

A BAR-MITZVAH AND A FUNERAL

One was a Bar Mitzvah in the morning, the other was a funeral in the afternoon. They occurred on the same day here in Jerusalem, and I was present at each of them. The Bar Mitzvah took place at the *kotel hamaaravi*. The funeral took place on an ordinary Jerusalem street, in front of a synagogue. But something beyond the obvious contrasts of life and death made the one event depressing, and the other uplifting.

As everyone knows, on Monday, Thursday, or Rosh Chodesh mornings, a large number of Bar Mitzvahs, most of them from the Diaspora, can be held simultaneously at any given moment in the huge plaza before the Wall. On a good morning, some thirty Bar Mitzvahs can be processed.

Unfortunately, a Bar Mitzvah at the *kotel* is not always a religious moment. That which should be profound, memorable, and filled with awe is often lost in a maze of chaos. Theoretically, the religious administration of the Wall assigns each family a specific table, at a specific time, at a specific location in the huge plaza. This is to serve as their "synagogue." But in practice, the tables are often appropriated by other Bar Mitzvah families who happen to arrive first and—in the absence of anyone in charge—simply take over the first empty spot.

On the particular morning that I attended, the table reserved for our group had already been commandeered by a young, full-bearded Israeli who informed us that he was holding it for a "Bar Mitzvah from Texas." For a fee, such individuals will handle every detail of a *kotel* Bar Mitzvah, and will even supply Torah readers, *baalei tefilah*, and arrange for a post-Bar Mitzvah breakfast at a nearby hotel. (You have to supply your own Bar Mitzvah boy.)

But the real problems began after we secured a table of our own. Because of the davening taking place at the adjoining synagogue one yard away, we were hard-pressed to follow our own. Melodies and pronunciations and *nuschaot* from around the world vied for our attention; *borechu*, *kaddish*, repetition of the *amidah*, and Torah reading reverberated from all directions; jostling photographers, anxious to record the memories for the neighbors back in Texas, compounded the cacophony with prowling videos and clicking cameras. (Bar Mitzvahs from America have been known to take place without tefillin, but never without cameras.) *Kavannah* was difficult. Somehow, the Bar Mitzvah boy recited his *berachot*, the hastily mumbled prayers ended—mercifully—the pictures were taken, and the group went off to its festive breakfast and more pictures. Looming in front of it all, almost forgotten in this ingathering of the tourists, was the Wall itself, stark, silent, massive, brooding.

The impact of all this babel on the thirteen-year-old himself can only be imagined. For over a year now, he had been looking forward to his Bar Mitzvah at the last earthly vestige of the ancient Holy Temple, but when the big day finally arrived the experience was hardly spiritual. The innocent boy and his family meant well, but they were caught up in a confusion over which they had no control. One can only hope that, years later, when the young man looks back at his *kotel* Bar Mitzvah, the memories will not be entirely negative. Perhaps time will help dissipate the trivialization of his day. But I wondered if such disarray

is found, *lehavdil*, at the Taj Mahal, or at the Arab holy places such as Mecca and Medina. Do they worship this way in the holiest areas of the Vatican? And Isaiah's acid *mi bikesh zot miyedchem*, "Who asks this of you—to trespass in my precincts," kept crossing my mind. I left the Wall that morning not at all uplifted; depressed would be more accurate.

That very afternoon, my depression evaporated and my spirits were lifted—at a funeral.

In my Jerusalem neighborhood, many of the funerals take place out on the sidewalk in front of the Shul. I was walking down the street when such a funeral was just beginning. Together with many of my neighbors, I stopped to take part in the mitzvah of *halvayat hamet*. The deceased had just been brought by the *chevra kadisha* van to the Shul sidewalk, where family and friends had already gathered. Several simple but genuine *hespedim* were given, *tehillim* were recited, the rending of the mourners' garments took place, kaddish was said. Traffic ground to a halt, buses and taxis waited, neighbors stood respectfully at their windows and porches. Except for the sound of weeping, all was silent and still.

After the service, the van moved slowly down the main street, all of us following on foot. When the cortege passed a synagogue or a yeshiva, the van paused and the mourners once again recited kaddish. Three or four such stops took place. The crowd of about one hundred followed silently for several blocks until the van drove off and the people slowly and quietly dispersed.

As a newcomer to the neighborhood, I did not know who had died, but the honesty and simplicity of the moment affected me. I had the unmistakable sense that I was participating in something authentic, and that this is how mitzvot were meant to be observed: everything was genuine, unvarnished, plain, honest; nothing was out of joint, or phony, or pretentious, or tasteless. The eulogies were simple and plain; the compassion and concern were true and right; the *chevra kadisha* people were obviously pious and learned Jews who performed their duties with dignity. Nothing was on display, nothing was said or done to impress. Even the *chevra kadisha* van was modest and unassuming, unlike the great black hearses which are endemic to so many funerals. And although I was a total stranger I did not find it strange at all that tears welled up in my eyes as the van gradually disappeared over the next hill.

Two significant events in the life of a Jew: joy and sadness, life and death, beginnings and ends. One event was off-key and dissonant, while the other struck a true, unerring note. At the holy city's holiest site, a joyous passage into Jewish life was deflated in a mishmash of perfunctory, soulless prayer in which the letter of halakhah was observed but the spirit lost by the intrusion of inauthentic concepts of celebration—and it was depressing. On an ordinary Jerusalem street, a melancholy passage out of life was ennobled by careful adherence to the letter and spirit of the halakhah, and the exclusion of inauthentic concepts of mourning—and it was uplifting.


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