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Progressive Judaism and the Bar Mitzvah

A Rites of Passage Ritual that Repositions the Mother in Her Sons' Lives

Ritual is a way of acknowledging our relationship to each other, to our culture, to our community, and to our past. Ritual is also a way of reminding ourselves of what is important and who is important. I am the Jewish mother of two sons, both of whom have now been bar mitzvah. I am also the sole Jewish parent, and along with my husband, we are members of a progressive Jewish community in Melbourne, Australia. The progressive Jewish bar and bat mitzvah ritual offers a way to capture the deep movement and meaning of our lives as we transition from childhood to young adulthood. The bar/bat mitzvah process engenders individuation yet adheres the individual to community and others. However, traditional bar and bat mitzvah rites of passage are deeply gendered with separate roles ascribed to the mother and father depending on the gender of the child. Furthermore, patriarchal mother-son discourse marks the father as a crucial mentor through a boy's transition to manhood. The mark of gender displaces the mother in relation to her son as he moves toward manhood. This paper draws on my personal experience to suggest that the progressive bar mitzvah process can both bind our sons to the Jewish community and their history, and help sanction a deep and powerful connection between mother and son.

I am married to a non-Jewish man. We have been together for more than half my lifetime and married for eighteen years. Together, we have a sixteen-year-old son and a fourteen-year-old son. I am also a white, able-bodied, educated, middle class, urban Jewish ciswoman. I have, and have always had, the privilege to figure out how I can best live a feminist life that matters both to me and hopefully to those around me. My domain has been of my own picking, and a few years ago, I explored feminist mothers' experiences of raising boys in my PhD work. "The personal is political" shapes my sense making of the world.

From my privileged location, I have tried hard to use feminism as my guide for living well and for working out ways to challenge the things seeking to diminish me and women in general (Ahmed).

For this reason, I believe it is important to talk about traditional bar mitzvah rites of passage, and how, if left in the quagmire of gendered difference, they diminish the mother and threaten to destroy the motherline. I have chosen to start this conversation by sharing my experience, within the progressive Jewish community in Melbourne, of the ways to take something as old as Judaism itself and use it to reposition the mother in boys' lives. This is a story of how progressive Judaism's deregulation of gender (as a response to gender inequality) created a space in the bar mitzvah ritual where I could step into my sons' transformation from child to adult, and in so doing, honour the motherline through Jewish culture and ritual.

Patriarchal Discourse about Rites of Passage

Jewish rites of passage are traditionally deeply gendered for both the ritual participant and for their parents. There are usually separate roles ascribed to the mother and father depending on the gender of the child. In traditional rites of passage ceremonies, the boy or girl is prepared for manhood by men or for womanhood by women (Biddulph). Within a rites of passage ritual constructed around gender difference discourse, this is the point at which the boy becomes a man and the girl becomes a woman. For boys, it is usually male elders who take on the responsibility for turning boys into men. Gender difference discourse structuring the traditional bar and bat mitzvah imposes a patriarchal stranglehold on girls, boys, and mothers (Shoham).

I argue a core assumption of gendered rites of passage is that manhood and womanhood are the primary defining identity markers—gender not only defines us but separates us, and it defines the gender binary, gender difference, and gender inequality. There are different roles and responsibilities attached to masculinity and femininity that separate us, and this difference is ensconced in ritual. This patriarchal discourse is perpetuated in myth, theology, popular psychology, and Anglo American culture: a man acts as the crucial mentor and special witness of a boy's transition to manhood (Biddulph; Bly). As a result, the mother becomes marginalized and displaced, and the discourse persists.

Patriarchal discourse about the bar mitzvah itself—proclaimed by both Jews and non-Jews—refers to this ritual as an "initiatory and sacred process for moving boys into manhood" (Biddulph 171). For example, Steve Biddulph, Australia's preeminent orator on raising boys, makes specific reference to rites of passage: "It's only by leaving the world of women that young men can break the mother-mould and relate to women as fellow adults. Domestic

violence, unfaithfulness and the inability to make a marriage work may all result not from any problem with women but from men's failure to take boys on this transforming journey" (23). Biddulph's argument for male initiation of boys is that they will otherwise remain in an infantile relationship with their mothers. Unless boys are initiated as men, and by men, they can never escape dependency on women and will remain immature. Biddulph warns that "Not having entered the community of men, they are distrustful of other men and have few real friends. They are afraid of commitment to women because for them it means being mothered, and that means being controlled. They are real 'nowhere men'" (25).

Orthodox and Progressive Judaism—Same But Different

A cursory analysis of contemporary Judaism is useful to better explain the progressive Jewish bar and bat mitzvah context. The Jewish community is not homogenous. Primarily, we vary according to our relationship to the Torah and Jewish Law, or Halacha (Averbukh et al.). For Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jews, the Torah is the word of God. Thus, the Jewish Law stemming from the Torah positions men as rabbis and as cantors, allocates different seating for men and women in the synagogue, and determines that only boys at the age of thirteen will be allowed to read directly from the Torah scroll as they bar mitzvah. In Orthodox bar mitzvah ceremonies, the boy will commonly start his *d'var Torah* (sermon) with the proclamation "Today, I am a man."

For girls, at age twelve and usually in groups, they are presented in synagogue, but they are not allowed to read or sing from the Torah (Mail), and when they are finished, they return to sitting—segregated with the women. The practice of segregation, the Mehitzah, is the physical manifestation of the institutionalized and cultural and spiritual organization of gender identity (Wolosky). However, as with all expressions of Judaism, inconsistency abounds because of Jews in the diaspora—an ever changing context that imposes political, cultural, economic, and survival exigencies (Wolosky). Consequently, there are debates about the level of a community's religiosity. And, often, a community's effort to maintain gender separation in all aspects of Jewish life is held up as the beacon for who is more Jewish than the other.

Progressive Jews or Reform Jews consider the Torah inspired by the idea of God but written by men at a specific time in history. As such, the Torah is contextual; it is a living document existing within a sociocultural, political, historical, and religious context. One of the most eminent progressive rabbis in Australia, Rabbi John Levi, recently used his sermon to describe the Torah as the Jewish people's dreamtime stories—myths that guide our lives, our relationships, and our community, but myths nonetheless. Within

the progressive Jewish movement, there are both male and female rabbis and cantors, and men and women sit together. And within my progressive Jewish community, where many of us are married to non-Jewish partners, women (and mothers) are actively involved in the religious and cultural teaching of our children.

Progressive Judaism deregulates gender by offering both bar and bat mitzvah in absolute equivalence (Joseph). Whether it is a female or male rabbi, both boys and girls when turning thirteen step up onto the Bimah, lead a Saturday morning Shabbat service that goes for two hours, sing around twenty-two verses of their portion from the Torah scroll itself, and conduct their own commentary on what this means to them (Mail). It is also common practice in my community for the mother to be involved in all stages of the ritual process marking the bar/bat mitzvah rites of passage.

My Experience

As stated earlier, I am married to a man who is not Jewish. Although he still has a formal paid membership at my synagogue, I, as the sole Jewish parent, was the only one who formally guided my sons through their bar mitzvah rites of passage ritual. Furthermore, women as mothers are not situated problematically within progressive Judaism in my local synagogue. Because of my own experience of a progressive bat mitzvah I was also called upon by the synagogue to share my knowledge, beliefs, and experience in order to help teach my sons the skills necessary to pass the tests of their own rites of passage. This progressive framework, combined with my own feminist maternal practice, provided a perfect context for activating the motherline.

Ritual is a way of reminding ourselves about what is important, about where we have come from, who we are connected to, and the responsibilities we have to the world around us. The bar/bat mitzvah rites of passage ritual offers a way to capture the deep movement and meaning of our lives as we transition from childhood to young adulthood. The ritual supports the construction of identity and of a preferred future self, within reach but not yet grasped. This ritual engenders individuation yet attaches the young person to the community and to others. When space is created for the mother to be involved in ritual as an authoritative guide and mentor, then she is afforded the opportunity to determine, for her sons, what is important and to extend their sense of responsibility to issues around social justice (including gender equality). Furthermore, the mother's presence (as material symbol and agentic subject) means that her son's sense of self is constructed in relationship to his mother instead of in rejection to her. This contributes to the activation of the motherline.

In general, rites of passage are about the transition of one state of being into a new one (Van Gennep). The purpose of transition is to move from one social status (in this case as a child) to a new social status (that of a full member of the Jewish community) (Joseph).

Prior to becoming bar/bat mitzvah, the young person's parents are responsible for their behaviour, particularly in relation to their spiritual, religious, and ethical practice. The bar/bat mitzvah ritual marks the formal acknowledgment by the community and by the child that they are now taking on these obligations and are full members of the Jewish community (Mail).

Ritual involves three distinct stages (Van Gennep). The first stage of the bar mitzvah ritual involves separation. The young person is taken aside, and told they are now on an important journey about preparing for the construction of a new identity (Johnson). In order to fully transition, the young person learns that they will have to pass multiple and difficult tests and that there are elders whose job it is to impart the necessary knowledge required to pass the tests. In the progressive synagogue where my sons were bar mitzvah, I was positioned as one of these elders. The tests are designed to teach the young person what it means to be the person they are becoming and how to behave in this new life (Mail). As an elder, I had the authority to shape the context in which my sons becoming would be framed. My feminist ethics and progressive ethics (both complementary and similar) helped demarcate these standards and expectations.

The young person also learns that these tests require endurance (Shoham). As their mother, who has also been bat mitzvah, I was proof of the ability to endure the tests, and I could share strategies for a successful completion of the ritual. My sons trusted my knowledge, and I understood their journey, their fear, anxiety, and trepidation. I reiterated over and over the belief that if I could do it so could they, that this was a process as old as Judaism itself, and that millions of children had done the same thing and thrived. Rites of passage rituals like the bar/bat mitzvah, though symbolized by a defining moment, can take months or even years to prepare for (Mail; Norris). Throughout the preparation, my sons and I were connected, sometimes by their resistance (often at the amount of effort and hours), yet always in conversation.

The separation stage of the bar/bat mitzvah ritual often starts when the child is eight or nine, when they learn to read Hebrew and learn about Jewish history, culture, and tradition. However, things speed up around a year before the day they stand before the community in synagogue. Different elders have different roles during this stage of the ritual. Over the course of the year, the children spend weekly meetings with the rabbi about the significance of the ritual and about the portion of the Torah selected for them to read.

The rabbi demands that they read and reread their Torah portion, consider what others have written about their portion, and work out what the portion

may mean for them. This work results in a sermon, a *d'var Torah*, in which they stand before the community and provide an analysis and try to make sense of myth, story, and history.

Over the course of the year, they also sit weekly with the cantor (the liturgical leader of prayer) who teaches them verse by verse the tune that they must sing in Hebrew of both their Torah portion and the Shabbat morning prayers. At home, they must practice night after night and week after week. This was done with both of my sons nightly at home in private regular practice and ultimately in public in front of scores of family and friends and community members.

Night after night, we sat together side by side as they read the Hebrew and sang the Hebrew. And together we deconstructed their Torah portion. Together, we questioned the myths, and questioned the relevance to their lives, to their world, and to the world around them. Backward and forwards, I questioned them. "What do you mean?" "Why have you said this?" "What is resonating for you?" Do you really believe this?" "Yes," I said, "you can be a Jew without believing in God." "Yes," I said, "questioning the decisions in the Torah is your entitlement. The word Israel means to wrestle, to query, to question." "Yes," I said, "this is hard, but this is worth it. You can do this." Then as their scribe, they spoke and I typed, and, over the course of time, they put together a treatise of meaning about the myths and about what they believed and who they felt they wanted to be. For me, this long and detailed process of encouraging critical thinking connects to my intentions as a feminist mother. I work hard to raise consciousness and to ensure that critical reflectivity and the questioning of truths are a core practice for both of my sons.

The second stage of the rites of passage ritual is about liminality, about transition itself (van Gennep). During transition, the young Jewish person is in limbo between worlds—no longer a part of their old life yet not fully inducted into their new life (Johnson; Norris). On the day of the ceremony, family sits in the front row of the synagogue along with a hundred others. Standing beside the rabbi on the Bimah (the podium upon which the service is conducted and the Torah scroll is read), the child begins transitioning. And just as my sons were on the precipice of stepping into the liminal space of the ritual, it was me, their mother, who handed my sons their Talit, the prayer shawl they wear as they utter their first prayer.

When I was bat mitzvah, my father handed me my grandfather's Talit, brought from Glowno in Poland—a place he miraculously left six weeks before Hitler invaded and wiped out his entire family. As my youngest son stood before me one last time a child, I handed him this Talit, my Talit, my grandfather's Talit, and it embraced his shoulders and tangled the motherline into the fabric of his journey toward adulthood.

My sons then began their formal transition. For the first hour and a half,

they led prayers for the community, as their voice sang out over the crowd. Then, they must leave the Bimah and not return until the Torah scroll is taken out of the Ark and opened before all.

All rites of passage rituals have a significant moment, a tipping point, at which the transformation is formally marked. Usually this requires the attempt and completion of a difficult ask, a defining activity signalling the point of no return, which marks the movement between the transition stage and the third and final stage of ritual called reincorporation (Joseph; Van Gennep).

My sons' names were called out loud, and in so doing, their parents' names were also called to herald each's origins. They stepped forward, and up onto the Bimah, to speak their sermon and say what they have learned and why it is important to them. Then, they touched the Torah parchment and sang. All of the work led to this moment; this is the final and most difficult test.

As the bar and bat mitzvah complete the final task of singing from the Torah, they stand before the community, who validates and honours their new status. This is the act that marks their new status; this is the act that entitles them to full and equal membership of the community. This is the act required for them to be reincorporated and to return as something new precisely because they connected to the old.

Implications of Bar and Bat Mitzvah Rites of Passage When Situated within Gender Difference Structures

Rites of passage rituals like the bar and bat mitzvah are coming of age ceremonies. The question here, however, is what are young men coming of age to? What kind of manhood will they be adopting? And is it necessary for a rites of passage ritual to be constructed by gender difference? Is it necessary for the transformation to be from girl to woman and boy to man? And if not, what else can the ritual signify?

Our lives are often organized around gender difference identities (Kretschmer and Meyer). The traditional bar mitzvah is no different: the mother's gender influences who she is in relation to her son, and in relation to men. The traditional bar mitzvah rites of passage structure has constrained the route available for the mother to make a claim on her son. Because this traditional rite of passage does not question gender difference, the ability for women to think about their interests and the opportunities available to them has been curtailed. The gender binary, as an organizing system within traditional Judaism, has shaped what is expected from both Jewish child and Jewish mother. This is not unique to the Jewish community of course; gender structures expectations, establishes opportunities, and maintains constraints in culture, politics, organizations, and personal interactions (Kretschmer and Meyer).

Traditional bar mitzvah rites of passage require the father and other male elders to mentor the boy toward manhood. I query what becoming a man means in this context. Displacing the mother in traditional ritual reinforces patriarchal discourse and misogynist practices, which not only diminishes mothers and women, but valorizes a masculinity devoid of any semblance of femininity.

However, when gender is deregulated, I believe our sons are offered the opportunity to construct relational masculinity (Dooley and Fedele), which recognizes those a boy is surrounded by, including his mother. I cannot claim that this is true of all progressive bar mitzvah experiences, but I can see this in my own experience. I have included below an excerpt from my thirteen-year-old's sermon in the hope that reading his words will go some way to demonstrating how deregulating gender can foster the relational self.

> Shabbat Shalom. Today is a very important part of my life. I have been on a journey leading up to this point and started preparing myself for my bar mitzvah when I was in grade three! Back then, I did not think I could do what I am doing today. But now, I am saying to myself I have done it! I feel accomplished…. I feel a sense of satisfaction.
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> Over this time, I have had to learn many new things, and this has not been easy. But as I look back, it all seems worth it. My bar mitzvah also marks the beginning of a new journey, a journey toward adulthood.
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> For me, today is also about understanding that the decisions we make and the connections we have are important; they can affect our lives in the present and the future…. And the meaning I would like to make of this is being willing to face difficult decisions and to understand the struggle. This stage of my journey, marked with my bar mitzvah, I hope has prepared me well to struggle, to keep going and know that it is all worthwhile. For me, this portion, the meeting between two brothers, tells me that if you do something wrong, own up to it. Don't let it ruin your life. Don't let it bottle up inside of you. For me, it is about sharing my feelings, about not hiding from them. It's better to have someone on your journey, your friends and family, than being without.

Conclusion: Progressive Judaism Authorizes the Motherline

Within progressive Judaism, the structural, cultural, and spiritual movement toward gender equality has created space for identity to be conceptualized in relation to gender but outside of gender difference discourse. By facilitating

equal access to Jewish values and ritual, women can claim authority for teaching ethics and for sharing with our sons what it looks like to put values into action. My knowledge of history and culture as well as my feminist ethics have been visible as I have been my sons' guide. And so, as they separated from their childhood, I was able to take a place alongside traditional cultural, spiritual, and ethical sources of knowledge such as the rabbi and the cantor. This process has repositioned me as central in my sons' lives.

As both my sons undertook becoming bar mitzvah, who I am in relation to them has been paramount. I have been formally called upon. Our connection has been honoured, and the mother and son relationship has been constructed as meaningful and value laden. This experience has facilitated both a private and public alignment between my sons and me. The deregulation of gender has facilitated a redefined gendered interaction. The motherline is formally honoured, whereas the patriarchal sanctions between mother and son are disputed.

My experience of guiding my sons through the progressive bar mitzvah process has highlighted two key things. First, as a legitimate authority, my history mattered to my sons, and as their mother, I was vital to their transition. As their mother, I was one of the elders entitled to lead them to the precipice and prepare them for the jump. And as they jumped, it was not away from their mother but toward something we shared; it was our connection that enabled them to jump, and they fell toward me at the same time as they were falling toward their own adulthood. The motherline pushed them off the cliff and held them as they jumped into the next phase of their life.

Second, I think that my authoritative presence has offered my sons a way to conceptualize their future—a way to establish preferred ideals and practices as adults that do not fit into preconceived gendered expectations and categories. My knowledge (and therefore my power) was not conceptualized as problematic or something to be concerned about. Rather, it was something celebrated and necessary, which is vital to maintaining the motherline.

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