



Patricia Keer Munro. *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016. 230 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8135-7594-0.

Reviewed by Samira Mehta

Published on H-Judaic (August, 2017)

Commissioned by Katja Vehlow (University of South Carolina)

Patricia Keer Munro's *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted* analyzes the role of the bar and bat mitzvah rituals in American Judaism. Munro has written a nuanced ethnographic exploration of these celebrations in the contemporary San Francisco Bay Area, examining the practices of Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and independent synagogues of a variety of sizes and demographics. This monograph is refreshing in its unflinching look at lived Judaism, free from hand wringing about declension in favor of a descriptive and analytically rigorous examination of a central contemporary Jewish practice.

Munro argues that these coming-of-age ceremonies are central ceremonies in the lives of American Jews, arguably one of the primary motivations for American families to join synagogues. Munro's investigation treats the bar/bat mitzvah as a ritual in flux, one that is created in constant negotiation of competing needs of parent and child, family and congregation, religious leader and congregant. Amid all of these tensions, Munro argues, the bar and bat mitzvah rituals have created American Jews as much as American Jews have created these celebrations. "This book," she writes, "tells the story of that persistent relationship." Munro goes on to present a nuanced and compelling depiction of that "persistent relation-

ship" in a monograph that expands on the dynamics of the contemporary bar/bat mitzvah (p. 2).

She points out that while b'nai mitzvah celebrations provide a primary impetus for families to join synagogues, their various constituents understand the rite of passage differently. One of her most telling examples points to the tension that often exists between family members and congregations. For family members, b'nai mitzvah are life cycle events to be shared with family and personalized for the bat or bar mitzvah student. For congregations, b'nai mitzvah may interrupt the rituals and routines of the Shabbat service. These tensions are particularly striking in communities where Torah services are regularly taken up by b'nai mitzvah ceremonies and in which many of the b'nai mitzvah children and their families are not well integrated into the community. Moreover, Munro demonstrates that clergy, parents, and teens often have disparate definitions of what counts as "successful" b'nai mitzvah. Similarly, adolescents and adults may also have differing understandings of how committed the child is to his or her Jewish identity after completing the bar/bat mitzvah. Munro is clear that a particular family's experience of the process and ceremony depends on many factors, ranging from the size of the community to the level of parental involvement in the community to the extent that they are

allowed to tailor the ceremony. She details and articulates the ramifications of the divergent educational expectations, practices, and flexibility of the movements and articulates the consequences of “failed” ritual. For instance, Munro demonstrates that the parents and/or child often consider the ritual a success, even when it has not met the ritual or educational bar set by the rabbi, cantor, or synagogue staff.

Since Munro worked with a range of congregations, including those affiliated with different movements and across a range of sizes, her analysis juggles a collection of variables. Her diverse sources help her make broader claims about an American Jewish phenomenon, but they also, at times, make her argument hard to follow. She is not always clear about which of the differences between the communities were significant and which were not, and sometimes detailing the variation detracts from or muddies her primary argument. That said, all of the information is interesting, and the primary problem is one of organization and clarity, not content.

In an important change from many works in Jewish studies, Munro has an accessible writing style, aimed at a broad audience. Before the main body of the monograph, she provides definitions for the shifting and flexible meanings of the terms “bar mitzvah,” “bat mitzvah,” and “Torah.” After tracing various definitions, she clarifies each of the meanings that she intends to use and makes clear exactly how she will differentiate between them. (She notes, for instance, that the term “bar or bat mitzvah” can refer to the student, the ritual, or the party afterward and explains that she will therefore use the term as an adjective, modifying one of those terms, though in common parlance, it is a noun that can mean any of the three depending on context.) She also dedicates a chapter to context, a move that might seem unnecessary to a specialist in Jewish studies, but is, in fact, crucial. In this chapter, she explains the basic format of the bar mitzvah ritual, noting that bat

mitzvahs are the same, except in Orthodox communities. She delineates several variations on the themes and clarifies some cultural assumptions about the bar/bat mitzvah process and performance. By providing context, she is able to “make the familiar strange” for experts in contemporary Judaism while also inviting comparison with rituals from other traditions. This care with terminology is extremely helpful to the reader. It also makes this book useful for religious studies classrooms in which one may not assume a high level of fluency in Judaism, be they introduction to Judaism courses or general religious studies courses where this text could serve as the “Jewish example” in a course on, for instance, religious practice or religion and childhood.

Since my own work has focused primarily on interfaith marriage between Christians and Jews, I was particularly attentive to Munro’s treatment of this large demographic and was very impressed with her approach. Munro was matter-of-fact about the presence of interfaith families in Jewish life and treated the innovations that they bring to the bar/bat mitzvah as additional variations on a constantly changing and evolving history. Munro’s handling of interfaith families exemplifies the critical empathy that she brought to all of the actors in her ethnography, providing a portrait that is simultaneously sympathetic and critically rigorous.

(p. 2)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Samira Mehta. Review of Munro, Patricia Keer. *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49750>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.