

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

by Carol Kaufman Newman

This issue of the Journal has brought a rush of memories to me about the Bat Mitzvah experiences of my three daughters.

My first daughter had her Bat Mitzvah more than 30 years ago. When she turned 11, we began conversations about what she would do to celebrate this milestone. I wanted it to be something significant—something that would involve deep and committed learning.

I met obstacles at every turn. The first was finding a female teacher. Thirty years ago there weren't many women studying Jewish texts. The limited number of names I was given were mostly of women studying at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), a Conservative institution. Most of them were so involved in their own learning that they had no time to devote to teaching an 11-year-old. I finally found someone, a wonderful young woman named Judy Weinberg. She taught my daughter for a year, as they studied how to make one's prayer meaningful when it is already set (the issues of *keva* and *kavvanah*). I remember taking my daughter up to JTS to meet with Dr. Judith Hauptman, a professor of Talmud, who tested her orally to see that she really understood all she had learned.

Our thought was to have her present her learning on Shabbat morning after regular services. The women would be invited down from the balcony to join the men on the main floor. We thought this would present no problem. But when I asked to have her speak from the pulpit so she could be both seen and heard, I was told that only rabbis and visiting male guests spoke from the pulpit. The rabbi was adamant. Lucky for us, the senior rabbi allowed it.

Would it be inappropriate to say how great my oldest daughter was, as she taught from the Talmud and from Rambam and took questions from the audience? When she was finished, the rabbi who had originally resisted her speaking from the pulpit stood up and said, "If you learn only one thing from a person they are allowed to be called your teacher, and for a teacher you rise." The whole congregation then stood as my daughter descended from the *bimah*.

My second daughter also began studying at age 11 with a female teacher. I'm big on role models! They learned together for the year and compiled a 70-page Tu B'Shevat *seder*. She wrote all the Hebrew quotes by hand and did the illustrations. At the ceremony she led our guests through the *seder*, using the book she wrote as the guide. She was funny and charming. She had been my most shy child, but during the year of learning I watched her grow in an

incredible way. She owned this learning. She spoke with such poise and confidence. We had so many requests to print more copies that we finally had the book copyrighted.

My youngest daughter was born right after Shavuot. For her Bat Mitzvah, once again I found a female teacher, and together they studied the origins and laws of Shavuot. She too wrote a book of almost 100 pages filled with sources and commentary. Her teacher told her that if she ever wanted a PhD in Jewish studies she could use this as her thesis. She taught our invited guests for close to an hour—and there was not a bored person in the room.

This past October I watched as my first granddaughter, Erica, celebrated her Bat Mitzvah by making a *siyyum* on *massekhet* Rosh Hashanah. When my granddaughter turned 11, my daughter called and asked me to suggest a teacher who could work with Erica. How the landscape had changed. There were now so many learned women to choose from. Can you imagine my joy when I saw the importance the next generation was giving to learning?

So back to the beginning. More than thirty years ago when this saga began, there were very few Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. I think our daughter's ceremony was the first one in our shul. Parents used to ask their daughters if they wanted a Bat Mitzvah, and if they didn't that was accepted—though we never asked the boys if they wanted a Bar Mitzvah. The landscape continues to change. In the Modern Orthodox world the celebration of a Bat Mitzvah now seems to be a given. And I hear that even in the *haredi* world there is something done to acknowledge a girl reaching *gil mitzvot*—even if only a family dinner.

My oldest daughter's son just turned 11, and she has begun to think about his Bar Mitzvah. I recently spoke to her about it, and I would like to share with you some of her thoughts:

I think that, because of the varieties of rituals that were crafted for girls for their Bat Mitzvahs, everyone now thinks more creatively about how to celebrate and mark this important moment in a child's life. Because I "taught about" a subject, and my sisters did too, because more girls study texts and make a *siyyum*, I think the traditional idea of reading the Torah as the only standard for a Bar Mitzvah boy in the modern Orthodox community is being rethought. Creative rituals inspired by Bat Mitzvah ceremonies are a tremendous help in planning a Bar Mitzvah for a creative and non-traditional son.

JOFA too has just celebrated its Bat Mitzvah year. We are proud to have reached this milestone and to have accomplished so much. However, there is still more work to be done. May we continue to grow, to be creative, and to fulfill our mission of enriching and uplifting individual and communal life for all Jews.

Carol Kaufman Newman is the immediate past president of JOFA.

[To read the rest of the Fall 2010 JOFA Journal, please click here.](#)