

## CELEBRATING THE OPPORTUNITIES, LAMENTING THE LIMITS

by Amy Newman

Soon after my eleventh birthday, I began learning to chant the extremely long *Parashat Naso*. I marked my Bat Mitzvah by *leyning* the *parashah* at the egalitarian shul my family joined after we became frustrated by the limited opportunities for women's participation at the traditional *minyán* where I had grown up.

Ten years later, I began studying Torah full-time at Drisha. My Zionist education had equipped me with excellent Hebrew skills, but I had little experience with religious texts. I was awed by my classmates' proficiency in halakha and Gemara. In the first week of our class on *kashrut*, we studied a section of Tractate *Hullin* that quotes excerpts of biblical verses on the laws of the Nazirite. When our teacher asked if anyone could quote these verses in context, I was immediately able to do because the laws of the Nazirite appear in *Parashat Naso*, which I have known by heart since I was 11 years old. Although I had not yet mastered (or even fully understood) the talmudic text that cites these verses, I felt proud to know their original context so intimately.

It was a transformative experience. In the decade since my Bat Mitzvah, I had made a series of religious choices that led me away from the egalitarian shul where I first *leyned* and toward a more traditional community. This moment in my halakha *shiur* reminded me how much I cherish the intimate relationship one develops with a text by learning to chant it. It affirmed my desire to include *leyning* in my Jewish practice, even though I had entered a community in which the opportunities for public *keri'at haTorah* do not usually extend to girls and women.

I soon discovered my niche. I became a Bat Mitzvah teacher for girls who were preparing to *leyn* in the women's *tefillah* group of a Modern Orthodox synagogue where most Bat Mitzvah celebrations consist of a party, a *d'var Torah*, and a *hesed* project, but where a few girls in each cohort do choose to *leyn*. Because I often teach the same girls in two different capacities—as their private *leyning* tutor and as a *Tanakh* teacher at the school they attend—I have a multifaceted perspective on their experiences. I have found it fascinating to observe both how the students respond to me as their female *leyning* teacher and how they navigate the process of learning to *leyn* in a setting where most girls do not do so.

I have been mostly delighted, but occasionally also troubled, by the ways in which the girls relate to me—delighted because most of them, even those who do not learn to *leyn*, think that it's cool that I know how to—and troubled because they seem to think this skill is unique to me. When one student heard that I was moving away, she asked, "Now who will teach my daughters to *leyn*?" She was being intentionally dramatic, but there was sincerity behind the drama. I worry that my students

perceive that I am the only woman who can fill this role. I hope to convince them that there are many other women who can teach *leyning* and that, more importantly, they themselves are now equipped with the skills to teach their friends, mothers, and sisters.

My *leyning* students know they are part of a small minority; 11-year-olds are acutely aware of their friends' choices, and any girl who learns to *leyn* knows that her women's *tefillah* Bat Mitzvah ceremony will be different from most of her peers' celebrations. For the small (but growing) group of girls at our school who mark their Bat Mitzvah by *leyning* Torah, the process serves to deepen their engagement with Judaism. In the Orthodox world, where there is often great distance—both literal and figurative— between women and Torah, learning to *leyn* gives girls a sense of ownership of our holy texts. In the weeks before a student's Bat Mitzvah, she and I spend a few lessons in the synagogue chapel, where she practices *leyning* from a *Sefer Torah*. By the second or third session, the student is usually comfortable removing the Torah from the *aron kodesh*, placing it gently on the *shulhan*, and opening it to the appropriate place. It is inspiring to watch an almost 12-year-old girl prepare to take on the Torah's obligations by holding the scroll tightly in her arms and then expertly scanning its words to find the beginning of the *parashah* she has spent a year mastering. These girls are accustomed to seeing the *Sefer Torah* from across the *mehitza*, where it is carried and read by their male classmates. The experience of holding the Torah themselves, even if only a few times, is a powerful one.

Not only does learning to *leyn* bring a student closer to Torah, both physically and symbolically, but it also helps her learn Torah better. When teachers ask students to read and explain previously unseen passages, the girls who recognize the cantillation marks are able to punctuate the verses, pausing in the right places and emphasizing the right words, which are important steps in helping them decipher their meanings. They also experience for the first time the thrill of knowing a text with absolute proficiency, just as I experienced in my first week at Drisha.

One day last October, during a sixth-grade class on *Parashat Noah*, the teacher pointed out the verse in which the people of Babel say to each other, "*hava nivneh lanu ir*"—"let us build ourselves a city." She asked if anyone knew where else in the Torah someone says "*hava*"—"let us." This word appears in *Parashat Shemot*, which every student in the room had studied in my fifth-grade *humash* class, but Talia—who was preparing to *leyn* that *parashah* at her Bat Mitzvah—was the only student who knew that it was Pharaoh who said "*hava, let us deal wisely with B'nei Yisrael.*" I was not in the room during that lesson, but heard about it from Talia's classmates, who were so impressed by her knowledge that they found me at lunch to tell me about it. I imagine the experience was as exciting for Talia as my moment at Drisha was for me. I hope it will motivate her—and her friends who admired her for her knowledge—to continue to pursue the same proficiency with other texts.

For the minority of girls at our school who mark their Bat Mitzvah by *leyning* Torah, the experience also seems to deepen their engagement with Jewish practice; it pulls them closer to Torah observance. I find great joy in seeing this positive effect. However, it is not always easy to be one of the girls who take on this project in a community where there are only limited opportunities for girls and women to *leyn* publicly. It is alienating for a girl to discover that the skill she has worked hard to master is not one that her school and shul will give her occasion to use. At the same time that learning to *leyn* pulls these girls closer to Torah, it also, paradoxically, pushes them away.

I am always proud when I hear that my students have continued to *leyn* after their Bat Mitzvah, but our school's women's *tefillah* group meets infrequently, and my students usually only experience Torah reading from across the *mehitza*. Exactly a year after one student's Bat Mitzvah, she listened to a male classmate *leyn* the *parashah* she still knew by heart. "He made mistakes," she told me afterward,

and I could feel her frustration. She and the boy had grown up as equals, but now only he was allowed to participate fully in a ritual she felt just as qualified to perform.

I struggle to find the words to comfort students in situations like this one, because their feelings mirror my own. They simultaneously experience the excitement of being included in a ritual that was not open to Orthodox girls when their mothers were their age, and the alienation of learning that they will only be included in this ritual on rare occasions. The sense that one is being concurrently pulled in and pushed away is a familiar tension for Orthodox feminists. I suspect it is a defining emotion for many of us. Every new opportunity that is extended to women has its limits, and I invest great emotional energy in seeking a balance between celebrating the opportunity and lamenting the limitations. In the partnership *minyán* where I daven on Shabbat mornings, I love seeing the *sh'lihat tzibbur* assume her spot at the *amud* to lead *p'sukei d'zimra*, but I feel a pang when she takes her seat and a man replaces her there to lead *Shaharit*.

Watching my Bat Mitzvah students navigate this tension for the first time, I am aware that they are likely to experience it again and again, just like I do. Perhaps that explains my uncertainty in how to comfort them. I encourage my students to channel the same confidence that led them to choose to *leyn* when most of their friends did not and to direct it toward advocating for more opportunities for girls' participation. My wish for them is that the engagement that comes with learning to *leyn* will outweigh the alienation that sometimes accompanies it. I hope their enhanced Torah study skills and their increased sense of ownership of our holy texts will motivate each of them to carve out the role that best suits her in her school and her community. For the students who choose to pursue the Orthodox feminist path, I look forward to their joining me as my colleagues and—one day—as my teachers.

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