Robert E. Malchman

Schmeer and shmoozing at a bar mitzvah

"Is man only a blander of God, or God only a blander of man?

— Friedrich Nietzsche

"You pay your money and you take your choice.

— Punch, X, 1846

I was eyeing the dozen unopened bottles of wine on ice at a nearby table in the lobby when the first wave hit.

"No, you're just shrinking. "So you'll see you around," I said, sliding away before she could even consider pinching my cheek.

I walked outside, as much to avoid the current architectural building as to get away from the wine which obstinately would not unopen. I'd seen some ugly shul in my day, but Temple Beth Israel took the cake. I knew before, in the back of my mind, that Sonny would have his son — my second cousin, Jack — celebrate his bar mitzvah in an ugly shul, but I was not prepared for the aggressive, modernist ugly perpetrated by Beth Israel, a low, flat, box-like structure with narrow vertical windows and dull yellow stucco walls. Nothing I could discern identified it as a House of God, save a crayon depiction of Theodor Herzl in the window of the Sunday school next door.

I sat on the aisle next to my father. Uncle Larry and Uncle Arthur sat behind us. Uncle Larry was asking my father some tax question: "Will the IRS buy it, Snippy?"

There are, unfortunately, two Irving and one Irwin in my family, all first cousins. To differentiate among them, they had been given nicknames as children — Sonny, the father of the bar mitzvah boy; Icky, my cousin; and Snippy, my father. Sonny had since somehow become Mark, except behind his back; Icky (No, I never asked) had become Irving again, as did my father, except to his brothers. I opened my prayer book and thanked God for not giving me older brothers to inveigh with a horrible nickname for the rest of my life.

The rabbi was generic, a product of the young-lean-and-beard school of Judaism. The cantor, on the other hand, was of the cute-young-and-blondenough-to-be-a-shiksa school. And such a voice. Were more cantors like she, instead of huffy old men with raspy voices, I might not have been so quick to check out of Hebrew school when I was eight.

I never liked Hebrew school. Getting up early Saturday mornings, sitting through banal services and classes, and learning the ancient language of God's Chosen People never really appealed to me.

The culmination of Hebrew school is the celebration of the bar mitzvah. It signifies a boy's passage into manhood. I never quite made it — to my bar mitzvah, that is. I felt uneasy about standing up and saying a number of things I did not necessarily believe, in exchange for cash and valuables. I wonder sometimes if I did the right thing. It would be nice to know some Hebrew, and the cash and valuables would come in handy when the Institute bill falls due.

Then I sit, and I stand — the ceremony closely resembles a game of 'Shimon Says' at times through a service at this godawful hour, and I wonder no more.

After a seemingly long while Jack got up to do his shtick. He read something in Hebrew. He read something else in Hebrew. Sonny got up and read something in Hebrew. The rabbi read some- thing else, and everyone stood up and sat down a few more times. Then the rabbi called Jack back up to say a few words to the congregation about his view of things as the bar mitzvah boy. "Will I be a good Jew in the years ahead?" Jack rhetorized. "Will I keep the Sabbath? Will I have the strength to say 'No, I can't go to the party tonight.'?"

I never asked."

Will I teach my children the faith? I can only hope God will guide me and lead me to the proper choice.

He went on for a few minutes this wasmit and sat down, never quite intimating what the proper choice would be. The question was academic, though, because anyone that nonspecifically equivocat- ing doesn't get asked to many parties on Friday nights.

The rabbi returned to expand upon Jack's thoughts. He transcended the hafnakh Jack read, from Ecclesiastes. It concerns these two holy men charged with keeping the temple. It seems the pair, with the best of intentions, brought "strange fire" or incense into the temple. God was dis- pleased, so he smote them.

"Strange fire" can be extrapolated to mean anything per- formed in the name of God that God doesn't like, the rabbi said.

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