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

By MAREK FUCHS
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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-feee 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 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. The camp spends about $3,500 a year on the Torah readings, 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."

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