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## INTRODUCTION

Laura Jean from Dallas, Texas, was twelve years old when she told her parents in 2003 that she would like a bat mitzvah: “She loved bat mitzvahs: the singing was “inspiring”; the parties were exciting; the attention, no doubt, was flattering. Why couldn’t *she* have one?”<sup>1</sup> The problem was that she was Methodist, not Jewish. But she went ahead anyway and held a party for 125 friends and relatives. The writer who reported this story commented: “In the United States, bar mitzvahs (for boys) and bat mitzvahs (for girls) get more attention than first communions, baptisms or confirmation *combined*, even though Christians outnumber Jews 590 to 1. They’re the summit, the *zenith*, the tops when it comes to teenage rites of passage.”<sup>2</sup> The popularity of the celebration has led to the phenomenon of many Christian teenagers wanting a bar mitzvah in order to emulate their Jewish friends. From 2004 onward in the United States there have also been reports of “black mitzvah,” a party celebrated by African American boys and girls. One blogger wrote of the so-called black mitzvah: “I love the warmth and respect shown by the adults to these kids. They made these young men feel special and I believe they will be successful in life.”<sup>3</sup> The suggestion is that the African American parents want to express the same kind of pride in their children that they notice among Jewish families.

How did bar and bat mitzvah come to be so popular? What is it that appeals to Jews with totally different beliefs and lifestyles from each other and even to non-Jews? How did the ceremony start, and why is it that a higher proportion of Jewish children celebrate it today than at any time in the past?

The original ceremony, which was only for boys, was invented by fathers for their own sons. *Bar mitzvah*, many books tell us, means “son of the commandment.”<sup>4</sup> But the first meaning of the term was “someone who has the responsibility for carrying out a particular duty.” That is the way

the term was used in ancient times, before anyone had thought of celebrating a boy's coming of age. The meaning of the term changed as the ceremony became important; it came to mean a Jewish boy aged at least thirteen and one day who from now on had the responsibility of carrying out all the religious duties of a Jewish man. In the twentieth century *bar mitzvah* changed its meaning again and came to refer to the celebration, rather than the child. In English today this is what the phrase means, and the child is called "the bar mitzvah boy" or "the bat mitzvah girl."

If you attend a boy's bar mitzvah today, you are likely to see some or all of four traditional elements that have been combined into a single sequence for the last four hundred years. First, during the synagogue service the boy is called up to the Torah to say the traditional blessings and, if he is able, to read or chant his own portion from the Torah scroll, instead of the usual weekly practice of it being read by a skilled volunteer or professional. In the main Ashkenazic tradition followed today in Israel, much of Europe, and in English-speaking lands, the boy is called up for *maftir* and haftarah on Shabbat morning—that is to say, on a Saturday morning in the synagogue, after the whole of the week's section has been read and seven adult men called to the Torah, the bar mitzvah recites the blessing before reading the Torah, repeats the prescribed last few verses that have already been read, recites the blessing after reading the Torah, and then reads the prescribed reading from the Prophets, with blessings said before and after.<sup>5</sup>

The blessings recited by the bar mitzvah are the same ones said by everyone called up to the Torah. Before the reading the boy says, "Bless the Eternal whom we are called to bless." The congregation responds, "Blessed is the Eternal whom we are called to bless forever and ever." The boy repeats the response and then carries on, "Blessed are You, our Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe, who chose us from all peoples to give us your Torah. Blessed are You, Eternal One, who gives us the Torah."

After the reading the boy recites another blessing: "Blessed are You, our Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe, who gave us the teaching of truth and planted eternal life within us. Blessed are You, Eternal One, who gives us the Torah." After the bar mitzvah boy has read from the Torah and recited the second blessing, the boy's father recites a five-word Hebrew blessing: *barukh she-petarani mei-onsho shel zeh*, "Blessed be the One who has freed me from punishment because of him." This is the second traditional element of the ceremony. These words were first recorded fifteen

hundred years ago and later incorporated into bar mitzvah.<sup>6</sup> In Sephardic and some Ashkenazic communities the blessing is recited on the occasion of the boy's first wearing tefillin, leather boxes worn for prayer on the head and arm for weekday mornings. Some traditions have not used this blessing.<sup>7</sup>

A celebration meal or party held for the family and other invited guests is the third element of the traditional ceremony. It is an essential part of the celebration. Finally, the boy delivers a *derashah* at the meal, that is, a speech explaining some aspect of Torah. This aspect of bar mitzvah still exists in Orthodox circles but has long been in decline. Today it is more common to hear the boy give a brief *derashah* as part of the synagogue ceremony.

Other elements such as a special prayer for the occasion and a speech and/or blessing given by parents and/or a rabbi grew up in the nineteenth century and have become common practice. There are many other modern additions to the ceremony, such as physically passing the Torah scroll from grandparents to parents to the child, symbolizing the handing on of the tradition.

There are many variations in the way bar mitzvah ceremonies are performed. In particular, an additional ceremony (or sometimes the only one) may take place when the Torah is read on a Monday morning, a Thursday morning, or on a Shabbat afternoon, in which case there is no haftarah for the boy to read. On a Monday or a Thursday the boy will wear tefillin. In many traditions, but not all, the boy will wear tefillin for the first time on the occasion of his bar mitzvah. In many Sephardic and some Hasidic traditions, the tefillin ceremony is regarded as the actual bar mitzvah, and the calling up to the Torah on the following Saturday is secondary.

#### WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I have stated that the bar mitzvah ceremony is universally popular among Jews, but there have been curious exceptions. I never had a bar mitzvah. The synagogues in the British Liberal movement had abolished bar mitzvah completely and replaced it with what they called "confirmation," a group ceremony held for both boys and girls at the age of fifteen or sixteen. My ceremony took place at Wembley and District Liberal Synagogue on the Sabbath before the festival of Shavuot, Shabbat *Bemidbar*, May 21, 1966. The confirmation class conducted the service, and we, the students, then had separate family parties.<sup>8</sup>

By the time I began to train as a rabbi at Leo Baeck College, London, in 1982, every Liberal synagogue had reintroduced bar mitzvah and, alongside it, an identical ceremony for girls, bat mitzvah, both held at the age of thirteen. The reintroduction was largely because of pressure from parents, who managed to convince a number of reluctant rabbis that the traditional ceremony could still be meaningful. In my work as a student rabbi in East London, my single most important task was to take family after family through the ceremony; indeed, in the smaller and younger communities these events were their principal activity and reason for existence. And yet, although universally popular among the parents, many children began their bar mitzvah year motivated mainly by parental pressure and the prospect of getting presents and having a party. It was my job and that of the other teachers to try to ensure that by the time the big day came around, the students' understanding was a little deeper and their love of Judaism enhanced by the process. I wondered if it had always been like that—a ceremony driven by parents, like most things in children's lives. I wondered, too, about the incredible popularity of the ceremony and how it began. This book is the result of my personal quest to find out. What I discovered is a fascinating story, especially because of hundreds of years of attempts by Jewish communities in Europe to limit the size and extravagance of the celebration and at the same time to improve the educational standards of the children. I came to realize that the dilemmas and tensions that surround bar and bat mitzvah today are by no means new. It was not so surprising after all that the ceremony was mainly driven by parents because it had always been like that. Bar mitzvah was invented by Jewish fathers for their own sons.

This history describes the origins and growth of the synagogue coming-of-age ceremonies known as bar mitzvah (for boys), bat mitzvah (for girls), and Jewish confirmation (for boys and girls). Before 1800 there was only one ceremony, bar mitzvah for boys, and it was rarely heard of outside Ashkenazic and Italian Jewish communities. I explore why confusion exists about the date of the first bar mitzvah and the first bat mitzvah and offer my own solutions to the puzzle of the evidence. I trace the growth, spread, and development of the celebration across Ashkenazic Europe and beyond; most of the earlier sources come from France, Germany, Poland, and Italy.

For the medieval period the sources refer to two elements of the ceremony, the blessing said by the father and the celebration meal. From the

sixteenth century onward the sources also mention the readings and the speech and, beginning in the seventeenth century, the bar mitzvah test. Jewish confirmation was an invention of Reform Jews in Germany at the start of the nineteenth century, and bat mitzvah is said to have begun in 1922, a claim that I examine in detail. I have chosen to emphasize those sources that illustrate the origin of the ceremonies, their social and educational aspects, and particularly the tensions between the educational and social elements, many of which are still relevant today. The individual stories given are examples from the many thousands available to illustrate the story of these very popular ceremonies. My emphasis has been on the synagogue ceremonies, the family celebrations, and issues that affect them. I have included Jewish legal aspects when they are relevant to the origin, growth, or shape of the ceremony. Readers not familiar with Hebrew terms will find brief explanations in the glossary at the back of the book.

Tensions between religion and culture, between synagogue officials and families, between faith and practice, are not new. Understanding the history helps today's debates about Jewish identity. Every bar mitzvah boy is aware that he is taking his place in a long tradition. Today girls are also part of that tradition. The popularity of bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah among such diverse communities of Jews can best be understood by exploring the history of the ceremony. The four traditional elements described earlier include both religious ceremony and party, both parent and child. The "people of the book" created a ceremony that has at its heart the reading from its most holy book. Yet within the Jewish community there is a wide range of views on whether it is the social or the religious aspects that are more important. A Jewish family today could regard the ceremony as marking a birthday, as marking an important transition on the way to adult life, as an educational achievement, as a simple step along the path of life in a religious community, as an excuse for a party, as a time for family nostalgia, or in many other ways. The traditional elements allow for any or all of these motives to be highlighted, explored, or even thrown out.

Ritual undoubtedly has the power to transform lives. But often it does not. Not every bar mitzvah is a deeply meaningful experience. A wide range of writers has explored this issue. Arthur Magida described his own bar mitzvah as "being yelled at a lot and wearing a suit that never stopped itching." You did it because it is what you were born into.<sup>9</sup> The memoirs recounted in his book show that bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah can be an unpleasant chore for the child. Undoubtedly, much of the celebra-

tion's high profile has come from the hype and glitz of very lavish parties. Many people never see beyond that. But thoughtful children are able to see past the glitz and to realize that the most successful celebration is not the most expensive but one that the child puts the most into.

For four hundred years there have been battles between families who want the minimum educational import and synagogues who demand the most they can get. Bar mitzvah began as an unusual ceremony probably indicating a special degree of piety. As soon as it became popular, inevitably there were those who wanted to cut corners. Regulations from Krakow in 1595 limited the number of guests who could be invited to the party. No doubt then, as now, there were families who considered the party more important than the synagogue service. And within one generation of the invention of the bar mitzvah speech, we find Leon Modena in Venice supplementing his income by composing speeches for the boys. For the less learned and less observant, the studying was a chore to be avoided if possible. But the emotional content for Jewish parents and grandparents has remained high. In *Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah* (1992), Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin encouraged parents to devote time to exploring the meaning of the ceremony, understanding the concept of mitzvah, and finding suitable charity projects.

This history makes clear that the tensions surrounding the ceremony have had a real and important purpose in preserving and enhancing the popularity of bar mitzvah. For those living in a non-Jewish environment, bar mitzvah has played a huge part in the survival of Jewish life. Take away the effort of learning, and the ceremony loses its sense of achievement, its value as an educational tool on the path of Jewish life; take away the hype, and the ceremony loses its luster in an age when celebrity status often counts most of all.

Many accounts of bar mitzvah suggest that it has now become a burden imposed on a reluctant child by families, communities, and rabbis. That interpretation fails to explain why it is more popular now than at any time in the past. The ceremony grew and became popular only because people wanted it—there is nothing in the Torah or rabbinic law to say that a child has to celebrate a bar mitzvah. It may be that children in the past were just as reluctant as some are today. It is the parents and grandparents who so often shed tears at a bar mitzvah, and it may well be the case that it has marked an emotional stage in their lives more than in the

child's life. The older sources only tell us what was done, not how people felt about it. But we can speculate. The origin of bar mitzvah was when Jewish fathers began to thank God with the words "Blessed be the One who has freed me from punishment because of him." Whose feelings are described here? The father's, not the son's.

The emphasis then was on the emotional experience of the parents, not the child. Family tensions and feelings are built into the ceremony. Bar mitzvah has provided an opportunity for parents and children, families and community, to act out their relationships in a secure environment. Rites of passage are imperfect but valuable ways of enacting meaning.<sup>10</sup> Rites of passage are performances that help us make sense of our daily lives.<sup>11</sup> In our time many Jews have lost the monthly and seasonal rhythms of Jewish life. But they retain the sense of a journey through life, in which important steps can be marked and celebrated. Bar and bat mitzvah have bucked the trend, growing in popularity even while other celebrations have declined.

In a world in which family life has become difficult and often troubled, such celebrations have taken on an added importance for many people. By creating the myth of an unchanging tradition that can be passed on in its entirety, bar and bat mitzvah require participants to act as if their family lives were stable, in the hope of modeling and even creating permanence amid the fragility of existence. For a fleeting moment everything in the world becomes as we would like it to be, and hopes and plans for the future can be expressed, publicized, and celebrated. Some children and parents begin the process with a degree of skepticism, but very few emerge from it unmoved.

This book has been shaped and inspired by questions asked by students, especially the many boys and girls whom I have taught and encouraged through the time leading up to their own bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. Many of their parents, too, have awakened my interest about the origin of particular customs. Among my past students are my own three sons, Samuel, Jacob, and Benjamin, whose constant questioning and curiosity have for many years led me on the quest for answers. To them, with great affection, this book is dedicated.



## CHAPTER ONE

*How Bar Mitzvah Began*

- ▶ The Bible records twenty as the age of majority, but in rabbinic times it became twelve plus one day for girls and thirteen plus one day for boys.
- ▶ In the midrash, as Esau at the age of thirteen went off to worship idols, his father Isaac was relieved of responsibility for him. Therefore, at that age and onward, a boy's father should say, "Blessed be the One who has freed me from punishment because of him."
- ▶ The synagogue ceremony was first recorded in thirteenth-century northern France. The boy was called to the Torah, and the father added the blessing. The ceremony may have been held before he left home for study in the schoolhouse. One of the sources for the synagogue ceremony also mentions that a father should make a party for his thirteen-year-old son.

## THIRTEEN AND A DAY

Abraham's father, Terah, kept a shop to which customers would come to buy idols. When Terah was away, Abraham was left to mind the shop. One day he took a stick, broke up the idols, and put the stick into the hand of the largest one. When his father asked what had happened, Abraham replied that the big idol had smashed up all the little ones. Terah said this was impossible, and his son, Abraham, pointed out that his father had revealed himself to be a fool who believed that man-made objects could be worshiped. This story is not found in the Bible but comes from Jewish literature known as "midrash." Early versions do not say how old Abraham was at the time, but later retellings say he was thirteen years old,<sup>1</sup> suggesting that this age had over time become recognized as the age of adult understanding.

There was no bar mitzvah in ancient times, no ceremony and no party. Many modern customs are not as old as we imagine them to be; children's birthday parties, for example, were invented in the nineteenth century,

yet many people assume they have always existed. Bar mitzvah is not a modern invention, but it is not as old as people think it is; many Jews and non-Jews imagine it has always been part of the Jewish faith. But in the ancient world not only was a boy's thirteenth birthday not celebrated, but none of his other birthdays were either. In the Hebrew Bible the only person who celebrated a birthday was the pharaoh who rescued Joseph from prison.<sup>2</sup> He would hardly have been taken as an example by the small group of Hebrews who were destined to become slaves to his successor.

People had good reason to fear the birthdays of kings: in the story of Hanukkah the desecration of the Temple by the wicked King Antiochus is said by some to have taken place on the date of his birthday celebration, which he insisted was observed every single month.<sup>3</sup> In the Christian Scriptures King Herod threw a birthday party at which John the Baptist was beheaded at Salome's request.<sup>4</sup>

Ordinary people could not have held birthday parties, even if they had wanted to. Although most people were aware of their age, precise dates of birth for most people were simply not recorded. Even weddings originally had no ceremony or party; the only ceremonial event connected with the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, for example, was the formal negotiations between their parents. When he met her, Isaac simply "brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death."<sup>5</sup>

It was Isaac's birth, not his marriage, that provided a reason for a family party. Abraham threw a party for Isaac's weaning onto solid food as a young child. The Bible gives no details of this party, mentioning only Sarah's jealousy of Abraham's concubine Hagar and their son, Ishmael. But the Hebrew words used to describe the party, *mishteh gadol*, are significant. The word *mishteh* implies drinking rather than eating—what we would call a "party" rather than the normal translation "feast." The only other mention in the Bible of a *mishteh gadol* (a big party) is the wedding banquet of Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus in the story of Purim.<sup>6</sup> So, not surprisingly, the rabbis elaborated the story of Abraham's weaning feast, imagining that he had invited all the great kings and chieftains of the time. The medieval commentator Rashi (1040–1105) explained that it was called "big" because all the important people of the time were there, such as Shem and Eber and Abimelech.<sup>7</sup>

Unable to find any evidence for bar mitzvah in the Bible, some came to believe that Isaac had been thirteen years old at the time of the party, that

he had been weaned from his “evil inclination” (that is to say, acquired his adult impulse to do good), and that this had been the very first bar mitzvah party. In the minds of those who thought up this idea, the bar mitzvah party was a more ancient practice than the synagogue ceremony celebrating the occasion.

The Torah insists that parents have a duty to teach their children and also mentions the son asking his father the meaning of the Passover offering and other laws.<sup>8</sup> Apart from these details we know almost nothing about how children were educated in biblical times. Even later, in the time of the Romans, it is by no means clear that most boys would have been able to read from a Torah scroll. The literacy rate among Jews in Roman Palestine is thought to have been somewhere between 3 and 15 percent. Culture and traditions were largely handed down orally.<sup>9</sup> Until Jewish literacy began to flourish in the Middle Ages, bar mitzvah remained a ceremony whose time had not yet come.

Although people did not know their exact date of birth, they would certainly have been aware of the changing seasons and kept count of how many years they had lived. The Torah tells us that Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised. And, it goes on, his son Ishmael was circumcised on the same day, and he was thirteen years old at the time.<sup>10</sup> At this point in the story Abraham has just been told by God that Isaac, the son who is yet to be born, will be his true successor, rather than Ishmael. So, Ishmael’s circumcision was *not* regarded as a precedent for the descendants of Isaac, and when Isaac was born, he was circumcised at the age of eight days. The ancient historian Josephus mentions, however, that the Arab peoples of his day circumcised their sons at the age of thirteen.<sup>11</sup> Rashi stated that Ishmael’s circumcision took place on the very day he was thirteen.<sup>12</sup> This comment was part of a train of thought suggesting that age thirteen could mark an important moment of transition.

#### BECOMING AN ADULT AT TWENTY

When were boys thought of as adults? The Book of Numbers begins as follows:

On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying:

Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms.<sup>13</sup>

Only men are to be counted in this census, and only those aged twenty and above; this was the age at which they were able to go to war because they would be strong enough by then.<sup>14</sup> No other age requirement for being an adult is mentioned in the Bible, even for marriage.

In the Mishnah, which gives us our first insight into rulings made by rabbis, there are different functions assigned to various ages.<sup>15</sup> Anyone old enough to walk holding his father's hand was not to be considered a "child" when it came to making the three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem:

Everyone has an obligation to appear on the festival pilgrimage, except for a deaf mute, a mentally disadvantaged person, and a child . . . Who is considered a child? Anyone who is too small to ride on his father's shoulders and to ascend from Jerusalem to the Temple Mount, according to the School of Shammai. But the School of Hillel say: anyone who cannot take hold of his father's hand and ascend from Jerusalem to the Temple Mount, as it says,<sup>16</sup> "three *foot* festivals."<sup>17</sup>

According to the School of Hillel, even young children just able to walk were obligated to participate in rituals and abide by established rules.

In the Christian Scriptures the young Jesus is described as twelve years old when he went to Jerusalem with his parents for Passover. We are not told whether or not this was the first time he had accompanied them. According to the story, as told by Luke, Jesus got lost, and it was three days before his parents discovered him in the Temple precincts, in enthusiastic dialogue with the teachers. A few Christian commentaries and some Christians today describe this as "Jesus' bar mitzvah," even though the story itself has no such suggestion.<sup>18</sup>

#### TAKING A VOW AT TWELVE OR THIRTEEN — PLUS ONE DAY

The first mention of the age thirteen in the first rabbinic book of rules, the Mishnah, comes in a completely different context, that of taking a vow. In traditional Jewish law the act of speaking a vow or an oath out

loud gives it binding value.<sup>19</sup> Jews are familiar with this idea from the *Kol Nidrei* prayer recited on Yom Kippur eve, when God is urged to cancel any vows or promises made to God in error. The Mishnah discusses the question of the earliest age at which a girl or a boy could be considered responsible enough to make a vow:

If a girl is eleven years old plus one day, her vows are examined [to make sure she is old enough to know what she is doing]. If a girl is twelve years old plus one day, her vows are valid. They examine them for the whole of her twelfth year.

If a boy is twelve years old plus one day, his vows are examined. If a boy is thirteen years old plus one day, his vows are valid. They examine them for the whole of his thirteenth year. Before the requisite age, even if they say “We know in whose name we have made the vow” or “we have made the dedication,” their vow is no vow and their dedication is no dedication. But after the requisite age, even if they say “We do not know in whose name we have made the vow” or “we have made the dedication,” their vow is indeed a valid vow and their dedication is a valid dedication.<sup>20</sup>

Even though this text has nothing to do with having a bat mitzvah or bar mitzvah, and even though the ceremony was invented many centuries later, it remains to this day the foundation for the “correct age”—twelve years plus one day for a girl and thirteen plus one day for a boy.

### *The Age of Puberty*

The Mishnah goes on to describe the physical changes that take place in a girl at puberty, thus making it clear that the age of twelve has been chosen because this is when her physical development normally occurs. She is therefore now able to take responsibility for her actions, as is a boy at the age of thirteen. The phrase “plus one day” seems to have been added simply to make absolutely certain that the correct age had been reached. It can be found in bar mitzvah regulations even today.

The Mishnah mentions girls before dealing with boys. That is not surprising, as this text comes from the section called *Niddah*, which deals with menstruation and family purity. But it may also be because girls mature at a younger age, so the Mishnah is able to proceed logically up the scale from age eleven to twelve and then to thirteen. So, even though the ceremony

of bar mitzvah for boys is much older than bat mitzvah for girls, the correct age for a girl can be found listed first, followed by the age for a boy.

### *The Presumption of Rava*

Once the age of responsibility was established, it became a fixed law for all girls and boys. Thus, there has been no need to quiz each child on his or her physical maturity or intellectual ability. It is similar to the way we may think of a child as being part of a particular school year, regardless of the intellect or growth rate of that individual child. A general rule was fixed, based on the majority, and it was then applied to everyone.

The Babylonian Talmud makes clear that this specific rule could be applied to fix an age of majority for girls: “Rava said: a girl who has reached the required number of years need not undergo a physical examination since we can make a presumption that she has produced the marks of puberty.”<sup>21</sup> This rule became known as the “presumption of Rava” and was applied to boys as well as to girls. It later became part of the rules for bar mitzvah. The age of thirteen plus one day became a sufficient measure, without any test or physical examination required.

### *“Thirteen for the Commandments”*

Another mention of the age of thirteen for boys comes from the well-known section of the Mishnah known as “Sayings of the Fathers” (*Pirkei Avot*) and follows a saying given in the name of a rabbi who lived in the second century CE, Judah son of Temah: “He used to say: a son of five years old for Bible: of ten years for Mishnah: of thirteen for the commandments [mitzvot], of fifteen for Talmud.”<sup>22</sup> The list suggests that these are the best ages for boys to start learning about the particular subjects. But none of the ages given here had legally binding status.<sup>23</sup> They were merely suggested ages rather than definite rules, for the passage goes on, amusingly: “eighteen for a wedding, twenty for a job, thirty for authority, forty for intelligence, fifty for giving advice, sixty for being an elder, seventy for grey hairs, eighty for special strength, ninety for being bowed back, and at a hundred, a man is as one that has died and passed away from the world.”

Yet not all ancient texts are what they seem. Although the saying appears in the Mishnah, it is in fact a later addition. The famous twelfth-century scholar Maimonides (1135–1204) did not include this paragraph in his edition of the Mishnah and did not use it when drawing up his own educa-

tional curriculum for the study of Torah. Some manuscripts even place it in a different place.<sup>24</sup>

The paragraph that precedes this text ends with a short prayer,<sup>25</sup> indicating the original ending of the section. There is no clear evidence that the saying was considered part of the Mishnah until the twelfth century.<sup>26</sup> The whole chapter gives lists based on various numbers—the ten items created on the eve of the Sabbath, the seven indications of a wise man, the four kinds of student, and so on. The paragraph noted here, on “the ages of man,” was modeled on the same pattern. The use of the word *Talmud* apparently referring to a specific book or books proves that this paragraph was written later. *Talmud* was a general word indicating “study,” but obviously one could not study “the Talmud” until after it had been written, meaning no earlier than the year 500 CE.<sup>27</sup> So, the famous saying “thirteen for the commandments” does not suggest that the tradition of bar mitzvah existed in ancient times.<sup>28</sup>

But thirteen was nevertheless an important age. It is mentioned in rabbinic literature as the time when the “impulse to do good” is acquired.<sup>29</sup> It also came to be the time when a boy could be considered a man. In the Book of Genesis we are told that Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob’s sons, took revenge on the people of the town of Shechem for the rape of their sister Dinah: “Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob’s sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males.”<sup>30</sup> The Hebrew literally means “they took each *man* his sword,” and that additional and unnecessary word *man* led to this comment: “Rabbi Shimon son of Elazar said: They were then thirteen years old.”<sup>31</sup> His comment was taken up in an anonymous twelfth-century commentary, which discussed the importance of the age of thirteen and added: “They introduce him to the fulfillment of the commandments.” The Hebrew word used here for *introduce* can also have a more physical meaning: “they bring him in.”<sup>32</sup>

Much more recently, in nineteenth-century commentaries, this story was linked with the bar mitzvah ceremony and used as evidence that at that time a boy becomes a man. Even though Simeon and Levi were aggressive and vengeful, and even though their actions were condemned, the idea that at thirteen a Jewish boy becomes a man has become part of modern Jewish popular consciousness, so much so that to this day bar mitzvah boys use the phrase “Today I am a man” in their speeches to their guests. In North America, it has become the traditional way such a speech begins and was particularly popular in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>33</sup>

Since the 1950s some boys parodied the phrase by saying “Today I am a fountain pen,” because for thirty years fountain pens had been popular gifts for the occasion. At his bar mitzvah in July 1946 Barry Vine, of New Haven, Connecticut, received sixteen fountain pens as gifts.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the facetious “Today I am a fountain pen” was intended by bar mitzvah boys to discourage well-meaning relatives from giving this little-appreciated gift.

More recently, the phrase “Today I am a man” was parodied in an episode of the TV series *The Simpsons*. In it the character Krusty the Clown is the son of a rabbi, but he did not have a bar mitzvah as a child because his father thought he would make fun of the ceremony. He decides to learn Hebrew and have a bar mitzvah as an adult. During the preparation period Krusty has to give up doing shows on a Saturday and is replaced by Homer Simpson. The episode was called “Today I Am a Clown.”<sup>35</sup>

#### READING THE TORAH AND LEADING THE SERVICE

At what age did boys take an active part in synagogue services? The Mishnah tells us that a boy may read from the Torah and translate.<sup>36</sup> It does not state any age and does not suggest that this was a common practice. The Jerusalem Talmud raises the question of whether the boy really understands what he is doing.<sup>37</sup> By the time the question was discussed in medieval Europe, it was common, as it is now, for a skilled leader to do the actual reading and for others simply to come up and say the blessings before and after.

A twelfth-century prayer book from France, the *Machzor Vitry*, rules that a boy is permitted to read from the Torah;<sup>38</sup> others insisted that at least three men be called up as well.<sup>39</sup> Rabbi Joshua Falk (Lvov, 1555–1614) mentioned the practice of a boy being called up as *maftir* (an additional call up to the Torah and reading the haftarah as well). But he objected to boys below the age of thirteen being included among the first seven men called up on Shabbat morning. The *Mishnah Berurah*, a rule book commonly used today by Orthodox Jews, confirms this ruling, that a boy under thirteen may *only* be called up for *maftir*.<sup>40</sup>

An exception is made on Simchat Torah, an autumn festival with many colorful customs deriving from medieval Ashkenazic Europe, when all the children in the synagogue can be called up as a group to the reading of the Torah. But that very custom marks an exception, a special day of rejoicing when the boys could be offered a taste of the life of an adult Jew.<sup>41</sup>



It may well have been a substitute for the earlier practice of allowing a boy to be called to the reading on an ordinary Shabbat or weekday, an honor from which boys under thirteen have gradually been excluded, so that the bar mitzvah boy comes up on his own for the first time in his life at his own celebration. This ruling applies whether or not he actually reads from the scroll or just comes up to say the blessings. Today it is common for the bar mitzvah to be called up for *maftir*, an honor permitted even for younger boys, but it is not a universal practice and was not the norm when bar mitzvah first became popular.

### *Leading the Prayers*

In the Jerusalem Talmud we find that a man should be fully grown—that is, twenty years old—before leading prayers.<sup>42</sup> During the medieval period the age was lowered. The ninth-century Rav Natronai Gaon stated that in an emergency someone younger than twenty could lead the prayers, provided he had reached the age of thirteen and one day.<sup>43</sup> The first full Jewish prayer book, *Seder Rav Amram*, was written by one of Natronai Gaon's students. It quoted his ruling but went on to criticize the custom of those places where a thirteen-year-old could be chosen to lead prayers, preferring someone fully grown.<sup>44</sup> Clearly, this was happening.

Most of the rules we use today about Jewish prayer come from the book known as “Tractate *Soferim*,” originally compiled around the year 750 CE. It states that a boy has to be at least thirteen to be included in the quorum for a service.<sup>45</sup> It goes on to say that the age itself is sufficient and no physical examination is required. But this section of *Soferim* is now thought to be much more recent. It is a huge complication in the history of Jewish customs that we cannot simply accept the traditional dates for a great deal of the evidence. In medieval times copying and revising a manuscript was every bit as effective as saving a new version on a computer today; the older version has gone forever.<sup>46</sup> The *Machzor Vitry*, a later prayer book, rules that in order to lead the part of the service including the *Shema*, a boy must be age thirteen and one day *and* have the beginnings of physical maturity.<sup>47</sup>

So, we have traced a fall in the minimum age from twenty down to thirteen. But it seems that even younger boys were sometimes allowed to lead prayers in medieval Europe. Although the general rule was thirteen, not everyone obeyed it. In practice it became quite common after the Crusades for boys who had lost a parent to lead the *Kaddish* for those

who had died and often to lead the last part of the service. Rashi's prayer book, discussing the end of morning service on Mondays and Thursdays, states, "And the boy rises to say *Kaddish*."<sup>48</sup>

Joseph Caro (1488–1575) wrote about this custom disapprovingly. A child was not obliged to pray regularly and so could not lead the prayers on behalf of adults. Caro mentioned that the custom of a boy leading prayers had even spread to Spain, and he knew about it from the rabbis who opposed it.<sup>49</sup> And so he ruled in the *Shulchan Arukh*, as did his contemporary Moses Isserles for Ashkenazic Jews, that age thirteen was the demarcation age and specifically that age alone was the defining moment, regardless of physical maturity: "At thirteen years old . . . they can make a presumption that he is like an adult . . . This is the custom and there is no need to change it."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Isserles added that the prevailing custom was for a boy not to wear tefillin "until he becomes bar mitzvah, that is, thirteen years old and one day."<sup>51</sup> Thus, we see that Jewish boys younger than thirteen in medieval Europe were at times allowed to lead prayers and read from the Torah, but both practices were gradually prohibited, except for the remaining custom, still practiced in some communities, of a younger boy being called up for *maftir*.

#### *Keeping All the Commandments*

Even in medieval Europe, not every rabbi thought that the age of thirteen on its own was sufficient to make it compulsory for a boy to perform all the commandments. The earliest indication of its importance can be found in an eleventh-century comment about the wearing of fringes on the corners of a garment: "Just as a man has to perform this command, so when he reaches the age of thirteen years and one day he becomes obligated for all the commandments of the Torah."<sup>52</sup> The statement was quoted with approval by the great commentator Rashi. Some claimed that it showed a very clear definition of the age of majority.<sup>53</sup> But nevertheless the debate was not over.

Since that time there has been considerable disagreement among rabbis, some of them insisting on there being physical signs of puberty in the boy, not just his arrival at the correct age. This issue came to be important when the new idea arose of celebrating bar mitzvah by means of a special meal.

We have traced a very clear change, from an age of male majority of twenty in the Bible to an age of thirteen during the Middle Ages. The

change reflects changes in Jewish history and life. The original age of twenty was considered a suitable age to join the army; the new age of thirteen was suitable for leading and performing rituals in the synagogue. Because thirteen marks the onset of puberty, a modern writer has explained the bar mitzvah age in rather discouraging terms: “The Rabbis treated all sexuality as fraught with danger. They evidently believed that the most difficult task of a grown-up human being (or at least a male) is controlling the sexual urge: so to insist that all the *mitzvot*—commands or precepts—were operative at puberty meant that the community was bracing itself to govern those urges.”<sup>54</sup> Some scholars have linked the popularity of bar/bat mitzvah today to the fact that it takes place at puberty, a common time for coming-of-age rituals in many societies, when young people can be guided toward becoming adults supportive of the wider group and formally inducted into a particular faith or culture.<sup>55</sup>

#### “A BEAUTIFUL CUSTOM”

The next pieces of evidence lead directly to the origin of the bar mitzvah ceremony. Tractate *Soferim* contains a description of “a beautiful custom in Jerusalem.”<sup>56</sup> Boys and girls, we read, were trained to practice fasting before the age when it became compulsory. They would fast for a half-day at age eleven, a full day at age twelve, and “afterwards” they were taken round all the elders of the town to receive congratulations and a blessing. The word *afterwards* could mean at the age of thirteen,<sup>57</sup> and if so, it certainly indicates a marking of that age with congratulations. Even if this text comes from the later part of *Soferim*, which reflects European practice, it could still be early evidence for celebrating the coming of age.<sup>58</sup>

One obvious stumbling block to linking this text to the history of bar mitzvah is that girls are here included along with the boys. But far more problematic is the likelihood that the text from *Soferim* as normally printed is wrong. Some texts read that the story is not about children aged eleven or twelve at all but about children aged one or two.<sup>59</sup> It is easy to dismiss this detail on the grounds that babies could not possibly have been trained to fast. But it is not as impossible as it at first appears. The twelfth-century northern French scholar Rabbeinu Tam criticized an overly pious practice of not feeding very young children on the fast day of Yom Kippur.<sup>60</sup> For those who disagreed with him, inventing or finding a story that even babes in arms would fast back in Jerusalem was a good way of encouraging people to be more pious.

*The Origin of the Father's Blessing*

The foundation text for the father's blessing later used at the synagogue celebration of bar mitzvah comes from the book *Bereshit Rabbah*. The core of this book has traditionally been thought to have been put together by Rabbi Hoshaiiah, who lived in the land of Israel in the third century CE. The book was probably expanded and edited in the fifth century, and some parts possibly even later. It is a commentary on the stories of Genesis, the book that recounts the history of Abraham and his family. In Genesis 25:27 we are told of the twins Esau and Jacob: "When the boys grew up, Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp." For thirteen years, says *Bereshit Rabbah*, the two boys went to school. But from that age onward one of them, Jacob, went to the house of study ("stayed in camp"), while the other, Esau, went to houses of idolatry ("a man of the outdoors").<sup>61</sup>

So, at the age of thirteen the twins Esau and Jacob made their own decisions about their lifestyle. Therefore, comments *Bereshit Rabbah*: "Said Rabbi Elazar: 'A man must take responsibility for his son up to the age of thirteen years, and from then on he needs to say "Blessed be the One who has freed me from punishment because of him."'"<sup>62</sup> This means that up to the age of thirteen the punishment for any misdeeds done by the son will be inflicted on his father, but from then on the boy takes the blame on his own, and the father cannot be punished for anything his son does. Rabbi Elazar may have been thinking of Esau in particular. Esau's father, Isaac, he suggests, is entitled to declare, now that the boy is thirteen and making his own way in life, that he as his father is not responsible for the misdeeds that will be done by him in the future and even by his descendants.

But Rabbi Elazar is not only thinking of Isaac and his twin sons, who turned out to be so different from each other. He suggests that any father should consider uttering such a blessing when his son reaches thirteen or at any suitable time after that. Rabbi Elazar does not suggest a definite time or occasion when the blessing is to be used. The phrase *from then on* indicates that it is something a father might say at various points in the future, particularly perhaps if the young man misbehaved. In the case of Esau *from then on* could carry the implication of "for all time."

*Saying the Blessing Out Loud*

"Blessed be the One who has freed me from punishment because of him." Perhaps some fathers, discovering this blessing in *Bereshit Rabbah*, may

have said it privately or muttered it under their breath when their teenage sons got into trouble. But then one day someone decided it would be a good idea to recite it out loud in the synagogue, in front of the congregation. But on what occasion would one do this? If it were to be done when a thirteen-year-old boy was called up to the reading of the Torah, it would be a declaration to everyone present that the boy was destined to grow up as a pious Jew, like Jacob, not as a good-for-nothing, like his brother Esau. The first time this was done can be thought of as the very first bar mitzvah ceremony, even though nobody called it a “bar mitzvah” at the time.

#### THE SYNAGOGUE CEREMONY

We have access to more knowledge about the origins of bar mitzvah than was available to previous generations. Some of the first accounts of the synagogue ceremony come from manuscripts first printed late in the twentieth century which are examined here very carefully, in chronological order from the time each one was written. The early accounts have a French background and reveal that what we now call “bar mitzvah” became a French Jewish custom in the thirteenth century.

In his book *Sefer HaIttur* Rabbi Isaac the son of Abba Mari of Marseilles, Provence (c. 1122–c. 1193), wrote: “When he says the blessing on the redemption of the firstborn, the priest says ‘Just as you deserve this mitzvah, so may you deserve to fulfill all the commandments (*mitzvot*) of the Torah.’ And there are places where, when he reaches thirteen, one recites the blessing: ‘Blessed be the One who has freed me from punishment because of him.’”<sup>63</sup> The life cycle of a Jewish boy is under discussion here. The prayer being quoted is that said for a firstborn son, in which the hope is expressed that the boy will grow up to be able to fulfill God’s commandments. At thirteen he is able to do so, and the father is then free of his responsibility. This is the first evidence we have that the blessing composed by Rabbi Elazar was actually being used; moreover, it was not used by one particular person but is given as a general rule, and it was not used for a boy at any time after the age of thirteen but now specifically at that age.

The text does not say that the prayer was said in synagogue or that the boy was bar mitzvah, but there are suggestive associations. It does not say here who actually recites the blessing—in *Bereshit Rabbah* it was the boy’s father, but here it could mean any member of the family or anyone

who knew that the boy had just become thirteen. Most likely, it was his father, as we can see from our next source.

Rabbi Judah the son of Yakar, who was born in Provence in the mid-twelfth century, made a similar brief mention of the custom. He had studied in northern France, which is where he may have heard of the new custom. From 1175 he was known to be living in Barcelona, Aragon. He wrote: “If someone has a son and he grows up to the age of thirteen, he says ‘Blessed be God (*ha-makom*) who has rescued me from punishment because of him.’”<sup>64</sup>

There are two variations—*God* and *rescued*—from the traditional text of the blessing, perhaps suggesting that as the custom of using it became more common, people remembered it wrongly or else deliberately varied the words. The phrasing “who has rescued me from punishment” really does make it sound as if the father thus becomes free of his responsibilities for his son.

These two sources from southern Europe do not mention any synagogue ceremony. But two sources from northern France do. One of them was not published until 1973. Several manuscripts survive that give teachings from Rabbi Yehiel of Paris, a famous scholar who defended Judaism in a public disputation in Paris in 1240. At the end of his book of teachings, in two of the manuscripts, there are a few pages giving an anonymous tiny collection of Ashkenazic customs and rules entitled *Horaot MiRabbanei Tzarfat* (Teachings of the Rabbis of France):

If someone has a son and he reaches the age of thirteen years, the first time that he stands up in the congregation to read from the Torah, his father should recite the blessing “Blessed are you, Eternal God, who has redeemed me from punishment because of him.” And the Gaon Rabbi Judah the son of Barukh stood up in the synagogue and recited this blessing the first time his son stood up to read from the Torah. And this blessing is obligatory.<sup>65</sup>

Figure 1 shows four paragraphs from the Oxford manuscript. Rabbi Judah (Yehudah) the son of Barukh, sometimes given the title Gaon, lived in Mainz and Worms in the middle of the eleventh century. This places him in the second generation of Ashkenazic rabbis, after Rabbeinu Gershom (c. 960–1040) but before Rashi (1040–1105).<sup>66</sup>

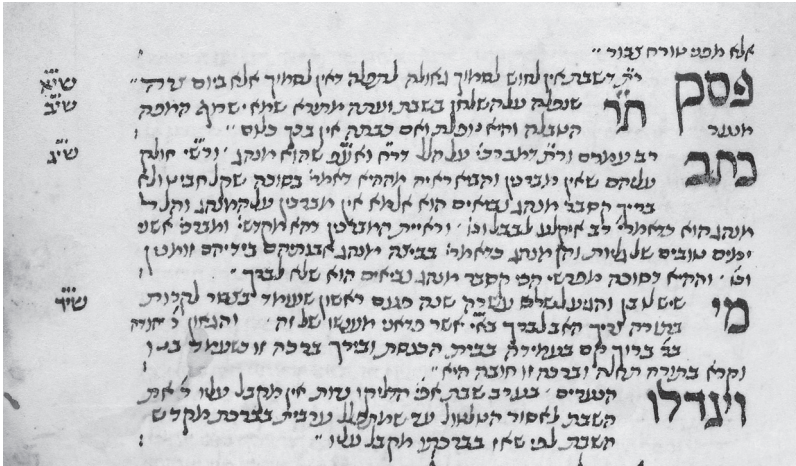


Fig. 1. Manuscript account of the earliest bar mitzvah synagogue ceremony containing a specific name (thirteenth century). Reproduced with permission from the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Manuscript Opp Add 4° 127, fol. 62a. The illustration shows the top half of leaf 62a, and the account is in the third paragraph, numbered 314.

### A FATHER'S NAME IS RECORDED

Despite being called “Teachings of the Rabbis of France,” the little collection contains many rulings of German rabbis,<sup>67</sup> indicating that German customs were spreading to France. Here we have the first boy whose father’s name is mentioned, along with the age of the child, the nature of the synagogue ceremony (reading from the Torah), the role of the father, a particular instance of the blessing being said, and a ruling for the future. What it does not say is that the little ceremony necessarily took place close to the boy’s birthday. And from the wording it was not necessarily the first time the boy had read from the Torah, only the first time after his birthday that he had done so. As we have seen, younger boys sometimes read from the Torah in synagogue at that time.

The wording of the blessing here has two changes from the traditional wording. First, the introductory words “Blessed are you, Eternal God” were added. This might appear unimportant, but it was an absolutely crucial change for the history of bar mitzvah. A declaration or blessing that does not include the name of God could be said as often as you wanted at any

time. But a Hebrew blessing that included God's name could only be said in particular circumstances. By adding the name of God to the father's blessing and then stressing that the blessing is compulsory, the "Rabbis of France," whoever they were, were making a rule that these words should *only* be said on the first occasion that one's son is called to the Torah after he reaches the age of thirteen. Unlike our first account, this one states that saying the blessing was obligatory. This meant, in effect, that having a bar mitzvah (as it was later called) was here thought of as compulsory for the boy, so that his father could say the blessing.

The second change is strange. Instead of "Blessed be the One who has freed me from punishment," Rabbi Judah said, "who has redeemed me from punishment." The word *redeemed* brings to mind the "redemption of the firstborn," for which a ceremony is mentioned in ancient sources and by our first medieval source, *Sefer HaIttur*.<sup>68</sup> The new synagogue ceremony is here likened to a second "redemption." *Redeemed* is a stronger word than *freed*, suggesting the father has really been saved from danger. But this variation in the text of the blessing did not catch on, so the phrasing "freed me from punishment" became the norm.

#### THE EUROPEAN ORIGIN OF BAR MITZVAH

Only when the story of Rabbi Judah son of Barukh was published in 1973 did it become really clear that bar mitzvah had a European origin. The simple story does not explain why this new custom began. Very little is known about this Rabbi Judah, but one of the few reports we have about him tells us that he used to fast for a second day after Yom Kippur. This may seem extraordinary, but it was a known practice among the group known as the Hasidei Askenaz, a pious group in twelfth-century Germany, and among their French contemporaries known as the tosafists.

So, this new custom that we now call bar mitzvah may have started off as another pious practice, a public acknowledgment by the father that his son will be responsible for his own actions and do his religious duties.<sup>69</sup> But is this report correct? Can we be sure that Judah was the first to do this, if the only account we have was written two hundred years later?

We do not know, but what we can be sure about is that this little ceremony was recorded as a French custom in a collection of sayings added by a scribe to a book by Rabbi Yehiel of Paris, who left France for the Holy Land in about the year 1260.<sup>70</sup> This first report was therefore before 1260 but not necessarily a long time before that. Until further evidence comes



to light, the best way to interpret this evidence is to say that the synagogue ceremony was first recorded in thirteenth-century northern France.

#### AVIGDOR THE FRENCHMAN

In 1996 another unusual text was printed for the first time, and it gives us further information. It was published under the name of an otherwise unknown Rabbi Avigdor Tzarfati (“Avigdor the Frenchman”). His report of the same thirteenth-century French custom has not been noticed by previous studies of the history of bar mitzvah:

In *Bereshit Rabbah* it says that on the day when his son was thirteen Isaac stood up and recited “Blessed are you, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who has freed me from punishment because of him.” **And this is the ruling:** it is a duty to recite this blessing over one’s son when he is thirteen years and one day old, when he stands up to read from the Torah, and one needs to stand over one’s son to place one’s hand on his head, and to recite the blessing as expressed here. **And this is the French custom.**<sup>71</sup>

Here for the first time it is ruled that the little ceremony should take place on the exact day the boy reaches the required age. As the Torah is not read in public every morning, it follows that the ceremony might have to be postponed for one or two days but not longer. The instruction is very precise.

This account of what was later called bar mitzvah adds the fascinating new detail of the father placing his hand on his son’s head. This was a time-honored Jewish gesture, traditionally done with two hands.<sup>72</sup> Jacob had placed his hands on the heads of his grandsons when blessing them, using a text that was taken up by Jewish families.<sup>73</sup> Moses placed his hands on the head of Joshua, and this became a key text for rabbinic ordination.<sup>74</sup> But this simple act has not elsewhere been connected with the father’s bar mitzvah blessing until modern times, when it is sometimes done by the father and sometimes by the rabbi.

Christians had introduced an individual laying on of the hands by the bishop as part of the Roman Catholic confirmation rite in the twelfth century.<sup>75</sup> This practice was modeled on an account in the Christian Scriptures,<sup>76</sup> and its reintroduction by the Church in the twelfth century followed the thinking of Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141),<sup>77</sup> a scholar

known to have studied the Bible with Jewish teachers.<sup>78</sup> Hugh taught at the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris.

Avigdor's account suggests that the father's blessing went back to Isaac, who "stood up and recited it," as if he had been attending synagogue with his son Jacob. According to one account, Rabbi Avigdor's own father was called Isaac, and in his youth Avigdor had traveled with his father and two teachers to Paris to witness the famous public disputation between Rabbi Yehiel of Paris and the convert Nicholas Donin (1240).<sup>79</sup> Perhaps his own father had recited the blessing for him according to the ruling preserved among the French customs. Perhaps, too, a party was held afterward because Avigdor's book is also an important source for that.

#### THIRTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

The two earliest reports of the synagogue ceremony were both recorded in French sources. One comes from a book of French customs, and the other says explicitly that bar mitzvah was a French custom. Paris was the largest city in Europe, and important centers of Jewish scholarship developed there and across France. Born in Troyes in 1040, the famous scholar Rashi studied in Worms on the Rhine and traveled frequently between the two towns. Following Rashi, the innovative twelfth-century scholars known as tosafists were a group based in both countries. The best known was Rashi's grandson, Rabbeinu Tam (1100–1171). They adopted a very distinctive approach to the study of rabbinic texts, refusing to depart from tradition but finding skillful ways of adapting the texts to the time and the culture in which they lived.

In thirteenth-century Normandy the age of thirteen marked a real practical transition in a boy's life. An Oxford manuscript dated 1309 preserves a rule book for the education of children.<sup>80</sup> The third stage of the child's education is that of the *perushim* (separated):

The rabbis said, "A thirteen-year-old for [the performance of] precepts." Their words are supported by [the verse], "I have formed this people for myself, they shall relate my praise" [Isa. 43:12]. The *gematria* equivalent of the word "this" (*zu*) is thirteen. They are worthy of being counted in a quorum of the community and to pray, and they can be counted among the numbers of the *perushim*. The father shall take his son the *parush* and encourage him with good words, "You are fortunate that you have merited to do the holy work," and he shall be

entered into the house that is designated for the *perushim*. The obligation of separation (*perishut*) does not begin until he reaches the age of sixteen. [The father] brings him before the head of the academy and he lays his hands upon him saying, “This is consecrated to the Lord.” And he says to his son, “I am directing to here that which you would have consumed in my house, for I have consecrated you to Torah study.” And he will remain there for seven years.<sup>81</sup>

There is a contradiction here between the ages of thirteen and sixteen for the boy going off to the house of study, but the quotations used support the age of thirteen. This would mean the young man would remain in the school until the age of twenty. It has been suggested that this rule book comes from Normandy. Archaeological remains of what may have been used as a boys’ high school (*yeshiva*) were discovered in the Jewish quarter of Rouen in Normandy in 1976.<sup>82</sup> Our text may well be linked to the remains of this building in Rouen.<sup>83</sup> One relevant point is that this rule book also specifically mentions a “French custom.”<sup>84</sup>

At the enrollment of the boy in the high school, there was a ceremony in which the father’s hands (or the director’s hands) were placed on the boy’s head.<sup>85</sup> This act echoes Avigdor’s account of bar mitzvah. So, this is one place where the ceremony could have developed, with the first part (which we now call bar mitzvah) taking place in the family town synagogue before the boy left for school and the second ceremony taking place on his arrival at the school. We now have not only a time and place for the ceremony but also a possible reason for it taking place, as boys became separated from their parents and went off to school on their own.<sup>86</sup>

### *Christian Cultural Influences*

The culture in which the small Jewish communities of France lived was a Christian one, in which Jews only survived when royal rulers and the Church allowed them to. Attacks on Jews were frequent during the first Crusade (1096–1099) and King Philip Augustus had all Jews expelled from those areas of France under his control in the year 1182. In 1198, however, they were allowed to return and resume their lives. But although life was hard for medieval Jews, this does not mean that every Jew and every Christian hated each other; the small Jewish communities would never have survived if Jews had been hated by all their Christian neighbors. Some Jews studied with Christians and knew how they interpreted the Bible.

There are many examples of Jews taking up Christian customs, provided they were consistent with Judaism. When Avigdor described the custom of the father placing his hand on the boy's head, he may well have known that this was also done in church. But because it was in the Hebrew Bible, it was acceptable. It was precisely this kind of innovative approach that allowed new rituals, such as bar mitzvah, to be developed and accepted.<sup>87</sup>

The recital of *Kaddish* by mourners was another new French custom from the same period and was particularly associated with boys who had lost a parent.<sup>88</sup> So, a boy who had a father could celebrate the new ceremony later called bar mitzvah—while a boy without a father could take part in another new tradition, that of saying *Kaddish*. It is easy to imagine two friends, one celebrating and one mourning.

The poignant juxtaposition of the two innovations brings to life the hazards and joys of medieval French Jewry. A boy would say *Kaddish* to plead for mercy for the soul of his dead father, who had been righteous and pious enough to teach his son. A father would say the bar mitzvah blessing to give thanks for the righteousness and piety of his son, whom he had taught and who was now responsible for his own actions. The two innovations mirror each other. One was a sad way, one a happy way, of marking the separation of a son from his parents and the transfer of responsibilities in an era of danger and persecution.

#### *Bar Mitzvah in Medieval England?*

Over two hundred manuscripts left by the tosafists have never been published, so there are very likely further early accounts of bar mitzvah waiting to be discovered.<sup>89</sup> Because of the closeness of the Norman French and medieval English Jewish communities, it is quite possible that bar mitzvah was also celebrated in thirteenth-century England, though we have no local evidence.<sup>90</sup>

I have described how the spread of bar mitzvah may have been linked to the high school in Rouen, with the recital of the blessing by the father in synagogue implying a wish that the son would go on to further study, like Jacob in the midrash from which the blessing was taken. Rouen has been described as a model for the medieval London community. King John of England proclaimed the Jew Jacob of London “king of the Jews” in a document he issued at Rouen in 1199. But within a few years King John lost control of Normandy, and thereafter Jewish links were not so close.