

# CONFIRMATION IS NOT A GRADUATION

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

Shavuot was the occasion, over 3300 years ago, when our ancestors stood at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. Ever since then, Jews have used this holiday to reaffirm our commitment to receive and learn our Torah, the spiritual lifeblood of our faith.

Shavuot was also the occasion when I and my religious school classmates, not nearly so long ago, stood at the Bimah to be Confirmed -- a modern ceremony found in many congregations (although, let's be honest, this ceremony, the age group involved, and the name, are all borrowed from the surrounding culture). Our studies at an end, we graduated. Passover may be the holiday of liberation, but on Shavuot, we were free!

What gave us this message -- tragic, for the People of the Book -- that we were done learning? I believe the answer is straightforward: none of our parents were attending classes. There were no classes for us in our later high school years, either. Jewish learning was obviously an activity for children.

The ceremony itself gave that message. We Confirmants and our families constituted the majority of attendees, on the holiday celebrating our communal attachment to Torah. We celebrated receiving the Torah, and few cared enough to appear.

Even today, parents often send their children off to Hebrew school with no interest in the subjects. Why, then, do their children go? In many synagogues, children cannot enjoy a Bar or Bat Mitzvah without mandatory family membership and Hebrew school attendance for two, three, or even four years. And children, as we all know, have to have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah (if the parents don't think so, the grandparents' strong opinion must also be considered). So to many parents and children Hebrew school is a long ordeal, a necessary prerequisite for the party at the end.

The Bar Mitzvah has been turned on its head: instead of a rite of entry into a life of Jewish learning and the assumption of Jewish responsibility, it has become a rite of exit. How did the Rabbi get rid of the mice in the synagogue? He gave them Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and they never came back!

We obviously need to reverse this trend. First and foremost, Jewish learning for adults must be as common as Hebrew school -- meaning, every concerned Jewish adult should participate on at least a weekly basis. [Obviously, I am preaching to the choir to some extent, because you are reading this. But do you go to live classes? Did you know that the LEAP engine on our web site now gives you an easy search engine for Torah classes near you?]

Second: parents must study with their children, if we want children to enjoy the experience of Jewish learning. Hebrew schools cannot (and do not) succeed when parental investment stops at the wallet. In many schools, parents already participate, and the impact is obvious. "I endured this, and now you must, too," is replaced with, "I do this, I enjoy this, and I hope you will too." How many surveys are needed to prove that this is vastly more productive?

Finally, I hesitate to say it, but Hebrew school should be reserved for families who actually want their children to attend. A Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration is not Hebrew school graduation, but a Jewish birthright. At age 13 or 12 a young boy or girl must take responsibility -- ready or not. If the parents and children are both not interested in Hebrew school, then the experience often does more harm than good. I would rather meet the teenager who went into the ceremony with little preparation, and now wonders what it was that he or she did and wants to learn more, over the one who thinks he or she has "been there, done that."

Shavuos, of course, is an ideal time for adults to start or resume learning. It is the time when the spiritual forces of the original receipt of the Torah come down to us. And, on a much more pragmatic level, it is the time when children are leaving Hebrew schools for the summer, or for good. For their sake and our own, we, as adults, must demonstrate that we value Jewish learning. For 3300 years, the Jewish people survived by learning Torah -- in kingdom and in exile, in wealth and in poverty, in times of freedom and times of oppression. And whenever Jews abandoned Torah study, assimilation followed.

To those proud young men and women now celebrating their own Confirmations, I would say: please remember that this is not a graduation, an end, but a beginning. Until now, your synagogue and your parents have made decisions regarding your Jewish education, but now it's up to you. And it is your choice to attach yourself to Torah, to go to learn because you want to learn, which will truly confirm your place in the Jewish community, now and for generations to come.

A happy and meaningful Shavuos, and a Good Shabbos!

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