

Bar Mitzvah

By RABBI SAMUEL SILVER

Considering how old Judaism is (it began with Abraham some 4,000 years ago) Bar Mitzvah is virtually an innovation, a "reform" in the Jewish liturgy, having been introduced in about the 13th century of this era. At that time, or perhaps earlier, young men near their 13th birthday, were "called up" to participate in the worship service.

The boy thus marks the completion of one stage of his religious education. Part of every Sabbath service is a reading from the first five books of the Bible, which are contained in a parchment scroll. Both the scroll and its contents are called Torah, a Hebrew word which means instruction.

In the Torah scroll the Hebrew is written without vowels. By reading them from the scroll and reciting the blessings before and after the Torah reading, the youngster demonstrates the results of his studies. The event is therefore a reason for celebration.

The 13-year-old boy is termed a Bar Mitzvah. Bar means "son of" or "expert in" in a language called Aramaic, which is related to Hebrew. Aramaic was the spoken tongue of the Judeans around the turn of the Millennium: it was the language which Jesus spoke.

Mitzvah means "commandment" or "good deed."

Bar Mitzvah, then, means a young man who is begin-

ning to reach the point when he can gain satisfaction from the performance of worthy deeds. In an Orthodox setting the Bar Mitzvah is counted as one of the ten men needed to start a prayer service.

The ceremony at which the Bar Mitzvah appears is also referred to as Bar Mitzvah.

In addition to reading from one of the first five books of the Bible, the Bar Mitzvah reads also an assigned part of another Biblical book. The second Scriptural reading is called Haftarah ("additional passage") and it too is preceded and followed by special blessings.

In traditional synagogues (Conservative and Orthodox) every youth is expected to become a Bar Mitzvah. In Reform synagogues it is optional, representing the willingness of the young man to undertake an assignment over

an beyond the regular curriculum of the Religious School. In Reform synagogues the young man is expected to continue his studies and, upon the completion of the ninth grade, he and his classmates are "inducted" into Judaism in a ceremony called Confirmation.

A ceremony introduced in modern times is the Bas Matzva ("daughter of the Commandment"), a Bar Mitzvah ceremony for girls.

The Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Bible) is divided into weekly sections, and one is read annually each week. The Bar Mitzvah's Torah reading is a segment of the reading - of-the-week (known in Hebrew as sedra, section, or parasha, portion).

The Torah and the Haftarah are usually linked together by an idea or content common to each.

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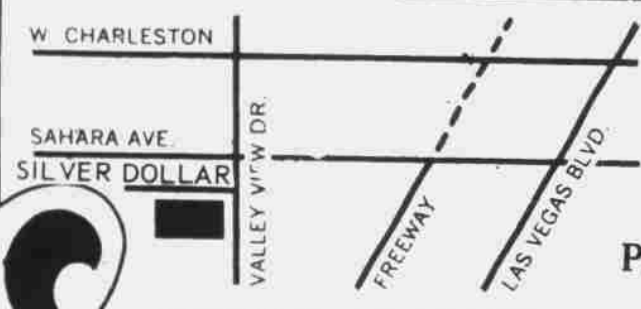
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