

**How We Celebrate**  
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**Temple Shir Tikva, Wayland, MA**

**“I was invited to a wedding – an old-fashioned Jewish wedding...”**

So begins a famous Yiddish story by Mordecai Spector. The story is a funny one, and I’m going to share it with you in a moment.

Our story is one about how Jews celebrate. It was a relevant topic two thousand years ago in the days of the Talmud, and it was important one hundred years ago at the time of Spector’s tale, and it is more appropriate than ever today. Because how we celebrate says an enormous amount about the values of who we are – as individuals, as families, and as a community.

The first question we might ask ourselves is, “Is it Jewish even to have parties on the occasion of weddings, brisses, bar and bat mitzvahs? Is it even appropriate?” The answer is yes. In Jewish tradition there is the notion of *seudat mitzvah*, which means a “Mitzvah celebration.” That is to say, it is an important part of Jewish living that when we reach a milestone in our lives that we celebrate with friends and our community.

However, over and over our tradition insists that there is a Jewish way – a moral way – to celebrate, and there is the opposite.

Here’s an example of the opposite.

It’s the story about the Bat Mitzvah of a certain defense contractor, and it was reported in the New York *Daily News*. I won’t mention the people involved by name, because it would violate the laws of *lashon ha-ra*. But: In 2005, a bat mitzvah party took place in New York’s famous Rainbow Room. Let me read from the article I have:

**[The hosts] outfitted the banquet hall for the occasion with a concert stage, a mammoth sound system, special carpeting and an array of Jumbotrons.**

**Kenny G. strolled during pre-dinner cocktails, playing his soprano saxophone, receiving an estimated \$250,000 for the gig.**

**The evening’s entertainment lineup included performances by rapper 50 Cent... rap diva Ciara and rocker Tom Petty, culminating with a performance by [members of The Eagles and Fleetwood Mac].**

**The rock band Aerosmith was flown in by private jet just in time to cap off the evening with a 45-minute set, for which they were reportedly paid \$2 million.**

**The more than 150 kids in attendance were handed \$1,000 gift bags, which included the latest video iPod and digital cameras to capture stills of their**

**favorite artists (except for “Fitty” Cent, whose bodyguards reportedly batted down the kids’ cameras, shouting “No pictures!”).**

**The price tag for the entire evening: \$10 million, according to the Daily News.<sup>1</sup>**

Let’s be clear – what’s wrong about that story? After all, some people might say, “If you’ve *got it* – the money to spend like that – what’s so wrong about flaunting it? Maybe the family also gives a lot to Tzedakah. So why shouldn’t they behave this way?”

Many of the reasons are obvious – The display of greed and vulgarity on display, the waste of money and the question of values and taste. Yet some of the most important reasons not to behave this way are not so obvious. Long ago, the Rabbis of old recognized that grand displays of wealth and spending were dangerous for the whole community.

The Rabbis worried about what would happen – if family made a wedding or a graduation or a bar mitzvah so expensive, how it would pressure other families to raise the expectations of their celebrations as well. I know families forced into bankruptcy because of the cost of a wedding – spending more money than they could afford, *because the expectations of the community had gotten so high.*

So, in a Jewish community, nobody can ever say, “The way I spend my money and throw a party is my business and nobody else’s.” The fact is – the way we celebrate is everybody’s business, because it affects everybody else in a community whether we like it or not.

I’ve got the opposite story to the defense contractor’s bat mitzvah as well. I knew a bat mitzvah girl in New Jersey named Noa. She loved a Mitzvah project called Songs of Love, which records personalized, customized songs for children in the hospital with terrible illnesses. So at her bat mitzvah party – right between the hors d’oeuvres and the dinner – she gathered all her family and friends on the dancefloor. John Beltzer, the founder of Songs of Love, came out with his recording equipment, and he distributed lyrics to a song. And all of Noa’s friends and family spent the next 20-30 minutes recording a song for a desperately sick child somewhere. And afterwards – everyone was so deeply moved by experience – said, **“Now, I’ve been to a bat mitzvah!”**

And a community trend is started: That the way we celebrate incorporates all of our highest values, that we mark ourselves as a community of justice and goodness.

This isn’t just about money, you know. It’s really about how others are impacted by our celebrations. In many Jewish day schools, for instance, there is a rule: If a child is to have a birthday party, they must invite every member of the class to the party, no exceptions. No child is ever to be made to feel like an outsider, or alone, because of others’ birthday parties.

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<sup>1</sup> Avi Frier, “Can a \$10 Million Party Ever Be a Mitzvah?” , *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California*, January 27, 2006, [http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story\\_id/28240/edition\\_id/537/format/html/displaystory.html](http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/28240/edition_id/537/format/html/displaystory.html)

Can we – you and I – envision a community like that here? Where the expectation is that every child in the class is invited, say, to every bar mitzvah? And where every celebration is modest enough so that no family feels the pressure to spend money they can't afford? That is the difference between a secular party, and a Jewish party.

[With this understanding, let's turn to our story.]

**"I was invited to a wedding – an old-fashioned Jewish wedding..."**  
So begins the story by Mordecai Spector.

**Now, The host of the wedding, Reb Yitzchok Berkover, had provided a free meal for the poor at the marriage of each of his children, for that was the custom of the town. And now it was the turn of his youngest daughter, and he had invited all the poor folk from the neighboring town of Lipowitz...**

**It was now the wedding day, two o'clock in the afternoon, and still no sign of the poor, for whom a servant in charge of three huge wagons had been dispatched that morning. Lipowitz was only a few miles away. What could the matter be? All the relatives and wedding guests were waiting impatiently for the ceremony to begin. At last the servant, out of breath and galloping on a horse that had been unhitched from a wagon, arrived alone.**

**"They don't want to come," he said.**

**"What do you mean, 'They don't want to come'?" we asked in astonishment.**

**"The poor say that they're going on strike. Unless each one is promised a ruble, under no circumstances are they coming to the wedding."**

**We all burst into laughter, but the servant continued with his story.**

**"You see, there's already been one wedding in Lipowitz today, complete with a free meal for the poor. So they're all full. Naturally they're in rebellion. If they're not given a ruble each they won't budge."....**

**"Their stock of merchandise must have gone up in price lately," snapped Reb Yitzchok with an angry laugh. "...Why did you leave the wagons behind? We'll do without those paupers!"**

**"I wasn't sure what to do," said the servant. "I was afraid you would be angry. I'll run back this instant and bring the wagons."**

**"Wait a while. Don't be in such a hurry." And Reb Yitzchok began to think about this unlooked-for problem.**

Now I interrupt the story for a moment. Consider Reb Yitzchok's predicament. How would you feel if you were him? The cultural expectation of his shtetl is: if you are hosting a wedding celebration, this grand act of Tzedakah is *expected* of you. And yet here are the poor – on strike! Refusing to come and grace his daughter's wedding! How would you feel? He probably felt shocked, flustered, and quite a bit resentful. How dare they embarrass him this way, by not coming!

In the story, Reb Yitzchok goes back and forth. Fine, he says to himself, we'll have the wedding without them. Then – wait!]

**“Wait!” Reb Yitzchok's rage subsided and he came to ask me and few others to do him a favor. He requested us to go to the town and see if we couldn't manage to win over the poor...**

**They made another horse and wagon ready for us, and we rode away.**

**Twenty minutes later we entered the town of Lipowitz. In the main square of the town... were at least a hundred people...They were making a terrific noise.**

**...One of the chief ringleaders was sitting in the driver's seat of one of the wagons and banging his crutches on the wood. A lanky beggar with a red plaster on his neck stood near him. The two were haranguing the crowd.**

**“Look,” cried the lanky one triumphantly as soon as he caught sight of us, “they've come to beg....”**

**“Why aren't you at the wedding?” we asked them. “There'll be a good meal, and each of you will get some money to take home with him too.”**

**“How much?” asked a chorus of voices.**

**“We can't tell exactly. But you'll take what you can get.”**

**“A ruble maybe? If not, we stay put.”**

**The beggars raised their sticks and ran at their tormentors. For a minute it looked like a real riot, but the lanky one on the wagon stretched himself to his full height and spoke to us. “Please realize, brothers, that unless we get a ruble each we don't move from here. We've no fear that Reb Yitzchok will marry off his favorite daughter without us. Where can he get another gang of paupers on the spur of the moment? Is he going to send to the next town for them? It'll be a lot more expensive ...! Do you think that just because we're poor they can do as they like with us?”**

**“R-r-r-ub-bles,” stuttered a beggar.**

**“Rubles,” screamed another.**

**“Rubles,” sang out two merry beggars, doing a dance.**

**“Rubles! Rubles!” screamed all the poor together.**

**All their lives, writes Spector, they had been condemned to silence, forced to swallow with their spittle every insult anyone cared to offer them, anyone who had given them a kopeck or thrown them a crust of dry bread or a gnawed bone. Now for the first time they were tasting the same pleasure as the well-to-do. For the first time these beggars felt that the well-fed people needed them, and they were determined to gain their point.**

**And sure enough, even as we were arguing with them, there came another messenger from Reb Yitzchok with word for the poor to set out at once and each would receive his ruble.**

**Bedlam broke loose, pandemonium... The merry beggars seated in the wagons started to jig with their feet. The horses were harnessed, and with much laughter the procession got under way. An escort of urchins accompanied us some distance, crying loudly, “Hooray!”**

**For the first time and perhaps the last, they had spoken out in loud voices and succeeded in getting their way. They had done exactly as they wanted.**

That’s not quite the end of the story, but let’s take stock for a moment what has happened. This story is about a revolution! And it’s a revolution that can only happen where justice is an automatic part of a celebration.

It’s a revolution that needs to happen everywhere in American life, and in Jewish life. Maybe it’s a revolution that can start in a community like ours. In fact, it’s already happening. Each week, I hear about the wonderful Mitzvah project our Bnai Mitzvah students perform. You know, when I became a bar mitzvah, no one told us we had the power to do it. No one told us we had the right to take 10-20% of our gift money and give it away. The connection of Mitzvah projects to the Bar & Bat Mitzvah process really is a revolution in the making.

I like that. Let them say that about us at Shir Tikva: Here’s where the revolution happened. The weddings, the bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, the brisses and graduations and everything else... When they are done with *menschlichkeit*, and Tzedakah, and tasteful respect and true joy, when justice is part of the celebration – let them say, “That was one of those Shir Tikva types of celebrations.” And I want to say today, on this Yom Kippur, to all the young people in the room: Let this revolution start with you.

You know, it turns out that in Jewish celebrations, there is no such thing as the “religious part” and the “party” part. It’s all one. Even more than that: it turns out that

the so-called “party” part of the event – the way in which we celebrate says more about our religious and moral values than even the religious ritual itself!

On this Yom Kippur – we must take stock of who we are, and what kind of lives we are leading. Not just as individuals – but as a community as well.

[Here is the epilogue of Mordecai Spector’s story.] **After the bridal ceremony, the feast was served to the wedding guests and to the poor. Reb Yitzchok and his closest relatives observed the commandment to wait on the poor with their own hands and to anticipate whatever their hearts desired in the way of food and drink.**

**“Your health, Reb Yitzchok. We wish you long life, happiness from your children, and even greater wealth!” The poor men kept drinking toasts to him.**

**“And your health, your health too, my brothers. Drink hearty. Long life to you. May G-d help the whole congregation of Israel, and you among the rest,” Reb Yitzchok responded.**

**After the meal the musicians began to play again, and the poor danced around in a great ring, holding Reb Yitzchok by the hands. Reb Yitzchok danced out into the very center of the ring made by the poor. His satin coat tails flew like the wings of an eagle. His eyes, from which tears of joy were freely running, seemed to be staring straight upward, while his thoughts soared higher than the Seventh Heaven. He laughed and he cried at the same time, like a child. And all the while, he kept embracing the poor, each in turn. He hugged them affectionately and kissed their cheeks.**

**“Brothers!” he cried out to them, dancing. “We must be merry! Let us be merry as only Jews know how to be merry! Fiddlers! Play something a little faster, louder, livelier, stronger!”**

[Spector writes at the end of his story:] **That is how a Jew is happy.**

**That is how a real Jewish wedding ought to be.**

**The poor, as well as the rest of the wedding guests, clapped their hands in time to the music.**

**In short, as I have told you, [dear reader,] I’ve been to a Jewish wedding.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Mordecai Spector, “A Meal for the Poor,” in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1953/1989 rev.). With some abridgement and slight emendation by me.