

Bar Mitzvah

Rebecca—one of two Rebeccas, this one Silver—texted the group. Inana was going into labor. Oh my God, Inana was going into labor. There for a while we had had our doubts. Only a few days ago had Carly declared, self-assured as always, that Inana was, in fact, not pregnant. Her due date had passed, after all, and of the two goats, Inana and Fiona, Inana was by far the smaller one. It seemed likely that we'd all gotten our hopes up for nothing, that there would be no birth on the farm during our time at Urban Adamah.

I'd been by their pen earlier in the day and saw what I thought were signs—a swollen vulva and some strange behavior—but who was I too judge? Who'd given me any authority on what is or what is not a swollen goat vulva? But, this time, I'd seen what there was to be seen, and oh my God, Inana was going into labor. We, me and two other fellows, were at a salvage yard not far from the house. I had a book of poetry in my hand. Kendra had another. We had to leave—apparently you could already see one of the baby's hooves.

“Do you think it'll be a boy or a girl?” Anna asked me as we left.

“Oh, a girl for sure,” I said. Too much feminine energy in the air for it to be otherwise. Inana's kid turned out to be a female, and though informed speculations and nearly 50/50 guesses are no miracles when they turn out to be right, getting both the birth and the sex right in the same day wound up making me wonder if I didn't have some slight talent for prophecy. If so, I hope to use these powers to greater ends than imposing gender on unborn goats, but, you know, ultimately, it turns out that we have very little control over how things manifest in our lives.

We bought our books and Kendra drove fast through Berkeley. By the time we got to the farm, a ring of fellows and staff had formed around the goat pen. Inana was shifting in the hay. Fiona watched over her. The rest of us tried to contain our excitement and give the mother-to-be some space. Soon you could begin to see a nose emerge.

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That day began early, but no earlier than the rest. As a fellow, you have to get up before seven on a normal day, or at around five thirty if you have farm chores to take care of before Avodat Lev (morning prayer and meditation). It was Saturday, Shabbos, and Rebecca—the other one, Rebecca Spiro—Sara and I wanted to go to a service. The night before we'd participated in Shabbat on the Rock, a Kabbalat Shabbat (Friday night service) held by a group of linen-clad Jews at Indian Rock in the Berkeley Hills. It was a moving experience, watching the sunset over the hills and trees and water, listening to a chorus of voices and instruments beat out the melodies of traditional Hebrew prayers and even some modern English ones. The world came alive as a piece of immaculate art, feeling magical and spontaneous, created and unfolding. I guess you could say that the three of us wanted more, wanted to a scratch a religious itch after this deeply spiritual experience. At first, none of us realized we'd be attending a Bar Mitzvah.

We went to Netivot Shalom, a socially-progressive Conservative shul in Berkeley. Sara's mother knew the rabbi. When we got there, there was a boy handing out siddurs (prayer books) with blue pieces of paper informing us as to the order of the service. In black letters at the top it read "Bar Mitzvah of Nathaniel Spiro." It was going to be my first Bar Mitzvah ceremony, I

informed Rebecca Spiro, who was already hard at work scheming up a backstory to pass herself off as an estranged relative of the Bar Mitzvah boy.

Since childhood I'd known about Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, having heard stories about the big parties kids had in order to celebrate their emergence into Jewish adulthood. I thought about them mostly as parties, and was glad I'd never had one, sure that the stress of having to compile a guest list for such an event at the age of thirteen would have killed me. I'd never gone to Hebrew school besides, and as the child of a non-Jewish mother, my status as a Jew always felt undefined. By fourteen I considered myself a hard-liner atheist, so having a Bar Mitzvah around then would have been a lot to swallow. Despite that, though, I'd always enjoyed celebrating Hanukkah and Pesach at home, and especially enjoyed when my dad would take my sister and me to temple to observe Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. My house didn't have very many traditions growing up, but those were a few that felt precious to me.

Nathaniel Spiro was excellent. He was tiny, young-looking the way that boys that age can tend to be, and wielded as he spoke a water bottle that seemed almost too big for his hands. But he read his Hebrew and, when the time came, offered a dvar Torah that was rich with humor and insight. His parsha was about a talking donkey and an invisible angel with a flaming sword. Seen through his eyes, the ancient biblical text became an allegory about climate change and the disconnection between humankind and nature. They say there are as many interpretations of scripture as there are those who read it, but I think Nathaniel had us all convinced and reflecting on our own relationship with the Earth. I smiled the entire time he spoke, and as his parents and mentors delivered their own small speeches, and as his friends rushed into the chamber to hear him speak, and as he helped to carry the Torah around the

room so that everyone might touch their siddur or tefillin to it. I saw the Bar Mitzvah as more than a party; I saw it as an act of community, of affirming one's presence before tribe and tradition as both shaper and participant.

If before I had suspected that, as an adult, having a Bar Mitzvah ceremony was something I might want, then attending Nathaniel Spiro's confirmed it. Even then, I did not consider the possibility of having one so soon, of getting bar mitzvahed before leaving Berkeley. Cara, another fellow, was the one who sowed the seeds of that development. Sitting at our kitchen table, she said that she could help me, that she'd tutored Bar and Bat Mitzvahs before. We could throw a ceremony together, could make the whole thing happen. I told her that I wasn't sure. I told her that if we went through with it, I'd want to make sure there was a rabbi there. For some reason, I was under the impression that that was what would make it official. I kept thinking of reasons no, but knew that underneath all of that was a single, persistent yes.

That evening, on Shabbos, before the sun had set and the full moon for which she was named came out in full force, we watched baby Levana be born. In the background, from the main tent, came the sound of corny jazz music. Somebody was having their Bar Mitzvah party.

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There were a few weeks of hemming and hawing on my part. I'm the type of person who should never be left with time to consider my decisions. I'm greedy with it, asking for more than I can get. Options are bad for me, too—every choice is its own calamity. I'm learning to trust my intuition more, to pick a path and pursue it instead of wavering endlessly at the crossroads, but it's difficult to change decades-worth of routine behavior. When it came to my

Bar Mitzvah, there was a lot of indecision over what was *necessary*. Did I *need* to make a big show of myself, to ask people to go out of their way to attend some ceremony that, in all likelihood, would wind up being kind of a mess? Would it be necessary to get staff from Urban Adamah involved? Would I have to learn Hebrew? Did I have to pick a date? These questions paralyzed the process, and for the most part I tried to keep things under wraps, not really talking to people too far outside of the circle of those who'd expressed interest in helping put the ceremony together that this was even something that I was considering doing. But from each person who I *did* talk to about my Bar Mitzvah, I received nothing but excitement and support. In talking to them about why it was that I wanted to do it and what aspects of the ceremony were most important to me, I became more sure. When I spoke about it, I knew it was something that I needed to do.

Over time, my concept of what a Bar Mitzvah—of what *my* Bar Mitzvah—should look like shifted dramatically. Originally, my thought was that it should be something formal. I'd decided not to participate in the ceremony a year earlier when my sister and I went to Israel because the large Bnei Mitzvah held for members of our tour group seemed, to me, a little kitschy (and besides, I don't think that I felt that I was ready to make that sort of "commitment" to Judaism at the time). To me, it seemed that an important component of a proper Bar Mitzvah was *work*—particularly in the forms of scriptural and Hebrew study. I was going to have to learn about the Bible and learn to read Hebrew words and letters. I also thought that a "real" Bar Mitzvah required the presence of a "spiritual authority"; at first, this meant a rabbi, but after a while, I was willing to settle for a "personal spiritual authority," someone from outside of my fellowship class that I looked up to in the community as a spiritual guide. I

wanted to do things by the book, but the funny thing is that I had no idea what the book entailed, or even what the title of the book might have been. The Hebrew Bible doesn't lay out certain requirements for a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, and what such a thing entails changes dramatically based on factors of space and time. Before long, I began to let go of my ideas of what was "proper" and "traditional," and instead chose to focus on what was important about the ceremony *to me*, on how I could make the experience feel relevant to who I am as a person and the type of Judaism that I want to participate in. What resulted broke a lot of rules, was messy and dysfunctional and joyful and fun. It was creative and communal. It was perfect in its way.

Of course, though, when you start out looking for a book, a book tends to be what you find. The process of preparing for my Bar Mitzvah began with a book, one that had to travel through decades—and from Chicago to my home in Leesburg, VA and then all the way out to Berkeley—to reach me. In English, the book is called *Reading for Beginners*. It's the revised version from 1968, twelve years younger than the original version published in 1956. It belonged to my grandmother sometime in the 80s, when, already a mother and twice married, she had her own Bat Mitzvah. Previously rare, Bat Mitzvah ceremonies came into vogue around that time as women began to gain more access to Jewish tradition and institutions. At some point before her, the book had belonged to a girl named Wendy. This I know because Wendy's name is scrawled in red crayon at the top of the book, the handwriting distinctly belonging to a twelve- or thirteen-year-old. An early Bat Mitzvah, or else a person who never grew up in a Judaism without it.

I didn't get *Reading for Beginners* until about the last month of the fellowship. Bubbe called me when I'd been in California for about a week, and we talked about the book then. Most of the other fellows had been to Hebrew school, and so could read Hebrew to various degrees. Sara, who was raised Conservative and spent a significant amount of time in Israel, was more or less fluent. Although I wasn't planning to have a Bar Mitzvah at the time, I thought that I could take the summer as an opportunity to learn a little bit of the language, and when my grandmother mentioned that she had an old primer I could use, I was very excited about it. She said she'd bring it to Leesburg with her when she came to visit in early July, and that she'd have my mother send it to me. When my mother received the book, she planned to send it to me, but was waiting until she could send it with a few other things that took her some time to get. It was a circuitous journey, but eventually the book got to me. Over sixty years old, the yellow paperback was in surprisingly good condition, although you can see where it might soon start to fall apart. It arrived with a magazine and a folded up newspaper clipping tucked between its pages. My first grade teacher was featured in the Washington Post's "Date Lab."

I'd been waiting to "officially" start preparing until the primer arrived. My thought was that I wanted to be ready to read my Torah portion in Hebrew by whatever date I chose for the ceremony, and so having the primer would be important for that. It was late July by the time it arrived, however, and though I love language learning, some twenty-odd days with very full schedules allows for little time to learn how to confidently read in a language that uses a writing system unlike any that you've known or studied before. Hebrew uses an alphabet, sure, but a very different one than the Latin alphabet used in English. Vowels don't get their own distinct letters, but are represented with different marks below the consonants. There are

letters that make no sound. It's a lot to absorb. Still, though, I did learn a little, with help from both the primer and my friends, and even picked up some Hebrew words from the months of prayer and ceremony and conversation with other Jews. By the time that my Bar Mitzvah rolled around, I didn't feel that I was personally ready to deliver the Hebrew with its proper cantillation, but Rebecca Spiro was more than happy to do the honors on my behalf. Language unites communities, and the reading served that purpose as Rebecca and I worked alongside each other in performing parts of the ceremony.

While I might not have learned as much from *Reading for Beginners* as I could have, it certainly had a hand in moving things along. Its presence by my bed served as a reminder of the ceremony we'd been meaning to plan. We were moving into August and there were only a few weeks left in the fellowship. Little Lev had gone from this tiny creature who could hardly stand to a confident, playful kid that liked to chew on my shoelaces and jump up into Fiona's feed bin to take her afternoon naps. We were all intoxicated by that baby goat, the new Moon that came into our lives on a Shabbos in the middle of the summer. She was part of the inspiration behind the date I chose for my Bar Mitzvah, August 22, 2017. The last Tuesday of our fellowship, our last night off. It was also Rosh Chodesh.

Rosh Chodesh is the Jewish observance of the New Moon. The Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar, and so Rosh Chodesh falls as the first day of every new month in Judaism. We were in Berkeley for three New Moons, the one in August being our last. It was Rosh Chodesh Elul, Elul being the month that leads up to the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement. Elul is meant to be a month of introspection, of piecing things together before moving on. Beginning just as our fellowship was ending, the



timing of this felt especially appropriate: coming up on the end of three months of intense physical, emotional, and spiritual work, a period of introspection seemed like something that we would all need. My dvar Torah, in which I was talking about the Rosh Chodesh parsha, which itself is focused entirely on the sacrifices that were made at the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, spoke to this. The intention was to find some solace in the End, to prepare myself and others present to step open-eyed into the future beyond Urban Adamah. I believe that I achieved that for myself, and others told me that my words had done the same for them. As a writer, I can't think of a greater gift to receive from people whom I've come to love very much. I'm glad that the words I wrote were able to help my friends, but I can't take credit for the inspiration behind them. That, I chalk up to the Moon.

We all respond to different symbols. The Moon has felt like a powerful presence in my life for a very long time. Some of my nicest memories from childhood are of playing in moonlight in the summer with my sister and the other neighborhood kids. During the colder months, I was still often up late, playing with toys or watching television—usually both. My mind has always been more active at night, particularly in the dark and quiet hours after people have gone to bed.

In college, I often had a hard time starting assignments until before nine or ten at night. If I had a big paper to write, the first words might not have hit the page until after midnight. If I wasn't working I'd still usually be awake, thinking in the dark. It was better then than in high school, when I only got between two and four hours of sleep most nights. I always felt tired during the day, and sometimes would take naps after coming home from school. But at night I

couldn't sleep, or wouldn't try. I spent a lot of time finding ways to distract myself because if I didn't, my thoughts would quickly turn against me.

Although it wasn't always pleasant, I began to feel somewhat beholden to the night, and the Moon as a part of the night. I always found it beautiful and captivating as an object, somewhat mysterious. In college, with a postmodern seriousness, I began to treat the Moon as a Goddess, a practice I adopted from a few of my friends. It is and was a joke, but the reverence we pay has its own authenticity. It was partially through this relationship with the Moon that I began to reframe my way of approaching the Divine, an activity that caused me to reconsider my Judaism and ultimately to wind up at Urban Adamah. In a certain sense, the Moon brought about my Bar Mitzvah, and I can only give credit for what happened there to Her.

The ceremony didn't go perfectly. For starters, I forgot to bring a kippah or a tallis from the house. Luckily, we were holding it in the big tent on the farm, and there was a basket of kippot there for when Urban Adamah hosted their monthly Kabbalat Shabbat. This was just after the eclipse, and the kids that attended the UA summer camp had painted a huge banner of "eclipse art" that featured many depictions of the moon. Rebecca Spiro had the idea of draping that around me as an improvised tallis. My "moon cape," we called it. There's a picture of me wearing it. I had to have Cara choreograph me through all of the prayers. There was no Torah, so Carly picked up a bongo drum and we proceeded around the tent with it. Everyone surrounded me and danced while I tried to follow along. I didn't completely understand what I was doing, but I felt loved. I felt acknowledged. I felt that I had gone before a very special tribe and said to them that we are united, and that, to me, felt like what was important. I understood that that was what I had meant to be doing all along.

