

## BECOMING A SERIOUS JEW

by Sari Abrams

When a baby boy is born into an Orthodox Jewish family, his ritual path to Jewish adulthood is more or less laid out for him, and there is little question as to how his Bar Mitzvah will be celebrated. Since the thirteenth century “the Bar Mitzvah rite has not changed... An *aliya* to the Torah is at the heart of the ritual.”<sup>1</sup>

However, when a baby girl is born into that same family, there is no such single ritual path to Jewish adulthood that the parents are sure to follow. When that family desires to celebrate the Bat Mitzvah of their daughter, there is no set Orthodox ritual to which they can turn. In writing about Bat Mitzvah three decades ago, Abraham Bloch stated, “No ritual has as yet crystallized for this occasion... Bat Mitzvah celebrations are held in some Orthodox congregations in Israel. The girl receives a congregational gift and the sermon is addressed to her. The religious ritual, however, is confined to the male members of the family.”<sup>2</sup> Though we have made much progress in the past 30 years in developing and creating religious rituals for girls celebrating their Bat Mitzvah, it is still far from universally accepted in Orthodox communities that girls should celebrate their Bat Mitzvah in a ritual manner.

One option that exists for girls in some communities is celebrating their Bat Mitzvah in the context of a women’s *tefillah* group (WTG). I have been teaching girls to read Torah, in preparation for celebrating their Bat Mitzvah, in a WTG in Los Angeles for the past dozen years. WTGs have been praised by some as progressive and groundbreaking and criticized by others as pale imitations of services run by men. In fact, some have questioned whether a new generation of girls and women will have any interest in WTGs. To explore this issue, I asked mothers and daughters to describe their motivations for celebrating their Bat Mitzvah in our WTG and how they felt afterward. Additionally, I explored with the girls whether they had experienced conflict resulting from their decision to celebrate their Bat Mitzvah in a way that was different from most of their friends.

The most striking, but not surprising, theme to emerge from these discussions is that, in every case, the families were seeking a religiously and communally meaningful experience for their daughters through direct interaction with the Torah. The decision to celebrate their Bat Mitzvah in the WTG came from the conviction that a “Bat Mitzvah should be first of all a

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<sup>1</sup> Bloch, Abraham P. *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies* (New York: Ktav, 1980), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22.

religious occasion, rather than simply a party, and that it should reflect in some way the accepting of *mitzvot*.” One of the girls, now a college student, talked about how her friends planned very different celebrations from hers. Theirs “revolved around expense and show: rented hotel dance floors with blaring music, themes, never-ending party favors... I really could not understand how they connected to learning and teaching Torah.” The sentiment that a Bat Mitzvah should be more than a party was repeatedly emphasized, by both mothers and daughters. One mother said that the WTG provided a “wonderful alternative to just giving a speech... and represents a way to equalize boys and girls in Orthodoxy.”

Some of the mothers who also have sons felt strongly that they wanted their daughter’s Bat Mitzvah to have as much meaning as their son’s Bar Mitzvah. As one of those mothers stated, she wanted her daughter “to have her own meaningful transition into Jewish adulthood.” Another mother, whose two daughters had celebrated their *B’not Mitzvah* in the WTG, said, “Bar Mitzvahs tend to be public events and I wanted my girls to have some sort of public event as well... We teach our children to love and live Torah and in order to do that we must be able to connect to a *Sefer Torah*.” One young woman, who has two older brothers, said that celebrating a Bat Mitzvah in the WTG “makes you feel like you are becoming a member of the community, which being a Bat Mitzvah is all about.”

The experience of *davening* and learning together in a WTG can be a very spiritual one—and different from the experience of *davening* with men and women together. In reflecting on her decision to celebrate her daughter’s Bat Mitzvah in the WTG, one mother shared this: “If women have their own religious world, their own separate thought world and particular spiritual camaraderie and outlook, why not celebrate that and initiate (my daughter) into that? That’s what I love about the WTG, the women’s religious connection, connection over text, over ritual, over a physical closeness with the Torah. The fact that it is all women is what’s neat.”

The girls and young women also shared some negative feelings that they had experienced before their Bat Mitzvah. Twelve-year-old girls can be particularly susceptible to peer pressure and may be painfully self-conscious and shy. Getting up in front of a room full of people to read from the Torah or to lead services was difficult for many of the girls. Additionally, learning how to *leyn* can be a time-consuming endeavor. Some of the girls were concerned about doing something that was different from their peers, imagining that it would lead to negative evaluation, perhaps even ridicule, by their peers. The mother of one of those girls shared that her daughter was initially very resistant to celebrating her Bat Mitzvah in a WTG. In large part that resistance was due to a heightened awareness that such a celebration did not “represent the norm for their class or their family and for an 11-year-old girl whose worst nightmare is to be different than her friends that can be a very powerful negative message.”

However, most of these same girls described feeling a great sense of pride and accomplishment after their Bat Mitzvah and talked about how, in the end, their friends enjoyed being at the WTG service and were impressed with all they did. Several of the young women who once were my students have become Bat Mitzvah teachers themselves. One young woman, who recently taught her own sister to read Torah for her Bat Mitzvah, expressed that

being “able to pass on my passion for learning and *leyning* to my own family has been the sweetest reward for my original efforts.” Another young woman paid her experience the ultimate compliment: “I would definitely encourage my own daughter to have a Bat Mitzvah similar to my own.”

A difficult issue with which parents sometimes have to grapple is how much to push their daughters to celebrate their Bat Mitzvah with more than just a party. One mother stated emphatically that “I don’t buy ‘my daughter doesn’t want to do this’ attitude. Parents don’t give their boys a choice. By parents not taking a Bat Mitzvah as seriously as the boys they are just promoting complacency in the girls.” It is certainly not easy to force your child to do something she does not want to do. However, it is important to evaluate the reasons why she does not want to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah in a religious ceremony. If we can “normalize” the experience for our young girls so they grow up attending women’s *tefillah*, observing women and teenage girls taking on roles that have traditionally been left to men and boys, there is a good chance that they will assume from a young age that, just as an *aliya* to the Torah is the heart of the ritual for a Bar Mitzvah, so too, an *aliya* to the Torah is the heart of the ritual for a Bat Mitzvah.

I myself have no daughters. Nevertheless I have invested my heart and soul in running and maintaining our WTG because it is crucial to me that our collective daughters have the kind of opportunities that did not exist when I was growing up, to feel they are valued members of the Jewish community. They must be able to stand before the congregation, as our sons do, and declare, “I am a serious Jew.”

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