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A Sacred Moment

Rabbi Sid Schwarz

The great American Bar/Bat Mitzvah has become a source of parody in Jewish life. The 13-year olds are at the most awkward stage of their lives with hormones raging. Anywhere from 10 to 50 friends might be invited who then sit in the sanctuary with no interest in the service and little clue as what is transpiring. The relatives and friends of the parents are polite but often sit stoically, unnerved by the unfamiliarity of the surroundings. And then there is, of course, the extravagance of the party which often obscures any hope that the young adolescent will emerge from the rite of passage with the lesson that Judaism's version of the "good life" requires modesty, compassion and generosity as opposed to indulgence and lavish excess.

But then there are those sublime, magical moments that can only happen in sacred time and sacred space. Such was the case on a recent Shabbat when I was privileged to be on the *bimah* at Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, MD, where I am the founding rabbi.

The Bar-Mitzvah boy was a young man named Moses Milchberg. The oldest of three children, Moses is an excellent student with a quiet confidence about him that clearly sets him off from many of his peers. He became a vegetarian in the 1st grade because he thought it was wrong to kill animals for food and he has stayed with it ever since. In addition to playing ice hockey himself, he regularly volunteers for a club that sponsors hockey for children with mental and physical disabilities. In addition to chanting both Torah and Haftarah selections beautifully, he delivered a *dvar torah* about the *parsha* of Toldot in which Jacob outwits his brother Esau to acquire the birthright. His message was about the dangers of feeling entitled.

Of course, in our upper middle class community, we are a Jewish Lake Wobegon—all the children are above average. What really set apart this day was that Moses's paternal grandparents, both survivors of the Holocaust, were present with him on the *bimah*.

Irving and Renee Milchberg were no ordinary survivors. They were walking symbols of Jewish survival. Renee was separated from her family as a child when the Germans invaded Poland. Along with her aunt and uncle on the Russian side of the River San, she was sent to a slave labor camp in Siberia. After the war her uncle brought her to America.

Irving was 10 when he and his family were sent to the Warsaw ghetto. His father was shot by a German guard and his mother and sister were deported to Treblinka where they perished. As an orphan, Ignacy (his given name) made his way to the Aryan side of Warsaw where he connected with a group of about 20 other Jewish orphans his age, five of them girls. He came to be known as "Bull" and he emerged as the leader of the group. He and the other children survived the war though a combination of wits, courage and extraordinary luck.

They rarely slept in the same place for more than a few nights. They smuggled goods and stole food to survive. They overcame injuries and disease. Bull was captured four separate times and each time, he found a way to escape. The little money they earned from selling contraband cigarettes to Poles and even to Nazis.

A book about their exploits was published by a member of the Jewish Polish underground Joseph Ziemian, who helped the children when he could. The book is titled, *The Cigarette Sellers of Three Crosses Square*. What the book does not recount but what I heard from Bull when we met was that these children also were couriers through the sewer system for the weapons that would later make possible the fateful Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943.

When the Bull and Renee came to the *bimah*, I told a bit of their story and we had them recite the *Birkat Gomel*, a prayer that is said when one escapes death or danger. Moses then read from our congregation's Holocaust Torah, which was acquired from the collection of scrolls confiscated by the Nazis and restored after the war by the Westminster Synagogue in England. A scroll that has been dated to the 16th century, we only take it out when a family has been directly affected by the Shoah. On this Shabbat, the scroll stood as a third witness to a miracle—the ability of two remarkable survivors to see their first grandson become a Bar Mitzvah in a congregation that is a testimony to the ongoing vibrancy of Jewish life.

After Moses finished his presentations, I had the whole family stand in their places to recite the *Shechyanu* prayer: Praised are You, Source of the Universe, who has kept us in life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this special moment. There was hardly a dry eye in the sanctuary and more than half of the attendees had no connection to the Milchberg family.

But what they witnessed was not lost on the congregation. Every week, in synagogues all around the world, a young person reading from the Torah represents a new link on a chain that goes all the way back to Sinai. That generational passage can and should be a sacred moment. If we do it right, these young men and women will one day be privileged to stand on a *bimah* watching their grandsons and granddaughters recite the blessings that will bring them into the eternal community of Israel.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is a senior fellow at Clal: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. The founder of the PANIM Institute for Leadership and Values, he is the author of *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews can Transform the American Synagogue* (Jewish Lights).