

Coming of Age in Remarried Families: The Bar Mitzvah*

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The Remarried Consultation Service, a division of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, was formed in 1976 to provide counseling, therapy, referral for special services when necessary and an educational program for remarried couples and their children, for those contemplating remarriage and for couples living together, one or both of whom are divorced.

While treating families for their presenting problems, therapists frequently are called upon to deal with particular crises which erupt around times of transition for individual members of the families. Often these transition stages are marked by religious rituals, such as circumcision of a boy at birth, Bar or Bat Mitzvah at the pre-adolescent stage, the exchange of marital vows of adult couples or the observance of *shiva*, the week of mourning after a death. At these times, we may see the emergence of divided loyalties, barely repressed enmities, jealousies and competition. We shall explore here some of the dynamics we have seen in our work with families with a boy preparing to become a Bar Mitzvah, described by Linzer as "the non-obligatory Jewish religious initiatory rite connected with the assumption of responsibility by a boy at the age of thirteen."¹

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¹ Norman Linzer, *The Jewish Family, A Compendium*, New York: Commission on Synagogue Relations, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, New York: 1972, p. 25.

Common Dynamics

In nuclear families, despite any current or previous times of difficulty, the child's Bar Mitzvah is generally experienced as a time of extreme joy, with a sense of its being a time for healing any old wounds and scars:

The Bar Mitzvah is a vital symbol for Jewish identification . . . it can serve as an affirmation for marginal Jewish youth of their ties to Judaism and to the Jewish community. It retains this significance for parents, too, who reaffirm their child's participation in this religious ceremony. As a family affair, it has the effect of bringing the far-flung family together.²

No so in the remarried family, where old or new schisms set the tone for the occasion, blurring and at times completely eradicating the good feelings usually inherent in the occasion.

Remarried families who have not been able to join together in making satisfactory arrangements for their son's Bar Mitzvah tend to have several identifying dynamics operating within their systems. These include:

1. The inability to form a workable parental coalition.
2. The inability of one or both of the former spouses to feel fully "divorced" from the other.
3. Use of the mutual child, the child of the two natural parents, to send verbal and/or non-verbal messages to the former spouse.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

4. Divided loyalties which keep the child from being able to please both his natural parents at any given time.

Let us examine these dynamics more fully:

1. *The inability to form a workable parental coalition.*

In many remarried families, parental coalitions are formed easily and effectively. For many remarried families who seek treatment, the formation of a parental coalition becomes a goal of the treatment. In these latter instances, what is stressed for natural parents and step-parents alike is that extra-parental input can enhance their child's life rather than threaten it. They are helped to see that children identify with parental figures, learn from them and make choices from among role models. Thus, a child who has a mother and father and a stepmother and stepfather has had an increase in the number of role models readily available to him, and he will identify with traits and beliefs of each of four people rather than two. This expands his choices and can induce growth and broaden his horizons. Seen in this light, the four parents can settle down to trying to be the best role model he or she can be rather than be caught up in the belief that for him or her to have any effect at all on the child, another parental figure has to be belittled or avoided. The four parents can then hopefully make Bar Mitzvah plans that center on the child's well-being.

2. *The inability of one or both of the former spouses to feel fully "divorced" from the other.*

In the families here described, with problems surrounding the Bar Mitzvah, in each instance the custodial parent had either not formed a replacement relationship for the lost spouse or had formed an unsatisfactory replacement relationship. Whether because of this or to explain this, the parent (in each of the cases presented

here, the mother) in many ways showed a strong attachment still to the former spouse despite his remarriage. Sometimes the attachment was of unrequited love, after having been abandoned by the former spouse. Sometimes the attachment was formed of hate, anger and disappointment for unmet needs. In either case, the parent clings to the relationship, seemingly cherishing it, feeding it through the child, through Court battles, through threats. The divorce, even though legal, is not complete, and treatment must address itself to this issue before it gets played out at the child's Bar Mitzvah.

3. *Use of the mutual child to send verbal and/or non-verbal messages to the former spouse.*

It must be noted that this would be less likely if a parental coalition could be achieved, as direct communication between all parental figures would then be available. In the event of the unavailability of such a coalition, however, many parents urge their children, indeed rehearse their children, to deliver messages to the other family. At times this is non-verbal:

Mrs. S.: My husband's first wife always sends the children to us dressed in tattered clothes, as if to tell us we're responsible for these "poor things" having nothing decent to wear.

At times it is verbal:

Seth: My mother tells me to call my father, then stays right next to me to make sure I tell him I need a new jacket and sneakers.

Parents must be guided in asserting their needs and rights in appropriate ways, without using their children as pawns in the divorce game. Parental communication can be encouraged and supported, with the therapist providing a safe arena within which to begin direct communication. A word of caution: it is advisable to set firm limits to the use of the therapy sessions, avoiding the therapist's being put into the position of judge, siding with one or the

other. This is possible if the boundaries of treatment are made clear from the beginning and reiterated when necessary during the course of treatment. Parental sessions are planned and structured to focus on parenting issues, excluding discussions of the previous marital relationship and divorce, and expressions of anger or bitterness.

4. *Divided loyalties which keep the child from being able to please both his natural parents at any given time.*

The remarriage of his parents presents a child with a second person to fill a role which is often already filled. He now has a step-mother and/or a step-father. How can he admire this new maternal figure without making his mother feel hurt and unneeded? How can he call his stepfather "Dad" when his father cringes at this reference to the new paternal figure? In many instances, the child is further confused by conflicts in the religious environments of his two different families. Having seen and adjusted to whatever the religious climate in his natural family home, after divorce and remarriage he may have to make an adjustment to not only one extra family home situation but to two, as the custodial and non-custodial parents make their own adjustments to the religious practices of the new spouses. For example, how can the child take Bar Mitzvah lessons urged on him by his father when his live-in stepfather tells him it's a waste of time, *he* never had any, and makes it plain that if the boy takes the lessons, stepfather will see it as something he's doing to please his *father* and be angry at the sign of loyalty toward the male who abandoned his mother? It is clear that in each of these circumstances, a child cannot win, cannot find a way to please, to be good, and to be happy. What is also clear is that parents cannot do well in this atmosphere either. Divided loyalties divide. Treatment must point out the price paid by all for such divisions and for all such binds

into which we put ourselves and our children. The Bar Mitzvah in such a family cannot help but be a tormenting and perhaps a tragic time.

We must all be aware of the highly-charged emotional atmosphere enveloping the child while he prepares to become a Bar Mitzvah. This is in official entry into manhood. Arlow discusses this within the context of the speech the Bar Mitzvah boy usually delivers on the day of the ceremony:

Usually the speech contains three essential points: First, an expression of gratitude by the Bar Mitzvah boy to his parents for having raised and educated him; second, a somewhat bombastic avowal that "Today I am a man;" third, a promise of allegiance to his people and their ideals. With the completion of the service in the synagogue the boy's mood is usually that of having gone through an ordeal successfully. The meaning of the Bar Mitzvah boy's assertion, "Today I am a man," may seem obscure. In our society certainly, the attainment of the age of thirteen brings with it no truly adult privileges . . . however, this element is so characteristically a part of the Bar Mitzvah celebration that no distortion or rationalization can obliterate it. Even those initiates who deliver no speech are invariably congratulated with the reminder, "Today you are a man." It is only in the biological sense that this statement has any element of validity. It is the transition to sexual maturity . . . which furnishes the affective core of the celebration.³

For the child in a remarried family, this difficult emotional period may be heightened and worsened by the pulls of the various factions within the family. At a time of stress, when he most needs support, stability and confidence in himself, parts of the family may withdraw support or offer it conditionally, creating an unstable environment, guaranteed to shake the child's

³ Jacob A. Arlow, "A Psychoanalytic Study of a Religious Initiation Rite: Bar Mitzvah," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, Vol. 6, New York: International Universities Press, 1951, pp. 358-59.

confidence in himself and in his resource systems. Such a child, buffeted by contradictory needs of family members, may find escape from the double bind through acting-out behaviors, depression or even suicide.

Genogram:

A genealogical chart of a family traces the family history by noting who married whom and when, who their children were and when they were born, who each of these children subsequently married and when, and so on. For treatment purposes, therapists have adopted the genogram as a tool in their work with families.⁴ It is particularly useful with remarried families, when many members of the child's family may not be present for the initial interviews and when those who are may prefer to see themselves and present themselves as a "natural" family, denying the importance to the child of a non-custodial parent.

The genogram is drawn in the first or second interview with the family, and encompasses their history and information about members of the family who are not present, including remarried spouses and their children. It is important for the therapist to note on the genogram the ages of all individuals. Besides other uses for this information, for the purposes of this paper there are two uses which are noteworthy:

1. The worker can become alert to a possible Bar Mitzvah crisis situation *before* it occurs when he or she sees a 12 year old boy in this family or in a related remarried family.

2. The worker can connect the age of this child now with a crisis or tragedy that his father or another male relative may

have experienced at the same age (the same, of course, holds true for Bat Mitzvahs involving 12 year old females).

Case Examples

Many remarried families in treatment respond to their child's Bar Mitzvah in healthy, joyful celebration, with a minimum of distress.

Mrs. A. and her two children were in treatment for parent-child problems. After several months of family therapy, when the eldest child, Barry, neared Bar Mitzvah age, he began to complain in a session about this mother's plan to keep his father, now remarried, out of the Bar Mitzvah celebrations. Mrs. A. admitted she wanted nothing to do with her ex-husband and was prepared to bear the expense herself of the synagogue services and of the small party that would follow. The therapist noted Barry's stated unhappiness with these plans and wondered if there could be an accommodation to Barry's needs. Barry suggested a compromise: perhaps his father could be invited to the synagogue services with the entire congregation present. Mrs. A. agreed that she could tolerate her ex-husband's presence at services and felt she could approach the subject directly with her ex-husband. At the next meeting, Mrs. A. reported she had extended the invitation. A few weeks later, she and Barry happily talked about his father's acceptance of the invitation.*

For other remarried families, even such temporary reconciliations are not possible, yet the child's Bar Mitzvah can become a matter of celebration:

Mrs. B. refused to allow the father of her two children to see or speak to them. She reported the precipitant to the break in relations was her ex-husband's using his visitation time with Ron, 12½, to have the boy take lessons to prepare for his Bar Mitzvah. Mrs. B. was unemployed and received Welfare benefits. Her long-time lover had recently moved into the apartment she shared with her children. Her ex-husband had remarried, and when the children visited him they helped him and his

⁴ For clarification of the genogram, please see: Jack O. Bradt, *The Family Diagram: Method, Technique and Use in Family Therapy*, Washington, D.C.: Groome Center, 1980.

* The therapist in this case was Edward Siegal, JBFCs caseworker.

wife at a flea market stand. This had annoyed Mrs. B., but she had stepped up her animosity toward her ex-husband with the advent of the Bar Mitzvah lessons.

Mrs. B. voiced, in sessions with the therapist, her disappointment in not being able to provide for her son's Bar Mitzvah on her own, due to her financial straits. It became clear that her own lack of resources to provide for a Bar Mitzvah celebration had led her to sabotage her ex-husband's efforts to provide one for his son, and in which his new wife and her family would share, to the exclusion of Mrs. B. It was this resentment of what he had to offer their son which led to her encouraging the estrangement between the children and their father.

Ron was thus not receiving Bar Mitzvah lessons and, in individual sessions, expressed sadness to the therapist about his not becoming a Bar Mitzvah as his friends would.

In a family session with Mrs. B. and the two children present, I decided to inform them of the actual requirements for a Bar Mitzvah, as differentiated from the social customs of their family and community. I let them know that Ron would automatically become a Bar Mitzvah when he reached the age of 13: nothing needed to be *done*. From the age of 13 on, he could be called to the *bimah* in any synagogue to read a short prayer which is recited before the reading of the Torah. That prayer, even when recited in Hebrew, could be transliterated in English. I added that it would be gracious for Mrs. B. to provide a small collation of drinks and cake (*Kiddush*) for the early morning congregants the day Ron would recite the prayer and that this would provide an air of celebration and an opportunity for the exchange of good wishes to mark the occasion. I offered to locate a rabbi for the family if Mrs. B. could not, or to speak in her behalf to one she might know.

The family voiced surprise at hearing this information and Mrs. B. determined she would speak to the Rabbi of a neighborhood synagogue and let me know if she needed help.

At our next meeting, Mrs. B. informed me she had been well received by the Rabbi and that all arrangements had been made for the marking of Ron's Bar Mitzvah.

Several months later, the family was seen a few days after the day of the Bar Mitzvah

celebration. All expressed extreme happiness with how it had gone and Ron was thrilled that he, like many of his friends, was now a Bar Mitzvah.

The therapist and the family can discuss the Bar Mitzvah in treatment sessions even after the fact, using the divisions and conflicts which attended the Bar Mitzvah to help focus on issues still in need of resolution:

Mrs. C., her male companion and her three children entered the room. Glenn, 7, wore a three-piece suit, a dramatic departure from his usual T shirt and jeans. Mrs. C. said he had wanted me to see him in the suit he had worn at Steve's Bar Mitzvah and Jodi's Bar Mitzvah, jointly held 9 months earlier. She had brought one of the photos, just received from the photographer, to show me how they had all looked that day. She passed the photo to me and identified herself, her parents, her sister and brother-in-law and the three children. All looked happy except for Steve and Jodi, both of whom had their mouths open, not smiling. I asked what they had wanted me to see from this picture. The children shrugged. Mrs. C. answered, "How everyone looks when we're all happy and looking good." I remarked that the two oldest children were not smiling in the picture. Steve said that was because he wasn't allowed to invite many of his friends, that most of the guests were his mother's and grandparents' friends. Jodi agreed. Mrs. C. said she'd invited 40 children and that was enough. Steve and Jodi complained that only 15 friends were included, the rest being children of relatives. I noted their father was not in the picture and wonder if he had been present. Steve shook his head "No." I asked why. He responded, "Nobody wanted him." I asked if that had included *him*. He nodded "Yes."

The photo had set the stage for the boy's sadness to be broached. Despite his having previously refused to be involved in family therapy, and his reluctance to come in for this session, before the end of the meeting he had offered to meet with me for individual sessions.

In nuclear families, when the brother of a Bar Mitzvah boy is granted the privilege of being called to the *bimah* to intone the prayers before and after the reading of the day's section of the Torah, it is often a time

that the bonds joining the family are more keenly felt and appreciated. When, however, the privilege is offered to the half-brother of the Bar Mitzvah boy, to the son of the father's first wife, the bonds are pulled and tightened in twists that leave raw welts on all concerned. In the son's acceptance lies tacit acknowledgment and acceptance of his father's new family, the one from which he is excluded most of the time. He acknowledges the importance of the other son in his father's life and with it may come the feeling of inflicting pain upon his own mother by this validation of the son of the other mother:

Mrs. D. came in with her two sons, Jeff, 21, and Larry, 17. Both sons were oppositional, involved with drugs, doing poorly in school and were unemployed. When the genogram was drawn, information was presented about the boys' father, his second wife and her 12½ year old son, Adam, whom he had adopted shortly after the remarriage.

My recommendation that Mr. D. be included in family sessions was agreed to and, after several attempts to get him involved, he did attend some of the family sessions. During one of these meetings, Mr. D. told of the difficulty he was having making some decisions regarding Adam's forthcoming Bar Mitzvah. Mr. D. was aware, and all spoke openly about this in sessions, that Jeff and Larry resented their father's having left their home, his living with another woman's son and his adoption of that son as his own. Mr. D. wanted to find ways for Jeff and Larry to participate in Adam's Bar Mitzvah. He hoped each would agree to a reading at the *bimah* at the services. Without enthusiasm, his sons agreed.

The week before Adam's Bar Mitzvah, Larry began insisting he would attend the Bar Mitzvah only if he could bring along his new girlfriend, as Jeff's girlfriend had been invited. Mr. D. declared heatedly, in an individual session, that he would not capitulate to Larry's blackmail, even if it meant Larry would not show up for the celebration. Larry's girlfriend, he said, was not known to any in the family, while Jeff's was well-known and liked by all after a three-year courtship. Larry, in individual session a few days before the Bar

Mitzvah, could only see himself in competition with Jeff and could not tolerate not having the same privileges as his older brother. He was not able to accept my suggestion that it was Adam with whom he was now competing and that he seemed determined to detract from the happiness of the day not only for Adam but most especially for Mr. D., the father of the boys. Larry had found a way to turn "Adam's Day" into "Larry's Day."⁵

Children can always find a way to thwart the best laid plans of parents. Parents who have not taken into consideration the feelings of their children and who have not managed an accommodation to suit their children's real needs may find their plans in disarray, as did the family in this final case example:

Mr. and Mrs. E. came to the agency after her 12 year-old son, David, has been discovered ready to drink a bottle of ink in an attempt at suicide. This was the culmination of much fighting in the home, amid repeated reports from David's school regarding his oppositional, acting-out behaviors. The genogram, drawn in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. E., David and his 11 year-old brother, Robbie, revealed that Mrs. E.'s first husband, the boys' father, had remarried shortly after their divorce and had a 3 year old son, Michael, from that marriage. Mr. E. had been widowed before marrying the mother of David and Robbie; he had two grown daughters from his first marriage.

At a team meeting of the Remarried Consultation Service, it was determined that the goal of treatment would be the formation of a parental coalition, with all four parents working out the setting of limits for David and Robbie, whose oppositionalism rivalled his brother's.

Two co-therapists met together with all seven family members (four parents and three children), some of whom had never met each other. Treatment modalities utilized included individual, couple, sibling, family and supra-family sessions (all adults and all children), the latter including the two co-therapists.

⁵ This case is cited in *Treating the Remarried Family*, by Clifford J. Sager, Hollis Brown, Helen Crohn, Tamara Engel, Evelyn Rodstein and Elizabeth Walker, to be published in Fall 1982 by Brunner-Mazel, New York.

A parental coalition was achieved, with the four parental figures able to draw up behavior modification contracts to which the children responded quite well. In individual sessions with the primary therapist David voiced a complaint about the plans for his Bar Mitzvah. His father and stepmother had informed him that his mother and stepfather would not be invited to a large party to be held the night after the Sabbath services at which he'd be reading from the Torah. David worried about what to say to his friends who would ask him why his mother wasn't at his Bar Mitzvah party. In an attempt at avoidance, David wanted to stop taking Hebrew and Bar Mitzvah lessons at the local Hebrew School. His mother and stepfather gave him permission to stop the lessons. His father and stepmother were adamant that he continue. David was encouraged to talk about his concerns at a suprafamily session, with the two therapists to help him be heard. He was able to do this, voicing his unhappiness both about attending Hebrew School and about his mother and stepfather being left out of the big party.

An agreement was reached that David's father and stepfather would explore ways to make the Hebrew lessons more palatable, perhaps decreasing the number of days of attendance or transferring David to a school where he would not be the only one preparing for Bar Mitzvah. Beyond this, there was no change agreeable to all, as David's father insisted he wanted to enjoy the party to which he'd be inviting friends and business associates: he did not want to have to introduce to them his ex-wife and her second husband. His wife stated, "It's *my* party and I want to enjoy it!"

Despite not getting as much relief as he'd wanted from what he felt was oppressive, David's behavior at home and at school improved and treatment ended.

More than six months later, David called the therapist and asked for a suprafamily session to help him discuss his desire, once again, to put a halt to his Bar Mitzvah lessons. The meeting was held and it became clear then, and in ensuing sessions, that David was reacting to problems in the home between his mother and stepfather. David stepped up his acting-out behaviors as his mother stepped up her threats to dissolve her second marriage. Suddenly, six weeks before the day of his Bar

Mitzvah, David was arrested for burglarizing a neighbor's home and stealing jewelry. Over the next few days, the facts leading to the arrest emerged: David's father and stepmother had continued in their announced plans to have a party to which his mother was not invited. In her anger about not "belonging" at their party, Mrs. E. had decided to retaliate and had mailed out invitations to a Saturday luncheon at her home for her family and friends. Thus, where before David had one party that he dreaded attending because he would not know how to explain the absence of his mother, he was now told he would have *two* parties at which he would have to explain the absence of a parent. When these events were traced with David's mother, she realized the burglary had taken place the day after she had mailed her party invitations.

It was a painful irony that on the day before his Bar Mitzvah, David's entire family appeared with him in Family Court for a hearing before a Judge.

Conclusions

We learn several important lessons from exploration of the issues presented in the above case examples. Perhaps, if Mrs. A. had known of the actual ritual practices involved in becoming a Bar Mitzvah, she might not have placed herself in competition with her ex-husband and might have been able to allow him his own way of celebrating their son's Bar Mitzvah, knowing she could celebrate it, too. Education, then, must be part of what we do in our work with clients. It may behoove us when working with remarried families to anticipate the Bar Mitzvah as a potential source of conflict and pain and to take the lead and open up for discussion any plans, thoughts or feelings family members have about the future Bar Mitzvah, well in advance of any of the actual arrangements for the event.

Of course, the assumption here is that workers are prepared to educate their clients and can be present information which is not only potentially helpful but accurate. Jewish agencies must respond to this need of their clients and of their workers by offering In-Service training.

Rabbis, I might suggest, would benefit from a two-way communications system, learning from workers and agencies to become more alert to the potential family conflicts inherent in the Bar Mitzvah plans of a remarried family. Usually, long before the day of the Bar Mitzvah, rabbis are sought out for consultation about the Bar Mitzvah, for tutoring to prepare for the Bar Mitzvah and for contracting to officiate at the services the day of the Bar Mitzvah. The rabbi who has become aware of the possible problems can thus begin early to explore what the plans are for the Big Day, and can either make some attempt on his own to recommend less conflictual resolutions or to refer the family to a Jewish agency for family counseling. Because of the spectacular rise in the rates of divorce and remarriage, all rabbis will have increasing opportunities to be of such service to these families and to be active liaisons between their communities and Jewish agencies.

The therapist facing a problematic Bar Mitzvah situation presented by remarried

clients needs not only the assistance of the educational component but knowledge of family life cycles and crisis intervention skills: whatever negative feelings exist in either or both families once a couple has divorced and remarried can be expected to emerge during the times of ritual transition of their mutual child. The therapist needs to establish a working relationship with each family member, including non-custodial parents whenever possible. The therapist must be able to take a firm stance and use his or her authority to let the family know what will be of most help to the child, oftentimes requiring some spirit of sacrifice and good will for the sake of the child.

If we can plan for these crisis times, if we can alert families to expect the worst parts of themselves to emerge at such supposedly-happy times and if we can appeal to that part of parents which is able to take a giant leap outside of self in order to care for children, then perhaps they can find and draw on their strengths to pass through the fires of ritual transitions unscathed, having utilized the experience for growth.