



# Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted

By Patricia Keer Munro

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## Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted By Patricia Keer Munro

The Jewish practice of bar mitzvah dates back to the twelfth century, but this ancient cultural ritual has changed radically since then, evolving with the times and adapting to local conditions. For many Jewish-American families, a child's bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah is both a major social event and a symbolic means of asserting the family's ongoing connection to the core values of Judaism. *Coming of Age in Jewish America* takes an inside look at bar and bat mitzvahs in the twenty-first century, examining how the practices have continued to morph and exploring how they serve as a sometimes shaky bridge between the values of contemporary American culture and Judaic tradition.

Interviewing over 200 individuals involved in bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, from family members to religious educators to rabbis, Patricia Keer Munro presents a candid portrait of the conflicts that often emerge and the negotiations that ensue. In the course of her study, she charts how this ritual is rife with contradictions; it is a private family event and a public community activity, and for the child, it is both an educational process and a high-stakes performance.

Through detailed observations of Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, and independent congregations in the San Francisco Bay Area, Munro draws intriguing, broad-reaching conclusions about both the current state and likely future of American Judaism. In the process, she shows not only how American Jews have forged a unique set of bar and bat mitzvah practices, but also how these rituals continue to shape a distinctive Jewish-American identity.

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#### **Review**

"Filled with powerful, often poignant quotes ... Munro provides many strategies for revitalizing the bar and bat mitzvah process."

*(Jewish Book Council)*

"For those unfamiliar with US Jewish religious life, there is much to be gleaned from this regional (San Francisco Bay) study of a central religious practice that varies among present-day Jewish communities. For those professionally involved in US Jewish community affairs, it offers the benefits of participant-observation for understanding the contemporary bar/bat mitzvah scene ... Highly recommended. All levels/librarians."

*(Choice)*

"Patricia Keer Munro has made an invaluable contribution to Jewish studies by elucidating the bar/bat mitzvah system as a sociological negotiation between emerging adults, their parents, educators, rabbis and congregations. Her analysis illustrates how this Jewish life-cycle ritual both influences and is influenced by traditional and liberal Judaism. The book should be required reading for scholars of Jewish life and communal professionals, as well people of other faiths seeking a better understanding of this pivotal experience."

*(Keren McGinity Brandeis University)*

#### **About the Author**

PATRICIA KEER MUNRO is a visiting scholar at the Berkeley Institute for Jewish Law and Israel Studies in Berkeley, California.

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