
The bar mitzvah ritual was a bottom-up development in the Jewish tradition, initially addressing the needs of parents in the twelfth century: to relieve the father “of responsibility for his son’s religious obligations” (2). In the twenty-first century and in an American context, this ritual now signifies a variety of meanings as it has become more significant to other members of the congregation (students, educators, tutors, attendees of the Shabbat service, and leaders). Despite this growing complexity, the bar and bat mitzvah ritual notably still continues to be a rite of passage most important to the laity. For this reason, Patricia Keer Munro offers a distinct perspective on perhaps the most significant religious event in Jewish American families’ lives. While other studies on this topic have focused on religious leaders, Munro’s goal is to “bring out the individual voices and stories of parents and children” (14). Examining the tensions and negotiations made at the intersection of the participants, the ritual, and the congregation, this book explores processes of change and continuity that will be of interest to both scholars of Jewish studies and more broadly sociologists of religion.

This study is built upon interviews, observations, and research (explained in detail in an appendix) on five congregations located in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Bay Area Jewish community is small but vibrant, liberal, and diverse. The area contains fewer than 100 congregations. The rate of intermarriage is significantly higher than the national average, while the rate of synagogue affiliation is lower. Due to the region’s distinctive lack of Jewish enclaves, there are fewer Orthodox congregations, and far more Reform, independent, and Renewal congregations (the percentage of Conservative congregations is similar to the national average). This study takes advantage of the Bay Area’s variety, including a Conservative, an Orthodox, a nonaffiliated or independent, and two Reform congregations (one with an average membership of 200-400 families, and the other, very large, with well over one thousand families). While distinct, the Bay Area is representative of twenty-first century trends towards increasing individualization and secularization according to current Pew research. From this sample, and dedicating nearly a chapter to each point, the author examines the bar and bat mitzvah ritual as an “interdependent system” including participants, the ritual itself, and the larger congregation, together negotiating the following four tensions: (1) different meanings and motives (2) education and identity versus ritual preparation (3) boundaries separating men and women and Jews from non-Jews, and (4) the public Shabbat service versus the private bar and bat mitzvah ritual.

Munro makes a significant contribution to social science research, which had neglected to explore the ways in which bar and bat mitzvah rituals have shaped American Jewish life. While the ritual symbolically promises that there will be a Jewish future, Munro asks whether the bar and bat mitzvah really matters. In addition to sociologists of religion and scholars of Jewish studies, American religious historians will find this book interesting as well. David Hollinger is acknowledged for giving “a historical perspective from outside the Jewish community” to this project (ix). And Munro’s analysis of bar and bat mitzvah rituals identifies thought-provoking connections to American and modern values of choice, self-creation, and voluntary association, especially in respect to child-rearing. While the study is confined to the twenty-first century, and examines only the bar and bat mitzvah ritual (not the party), this book
nevertheless is a thorough reinterpretation of a rite of passage central to American Jewish life.

Megan Leverage
Florida State University