

BAT MITZVAH: CREATING A COMMUNAL SPACE

by Giti Bendheim and Barbara Gochberg

Thinking about what the Bat Mitzvah experience means to today's 12-year-old girls raises important issues. For most girls, this rite of passage comes somewhere around the onset of puberty or adolescence, a long period of cognitive, emotional, and physical development that culminates in adulthood with the achievement of full psychosexual maturity. It is very clear that today's 12-year-old girls, who are in the sixth or seventh grade, are far removed from adulthood, let alone from the possibility of marriage or parenthood. Arrival at the age of Bat Mitzvah, although still signaling something about sexual maturity, no longer signals a readiness for marriage, as it may have in earlier times. It is thus no longer an inherently signifying moment, but rather a somewhat arbitrary marker set within a developmental zone whose physiological reality has long ago lost most of its functional purpose. This situation offers us the opportunity to make meaning of traditional demands in a modern setting.

The lack of symmetry between girls' changing halakhic status and psychosocial development produces a peculiar kind of dissonance. How do we help these young members of our community make sense of achieving Jewish womanhood while being deeply entrenched in twenty-first century girlhood? For a boy, reaching the age of Bar Mitzvah signals a change in formal public status in matters of making a *minyan*, putting on *tefillin*, and other public time-bound ritual practices. However, for a girl, arrival at this age does not bring many new public obligations, and those obligations that it does bring—like fasting or hearing the *megillah* and *shofar*—do not constitute changes in the ongoing flow of daily life. Unlike boys, who are suddenly “counted” as one of the adults when they reach the age of 13, girls do not tend to feel particularly “grown up” on becoming a Bat Mitzvah in the Modern Orthodox world. More than that, becoming a Bat Mitzvah can be somewhat confusing since whether a girl has reached puberty or not—whether she still feels like a little girl or has already become immersed in teen culture—she is officially an adult in the eyes of halakha, though she lacks any external symbols within which to ground her status. The fact of her having passed through a boundary is not visible to the community.

The question of making meaning of the Bat Mitzvah passage is complicated by the realities of the general culture as they affect the typical Modern Orthodox 12-year-old girl. On the one hand, cognitive theory tells us that a girl's intellectual development is congruent with the change in status that the Bat Mitzvah brings, coming precisely at the time when a girl's reasoning ability takes a quantum leap, allowing her to absorb information on a more abstract level than in previous years. This expanded intellectual ability has many, sometimes conflicting, implications. It brings her squarely into a general culture that beckons in new and provocative directions, and in the arena of her Jewish learning, it opens

up the capacity for deeper intellectual exploration just when the Bat Mitzvah girl needs to commit herself to formal and informed religious practice.

This congruence is not true of a girl's psychosexual development. By sixth or seventh grade, American girls may know far more about sex and sexualized relationships from the media than their psyches can handle. While we like to hope that things are proceeding at a slower, more age-appropriate pace in the yeshiva and day school environment, the reality is that Modern Orthodox girls have access to and are interested in more aspects of modern teen culture than we would often like or care to admit. At a time when a girl is beginning to reach out in many directions to sample elements of experience that will ultimately allow her to consolidate an identity, the points of dissonance between Jewish and secular culture are—and should be—striking and jarring. This clash of values gives us and our girls an additional, very challenging dimension to negotiate, as we figure out how to live our modern lives by a sacred code.

In fact, in a secular culture where sexual activity is seen by many as the entry card to maturity and is largely disconnected from the notion of marriage, the Bat Mitzvah celebration takes on the potential significance of clarifying the distinction between being the daughter of the general culture and, literally, the “daughter of *mitzvah*.” The job of emphasizing the gravity of this moment, which falls to parents, school, shul, and the Bat Mitzvah girl herself, is both sobering and exhilarating. The Bat Mitzvah celebration provides an opportunity to articulate a position that embraces a girl's nascent sexuality—something to celebrate—while not linking it to sexual activity. It marks a girl's progress, although she is nowhere near the finish line, in the process of separation and individuation, while not releasing her from parental supervision. It privileges her emerging ability—which has not yet been well-honed—to learn, judge, and make good choices in the defining context of strong Jewish values and practices. A Bat Mitzvah observance that takes note of a young girl's position along these developmental lines will afford her the maximum opportunity to experience joy, meaning, and satisfaction from this rite of passage.

Twelve-year-olds bring a predictable range of individual and developmental characteristics to this process of separation. The transfer of power from parent to peer has begun to take hold at this stage of adolescence. A girl of this age starts to move away from acknowledging her parents as the repository of power and arbiter of right and wrong toward a dependency on—and temporary identification with—her peers. Parental approval, though still important, takes a back seat to the approval of peers. This thrust toward the peer group serves the interest of separation, a crucial step in the process of identity formation.

Because their central concerns often revolve around their experience of themselves within their peer group, girls at this age look toward each other for moment-to-moment confirmation. They spend a considerable amount of internal energy on finding a place in the social group and calibrating subtle and more particular evaluations of the self and of others. At this age girls vary widely in their willingness to step forward in leadership roles and in their confidence and capacity to tolerate being different from their friends. Accordingly, some girls relish the performance aspects of current Bat Mitzvah celebrations, whereas others participate more reluctantly or are eager to opt out. These fraught and exciting developments are not a negative consequence of growing up, but rather part of a natural developmental progression.

It is important to note that daughters and mothers reach the moment of a daughter's Bat Mitzvah from opposite directions and that Modern Orthodox mothers, in turn, have their own “developmental” issues. Because our religious culture has left the Bat Mitzvah moment unscripted, it is often left to mothers to work out its particulars with their daughters. Planning a Bat Mitzvah may stir up memories for mothers of their own less meaningful Bat Mitzvah observance, reaffirm their more low-

key Bat Mitzvah experience, or raise resentment that they had no celebration at all. For both parties, this moment can arouse deep feelings about what it means, or has meant, to be a female in the Modern Orthodox community.

Together, however, both peer pressure and adult experience can have a synergistic effect on the establishment of Bat Mitzvah observance when the peer group has already accepted for itself a positive and active model of observance. This happens most clearly when the community demonstrates a commitment to marking this rite of passage in an expected public way. Although girls of this age look to each other for the parameters of self-definition, they are also on the lookout for role models and images of strength and power as they explore possibilities for themselves. (This is why they love movie stars.) Resolute and empowering action on the part of adults in the community, most of whom are not their parents, gives these girls an idea of the strong, active, committed, and unique individuals they can become even as they are moving away from the parental adulation of their early years.

We can learn from the experience of boys that the ritualization of communal observance at a Bar Mitzvah is grounding, precisely because it is expected and generally non-optional. True, this expectation may feel pressuring and overwhelming for even the sturdiest young teenager, and there may be something to learn for both sexes from our current freedom to tailor a Bat Mitzvah observance to fit the individual girl. To raise daughters who have strong identities in the face of the complexities of Modern Orthodox life, communities, like parents, can set up disciplined but flexible expectations. However, failure to mark this halakhic developmental milestone through communal recognition risks conveying a lack of clarity about its meaning, and a consequent difficulty in transmitting the values it represents with honesty and coherence.

When a community articulates a formal framework for the Bat Mitzvah, it grasps the opportunity to harness the energy of the adolescent push toward self-differentiation and to use it to fuel the emergence of a Jewish identity. Providing choices that are commensurate with the powerful gravity of having arrived at halakhic maturity ensures that this rite of passage is not lost or trivialized in the face of the compelling claims of secular culture or the turmoil of early adolescence. Such a defining moment requires particular action grounded in a religious and psychosocial reality that affirms for a girl that she has arrived at a place that has been set for her by a welcoming community.

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