

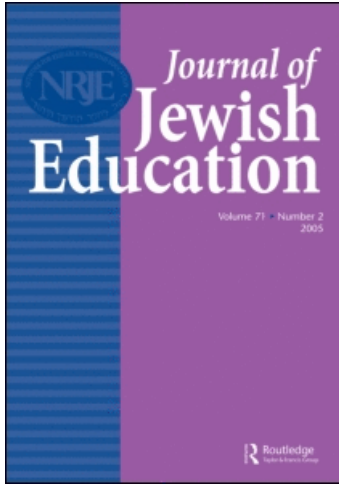
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Supplementary Schooling and the Law of Unanticipated Consequences: A Review Essay of Stuart Schoenfeld’s “Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America”

ISA ARON

Stuart Schoenfeld’s (1987) essay “Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America” recounts how, in the 1930s and 40s, rabbis and Jewish educators banded together to impose attendance requirements on families that wanted to celebrate their sons’ b’nei mitzvah in synagogues. Though this newly instituted requirement succeeded in increasing synagogue membership and religious school enrollment, it led to unintended and unfortunate consequences that affect us to this day—a high drop-out rate after bar/bat mitzvah, a reduction of Hebrew instruction to decoding from the Siddur, and proliferation of non-synagogue venues for the celebration of b’nei bat mitzvah. After summarizing Schoenfeld’s research and reviewing the undesirable consequences of the attendance requirement, I describe several alternative models of the religious school that have successfully communicated to parents and children that the goals of religious education are broader and deeper than bar/bat mitzvah preparation.

The Law of Unanticipated Consequences, first coined by sociologist Robert Merton (1936), is one of those observations that calls our attention to, and deepens our understanding of, phenomena we may have noticed, but not thought about very much. It states that things don’t always turn out the way

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we expect, particularly when we are trying to apply a relatively simple solution to a complex problem. It warns that the solution we propose might lead to results that we never imagined. These surprising outcomes might be welcome. For example, the scientists who formulated the birth control pill 50 years ago, predicted that it would limit unwanted pregnancies, curb worldwide population growth, and end global poverty, all of which it failed to do; they did not predict that it would enable women to marry later, thereby hastening their entry into professions.¹ Alternately, an action might have negative effects. For example, the laws of Prohibition, intended to curtail the alcohol consumption of Americans in the 1920s, had the unanticipated consequence of driving the production of alcohol underground, and consolidating the resources of the organized criminals who controlled its distribution.

Stuart Schoenfeld's (1987) essay "Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America" offers a striking example of the Law of Unanticipated Consequences as it applies to Jewish education. The article recounts how, in the 1930s and 40s, synagogues and central agencies of Jewish education banded together to impose attendance requirements on students whose families wanted to celebrate their b'nei mitzvah² in a synagogue, thereby minimizing two trends that concerned them—the low rate of synagogue affiliation, and the correspondingly low rate of enrollment in synagogue schools. Though this mandate succeeded, in that it led to an increase in synagogue membership and school enrollment, it also had unintended and unfortunate consequences that affect us to this day. Schoenfeld's article is worth revisiting for two reasons: it gives us a larger context through which we can understand a number of the problems plaguing religious schools today; and it can help us think more critically about the unintended consequences of purported solutions that Jewish educational institutions are undertaking today. After summarizing Schoenfeld's research, and exploring the more negative consequences of the attendance requirements, I will describe some recent attempts to separate religious school from bar/bat mitzvah preparation, thereby minimizing these consequences.

SCHOENFELD'S STUDY

The problem facing synagogues in the 1930s and 40s, Schoenfeld (1987) writes, was that "far fewer than one-half of American Jewish families were synagogue members."

¹May, E. (2010, April 25). Promises the pill could never keep. *New York Times*, p. WK13., <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/25/opinion/25may.html?scp=2&sq=Elaine%20May&st=cse>

²In those years boys comprised the large majority of b'nei mitzvah celebrants. Though Mordecai Kaplan introduced the bat mitzvah ceremony for his daughter Judith in 1922, it took a long time for this custom to gain acceptance in both the Reform and Conservative movements (Stein, 2001).

[O]verall, from the end of mass immigration until after World War II, far fewer than one-half of American Jewish families were synagogue members. Organized Jewish schools enrolled only a minority of school-aged children and many received tutoring only before their bar mitzvahs. (p. 71)

Realizing how important the bar mitzvah ceremony was to parents (the folk), educational leaders (the elite) who were interested in increasing the enrollment in Jewish schools joined forces to set minimum educational standards for bar mitzvah celebrations.

One way of strengthening synagogues and synagogue schools and enforcing a higher level of adherence to elite norms was to use the folk expectation that Jewish boys would have a bar mitzvah ceremony as a basis for pressuring otherwise reluctant North American Jews to become more involved with the synagogue. (Schoenfeld, 1987, p. 72)

Schoenfeld (1987) unearthed a collection of documents that attest to the concerted effort taken to impose these requirements. A 1937 editorial of *The Reconstructionist* “included this succinct statement of strategy and tactics”:

In order that these rites may not represent merely the attainment of certain ages, but also the accomplishment of certain minimum education, it would be necessary for the national organizations, such as the United Synagogue of America and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, to set up for their respective constituents standard requirements for *bar mizvah*(sic) and for Confirmation. (p. 72)

In a similar vein the Chicago Board of Jewish Education (BJE) mandated, in 1938, that all congregations affiliated with the BJE require all boys to have “a minimum of three years’ attendance at a daily Hebrew School of recognized standing, or evidence of the candidate’s fitness, to be determined by the Board of Jewish Education through examinations” (p. 72).

Typically, Schoenfeld (1987) writes, smaller Jewish communities had more success than larger ones in imposing these mandates.

Minimum requirements were more effective where they were jointly imposed by congregations acting as a cartel. Joint congregational action, usually through the local board of Jewish education, was taken to standardize minimum regulations in Cleveland (1942), Cincinnati (1944), Minneapolis (1947), Schenectady (1948), Indianapolis (1949) and Bridgeport (1950). (p. 74)

A 1950 survey undertaken by the American Association for Jewish Education (a national umbrella organization that was the precursor to JESNA)

attempted to ascertain how many congregations and communities had succeeded in imposing these requirements. Schoenfeld (1987) summarizes the findings as follows:

Fifty-one (45.5%) reported no minimum educational requirements for bar mitzvah. The remainder indicated that at least one congregation in the community made such requirements. Of the 112 communities responding to the survey, 107 had Jewish populations of less than 100,000. In communities of this size, minimum requirements were imposed by synagogues representing all branches of Judaism. For the five communities of over 100,000, no information was available beyond the fact that at least one congregation in each of these communities had educational requirements. The most common requirement in place was three years' attendance, but some congregations required less and a few congregations required more. . . . The number of communities in which bat mitzvahs were held was not given; where bat mitzvahs were held, the educational requirements were the same for girls as boys. (p. 74)

These strictures were remarkably successful:

[T]he pattern of Jewish education in North America was substantially different before and after minimum educational requirements became widespread. First, the percentage of enrolled school-aged children approximately doubled. From the period of mass migration until World War II, from 25 to 30% of Jewish children aged 5–14 were enrolled in Jewish education each year. A study of enrollment between 1948 and 1958 showed an increase of 131.2%, raising the percentage of children 5–14 receiving Jewish education to between 40 and 45%. In 1962, it was estimated that of Jewish children 5–17, 53% were enrolled in Jewish education. Second, the setting of Jewish education changed. While in the pre-war period congregational schools were common, a substantial percentage of students were enrolled in communally sponsored Talmud Torahs, tiny *bedarim*, secular Yiddish schools, or were privately tutored. By 1958, the congregational school had become dominant, accounting for 88.5% of total enrollments. Third, it appears that attendance expectations changed. A 1918 New York report found that more than half of the students “dropped out” of class without completing the year. A 1919 Chicago report estimated a drop-out rate of one-third. By the 1950s, with a bar mitzvah ceremony usually dependent on continuous enrollment for a number of years, the drop-out rate was much lower. (p. 77)

While data of this sort cannot demonstrate causality, and while a number of factors—including the Holocaust, the founding of the State of Israel, and increased social and economic mobility—might have accounted, in part, for the increased enrollment of Jewish children in synagogue schools, Schoenfeld doubts that these were the only reasons:

While there was undoubtedly much enthusiasm for synagogue-building and a heightened interest in Jewish education, it is easy to overestimate the degree to which all North American Jews took for granted that affiliation with an expensive synagogue and a minimum of three or more years of Jewish education. . . . Certain features of Jewish education, synagogue affiliation, and family life become more understandable if the imposition of minimum educational requirements for bar (and by extension bat) mitzvah is seen as the outcome of a process of tension, conflict and accommodation between “elite” and “folk” interest groups within Judaism. (Schoenfeld, 1987, p. 77)

In extracting this “payment” from the folk, the elite seemed unaware of the Law of Unanticipated Consequences. They seemed indifferent to the fact that coercion is a far cry from intrinsic motivation. While the folk followed the rules set by the elite, they did not necessarily become more committed to either Judaism or to the synagogue.

Coerced enrollment in Jewish education . . . was rarely accompanied by a change in the home environment. Tension between what the school taught and what the family believed and practiced remained an institutionalized part of Jewish life, with many students having a school experience that has been referred to as “Siddur and yelling.” Jewish educators, however, clearly preferred to have students under these circumstances than not to have them at all.

Instead of being a ceremony acknowledging full participation of the adolescent in sacred rituals, bar mitzvah appears to have become a ritual of discontinuity, the last time the boy was obligated to present himself as a participant in his father’s world. It became a ritual in which traditional commitments were affirmed and then ignored. (Schoenfeld, p. 69)

Had the elites of the 1930s and 40s considered all of the potential consequences of this attempt to mandate attendance, they might have thought twice. From this period on, the supplementary school became inextricably linked with bar/bat mitzvah preparation.

UNINTENDED AND UNWELCOME CONSEQUENCES OF LINKING BAR MITZVAH CELEBRATIONS TO JEWISH SCHOOLING

The notion that the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony represents the culmination of religious school makes perfect sense if one accepts the conventional American notion that the purpose of schooling is to accumulate credits toward a diploma. That the folk would perceive the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony as the equivalent of the high school graduation is understandable.

Unfortunately, the elite too often succumb to this way of thinking, or at least this way of talking. When promoting their synagogue's school, rabbis speak with pride of the proficiency with which their students lead prayers and/or chant Torah at their b'nei mitzvah. Educators warn parents that the consequence of excessive absences might be that their child will not be sufficiently prepared for the ceremony, and might need extra tutoring at the parents' expense. Websites and synagogue brochures note prominently the number of years students must be enrolled in the school in order to celebrate their b'nei mitzvah at the age of 13. While synagogue professionals certainly have many other goals in mind for a child's Jewish education, statements such as these reinforce the notion that the ultimate goal is bar/bat mitzvah preparation.

A 2007 AVI CHAI report summarized the problem in the following way:

Many congregations continue to tie synagogue education to the bar/bat mitzvah celebration, thinking this gives them leverage with families. It probably does, but the consequence is a distortion of Jewish education, which becomes focused on a one-time performance, rather than enculturation to a "way of life." It also reduces Jewish education to a coercive experience that families must endure—i.e., they are instructed to attend a set number of religious services over the course of the year prior to the bar/bat mitzvah. The linkage also places a strong emphasis on the acquisition of skills needed at the event, rather than on the breadth of education necessary to live as a Jew. (Wertheimer, 2007, p. 6)

The most obvious unintended consequence of this way of thinking is the precipitous drop in enrollment in the year after bar/bat mitzvah. But two other consequences are worth noting—a distortion of the Hebrew curriculum, and the proliferation of independent bar/bat mitzvah venues.

Post-B'nei Mitzvah Dropouts

The linkage of Jewish education to bar/bat mitzvah preparation leads students and their families to assume that there is no reason to continue their schooling after the big day. Stories abound of seventh-grade classes in which students stop coming immediately after celebrating their bar or bat mitzvah, leaving only the few who will not turn 13 until the eighth grade. Schools have responded to this attrition with a variety of strategies, most of them unsuccessful. Early on, the Reform Movement attempted to abolish the bar mitzvah ceremony entirely, replacing it with Confirmation in high school. But this trend never took hold; a 1960 survey found that 96% of Reform synagogues had reintroduced the bar mitzvah ceremony (Meyer, 1988, p. 374; Meyer & Plaut, 2001, pp. 104–106). Some congregations ask their bar/bat mitzvah candidates to sign a pledge stating that they will remain

in the religious school through Confirmation; but, of course, no significant consequences can be imposed on students who do not honor the pledge.

Some congregations have been able to retain their middle school and high school students by offering attractive programs that match adolescent needs and interests; one of these will be discussed below. But a recent census of supplementary schools shows just how prevalent this problem is: nationally, drop-out rates range from 35% in 8th grade and 55% by 9th grade, to 80–85% by 11th and 12th grades (Wertheimer, 2008, p. 10).

The consequences for synagogue life are also sobering. When parents associate synagogue membership with the celebration of b'nei mitzvah, they see no need to retain their membership in subsequent years. Thus, surveys of membership in Reform congregations consistently find that the distribution of families with children peaks when the youngest child reaches the age of 13.³

The Degradation of Hebrew Education

A second unintended consequence of linking Jewish schooling to bar/bat mitzvah preparation has been the gradual narrowing of the Hebrew curriculum to the decoding of a set of prayers. This change did not happen overnight. In the 1930s through the 1960s, the rebirth of the State of Israel led to a keen interest in Modern Hebrew among teachers and students alike. But as the decades passed, the State of Israel came to be taken for granted, Israelis became increasingly conversant in English, and the belief that studying Hebrew was a way of supporting the State appeared increasingly dubious.

Throughout the 20th century, the interest of Americans in foreign languages continued to wane. With the exception of immigrant families, children in the United States are rarely exposed to a second language before they reach high school. At the same time, the most recent research on language acquisition challenges the assumption that foreign languages can be taught effectively through textbooks. In a recent article in the *Journal of Jewish Education*, Lifsa Schachter (2010) summarizes the findings of decades of brain-research on reading, and applies the lessons of this research to the teaching of Hebrew.

One of the most important findings from the research on reading, which maps areas of the brain that are activated when identifying print symbols,

³In the Conservative Movement there is also a drop in membership after the bar/bat mitzvah of the youngest child, but it is not as drastic as it is in the Reform Movement (26% in the Conservative Movement, as opposed to well over 35% in the Reform Movement; <http://www.huc.edu/faculty/faculty/pubs/StevenCohen/MembersAndMotives.pdf>, p. 5.) I would like to thank Stuart Schoenfeld for calling this paper to my attention.

is the extent of the speaking-reading continuum. Reading begins as an oral process. . . . Words are stored in the brain as sounds and not as print images. (p. 77)

The current consensus among foreign language specialists, Schachter (2010) notes, is that reading should not be introduced until students are exposed to a language orally, and have a base vocabulary. This is antithetical to the current practice of teaching the decoding of words with which the students are barely familiar, that express concepts that are highly abstract.

In the supplementary school children typically spend two to three years learning the alphabet. From third to sixth grade they review the letters and vowel signs, practice reading parts of words, non-words, and clusters of words, often without relation to regular word patterns and sequences. They may even practice letter combinations that cannot occur in Hebrew words. They also practice reciting specific prayers and are taught a limited vocabulary. Despite all the time spent at these tasks, few can apply decoding skills with any fluency to untaught material.

After many years of study, students generally remain hesitant and unsure when sounding out new material. It is a rare learner who reaches a level of automaticity and fluency that allows for decoding new material with the ease characteristic of good decoders. Most children require extensive tutoring in decoding skills as part of bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah preparations. (p. 79)

Students who are exceptionally motivated can overcome all of these barriers, Schachter (2010) notes, citing Refuseniks in the Former Soviet Union as an example:

I witnessed the power of motivation when I visited an underground Jewish Sunday School in Moscow in the late 1980s. Despite untrained teachers and inadequate materials, these students, who came together only once a week for several hours, reached levels of achievement that would be the envy of all our institutions.

What these students had and our students frequently lack is a goal of ultimate meaning. Learning Hebrew for the sake of the bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah ceremonies is not sufficiently motivating. It is too remote for most students until a few months prior to the event, and both the students and their parents know that there can be last minute tutoring so that the child will in any event be able to perform adequately for the ceremony. (pp. 87-88)

Linking Jewish schooling to bar/bat mitzvah preparation was ultimately self-defeating. The emphasis on performance at the prayer service reduced

the Hebrew curriculum to the most difficult aspect of the language, diminishing most students' chances of success, and wasting many hours of instruction.

The Do-It-Yourself Bar/Bat Mitzvah

With so many of the stakeholders reinforcing (either explicitly or implicitly) the notion that the crowning achievement of Jewish education is leading prayers and reading Torah at one's bar/bat mitzvah ceremony, the logical next step was to bypass the synagogue altogether. Children of middle-school age could be trained to recite prayers and read Torah within a year, and their parents could then hold a private ceremony at their home or country club. While synagogues have often been accused of being "bar mitzvah mills," it took a surprisingly long time for these true bar mitzvah mills to proliferate.

B'nai Horin (whose name means Children of Freedom) is a Jewish Renewal congregation located in Los Angeles. It offers a year-long bar/bat mitzvah preparation class that is open to any 12-year-old. The program includes Sunday classes and Hebrew tutoring, whose cost ranges from \$4,500 to \$7,000, depending upon the amount of tutoring required.⁴ Costs for the ceremony itself range from \$1,000 to \$2,000. Membership in the congregation (which costs only \$360 per year) is encouraged, but not required.

While bar/bat mitzvah programs like the one at B'nai Horin have existed for many years, with parents being referred through word of mouth, more recent programs owe their popularity to the Internet. Googling "bar mitzvah vacations," one can find (in addition to the tours of Israel that presumably complement the synagogue-based bar/bat mitzvah) a variety "unique," "easy," and "more affordable" ways to celebrate one's child's bar/bat mitzvah, including: Skype-based tutoring with a cantor;⁵ cruises that include a day spent marking the ceremony at a "historic" synagogue;⁶ and a variety of other "destination" bar mitzvahs.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO REVERSE THE TREND?

Once the genie escapes from the bottle, it is nearly impossible to recapture it. Nonetheless, a number of supplementary schools have managed to enter into a new understanding with students and parents, in which the bar/bat mitzvah is seen as just one milestone within the larger context of Jewish education.

⁴<http://www.bnaihorin.com/bnai-mitzvah/costs-and-fees/>

⁵<http://www.easybarmitzvah.org/>

⁶http://www.barmitzvahvacations.com/caribbean_cruise_bar_mitzvah.php

Kehillah

Kehillah (community) is the pseudonym for an independent supplementary school that has received national attention for its innovative approach to supplementary Jewish education, combining afterschool care with Jewish learning, and hiring teachers for half-time positions.⁷ While most schools primarily offer classroom instruction, perhaps augmented by a Shabbaton or family program, Kehillah sees itself as a community whose overall purpose is enculturation. A description posted on its website includes the following:

[Kehillah] isn't just a place to acquire Jewish knowledge. It's also a place where kids learn to become a part of the living Jewish tradition—in play, social interaction, and study. A place where we create positive Jewish memories and nurture happy Jewish children.

“Kehillah kids” learn Judaism through the heart, soul and intellect. They develop a love of Jewish life through joyful engagement with fellow students and teachers in the rich weave of Jewish Tradition and culture. The Kehillah day from start to finish is infused with Jewish values and the Hebrew language. (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009, p. 4)

Kehillah is not affiliated with any synagogue. Middle school and high school students hold *mincha* and *ma'ariv* services, but the school does not hold services on Shabbat. Thus, it has the liberty of side-stepping the goal of preparation for bar/bat mitzvah. In the words of the director of one branch of Kehillah:

I'm much more interested in what does it mean to be 13 and make Jewish choices, and have a Jewish vocabulary, and know your history and what that means to you now, and feel like a speaker of the language. That's who I want 13-year-olds to be. And my belief about that is that if they can do all that, they are going to do just fine that morning. They are studiers of text and deep thinkers of issues, and so they'll write their *dvar torah* just fine. We don't do that with them, but we study a whole lot of text with them and so they know how to do it. We don't teach them to lead services or chant from the *Siddur*, but reading Hebrew is pretty comfortable for them. (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009, p. 21)

Because it wants to teach Hebrew as a communicative language, and because prayers form a relatively minor part of its curriculum, Kehillah teaches modern Hebrew, rather than Siddur Hebrew,

⁷In contrast, synagogue-based religious schools, where 64% of teachers teach 1–4 hours a week, and 32% taught 5–12 hours; and only 4% teach 13 hours or more (Gamoran, Goldring, & Robinson, 1998, p. 12).

because it's a living language and kids naturally like learning it. It's fun. *Siddur* Hebrew isn't fun. It's not compelling. It's not the compelling part of prayer—you want to know what you're saying, but the work of figuring out what you're saying isn't the compelling part. If you're not instinctually prayerful, it is hard. (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009, p. 21)

A majority of Kehillah parents are synagogue members, and celebrate their children's b'nei mitzvah at those congregations.⁸ For parents who are not affiliated with synagogues, but want their children to celebrate their b'nei mitzvah, Kehillah teachers tutor the child privately, and sometimes also help the parents plan the ceremony.

With bar/bat mitzvah taken out of the equation, both parents and students appreciate Kehillah for its strong community and deeply rooted values, especially the value of *kavod* (respect). One mother said of her son, a second grader:

He really takes to heart the stuff they talk about here, like *kavod*. He'll come home . . . [after they've had a discussion of] what they can do to be respectful of your parents, to be helpful . . . and he'll start doing them. And he's not doing them because he has to come back in and tell them. It's really kind of cool. . . . they're teaching him to become a mensch. (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009, p. 37)

Beginning in the sixth grade, students pray a short service together, and teachers focus more on prayer in general and the Hebrew of the Siddur in particular. Perhaps because the students haven't spent four years on the decoding of prayers, they seem more open to praying in the context of Kehillah. The father of a teenager praises Kehillah for its spirituality:

the primary success has been the cultural identification, the content, the spirit. . . . My daughter loves prayer. She leads *t'fillah* in the evening, a *Maariv* (evening) service for the kids in *Tichon*. She's very comfortable in synagogue with the ritual part of it. But she's very thoughtful and well educated in the other dimensions, too. (Aron & Moskowitz, 2009, p. 38)

Tikvah

Tikvah (hope) is the pseudonym for a small synagogue of 165-member units in a relatively isolated mid-Western Jewish community. In keeping with its

⁸It is a sad commentary on the way in which schooling and bar/bat mitzvah have become intertwined that some (though by no means all) local synagogues will not allow students at Kehillah to celebrate their b'nei mitzvah there unless they also attend the synagogue's school.

Conservative affiliation and the strong ideological stance of its rabbi, much of the education is focused on teaching the prayers of the Siddur. “[The rabbi and teachers] want their students to become totally comfortable with Shabbat liturgy and practice and to have the interest, skills and motivation to participate fully” (Shevitz & Gribetz, 2009, p. 54). The school meets on Shabbat morning, and part of the instruction takes place in the midst of the Shabbat morning service. However, “the learning, for children as well as adults, doesn’t come only from classes.”

It comes from experiencing how their community operates and them enacting its norms. The content presented in class has real-life implications. From the youngest to the oldest, people practice what they learn. . . . In a place like this, a parent explains, you “can’t have the attitude that we can sit back and wait for the big shots to do it!” People have to get involved. (p. 51)

At *Tikvah*, the bar/bat mitzvah has been returned to its proper place as signifier of deepening commitment, rather than as a graduation ceremony. Students read Torah and lead parts of the service both before and after their b’nei mitzvah. There are few, if any, dropouts after the age of 13. Rather, post-b’nai mitzvah students are expected to participate like the adults; and, with few exceptions, they do.

[A] teenager explains that the rabbi “gives a list like every month and a half, and we’re all on there [with liturgical responsibilities]. Oh you’re doing that, and you’re doing the *haftorah* and you have the *maftir*. We all help out.” Others are quick to point out that if anyone doesn’t like a particular responsibility, they do something else: “Like Lauren, she doesn’t lead services or have an *aliyah* . . . so she is asked to usher.” (Shevitz & Gribetz, 2009, p. 51)

The Shabbat service is the core of the community. Without any written pledge, and without any coercion, teenagers participate in the service, because they feel as much ownership as the rabbi. A mother whose family moved from another city “insisted that their children, dead-set against attending the school, try it. ‘By the third week they were totally at home. My daughter almost lives there now’” (Shevitz & Gribetz, 2009, p. 68). In the words of another teenager:

When someone’s not here, everyone knows. . . . If someone’s sick everyone hopes you get better. Everyone is really an important part of community. . . . We all read Torah and lead services all the time and its part of the small community. . . . There isn’t one rabbi who does everything. (p. 68)

Both Kehillah and Tikvah are small, tightly knit communities that have a clearly defined vision, and a structure that enables that vision to be realized. In both, teachers, parents, and even students can articulate and explain the vision; and in both the rite of passage marked by bar/bat mitzvah is just a small part of a larger context of becoming a Jewish adult.

Shabbat Communities

A school need not be small in order to communicate the message that Jewish learning is a life-long endeavor, and that bar/bat mitzvah is but one milestone on this journey. In the past two decades a significant number of congregations have embraced the ideal of becoming “Congregations of Learners.” These synagogues have found a variety of ways to downplay the bar/bat mitzvah as an endpoint, and promote the notion that Jewish learning is *l’shma*, for its own sake. Most popular among the new models they have created is the “Shabbat Community,” in which parents attend school along with their children, on either Shabbat morning or Shabbat afternoon, in lieu of the children’s attending on Sunday (Langer, 2002; Margolius & Weissman, 2002; Weissman & Margolius, 2002). The programs generally include a family worship service, an opportunity to learn as a family, and an opportunity to learn in age cohorts, either weekly or biweekly.⁹ A few programs of this type meet on Sunday mornings, and thus may not have a worship component, but adhere to the same basic structure otherwise.

This model represents the logical extension of family education; by attending along with their children, parents in these programs demonstrate that they see Jewish learning as relevant for adults too. Participation in a Shabbat community can have a profound effect on families. Susan Wolfe, a parent in *Shabbaton* at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, CA, one of the earliest of these programs, writes:

After five years, how has *Shabbaton* affected our family? For one thing, it has demonstrated to our children that Jewish learning is not only for children; we are involved in their learning, and in our own. When they go to religious school, we go to religious school. When we come back together, we each have an experience to share on a common Jewish topic. Additionally, we are practicing what we preach: We tell our children that Shabbat is a time for relaxation and study; each Shabbat, we relax and study with other Jewish families at our synagogue. . . .

But perhaps the most meaningful outcomes have been personal. As much as anything I have learned at *Shabbaton*, I have learned how

⁹Students in grades 3–7 generally continue studying Hebrew during the week, alongside their former Sunday school classmates.

very much I have yet to learn. I discovered the depth of my hunger to further my understanding and appreciation of our Jewish heritage. (Aron, 2000, p. 19)

Not every family in these congregations is willing or able to commit to this intensive involvement, and most synagogues with Shabbat Communities also offer a more conventional Sunday religious school classes as well. The percentage of parents participating in the family school alternative ranges from 20–60%. This creates a natural experiment, with students who attend the normative school serving as a “control group.” While no hard data exists to date,¹⁰ educators in these congregations report that students in the family school are more engaged than their Sunday-school counterparts. While they may have joined the program for a variety of reasons (some because they like the idea of spending a weekend morning with their children, others because Saturday was more convenient for their family, or because their friends were in the program), after 6 or 7 years of attending Shabbat services with their families, they understand that being Jewish goes far beyond having a bar/bat mitzvah. In the words of Rabbi/Cantor Angela Warnick Buchdal, who led the Sharing Shabbat program at Westchester Reform Temple for several years:

At the end of the day, virtually everyone comes out of the experience feeling, “I am a super involved Reform Jew. I am literate with the liturgy, I’m a regular Shabbat goer. Shabbat has become a real part of my week and my family’s week. This has become a sanctuary and time for my family.” (Rabbi/Cantor Angela Buchdal, Western Reform Temple, Personal Communication, February 1, 2006)

Shifting the Focus of Bar/Bat Mitzvah Programs

At least one synagogue school has found that by shifting the focus of the bar/bat mitzvah program away from the prayers to be recited at the ceremony to the mitzvah of *gemilut hasadim* (good deeds), candidates for b’nei mitzvah stay engaged during the year of preparation and beyond. The BM3T (Bar Mitzvah Magical Mystery Tour) Program, an 18-month program for sixth and seventh graders at Temple Beth Elohim of Wellesley, MA, begins with a weekly 2½-hour class for the first 6 months. But it also includes two retreats, nine sessions for families, and a Sunday program called *Ma’asim Tovim*, which is described in the following way:

¹⁰The Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) is conducting such a study, collecting its baseline data before many of these models were launched; it will take a number of years with this model (and others) running, before data for comparisons can be collected.

Part of becoming a bar or bat mitzvah is becoming an active and responsible member of the community. Over the course of the BM3T experience, students will engage in classroom learning about mitzvot and ethics, social justice training workshops, long-term volunteer service activities, and service learning.¹¹

The goals of the program are listed on the website as:

- To engage students and their families in the process of study, mitzvot, worship, *ma'asim tovim* (good deeds), and celebration in order to inspire their continued engagement in lifelong Jewish learning and living.
- To foster a sense of community through the interaction of students, parents, families, clergy and staff.¹²

Beginning in the spring of the sixth grade and continuing through the seventh grade, the students no longer attend class, but rather spend between 1½ and 3 hours every 2 to 4 weeks volunteering at 1 of 8 to 10 organizations, such as a soup kitchen or a recycling center. To make the connection between Judaism and their volunteer work, each site visit begins with a 20- to 30-minute study of a relevant Jewish text; to maximize the personal impact of the work, students keep journals. Through this combination of activities, the synagogue maximizes the values it prizes above all others: the creation of community, and life-long engagement in Jewish learning and living. To be sure, part of the program focuses on preparation for the bar/bat mitzvah; but a larger part is focused on life-long Jewish living and learning.

Flexible and Engaging Programs for Middle School and High School Students

For decades, Jewish communal leaders have bemoaned the drop-out rate among eighth grade students. As noted above, many congregations ask their b'nei mitzvah candidates to sign a pledge saying they will remain in the school through Confirmation. Data on the effectiveness of these pledges has not been collected, so it is difficult to know just how many students in these synagogues enroll for the eighth grade and beyond, and how this percentage compares to the percentage of students in schools that do not require such a pledge.

¹¹This quotation is taken from the brochure.

¹²<http://www.bethelohim-wellesley.org/learning/bm3t.php?page=21972>

The challenges of post-b'nei mitzvah education go beyond the perception that bar/bat mitzvah is akin to graduation. Even families who would like their children to continue in religious school find that the workload of middle school and high school students, coupled with the expectation that these students engage in afterschool activities that will make them stand out in the competition for college admission, preclude ongoing participation in any additional activities. But part of the problem is the quality of the high school program. Over the years, individual congregations have experimented with different approaches to post-b'nei mitzvah education. Unfortunately, few of these programs last more than a few years; even congregations that have experimented with alternative structures for their pre-b'nei mitzvah program have a difficult time creating and sustaining a post-b'nei mitzvah program that will meet the needs and interests of teenagers to the extent that they will come voluntarily, despite their other obligations and activities.

The educators and rabbis at Temple Beth Elohim sought to create a program that revolved around the students' interests, enabled them to interact with their peers, and yet provided sufficient flexibility so as not to create additional stress in their lives. Over the years, their *Havaya* (Hebrew for "experience") program evolved to include a *bavurah* (fellowship group) component, a youth group component, and a retreat component.

Havurot meet approximately twice a month for anywhere between 1 and 5 hours. Though the themes of the *bavurot* vary somewhat from year to year based on students' interest and instructor availability, *bavurot* that are offered annually include Jewish Actors' Workshop, Youth Choir, Tastes of Judaism (cooking), Madrichim (teaching assistants), and *Sherut* (social action). Students may participate in more than one *bavurah*, and post-Confirmation students in 11th and 12th are eligible for the leadership *bavurah*.

Havaya retreats are held three times a year, with topics that rotate on a triennial cycle: world Jewish history one year, American Jewish history the next, and Israel the 3rd year. The retreats include *r'fillah* and the viewing of theme-related films.

In 2007, *Havaya's* 3rd year, the synagogue had a post-b'nei mitzvah retention rate of 66%, up from 23% in 2004. The education team was working on ways to increase the retention rate even further. The directors of the program realized that both of them needed to teach in the BM3T program, so that they would develop personal relationships with the students at an earlier age. They created a youth lounge that was truly a refuge for teenagers to hang out on their own. Realizing that among their most active teens were some whose parents were not involved in the synagogue, and had no expectation that their children continue their Jewish education, they made an effort to reach out to all parents, explaining what the synagogue had to offer their teens by way of a safe and non-stressful haven.

A Call for Collective Action

In a 2002 posting on the Synagogue 3000 website, Rabbi Richard Marker wrote that the time had come “to put the bar/bat mitzvah back in a healthy and appropriate context—for the benefit of synagogues, the families, and the Jewish people.” To do so, he argued, would require a national effort:

[W]hile I am not typically a proponent of national conferences to solve problems, in this case I feel that a trans-denominational conference committed to the question of rethinking the bar/bat mitzvah experience may be the only way that individual synagogues can be empowered in their commitment to explore changes in their own practices.¹³

This brings us full circle. From a concerted effort to use bar mitzvah to solve the problem of low student enrollment, 70 years later comes a call for a concerted effort to solve the problem of bar/bat mitzvah itself. To date, the call does not seem to have been answered, but we would do well to consider the possibility of a collective approach. Might synagogues be able to join together in an effort to convince students and parents that Jewish education is much more than bar/bat mitzvah preparation? Might re-thinking the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony, and tying preparation for that ceremony to active participation in Jewish life, rather than a more conventional classroom experience, lead parents to value the communal synagogue experience over the private boutique one? Might a more unified front succeed in creating a different kind of climate, giving synagogues the incentive to become more daring and less conventional? On the other hand, might collective action inevitably lead to a new set of unanticipated and unwanted consequences? While we cannot accurately predict all the consequences of a particular set of actions, we owe it to ourselves, and to the coming generation to Jewish students and educators to consider possible negative outcomes, in addition to positive ones. A collective effort to separate Jewish education from bar/bat mitzvah would undoubtedly lead some additional parents to skip religious school altogether and simply hold a private ceremony. How large might such a group be? Would the loss of this set of families increase or decrease the quality of Jewish education for the remainder of the students? Might synagogue boards be willing to accept a decline in membership? Might they choose, instead, to offer a wider variety of educational options, or to merge with other synagogues? How might these changes affect the quality of Jewish education?

¹³<http://www.synagogue3000.org/synagogue-transformation-revisited-and-some-thoughts-kdushah>

BEWARE THE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

In the article in which he first proposed the Law of Unintended Consequences, Merton (1936) considered a range of reasons why those who attempt to implement social policies neglect to consider the broad range of possible consequences. In some cases, ignorance or error are the culprits. In other cases the prediction of a dire consequence is proven false, because people heed the warning and change their ways, much like the Ninevites heeded Jonah's prophecy and repented.

The reason that best fits the case of bar/bat mitzvah is what Merton (1936) called the "imperious immediacy of interest," a situation in which the advocates of a presumed consequence are so intent on this particular solution that they ignore, if not willfully then at least consistently, any data that point to other possible results. The advocates of mandatory requirements for religious school were so focused on the goal of increased enrollment that they failed to consider the damage these mandates might cause to religious school curricula or post-b'nei mitzvah programs.

This particular syndrome should give us pause, because Jewish educators fall into it so easily. Two examples come to mind. Some progressive day schools are so eager to attract parents that they tend to stress the excellence of their secular studies, and to downplay Hebrew and Judaic studies. Focusing on admissions, they fail to consider the values and attitudes of the parents, and are then surprised when parents object to increases in the time or money allotted to Judaic studies. Advocates of Taglit-Birthright Israel have been so focused on the ways in which a trip to Israel can enrich a young adult's Jewish identity that they have not paid sufficient attention to the unanticipated consequence of their program's success—that many who might otherwise have traveled to Israel for 4–8 weeks as teenagers defer this trip in order to be eligible for a free 10-day trip when they are in college. Perhaps 10 days as an adult is more beneficial than 6 weeks as a teenager; but one does not hear any open, measured discussion of this issue, because of the "imperious immediacy of interest."

Schoenfeld's (1987) article teaches us is that we ignore the Law of Unanticipated Consequences at our own peril.

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