

BAT MITZVAH: HISTORICAL AND HALAKHIC ASPECTS

by Dr. Norma Baumel Joseph

The facts, just the facts, ma'am." Those were the oft repeated words spoken by the detective in *Dragnet*, a popular TV show in the 1950s. They appeal to me as appropriate in exposing the many layers of misrepresentation that have created confusion in discussions concerning Bat Mitzvah in the Orthodox world. So let me begin with some surprising facts.

In every sector of the Orthodox Jewish world today, there is some form of Bat Mitzvah celebration or public recognition. In 1956, the year I turned 12, there was no Bat Mitzvah experience in Orthodox North America.¹ The Bat Mitzvah celebration seems new, and its spread in Orthodoxy today is feminist inspired. However, the original Bat Mitzvah celebrations were not inspired by feminism, nor were they Reconstructionist, as many people think.

The term "Bat Mitzvah" is a juridical category known in rabbinic literature and cited in the Talmud. Various sources refer to a girl who, at age 12 and one day, becomes legally obligated under Jewish law as an adult by virtue of her age alone.² There is no difference between Bar and Bat Mitzvah in categorical terms except that boys do not reach this age until 13. The rabbis discuss the classification for boys and girls in social, legal, and physical terms. There is no question or disagreement; a girl is a Bat Mitzvah at twelve and one day. She assumes legal and ritual responsibility at that age.

There is no rabbinic discussion of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration for boys or girls, but the recognition of the change in their status varies.³ Boys are recognized as members of the *minyan*. They can have an *aliya*. They wear *tefillin*. Thus, their coming of age has a public cast to it. It is visible and has a special significance. As *minyan* members they now represent the community, and they count publicly.

What exemplifies a girl's obligation? She must fast on Yom Kippur and is absent from the men's section of the synagogue.⁴ These are private, publicly invisible acts. But there was one significant and

¹ To keep the historical record accurate, in 1944 Rabbi Jerome Tov Feinstein of Anshe Emes in Brooklyn created a Friday night Bat Mitzvah service. Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America," in P. Nadell & J. Sarna, eds., *Women and American Judaism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2001), p. 227. (Editor's note: See the article by Rabbi Jerome Tov Feinstein reproduced in this issue.)

² See my entry "Bat Mitzvah" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd Edition, 2006). The Talmud mentions Bat Mitzvah in TB *Bava Kama* 15a. See further, *Niddah* 5:6 and *Yoma* 85. Maimonides (*Yad, Ishut* 2: 9-10) completes the equation and specifies that a girl's signs of adulthood are those that appear only after her twelfth birthday plus one day.

³ The clearest reference to a festive meal for a boy on his thirteenth birthday is found in the work of Rabbi Shlomo Luria (sixteenth-century Poland), *Yam Shel Shlomo (Bava Kama 7:37)*.

⁴ Note that in most rabbinical and historical texts the men's section is

possibly public act for a 12-year-old. At that point her father could no longer make betrothal arrangements for her without her consent. Furthermore, at 12½, she was considered a *bogeret*, able to make her own marital choices without her father's involvement at all. This radical change in a female's dependency was mostly communally unobserved.

But our current concern is with celebrations. Celebrations for boys probably did not begin until the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries in either the Ashkenazic or Sephardic milieu. And for girls? Most historians date the first Bat Mitzvah at 1922—that of Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, in New York.

But the facts are otherwise.

Aside from the detail that celebrations were possibly held in the United States around 1907,⁵ Jewish celebrations of a girl's coming of age, or a puberty rite of passage, were known in Egypt, Italy, Baghdad, and Europe as early as the nineteenth century.⁶ The early sources indicate some form of recognition, such as a private blessing, a father's *aliya* to the Torah, a rabbi's sermon, or the girl's public examination on Judaic matters, to mark a girl's coming of age. The earliest reference to a Bat Mitzvah ceremony is from Italy in 1844. This was not a replica of a contemporary Bar Mitzvah, but there was a public recognition of the girl's attainment of maturity. We have similar anecdotal information from Warsaw, Lvov, France, and Berlin. (The oft-cited example of Rabbi Ettlinger in Germany is incorrect as he did not allow any such confirmation or Bat Mitzvah. Although he was forced by the state to examine the Jewish girls as to their competency on religious matters, he refused to allow this to be called a confirmation or a Bat Mitzvah.)⁷ In 1907, Rabbi Eliahu Hazan held a synagogue celebration for *B'not Mitzvah* girls in Alexandria, Egypt. It was a celebration for those girls who had completed studies in religion and Jewish history.

Perhaps the most inspiring example of halakhic recognition for the validity of a celebration for girls is found in the writings of Rabbi Joseph Hayyim b. Elijah of Iraq, the Ben Ish Hai (1834-1909). In his text we have a rabbinic authority proclaim that it is a good idea for a father to make sure that there is some form of celebration for his daughter's Bat Mitzvah. Significantly, he advocates that there should be a liturgical element rather than only a party. He writes that the girl should wear a new garment so that she can say the blessing *shehehiyanu*. He then goes on to say that there is an equal sense of *simha* for the girl as there is for the boy.

This pronouncement is surely unprecedented and historic. First, the father should see to it that the girl's coming of age is appropriately celebrated. Then, by giving her a blessing to recite, he assures that the girl herself has a role to play rather than merely listening to a sermon on her new juridical status. Finally, he notes that, although this celebration is not practiced in his community it is a good idea. So internal sources serve as precedents for the Bat Mitzvah to take place.

the synagogue proper and the women's section is not the synagogue, but the *weibershul*, separate and not equal. Most girls abandon or are dislodged from the men's section long before their twelfth birthdays.

⁵ The information about a Bat Mitzvah held in the Midwest came in a personal communication from Gilad Gevanyahu (May 30, 2002). Dov Sadan "Bat Mitzvah," *Dat u'Madda (Tevet, 1949)*, pp. 59–61.

⁶ See my entry in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd Edition, 2006), "Bat Mitzvah."

⁷ The confusion about his position has continued despite Judith Bleich's refutation in her PhD dissertation, *Jacob Ettlinger, His Life and Works* (New York University, 1974) and her "Between East and West: Modernity and Traditionalism in the Writings of Rabbi Yehi'el Ya'akov Weinberg," in Moshe Sokol, ed., *Engaging Modernity* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1997), pp. 169–273. However, it is clear in Ettlinger's *Binyan Tzion* 107 (1867) p. 145, that he opposed confirmation and any similar celebration.

The battle of contemporary Orthodoxies over Bat Mitzvah celebrations depends on a number of factors. Primarily, decisors are split on the nature of the obligatory festive meal (*se'udat mitzvah*). A number of sources suggest an equal obligation on families of boys and girls. The clearest reference to a festive meal for a boy on his thirteenth birthday is found in the work of Rabbi Shlomo Luria (sixteenth-century Poland), *Yam Shel Shlomo (Bava Kama, 7:37)*. Twentieth-century decisors in favor of a *se'udat mitzvah* in honor of a girl's Bat Mitzvah on her birthday are Rabbi Y. Nissim (*No'am* 7:4), Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (*Yabia Omer* 6:29.4, *Yehaveh Da'at* 2:29, 3:10), and Rabbi Chanoch Grossberg (*Ma'ayan* 13:42). Moreover, Rabbi Abraham Musafia, writing in the latter part of the nineteenth century (first printed in *No'am* 7 [5724, 1964] p. 4), claims that there is no difference between a boy and a girl in terms of the obligatory nature of the festive meal and that this festive meal was customarily held for boys and girls in France. These sources have been lost in Orthodoxy's current debate.

The other factor informing the debate about Bat Mitzvah celebrations has been the fear of the source of the ritual or celebration (i.e., fear of non-Jewish practices or fear of copying non-Orthodox Jewish practices). For Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the Bat Mitzvah celebration is forbidden in part because it comes from the Conservative and Reform communities.⁸ In fact, he equally disdained the Bar Mitzvah: "If I had the power, I also would cancel the celebration of the Bar Mitzvah for boys in our country since it is obvious it does not bring anyone closer to Torah and commandments."⁹ Yet he allows that the Bar Mitzvah has its source in the laws of Torah study and obligations, whereas the Bat Mitzvah "is not in any way prescribed and is merely an optional celebration like any birthday."¹⁰ He emphatically refuses to allow it to be held in the synagogue: "The Bat Mitzvah ceremony is surely optional and worthless and there is no room to allow it in the synagogue. Especially since the source is from the Reform and Conservative."¹¹

However, according to historical sources, the first recognized Reconstructionist celebration—that of Judith Kaplan in 1922—appears to have been copied from Italian Orthodox communities. Additionally, that first celebration was not an egalitarian ritual at all. What Judith Kaplan did was to read from a printed Bible. She did not have an *aliya* to the Torah in a full traditional ritual sense. The ceremony was a precursor to today's Bat Mitzvah ritual in the Conservative and Reform movements, a ritual that was not instituted until the middle of the twentieth century, and even then there was much opposition to such celebrations within each movement. Most important, as we have seen, the facts indicate that there were halakhic sources that approved of Bat Mitzvah celebrations before any American versions were developed in the mid-1950s.

There is no evidence from his writings that Rabbi Feinstein was aware of these historical precedents. What would Rabbi Feinstein have ruled had he known the full origins of the Bat Mitzvah? Would he have agreed with the Ben Ish Hai as Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef does? It is important to remember that Rabbi Feinstein spoke directly to the issues of Bat Mitzvah celebrations and rituals in five separate *teshuvot* in *Iggerot Moshe*. In one very interesting decision dated 1959, Rabbi Feinstein would seem to allow the girl on her twelfth birthday to say words of Torah in the sanctuary and have a *kiddush* to celebrate the *simha* there.¹² After clearly stating that a Bat Mitzvah celebration cannot take place in a

⁸ For a full analysis of Rabbi Feinstein's responsa on Bat Mitzvah, see my "Ritual Law and Praxis: Bat Mitsva Celebrations," *Modern Judaism* 22(3): 231–260.

⁹ *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Hayyim* 1:104.

¹⁰ *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Hayyim* 2:30

¹¹ *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Hayyim* 1:104.

¹² *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Hayyim* 4:36. It seems clear in the group of five decisions dealing with issues relating to Bat Mitzvah that for Rabbi Feinstein, "synagogue" means the place of prayer and not the place of parties or as he calls them "halls." In a later responsum (*Iggerot Moshe, OH* 2:40 dated 1961), he addresses the issues of celebrating a

synagogue because it is not an obligatory festive meal and optional feasts are not allowed in the synagogue proper, he consents to the following: “However, it is quite permissible to celebrate by sponsoring a *kiddush* in the synagogue since that is the custom for all such joyous occasions in this country. This *simha* is not of less import than any other such event. Moreover, the girl is permitted to say some words (*milim*) in honour of her *simha*.” He considers that her birthday is a *simha*, and her father can celebrate that as any birthday. He just will not allow it to take place in a synagogue as a Bat Mitzvah celebration because it is not necessary and because of the taint of the Conservative and Reform movements.

However, if we look at the permission given, then we have a serious question to ask. If a girl gets up in the synagogue proper—and there seems to be no doubt that Rabbi Feinstein is talking about a place where there is a Torah—and she can say words of Torah and there can be a *kiddush*, is that not a Bat Mitzvah celebration? I believe that he just will not let us call it that because of its source. Had he been aware of the traditional Orthodox precedents, would he have allowed the term to be used? I do not think he would have changed his opinion about the *se’udat mitzvah*, because for him the level of obligation was different, as only boys must learn Torah. But he often claimed that the *simha* was the same. In effect, although Rabbi Feinstein officially forbade a Bat Mitzvah celebration in the synagogue, as shown in *Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 1:104 written in 1956—the source that is his most negative and most often cited—looking at the 1959 responsum (*Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 4:36), one sees he Permitted the trappings of such a celebration. In fact, there he opens the door to a new format with a synagogue celebration of the Bat Mitzvah. His prohibition stemmed from fear of forbidden assimilation. He did not see the celebration of Bat Mitzvah as an internal development within halakhic Judaism. But we can see it that way.

Rabbi Feinstein disliked the celebration for boys and girls equally. He saw no *to’eret*, purpose, for either. But I think we can see a great purpose. Children cement their relationship with community, with Judaism, through such initiations—if they are done right. In today’s world, the absence of such a celebration for girls sends its own message of invisibility and communal disinterest. The purpose of such a rite is to link a girl’s growth with her study of Torah and ritual responsibility—and to make sure she knows her family and community are proud of her. The Bat Mitzvah celebration keeps that link strong and viable.

So would knowledge of the historical facts change legal opinion of the permissibility of the Bat Mitzvah celebration? And should it? How should we celebrate the Bat Mitzvah of our young women?

We now have some more facts and know some history. For more than a century, traditional Jews struggled to celebrate their daughters’ juridical status. We should too—in full Orthodox tradition, without apologetics or superficial symbolism, and in synagogue, with words of Torah from the *bimah* and with a festive meal. The *simha* is the same as for a boy; so too should be the celebration.¹³ That should be our tradition!

Norma Baumel Joseph is associate professor and graduate program director in the Department of Religion at Concordia University in Montreal. She has written on Jewish law and gender and been active on Jewish feminist issues since the 1970s.

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Bat Mitzvah in a social hall of the synagogue.

¹³ By this I mean that there should be a celebration with equal significance, not necessarily that the rituals must be identical to the male pattern. Indeed, it might be possible to view a Bat Mitzvah as an opportunity for innovative liturgical development to mark the *simha*.