

Coming of Age in 2016

In the Jewish tradition we have a well-known coming of age ceremony for a boy, when he reaches the age of thirteen, known as a bar mitzvah (or bat mitzvah for a girl). In my work-life prior to coming to Fall River, I probably trained over 2,000 young people for this important milestone. Usually the bar/bat mitzvah student spends a number of years learning Hebrew, Jewish history, customs, and traditions and then finally focuses on the specific preparations required for about six months. The most difficult part of the specific preparations is learning to chant a portion from one of the Books of the Prophets (usually from Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel) and/or a section from the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) both of which are specific to the particular day on which their coming of age ceremony takes place.

Since I have spent so much time preparing students for this occasion I've noticed a number of things about it. It is a formidable task to achieve this long-term goal. It is probably the first time in a young person's life when they begin to prepare for something so far in advance that may initially seem out of reach, but with persistence and perseverance they will ultimately excel at. I think many people remember this milestone for the rest of their lives. They may not remember the specific details of the event as much as the experience of having achieved something so far beyond what seemed do-able. Much of the experience of training a student for this special day is not only teaching the specific skills required to attain a sufficient level of fluency with the ancient texts our ancestors also chanted, but likewise supporting and encouraging the self-confidence and self-reliance of the young person.

The teacher has the privilege of watching a young person grow and come into their own. You get to help them face a challenge that they are often not convinced they are up to. You get to watch them come to recognize that they are able to achieve this long-term goal which will help them face many future long-term goals. That is part of the great value of the entire enterprise.

In the Jewish tradition, the milestone of bar/bat mitzvah marks the transition of the child into an “adult” in the community, when they become responsible for their own decisions and actions. The community gives them the honor of leading important parts of the Shabbat (Saturday) morning service and the bar or bat mitzvah reciprocates by respecting the community enough to take this role seriously. (Technically one “becomes” a bar or bat mitzvah rather than “has” a bar or bat mitzvah i.e. they become a “son” or “daughter” of the 613 commandments, that is, responsible for their actions).

As a teacher of mine, Rabbi Irwin Kula, is fond of asking: What is the job or jobs that this ritual/life-cycle event gets done? It takes a crucial often confusing period of a young person’s life, the time of puberty, the physical transition from child to adult, and has the community celebrate that transition. However, it is not a celebration simply for the fact of this major change in a young person’s life. It requires that the bar/bat mitzvah demonstrates a certain level of intellectual achievement that will affect the rest of their lives. It will give them the skills to facilitate their becoming an active member of the community. Much more important than any party that may celebrate becoming a bar/bat mitzvah might be, and even more important than the day itself, is the *preparation* that leads to that day. It is the months and years of preparation (of which the day is but one expression) that have long term effects on this young person’s character.

Some students have an easier time of it than others. Hebrew, for an English speaker, is not such an easy language. Its alphabet looks nothing like the English alphabet. It’s read from right to left; the ancient scriptures are sung or chanted and not read. Finally, when it comes to chanting out of the Torah scroll itself, the vowels and musical notation are nowhere to be seen. This can seem insurmountable, but of those 2,000 plus students that I mentioned earlier, they all achieved it. In certain ways having a harder time, paradoxically, is a *gift* of sorts because the ability to stick with something and achieve a goal despite the difficulty is a much more important life-skill than merely doing what comes easily. No matter how talented or bright someone might be, they always reach a point where they have to find the inner resources to work even when they don’t feel like it because it’s too hard.

As the teacher, I was really just the facilitator that enabled them to reach a certain milestone in their life, who encouraged them to grow into their own power. That's what I believe any "spiritual" teacher can at best hope to do – encourage people to be the best version of themselves that they can be, encourage them to find the abilities they already have, and respect those abilities enough that they bring them to fruition. As guides, or facilitators, we may strive to help these young people grow into the highest moral or spiritual parts of themselves, and to encourage them to be faithful to that calling. I think we can open the doors and windows into the treasures of our respective traditions and hopefully kindle a spark in others to find meaning in them. If the practices of our traditions don't make the lives of those engaged in them more moral, more meaningful, and more spiritual they will offer only a shell without an authentic compelling core. We owe our children an authentic, meaningful life.

Why are all these thoughts so prominent in my mind today? Our son is about to become a Bar Mitzvah – something I have anticipated for the last thirteen years.