of the changing Jewish family. As a community, we have a unique opportunity at the Bar/Bat Mitzvah stage of the family's Jewish life to intervene positively and effectively and to assist in powerful ways to help create new models of inclusion.

COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM

The "Celebration and Negotiation" program has two principal components: (1) educating and sensitizing congregants and staff to the issues facing divorced and remarried families approaching major life-cycle celebrations and (2) hands-on discussion and problem-solving workshops for families preparing for those celebrations. To educate the congregation as a whole, Valley Beth Shalom scheduled a major Shabbat program at which the rabbi deliv-

ered a sermon on the changing nature of the Jewish family and its implications for synagogue life. In addition, there is ongoing role modeling from the pulpit that, while supporting the centrality of the two-parent family, addresses the status and issues of alternative family structures. This assistance from the pulpit in helping generalize and normalize family experiences strengthens core Jewish family values, whatever the composition of the household at any given moment.

It is equally important to educate and sensitize all staff members who come into contact with Bar/Bat Mitzvah students and their families. In a series of staff development sessions at Valley Beth Shalom, the results of the 1990 NJPS were presented and discussed, with emphasis on the specific synagogue populations targeted by this program. When a teacher, in a discussion of upcoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations, is able to say, "I know some of you have more than one family. Your families may have some special issues about how to involve people in your *simcha*. The synagogue will be here to help with that," children from nontraditional homes are immediately brought into the circle of inclusion of congregational life. This also helps open the door for other children to share models of what happened at their family *simchas*. Positive or negative, their sharing will provide a baseline of openness and discussion that will help normalize alternative family experiences.

One approach to assisting families with specific areas of decision making is through a family workshop that addresses both concerns and new models for celebration that fit varying family circumstances. The "Celebration and Negotiation" workshops developed by Valley Beth Shalom and Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles, were co-facilitated by the rabbi and a JFS social worker, thereby enabling families to benefit from the combined expertise of both professionals. In the first year that the program was offered, the workshops were an optional

addition to the regular family Bar/Bat Mitzvah orientation programs offered by the synagogue. Separated, divorced, or remarried families with Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies scheduled in the next 8 to 12 months were contacted by a letter from the rabbi, and follow-up phone calls were made by the social worker. Four families attended the three scheduled sessions.

This approach was changed during the second year of the program because of concerns that specific targeting of divorced families served to isolate these families further within the synagogue — the opposite of what the program had hoped to accomplish! Instead, the social worker was invited to participate with the rabbi and synagogue staff in a mandatory program for all B'nai Mitzvah families 4 to 6 months before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah date. This program had two parts. The rabbi, cantor, and educational director directed the first part of the program during which information about the service was presented, and the prayers and melodies for candle-lighting and *aliyot* were taught.

For the second part of the program, participants were divided into small discussion groups that were facilitated by the rabbi, social worker, and various synagogue staff members. The program began with an exercise in which the children and adults were asked to write responses to the following statements: "What Bar/Bat Mitzvah means to me," "What I am most looking forward to," and "What concerns me the most." These responses were shared aloud, and the children and parents were asked, respectively, "How many of you think your parent (child) wrote this?" This exercise was extremely effective in facilitating family communication for all of the families present, as children and parents invariably asked each other, "Why didn't you know that was mine?" or "How could you think I'd write that?" It also provided a base of commonality, as inevitably many similar issues and feelings were expressed, including issues of dealing with absent parents and blended

families. At the end of the evening, when summarizing the discussions, the rabbi announced that the social worker would be facilitating two to three optional follow-up discussions for any families with special issues. Eight families signed up for these meetings. They consisted of six single mothers, one separated couple, and one remarried couple.

The follow-up sessions were guided by the issues that participants brought with them. They invariably included discussions of how to word invitations, how to deal with family members of the ex-spouse whom they did not particularly want to invite, and negotiating finances. These and other issues are discussed in more detail below. A variety of techniques were experimented with in these sessions to facilitate the discussions. In the first year, the facilitator asked each family to articulate their areas of consensus and concern regarding the *simcha* and to record these in a journal. This journal was intended to help the family break complex issues into more manageable parts and to assist them in keeping track of progress between each session. It was also designed to maintain communication between the parent who attended and the one who did not attend. Families were then to return to the journal at the end of the program to see where they had reached additional areas of consensus or, at least, to record possible models of negotiation that might lead to later consensus. In practice, however, this journal was not found to be as effective as hoped. It seemed that either ex-spouses were communicating very well and therefore did not need this form of communication or were so hostile to one another that the parent who attended had no intention of investing additional time in this part of the project. Therefore, this idea was modified so that sessions ended with each parent having a specific assignment of "unfinished business" to discuss with the ex-spouse. Here is one example of a piece of unfinished business:

David's¹ mother complained that her ex-husband had refused to discuss the reception budget or any reception plans with her, from which she deduced that her ex-husband was signaling that he would not be willing to pay for any reception at all. As it turned out, she had not specifically asked him to discuss the reception, nor had he initiated any discussions about it. She had therefore assumed he would not discuss it. Her assignment was to contact her ex-husband and arrange to have all estimates related to a reception sent to him in writing. A date was then negotiated for them to sit down together, review the figures, and make some decisions about the type of reception they would plan. The most important thing negotiated was that this was *ALL* they would negotiate at this meeting. Once this issue was resolved, they were able to move on to the next issue on their agenda.

Another technique invited group participants to share solutions upon which they had already agreed. This provided an opportunity to *share successes*, to discuss the elements of successful decision making, and to highlight some alternatives that other families had not yet considered. The social worker also offered solutions, using examples from families who had already celebrated their B'nai Mitzvah, and suggested how they might be adapted to fit the particular situations of participant families.

Another discussion technique used was sharing and listing obstacles to solution-finding. This technique is more difficult as it is much more personal. However, for families willing to engage in this process, it is an opportunity to somewhat objectify very emotional issues. Such discussions must be held on a voluntary basis; for example the facilitator might ask, "Is there anyone who would be comfortable sharing what stands in the way of working out this situation?" The group facilitator then has the opportunity to rephrase the issue and even to com-

ment, "Yes, that's a problem many families have." This comment in itself helps normalize what may feel like an isolated and abnormal family dilemma. In several instances the opportunity to share personal anecdotes provided comic relief to the discussion. The bottom line is that it never hurts to ask people to share their dilemmas with one another — at best, they can support and assist each other; at worst, they'll decline.

For most families, an important part of the workshop was the specific step-by-step information provided on the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparations and service, delineating the areas of decision-making. Although many issues may seem benign, it was crucial to raise them to assure families that there is no one obvious way to handle them. Any issue that can be negotiated comfortably paves the way for a greater possibility of negotiation around more difficult issues. In addition, in the process families may find they have fewer contested issues than they previously believed.

Although the follow-up sessions for the second year were designed primarily for the parents, most of the children attended as well. A technique found to be effective for this mixed population called for parents to meet with parents and students to meet with students to share mutual concerns and mutual suggestions. Information from these sessions was then shared with the group as a whole, which facilitated both open communication and the sharing of common issues, concerns, and suggestions for resolution. In some workshops, parents met with children other than their own for some of the discussions, as it was often easier to hear issues and concerns in a more objective environment.

NEGOTIATING DIFFICULT ISSUES

This section explores the major issues and areas around which problems arise in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah decision-making process, and suggests some models of creative problem solving. Although each issue is ad-

¹ All names of individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

dressed here separately, families often deal with them in varying combinations.

The purpose of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony is to mark the day publicly that the child comes of age. In planning for this event, one must assume that parents begin with the best of intentions and wish to put their child's welfare first. Of course, as with all families, other things may get in the way of this intention. Although it may be difficult, families need to keep their focus on the child and the *simcha*. This should be the guiding principle for all decision making.

Families must make any number of decisions as they approach the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparations. One threshold decision is who will have the final say in the decision-making process. Is it the custodial parent? Is it the synagogue member? Is it the parent who is carrying the brunt of the financial expense? Although ideally decisions will be made jointly, this cannot be assumed. Often, the decision-making process will replay how decisions were made during the marriage. It is hoped that both sides will see clearly that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is not the time to punish one's ex-spouse. It is also important to avoid leaving the decisions up to the child, although the child's input is important. Although parents may believe it will be easier for the child to make the decisions, by abdicating their role they force the child to choose between the parents. Instead, parents need to define the range of choices they agree upon and then ask the child to choose among them.

Invitations and Synagogue Publicity

On the day of Sarah's Bat Mitzvah, her father, a member of a different synagogue, angrily approached the rabbi upon discovering that he was not listed on the Shabbat morning program. To him, it appeared that the synagogue had taken sides with his ex-wife. Whereas he had only divorced her, the program suggested he had divorced Sarah as well.

Families are often very concerned about the wording of invitations and synagogue publicity as they reflect personal status and family configuration and the way the information is presented may reveal more or less than the family is comfortable with at the time. Thus, the biggest battles often occur over these logistical pieces. It is also important to consider that the exclusion of one parent's name can often be as emotional, if not more so, for other relatives. This can be true even if the parent does not attend the service or participate in any way.

In the case of synagogue publicity, standardized policies set by the synagogue serve to keep it from being placed in the middle, ensure that the focus remains on the child, and teach the mitzvah of honoring one's mother and father. For example, the synagogue may wish to institute a policy that only the name of the Bar/Bat mitzvah child will be listed after the date. Alternatively, the policy may be that the child and the parents will be listed, regardless of whether they are members or whether they are married to each other or to others. Or, the synagogue could give the option to the synagogue member either to list both parents or neither parent, but not to list one parent without the other.

The decisions regarding invitations, however, can only be made family by family. Each family will have its own set of issues as to which names and in which order the names should be listed. Providing examples of how other families have dealt with this decision is an important first step in modeling both acceptance and problem solving. Ideally, the synagogue should have a scrapbook of invitations available to show families, in order to share not only the wording but also the beauty of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah invitation. Some sample invitations are as follows:

- An invitation from the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child:

With great pleasure my family and I
are delighted to invite you to
join in our simcha as
I lead the congregation in prayer and
I am called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah.
Rachel Goldfarb

- An invitation from the parents when both have remarried:

We are delighted to invite you to share
with our families this joyous occasion when
our daughter
Rachel Goldfarb
will be called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah
Ellen² and Michael Steinberg
Mark² and Cathy Goldfarb

- An invitation from the parents when there has not been a remarriage or where a decision has been made not to list the names of new spouses:

We invite you to share in our happiness
when our daughter
Rachel Gail
is called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah
Ellen Goldfarb and Mark Goldfarb

- An invitation from the parents when one has remarried:

We invite you to share in our happiness
when our daughter
Rachel Gail
is called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah
Ellen Goldfarb
Mark and Cathy Goldfarb

Who "Has To" Attend

The issue underlying this question is whether ex-relatives who have not been supportive of the parents since the divorce must be invited. This question may also reflect the desire *not* to invite the ex-spouse.

² Notice that the Bat Mitzvah girl's parents' names come first.

Providing the opportunity for a group member to discuss this question invariably evokes a great deal of empathy from other participants who have or have had similar feelings. Specific concerns may be raised: What if there is a scene and someone behaves badly? How am I going to keep the two families apart? I don't want to pay for them!

In the group setting, the facilitator can be helpful and reassuring. With very, very few exceptions, there rarely have been "scenes" at receptions — family members want to attend either because they want to support one of the parents or because they want to support the child. Strategic seating arrangements can be suggested, including how to keep families on separate side of the room if necessary. In one particularly difficult divorce, it was negotiated that the father and son would greet his family members at their tables on one side of the room and then the mother and son would greet her family members at tables on the other side of the room. Since the custom of seating the family at one head table can be particularly problematic, it is important to underscore that this custom can, and in many cases should, be changed to meet the new family situation. Alternative options may be to seat the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child at a kid's table and each parent at his or her own family table or to spread all family members around the room to different tables, intermingled with the guests to make every table a special table.

Finances

Financial issues range from general ones that arise for every family to specific ones that are best handled on an individual basis. As painful as these discussions may be, they belong in the arena of adult discourse, and the child should not be placed in the middle. Couples often cannot move on to other issues until they have dealt with money issues. Most of the work, therefore, is to empower the participants of the workshops to discuss financial issues with their ex-

spouses without getting diverted into other issues. Parents also need to set realistic goals about the celebration and deal openly with their children about the possible limitations. Discussing such limitations is an appropriate way to include the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child. It is important to focus the family on the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as the child's *simcha*, rather than as a symbol of the family's changed status, as they begin to cope with changed expectations for the celebration.

Families should be encouraged to speak with the rabbi confidentially about particularly difficult issues, including the refusal of a parent to pay synagogue dues or Bar/Bat Mitzvah fees, thus placing the event in jeopardy, or "blackmail," as in "My new spouse goes up on the *bima* or I don't pay." In one extreme example, the Bar Mitzvah celebration was almost cancelled due to the inability of the parents to resolve their differences over financial issues:

Joe's mother refused to send invitations to his father's family because she did not trust that she would be reimbursed by him. Joe's father refused to pay in advance because he could not know how many would attend and did not trust he would be paid back for overpayment. For the sake of the child, the rabbi agreed to hold the money in a trust account at the synagogue until the time when the proper amount would be paid by the husband's family.

This example demonstrates the significant impact of flexibility and creativity on the part of the synagogue and the rabbi.

Separate Ceremonies and Celebrations

Some families may consider holding separate ceremonies and/or celebrations, which have both advantages and disadvantages. The principal advantage of separate functions is that they minimize the interactions between the two parents and their families. This may be especially important when there has been a nasty separation or divorce

and/or when one parent lives in another city. Often, families believe that in this way they can avoid facing the difficult issues that might arise in planning joint functions. However, even if the delay tactic works, these issues will surely come up again at the next life-cycle event of the children; for example, graduations, weddings, and the like.

Yet, holding separate ceremonies raises a set of problematic issues. According to Jewish tradition, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah marks the passage to adulthood. Does that mean that one can become an adult twice? Does the existence of a second ceremony negate the first or make a farce of the second? Which ceremony will be held first? Will the child need to learn a second *parsha*? It is possible to have two ceremonies, but there needs to be careful consideration of the message that this sends to the child and to others involved, as well as to the possible burden it places on the child.

Separate receptions following a single ceremony may be the best solution for families where the divorce has been particularly unpleasant. However, this solution has potential pitfalls. Two receptions may be planned for the same evening, forcing the child to choose which one to attend, and/or there may be competition between the parents for "who can do it best." If the guideline is what's best for the child, one should try to help parents start by exploring the pros and cons of a shared reception. What are their concerns? How can such "traditions" as tables and family seating arrangements be adapted to the new family configuration? What can be negotiated, and what cannot?

Presenting the *Tallit*

In some synagogues the parent(s) presents a *tallit* or other gift to the child during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Traditionally, it is a time for parents to share not only the ritual object but also their hopes and dreams for the future. In most instances, parents make the *tallit* presentation together. However, there may be complicating factors —

“Yes, but you can’t bring your new husband up with you” is a key complication! For some families, even in the absence of remarriage, the pain of divorce is so intense that it is not emotionally possible to stand before the child and congregation together. In such cases, rabbis may choose to give preference to the parent who is the synagogue member, encouraging the participation of the other parent in another part of the service. Or it may be that only one parent feels strongly about presenting the *tallit* while the other would be content to make a verbal presentation. The synagogue has the option of making a policy about the role of parents in this instance. For example, some synagogues have instituted the policy that only the natural parents can be on the *bima* at this time; this may or may not be an acceptable policy for every congregation, but it indicates the breadth of choices available.

There may be other complicating factors as well, and in looking for solutions, flexibility is the key factor. Consider this case example:

Joshua’s father wished to present his son with his own father’s *tallit*. His mother wanted to present the *tallit* she purchased for him on her first visit to Israel. They decided to present both *tallitot*, asking him to wear one for leading the service, the communal prayers he recited with the entire congregation, and the other as he read the Torah, the part of the service that was distinctive and unique to his Bar Mitzvah. By reaching this compromise, they were able to turn this presentation into something positive, rather than adversarial.

Synagogue Honors

Assigning synagogue honors is difficult for divorced families particularly when there has been a remarriage. For some parents, standing up on the *bima* with an ex-spouse is a shameful symbol of the failure of their dreams and their marriages. Often, there are questions about the role of other family members in the ceremony: Should a mother

invite her new husband or boyfriend to share her *aliyah*? How can new stepsiblings be included meaningfully, especially if there is friction between them and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child? Several options exist for each question, and the pros and cons can be explored in the workshop. For example, sharing an *aliyah* with a spouse, as painful as it seems, is a way for some parents to signify to the child that, despite the divorce, they are still parents together. Another option — standing on the *bima* separately — might mean fewer honors to be shared with other family members. A third option is that parents might choose to go up with the grandparents, sharing an “extended family *aliyah*.” In each case, families should be given the opportunity to consider what would be right and comfortable for them in this setting.

The rabbi is often able to diffuse potentially destructive situations by making use of synagogue policies already in place. For example, Valley Beth Shalom has instituted a policy that automatically gives each parent an *aliyah* at his or her child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Adhering to this policy means that no parent can be denied this honor by the other parent. In addition, the synagogue makes a positive statement of Jewish values and the importance of honoring one’s mother and father.

THE ROLE OF THE SYNAGOGUE

A major concern for families is how comfortable they will feel on the *bima*. To a certain degree, all families feel vulnerable and exposed up on the *bima* in front of the entire congregation. However, for some this is particularly problematic. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony may be the first time that the family is in public together after the separation, divorce, or remarriage, and there may be some very real concerns about this public appearance.

The synagogue can play a major role by helping families focus their attention onto the child and the *simcha*. By emphasizing the importance of the day for the child, the

synagogue transmits a message of positive Jewish family values to the child, family, and community as a whole. This emphasis also gives the family a new lens for decision making.

The synagogue can also play a role in communal education by not treating separated, divorced, and remarried families any differently from other families in the congregation, thereby teaching that Jewish values are transmitted in families regardless of how they may look structurally. Through their actions, synagogues communicate that these families are not "broken," but rather they have "changed." By normalizing the experience, synagogues help individual families and strengthen their own congregations.

One way for the synagogues to normalize the experience is to develop policies that will serve all families. All synagogues already have in place a number of such policies that set forth the responsibilities of the child and the parent on the Bar/Bat Mitzvah day. Other policies may be instituted that are sensitive to the needs of divorced and remarried families, yet apply to all families equally, such as standardizing the wording of synagogue publicity and the distribution of synagogue honors. In developing these other policies, synagogues will need to clarify the boundaries of the decision-making process. They will need to decide how

much they wish to be involved and at what point they will draw the line and stay out of the families' decision-making process. At the core of this issue is the synagogue's moral center — what does the synagogue stand for? The answer to this question will help the synagogue focus its thinking and formulate policies. It is important, however, to recognize that some complex issues — for example, families where there has been child abuse — cannot be addressed by synagogue policy, but will need to be handled on an individual basis. Even in these extremely difficult cases, however, the synagogue can help keep the focus on what is best for the child.

CONCLUSION

Families come to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience with hopes, dreams, and memories. Often, for separated, divorced, and remarried families, they also come with anger and sorrow — for failed dreams and failed expectations. We cannot ask them to bury these feelings completely, nor do we expect that all of their issues can be resolved easily, even with synagogue intervention. Yet, by approaching this as a Jewish family program — and not simply a Jewish family problem — the synagogue models ways in which we all can accept and validate the vitality and complexity of the changing Jewish family.