

On the Bat Mitzvah Celebration: An Annotated Bibliography

Esther Nussbaum

When a female child reaches the age of twelve years and one day she is halakhically a Bat Mitzvah. A search of literature dealing with religious observance as relating to women indicates minimal sources available to those wishing to mark the occasion. For basic information on halakhah (in English) one should consult *Serving the Creator: A Guide to Rabbinic Sources v.1., Women and the Mitzvot*, by Rabbi Getzel Ellinson.² Chapter 15, entitled "Bat Mitzvah — Induction into the Mitzvot" (pp. 280-296) deals with two of the features of halakhah which apply to a Bar Mitzvah — the festive meal and the blessing, *Barukh She'ptarani*, and their applicability to a Bat Mitzvah. Whether such an occasion may be celebrated in the synagogue is also dealt with. Undisputed, according to the author, is the joyous quality for the girl herself who should definitely wear Shabbat clothing, preferably something new, recite *She'hechyanu*, bearing in mind that this blessing applies to her newly acquired obligation to observe the mitzvot (p. 281). References are provided with regard to the blessing at a son's Bar Mitzvah and rabbinic declarations are

cited for both positive and negative views of reciting the same blessing for a daughter. As for the *seudat mitzvah*, the festive meal at a Bat Mitzvah, the references range from "categorical objection" to those favoring "modest celebration" to those "advocating full celebration" (Rabbi Ellinson's terminology). The strongest opposition cited is in *Responsa Iggerot Moshe, Orach Hayyim* 104: in which Rav Feinstein wrote, "To introduce a celebration for girls which has no religious significance whatsoever is to be avoided."

A festive meal in the home among family members focusing on the religious and moral aspects of mitzvah observance are recommended by those favoring "modest celebrations," while advocates of "full celebrations" such as the Responsum of Rav Yitzhak Nissim (*Noam*, Vol. 7, p.4) support "a feast made on the day a girl becomes subject to the mitzvot, i.e. on her twelfth birthday. [It] is a *seudat mitzvah* just as that of a Bar Mitzvah, for what is the difference? It is a worthy custom, followed in certain towns for both a son and a daughter, [and] has [halakhic] significance; if invited to such an occasion one is obliged to attend." (p. 290)

In Rabbi Ellinson's explication of the *Responsa* of Rav Weinberg, (*S'ridei Esh*, Vol. 3, Sec. 93) he notes that a practice which resembles that of the gentiles but is not done to imitate them but "to inculcate in the girl's heart a feeling of love for the mitzvot and pride in her Jewish-

ness" is permissible. Rabbi Weinberg considers intention as an important determinant: "It all depends upon the motives of the initiators of this custom, whether they are genuinely concerned with the mitzvot or, G-d forbid, merely wish to imitate the separatists... Since... most members of the community are in favor of such a celebration, do not oppose the suggestion; rather ensure that it truly fortify the spirit of Torah and mitzvot in hearts of Jewish daughters." (p. 292)

Other issues deal with concern whether a girl recites a *She'hechyanu* on the day of assuming the yoke of mitzvot, whether she should intensify her self-study, and whether a mother recites *Barukh She'ptarani*.

In *Tradition* XIV:1 Spring-Summer 1973, Rabbi J. David Bleich included a discussion of Bat Mitzvah celebrations in his "Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature." He noted the historic basis for Bat Mitzvah ceremonies in Modern Orthodox congregations as well as the influence of the popularization of the ritual by the Conservative movement. "The institution of some type of ceremony to mark the occasion can be traced to the mid-19th century. Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger apparently allowed such observances in Germany and even delivered addresses on such occasions."

Rabbi Bleich expanded this in *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, v.1 (c. 1977). He cites, as does Rabbi Ellinson,

continued

ESTHER NUSSBAUM is the Head Librarian at the Ramaz Upper School, New York. She is also the President of the New York/Metropolitan Area Chapter of the Association of Jewish Libraries.

Iggrot Moshe, Orah Hayyim I, 104, which declares that there is no source for celebration, that "a festive meal is not viewed as a *seudat mitzva* (a ritual repast)" that use of the synagogue for a Bat Mitzvah ceremony is a violation of its sanctity. Rabbi Bleich quotes other negative rulings, attributed to a Bat Mitzvah's resemblance to Reform practice or even to Christian confirmation, either being anathema to tradition.

The author also takes note of positive views on the same question.⁴ His reference citations direct the reader to the primary documents which include some unpublished Responsa.

Popular interest is evident when the subject makes its way into the press. Indeed, the JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency) Daily News Bulletin of October 26, 1982, Dateline Jerusalem October 25, carried the news that Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Ovadia Yosef, ruled that Bat Mitzvah celebrations for girls reaching the age of twelve are "as legitimate and valid as Bar Mitzvah for boys." The statement was published in the *Heichal Shlomo Year Book*.³ The bulletin quoted Rav Yosef as saying that each celebration is a *seudat mitzva* and that in contemporary society it was necessary from "a pedagogic point of view" to encourage girls by giving them Bat Mitzvah parties and not causing feelings of resentment among girls by "discriminating" between them and boys. According to the news agency, Rav Yosef conceded that Bat Mitzvah celebrations were not formerly a usual practice but that perhaps this was because Jewish girls in earlier times "absorbed religious values in the home."

Rabbi Menahem Brayer alludes to the "radical change in women's status" (p.194) in volume II of *Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: A Psychohistorical Perspective*. Fully cognizant of the issues raised by Jewish feminists and the Women's Liberation Movement, Rabbi Brayer discusses the Bat Mitzvah, following his avowal of "the viability and flexibility of halakhah...that tradition is not in opposition to constructive innovations." Rabbi Brayer denies the validity of what he considers the feminist view that the "essence of Judaism [is] a series of religious ceremonies" and concludes that "when a Jewish woman seeks her self-realization through a Bat Mitzvah ceremony...she will be disappointed. Contrary to her belief that a bat-mitzvah ceremony will strengthen

desirable values, ease her identity crisis, and offer constructive channels for the transfer of parental authority to individual responsibility — without a commitment to the full observance of Torah and Mitzvot — the ceremony will remain just that — a ceremony and some faded photographs of a fleeting moment of emptiness." Rabbi Brayer does take the opportunity to offer his idea of an appropriate Bat Mitzvah ceremony: a festive kiddush, considered a "*seudat hodaya*, a Thanksgiving feast, at which...the girl may deliver a talk in honor of her *hodaya* at reaching the age of mitzvot."⁵

Whereas Bat Mitzvah celebrations have not evolved into elaborate religious rituals, they have become community celebrations wherein families endeavor to find meaningful ways to mark this significant milestone and to express a sense of *hodaya* in their own unique way. ■

FOOTNOTES

1. A basic bibliography containing Hebrew citations includes:

Ellinson, Elyakim (Getzel). *Ha'Ishah V'Ha-Mitzvot*. (Jerusalem, 1977), 171-80.

Feinstein, Moshe *Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim I:104-36*

Fuks, Yizhak. *Halikhot Bat Yisrael*. (Jerusalem, 1984), 137-42.

Grossberg, Hanokh Z. "*Se'udat Bat Mizvah*," *Ha-Ma'ayan XIII* (1972-73), 41-2

Nisim, Yizhak. "Al Birkhat Barukh She'pitarani," *No'am VII* (1964), 4-5.

Roth, Meshulum. *She'elot U-Teshuvot Kol Mevasser*, II:44

Weinberg, Ya'akov Yehiel. *She'elot U-Teshuvot Sridei Esh*, III:93

Yosef, Ovadya Yabi'a Omer VI:29

"*Mesibat Bat Mizvah, Im Nehshevet Se'udat Mizvah*," *Shanah B'Shanah* (1983), 157-61.

My personal thanks to Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter.

2. Ellinson, Rabbi Getsel. *Serving the Creator: A Guide to the Rabbinic Sources*. (Series: *Women and the Mitzvot*. Vol. 1) Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization. Jerusalem, 1986. This is a translation and somewhat edited version of the work, published in Hebrew, *Halshah V'Ha-Mitzvot*, Jerusalem, 1977.

3. See bibliographic citation above.

4. Positive views cited by Rabbi Bleich include that of Rabbi Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg who approved Bat Mitzvah observances within a specific framework, and that of Rabbi Chanoch Zundel Grossberg regarding whether a festive meal constitutes a *se'udat mitzva*. (See bibliographic citation)

5. Menachem Brayer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: A Psychohistorical Perspective*. New Jersey: Ktav Publishing, 1986.

SUGGESTED READING

Non-Halakhic aspects of Bat Mitzva as well as "customized" celebrations are discussed in the following:

Books

Greenberg, Blu. *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*. Simon and Schuster, 1983.

Matzner, Bikerman, Shoshana. *The Jewish Child: Halakhic Perspectives*. New York: Ktav, 1984.

Schneider, Susan Weidman. *Jewish and Female: Choices and Changes in our Lives Today*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984.

Articles

Corne, Sharon. "The Bat Mitzvah Problem." *Response*, Summer 1973, pp. 114-116. (The issue was later published in book form by Ktav, entitled: *The Jewish Woman*, edited by Elizabeth Koltun)

Isserow, Rachel. "Some Thoughts on Women and the Orthodox." *Young Israel Viewpoint*, April 1976, p. 3.

Personal Recollections

Kaplan, Joseph C. "From Behind the Mechtiza." *Sh'Ma* 12/222, November 27, 1981. p. 10-11.

Simchat Torah celebration of the bat mitzva of niece elicits sensitive soul-searching by Orthodox male, women's rights champion. (A tribute written by the grandmother, an Orthodox rebbetzin, for the same occasion appeared in the *Amit Women*.)

Toledano, Talya. "For Having Made Me a Woman." *Women's Tefillah Network Newsletter* VI #3, November 1985/Kislev 5746, p. 1. A precociously mature description detailing the road to her Bat Mitzva celebration at the Riverdale, N.Y. Women's Tefillah Service.

Young Adult Literature

Asher, Sandy. *Daughters of the Law*. Beaufort, 1980

Child of Holocaust survivors is faced with decisions which revolve around the year of Bat Mitzva preparation.

Goldreich, Gloria. *Season of Discovery*. Thomas Nelson, 1976.

A young girl's concerns during the year in which she becomes Bat Mitzva. According to the author it is "basically the story of one girl's acceptance of herself, her family and her heritage."

Waxman, Meyer. Ish-Kishor, and Sloan, Jacob. *Blessed is the Match*. New York: Shengold, 1959 (o.p.)

Jewish women in history and literature from Biblical times to recent epochs are described in order to inspire the pre-adolescent girl with heroic role models.