

Gen Z Jew

In middle school, there were a few more Jews in my grade than there had been at my previous schools, one of them being a kid in my science class. Let's call him Johnny. Johnny and I were both Jewish but we'd never acknowledged that. We were both aware of it, but I wasn't a fan of Johnny, so he wasn't a fan of me. He'd had his bar mitzvah a month or so before mine and hadn't invited me, so I didn't invite him to mine. Despite the fact that he annoyed me, we were assigned to sit at the same table in science class, so we had to work together on projects most of the time. In order for you to fully understand what happened next, you need to know what a bar or bat mitzvah is.

A bar or bat mitzvah traditionally takes place around the 13th birthday of a Jewish boy and the 12th birthday of a Jewish girl. It's essentially a coming of age ritual, usually involving a service and some sort of luncheon/party combo to follow. If you're a boy, you have a bar mitzvah and if you're a girl, you have a bat mitzvah. As fun as it might seem to have one of these strange Jewish party thingies, they're actually quite a lot of work to pull off. You have a Torah portion that you have to read at your service, which is entirely in Hebrew. You can choose to either memorize it or learn to read Hebrew, both of which require the help of a tutor. I put my tutor through quite a lot because I really didn't want to have a bat mitzvah. It involves reading your Torah portion out loud in front of lots of people, talking to them about your tzedakah project (a service project you do to help your community in honor of your bat mitzvah), and reading your D'var Torah (a piece of writing by you in English connecting the themes of your Torah portion to a life lesson). However, I decided to just put in the work and get it over with. In the end, I was pleased with my bat mitzvah experience and all my work felt like it had paid off.

The week following my bat mitzvah weekend, Johnny and I were in science class working with our other group members on a poster. I noticed that he was gluing papers in the wrong order, so I said, "I think you're gluing those on the wrong way. You made the food chain backwards." Johnny got irritated very quickly and assumed I was trying to pick a fight with him. "Maybe you just don't know the direction the food chain is supposed to go in," he shot back. After going back and forth a few times, I gave up. "We should just each work on our section of the poster the way we were before. We'll put our names on them and if one of us did it wrong, their grade will suffer." Johnny thought this was a great idea, and went back to making his wonky food chain for the remainder of our time. The end of class finally arrived, so everyone started putting materials away. As I made my way back to our table and packed up my bag, Johnny zipped his backpack shut, looked up at me with a smile, and said, "Oh, and Mazel Tov."

I think Gen Z Jews are similar to each other in a lot of ways. We have memories of helping braid challah, looking forward to summer camp every year, and of course, being asked by our classmates what we want for Christmas. The conversation always seemed to go the same way.

“What are you asking for this year?”

“Huh?”

“For Christmas...?”

“Oh, I don’t celebrate Christmas. I’m Jewish.”

Then would come the look of confusion, usually followed by a quiet “Oh. Ok.” This would start in October or November every year and go on right up until Christmas, and from then on the question would be, “What’d you get for Christmas?” This finally stopped once my classmates started remembering that I was Jewish every year. There were very few other Jews at my elementary school, but we’d often wish each other a Happy Hanukkah. Non-Jewish kids started picking it up, so I’d get a few “Happy Hanukkah!”s every year, even though they just chose a random day in December to tell me. How are non-Jews supposed to know when Hanukkah starts if it changes so much every year that even Jews can’t keep up?

I reflected on these experiences as I tried to figure out why Johnny had congratulated me on my bat mitzvah. I hadn’t done the same for him because he hadn’t invited me to his bar mitzvah and all he’d done at school the week following it was brag about all the money he’d received. I wasn’t about to do it then. In addition, I didn’t love the idea of pretending to be happy for someone I didn’t like. It was then that I realized that there’s some sort of Jew code that we follow. Even if you’ve never talked to them before, you should always wish a fellow Jew mazel tov on their bar or bat mitzvah. I think this is because it takes so much effort and bravery that it’s only right to admire them for their hard work. Even though Johnny wasn’t my favorite person and the circumstances were kind of weird, I really appreciated his “Mazel Tov.” If there was one thing Johnny taught me- and it definitely wasn’t about food chains- it was that Jews have to stick together.