

Caucasian, manages to stay single, too, and I thought how nice it would be if he could spin her Kai in Waikiki), he has been graduated up a notch as an executive with a big building firm.

TIMES-ADVOCATE Family

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Rites an entry to adult world

Bar, bat mitzvah ceremonies require much study for youths

By MALCOLM SCHWARTZ
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Someone once quipped, "There's more bar than mitzvah in America."

While the anonymous speaker undoubtedly was referring to those who go overboard celebrating a Jewish child's entry into the religious world as an adult, a bar mitzvah (or bat mitzvah for girls) means something entirely different to the youngster involved.

It not infrequently proves to be an ordeal. But it also can prove to be a very satisfying one upon its completion.

Witness Casey Merrill, who now can afford to look back with all the 14 years of wisdom she's attained in her young life and philosophize about her ordeal.

"You're scared to death when you go up there," she says, thinking back six months. "And when it's over, you're so glad it's over."

"You really feel like you've accomplished something. You're proud of yourself and proud to be a Jew."

Casey, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. M.S. Merrill of Vista, became a bat mitzvah last December.

On the other hand is Brett Gitskin, the 12-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Gitskin of Vista, who is in the midst of his ordeal. He will become a bar mitzvah in August.

Circumstances tend to make him far more concerned with practical considerations — like making certain he's learned his lessons well. He attempts to mask his concern with humor.

"I'll have a nervous breakdown," he laughs goodnaturedly.

Bar mitzvah literally means "son of the commandment." "Bat" (pronounced as in the word "hot") is the Hebrew word for "daughter of."

It is the day, normally a boy's 13th birthday, when congregational responsibilities formally fall on a young person's still-growing shoulders.

To Rabbi Melvin Weinman, spiritual leader of the North County Jewish Community Center in Vista, it's the day of "spiritualization of the idea of being initiated into the adult community."

The practice of the bar mitzvah, he says, evolved from the old initiatory rites of primitive people, which used to consist of feats of war, hunting and athletics.

"The ancient Hebrews came out of an area (the Mideast) that was primitive," he points out.

"The bar mitzvah is a challenge to a youngster's literacy, his stage presence in front of the community and, finally, his intellectual understanding of the meaning of the texts from the Bible that are assigned for that week."

Different portions of the Torah, the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) are read consecutively each week at Sabbath services in which the bar mitzvah child participates.

Brett's portion on the day of his bar mitzvah, Aug. 24, consists of Deuteronomy 16:18 to 21:9. In Hebrew, his portion, called a sedrah, is known as Shoftim and loosely translated means judgments.

It deals with ancient Israel's establishment of a judiciary system, Brett explains.

Casey's sedrah in Genesis included

the story of Jacob's return to the land of Canaan after years of self-imposed exile and the account of his wrestling with an angel.

"A most important sedrah," says Weinman, referring to the concept espoused — "the idea that every man really wrestles with God" in his or her own way.

Casey read the ancient Hebrew script from the Torah scrolls to the congregation on the day of her bat mitzvah. She recalls her period of concentrated study in preparation.

"When I first started studying," she says, "I thought it was going to be a regular ceremony, and that's it. But then I started studying with the rabbi, and then you really kinda get into your Torah portion."

"I don't understand Hebrew, and so it doesn't really mean anything. And then you start studying with the rabbi and you really understand what the Torah is and how it relates to life today. You understand how to interpret it better."

Weinman sees this preparation as "a very difficult and adult challenge to a youngster of 13 — boy or girl."

"The Bible is not a book for children," he explains. "It's not nursery rhymes. It's about adult feelings, motivations and, frankly, sins. And a youngster at the age of 13 ought to be introduced to this. That's what this means to the Jewish community."

There is more involved. Aside from the Torah portion, another portion from the latter books of the Old Testament is read or chanted at the Sabbath service.

The practice goes back to times of persecution of Jews when they were prohibited under penalty of death from studying the Torah or even reading the weekly portion at Sabbath services.

They devised a system of getting around the edict. Instead of reading the weekly Torah portion, they would read portions from the latter books of the Old Testament instead.

But not just any portion. They carefully selected portions that would specifically remind them of the weekly Torah portions supposed to be read every Sabbath.

Tradition dies hard in Judaism, and the practice continues this very day as part of the Torah service.

The bar or bat mitzvah traditionally chants the haftora at the service.

Brett is now learning to chant the haftora assigned to his weekly Torah portion. It is Isaiah 51:12 to 52:12, and it deals with establishing a program of religion for Israel after the Jews' return from exile in ancient Babylonia.

Brett's task (as was Casey's) is by no means an easy one despite years of Sunday School and Hebrew School.

But "from the standpoint of the youngster," says Weinman, "it is such a challenge that most of them outdo themselves."

"They are highly motivated by the opportunity to present themselves to the adult congregation in the way that a bar mitzvah requires. They feel honored, and most of them will therefore work very hard to perfect themselves."

Preparation for a bar mitzvah, he points out, can start perhaps 18 months before the set day.

"In my experience," says Weinman

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