

Taking Personal Responsibility

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On the occasion of the *Bar Mitzvah* of Samuel Clemons

Bar Mitzvah has different meanings to different people. What it meant to me when I became a *Bar Mitzvah*, was that it was a time to appease my parents and grandparents, to have a party & get presents from relatives I didn't know, and to not have to go back to Hebrew School. Samuel (whose *Bar Mitzvah* we are celebrating today) is far ahead of where I was at his age, and I thank God for it. Still, at Ohev Yisrael and at all Messianic Jewish congregations, there is so much planning and attention given to the ceremonial aspect of *Bar Mitzvah*, that I think it is well for us to be reminded of *Bar Mitzvah's* real intended meaning.

"*Bar Mitzvah*" is Aramaic for "Son of Commandment," and God's commandments define what is right and what is wrong in human behavior. In a sense, we are all *b'nei mitzvah* (sons & daughters of God) and, whether or not we choose to obey God (in fact, whether or not we even believe in Him) we come to an age in our adulthood when God holds us responsible for our conduct independent of our parents. Scripture does not tell us exactly what that age is but, according to Jewish tradition, it is age 13 for boys, and age 12 for girls. So, in Jewish tradition, a *Bar Mitzvah* (and a *Bat Mitzvah* in the case of a girl) is not a ceremony at all, but it is rather a young man or woman who has reached that age of personal responsibility and accountability, and professes himself or herself to be a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*; Samuel Clemons is, therefore, a *Bar Mitzvah*.

And we say that today is the day of Samuel's *Bar Mitzvah* because, despite this not being his exact thirteenth birthday, it is today that we are recognizing that Samuel has passed from the shelter of his childhood to the glaring light of accountable adulthood. Samuel could have slept in this morning instead of his having come to his own celebration, and he would still be a *Bar Mitzvah* in both God's eyes and ours. So, Samuel, what I will say in the rest of this message directly applies to you, but it also applies to the rest of us adults because we are all responsible for keeping the commandments of God that apply to us individually.

Although it does not mention *Bar Mitzvah* by name, Scripture is replete with exhortations to personal responsibility and accountability as we graduate from childhood to adulthood. In 1 Corinthians 13:11 we read:

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, argued like a child; now that I have become a man, I have finished with childish ways."

Prior to our reaching the age of personal responsibility, God held our parents responsible for our conduct, in that He commanded them (in Proverbs 22:6):

"Train a child in the way he [should] go; and, even when old, he will not swerve from it."

But Scripture is clear that once we reach the age of personal responsibility (the age of *Bar Mitzvah*), God holds us (not our parents) accountable for sins we commit. With regard to the most grievous of sins, Deuteronomy 24:16 states it this way:

“Fathers are not to be executed for the children, nor are children to be executed for the fathers; every person will be executed for his own sin.”

Similarly, in Ezekiel 18:20 we read:

“The person who sins is the one that will die- a son is not to bear his father's guilt with him, nor is the father to bear his son's guilt with him; but the righteousness of the righteous will be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked will be his own.”

The fact that God holds adults personally responsible for their actions (both their righteous actions and their sinful actions), and rewards and punishes accordingly, is not only a matter that is between children and their parents, but is a general Kingdom principle; we read from:

Proverbs 9:12:

“If you are wise, your wisdom helps you; but if you scoff, you bear the consequences alone.”

Isaiah 3:10-11

“Say that it will go well with the righteous, that they will enjoy the fruit of their actions; but woe to the wicked, it will go badly with him; for what he has done will be done to him.”

Galatians 6:5

“.. each person will carry his own load.”

Those of us who have been adults for a while have come to know this, but young men and women newly coming of age sometimes insist on learning the hard way. God sees everything, and it is futile to try to hide our deeds from God. In Numbers 32:22-23, Moses instructs Israel to obey God by crossing the Jordan and taking the promised land, and he tells them:

“.. if the land has been conquered before *ADONAI*, and only after that do you return- then you will be clear before *ADONAI* and before Isra'el, and this land here will be yours to possess before *ADONAI*. But if you will not do this, then you have sinned against *ADONAI*, and you must understand that your sin will find you out.”

And in Galatians 6:7-8 we read:

“Don't delude yourselves: no one makes a fool of God! A person reaps what he sows. Those who keep sowing in the field of their old nature, in order to meet its demands, will eventually reap ruin; but those who keep sowing in the field of the Spirit will reap from the Spirit everlasting life.”

And 2 Corinthians 5:10:

“.. for we must all appear before the Messiah's court of judgment, where everyone will receive the good or bad consequences of what he did while he was in the body.”

There are many examples in Scripture of persons seeking to avoid personal responsibility by shifting blame to others; here are two of the most famous ones:

Genesis 3:9-13

“ADONAI, God, called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I ordered you not to eat?" The man replied, "The woman you gave to be with me- she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." ADONAI, God, said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman answered, "The serpent tricked me, so I ate.””

Matthew 27:22-24

“Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Yeshua, called 'the Messiah'?" They all said, "Put him to death on the stake! Put him to death on the stake!" When he asked, "Why? What crime has he committed?" they shouted all the louder, "Put him to death on the stake!" When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, "My hands are clean of this man's blood; it's your responsibility.””

Unless we want to be in the company of Adam and Pilate and share their fate, trying to fool God by shifting blame about our sins is not what we want to do, for Romans 1:18-20 says that we are without excuse:

“What is revealed is God's anger from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who in their wickedness keep suppressing the truth; because what is known about God is plain to them, since God has made it plain to them. For ever since the creation of the universe his invisible qualities- both his eternal power and his divine nature- have been clearly seen, because they can be understood from what he has made. Therefore, they have no excuse;”

Mankind’s need to embrace personal responsibility and not blame-shift is recognized even in the secular realm. Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution published this statement in his July 2009 article titled “The Sequence of Personal Responsibility,” he wrote:

“Personal responsibility is the willingness to both accept the importance of standards that society establishes for individual behavior and to make strenuous personal efforts to live by those standards. But personal responsibility also means that when individuals fail to meet expected standards, they do not look around for some factor outside themselves to blame. The demise of personal responsibility occurs when individuals blame their family, their peers, their economic circumstances, or their society for their own failure to meet standards. The three areas of personal decision-making in which the nation’s youth and young adults most need to learn and practice personal responsibility are education, sexual behavior and marriage, and work.”

It is an excellent statement, and the only thing that makes it different from what Scripture teaches, is that the standards it espouses are “society’s standards” which, regrettably, are not always God’s standards.

The personal responsibility about which I spoke so far, is responsibility for ourselves – for our conduct, and for maintaining our relationship with God. Indeed, In Deuteronomy 6:2-3, God commands us to:

“.. fear *ADONAI* your God and observe all his regulations and *mitzvot* that I am giving you- you, your child and your grandchild- as long as you live, and so that you will have long life. Therefore listen, Isra'el, and take care to obey, so that things will go well with you, and so that you will increase greatly, as *ADONAI*, the God of your ancestors, promised you by giving you a land flowing with milk and honey.”

And centuries later, in Mark 1:15, Yeshua says to us:

“The time has come, God's Kingdom is near! Turn to God from your sins and believe the Good News!”

The Good News of which Yeshua spoke was that He was sent from the Father to cleanse us of our sins, to bring us close to Him and, if we repent and receive Him, to give us eternal life. In 1 John 5:11-13 we read:

“And this is the witness: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Those who have the Son have the life; those who do not have the Son of God do not have the life. I have written you these things so that you may know that you have eternal life- you who keep trusting in the person and power of the Son of God.”

And in John 3:16-18 we read:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life, instead of being utterly destroyed. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but rather so that through him, the world might be saved. Those who trust in him are not judged; those who do not trust have been judged already, in that they have not trusted in the one who is God's only and unique Son.”

That is the Good News we are responsible for embracing.

But it is only part of the story – the part that speaks of our taking personal responsibility for ourselves. The part of which I have not yet spoken (and which is the next step in a *Bar Mitzvah*'s growth and maturation), is the taking upon oneself responsibility for the welfare of others; for as Philippians 2:4 instructs us:

“.. look out for each other's interests and not just for your own.”

Also, the *Sh'ma* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) that we heard earlier today, speaks not only of embracing the *Torah* ourselves, but also of conveying it to others:

“.. and you are to love *ADONAI* your God with all your heart, all your being and all your resources. These words, which I am ordering you today, are to be on your heart; and you are to teach them carefully to your children. You are to talk about them when you sit at home, when you are traveling on the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them on your hand as a sign, put them at the front of a headband around your forehead, and write them on the door-frames of your house and on your gates.”

Yeshua confirmed the *Sh'ma*, when in Luke 10:25-28:

“An expert in *Torah* stood up to try and trap him by asking, "Rabbi, what should I do to obtain eternal life?" But Yeshua said to him, "What is written in the *Torah*? How do you read it?" He answered, "You are to love *ADONAI* your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your understanding; and your neighbor as yourself." "That's the right answer," Yeshua said. "Do this, and you will have life."”

As you plainly see, the “*Sh'ma*” calls us to first take responsibility for ourselves, and then to take responsibility for the welfare of others. The others are first our family, and then our neighbor who is any other person that God brings across our path that needs our friendship or our help. Samuel, as a young *Bar Mitzvah*, in addition to serving your family, there are two kinds of help that you may be called on by God to give to others, and two kinds of others that may need your help. The two kinds of help are (1) physical help and (2) directive/corrective help, and the two kinds of persons who may need your help, are (1) adults older than yourself, and (2) peers your own age.

Giving others physical help is the easiest, and you no doubt give it already. A package is too heavy or awkward for one person to carry, so you lend your hand to carry it. It is the other kind of help – the one that requires your advice, direction, and yes, even your correction of others, that is the challenging one. When you are faced with the responsibility of giving such help and think that it is not your place to give it, it would be well to remember Galatians 6:1-2:

“Brothers, suppose someone is caught doing something wrong. You who have the Spirit should set him right, but in a spirit of humility, keeping an eye on yourselves so that you won't be tempted too. Bear one another's burdens- in this way you will be fulfilling the *Torah's* true meaning, which the Messiah upholds.”

Samuel, as a young person, you have likely had more experience being on the receiving end of correction than experience in correcting others. But that is one of the responsibilities of becoming a *Bar Mitzvah*. You must remain teachable and correctable yourself – especially from your parents – but God now calls you to teach and correct others as well.

Now as to giving directive or corrective help to those older than you: It is difficult to bring yourself to do it but, when God calls you do it, remember the Apostle Paul's advice to his younger brother in the faith Timothy; he said to him:

“Don't let anyone look down on you because of your youth; on the contrary, set the believers an example in your speech, behavior, love, trust and purity.” (1Timothy 4:12)

And also in 2 Timothy 2:22-25, Paul also instructed Timothy to:

“.. flee the passions of youth; and, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart, pursue righteousness, faithfulness, love and peace. But stay away from stupid and ignorant controversies- you know that they lead to fights, and a slave of the Lord shouldn't fight. On the contrary, he should be kind to everyone, a good teacher, and not resentful when mistreated. Also he should be gentle as he corrects his opponents. For God may perhaps grant them the opportunity to turn from their sins, acquire full knowledge of the truth,”

Samuel, Paul's words are for you as well, and when you are called upon by God to give correction to those who are your seniors:

“Always be humble, gentle and patient, bearing with one another in love, and making every effort to preserve the unity the Spirit gives through the binding power of *shalom*.”
(Ephesians 4:2-3)

Now, as for offering direction or correction to your peers – that is what is called servant leadership, and you must not shrink back from embracing it. Yeshua explained servant leadership to his disciples this way; he said:

“You know that among the *Goyim*, those who are supposed to rule them become tyrants, and their superiors become dictators. Among you, it must not be like that. On the contrary, whoever among you wants to be a leader must become your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave! For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve- and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28)

Samuel, you and all *B'nei Mitzvah* are called by God to be servant leaders of our peers.

There is so much more I want to say to you, Samuel, but it is time that we stop. I know that my words for you today came from the Holy Spirit, so ingest them and act on them. May the Lord bless you and your family on this great day of passage from childhood to adulthood, and in your years to come.