

U.S.C. RESEARCH: BAR MITZVAH LOST RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

LOS ANGELES -- The Jewish Bar Mitzvah rite apparently has lost its traditional religious significance, at least for the majority of boys and their families surveyed in a University of Southern California research study.

Findings indicated it now is more a social and ethnic event. For many Jewish boys, Bar Mitzvah marks the end of their formal religious practice and education in the Jewish faith, Dr. J.J. Horowitz found in a study for his doctoral dissertation at USC.

Horowitz, of Los Angeles (90025), is a faculty member of West Los Angeles College. He recently earned the Ph.D. degree in sociology at USC.

He terms the study "exploratory," its research sample not intended to be a stringent scientifically representative one of Jews at large. But Horowitz feels the findings do reflect a widespread phenomenon, he said in an interview.

Bar Mitzvah is an ancient and traditional "rite of passage" in which the Jewish boy purportedly is initiated into adult religious status.

But the rite doesn't seem to have much religious effect on the boys or their families, even though the youngsters spend considerable time in religious training preparing for the Bar Mitzvah Horowitz said.

In his study sample of 81 Orthodox, Conservative and Reform families, most had joined a temple on a "temporary basis" for the specific purpose of training the youngster for Bar Mitzvah.

After the rite, the formal religious practice of most of the boys and their families was found

to revert to the pre-Bar Mitzvah level of little or none.

"For many families, the stress and tension associated with the celebration of Bar Mitzvah appears to have crystallized into permanent feelings of hostility toward the rabbis and temples where the ceremony took place," Horowitz said in an interview.

However, most of the families surveyed had positive feelings about the Bar Mitzvah and felt the time and effort expended were worthwhile.

"The principal benefits of the rite were seen to be an opportunity for the youngster and his family to identify with and affirm their Jewishness. It is an experience which the Jew can remember fondly throughout his lifetime."

An unexpected finding of Horowitz' study was that well over 50 per cent of Bar Mitzvah families felt the rite was of major importance in enabling their non-Jewish guests at the event to better understand Jewish customs and ceremonies.

Horowitz said the ritual does motivate the Jewish child to learn the Hebrew language and to receive at least a limited Jewish education, but it serves as a motivation for continued Jewish study beyond the age of 13 for only a minority of celebrants.

A similar "rite of passage" for girls, the Bat Mitzvah, is a different story, Horowitz found. The Bat Mitzvah is celebrated far less frequently. There is less expectation and pressure that a girl become Bat Mitzvah than there is that a boy become Bar Mitzvah. Most Bat Mitzvahs are likely to be accompanied by significantly more religious commitment and continuing practice than are Bar Mitzvahs.

Another interesting finding of Horowitz' study was that despite the apparent lessening of the Bar Mitzvah's religious significance, it continues to be practiced widely.

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