

Back to Nature, and Back to the No-Frills Bar Mitzvah

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COLD SPRING, N.Y. - It is a bar mitzvah factory, this Eddie Cantor Theater along the lake here, but not one where any of the predictable trappings of many modern bar and bat mitzvahs and other rite-of-passage ceremonies can be found.

The fashionable D.J.'s, ice sculptures and other wedding-style paraphernalia - and costs - are out. In are gravel isles, wooden benches set in cement posts, guests in sandals and shorts. Rather than over-the-top, the several bar and bat mitzvahs that can be held here on any summer Saturday hark back to the day when children came of age and did their Torah reading followed by nothing more elaborate than a gathering of family and a few friends for herring and some schnapps.

About two dozen campers a summer have their bar mitzvahs at Surprise Lake camp here in the picturesque Hudson Valley. The camp was started in the early 1900's to serve underprivileged Jewish boys and has since gone co-educational and taken on full-fee campers. Currently, 60 percent of campers pay a reduced fee, with some charged as little as \$100 for a four-week overnight session. Forty percent pay the full fee of \$2,000 to \$2,400, depending on age.

In the camp's early years, free bar mitzvah education and training was given to the boys, many of whom came from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and though the practice stopped for years, it was revived about a decade ago to serve many

campers who had come from Russia with little money or religious knowledge.

But then something unexpected happened on the way to holding free, no-frills bar and bat mitzvahs for the poor. Full-fee campers, intrigued by the ceremonies stripped to their essence, their spiritual core, began to ask for them, too.

The camp now offers all who ask religious tutoring with no charge and then a bar or bat mitzvah in the modest Eddie Cantor Theater, named for the comedian who was a former camper and helped raise money for the outdoor structure, which overlooks Surprise Lake.

On a Saturday this summer, with the camp's nearly 500 campers and dozens of staff members sitting on the wood benches, still a touch damp from rain, three campers were called to the Torah, one at a time over the course of an hour. The pulpit the Torah sat on was makeshift, a table covered with a cloth drawn on by the campers.

As the campers were called up, they were greeted by pockets of cheers from bunkmates that ranged in tone from throaty to squeaky. Parents sat in the first few rows, not a tux or gown among them, or even a tie, and the 13-year-olds themselves were also dressed casually, with Zoie Schachter wearing shorts, pink flip-flops and a pink bow in her hair.

After the Torah readings, each bar or bat mitzvah camper was given a brief chance to make a speech, but only long enough to thank those who had helped him, people like Rabbi Eric Hammer, who helps lead the service and the camp's bar mitzvah education effort, and Claire Ginsburg Goldstein, a rabbinical student who teaches bar mitzvah training here.

Others thanked friends. "I want to thank Lauren and Chelsea because they wanted to be in my speech," Zoie said. But the speeches, like all else, were kept to a minimum, and the service follows the same spare format each week.

"Occasionally, a family will want to spice it up one way or another," the camp's executive director, Jordan Dale, said. "We won't have a D.J., but if they want to do it a way that fits, it's fine."

For example, referring to a prayer shawl, Mr. Dale said, "If they have an idiosyncratic addition, like a tallit that has been in the family that they want to present, we'll do it."

"We once had a mother who wanted to give a short speech," he added, "but we won't be doing that again."

The camp spends about \$3,500 a year on the ceremonies, Mr. Jordan said, with some overlap in costs for staff members.

The ceremony ended with songs, including an adaptation of Kool and the Gang's "Celebration" that went: "Just bring your good friends and your mitzvahs, too, we want to celebrate your shabbas with you." One chorus member perched a beanie baby on her head and made it wave to friends in the large audience.

For any camper with stage fright, dispensation is given for a bar mitzvah during the week, in front of a minimal audience, but afterward for all there is a simple benediction, or kiddush, held in the mess hall in the camp's main building, where family members and a few of the campers' friends are invited for grape juice and snacks.

The camp provides glatt kosher food, but attracts campers ranging from Orthodox to Reform to nonpracticing.

Alexis Rothberg, just bat mitzvahed, said she wanted her ceremony in camp because at home in Manhattan her parents, Jay and Peggy, belong to a humanistic congregation where she said she would not have had the opportunity to read from the Torah as she wanted to. The decision worked for her father, who said: "The services are so simple. We've seen one before and were just struck by it."

Zoie said that because the whole camp was invited, she did not have to get into the thorny process of winnowing the number of people she invited to fit the specifications of a certain room.

Vitaly Dvorkin, who had just been bar mitzvahed, said that getting called up to the Torah was easier in camp in an environment that was less formal and more forgiving than an intimidating gathering filled with many of his parents' friends. Asked if it was hard to bear down to study for that final stretch before his bar mitzvah while faced with the temptations of summer camp, Vitaly demurred.

"No," he said, "I don't like to swim anyway."

After an hour of snacking, parents headed home and it was back to waterfront activities, basketball games and whiling away time in their cabins for the newly bar mitzvahed. Alexis, like the others, was all smiles and happy with her choice of a simple bat mitzvah.

"The other way is overwhelming," she said, before being hit by a wave of mischief. "And I'm saving overwhelming for my Sweet 16."