

## “Two Conditions”

By Art Feinglass

I’m pretty sure it’s heresy to say that I’m grateful for the pandemic. Not, of course, for all the havoc it wrought and all the human suffering it caused but for how one of its consequences has enriched my life.

The consequence I have in mind is the shutdown that put a halt to travel and the effect that had on my relationships with my grandchildren.

My two oldest grandkids live in Seattle, the two youngest in L.A. Before the pandemic I lived half the year in New York and half in Seattle and my *now-I’m-here, now-I’m-not* lifestyle hampered my relationships with the kids. But when the travel ban went into effect, I became more of a steady presence in the lives of my Seattle grandchildren. And, thanks to the advent of Zoom in the pandemic, I became a virtual presence in the lives of the boys in L.A.

The year before, my granddaughter, the oldest of the four kids, had a lovely bat mitzvah in the temple in Seattle and did a wonderful job with her Torah and Haftorah readings, chanting the ancient Hebrew lines and melodies with a beautiful, lilting voice. But when it was her brother’s turn to have a bar mitzvah he declared that he wouldn’t do it.

He gave all the standard reasons every Jewish child has given down the ages: he wasn’t religious, he didn’t believe in God, he didn’t understand the Hebrew, the ritual didn’t mean anything to him; the list went on, and each of his assertions made perfect sense. I had said them all to my parents; my daughters had said them all to me. The parental answer, also firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, had been “It doesn’t matter, you’re having a bar mitzvah (or in the case of my two daughters, a bat mitzvah) and that’s final.”

That argument worked for me and it worked for my daughters but it cut no ice with my grandson. He refused to have a bar mitzvah and that was that. My daughter informed the temple that the bar mitzvah was off. She cancelled the hall she'd reserved for the post-bar mitzvah party and his 13th birthday was marked with just a regular family birthday party on their backyard deck. I was very disappointed but apparently there was nothing I could've done to change his mind.

This concern about a bar mitzvah was an ironic turn of events for me since, for most of my life, I'd been a confirmed atheist. My parents were proudly Jewish but completely secular. We didn't belong to a synagogue and I never set foot in one until the day of my own bar mitzvah. The synagogue was near my grandmother's apartment in The Bronx and the gray-bearded rabbi whom I had never seen before made a lovely speech about what a fine young man I was. As he traced his pointer along the lines of text in the Torah scroll, I pretended to be reading as I recited the Hebrew words I'd memorized from a 45 rpm record. I had no idea what I was saying.

That pretty much soured me on organized religion in general and on Judaism in particular. I became a confirmed atheist. But, as a Jewish comic famously said, "A Jewish atheist knows what the God he doesn't believe in expects of him." For reasons I didn't fully understand myself, when I reached my forties I began to lose my faith in atheism. I came to value Jewish tradition, joined a synagogue and made sure my two daughters had bat mitzvahs. And now I wanted all my grandchildren to have bar mitzvahs as well.

Thanks to my regular presence at the weekly family dinners, my grandson and I had grown close. He'd confided in me that what he wanted for his birthday was a BB gun. After checking that it was alright with his parents, I got him a Red Ryder BB rifle, the same classic model my father

had gotten me six decades earlier. I taught him how to aim and shoot and made him memorize the rules of gun safety.

On summer evenings, as we blasted away at paper targets in his backyard, we talked of this and that and grew closer still. I began a stealth campaign of trying to convince him to change his mind about having a bar mitzvah. When he complained that reading Hebrew was too hard, I pointed to the family candlesticks with their blue Hebrew letters spelling out the word Shabbat. If he could read that—and he could—he could read his bar mitzvah portion from the Torah. It would just take some practice, I assured him. He was a bright kid, he could do it. But he remained unconvinced.

Our backyard target practice expanded to include tin cans, which we sent flying into the air with satisfying *plunk* sounds of the BBs hitting home. As we took turns, passing the BB gun back and forth, I offered observations about Jewish tradition and history and culture and how much he'd regret not having a bar mitzvah in years to come and how glad he'd be if did have one. I was at my Clarence-Darrow-for-the-defense best, but to no avail. He remained steadfast in his refusal. And I remained stubbornly determined to get him to change his mind.

Finally one evening in the backyard, after sending another legion of tin cans into the stratosphere, he handed me the BB gun and said, in a voice that had recently begun to get deeper, "Okay."

I froze in place. I *hoped* he was talking about having a bar mitzvah but I wasn't sure. Maybe what he meant was, "Okay we can shoot another two million cans into the air."

"Okay what?" I asked him. And held my breath.

"Okay, I'll have a bar mitzvah," he said, and I hugged him and told him he'd just made his grandpa very happy. "But," he added in mid-hug, "on two

conditions.”

“Whatever the conditions, the answer is yes,” I assured him.

I didn’t know what he had in mind, maybe a lifetime supply of tin cans, but any conditions were fine with me, as long as he’d have a bar mitzvah.

“The first condition,” he said, “is *you* have to be my teacher.”

I was surprised and flattered. I knew I could teach him how to read the necessary Hebrew. I’d learned the language when I lived in Israel and had taught Hebrew for extra money when I was in graduate school.

“Okay, I’ll be happy to. I’ll make the lesson fun. You’ll have it all down in no time.” So far so good. I wondered what would be his second condition.

“And I want *you* to do the bar mitzvah service. Here in the house, just for the family.”

That was some request. I wasn’t sure if he knew I’d attended rabbinical seminary for a year but that I’d dropped out. I wanted to finalize the deal while the finalizing was good.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll be honored to conduct your bar mitzvah. It doesn’t require a rabbi to run the service.” I wasn’t 100% sure that was true, but anything to close the deal.

That got me another hug. I wanted to rush into the house and tell his parents that the bar mitzvah was on again, but I was afraid that making too big a deal of it might scare him off so, instead, I handed him back the BB gun and we went back to plinking at cans.

The following week I called a rabbi friend of mine who assured me that I’d been right, it would, indeed, be “kosher” for me to conduct the bar mitzvah service. He confirmed my understanding that what was required was that my grandson read a passage from the Torah and a passage from the Prophets. He congratulated me and promised to be available if I had any

questions.

I asked my grandson which of my brilliant arguments had finally convinced him to have a bar mitzvah.

“None of them,” he said.

“None?”

“I’m doing it because it’s important to you and to my mom.”

So much for my oratorical genius. But at least my persistence had paid off.

I began meeting with my grandson one afternoon a week, after he finished his digital school day, going over the passages for his bar mitzvah, coaching him on his Hebrew reading and pronunciation and explaining to him the meaning of the words and the significance of the passages. Unlike me at my bar mitzvah, he would actually understand what he was saying and why it was significant.

We worked at it seriously but we also laughed a lot together. For study breaks from the text I showed him maps and photos to give him a sense of the historical context of what he was reading. After one of our classes I praised him for how well he was doing.

Putting a hand on his shoulder, I said, a little pompously, “I’m very pleased with my student.”

Matching my tone, he put his hand on my shoulder and intoned, “And I’m very pleased with my teacher.”

We both laughed and his words continued to echo in my mind long after.

His younger cousins in L.A. told their mother they also wanted grandpa to be their bar mitzvah teacher. I was delighted and, via Zoom, began teaching the 11-year-old the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Soon we were reading a children’s book of bible stories in Hebrew together. Next

year, when it's time for him to start learning his Torah portion, he'll be able to read the biblical Hebrew without too much trouble.

His 9-year-old brother was feeling left out so I taught him to sing the traditional *Ma Nishtana* for the Passover seder. His sweet, angelic voice brought down the house. Soon I'll begin teaching him the Hebrew alphabet as the first step in his bar mitzvah training. He told his mother he's looking forward to "Grandpa Class."

I'm convinced that if the pandemic hadn't kept me grounded in Seattle I wouldn't have bonded as I did with my grandson and wouldn't now be preparing him for the bar mitzvah he'd been determined not to have. And I wouldn't be going on to prepare my two other grandsons for their bar mitzvahs.

Once they've had their bar mitzvahs and can read Hebrew they'll have the keys to however much of Jewish tradition they care to experience. They may choose to explore the rich, ancient heritage that's theirs or not, but they'll always know they have the keys.

I've done a lot of different things in my life and had some successes along the way but, from my septuagenarian vantage point of view, guiding my grandchildren through this ancient Jewish rite of passage counts more than all the rest put together. If, after I'm gone, people remember me at all, what they recall may well be, "He bar mitzvahed his three grandsons." And for that, I'll be deeply grateful.