

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SIDDUR PARTY TO BAR/BAT MITZVAH

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Sermon For

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The Importance Of The Siddur Party

One of the least surprising, yet amusing things I experience as a rabbi is when I encounter a young person approaching bar/bat mitzvah and ask them, “what is bar/bat mitzvah?” Yes – I'm sure you've already anticipated it. They almost invariably say, “that is when I become a man/woman”. This answer is almost standard irrespective of whether the child attends a Jewish day school or not. After a little chuckle, I try and get a little more serious and give them the stock answer about bar/bat mitzvah. A “son” or “daughter” of the commandment means just that – a young person who becomes responsible for the commandments of the Jewish faith and tradition. The term actually refers to the young person, and NOT to the ceremony – another amusing misconception of parents, rather than young people. The young person automatically becomes a bar/bat mitzvah upon reaching the proper age – in this case, at Reform synagogues, both boys and girls, at 13. The ceremony or Shabbat service in which the young person takes part is merely a way of marking this transition from childhood into bar/bat mitzvah. Parents say “I am having my son/daughter 'bar mitzvah-ed' – I suppose it's seen as some kind of magical ritual that does, well, something that perhaps many people are not sure about. A bar/bat mitzvah does not magically become a man or a woman, and Jewish tradition is quite clear about this. In the Mishnah, it states that 13 is the age for fulfillment of the commandments, but 18 is the proper age for marriage and 20 the proper age for earning a livelihood. I suppose some parents, especially those living with adult children well into their third or even fourth decade, might like to hear that latter one.

So, in fact, what does this transition, this new state actually signify? Under Jewish Law, children are not obligated to observe the commandments, although they are encouraged to do so as much as possible to learn the obligations they will have as adults. At the age of 13, children become obligated to observe the commandments. The bar/bat mitzvah ceremony formally, publicly marks the assumption of that obligation, along with the corresponding right to take part in leading religious services, to count in a *minyan*, form a binding contract, to testify before religious courts and to marry. Of course, in fact, no ceremony is needed to confer these rights and obligations. The popular bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is not required, and does not fulfill any commandment. These phenomenon of having these ceremonies is comparatively young – a mere few hundred years old. One website declared, “It is certainly not, as one episode of the Simpsons would have you believe, necessary to have a bar mitzvah in order to be considered a Jew!” I quoted that to you, because I think if certain religious sites want to mock popular culture, they should get their facts correct. I am fairly certain it was an episode of “The Family Guy” and not The Simpsons. The Simpsons is usually quite amusingly, and shockingly, correct in its facts.

Today we are welcoming some of our young people as they begin their journey towards bar/bat mitzvah. It seems fitting to offer them a *siddur*, our prayer book, containing our set of Shabbat prayers, some of the festival prayers, as well as wonderful readings from our ancient tradition, and the best of modern thought, philosophy, theology and even poetry and prose. The foundation of this book is about 1200 years old, and therefore important and integral to this Jewish adult journey that our young people are entering today.

Let us think for a moment about this festival of Sukkot that we are now celebrating.

So important, it is considered the most universalistic of our festivals – the one we will be celebrating in the world to come. It is called “*zman simchateinu*” the time of our rejoicing, or *HE-hag*, THE festival. What is it about the festival that gives it such power?

One commentator looks to the custom of *ushpizin*, the guests that are invited each night into our *sukkah*. Every tradition has different important guests, but they usually include prophets, sages, ancient and modern heroes, great biblical figures. But, despite being commanded to invite guests into our *sukkot*, and being forced to confront the vulnerability of our position within nature and the luxury we have every other day of the year of having permanent homes, it is difficult to truly identify and empathize with those who really have no permanent home and the vulnerability of going day to day wondering whether they will have enough food.

The *ushpizin* help give us an insight. In the mystical text of the Zohar, it says, “One must also gladden the poor, and the portion that would otherwise have been set aside for these Ushpizin guests should go to the poor. For if a person sits in the shadow of faith and invites those guests and does not give their portion to the poor, they all remain distant from him. ...The first of everything must be for one’s guests. If one gladdens guests and satisfies them, God rejoices over him. (Zohar, Emor 103a).” I think what is so wonderful about the Israeli film called *Ushpizin* is that it so beautifully encapsulates this notion from the Zohar – welcoming in absolutely every one who seeks its shelter, no matter how you may feel about them. In that movie, the couple welcoming the guests had to overcome every perfectly rational feeling of fear, disgust and contempt for the guests asking for their hospitality.

Our commentator continues by observing that the wisdom of the *ushpizin* custom is that it helps fuse reality with mythic possibility. If we were to really take seriously the command of the Zohar, we would be able to transform our *sukkah* into a safe space for social justice and radical welcome, for encounter and connection. He concludes, “In short, the *Ushpizin* teaches that a *sukkah* is, after all, an ancient microcosm of the world as it could be, as it must become—a universal shelter of peace.”

This insight provides a perfect example of why the continuity of our Jewish tradition, passing it on, living by example, is so essential when we think about how to raise our children. Even when we are remembering our history, or living out the commandments, we can find a vital, meaningful and even essential contemporary significance. By passing on our *siddur* to our young people, we are not only passing down 1200, and more, years of wisdom and experience, but we are passing on a symbol of how our tradition remains meaningful and significant in every realm of life and through every moment of our lives. When they understand this, they will have become truly worthy Jewish men and women.