
**A Closer Look at
Independent B'nai Mitzvah
in the Chicagoland Area**

By Abigail Pickus



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The independent B'nai Mitzvah ceremony and preparation process is a small but growing phenomenon among Chicago Jewish families who, for a variety of reasons detailed in the report, choose to forgo participation in a synagogue education and ceremony. The findings of this report, gleaned from interviews with parents, educators, tutors, and clergy, present the circumstances behind this phenomenon and attempt to frame its potential impact on the congregational and communal structure.

Dear Reader,

The Community Foundation for Jewish Education of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago (CFJE) is pleased to present our first report as part of our series “CFJE Reports” regarding research on issues of local interest to Chicago’s Jewish education professionals and stake holders that have not been examined in depth on the local level in the past. This first report addresses a growing trend towards independent b’nai mitzvah in which families are choosing to forgo congregational membership and education to prepare their children and conduct their own ritual ceremonies. This report is a snapshot of this trend and offers a glimpse inside the motivations of families to undertake this process, the tutors and clergy who assist them and the congregational professionals who struggle with the loss of these families to the congregational community. The findings of the report are informative to our greater Chicago Jewish community as they offer us perspective on the reasoning for, and impact of, this phenomenon so that local educators and stakeholders can have a better understanding for their own work with b’nai mitzvah families.

It is our hope that by engaging in research such as this report that provides insight and context to local Jewish educational issues, we will be able to facilitate the provision of Jewish education to the local community more effectively and from a better informed and more transparent position. CFJE owes its thanks to Abigail Pickus who deftly undertook the commission for this study and dug in to the topic with sensitivity and respect for all parties. It is our hope that her work will not only inform our local education community about the current trend, but provide some informational context to congregations and individuals that are impacted by this trend. Special appreciation goes to the rabbis, educators, tutors and parents who spoke with Abigail candidly and directly about this issue from their own perspectives.

L’Shalom,

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Introduction

The congregational view goes something like this: a congregant asks to have a *mincha* bar mitzvah – even though this isn't part of the menu of options for b'nai mitzvah – because they want a “seamless motion from the ceremony to the party.” Another congregant asks if their synagogue's clergy will officiate their bar mitzvah at a hockey rink. “And the moment the family's requests are turned down is when they decide to go private,” said a rabbi.

The families see it differently. Some feel the synagogue is not adequately accommodating their special needs child. Others don't want to feel locked into a “cookie cutter” service. And still others have never been members of a congregation and don't feel the need to join merely because their child is becoming a b'nai mitzvah.

Whatever the motivating factors, many Jewish families are choosing to have one of the biggest milestones in Jewish life outside the confines of a congregation as part of a growing shift towards a more personalized, customized Judaism. Whether this is a reflection of radical individualism, a trend towards consumerism in Judaism or a generation that “wants what they want and need to customize everything,” this increase in ‘special orders’ in what used to be a one-size-fits-all lifecycle event, is forcing congregations to “think about their purpose, who they serve and how they are structured,” said one rabbi. “Congregations have to figure out what they can provide that is meaningful and important to families that they can't [find] on their own.”

While it's true that the b'nai mitzvah is merely one lifecycle event in a lifetime of Jewish traditions, it is also no secret that families with b'nai mitzvah-aged children (and the years leading up to it) are a significant source of membership, revenue and religious school attendance for non-Orthodox congregations. (In general, Orthodox congregations are not as much at risk since families who are bound by *halacha* need the *shul* as much as the *shul* needs them.) What this comes down to is Reform and Conservative congregations, both large and small, are increasingly affected by growing instances of do-it-yourself Judaism, through the prism of the independent b'nai mitzvah. Whether the families are former members who left to have the b'nai mitzvah done their way or they have never been members anywhere and instead are finding satisfying ways of fulfilling lifecycle events without having to step foot inside a synagogue, rabbis from across the spectrum agree that congregational life is at stake. While the rabbis interviewed for this study confirm the existence of this phenomenon, most claim that it does not affect their congregation as of now. And even though they disagree on whether the independent b'nai mitzvah is a rising trend or a passing phase, they all concede that in the face of this phenomenon, it is the congregations – and by association, organized Jewish life – that is the most at risk and therefore has the most to lose.

“It’s all built on a house of cards,” said one rabbi. “It [the synagogue] is working because they [members] are agreeing to do it and they are coming, but the moment they decide they don’t want it and they stop coming it is all over. We have no teeth. We have nothing to make them do it.”

The Study

For this study, the Chicago-based sources interviewed included: 10 congregational rabbis (Reform and Conservative), 13 independent tutors and rabbis, 10 families - all in the Chicagoland area. Identities have been kept private to preserve anonymity.

This study does not include Chicago-area families who have a b’nai mitzvah in Israel.

The goal of this study is to explore:

- What does the independent b’nai mitzvah look like and what does it involve? Who are the people having them and preparing students for them?
- Are independent b’nai mitzvah a new phenomenon? Is it on the rise?
- What are its underlying causes?
- Are they a threat to Jewish congregational life?
- How will the growth of independent b’nai mitzvah change the landscape of congregational life in Chicagoland?
- What are some ways congregations are adapting and planning for the future?

Independent b’nai mitzvah defined

For the purposes of this study, independent b’nai mitzvah are when the Judaic preparation and ceremony happen outside the bonds of a congregation. Typically, the family will hire private tutors to prepare the child for understanding and leading the service and independent clergy to officiate. In some instances, the tutor also officiates. Often, tutors create personalized *siddurim* solely for the occasion, made up of prayers, poems and readings reflecting the preferences of the child and the type of service.

Tutors/Clergy

There are a growing number of freelancers in the marketplace working

independently. Before embarking as solo practitioners, the majority of the interviewed b'nai mitzvah tutors worked for many years (in some cases upwards of 20+ years) at large congregations in the Chicagoland area in various administrative capacities, including religious school directors, overseeing the bar and bat mitzvah programs, and tutoring b'nai mitzvah students.

The tutors represent a wide stretch of academic backgrounds, from having worked for years at synagogues as b'nai mitzvah tutors and having strong Jewish backgrounds or having grown up in Israel (but no formal academic degree) to having advanced degrees in Jewish education.

The independent rabbis and cantors in this field similarly come from a variety of backgrounds. For this study, the range includes ordination from mainstream and nondenominational rabbinical schools.

Similarly, there is a wide range of independent b'nai mitzvah performed per year depending on the tutor/clergy, with some of the tutors averaging 1-5 a year, while others (mostly the independent rabbis) estimating upwards of 20-30 a year.

Publicity

While many tutors and clergy do advertise online for their services, the majority of families find them through word of mouth and recommendations. Either they attend another independent b'nai mitzvah and are referred that way or they ask around and find recommendations through friends or trusted acquaintances. Some of the families interviewed did find their tutors through a general online search. Typically, tutors work with specific clergy and vice versa so a family only needs to find one part of the equation and then is matched with the other.

Curriculum

The Judaic preparation for the b'nai mitzvah is usually from a half - hour to two hours a week for the year leading up to the actual ceremony, with many families beginning the process at least one year before the ceremony, often earlier than that. Tutors frequently go to the family's home. The rabbis meet with the family and students on average once per month.

The curriculum is highly personal. Tutors and clergy typically have an initial meeting with the student and their parents to decide what kind of service suits them and to determine the student's Hebrew proficiency and general Judaic knowledge. Based on that meeting, they come up with the curriculum. What the majority of tutors and families share about the process is that the tutors make Jewish learning relevant to the student. "It's an intensive holistic approach to the tutoring process," explained one tutor. "It's not about

just learning trope and the Torah portion, but understanding *why* the trope fall where they do. It's a fuller understanding so [the learning is for learning's sake] and not just because it's what [the student] has to do."

In addition to covering basics like the *parsha*, Torah and/or Haftarah and relevant prayers, tutors often initiate fun educational activities such as baking treats by following a Hebrew recipe or reading the Diary of Anne Frank and then taking a field trip to the Holocaust Museum in Skokie.

"We focus on the holidays coming up, incorporate baking and food into our sessions, talk about Holocaust Remembrance Day, learn prayers and write in Hebrew; in short we discuss anything that is relevant to their life today," said one tutor. Said another: "Our sessions together focus on things that make her [the student] feel excited and empowered and that give her ownership over the experience."

Service

The ceremonies run the gamut from a traditional Shabbat morning service, complete with Torah and Haftarah readings, to weekday *mincha*, havdalah and kabbalat Shabbat services. How in line with Jewish custom and law the ceremony is depends on the family and the tutor/rabbis involved. The same goes for the kinds of *siddurim* used, which can vary from the *Gates of Prayer* (or other prayer books commonly used within congregations) to personalized pamphlets. Some ceremonies incorporate music and poems and personal reflections by family members. "We found a tutor who told us that she can personalize the service. We don't have to have every prayer. She picks different texts and poems and songs and asks us, 'How do these fit into your family?' The kids were happy with it. It was short and to the point, around an hour and a half," said one mother.

In the same way that the services themselves vary according to the wishes of the family, each tutor and independent clergy have their own set of codes and standards. One rabbi who has tutored independently said she tells families very early on: "If you want to be arbitrarily reading Torah when you don't read Torah [according to Jewish practice] you will have to find a different rabbi. If you want work with me, these are the rules." While another tutor said: "I take my observance and affiliation out of the picture. If they want a Friday night Torah reading, I tell them that's not done, but it's ok, we can create a *kabbalat* Shabbat with a Torah reading."

One tutor who spent seven years as an independent freelancer, tutoring students for b'nai mitzvah from several large congregations throughout the city and suburbs and for unaffiliated families, summed up the tutoring and ceremonies she led this way:

"One extreme [case] was the child who did nothing but give a short,

superficial speech on what it means to be Jewish. They held this at a fancy hotel. I constructed a very brief service where I brought my guitar and sang songs, not prayers. Then they had a 6-figure celebration with expensive food.”

On the other side was the family who belonged to a modern Orthodox synagogue in the city who wanted their daughter to be able to celebrate her bat mitzvah in an egalitarian service. “They asked me to give her a full year of religious school education, covering lifecycle events, Hebrew reading and prayer proficiency, the roots of words, and so forth, so that she could look at the *siddur* and understand the text. I also taught her how to lead correct *nussach* for a Shavuot service. It was a full quality religious school experience. I met with her weekly for a full hour for a year. They had the ceremony at a hotel.”

But the standard, according to the tutors interviewed, often falls somewhere in between. One tutor put it this way: “The norm was for me to design a nontraditional service with guitar, songs, and a brochure or booklet that served as a customized *siddur* with English and Hebrew featuring some [shorter version] of the *shacharit* or *maariv* service or, often, *havdalah*. It involved a lot of Debbie Friedman songs, reading Torah if we could get hands on a Torah or out of the *tikkun* if we couldn’t, followed by a schmanzy party afterwards.”

Venues

When it comes to the independent b’nai mitzvah ceremony, there are as many venues as there are personal preferences. Popular venues include a family’s home, a private club or hotel or a place that reflects the child’s interests. Families who want the service in a synagogue but don’t belong to a synagogue also have the option of renting out a sanctuary (including all that it entails, notably the Torah scrolls and *siddurim*). While most synagogues in the Chicagoland area will not rent out their sanctuaries or space to nonmembers, there are some that will as long as the dates don’t conflict with members’ b’nai mitzvah.

Who are the families?

Just as the ways to celebrate the b’nai mitzvah independently are varied and deeply personal, so, too, are the families who choose this option. Certainly, there are families who quit their congregation for a host of reasons and embark upon the “rogue” path, as one mother put it. But there are also affiliated families, families who send their children to day school and who are members of more than one synagogue. Said one mother of four (two boys, two girls) who had independent b’nai mitzvah for all of them: “We were always in some kind of a community, but we were never members of a community that had a space big enough to have 200 people.” They held one bar mitzvah in a tent in their backyard. It was a traditional Shabbat morning

service and they used an Orthodox siddur. One bat mitzvah was held at a venue in the North Shore and because it was on Purim, the bat mitzvah girl read Megillat Esther. Expounding a bit more, the mother continued: “We never found a *shul* that we felt comfortable in. We have found many great communities, but never the one right *shul* for us.”

Another family sends their children to Jewish day school, but when their older child was close to becoming a bar mitzvah they couldn’t agree upon a synagogue. “We found ourselves *shul*-less,” said the mother. “My husband grew up traditional abroad, and I prefer Reform.” In the end they had their son privately tutored and they held the bar mitzvah at a Jewish camp in Wisconsin, which they rented out for the weekend, filling it up with nearly 200 friends and family, and holding kabbalat Shabbat, Shabbat morning services and also havdalah, which the bar mitzvah boy led. With their daughter, even though they did join an independent *minyán*, they are still going the independent route and having the bat mitzvah at the same camp.

According to one tutor who worked independently for years and is now employed at a congregation, the families she tutored and led ceremonies for can be broken down into a few general groupings. “60-70% of the families [I worked with] didn’t understand the value of the Jewish community or regular involvement in Jewish life. They didn’t want to pay [synagogue] dues. Their financial priorities are elsewhere and not connected with their Jewish lives. They did want to have a bar mitzvah, but it was cultural, a ‘keeping up with Steins,’ kind of thing. This group is always very affluent,” she said.

“30-40% demographic of people [I worked with] really wanted to be involved in a synagogue and in Jewish life, but finding a perfect fit with a synagogue in today’s world is very hard,” she continued. “It’s a struggle even for a committed Jew who wants to be part of the community. Finding a synagogue that gives you everything you like is very hard. One synagogue may have the clergy you like, but another has the service you like.”

Key Demographics: Unaffiliated, Special Needs and Interfaith

While observant and affiliated families are part of the independent b’nai mitzvah equation, a large percentage of the families who go this route fall into one of three categories: unaffiliated, special needs child or interfaith.

- **Unaffiliated**

“The majority of American Jews are unaffiliated,” said a rabbi in Chicago. For Jewish families dubbed by the organized community as “unaffiliated,” their only real option for having a b’nai mitzvah is an independent one.

“We’re not a synagogue family. It’s not what our family does,” was how one

parent put it. Another parent who had two independent bat mitzvot for her daughters said: “I was never brought up with a synagogue, so how can you miss something you never had? To me, Judaism is about family and moral values. I don’t want to go to temple or listen to a rabbi.” She continued: “For us, Judaism was always a cultural thing. Judaism is important to us but in a different way.”

Despite the label “unaffiliated,” the fact that these families go the extra mile to arrange for ongoing b’nai mitzvah training and a ceremony attests to a commitment to Judaism. As one rabbi put it, “These are people who are taking complete ownership of their Jewish life. These are not passive, apathetic people who do not want Judaism. These are people who care enough to seek out clergy to be with them. But this is too much ownership from the congregational view. They want people to show up and do the program, but that [expectation] is over.”

One family who left a North Shore synagogue and employed a private tutor for their son to prepare him for his bar mitzvah and have kept her on to tutor their 11-year-old daughter explained their connection to Judaism this way: “[Judaism] is an integral part of who we are, but for us it is not a full-time priority. We really like the public education our kids get, so for us, it’s about quality Jewish education, whether it was one hour or 20 hours a week, we wanted it to be worthwhile.”

- **Interfaith**

Interfaith families – particularly those in which two faiths are practiced in the home – continue to be a challenge to the organized Jewish community when it comes time for the bar mitzvah. “There is a debate among rabbis: What does the b’nai mitzvah mean? Are you affirming that you are Jewish adults? There is also a larger theological, *halachic* modern commentary about what it means to be bar and bat mitzvah. Because there are many rabbis who feel that if a child feels enriched by Christianity then that child should not have a bar or bat mitzvah,” said a rabbi who works with interfaith families in the Chicagoland area.

Because most congregations have a policy that children being raised with both faiths cannot be members or attend the religious school, “their only option is to hire a private rabbi,” continued that rabbi.

One Catholic woman married to a Jewish man who are raising their children in both faiths remembers approaching a synagogue when their oldest (now 15) was in kindergarten. “They told me to my face, ‘we will accept you as a family, but you have to commit to raising your kids Jewish.’ To me, that is intolerant to families who are raising their children in both faiths,” she said.

Instead of seeking out further synagogues, this family chose to be part of an

interfaith Catholic-Jewish family school whose options include Hebrew language and sacrament studies. Family-led, there is a rabbi and a priest affiliated with the school.

When it came time for b'nai mitzvah, they went the independent route. They rented "sacred spaces," such as chapels, had the rabbi affiliated with their family school tutor their children, and held services that incorporated elements of both faiths, including Torah readings, a *dvar* Torah and Catholic prayers, such as the prayer of St. Francis. A lot of time was devoted to the preparation of the b'nai mitzvah. "This is not something we take lightly at all," said the mother. "I am not just going to check a box and then we're done. We want our kids to have a meaningful service, something that is really going to be part of their religious development."

One Reform congregation in the northern suburbs that is made up largely of interfaith and unaffiliated families, is more fluid in their definition of what makes a Jewish home. "Our lives are not binary anymore. We live on a spectrum," said its rabbi. Which means interfaith families who claim Judaism as their primary religion might still have a Christmas tree at home for cultural reasons. And this rabbi isn't going to question that.

During the b'nai mitzvah service itself, this congregation goes out of its way to make non-Jews feel part of the community. "Our families are families of diversity. Even where both parents are Jewish, then a sibling will have intermarried," continued this rabbi. "The question when a b'nai mitzvah service is happening is - are we mindful of the diversity of the families that are there and making that service meaningful for anyone? We encourage all members of the family, including non-Jewish ones, to participate, such as opening the ark or reading English translations of the Torah or other English prayers."

At the same time, he is clear that this is an "authentic Jewish sacred congregation," which means "we don't include Christian prayers in our service." Still, even this rabbi whose congregation is on the very inclusive end of the spectrum, admits that it's a "tightrope that everyone has to walk in their own way."

- **Special needs**

Children with ADHD, autism or other special needs are likely to have a harder time "fitting in" to the standard b'nai mitzvah program, such as having trouble learning the Hebrew prayers or feeling intimidated by a large and imposing sanctuary.

One tutor who specializes in b'nai mitzvah preparation for those with learning difficulties and "kids who don't fit into the system for social or financial reasons" said: "There was one student with severe learning

disabilities who could not read Hebrew at all when we started and I taught her Torah portion to her,” she said.

But helping families of special needs children have independent b’nai mitzvah has occasionally pitted her against some unhappy rabbis.

“With one family I told them they don’t have to go through the synagogue, that we can be creative, but the rabbi called me, angry. He told me I was destroying the fabric of synagogue life; that I am taking away their livelihood. But here was this kid with severe stage fright and anxiety, who was on all kinds of medication [so having a bar mitzvah ceremony in the synagogue was not good for him]. In the end, the rabbi made me feel so terrible that this child did have the bar mitzvah at the synagogue. I was blackmailed. The rabbi made very clear to me that I was not good for the community.”

It is unclear how representative this story is of rabbis or congregations across the board – although more than one independent tutor shared disturbing anecdotes like this. On the other hand, nearly all the rabbis interviewed for this study specifically mentioned making special accommodations for children with special needs – even though in some instances, the family still decides to pull out.

“One of my kids is autistic and other has significant ADD,” said a mother who quit their congregation because they felt their needs were not being met. Particularly because the sanctuary is a “huge, massive room,” the family asked if they could have a small bar mitzvah in the rabbi’s library. “My husband and I really wanted a very intimate bar mitzvah for just our family and out of town guests.” In the end, the family hired an independent tutor and rabbi and they will hold the ceremony in their living room.

One senior rabbi of a large congregation said that they allow accommodations for special needs students on a case-by-case basis. “Sometimes the Shabbat service can be overwhelming,” he said. “If a student can’t learn a full Haftorah we occasionally do a Shabbat *mincha* service,” adding that they have one or two students a year in which they make special accommodations.

Is This Anything New?

Within the context of this study, it appears that while independent b’nai mitzvah are not new – one interviewee claims they have been going on for 20+ years – they have become more visible and more professionalized over the last few years. This is in direct correlation to a number of factors, including the rising number of freelancers in the market (private tutors and rabbis) and the prevalence of the Internet and social media, which make publicity and connecting easy and immediate.

One rabbi of a large congregation said that a friend posted on Facebook that she was looking for a Torah scroll for her child's bat mitzvah. "If [independent b'nai mitzvah] have been there it's been quiet. It was not as socially acceptable before. I'm not saying people haven't done this for a long time, but I do think the numbers are growing and it is much more public and there are more private service providers able to advertise," she said.

Another rabbi of a large congregation called it a "phenomenon. We are definitely seeing more and more 'cottage industry' b'nai mitzvah where they are doing off site, personalized services." He cited a case where the family planned to have the bar mitzvah at the synagogue but at a late date because of "family issues" hired a chazzan to lead the service and held it at a hotel downtown. "We had nothing to do with it. It was independent of our tutors, of any of us and for us that is very problematic."

Still another independent rabbi, who officiates at upwards of 20 b'nai mitzvah a year, said the phenomenon is "irreversible – a trend that cannot be undone." One rabbi even cited a do-it-yourself (DIY) bar mitzvah "movement" in New York where there aren't any clergy. "People are realizing that they don't need a rabbi to have a kid observe a b'nai mitzvah. All they actually need is a minyan. The bar mitzvah child has to have an *aliyah* and say a blessing before and after the Torah reading. That is the observance," she said.

But a senior rabbi of a congregation on the North Shore has a different take. "I feel it is on the rise and is a trend and will fizzle out because in the long run it is watered down," she said. "If you go to these bar mitzvahs, there is no substance. The expectation, the level of commitment, the *tzedakah* projects, in the end all you have is a great moment, but it is not particularly deep. Eventually, the trend will come back. It may not come back to the synagogue as we know it, but if the synagogues get clever, it will come back to something of more substance than it is."

Causes & Impetus

Why are families choosing to have b'nai mitzvah outside of a congregation?

While there are as many reasons as there are people, the causes and impetus behind the phenomenon can be reduced to a few central motifs:

- **Societal**

In assessing independent b'nai mitzvah, nearly every rabbi interviewed put these actions into a larger context of a Western society that is no longer satisfied with a one-size-fits-all approach. Increasingly, middle and upper class families, accustomed to options in daily life, have come to expect that they can pick and choose what works best for *them* – as opposed to accepting

what is offered to the group. This is especially true for Millennials, a generation that came of age being encouraged to nurture their individualism. In that light, the independent b'nai mitzvah is but an extension of a new generation and a new societal norm that, for better or for worse, feels they have the right to customize and personalize all of their experiences. As a Chicago-based Jewish educator put it, "In the 21st century, people want to meet their individual needs."

"You can't look at this in a vacuum," added a rabbi. "It's indicative of the times we live in." Another rabbi referenced "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," a nonfiction book that made headlines in 2000 for its conclusion that our society has become increasingly alienated and disconnected, to make the larger point that people are not necessarily seeking out community as we have defined it.

On the micro level, this is a reflection of a "Starbucks Generation," according to yet another rabbi, a generation that is accustomed to "brew[ing] the exact blend of coffee the way you want it." While ordering a very idiosyncratic coffee drink at a café is one thing, how a society of individuals will affect our communal culture as a whole remains to be seen. "How can you run a congregation where everyone wants a hyper-individualized Judaism?" continued the rabbi, with some people saying 'Hebrew school doesn't work for me Tuesdays and Thursdays at 4, but this tutor can come at 5.'"

Tutors, in fact, are an integral part of life for many middle and upper classes in American society, and the Chicagoland area is no exception. People are hiring tutors for everything from helping their children pass physics to getting into a top college. So adding a tutor for the b'nai mitzvah training (instead of going through a synagogue) is just an extension of the way many families are already leading their lives, according to an independent rabbi in Chicago. As one tutor put it: "In today's world when you can go a la carte for everything, they want it for Hebrew school, too."

There is another element here, which one rabbi summed up as a "trend towards consumerism in Jewish life where people only want to buy the services that they perceive they need or want and they don't have the sense of what it means to be a Jew in a holistic community on a regular basis." One area markedly affected by this is philanthropy, with Millennials in particular not content to donate to an umbrella group as their parents once did, but instead wanting complete "transparency" and the ability to contribute funds *only* to the specific charity or project of their choosing.

When it comes to the b'nai mitzvah, this a la carte mentality is reflected in families not wanting to pay for a Kiddush for people they don't know or for building dues, for example, but being willing to pay top dollar to create an experience that is tailor-made for their child and will benefit only their family and friends. "It's not the cost, but what you are getting for your

money,” was how one mother put it.

Finally, the fact that society is going through a “paradigmatic shift, an age of information,” as one independent rabbi put it, makes putting together an independent b’nai mitzvah easier than ever before. Whether families want to find a rabbi, a special venue or even a Torah scroll, is often only a quick Internet search or social media post away.

Seen in this light, while arranging an independent bar mitzvah is nonetheless still not *easy*, what is clear is that the whole phenomenon is the natural outgrowth of a new generation accustomed to doing things their way and having the technological tools at their fingertips to make this possible.

- **Outgrowth of the Reform Movement**

“I didn’t want to pay for Kiddush for 200 people. I don’t believe I have to feed the community lunch for \$3,000,” said a mother who left the synagogue and ended up having three independent b’nai mitzvah for her children.

For many normative Reform congregations, the Saturday morning b’nai mitzvah service has become, for all intents and purposes, a private affair. Said one rabbi of a large congregation on the North Shore: “Because the b’nai mitzvah service is really focused on the child with our kids leading almost the entire service, the only people who come are people who are invited guests. In reality, the service would be boring [to an outsider], it wouldn’t be fulfilling to me as a worshipper. And the people who are there are the unaffiliated, disenfranchised, shut down population. I sometimes feel like the Statue of Liberty: ‘Give me your tired...your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.’ If I am praying to your sophisticated *davener*, the others are turned off. So we separate the population. We have a morning service for a ‘real’ *minyan* and then we have the bar mitzvah service, which turns into an outreach service, an opportunity for the child to do everything and also for me to explain to the adults what all the prayers are, not in a didactic way, but in a more spiritual way to bring in the disenfranchised Jew or to unpack the service for the Christian guest.”

The Kiddush following the service is also often separated, as well. “The b’nai mitzvah kiddush luncheon is entrepreneurial,” continued the rabbi. “There are two separate rooms with the same bagels, the same lox. The family spends so much money to have their own private party. They want to have their own color tablecloths, to have it about them. They don’t want to have a community Kiddush.” In some instances, there is only one Kiddush luncheon after the b’nai mitzvah service that is completely private, with only guests of the family invited. Because of this, many rabbis argue that the “entrepreneurial” b’nai mitzvah is but a natural outgrowth of these “entrepreneurial” congregational b’nai mitzvah and Kiddush luncheons.

“When the Reform movement teaches people that the b’nai mitzvah is a

private affair, why should they feel it is a communal one? What difference does it make if they have it at a synagogue or the Standard Club as long as they have a Torah there?” said another rabbi of a large congregation on the North Shore.

Still another Reform rabbi took this sentiment even further by saying that independent b’nai mitzvah are a “natural outgrowth of the Reform movement.” The underlying message here is that if congregations feel that by having an independent b’nai mitzvah, families are separating themselves from the community, then it is up to the congregation to start by modeling what that means to be part of a larger community. “We, the congregations, have an opportunity to do better and teach. It is all a matter of teaching and it begins with vocabulary. How can anyone have an issue with: Your child is becoming a bar mitzvah in *our* community and we invite you to *sponsor our community one*, but [what they are told instead] is that there are specific fees for specific services,” said an independent b’nai mitzvah tutor who formerly worked at a large congregation.

“When people come with a checkbook to buy services at an institution, we have to ask: What makes you think this is an institution you can buy only the things you want to choose from?” the tutor continued. “I am a firm believer in membership contracts, a *brit*. If we institute a set of expectations of board members that we asked them to make a commitment to, why do we not also set up a covenant of membership to teach that joining a community means they give to the community and they also receive? Instead, we give them a form to fill out with their biographical information, we ask them to sign and pay a check, so why shouldn’t they think they are signing up for individual services?”

- **Failure of American Congregational Culture and Religious School**

One constant among affiliated families who choose the independent route for the b’nai mitzvah is their disappointment in the religious school experience.

A representative example is one family who belonged to a large congregation. “We felt it was very much an institution,” said the parent. “Both the synagogue and the Hebrew school are highly structured and regimented. It’s a big Hebrew school and the synagogue is really large and cold. We didn’t love the rabbi and he wasn’t going anywhere.”

But the main factor that led them to pull out entirely and hire a private Judaic studies tutor was the conclusion that: “our kids were getting a suboptimal Judaic education. It was just a waste [of time] with arts and crafts and distracted, inconsistent teachers. We started to feel that [Hebrew school] was actually backfiring on our kids. It was such drudgery and so painful for them that Judaism was becoming a negative thing to them and

that clearly is not our intention.”

Finding themselves at a “critical juncture,” they decided to ‘go rogue.’ “We felt like this is the time. I don’t care about arts and crafts, I care about Jewish identity at this stage.” With one child who had completed a bar mitzvah (not at the synagogue but at Chabad, where they joined after they left their congregation) and another child with a bat mitzvah approaching, they found a tutor with an extensive Judaic and academic background. While the tutor has been coming to their home twice a week to work with their daughter leading up to the bat mitzvah (which they will have in Israel), the family intends to continue the sessions beyond the bat mitzvah because “we wanted to change the course in our daughter’s Jewish education and the bat mitzvah was just one component of that.”

While tutoring continuing after the b’nai mitzvah does occur, it is rare. What is common from this family’s story is the backlash against the large synagogue model.

“American congregations, particularly the Conservative and Reform ones, are very corporate. They are not capable of providing families what they need. When you have thousands of families in your congregation, it is simply not feasible for a rabbi to spend more than 30 minutes with a congregant. It’s the fault of the system not the fault of any particular rabbi,” said one independent rabbi based in the Northwest suburbs.

“We are at a critical point, the boiling point,” he continued. “That sense of family has become inevitably lost as our synagogues become more corporate. So that sense of genuineness is lost.”

This sentiment was reflected in comments made by families who left synagogues specifically because of the b’nai mitzvah process. Said one mother of the synagogue experience: “It felt very rigid. There were lots of rules: You have to attend 12 services a year, you have to invite everybody in their Hebrew and Sunday school class, you have to pay for flowers on the *bimah* and pay the bar mitzvah fee. There were lots of ‘have to’s.’”

Said another parent “You look at big synagogues and they are very formulaic. There is no discussion. Could that be any less of a meaningful experience? The synagogues all complain about how [the b’nai mitzvah] becomes all about the party and dresses, but the truth is they fit into that because Judaism is about asking questions and finding your own answers but there is no room for that in a big synagogue.”

In summing up the b’nai mitzvah synagogue experience, one independent rabbi went so far as to call it a “bar mitzvah hostage mill. They hold you hostage, you have to be a member with a kid in the religious school for at least two years minimum and the pressure is to get there as early as possible. And

then there is a high attrition rate after the bar mitzvah.”

“It’s all a massive professionalized machine,” he continued. “Intentionally or unintentionally, synagogues run on a dumbed down constituency. They rely on people to join but not to show up. The synagogue model can’t work.”

While that may be a hyperbolic statement, the kernel of truth underlying this message taps into something big synagogues are grappling with across the country. “I think Hebrew school and religious school are boring and don’t work. They are not engaging for most of the kids,” said the rabbi of a once large congregation that oversaw hundreds of b’nai mitzvah a year at its peak – and is now down to half of its former membership.

According to this rabbi, the congregation has been working steadily to respond to the needs of its members. One example was slashing the five-week mandatory Sunday morning family education program for b’nai mitzvah families – something the rabbi said were “stellar” and involved hours of advanced planning. Despite this, families were not interested in it. “We got so much flax for it that we made it optional and then condensed all of this fabulous material. Now it has been diluted even more into this yearly one-hour family program and the rest is done at Sunday school,” said the rabbi.

The b’nai mitzvah program has similarly gone through a metamorphosis, where each is “tailored to the family. There is no longer the cookie cutter [service]. It no longer has to be on a Saturday morning, but can be a mincha/havdalah service or some other options,” said the rabbi.

The synagogue has gone so far as to be “... completely open to the possibility that they don’t even need to have a service. They don’t have to have complete prayer proficiency or Torah reading. The kids will become a b’nai mitzvah whether they read Torah or not,” said the rabbi.

Instead of mastering certain prayers or readings, the key, according to this rabbi, is engagement. “It’s all about reaching people so that there is another generation [connected to Judaism]. How do we do that? For me, if they study with me to write the *dvar* Torah and engage in Torah in some way, but the child doesn’t want to [read from the Torah], that’s fine. We have to think out of the box,” continued the rabbi.

“Instead of going to Sunday school, why don’t we have a service trip? If in 15 years we are still around, I hope we have much more positive, engaging programs than going to the classroom every Sunday. There is so much potential.”

Even one of the last remaining congregations with three-day a week religious school is in the midst of a “big process of reviewing and exploring,” according

to one of its rabbis. “We are committed not just to reducing from three days to two, but with ways to be flexible.” In other words, if a child has hockey on a religious school day, is there a way for him to come another day? Because what congregations like this are finding is that if they force families to choose between hockey and Hebrew school, it’s not the hockey that gets the boot. “We are doing this with a sense of a trepidation of whether we can provide the same quality education if we alter how we deliver it,” continued the rabbi. “That’s why we are trying to find a more innovative way to deliver the same quality of education with more flexible hours. We are not simply going from three days to two days. That would be a capitulation. That would be saying, ‘we better do two days to survive’ rather than doing something positive and innovative.”

What it comes down to for nearly all congregations is: “How do we sustain the structure of the Jewish community as synagogues? How do we change to better fit into how our society is today?” said one rabbi.

- **The Core Issue: Institutional Judaism**

The independent b’nai mitzvah is the elephant in the room when it comes to organized Judaism. Because even if rabbis like to think it’s not happening at their synagogue, the reality is Jewish families are increasingly finding ways to have meaningful Jewish experiences outside of the congregation, which not surprisingly elicits strong feelings – on both sides of the equation.

One congregational rabbi summed up the independent b’nai mitzvah this way: “People want to have what they want when they want. It’s about them and their family. They create these ‘Brigadoon’ services, everyone has a tearful moment and then it goes away never to be repeated.”

Yet, an independent rabbi has the opposite take: “People don’t want an individualized service, they want meaning. The individualized service is just the form. They want to be challenged and stretched and inspired and they are not getting that at the synagogue. It is really important not to characterize these people as narcissists.”

Another rabbi of a congregation summed it up this way: “I’ve seen people who want to do it individually for very good values and I’ve seen it also with really screwed up values.”

“To me, it is not an issue of good or bad,” said still another congregational rabbi. “This is what it is, so the question becomes: how can we still make Jewish observance an opportunity for a teenager to enter a community of Jewish adults that is meaningful to the teens and their families?”

“What is the whole point anyway?” the rabbi continued. “Where is the opportunity in any situation to teach children and families what this thing is

all about? Because the key issue is about their history and what it means to be a Jew. It is not about an on-site or an off-site b'nai mitzvah. The issue of the bar mitzvah today is ultimately the issue of Judaism institutionally today.” Another rabbi said: “This is a new frontier for us to understand why you would choose to do a rent-a-rabbi or why choose to be a member and then go outside for the service. I don’t know answer to that, but this is an important issue and one for which we are in the midst of doing some market research.”

Challenges & Advantages

Advantages

The advantages for families choosing to go independent can be narrowed down to:

- **Personalization** – Said one parent: “We liked the idea of doing something very personal to us. We have been to many traditional bar and bat mitzvahs at serious synagogues, but we had never been to one like the one we were putting together. It was very emblematic of our family, very culturally Jewish, and while it did recognize the more institutional aspect of observance, it was independent. It was the way that we wanted it. We structured it. We wrote parts of it.
- **Convenience** – Many families have cited preferring a shorter service. “We don’t believe in all those prayers and we don’t connect to most of them,” said one parent. Others mentioned the convenience of the tutor coming to them at times/days that fit in their schedule.
- **Increased Motivation** – Families report that their children are more motivated to work with their private tutor because they bond with them, are invested in the process and feel the learning is fun.
- **Experiential Education** – Many families referenced their kids doing art projects at religious school as a point of contention. With the private tutor the learning is hands-on and tailored to their interests. “It’s more relevant to their lives and the lessons sink in more,” was how one parent put it.
- **On their Terms** – This may be more of a psychological point but one parent referred to it this way: “It’s a control thing. There is a struggle between families and synagogues about who is going to control your service, with synagogues saying, ‘we always do it this way’ and that works for a lot of families, but that doesn’t work for us.”

Disadvantages

- **Logistics** – It isn't easy to put together an entire b'nai mizvah. As one parent who had all four of their children's b'nai mizvah either at home or at a rented venue said: "It was a pain to have to go and find a space and then get the caterer. It would have been so much easier to have someone else say, 'let me take care of this for you.'" Add to the mix finding a Torah scroll, which can be a challenge. Plus it is a responsibility to be in charge of a Torah.
- **Psychological barriers** – Many families who go off the grid for the bar mitzvah first have to overcome some deep-rooted beliefs about not having the ceremony at a synagogue – even if they were never bar mitzvahed or have never belonged to a synagogue. "I always thought by the time [my daughter] was in the third grade we would have to join a synagogue, but now that we've decided to do this on our own, it has started making me think we don't have to [join a synagogue]," said one parent. Another said: "I am surprised we are not members anywhere. I feel we should be." Still another parent said, "If you are traditional, at first you probably wonder, what will people think? It is nice to have [the b'nai mizvah] in *shul*, the ambience is nice. But once we wrapped our heads around this other way, we took it and ran with it and we really liked it. It's so individualized. We picked the songs and texts and prayer. It was very non-traditional and it really worked for us. When the service was over, we got so many compliments. People came up and told us that it was so beautiful, so cheery. That it was the best service they had ever been to." This is representative of most of the families' experiences. Once they've overcome the psychological barriers and move forward on their independent path, there is no looking back. Said one independent rabbi who officiates at an increasing number of b'nai mizvah, "By the time families call me, they have no intention of remaining in or joining a synagogue."

Cost

Having a b'nai mizvah does not come cheap – whether inside or outside of a congregation. For families going the private route, tutors cost on average \$60-\$100 an hour; most of the independent rabbis interviewed wouldn't divulge their fees but one reported charging \$200 an hour and \$1,000 to officiate at the service. It is no secret that synagogue membership is also a financial commitment, with the big congregations costing on average \$5,000 a year per family, not including extras for religious school or b'nai mizvah fees.

But what emerged from this study is that for families with means, "It's not the cost but what you are getting for your money," was how one parent put it. Another said: Getting a private tutor/rabbi route is not any less expensive [than being synagogue members]. But the question is, do I want to pay for

building dues? For the kiddush for people we don't know? I want to put our money where it [gives us a return.] We have found two people [independent rabbi and tutor] who seem to care about what makes my daughter tick and what will make her interested in lifelong learning."

Certainly, even if the short-term costs of preparing for and having an independent b'nai mitzvah are equal to (and some say higher than) going through a synagogue, the long term costs are less if the family decides to conclude the learning after the b'nai mitzvah is over. But dollar for dollar, the expense of preparing for and having an independent b'nai mitzvah ceremony – not including the party afterwards – is comparable to or even a bit more expensive than having everything through a synagogue.

Community

The first thing most congregational rabbis say when they hear about an independent b'nai mitzvah is: What about community?

Said one congregational rabbi, "One of the issues around having the b'nai mitzvah child's entrance into the community done privately is it defeats the purpose of what it is all about. What are we teaching our children? They won't feel any responsibility for our community. And our society is already too self-absorbed as it is."

Said another: "So what will they do when their mother dies? Rent another rabbi? There is no relationship, no community. What is there, exactly? Going back to the tennis club as their community?"

Those on the independent side of the fence take issue with all of these assertions.

"I think people have community and they are not seeking it out. It is not a hole in their lives that they are looking for," said an independent rabbi. "Beyond that, just because you are not affiliated does not mean you do not have Jewish community in your life and because you are affiliated doesn't mean you have community, either."

The term "rent-a-rabbi" is also considered offensive. "These are clergy who are part of these families' lives. They spend many more hours with them than the congregational rabbi would. Our rabbis are in these families' home and are in these families' lives. It's really the opposite of rent-a-rabbi," continued the independent rabbi.

As for the families who have chosen the independent path, the consensus is that they do not feel they are missing community, saying everything from "our community is our family and friends" and "the synagogue community is an artificial construct" to "it would have been easier go through a synagogue and 'stand up before your community,' but it wouldn't have been our community."

As one congregational rabbi put it: “We could say the line is communal versus individual, but it’s not since these individuals are self-defining their communities.”

Taking this even further, another congregational rabbi observed: “The b’nai mitzvah is both individual and communal. When a child is at their bar mitzvah reading from the Torah, at every synagogue in the world on that day the same Torah portion is read. If you were in a space station looking down at earth and all the synagogues were lifting off you would see all the synagogues were reading the same words, but if you stick around for the dvar Torah, each one is different. So Jewish life is both doing the same thing that everyone else is doing but also doing something unique only to you.”

Therein lies the inherent conflict. If the b’nai mitzvah is *both* individual and communal, where does it belong – in a synagogue or outside of one? And how can a congregation meet the individual needs of its members while also meeting the needs of the community as a whole?

“As a large Reform congregation, we realized that one size doesn’t fit all,” said one rabbi. “So we are trying to find the balance between community and the individual, trying to hold up both, this being about your family and child and also about the community. Some of these values can come with a tension but that is the value we are trying to uphold.”

Another congregational rabbi reiterated this: “The goal of the synagogue is to build community, to teach children that Judaism is something that is exciting, stimulating, challenging, demanding and also is not all about them – that they are part of something larger.”

The synagogue, rabbis argue, offer something inherently unique that cannot be found elsewhere. “The mission of the synagogue is to provide platforms and portals in which people can discover meaning and purpose of their life through core values including *gemilut chasidim*, Israel, and community. You can have really good community through your country club or school or tennis club, but there is a uniqueness that a synagogue should have as its sole purpose, which is to provide the platform to discover the meaning of your life, meaning for your children and the purpose for your children and for yourself. It is on us to explain that better and if they are not looking for it or aren’t looking for it yet, nevertheless we are here to offer it,” said one rabbi.

If that is the case, then why are so many synagogues falling short in this arena? One independent rabbi blames the congregational rabbis for not creating enough personal relationships with members. Referencing Dr. Ron Wolfson’s “Relational Judaism” she said: “If a family is actually seeking out congregational life, which is against the statistical norm, and they’re paying \$5 thousand a year for religious school and membership, that rabbi should

try as hard as they can to build a relationship with that family so that that family wants to be part of the congregation. If the family feels they have a relationship with the clergy and other members, it is harder for them to leave it.”

But for rabbis to establish relationships with congregants they first have to get them in the door. And once they are in the door, they have to want to be there or no amount of “engagement” will matter. As one congregational rabbi said, “it’s a two-way street. You have to want that or reach out a little as well, it can’t just be on the synagogue.”

Part of the challenge is building an institution around a set of religious practices that most Jews no longer keep – and no longer feel obligated to pay lip service to. “Congregations are still based on Friday night and Saturday morning worship and by and large are not engaging to secular liberal Jews. Congregations are going to have to think about their purpose. What can they provide that someone else can’t provide? Opportunities for social justice are hard to do alone. Opportunities for holidays are also difficult to do alone. Congregations have to figure out what they can provide that would be meaningful and important to families that they can’t provide on their own,” said one independent rabbi.

The crux of it all is where people place value. “When the soccer league has its open registration moms are logging onto their computers at 5 am to sign their kids up. They are not going to miss that open registration because they put value on their children playing organized soccer,” continued the independent rabbi. “But for whatever reason, a new generation of liberal Jews is not placing value on the experience of congregational life. But they do value other things. They are not going to give up on blessing their babies or ushering their teenagers through a major lifecycle event. They still want to mark their lives with meaning.”

Is this a threat?

“I hope you will not encourage ‘backyard bar mitzvahs,’” said a congregational rabbi to an independent one.

One Jewish educator who has been tutoring b’nai mitzvah kids privately for over ten years after working for many years at a large congregation said, “I see independents [b’nai mitzvah] growing and I see congregations shaking in their boots because of it and it is a shame. I don’t think independents are at any way a risk to congregations, but [the response] is out of fear. We are not going to shake the stability of the institutions; we are not the enemy. If we can work together we can help them better serve the families. Larger congregations, through no fault of their own, are not always able to meet the individual needs of every family. Partnerships with other sources to serve families would be of greater service to the community as a whole.”

Added an independent rabbi who officiates at a growing number of b'nai mitzvah and other lifecycle events every year, in addition to running high holiday services: "If any synagogue views me as a competition I am not the problem or the threat. We are living in changing times. In fact, congregational rabbis have expressed their appreciation to me for all the unaffiliated families who now have a place to go and a rabbi to turn to."

"I feel this the most divisive, sensitive thing going on in Chicago," said another independent rabbi. "I once had a congregational rabbi say to me, 'I hope you will not encourage backyard bar mitzvahs.' In Chicago, we are still an old school model based on affiliation."

For their part, while most congregational rabbis are reticent about publically labeling independent clergy as a "threat," they are vocal about wanting to experiment with new engagement models. "We did have a family who quit [over a bar mitzvah]," said a rabbi of a large congregation in the city. "That is a failure on our part. Do I think [independent b'nai mitzvah] are a threat? No. But it is our job to engage families and if we don't, shame on us."

Disruptive Innovation

Congregations and religious schools across the country are in the midst of an intense period of change and self-evaluation. From experimental synagogue projects to a growing network of after school enrichment programs modeled on Jewish summer camp, rabbis and Jewish educators are racing against time to make Judaism enticing and meaningful to a changing American Jewish demographic.

Whether or not the rumblings of change represent 'disruptive innovation' – a term originally coined to describe the way innovation can launch new markets and value networks while disrupting the existing market (such as the creation of personal computers) – remains to be seen.

But one thing is clear. Whether or not independent b'nai mitzvah are the catalyst or just one (highly visible) part of a larger move away from organized Jewish life, congregational rabbis are trying to find the right balance between sustaining their institution and meeting the needs of an individualized, "Starbucks" generation.

"That's the million dollar question: how to meet the needs everyone? I don't think we have the answers yet. We are in the midst of re-inventing ourselves," said a Chicago-area Jewish educator who recently launched an online religious school, which includes b'nai mitzvah training.

In surveying a selection of congregations in the Chicagoland area, however, there are a handful of widespread innovations and changes that can be

generalized as follows:

The Flexible B'nai Mitzvah Plan – The spectrum for this varies, but many congregations are allowing families to choose what kind of service they want and sometimes even which readings will be included from the prayer book. Typically, there is a menu of options instead of permitting families to completely build their own individualized service.

Referring the Tutor – A handful of congregations have started working with private tutors that they refer families to. This way, the congregation has some control over the process because the tutor has been vetted and approved by them.

Making Religious School Relevant – In addition to cutting down days and hours of religious school, congregations are changing up the curriculum. One congregation hosts a very popular “sex retreat” to discuss issues of sexuality for 7th graders as part of a curriculum focusing on relationship and sexuality.

Flexible Hours - A common challenge faced by religious schools is the conflict between students’ hectic after school schedules. Facing a losing battle against soccer and play practice, many synagogues are toying with ways for them to be more flexible so that children are not necessarily required to be at the school on specific days.

Family School – Some congregations offer only family school while others include it as one part of their religious school, but advocates argue that it is not enough to just engage the children – in order to make an impact, the entire family must be engaged, which includes the parents learning as well as the children.

Social Action – Reform congregations, in general, are known for their commitment to *tikkun olam*. For the b'nai mitzvah year, in addition to general mitzvah projects, many congregations offer a variety of social action trips, including some that take kids everywhere from a civil rights trip through the South and an AIPAC trip to Israel to a social action trip to the Czech Republic. “There are lots of different tracks you can engage in. This is based on the premise that you engage people the best through the portal that they are passionate about,” said the rabbi of a large Reform congregation that offers a variety of very popular social action programming for youth and adults.

Student Mentors – For a while now, many congregations have been encouraging students to continue their studies post b'nai mitzvah by offering them opportunities to teach and mentor the younger kids, often for a nominal pay.

Creative Programming – One large congregation in the city keeps its doors

open all day on Shabbat with options for the whole family from break-out study sessions and yoga to basketball. Others have programs at families' homes, like a Sunday brunch for the b'nai mitzvah families or a Torah treasure hunt for younger children.

Torah Reading – At one Reform Congregation, children start to read from the Torah as early as five years old as a “badge of honor” and a way for them to feel comfortable so that by the time they are b'nai mitzvah age, being on the bimah and reading Torah will come naturally. It is also a way to get the families to attend Shabbat services.

Looking Forward

As congregations look to the future, they are experimenting with different ways their model will look with the understanding that, as one rabbi said, “in our society, there is no one size that fits all. Maybe the synagogue will continue to be the place where Jews can learn Jewish values but maybe it will be called a Center for Jewish Life, complete with different options.”

What it may come down to are “touch points” – that one emotional encounter that reaches people and brings them in. Of course, each person's touch point is different or as one educator put it, “You never know a family's touch point, but once you hit it, it makes a huge difference.”

But maybe there is a way to narrow down the touch points of Judaism in general. “This prompts congregations to think very seriously about how they offer what they have to offer to the community. We might discover that there are things people want that we didn't know they wanted. We have to think about new ways to reach out to those who are doing Jewish things outside the context of a synagogue,” said one rabbi.

Here are some new ways of thinking and acting as shared by some Chicagoland congregations:

Engagement Re-Defined

One congregation on the North Shore is in the process of re-defining engagement. “The classical assumption of engagement is if you show up, you are engaged. The amount of time you are present in the building correlates to the level of engagement,” said the rabbi. “We are in the process of throwing out that assumption.”

An example is the adult who lives in Arizona six months out of the year and comes back to Chicago for the high holidays. But they are “incredibly engaged” even though they technically only “show up” three times a year. “We consider that a high level of engagement even though their presence isn't here,” said the rabbi.

The same goes for the youth who reads Torah twice a year post b'nai mitzvah but otherwise doesn't set foot in the synagogue. Because "their consciousness is high, they remember being part of the synagogue, even if their participation is lower than one would expect in typical engagement." The underlying assumption is that the emotional connection to the congregation is high, which equals engagement and a positive, long-lasting connection to the synagogue – with regular, ongoing attendance not becoming as relevant. "This is a watershed perception," continued the rabbi. Because when they are adults, they will be categorized as "affiliated" or "unaffiliated," a binary view that might in some way encourage people to not engage.

Engagement should also not be limited to the building.

"What if we followed the mega-church model?" continued this rabbi. "What if through Skype and online you could learn and engage in real learning? What if I flew out to Iowa and did your bar mitzvah there? What if congregations recognized that the huge unaffiliated population would actually affiliate if you change the definition of affiliation and hired a person whose sole job was to work outside the walls of the synagogue in order to serve God and the Jewish people?"

"What are we in service to?" she continued. "Are we in service to the institution and to membership and maintaining it in a traditional way or are we in service to the Jewish people? The answer must be yes... and. You have to be in service to both so that I also get paid and we can maintain the building. What will the market bear and how much of it will come back to sustain the synagogue?"

Creative engagement, however, should not come at the expense of substance. "This is the challenge for the entire Jewish community. It shouldn't be about lowering the bar to make it easier to come in because if you just lower the bar and don't have anything of substance, who cares? It might be easy to come in but it is also easy to walk out because there is nothing to engage me," said the rabbi.

Membership

There is already at least one congregation in the Chicagoland area that has replaced membership dues with a pledging system. But the vast majority of congregations are still based on a membership system, including the often-mentioned "building fund" that elicits a lot of ire.

In response, one congregation in the Northern suburbs is taking another look at membership.

"Can you be a member by joining a la carte instead of the entire package?"

What if we made the b'nai mitzvah one of those a la carte options? Would that be blowing our standards or would that be outreach to a unaffiliated disenfranchised group?" asked the rabbi. "In some ways, we already have a la carte members because we sell high holiday tickets to nonmembers."

On the other hand, this approach might encourage what some critics have called "transactional instead of transformational Judaism" – unintentionally creating a culture of individualized services for sale.

Yes? No? Somewhere in Between?

One rabbi tells of how a congregant asked her to officiate a bar mitzvah in Aspen. Another wanted to have the service in the woods. "I said to my cantor, 'Let's go. Let's stop saying no to people and see what happens when we start saying yes.'"

Not every rabbi agrees with this concept, arguing that always saying yes is a slippery slope. "The more I bend over backwards for families and concede on all the points, 99% of the time they are out the door," said a rabbi. "What they are indicating is they are not interested. I believe 100% that when I see people who don't want to work with me and don't want to compromise and it is all about them and not at all about the synagogue then they are not interested in this relationship. If they want to work with me that is different, but if they say 'it is my way or highway' if I give in, it becomes the highway soon after."

"The two main responses that the synagogues are doing are both extreme," continued another rabbi. "The 1950's model that says there is one way to do things and the answer is no to everything else is alienating. On the other side, saying yes to everything erodes the sense of community. There has to be a place somewhere in the middle where we can promote communal experiences that are personalized. That is the sweet spot and it is very hard to do."

Take the Torah to the People

One congregation on the North Shore is beginning to explore what it would mean to perform b'nai mitzvah outside the synagogue, with requests to have the rabbis officiate everywhere from a Holocaust Museum to a hockey rink. "This open doors and once you open the door, it is harder to articulate boundaries. That is the great challenge in navigating this. For example: Is there a difference between the Holocaust museum and a hockey rink? Personally, I do think there is a difference, but when we get stuck thinking of things that way it takes us out the whole question – the more significant question of what is the whole point [of the b'nai mitzvah] anyway?" asked its rabbi.

In fact, the Torah has always gone to the people.

“It was read in grocery stores on Mondays and Thursdays because the Torah was publically read on market day because that was where the people were. Certainly, there is traditionally rooted justification for the idea that the Torah would go to the Torah [meaning stay at the synagogue], not that the Torah would go to the people, but we are called on in this day and age to see both with integrity,” continued the rabbi.

Give Youth Ownership

One point made by more than one parent who pulled their children out of religious school for the independent route was that their children *wanted* more ownership in the learning process. “At the temple, our kids were not motivated to learn. Two things that I know make my kids motivated is if they are asked to help and if they have a job or a responsibility,” said one parent. Another said: “If you don’t give them stock in the process, they have no ownership over it.”

While it may be challenging to accomplish this within the limited timeframe of religious school, what these parents are underscoring is that to feel like insiders, their children must be brought into the process. They cannot be passive recipients or they will not be invested in learning. The same can be extended to the adults. Specifically pertaining to the issue of the independent b’nai mitzvah, one rabbi said that these types of decisions – i.e. whether to perform the ceremony outside the walls of the congregation or not – should not be the sole responsibility of the rabbi. “These are communal decisions,” he said. “It is not like families against the rabbi. We are a community. These types of questions should go through the ritual committee. They should study these questions through text and then form a recommendation that they give to the board and the rabbi, who can either approve it or not. This is the way to model how the community works. The power must be taken away from the rabbi and instead, they should model the value of the community.”

Make it More Like Summer Camp

There is a growing move towards afterschool Jewish enrichment programs. Advocates argue that its experiential, hands-on approach makes learning fun and relevant to youth. They even talk about the importance of a colorful and comfortable environment as a way to make kids feel at home – as opposed to a cold or imposing building.

But one thing these after school programs do that the congregational schools often don’t is create an accepting atmosphere. With so many families feeling turned off by all the “rules and regulations” they feel are part and parcel of the culture of the congregation, many of the independent educators and rabbis are pushing for institutions to be built on acceptance. “Happy Jewish

kids have a better chance of being happy Jewish adults if they are not forced in the process,” said one private tutor. “Offer a warm and embracing model,” said another.

But critics warn that too much fun means too little learning. One congregational rabbi offers as a solution lessons taken from a parenting book called “Punished by Rewards” by Alfie Kohn, which argues that motivating people via incentives (i.e. rewards like grades or treats) only works in the short-term. That for long-term results, “intrinsic motivation” is required based on the three c’s: content, collaboration and choice. Extending these concepts to religious schools, and by association, to congregational culture, comes down to “good content, collaborating with parents, and giving choices,” said the rabbi.

