

SJ Edelheit
Mitzvah

BAR MITZVAH TIME. I was about to turn 13 and like all good Jewish boys I was expected to go through this ancient ritual. I dreaded the prospect. My parents weren't especially religious; and since the temples or shuls in the Long Island suburbs of New York City where we lived had pricey membership fees, they had never bothered to become members. Oh, they managed, occasionally, to attend on high holy days and drag me and my older brother along. But, otherwise, we were free to be the heathens we naturally were.

But two years before, my mother's father had come to live with us after the death of his wife, my grandmother. He was small, kind, cigar-smoking, and at times a Groucho Marx funny Russian immigrant; he was also a proud and ardent member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. When he left the Bronx to move in with us, he brought along his old, well-oiled, foot-pedal operated Singer sewing machine. Like the master craftsman he was, he would bend, humpbacked, over this humming low-tech marvel still turning out new clothes for my mother and repairing the torn jeans and shirts my brother and I would regularly obliterate in our daily roughhousing. He spoke a mushed version of English, Russian, and Yiddish complicated further with strange unionisms he'd picked up over the years. Once during some labor troubles he came home fuming about a fellow worker: "He's a striker-breaker, farblunget and should go to hell in a basket," he said. So I couldn't always understand him, but I respected my grandfather and I loved him. And when he declared in no uncertain, and clearly understood, terms that he expected me to be Bar Mitzvahed, that was that.

My father, always a man of action, promptly, and somewhat mysteriously, unearthed a Hebrew tutor to prepare me for the ceremony. And "unearthed" is the proper word. He was a man in his 80's, tall, gaunt, tottering, always dressed in a tattered, shiny black suit. His long white beard was invariably stained with food and crumbs. He looked, walked, and spoke as if he had just risen from the grave, or so my over-vivid 12-year old imagination believed.

Of course I complained to my father about this smelly and severe presence he was bringing into my life. My father, large-hearted but bull-headed as always, would hear none of it. He was a short, thick-bodied, fiercely strong and stubborn man who loved his kids and wanted the best for them but was incapable of hearing them; once he decided on something, there was no challenging him. He was a force of nature; opposing him was like trying to stand in the way of a lava flow. His quick temper would ignite and he would just roll right over you with great energy and heat. So I had no choice but to accept the decision and put up with the scary tutor.

I never knew what to make of "The Scholar," as my father called him, though that was half in jest as he was nearly as disparaging of this wraith-like being as I was. But the Scholar made no secret of what he thought of me and my woeful Hebrew abilities. He sputtered in anger when he corrected my pronunciation, and I would try, unsuccessfully, to duck the spittle that came my way. He would tap the page with an overgrown

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finger nail or a long wooden pointer and mutter "again, again". And sometimes, if I had especially exasperated him with my mangled Alephs and Gimels, Memes and Shins, he would raise the pointer as if to strike my hand the way nuns in Catholic schools were said to do. But he would always look up to see my grandfather hovering nervously across the room and pull his hand back with some growled words I couldn't decipher.

So you might say I came to hate this torture and if I had had enough Hebrew to pray in, I would have used it to beseech Yahweh and ask out. But like it or not, the lessons went on for six weeks or so and as my birthday drew near, preparations for the big day began in earnest: A party was planned; invitations went out; a hand-me-down suit of my brother's was carefully re-tailored to fit by my grandfather. But there was one big problem. Not being a member of any nearby temples, we had to put in special requests to the local rabbis for an exception, a dispensation, to allow this outsider Jew the benefits of the mitzvah. They all refused with weak excuses or none. It was pay to play in the Long Island mitzvah world. My grandfather was embarrassed and my father fumed, but I was secretly delighted. We were all surprised and unprepared when the Scholar stepped up with a proposed solution. He knew of an old shul in Brooklyn where the rabbi, for a modest contribution, might be convinced to allow the Bar Mitzvah to take place. So arrangements were made, a date set, the Hebrew lessons put on a cram schedule. There was nothing I could do to slow the momentum.

The appointed day dawned dark and menacing and I felt I was swept up in a bad novel. The weather reports were ominous, but my father brushed these aside with a wave of his hand and a cheerless "It will be fine." So we were all, me, my brother, mother, grandfather, the Scholar, bundled into my father's old DeSoto for the trek to deepest Brooklyn. Squeezed in the back seat between my brother and the Scholar, I watched the scenery change from the green suburban lawns to the increasingly shabby tenements of the old Williamsburg streets.

When we arrived, the sky was a thickening grey and the wind was whipping the Scholar's beard horizontal. Though we didn't yet know it, the forecast tropical front was thrashing its way to a hurricane. A birthday Bar Mitzvah present from mother nature. From the outside, the synagogue was a worn brownstone with a chipped facade, a far cry from the Long Island temple-palaces. "Country clubs," my father had contemptuously called them. "Not for us!" His roots were in Brooklyn and he was far more comfortable in his city streets even if the neighborhoods had changed; and in some, like this, there were few Jews left and barely enough apparently to support this decaying old synagogue.

Inside, this old shul still had some lush though worn trappings. Red velvet seats, an elaborately carved wooden dais, and, in a glass-fronted case, a beautifully embroidered blue and white Torah. The Scholar had told us on the way here that it was said to be some 200-years old, very valuable, "worth its weight in gold", he said. "Or at least in matzoh," I heard my father quip from the front seat.

The temple's rabbi came out to meet us, a man even older and more decrepit than the Scholar. He, too, wore a shiny black suit and had thick, black-framed glasses that obscured his face. Unsmiling, he shook my fa-

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ther's hand and quickly pocketed the envelop my father offered. It looked like some holy version of a drug drop. Business transaction done, we moved on to the spiritual realm. Once indoors, the rabbi began to count the male adults present. With my grandfather, father, and the Scholar, we needed six more for the required minyan. We had been told that as part of the deal the temple would provide the necessary minyan numbers. But the count came up four short. The rabbi shrugged, said something about the weather, and shuffled off. My father's face grew red but he said nothing. What was he going to say? "We had a deal, give me back the cash?"

But my father was nothing if not quick-thinking and resourceful. He went over to my brother, grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him forwards. Before the rabbi could object, my father growled, "He's 17, for God's sake." I secretly enjoyed the stricken look on my brother's face, pressed unwillingly into service like those unfortunate 19th century British seamen scooped off the streets and dockyards to man his majesty's fleet. But even so we were still three short of a minyan.

The wind howled, the temple windows shook, and my grandfather and the Scholar exchanged worried commentary in some Hebrew-Yiddish-Russian dialect. Meanwhile, the original minyan-less group of pale elderly men gathered for the service sunk into their seats and looked suitably miserable. I could hear their occasional guttered whispers of unhappiness. I saw that my brother, now seated among them, had turned his yarmulke inside out and stared, grinning, up at the ceiling. He seemed to think he had been deposited into some old-age sitcom and couldn't help laughing whenever my father looked away. I was just in a daze, vaguely hoping this day-of-becoming-a-man disaster didn't foretell a story of a farcical adulthood to come.

Finally, my impatient father had enough of this waiting. It was clear no one else would show up in this howling hurricane to complete the minyan so the service could begin. He quickly threw on his overcoat, shushed my nervous mother's protestations and stamped off out the door and into the storm. "Where's he going?" I asked. "You know your father," my mother said. "No patience. He'll be back." My grandfather said nothing but his hands knotted and pulled on a handkerchief he had taken from his pocket. I felt bad for him. This was all really for his benefit after all and I didn't want him humiliated. My humiliation I could deal with. None of my friends were here and I only had to put up with the jibes from my un-Bar Mitzvahed brother. (He was already too old when my grandfather had come to live with us.) "This is great," he called from the minyan seats. "Maybe we'll have to walk home. In a hurricane!"

But then the temple doors burst open and in rushed my burly father followed by a slight elderly Black man who looked around at us as if he'd just stepped on another planet. My father took a yarmulke from his pocket and patted onto the man's head. "Sit, sit," he said, gesturing to the minyan seats. He flashed my mother an everything-will-be-all-right grin, then hurried out again into the storm.

We all stared at the newcomer who took the yarmulke from his head and turned it around and over in his hands. Then, apparently giving up on any attempt to make sense of this strange head covering, he smiled weakly at us, shrugged, and placed it flat and misshapen back on his

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head. Off in a corner, the Scholar and the Rebbe engaged in a heated, worried-whisper talk while my grandfather slumped into a chair next to my mother. You could trace the genetic resemblance in their deeply furrowed, worried brows.

We were still two short for the minyan but not for long. Ten minutes later my father again reappeared, the wind outside howling and then shushing as he opened and then shut the heavy wood door. This time he had in tow two young Hispanic men. They strutted and smiled as if this was a lark, a little adventure on a do-nothing stormy day for which they were no doubt being compensated. (Twenty bucks a head my father later confessed on the drive home.) One said something in Spanish and the other laughed. The Rebbe came over making shushing noises and gave my father a Sodom and Gamorrah look that would have turned him to stone had my father seen it or cared. But he was busy introducing these new recruits to the mysteries of the yarmulke and getting them seated. I noted most of the elderly minyan Jews moved their chairs a few inches further away from these unwelcome guests; but one, a ruddy-faced, bright-eyed old man clapped his hands together and looked delighted, as if watching a favorite soap opera come to life. Which of course was exactly what this attempted Bar Mitzvah was rapidly becoming.

There was a moment of suspended animation. The Rebbe, the Scholar, and my grandfather stared in disbelief at the mixed minyan group. My mother shook her head and tried to disappear into her chair. My brother sat with a twisted grin and arms resolutely folded waiting for the show to go on. But nobody said anything until my father slapped his hand on the dais to break the spell. "OK, let's do it!" he said, gesturing for the Rebbe to come take his place on the podium. The Rebbe shrugged, sighed deeply, and with a few muttered words in Hebrew stepped forward. He briefly surveyed the motley group before him and started to read the opening prayers for the service. But then, as if just wanting this farce over, he stopped, looked up, and snapped the prayer book closed. He pointed at me and beckoned me forward with a crooked finger.

I stepped up on the dais and stood behind the podium. The booklet with the relevant readings was placed before me by an unseen hand. (I was staring down at the unraveling cuff of my suit jacket, the hand-me-down from my brother that had seen better days.) So this was it. A deep breath, a quick look around the room, and then, studying the prayer book in front of me, I got to it. The strange spirals and bars of the ancient alphabet came into focus and made perfect sense, and the Hebrew flowed from my lips in a rich singing tone. I had it, I was in a "flow" or a "zone" as they say in basketball when you couldn't miss and all your shots were destined to go in. I was floating, I couldn't miss. When I looked up, the old men of the minyan were nodding and swaying rhythmically in their seats; the two Hispanic guys were drumming along, getting into it, keeping a beat with fingers on their knees; my family all had faces of shocked, happy amazement; even the mordant Scholar looked pleased, no doubt congratulating himself on a job well done.

And then there was a pause while the Rebbe went to the old polished wood cabinet behind me, unlocked it, and came forward with the beautiful 200-year old torah covered with what looked like bejeweled blue and

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white satin. He cradled it protectively in his arms as he shuffled over to me. I knew I was supposed to hold this rare and sacred object as I read the final prayer. But as the Rebbe placed it in my hands I was still looking down at the reading. I took my eye off the ball and the flow was suddenly broken. No sooner had I started the prayer when I felt the unexpectedly heavy torah begin to slip through my fingers. I grabbed roughly at it, then froze as the beautiful sacred scroll hit the floor with a dull thump and began to unroll across the stage.

I looked up to see my audience had frozen too, their mouths open in a silent gasp. And then time unstuck and again lurched forward. The gasps became audible and a low moan seemed to come from somewhere off to my right where the Scholar and my grandfather sat. A burst of harsh Hebrew-Yiddish and the Rebbe with flailing arms raced on his knees after the unspooling scroll.

What happened next is a blank. I came to with a blast of wet air in my face and realized we had stepped outside into the storm. The wind shrieked and if there was any conversation around me I couldn't hear it. But I remember my father's arm around me as he opened the door to the car. He held on to me as the others hurriedly ducked inside. Then my father gestured for me to sit up front with him; but as I moved forward, he suddenly pulled me back and wrapped me in his bear-like arms. I could feel his rough shaven face against my cheek. "So now you're a man!" he said happily, clapping me on the back as the dark skies opened and the rain began to fall.