

**Isaac's Failed Bar Mitzvah - Introduction to The Torah Reading
Rosh HaShanah 5774, Community Synagogue of Rye
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Like many of my colleagues, I begin thinking about High Holiday messages around Passover. Yet no matter what I do, God (or the world) seems to always have the last laugh. So at this time of year, I've learned to hold my breath and wait...

First it was 9/11, then Katrina, the financial crisis of 2008 and Hurricane Irene. This year, as we wait with baited breath to see what congress decides, it's Syria. And yesterday morning, aaarrgghh, it was the NY Times!

I hope many of you saw the article about Bar Mitzvahs needing to get a makeover. It's about how b'nei mitzvah, acting too often as a graduation from Jewish life has been undermining organized Judaism for generations. It was about how, our Reform movement – including Community Synagogue - is standing at the forefront of an initiative to re-imagine the entire process. Called "B'nei Mitzvah Revolution", we are willing to put everything on the table to reinvent what this coming of age ceremony looks like. Up till now, the discussions have mostly been taking place among the senior staff but it is now time to widen those circles to ask, "How do we truly make this a meaningful event that will imprint long lasting values after the last 'thank you note' is written."

In light of this article, I believe the piece of Torah we read this morning was intended to be Isaac's bar mitzvah experience.

Some rabbinic legends say Isaac 13 when Abraham took his son to sacrifice him. Looking at it this way, the Akeida was a test for Isaac as much as it was for Abraham.

When Abraham's father Terach left Abraham in charge of his idol shop, Abraham was 13. Terach knew what he was doing. He knew that Abraham might pick up a stick and smash all the idols. Terach was giving his son a chance to grow up, a chance to rebel in a controlled environment. Abraham took the opportunity, smashed his father's idols, and started a whole new way of life. Not Isaac.

Isaac never struggles. The only question he asks is, “where is the lamb for the offering?” There is no fight, no running away, not even a question of, “uh, dad, why are you tying me up?” Laying out each detail until Abraham raises the knife; from building the altar, to laying the wood, to binding Isaac, to laying him on the wood, to even reaching for the knife, the text seems to indicate that Abraham gave Isaac multiple opportunities to push back – to do what Bar Mitzvah is supposed to do, to help a young boy or girl wave goodbye to his or her childhood as they set out on the long narrow bridge to adulthood. For Isaac, it never happens. He fails the test. He remains a child, bound on the altar. His only accomplishment in life is to re-dig Abraham’s wells. Isaac’s potential “bar mitzvah moment” is an epic fail. It transforms the father but not the son. This isn’t the way b’nei mitzvah is supposed to work. It is supposed to give a child - who is no longer really a child - a feeling of adequacy that will give them the tools to make Jewish choices as an adult, even maybe to rebel a little against what they've learned, against what's expected of them. Or at least what they *think* is expected of them. The question is, do they even know what that is? Do we?

I believe we CAN revolutionize b’nei mitzvah to truly make it a transformational rite of passage. I believe we CAN move away from the pediatric, assembly line, religious school industrial complex we created. This the test God is putting before us right now. Are we willing, like Abraham, to say Hineini – I am here, I am present and I am ready? Are we willing to smash some idols? Or will we remain like Isaac, bound on the altar, sentenced to repeating our past?