

The Special Needs Child at Bar and Batmitzvah

By Rabbi Dr Julian Shindler

Introduction

The celebration of a Bar or Batmitzvah is a time at which every Jewish child should feel connected to their spiritual and cultural heritage, as well as a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. This is perhaps especially so for the child with special needs, for whom day-to-day living presents extraordinary challenges. But in working to achieve this goal, there are several concerns to be taken into consideration

- i) The range of possibilities available that are appropriate to the child's abilities
- ii) To be mindful of any *halachic* requirements that need to be satisfied
- iii) To give careful thought to the emotional and psychological impact on a sensitive child who may be asked to 'perform' in public.

Clearly, this process is best facilitated by means of close co-operation between the parents and their local rabbi, who should be contacted at an early stage, preferably at least one year beforehand. Where necessary, he will be able to refer specific issues to a reputable Beth Din or other halachic authority for guidance.

Are Bar/Batmitzvah Ceremonies Obligatory?

The age of Bar or Batmitzvah defines the moment at which the young boy or girl becomes responsible for his or her actions and is regarded as a Jewish adult. Occurring at or around puberty, where intellectual development and physical growth are linked, becoming Bar/Batmitzvah signifies the capacity of the young adult to distinguish between right and wrong and to make moral judgements. From that moment on, the young person is credited for the *mitzvot* s/he performs and is likewise held accountable for any wrong-doing.

According to Jewish tradition, a boy becomes Barmitzvah upon reaching the age of thirteen years and one day; a girl becomes Batmitzvah at twelve years and a day. This occurs *automatically* upon reaching the prescribed chronological age. It is totally independent of the means by which this is celebrated. While there are clearly good reasons for encouraging ways of giving communal recognition to this important moment in the life of a young Jew/ess, it should be borne in mind that this is not absolutely essential.

It follows that if a boy or girl has special needs to the extent that he or she cannot celebrate their Bar/Batmitzvah in the conventional way, while this is understandably disappointing, it does not affect their Jewish status, neither does it violate any Jewish law.

Barmitzvah Ceremonies

Convention involves, minimally, that the boy says the blessings over the Torah *parsha* and reads this on behalf of the congregation. Apart from acquiring the skills required for this, certain *halachic* requirements also have to be satisfied which might disqualify boys with certain disabilities from this particular form of celebration. The *ba'al kriah* needs a degree of mental competence which may never be achieved by a person with severe developmental delay or learning difficulties. A person whose vision is seriously impaired may recite the blessings but cannot read the portion. A boy who is profoundly deaf or who is unable to speak cannot fulfill the congregation's obligation to hear the Torah portion. Since disabilities of this sort encompass a wide range of variation, a competent rabbinic authority should be consulted for guidance. Where the disability is restricted mobility, it may be necessary to provide some physical support and arrangements should be made to convey the boy to and from the synagogue without violating Shabbat law.

Alternative Strategies

Where a boy cannot celebrate his Barmitzvah in the conventional way, thought needs to be given as to what they *are* able to do. A number of possible alternatives which can be considered include the following:

The father could recite the blessings with the son standing by; this would be followed by the usual *mi sheberach*

The boy could open/close the ark or, if physically able, perform the *mitzvah* of *hagbahah* or *gelilah*

He could sit holding the *sefer torah* while a *mi sheberach* is recited

His contribution could take the form of a short *dvar torah*

Emotional / Behavioural Problems.

A child who is very shy or who has behavioural problems may have his anxieties exacerbated by being 'centre stage' in a full shul on Shabbat. It should be remembered that the Torah is also read on some weekday mornings and at *mincha* on Shabbat where the much smaller attendance may be less intimidating. Being called to the Torah in these circumstances may be more suitable and can be followed by a celebratory *l'chaim*.

Batmitzvah Ceremonies

Batmitzvah ceremonies have become a normative part of communal life in recent years and they have diversified into various formats. Commonly, they take place on a Sunday afternoon, structured around a more elaborate *mincha* service, though a growing number of communities also offer the possibility of celebrating the Batmitzvah on Shabbat. This

usually takes the form of an addendum to the service before *Adon Olam* or perhaps at the communal *kiddush* following the service.

In these ceremonies, the part played by the girl involves the recitation of certain prayers or readings with, perhaps, a short *dvar Torah*. Since this activity does not involve her acting on behalf of the community, most of the *halachic* concerns discussed earlier do not apply and do not, therefore, pose a problem. It should thus be possible to devise something appropriate for her abilities and understanding. This could include, for example, designing and producing an item of Jewish art/craft.

Conclusion

Both rabbis and parents can work co-operatively to make it possible for something special to happen at this important rite of passage which will be enjoyable for the child, appreciated by the family and meaningful for the community. Indeed, the poignancy of the Bar/Batmitzvah of a 'special' child can make a great impact on everyone who is present, not only the immediate family of the boy or girl concerned.

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