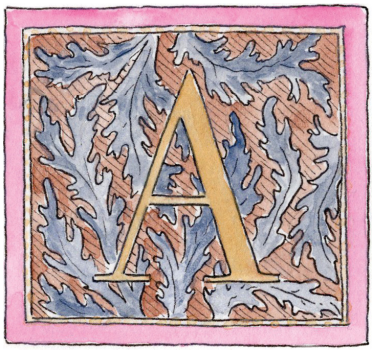
ADAM TEITELBAUM

Boyz II Mensches

The bar mitzvah needs a makeover, and Jewish men a kick in the pants



MERICAN society has, for some time now, struggled with masculinity. The 1999 book *Real Boys*, by clinical psychologist William Pollack, named it. But even before that, we had long been trying, and failing, to fulfill the aim of the book's subtitle: *Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. The first quarter century of the new millennium has seen boys trail girls at nearly every level of academic achievement; 12.4 percent of prime-age men detach from the workforce; and, most tragically, suicide now ranks as the second-most-common cause of death for American men under the age of 35.

Writers such as Scott Galloway, Richard Reeves, and Robert Putnam have recently shown that the crisis has various origins: neurobiological, social, and cultural. But the overriding manifestation, as Putnam and Reeves put it in the *New York Times*, is "a crisis of connec-

tion, as men and boys are increasingly detached from civic, familial, and social life." This detachment has been thoroughly aided by the pathologizing of masculinity itself, the cultural acceptance of seeing its toxic forms as fundamental features of manhood, and social isolation exacerbating the loneliness epidemic. Absent a healthy, dignified, and respectable vision of masculinity, boys are, at best, left ambivalent about becoming men, at worst radicalized by violent and hateful social movements. The monumental achievement of gender egalitarianism, beginning with the suffragettes and continuing through the waves of feminism, has given way to the dark reality of male disengagement.

The Jewish community is not immune from this pattern of male retreat in correlation with female success. Over the past 100 years, the Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and even Orthodox movements have made major strides to correct the centuries-old gender imbalance in Jewish life. The unintended and unfortunate by-product of this shift has been the widespread disengagement of boys and men from Jewish life outside of Orthodoxy. Women now make up roughly 70 percent of the Jewish nonprofit workforce, and they dominate classrooms, camps, and cultural programs, even while men, as in American society writ large, continue to hold most top executive positions. Despite the richness of Jewish life in America, data reveal a widening gender gap in participation and leadership. As early as 2008, a Brandeis University study reported that "just as Jewish women were marginalized from the centers of Jewish life for much of history, American Jewish men now feel displaced from Judaism." A more recent Brandeis study in 2025 confirmed that "the differences we see between men and women with respect to Jewish engagement mirror those between men and women with respect to religious, communal, and civic engagement in the larger society."

The situation in both Jewish and broader American life has been described as either a great "feminization" or a "boy crisis," depend-

ing on which side of the gender divide you're down with. Regardless, what Jewish and American life both desperately need is a renewed masculinity, one that engages boys in the work of civic, familial, and communal life and teaches them how to become good men.

Fortunately, Judaism has its own conception of masculinity, one rooted in the power of responsibility for one's family, community, and society.

The Hebrew word for masculinity, *gavrut*, derives from *gibur*, meaning "a strong man" or "hero," a word that makes a marked appearance in the — aptly titled for our masculine purposes — *Ethics of the Fathers*. "Who is a strong man/hero [*gibur*]? He who conquers his evil inclination" (4:1).

How interesting. Jewish masculinity here is synonymous with the triumph over the evil inside oneself, or, in the parlance of our times, one's toxicity. The Jewish image of manhood is the force that opposes toxicity, and the adjacent lines of the text round out the picture. "Who is wise? He who learns from every man, as it is said: 'From all who taught me have I gained understanding (Psalms 119:99)….' He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that rules his spirit than he that takes a city' (Proverbs 16:32)." And concluding: "Who is he that is honored? He who honors his fellow human beings."

According to the Fathers, and in particular the sage Ben Zoma to whom this teaching is attributed, a man's character is defined by the disciplinary power he exerts over himself, his interest and engagement in others, and the respect he shows to them.

Could there be a more concise and prescient teaching for the masculinity crisis of our time?

The problem is that this teaching needs to be embodied,

demonstrated, and modeled in order for it to take root. The lack of male role models in American and Jewish culture who can personify this teaching and then hold boys accountable to it is a problem with exponential outcomes. As both Reeves and Galloway explain in their recent books, the absence of a consistent male role model in boyhood is one of the strongest predictors of future disengagement. Although less dangerous in the Jewish-engagement context than in overall life outcomes, what it means is that the absence of a Jewish mentor in youth diminishes Judaism's relevance later in life. The expansion of women's roles and women's voices in rabbinic, communal, and political leadership is an incalculable benefit to the Jewish community, but the decreasing number of male leaders in those spaces is a recipe for the Jewish gender problem in reverse. A sans-male Judaism is as incomplete as a Judaism before feminism.

In their also prescient book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*, published 35 years ago, Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette critiqued the then fashionable impulse to solve the masculinity crisis by injecting more femininity into men's lives. That instinct, they wrote, is understandable but misguided—it treats masculine energy itself, rather than its distortion or misdirection, as the problem. The answer to toxic or adolescent masculinity is not less masculinity but mature masculinity: disciplined strength, creative purpose, and service to something beyond the self. Healthy masculinity requires an audacious vision of who and what men can become.

Judaism is the perfect crucible for such a charge. For millennia, Judaism has offered the most sophisticated apprenticeship ever devised for the human soul. It does not teach or promise serenity; it promises struggle and teaches the tools to triumph over it—the daily grappling between impulse and conscience. Its rituals are not deco-

rations of faith but instruments of discipline. Every mitzvah, from tefillin to Torah to tzedakah, is a small act of mastery. It's a system of personal and communal obligation, and its core premise is responsibility — the daily, disciplined effort to align behavior with purpose. After spending 15 years inside the Jewish communal world — working with young Jewish men at AEPi Fraternity, training leaders for AIPAC and the Jewish Federations of North America — I've come to the realization that the Jewish masculinity crisis is, at its core, a spiritual one. The timeless, sometimes gendered, practices of Judaism — its obligations, its rituals, its discipline — offer the most powerful framework for restoring masculine purpose, service, and responsibility. The rabbis understood what modern thinkers such as Galloway, Reeves, Moore, and Gillette have rediscovered: Responsibility rescues us from drift, mentorship averts us from mediocrity, and community saves us from despair.

What needs revamping is the customary Jewish initiation ritual into that framework: the bar mitzvah.

The word itself, *bar mitzvah*, is Hebrew for "owner of the commandment," meant to convey the arrival of manly expectation and responsibility. In their book, Moore and Gillette explain that the demise of traditional cultures has left modern secular society bereft of "gender-specific initiations to help people reach maturity." Without rites of passage, they warned, boys remain stuck in "boy psychology," oscillating between grandiosity and passivity. The counterintuitive truth is that societies heal men not by feminizing them but by initiating them — teaching them how to wield power responsibly, love deeply, and serve the tribe rather than the ego. The bar mitzvah, properly understood, is the structured transfor-

mation that channels raw boyhood energy into generative manhood. It is the first formal step in shaping young men into exemplary partners, fathers, and community leaders.

But transitioning from childhood to adulthood takes time, years, in fact, and more of them for boys than it does for girls. In his groundbreaking book *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*, Reeves identifies "the very different speeds at which boys and girls mature, especially in adolescence" as the "main cause" of the gender gap in K–12 education, the effects of which cascade as boys transition to manhood. "Boys' brains develop more slowly, especially during the most critical years of secondary education." Those critical years when "the biggest sex differences occur" are those of "middle adolescence," ages 14 to 17, immediately following the bar mitzvah at age 13. And it also happens to be the period of time when more than a third of Hebrew-school students drop out. By 12th grade, according to research by the Avichai Foundation, only 15 percent remain.

If the bar mitzvah is an initiation ritual into Jewish manhood, why is it widely treated as the finish line of Jewish childhood? The American bar mitzvah tends to stand as a singular event, often in the form of a recital followed by a themed party along the lines of the young man's childhood passion: a sports team, a superhero, Rolex. We coach boys to perform, not to transform, and then we congratulate them for finishing the one curriculum that should have been the starting point for everything in their life. The transition to manhood is not a singular event meant to look backward. It is, as I say above, a structured transformation into the future. At this critical moment, the bar mitzvah needs to be reconceived not as a single initiation *ritual* but as an initiation *process* that continues throughout adolescence.

Here is the counter-proposal: Retire the pageant; rebuild the passage. Bar mitzvah becomes a six-year track that begins at 12.5 and

culminates at 18. The certificate at 13 is not an exit but a *commission*: You are now responsible to, as the Hebrew instructs, *own* the mitzvot as they pertain to you, your community, and the future of both. The celebration moves to the end of this process, the completion of the transformation rather than its initial spurts.

How it works.

Each participant joins a 10-man cohort that meets monthly from ages 12.5 through 18. Cohorts are local, tied to a communal institution (a synagogue, school, or JCC); the framework is shared nationally so that comparative outcomes can be assessed. Every boy has two partners: a *hevruta* his own age and an adult mentor, preferably a father or grandfather fulfilling the directive found in the Shema prayer to impart the Torah's teachings to your children, otherwise an uncle, coach, or vetted community elder. Formation happens in a triangle: peer friction, adult example, public accountability.

The curriculum is three verbs:

Learn. *Hevruta* on the weekly portion, short sources on business ethics, speech, money, family, anything on their mind. Not philology for its own sake but moral cases from the Tanakh. What does *lashon hara* (evil speech) look like in a group chat? What is *ona'at devarim* (verbal fraud) when you are selling something online? What do *tzniut* (modesty) and *kavod* (respect) require of a boyfriend? When a boy argues these out loud, with a text in the middle and a friend across the table who pushes back, he learns how to engage in an argument for the sake of heaven.

Do. Habits stacked and tracked. Wrap tefillin on weekdays, or choose an equivalent daily ritual; lead kiddush on Friday nights; log Shab-

bat phone-off hours; volunteer monthly with your cohort; complete a service project you design and budget. Streaks matter. The goal is not piety; it is reliability, consistency, grit. Boys who keep promises become men others can trust.

Lead. Formation becomes real only when transmitted. Each participant must teach something he's learned at least twice a year. By 16, he must stand up in front of strangers and raise tzedakah for a cause he cares about. Fundraising is not crass; it is a mature form of speech.

In *Notes on Being a Man*, Galloway recounts not having had a bar mitzvah because his single, immigrant mother couldn't afford Hebrew school, but that the Boy Scouts saved him "from utter obscurity" through confidence-building and the values of camaraderie and community. But why not merge the two? There would be merit pathways, borrowed from scouting, which foster habit formation through accountability. Finish a tractate of Mishnah; read Torah three times; attend 300 minyanim; design and execute a tzedakah project. Boys must earn enough merit badges to become eligible for the capstone: a *Nesher Mensch* (Eagle Man) project that addresses a real need — elder tech tutoring, food rescue, a new-member Shabbat pipeline — and then is presented to a community review board. The lesson is that excellence is crafted and earned.

Executed wisely, this bar mitzvah pathway will bring more good men into Jewish communal space and practice. If federations and foundations want male participation, they should fund mentors: seasoned adults who coach, model, and hold boundaries. The metrics and demographics will start to shift.

And it needn't stop at 18. Every stage culminates in a public act of

accountability: At 16, each young man should have a midcourse check-in: a *Brit Ma'asim* (a covenant of deeds) marking his commitments to learning, service, and self-mastery. At 27, a *Tikkun Ha-Derech* (road repair), an evaluation of where he is in his journey and an affirmation of the values he will carry into adulthood. At 40, a *Hevruta HaDor* (generational partner)—a pledge to mentor others. At 60, a *Kabbalat Ahdut* (acceptance of unity)—a recommitment to community leadership.

This is not a youth program. It is a generational infrastructure project—a national network of *hevruta* circles, mentors, and initiation tracks that embed Jewish discipline and masculine virtue into the bloodstream of Jewish life. The bar mitzvah reforged is not a nostalgic recovery of the past; it's the reclamation of Judaism's greatest educational insight: that responsibility, not comfort, is the path to meaning.

Its purpose is nothing less than to re-forge the Jewish man: strong *and* humble, ambitious *and* ethical, driven *and* devoted, compassionate *and* resolute. The goal is not simply to retain members but to form men who form families, serve communities, and carry the covenant with conviction: men who partner with women (or other men, as the case may be) to co-create the future they want their children and grandchildren to inherit.

If we fail, the pattern is predictable. Boys drift toward harsher models of masculinity, amplified by algorithms that monetize their confusion. Girls grow up to be women without sturdy, affectionate Jewish men to partner with. Jewish women have been carrying modern Judaism for all of us, and through all sorts of labor. It's about time we stepped up and started carrying our weight. ✳

ADAM TEITELBAUM founded Level III Industries to uplift Torah wisdom and Jewish ritual as the foundation for fatherhood after directing programs at Alpha Epsilon Pi, AIPAC, and the Jewish Federations of North America. He is a proud husband and the father of two boys.