

The Case for the Black Bar Mitzvah

By

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My son was circumcised when he was eight days old, I cried. He was redeemed when he was thirty days old and guess what? I cried. Now we come to our next milestone, his Bar Mitzvah. The odds are I'm probably going to go Niagara Falls that day as well.

I can remember being pregnant with him and terrified when the doctor looked at the sonogram photo and pointed out the extra appendage that I prayed wouldn't be there. I already had a daughter and I was hoping for another; not because I didn't want a son but I reckon it was much like what the Israelite mothers in Egypt were feeling when their infant sons were being slain. I would be bringing my son home to a neighborhood where black boys were slain on a regular basis and the thought of losing him before even getting to meet him overshadowed any joy that I should've been feeling at that blessed moment. How would I protect him, protect us, his family from all that I knew could befall us? How many other mothers loved their sons as I would love mines? How many others tried to keep their sons safe only to end up taking trips to the jailhouse or the cemetery? I didn't know exactly how many but the thought of just the ones that I knew was more than I could bare. I knew I wasn't rich, so I couldn't purchase a better chance for him by moving into a better neighborhood where it was safer. I wasn't super intellectual, so I couldn't rely on my knowledge to rationalize and outsmart the realities of ghetto life. All I had was my faith in G-d. I knew I couldn't make it through, we couldn't make it through without his assistance and mercy and not making it through was not an option.

I agreed to do my part. I took my son to our temple and on the eighth day and the Mohel circumcised him; thus, entering him into the ages old covenant that began with Abraham. In my taking him there, I was saying to G-d, "I believe and I know that you will be a partner in the rearing of this child." My son was eight days old so he wasn't saying anything. That was between G-d and me. I took him back twenty-two days later to have him named and redeemed. I gave the priest five shekalim and he returned my son to me.

I took him home and was always mindful of the agreement that I had made with G-d and the safety of my children, especially my son had proven that the most high hadn't forgotten either. I have seen the goodness of the lord everyday in my son. I have seen how his thoughts, opinions, and actions have been impacted and shaped by his study of Torah. Now, we have come to this, his Bar Mitzvah. The words mean "Son of the Commandments" but to me it

means the son who arrived here unharmed. I did have to lay hands on him a few times but I didn't break him, get bored with and neglect him and I certainly did not lose him. I was returning him in the same condition in which he was gifted to me. Yet, on that day I will cease to be the liason between my son and his G-d. He will stand there on his own and read Torah before the entire congregation and represent them in the eyesight of the most high. From that day on he will be responsible for his own relationship with G-d. The same son that I redeemed some thirteen years before would in a sense be returning to G-d of his own free will. This same child that once told me he didn't feel that he had to go to Temple every Shabbat because he *knew* that G-d was with him. That's why he never gets jumped or shot at or anything bad. He knew that G-d was with him then and he knows that G-d will be with him after his Bar Mitzvah because his faith will still be with G-d. That gave me comfort. Raising a teenager is a whole lot less scary when you have a kid who conducts himself as if he's always under your watchful eye because he know he's already under G-ds. It's also good to know that with this Bar Mitzvah this young man has affirmed his faith in his creator and I'd like to think that G-d recognizes that as well.

As I stood watching the tailor fit my son I was overwhelmed with by the thought of how truly fortunate I was to be standing there picking the suit that he would be standing before G-d in and not before the judge or lying down in. I couldn't help but feel a little sad for the many mothers, my sisters who would never feel the warmth of this kind of joy.

I suppose I feel a lot like Hannah right now on the eve of the day which she would return Samuel to Eli. She knew that she had prayed and asked G-d for her son and that he was given to her but just as a loan and one day she would have to return him, but if she was anything like me she would've definitely moved into the neighborhood (next door to the temple if possible). I think that mothers now could really learn a lesson from Hannah. We all get a choice in the way that our children will return to G-d and this way is the best that I could ever imagine.

I believe that if other faith communities in the African American community had rites of passage, that perhaps our sons would develop a greater sense of self awareness and a deeper insight into the creator of the universe and ultimately a greater respect for them both.