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Review:

*Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted*, Patricia Keer Munro

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*Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted*,  
Patricia Keer Munro (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press,  
2016), ISBN 978-0-8135-7594-0, pp. 232, \$95.00.

For those of us who have laboured through watching our children move through bnei mitzvah rituals, or who have celebrated others doing so, reading Munro's *Coming of Age in Jewish America* is almost a cathartic experience. It is not so much a reinterpretation of this Jewish rite of passage, as the subtitle suggests, as a more holistic account of the various players and strategies to engage young adults as Jewish Americans. Although the bar and bat mitzvah service is diverse and geographically distinctive, Munro chooses to focus on multiple Jewish denominations in the California Bay Area. She recognizes the cost of this focused study, but also the benefits too, and there are many. To be sure, San Francisco Jewish communities do not perfectly mirror other Jewish groups in the United States; but Munro shows how they do negotiate tensions, cultural expectations, and generational conflicts similar to those of just about every other synagogue in America. Munro's point is well made: by looking closely at the different roles that rabbis, parents, families, and congregations play in this ritual pageantry, we can better assess how different Jewish communities negotiate their place in America, together with their notions of tradition, continuity, and Jewish identity. She offers a wider frame of reference for those stuck in the mud of ritual anxiety. Although a good deal of Munro's analysis "is clear and seemingly obvious" (p. 10), she is right to say that many of us fail to see the forest for the trees.

To move us to see more holistically, Munro suggests we think of the bar and bat mitzvah ritual as a "system" comprised of four functions: 1) negotiating meaning; 2) balancing process and performance; 3) raising and lowering community boundaries; and 4) managing public and private ritual needs. *Coming of Age in Jewish America* discusses how families, rabbis, and congregants work within and among these four systematic features of the bnei mitzvah ritual. But I fail to understand how these issues function as a system. What exactly is systemic about these four functions? They read to me like guiding themes or rubrics that structure her analysis. And Munro fails to offer a theoretical account of how systems work culturally, much less religiously. To my mind, situating her multi-dimensional work under a confining "system" does an injustice to her nuanced readings

of congregational life. Note, for example, Munro's account of the bat mitzvah ceremony at one Orthodox congregation in the Bay Area. Rabbi Teitelbaum will not allow girls to read Torah in the synagogue, but "he will prepare girls for the ritual and enable the family to hold the service outside the synagogue" (p. 119). Munro thoughtfully suggests how this boundary maintenance is determined by space rather than role. But where does an analysis of space fit within her system? How should we think about religious space, and where should we find it? Munro does not engage her own thoughtful observation here, perhaps because her system confines her own intellectual curiosity. I would have preferred a more thoughtful encounter with making sacred space to Munro's systemic language of balancing individual with communal needs.

I also would have liked a more sustained reflection on how religious rituals function within American communities. At times, Munro simply articulates one prominent view of ritual as if it were so universally accepted as to defy explanation: "Rituals take the sacred beliefs of a community and – through investing words, actions, and objects with meaning – bring these beliefs to life, thus reproducing the social and moral underpinnings of that community" (p. 14). This may indeed be how some rituals work, some of the time. But rituals also normalize bodies; they create patterns of behaviour; they perform racial, gender, and class hierarchies. In a word, they produce and not only reproduce social and ethical modalities. Indeed, there is an ever increasing literature on religious rituals as more about power than meaning. But Munro uncritically accepts a symbolic interpretation of ritual, one that appears to rely heavily on Clifford Geertz's analysis in his classic essay, "Religion as a Cultural System" (1966). A book dedicated to one particular religious ritual ought to theorize the various modes of ritual activity within American Jewish communities. Sometimes rituals do not symbolize anything; they do things, and often do things to bodies.

Yet even if *Coming of Age in Jewish America* is under-theorized, it still offers a fascinating picture of Jewish life in America. Munro suggests that she takes the more objective road to analysis, but she makes clear just how strange this ritual is for young adults and their families. They invest so much of their labour into a fleeting moment, which those who actually perform the ritual wish to be over as soon as possible. Munro has stretched out this moment in Jewish life so that we can inhabit this space, and this time, once again. Although she does not discuss adult bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, I am left wondering why we wish to return to this moment.

What attracts adults to this sense of transition from youth to maturity? Perhaps the bar and bat mitzvah ritual symbolizes less our sacred beliefs than it embodies our deep investment in childhood. And in this sense, the bar and bat mitzvah ceremony might perform important ideological work for how Jewish Americans imagine that kind of innocence.

*Ken Koltun-Fromm*