

# THE BAR MITZVAH OF JESUS GOLDFARB

by Andrew R. Heinze

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**SYNOPSIS:** Jason Goldfarb wants a new name for his Bar Mitzvah. This is a big problem for Rabbi Deborah Silverman.

**TIME:** Early 2010s. A rainy Friday afternoon.

**SETTING:** A Reform synagogue, the rabbi's office.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS***(1 female, 1 either gender)*

JASON GOLDFARB (m/f)..... 13; The actor playing JASON need not be a teenager; he/she should simply be conceivable as a thirteen-year old boy. (34 lines)

RABBI DEBORAH SILVERMAN (f)..... 50. (40 lines)

**SET REQUIREMENTS**

Two chairs, one desk. If possible, a few other office props such as a bookcase and suitable decorations may be included.

**PREMIERE PRODUCTION**

THE BAR MITZVAH OF JESUS GOLDFARB premiered at the *17th Annual New York City 15-Minute Playwriting Competition* at the American Globe Theater in 2011. It was awarded both "Judges' Choice: BestPlay" and "Audience Choice: BestPlay." Directed by Sally Burtenshaw, with the following original cast:

JASON GOLDFARB .....Amanda Ladd\*

RABBI DEBORAH SILVERMAN.....Kathryn Danielle\*

\*Member, AEA

**AT START:** *JASON GOLDFARB (13) and RABBI DEBORAH SILVERMAN (50) are seated in the rabbi's office, in the midst of a conversation. The door is closed for privacy. JASON has a school notebook on his lap. There is a window behind the rabbi, which JASON can see. The sound of rain against the window is heard. JASON habitually twiddles his pen back and forth between his fingers.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Jason, you're the finest Bar Mitzvah student I've had in... well, ever. You know it, your parents know it, the entire congregation knows it. Everyone is looking forward to tomorrow. I'd do almost anything to make it the kind of day you want it to be, but I can't do that—not that.

**JASON:** But it's just a name.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** You know perfectly well it's not just a name. *(Looking at the pen JASON twiddles.)* Jason, you're twiddling your pen.

*JASON stops twiddling, momentarily.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** You cannot be called to the Torah tomorrow under the name of Jesus.

**JASON:** Why not?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Because.

**JASON:** Rabbi Silverman, you taught us Jews don't take "because" as an answer.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** I mean—

**JASON:** —You said the reason we've survived the last two thousand years is that we ask questions.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** It's also the reason we've been in trouble for the last two thousand years.

*The RABBI'S cell phone rings the opening of Beethoven's Fifth. She gestures an apology to JASON and answers.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Deborah Silverman... *(Coolly.)* Hello, Alan. Thanks for returning my call. Did the tenure committee receive the letters of recommendation for my file? ...Good... *(Annoyed.)* Yes, I know the performance of our Bar Mitzvah students matters to my... *(More annoyed.)* Of course, I realize they represent the future of our... *(Angrily.)* Alan, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I don't need to be reminded of the importance of our traditions... *(Coolly.)* Look, I can't talk now. I've got a student... Yes, Jason Goldfarb... *(Impatiently.)* Yes, we're all looking forward to tomorrow... *(Anxious to hang up.)* Shabbat Shalom, Alan... *(Desperate to hang up.)* Alan, Shabbat Shalom... *(Nearly shouting.)* Shabbat Shalom! *(She ends the call and takes a moment to regain her composure.)* Jason, listen. I understand you don't like your Hebrew name and want to change it for your Bar Mitzvah but—

**JASON:** —It's not that I don't like it. It's that I didn't choose it. My parents gave it to me when I was a kid. Tomorrow I become a man, right?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Yes.

**JASON:** Tomorrow I take on all the responsibilities and obligations of an adult. That's what you said. I become responsible in the eyes of God.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Of course. But—

**JASON:** —So how can I be an adult if I can't choose my own spiritual name? Isn't that why we have two names, a Hebrew one and an English one?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Yes, but the Hebrew one is supposed to be Jewish.

**JASON:** Jesus is Jewish. I have all my notes from your classes. *(Opening his notebook, finds a page.)* You taught us that Jesus was a great Jewish man. Those were your words: a great Jewish man.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** *(Hurriedly, with frustration.)* Yes, Jesus was a great man, Jesus was a great man. *(Pause, then slightly irritated.)* Your pen, Jason.

*JASON stops twiddling the pen, momentarily.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** I know I taught you that. My point was that he was a man, not a God.

**JASON:** A great man, you said.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Fine. Jesus was a great man.

*A tremendous thunderclap is heard.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** (*Screams.*) Oy va voy! My God! What was that!

**JASON:** Thunder and lightning.

*Another peal of thunder causes them to speak the next two lines louder than usual.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** (*Loudly.*) It's not even the storm season. Where were we?

**JASON:** (*Loudly.*) Jesus was a great Jewish man.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Shush! Not so loud. I hear Rabbi Bender outside.

**JASON:** I want to name myself after a great Jewish man.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** The Torah is full of great Jewish men. What about the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob?

**JASON:** Too fathery.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** What about Moses?

**JASON:** Too cranky.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Jason, are you trying to be provocative? You've got dozens of names to choose from—prophets, judges, kings—so why would you choose someone who isn't in the Torah?

**JASON:** Because I like the Sermon on the Mount.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Where did you read that?

**JASON:** On the internet, after your class where you talked about Jesus the Jew. I wanted to learn more about him.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** The Sermon on the Mount just repeats what the Prophets said centuries before Jesus was born.

**JASON:** But I like the line, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Yes but—

**JASON:** —Rabbi Silverman, remember how you said each of us has a line of Torah that speaks especially to us?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Yes.

**JASON:** And that we'd know the line when we found it?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** (*Pause.*) So this is your line.

**JASON:** Yes! Awesome, huh?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** You know, I could find you the same basic line a dozen places in the Hebrew Scriptures.

**JASON:** But remember how you said Jesus was like us, like Reform Jews, because he didn't care about following every single commandment in the Torah but concentrated on the ones that make us better human beings? Remember you said that?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Yes, but I didn't mean—

**JASON:** —And remember you said that was the same reason why Reform Jews let women become rabbis and the Orthodox still don't? Remember?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Of course, I remember.

**JASON:** So how come Christians are the only ones who can say "I want to be like Jesus." Why can't a Jew say that?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** I'll give you one big reason. Because his name is associated with all the persecutions our people suffered.

**JASON:** But the Christians don't persecute the Jews anymore.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Jason, there are older people in our congregation... Would you please stop with the pen already? It's making me crazy.

*JASON stops twiddling the pen, momentarily.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** There are older people in our congregation who grew up in Europe and for them the name of Jesus is a scary thing. They have family who died because of it. You've got to think of the community.

**JASON:** Are you saying I should make my Bar Mitzvah about what other people want me to do? About being afraid of what people think? You taught me that a man thinks for himself even if it's not popular.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** All right, but why do you insist on using the English version of his name? You know the custom is to use the Hebrew when you're called to the Torah. That would be Yeshua. We might be able to slip Yeshua in under the radar. *(Pause.)* Some of the people will know what it means but the older ones won't, and as long as it sounds like a good Hebrew name maybe no one will care.

**JASON:** I care! I want them to know the name I've chosen. I want them to hear it. That's the whole point. If he's really a Jew like we keep saying then I have the right to name myself after him. This is my day, my one and only day, and I'm not going to wimp out. I'm not going to ruin it by being a coward.

*RABBI SILVERMAN'S cell phone rings the opening of Beethoven's Fifth and she answers.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Yes? ...Yes, Alan... *(Impatiently.)* Yes, I plan on submitting a full explanation of my position on end-of-life issues. *(Angrily.)* It's about the right to be free from pain! And if they can't... What? ...We're breaking up. *(She ends the call. Long pause.)* Jason, normally I wouldn't tell you this. I shouldn't. But your Bar Mitzvah matters to me as much as it does to you.

**JASON:** Sure. Because you're concerned about my spiritual growth.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Yes, of course, but there's another reason.

**JASON:** There is?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** I shouldn't even be telling you. If your Bar Mitzvah...

**JASON:** What?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** If your Bar Mitzvah turns into a big controversy, I'll be fired.

**JASON:** Fired?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** In two weeks the Board of Directors decides whether or not to keep me as a permanent rabbi. If they vote no, I have to leave.

**JASON:** That's not fair. You're a great rabbi.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Not everyone agrees with you. *(Pause.)* When I went to rabbinical school there weren't many women. I had to struggle, I had to prove that a woman could be as successful as a man, that she could be an authority figure people would respect.

**JASON:** You did prove it.

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** This is the congregation I always wanted to serve. I grew up here. I love this place, and I'm not young anymore. My career path ends here. I either become permanent or I'm unemployed. *(Pause.)* I feel embarrassed that I told you this. It's not professional. But it's the truth.

**JASON:** I don't understand why the name I choose would hurt you. Doesn't everyone want us to make our own decisions when we turn thirteen?

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** *(Animated.)* If you're called to the Torah under the name Jesus, they'll blame me. I'm responsible for your religious training. It'll be the last straw for the ones who don't want me here. They'll say it proves that I'm destroying our traditions.

**JASON:** But why would you want to work for a place that would fire you over a name?

*Long pause as RABBI SILVERMAN ponders what JASON has said. She looks JASON in the eye, then picks up the phone on her desk and hits a button.*

**RABBI SILVERMAN:** Esperanza, when Jason is called to the Torah tomorrow, he should be called by the name Jesus... No, not *(Saying the Spanish pronunciation.)* Hay-Zeus. And not Yeshua. Just Jesus... I know... That's what he's chosen. He's an adult, he can choose his name... They'll think what they think. *(RABBI SILVERMAN hangs up the phone, stares at JASON, gives a big stressful exhale.)* Jesus. *(Long pause, as she makes a gesture of resigned acceptance, and smiles faintly.)* Jesus Goldfarb.

*Lights out.*

**THE END**