

# CARR 240-241

## CCAR RESPONSA

### *Contemporary American Reform Responsa*

#### **160. Non-Jewish Participation in *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* Service\***

**QUESTION:** A child of a mixed marriage is about to be *Bar Mitzvah*. It is customary for the parents to participate in the service. Would it be possible for the non-Jewish parent to also participate? In this instance, the father is Christian and the mother is Jewish. Are there any limits on participation? (Rabbi L. Mahrer, Topeka, KS)

**ANSWER:** The general question has been answered in a responsum entitled, "Participation of Non-Jews in a Jewish Public Service" (W. Jacob, *American Reform Responsa*, #6). We must now turn to specific participation in the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* service. In this instance, the non-Jewish spouse has been very much involved in raising the child and may or may not have been somewhat active in Jewish life. It is clear that we want to include the non-Jewish spouse in order to make him continue to feel at home in the synagogue and to emphasize the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* as a family occasion. There are, however, limits in which our Reform tradition and good judgment would indicate. We would recommend the following procedure:

1. It would be inappropriate for the non-Jewish spouse to lead the major segments of our service, to proclaim the traditional *berakhot*, or phrases like, "Who has commanded us" or "Who has chosen us." Such statements which express specific Jewish sentiments and ideas should only be recited by Jews. A minority of the *Responsa* Committee felt that a non-Jewish spouse should not participate in any portion of the formal service, but that such participation should be restricted to a personal prayer or statement directly connected with the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. In that way family feelings and the bond between parents and children could be stressed while remaining completely honest about the nature of this service which is specifically Jewish.

Some members of the committee felt that participation in the earlier part of the service is appropriate if restricted to:

- a. some specific psalms or responsive readings;
- b. to the preliminary portions of the service before the formal service begins, i.e., before the *barkhu*;
- c. special prayers which are normally not found in the liturgy. One member of the committee felt that it would be better to involve the non-Jew in all aspects of the service in which a Jewish family member is normally involved and simply change the blessing or prayers to conform with his status as a non-Jew through some neutral wording.

2. The non-Jewish partner should not be involved in the removal of the *Torah* from the Ark and handing it to the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. It would be inappropriate to involve the non-jewish parent in this ritual as it is frequently accompanied by a statement indicating the transmission of the Jewish tradition from one generation to another. Even if nothing is said, the act itself indicates that transmission which can, of course, not occur from a non-Jew to a Jew. Therefore, the Jewish spouse should be involved in this ritual or it should be omitted. One member of the Committee felt that such participation by a non-Jew was appropriate

3. Some private words or prayers at an appropriate point during the *Torah* service should be permitted to the non-Jewish parent. In summary, we therefore recommend that participation of non-Jews in a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* service be sharply restricted with one member of the committee feeling that segments of the service normally recited by a parent be modified to suit his non-Jewish status

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# CURR 91-93

## Gentile Stepfather at Bar Mitzvah

The following question has been asked a number of times: A Jewish woman divorced from a Jewish husband, remarries an unconverted Christian. Her son by her first marriage is being Bar Mitzvah. The Christian stepfather has adopted the child and has been truly a father to the boy. It seems wrong to keep him from participating as father in the Bar Mitzvah ceremony of the son. What may or may not a Christian stepfather do in the ceremony?

First of all, he can certainly be called to the Torah, since the Bible is sacred to Jews and Christians alike, but the question would be whether he can sincerely recite the blessings over the Torah. We should not require him to pronounce words which he does not believe and thus make of the blessing an insincere formality. The blessings over the Torah say, "Who has chosen us among all people and given us His law." This refers to the people of Israel. If he were a convert to Judaism, he could count himself as a member of a family of Israel and recite the blessings as if he were of Jewish descent (see Maimonides' answer to Obadiah, the proselyte, Treasury of Responsa, page 28). But this stepfather is not a Jew by religion and so he cannot truthfully recite the blessing. We might perhaps write out a special blessing for him somewhat as follows:

"Praised be Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has given His sacred law unto all His children that we may learn, observe, and serve Him in righteousness."

However, the father is also expected to recite the special blessing at the Bar Mitzvah, *baruch sheptorani*. This blessing involves a problem. Although there are alternate explanations of the meaning of this blessing, it is generally understood to mean, "Now I am rid of the responsibility for this person's obedience to the law." Who had had the responsibility until now? The authorities would agree that it was the boy's natural father. The fact that the father and mother had been divorced does not excuse the natural father from the responsibilities of teaching his child the Torah, etc. If, therefore, the natural father were present, it would be he who should recite the blessing, *baruch sheptorani*.

But if the father is not present, as may well be the case, and the Gentile father, who is legally the adopted father, is the only father participating in the Bar Mitzvah ceremony, who shall then recite this particular blessing? A Gentile is a *ben Noach* and has special commandments incumbent upon him. But clearly the commandment to teach his son the Torah and to keep him obedient to the mitzvos is no part of the duty of the Gentile. It is not one of the seven commandments incumbent upon the sons of Noah. Therefore for him to say this blessing would be a mockery. What can be done in these circumstances without offending decent, well-intentioned people?

First of all, we may consider that his blessing is not indispensable. Joseph Caro does not even mention such a blessing. Moses Isserles who suggests the blessing (see *Orah Hayyim* 225:2) has considerable doubt as to the validity of the blessing and therefore recommends, as is done in all cases of such doubt as to the validity of a blessing, that the blessing be recited without including God's name, because there is the danger of using God's name in vain; and in this case the danger derives from the fact that the blessing is of dubious validity. Hence, in these special circumstances, we may well omit the blessing entirely. There is another procedure which we might follow. When, for example, a boy has not been circumcised, either because his father was not available or if he were negligent, the *Bes Din* has the obligation to circumcise the child *in loco parentis*. A similar circumstance exists with regard to the redemption of a first born son. If the father is not available, the grandfather is eligible to perform the ceremony *in loco parentis*. Therefore, in this case, where the adoptive stepfather is a Christian who cannot sincerely recite this special blessing, the grandfather may be called upon to pronounce it, or the rabbi himself as the *Bes Din* may recite it.