

NEW FILM RESTORATION WITH NEW ENGLISH SUBTITLES
By The National Center for Jewish Film

BAR MITZVAH

STARRING BORIS THOMASHEFSKY

Written & Directed by Henry Lynn
Based on a Play by Boris Thomashefsky

USA | 1935 | Yiddish Feature Film

☆☆ **WORLD PREMIERE - NEW RESTORATION** ☆☆
Jerusalem International Film Festival (July 2009)

☆☆ **USA PREMIERE - NEW RESTORATION** ☆☆ **New**
York Jewish Film Festival (Lincoln Center, Jan 2010)



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The National
Center for
Jewish Film

The National Center for Jewish Film
Lown 102, MS 053, Brandeis University
Waltham, MA 02454
jewishfilm@brandeis.edu
(781) 736-8600
WWW.JEWISHFILM.ORG

Bar Mitzvah

An early sound, American-made, Yiddish-language musical drama, **Bar Mitzvah** stars Yiddish theater superstar Boris Thomashefsky in his only film performance. **Bar Mitzvah** has been newly restored and includes new English subtitles.

Film Credits

USA, 1935, 76 minutes, b&w, Yiddish with new English subtitles

Feature Film / Musical

Available formats: DigiBeta NTSC or DVD

Director: Henry Lynn

Script: Henry Lynn

Based on play by: Boris Thomashefsky

Cinematographers: Robert J. Marshal, George H. Wicke, Jr.

Editor: Jack Kemp

Musical Director: Jack Stillman

Sound Engineer: Jerry Barton

Cast: Boris Thomashefsky (Israel), Regina Zuckerberg (Leah), Anita Chayes (Rosalie), Peter Graf (Yeruchim), Gertrude Bulman (Feigele aka Birdie), Morris Strassberg (Abraham), Leah Naomi (Sara), Sam Colton (Sam), Morris Tarlowsky (Alexander), Benjamin Schechtman (Yudele)

2009 Film Restoration and New English Subtitles: The National Center for Jewish Film

Synopsis

Israel (Boris Thomashefsky), a Polish widower whose beloved wife Leah was lost at sea ten years earlier, is preparing his son Yudele for his bar mitzvah. Israel has remarried Rosalie (Anita Chayes), a schemer planning to rob him and run off with her lover. Unbeknownst to her still grieving family, Leah (Regina Zuckerberg) survived the shipwreck and has recently regained her memory. When she discovers that Israel has remarried, Leah determines not to cause her family any more pain ("I can't live anymore, I'm going back to the ocean"). She secretly attends Yudele's bar mitzvah ceremony, however, and is revealed by her sobbing when Yudele chants the Kaddish (prayer for the dead) for his "dead" mother. Israel soon discovers Rosalie's treacheries and her lover pulls a gun. All is set right, however, when Israel is saved by his daughter's happy-go-lucky American suitor. In the end, the con artists are arrested and the family is reunited.

The drama is punctuated with numerous songs typical of the vaudeville stage and New York's Lower East Side Yiddish theater. Highlights include the hit song "Erlekh Zayn" ("Be Virtuous") sung by Thomashefsky and a lively song-and-dance number by Sam Colton as the young American suitor.

An American-made feature film about Jewish Poland (and the Old Country more generally), **Bar Mitzvah** illustrates how American and Polish Jews caricaturized each other during this period.

Introduction to Boris Thomashefsky & The Yiddish Theater From *The Jewish Americans*

Public exhibition screenings of **Bar Mitzvah** will be preceded by an 8-minute video introduction to Boris Thomashefsky & the Yiddish theater excerpted from the 2008 documentary film *The Jewish Americans*. Public exhibition film materials in Beta and DVD formats will include this film segment, which has been provided Courtesy of WETA, Washington, D.C. Special thanks to David Grubin Productions.

Bar Mitzvah & Boris Thomashefsky

Bar Mitzvah features the only surviving film performance of Yiddish theater superstar Boris Thomashefsky. Produced in New York in 1935, *Bar Mitzvah* was written and directed by Henry Lynn, director of the Yiddish features *Where is My Child* and *Mothers of Today* (previously restored by NCJF). *Bar Mitzvah* was produced by Lynn and Jack Stillman, who also served as the film's musical director. *Bar Mitzvah* was based on a play of the same name written by Thomashefsky. Thomashefsky was 67 years old when he starred in *Bar Mitzvah*; he died four years later.

An actor, singer and producer, Boris Thomashefsky (1868-1939) was a pioneer of the American Yiddish Theater and one of its central figures for nearly fifty years. He introduced Shakespeare and Faust to the Yiddish stage and arranged for the Vilna Troup to perform in New York. He staged Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* in Yiddish under Zangwill's supervision in 1905. In the first decade of the 20th century, Boris and his wife, Yiddish actress Bessie Thomashefsky, reigned as the golden couple of the Yiddish Theater. They founded two Yiddish theaters, published their own magazine and encouraged new generations of young artists. Enormously popular, with a flamboyant personality and a famously tumultuous personal life, Thomashefsky was the superstar of Yiddish theater. On the occasion of his funeral in 1939, 30,000 people lined the streets of the Lower East Side.

Three silent films all made before 1915 were reportedly produced by the Boris Thomashefsky Film Co. and featured the actor—none have been located. In fact, aside from several brief sound recordings, *Bar Mitzvah* represents the only surviving document of Thomashefsky's performing.

Bar Mitzvah Original Release

Bar Mitzvah opened on March 15, 1935, at the Clinton Theater in New York City. Located on Clinton Street north of Delancey Street, the theater was situated amid one of the most congested and clamorous areas on the Lower East Side. The film had a reasonable theatrical run in the US and remained in distribution for several years. Records show, for instance, that in November 1938, proceeds from screenings of the film in Kansas City went to the B.M.B.G. Polish Aid Society, providing funds for Polish Jews. *Bar Mitzvah* was a more substantial hit overseas. Joseph Green distributed prints of the film in Poland to great success, a business venture that encouraged him to begin making films himself. The following year, Green directed *Yiddle with His Fiddle*.

"Shund"

Bar Mitzvah represents the pinnacle of low-budget movie making. Aside from its unequivocal documentary and historical value, it is a great piece of kitsch. More accurately it is a masterwork of *shund* – popular Yiddish lowbrow theatrical fare that was the bread and butter of Yiddish theatrical productions. As critic J. Hoberman writes, after lamenting the film's less than stellar production values, "And yet, one must be grateful that *Bar Mitzvah* was made, for, more than any other performer, its star was the popular Yiddish theater incarnate."

"*Shund*," Hoberman continues "is a term of contempt indicating literary or theatrical 'trash' and denoting variously an inept mishmash, a vulgar display, a mass-produced trifle, or a piece of sentimental claptrap. *Shund* encompasses that full range of Yiddish kitsch, from the primitive Biblical operettas that followed Goldfaden to the grim domestic melodramas that came to dominate Yiddish theater after World War I...*Shund* became Americanized through the immigrant Jewish contribution to Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood...True *shund* must be uplifting, pandering variously to nationalist, family, or religious sentiments." (Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 206-207)

Bar Mitzvah Film Restoration

The National Center for Jewish Film has restored and preserved *Bar Mitzvah* using the sole existing 35mm nitrate element of this film. Restoration included labor-intensive patching and repairing of badly damaged film materials. While the original Yiddish-language print contained a limited number of English subtitles, NCJF created over 200 new subtitles, including new translations of all of the songs. All of the film materials are owned by the National Center for Jewish Film.

Preservation and restoration of *Bar Mitzvah* was made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Eastman Kodak Company, with support from Brandeis University, the Massachusetts Cultural Council and The National Center for Jewish Film's Reel Funders.



Michael Tilson Thomas & Bar Mitzvah

Michael Tilson Thomas, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, is the grandson of Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. A two-minute segment of *Bar Mitzvah* was showcased as part of the original theatrical production "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater" written and performed by Michael Tilson Thomas at Carnegie Hall in New York City in April 2005. The production has since been performed in San Francisco, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Yiddish Film & The National Center for Jewish Film

The National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF) is a unique nonprofit film archive, distributor and resource center, housing the largest collection of Jewish-theme film and video in the world, outside of Israel. NCJF exclusively owns 12,000 reels of feature films, documentaries, shorts, newsreels, home movies and institutional films, dating from 1903 to the present. NCJF's first priority is the preservation and restoration of rare and endangered film materials.

NCJF holds the largest existing collection of Yiddish feature films and has long been recognized and honored as the world leader in the revival of Yiddish cinema, having rescued these invaluable cultural and artistic artifacts from oblivion. Since 1976, NCJF has restored 38 Yiddish feature films and remains the only source for restored Yiddish films. In all, NCJF has restored approximately 100 rare and orphan films that document the diversity and vibrancy of Jewish culture. In addition to its own restored materials, NCJF represents the work of 150 independent filmmakers. Over 300 films—restored classics and contemporary independent films—are available for public exhibition and DVD purchase. www.jewishfilm.org