

Memoir

At thirteen, I became what most Jewish boys become at that age: A Bar Mitzvah. The passage into adulthood is, for those cultures that celebrate such an event, a strenuous event, and becoming a Bar Mitzvah is no different. I believed, at the time, however, that the process of preparing for this important event was the worst torture imaginable; I spent countless hours memorizing my torah portion (which was necessary since I did not know the hebrew of the torah well), and even more writing and practicing my speech.

Don't misunderstand me. I knew (to a certain extent) why I was going through the process, and in many ways was excited about it, but I also knew that regardless of my feelings about becoming a Bar Mitzvah, I didn't have a choice. This is not to say that I was told that I would be a Bar Mitzvah or else; Certainly if I put up enough of a fight I would not have been forced into it. I felt, though, that the event was important. It had meaning for me, and I would appreciate it, if not at the time, than perhaps later.

It was my first time in front of such a large crowd of friends and relatives. I'd performed on stage a few years before in a school production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, but that wasn't like this time: the lights weren't blinding in the synagogue, so I could see every face. They all were waiting to see a performance — mine — on the bimah (pulpit). I was on show, for everyone that was close to me. This wasn't what rabbi Widom had described to me so long ago when I began my studies; It wasn't supposed to be a performance, with rehearsals and the memorizing of lines. Becoming a Bar Mitzvah was about *my* passage into adulthood; It was *for* me. Yet standing at the

podium, reading from the torah, I couldn't help but feel that the process was as much for them — my family and friends — as it was for me.

This was how it began as I walked down the center aisle with the rabbi. The performance was starting, and every face in the synagogue was turned towards me. "I've got this under control," I muttered to myself, under my breath. I felt like I was teetering on the edge of some high cliff, ready to stumble and fall if I made one mistake. I didn't have anything under control — I was just kidding myself.

The rabbi made a subtle gesture for the congregation to sit, and put a consoling hand on my shoulder; He knew what I was going through, but that knowledge wasn't much comfort. He pointed to a passage in a prayer book laid out on the podium, and as he did, my stomach sunk to the bottom of my feet, and I felt the sweat dripping from my forehead. I was anxious as hell, but I couldn't back off. I glanced at the audience in front, but this only made the matter worse. A million years passed as I stood, waiting for a sound — any sound — to come from my mouth. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and started automatically. I was reciting the prayer (although I wasn't sure it was me, and not some outside forcing moving my mouth).

Most of the service, I felt like I was outside myself, looking in. Time whipped by in a blur. Yet I was doing it — performing exactly that which I had practiced so long and so hard. More important, I was enjoying this performance; It was enjoyable to see the smiling faces before me, knowing that they are listening to me alone — I was their sole purpose for sitting in the synagogue that Saturday morning.

The service was over before I realized it. One hour, forty two minutes and thirty three

seconds had passed, and I walked out of the synagogue with the rabbi the same way I had entered. As the rest of the congregation joined us outside to have some challah, I realized that the process was over, I was a Bar Mitzvah: I made my speech, said the prayers, read from the Torah — all without incident. I felt relieved that the service was finally over, yet yearned for something to look forward to. I had the rest of my life as an adult ahead of me, and I was excited to explore my new found manhood, but I wanted a more immediate, and less ethereal expectation. I realized, at that point, that the whole point of the rite of passage into adulthood was the process, not the end result. By practicing, and readying myself, I learned patience and discipline; By performing the ceremony, I learned to face my anxiety, and deal with it.

My mother ran over and hugged and kissed me, and my father walked over and extended his hand. “You did great, Dana,” he said, shaking my hand, “Now you are a man.”