



My Thirty-Minute Bar Mitzvah

Denis Hirson

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A potent story of a diaspora coming-of-age, Denis Hirson's memoir troubles the distance between inheritance and the lives we make for ourselves.

In Hirson's Johannesburg childhood, certain topics were forbidden, including politics and religion. Hirson knew that he was Jewish, but not in the way of his peers: there were no Hebrew lessons, no shul, no collection boxes for Israel. His mother made him delicious treyf sandwiches that he could not share. When he was twelve, his imposing but adored father (who, days later, was arrested for organizing against apartheid) made him agree to forgo a bar mitzvah, too. Hirson "celebrated" thirteen in the back of a police car with his father. No prayers. No ceremony. His already complicated family was rent once more.

Hirson's story is one marked by yearning and the forces of history. The grandson of immigrants who escaped Russian pogroms to make their ways in South Africa, England, and Israel, he was given no language with which to understand his family's past or present—including his father's political activism in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre. He went to school among Christians; their influence remains in his use of "Old" Testament, in capitalized pronouns for God. But he was also Jewish through and through: moved by the sound of a ram's horn "rising with ... wild and despairing ease," piqued by Paris streets on which "Jews drifted along in ... the heavy shadows of ancestry, light turning sepia ... behind them." When his brother—protected from his father's influence by the prison sentence—celebrated his own traditional bar mitzvah years later, he was jealous. When his daughter celebrated her bat mitzvah, he was proud.

"Inside me ... elusive, latent forces of ancestry [were] at work," Hirson notes. These propel the pages of his moving, historically significant memoir, *My Thirty-Minute Bar Mitzvah*.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2024)

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