

COMING OF AGE AT 66

A MOST UNFORGETTABLE BAR MITZVAH

I baked a cake of course. In our small academic community of 150 Jewish families, we always bring food for a bar mitzvah Oneg Shabbat. But what gift do you bring for a 66-year-old bar mitzvah? And what do you say when the 66-year-old bar mitzvah "boy" is mentally handicapped?

We went to Bill's bar mitzvah thinking we were doing Bill a favor. As it turned out, he did us one.

Bill's story is tied up with the larger immigrant experience. As Barry Morrow has reconstructed it, Bill was the child of Russian-Jewish parents who emigrated to Minneapolis at the turn of the century. Bill was born in 1913; his mother was widowed six years later. Social agencies diagnosed the child as "subnormal" and "feble-minded" in the language of the day, and the desperately impoverished mother was persuaded to commit her son to the Faribault State School for the Feble-minded and Epileptic. It is now agreed that Bill may have been less severely retarded than he now seems to be, but the prejudices and assumptions of the time, along with the language difficulties, made it easy to label him. Institutionalized, and treated since childhood as seriously retarded, he failed to develop normally.

During the 44 years that Bill was in institutions, his religious background was obscured. He went to Jewish and Christian services indiscriminately, responding to the music and the ritual, as he still does. In 1964, when work-release programs were opening locked doors of institutions, Bill was placed in a boarding home in Minneapolis. He was working as a handyman in a country club when Bev and Barry Morrow met him. It was the Morrrows who managed to have the old records scrutinized. They con-

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firmed Bill's Jewish identity.

Bev and Barry Morrow arranged for Bill to come to Iowa City when they moved here several years ago. He boards with a kind woman, Mae Driscoll, who helps him keep his things in order and prepares his lunch. Bill keeps his pet bird Chubby in his room, feeding and caring for it. "I found a good home," says Bill, "and I've been home ever since."

Every morning Bill boards the city bus and heads for his job. The University of Iowa School of Social Work may be the only school in the country with a mentally handicapped staff member. Bill's title is formidable: Special Developmental Disabilities Consultant. He putters around the lounge, making fresh coffee, sanding furniture, straightening up, chatting with children who wander up from the Early Childhood Development Center, ready to pass the time of day with anyone who happens by. "Shabbat Shalom," he says cheerfully to everyone, any day of the week. Someone has put up a sign: "Wild Bill's Bar and Grill."

"It started as a generous gesture on our part," observes Barry Morrow. "But Bill is a major educational resource. He offers friendship, warmth and music. On a lazy afternoon, Bill is as good a person to spend time with as anyone I know. Over a cup of coffee, he teaches social work students the very essence of their profession."

As befits a member of a distinguished faculty, Bill can list honors and awards on his vita. He has a bronze plaque naming him "Handicapped Iowan of the Year—1976" that was presented to him by the Governor at a formal banquet. He has an award from the American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine. But perhaps his greatest achievement is that he holds no bitterness. He remembers being badly treated at Faribault, but of those days he will say only, "That was bad."

"He's not trapped by his past," observes Jim Cospers, who loves to spend time with Bill. "What some would take as a sign of retardation,

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I think may be a sign of advancement."

It was Saturday afternoon, and the sun was setting. At the Hillel sanctuary the folding doors were opened, the chairs moved out of the way, an improvised Bimah set up in the center of the floor.

"We wanted something informal," Rabbi Jeffrey Portman observed later, "and Havdalah seemed just right. We also wanted to arrange it in the round, to increase access to the Torah, since that is the part of the service Bill likes best."

The familiar words of the Mincha/Ma'ariv service began, and we shuffled, awkwardly, into a vague circle. Gathered were well over a hundred people, children and adults, Jewish and non-Jewish. Familiar faces from the congregation, from the faculty, staff and students of the School of Social Work. Our ceremony would be a formal welcome into the Jewish community of a man who had been institutionalized as feeble-minded sixty years before.

The Torah service began. Rabbi Portman handed the Torah to Bill, who wrapped his arms around it. The usual verses were too complex a musical line, but Bill knows and loves Hine-ma-tov, so we sang that, over and over again as Bill carried the Torah slowly around our circle, making sure that everyone, including children, got to touch it. "Hine-ma-tov, Hine-ma-tov," hummed Bill. "Behold it is good."

"Y'a'mod Simcha Ben Abraham, ha bar mitzvah." Jonathan Goldstein, the professor of ancient history who regularly reads our Torah, called Bill by the Hebrew name that Rabbi Portman had devised for him: Simcha for happiness. They said the words of the aliyah together: Rabbi Portman loud and clear; Bill echoing along in his own Hebrew.

The president of the synagogue made the same speech he makes to every bar and bat mitzvah, presenting a certificate testifying to the successful completion of Hebrew preparation. Martha Lubaroff, the

president of the Sisterhood, presented a tallis. Bill's parents are long since dead, but his court-appointed conservator, Barry Morrow, was there.

"There have been many occasions like this when I've stood beside you, Bill, but somehow tonight seems like the most important. I know you missed many things when you were growing up—your bar mitzvah was one. Tonight you have been reunited with your religious heritage and the faith of your parents."

It was time for the bar mitzvah to make a speech. Bill moved to the Bimah. "Thanks to all my friends for coming. God bless you. Thank you very much." Pausing a moment, he reached for his harmonica, and, facing the Torah, for all the world like the Fool in the Isaac Bashevis Singer story, Bill Sackter played his harmonica before the Lord.

Bill's bar mitzvah has come to be a mythological event for the synagogue of Agudas Achim. "Let us tell you about Bill's bar mitzvah," we tell anyone who will listen. It taught us that the form of all ceremonies need not be precisely the same, that the rules can be broken yet the essentials kept.

It is important to say bluntly that Bill's was not a second-class ceremony, a pathetic gesture for a retarded patient. Though Bill could not understand the words, he understood the essentials. He understands that he has a lot of friends who had gathered to welcome him. He is proud of his bar mitzvah certificate, which hangs framed on his wall. He is proud of his tallis, which he wears as often as he can. He feels a legitimate part of the community; "I had a bar mitzvah," he tells visitors cheerfully.

Every Friday night and Saturday morning, Rabbi Portman or another friend stops by to bring Bill to services. He loves the music and the ritual; it is very important to him to have a friend keep him on the correct page.

"He is the most consistent shul-goer in the community," observes

Debbie Cosper. "If I don't go, Bill will worry that I'm sick, and I worry that no one will help Bill find his place. So I go, and then Jim goes, and that makes three."

Bill watches Rabbi Portman count the adults, and he is as pleased to be needed for the minyan as we are to have him there. He has a good ear, and his approximation of the aliyah has come a lot closer over the years. Nearly every Saturday Bill carries the Torah. And after services Bill's harmonica is a joyous celebration of the Sabbath.

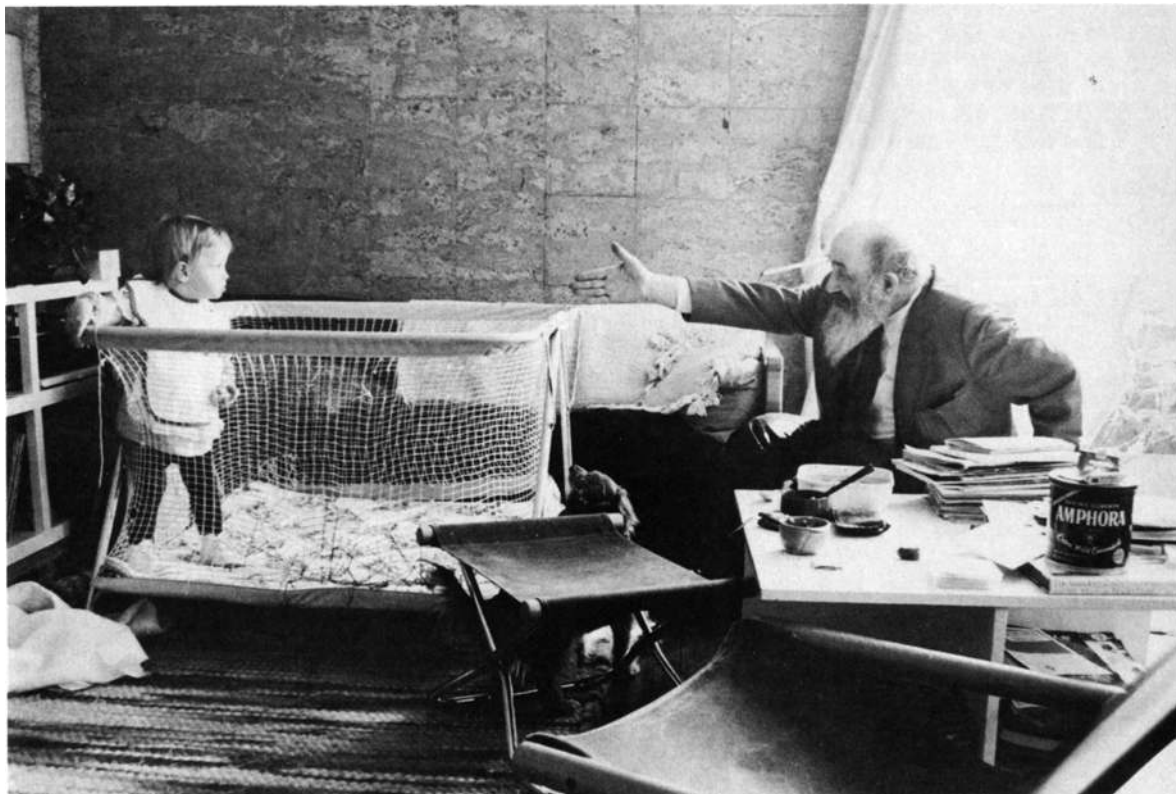
Iowa City is a university town, and ours is a homogenous community. Most of us are middle-aged, in our thirties and forties. We tend to be highly educated; many of us teach at the University. We are doctors, lawyers, writers. We are vulnerable to the sin of pride in our intellectual accomplishments; "What do you do?" we demand of the stranger at the Oneg.

But we cannot demand of Bill, "What do you do?" We have to find something else to say. He has a wonderful ability to disarm the pompous. "I think he's the easiest person to talk to because he accepts you right away," says Debbie Cosper. "He doesn't care what your status is. Getting to know him means getting to know a *person*, rather than a doctor, a lawyer. . . ." She pauses, gropes for the right phrase. "I watch new people who haven't met him before. The encounter is a test of whether you are a *mensch*."

Our encounter with Bill has been profound. We have not been used to thinking of mentally handicapped people as assertive or aggressive, but we have learned from Bill that they can be. No one pushes Bill around; he goes where he chooses.

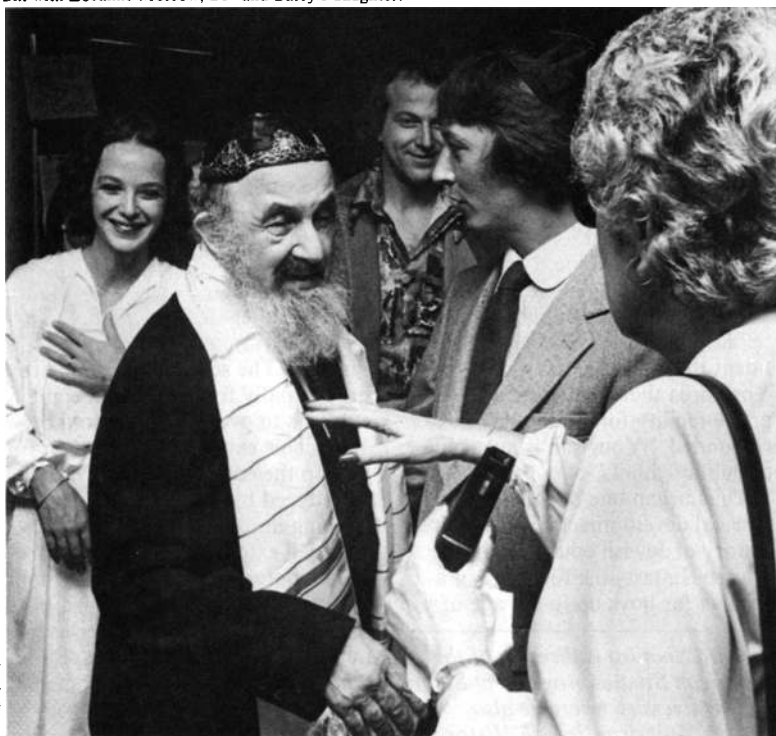
Bill gives our congregation depth of age. He gives us our minyan. He gives us music. He has instructed us in encountering another human being directly, without the trappings of status or ascribed roles. And he teaches us philosophy.

"The Lord," says Bill, "helps those who *can't* help themselves." ★



Photograph by Barry Morrow

Bill with Zoanne Morrow, Bev and Barry's daughter.



Photograph by Drake Holmstrom



Photograph by Barry Morrow

Bill and Chubby.
Left: After his bar mitzvah, Bill celebrating with Bev Morrow on his left, Barry Morrow on his right, and other well-wishers.