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Today I am a Man -- The Bar Mitzvah experience Italian style

In his delightful book, "Haiku for Jews," David M. Bader applies the 5-7-5 Japanese formula to a universal Jewish experience when he writes:

Today I am a man. On Monday I return to the seventh grade.

For Joey Capriotti, Bader's Haiku has special significance. Saturday, March 26, after he became a Bar Mitzvah, Joey not only returned to school but he flew back to his home in Florida after having experienced becoming a Bar Mitzvah in Milan, Italy.

As the rabbi of Synagogue Lev Chadash (Hebrew for "New Heart") here in Milan, I have had the opportunity to experience many "firsts." Lev Chadash is the first Progressive (Reform) synagogue in Italy. I am the first Progressive rabbi and the first woman rabbi in Italy. In mid-March we held our first Progressive wedding ceremony in our tiny sanctuary. Then, just two weeks later, our synagogue hosted its very first Bar Mitzvah celebration.

The young man is Joey Capriotti, bright, determined, with a dry sense of humor and a brilliant smile. His mother and father are examples of what many of us Progressive rabbis feel is the hope for modern Judaism ... the interfaith family. The Capriottis are part of an Italian-

American-Jewish family who have made the commitment to raise their sons in the Jewish faith. And with the help of a small congregation in Bradenton, Florida, Chavurah Ner Tamid, and a Progressive synagogue thousands of miles away in Italy, they have managed to do just that.

Jewish tradition is replete with miracles, but none was more appreciated than the modern miracle of e-mail which helped make Joey's Bar Mitzvah study Florida and ceremony in Italy an easy thing to accomplish. For nearly a year, Joey's teacher and I communicated about everything from study of the Hebrew language, to selection of Joey's portion of the Torah that he would read in Hebrew, to a "Tikkun Olam" ("repair of the world") community service project, to Joey's actual practice as a Shabbat service assistant leader.

When all was in order, Joey, along with his mother, Caryn, father, Rich, older brother Matt, Grandpa Bob and a group of nearly a dozen aunts, uncles and cousins, came to Milan. The family had several goals, not the least of which was to have Joey become a Bar Mitzvah in the country of his ancestors and to allow him to connect in a meaningful way with both his Italian and his Jewish heritage.

The connection was a beautiful one. In our little synagogue filled with Italian Jews, some of whom, like me, trace their ancestry back to Inquisition times when the Jews of Calabria and Sicily (40 percent of the entire population at that time) were systematically wiped out by Torquemada, Joey experienced something that so many Americans sometimes forget. Yes, it is possible to be Italian and Jewish!

In his excellent book, "The Wonder of Boys," author Michael Gurian makes specific suggestions for raising healthy young men. Gurian writes about a boy's need for rituals in the development of a strong spiritual base and that "stories are the oldest tool for teaching values and morality."

The ritual of becoming Bar Mitzvah provides Jewish boys with what Gurian agrees is an essential developmental milestone. Jewish stories are the oldest in the world. Jewish texts present opportunities to consider the morality, or lack of it, in human behavior. Joey's ceremony of becoming Bar Mitzvah, when he stood before his Jewish families from two continents and chanted in Hebrew directly from the Torah scroll, was the culmination of studies that when taught in a relevant, meaningful way, give young boys like Joey a foundation for spiritual growth.

As a rabbi, nothing pleases me more than to be a part of the moral development of young men and young women as they prepare for their special day. Bar Mitzvah means "son of the commandment." Bat Mitzvah brings a young girl into the Jewish community as a "daughter of the commandment." In Milan last Saturday, after Joey hoisted the Torah scroll high above his head and after we hoisted Joey's chair high above the crowd, we were uplifted as well. Thanks to the efforts of so many in America and in Italy who believe in the hope and promise of Interfaith families, Joey now has his very own intercontinental "meshpucha," a Jewish-Italian extended family, whose warmth, love and exuberant inclusion are examples to us all.

Rabbi Barbara Aiello is rabbi of sinagoga Lev Chadash in Milan, Italy and rabbinic advisor to Chavurah Ner Tamid in Bradenton, Florida. Write to her at: rabbi@rabbibarbara.com.

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello

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