

## FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION: A SPECIAL BONDING

*by Rae Drazin*

When I was growing up in San Francisco, my parents made a simple *kiddush* in shul to celebrate my becoming a Bat Mitzvah. There were so few Orthodox families in our community that I had no real friends with whom to celebrate. As there were no boys in our family, I didn't feel cheated in any way, but I didn't feel particularly special either. In fact, what I remember most about the occasion was how unhappy I was that I could no longer sit with my father in shul.

When I moved to Los Angeles in 1968, I became involved with the women's liberation movement and began thinking about feminism, especially as it related to my religious observance. In the early 1970s, a group of women decided to form a women's prayer group. We consulted with local rabbis, but none would sanction our reading from a *Sefer Torah*. So we met in one of our homes, davened, studied, and read the *parashah* together. One of the leaders of the group, Ada Sharfman, z"l, was a Hebrew teacher who offered to teach each of us to chant the *haftarah* associated with our birthdays. We excitedly learned the *haftarah* trope, and each of us had another Bat Mitzvah. I remember bringing my oldest son, Noam, who was then 2 or 3 years old, with me for my Bat Mitzvah celebration. I chanted my *haftarah*, the women sang and celebrated with me, and of course, we had refreshments. It was wonderful!

When it was time for Noam to have his Bar Mitzvah, we decided to go to Israel to celebrate the event; his best friend came along. Noam's Bar Mitzvah took place at the Kotel on Thursday morning, and the celebration, which was intimate and attended mostly by family, continued over Shabbat. Our second son chose to have his Bar Mitzvah in Los Angeles so that he could be surrounded and supported by all his friends. With no daughters, there were no decisions to be made about marking the age of *mitzvot* for a girl.

I continued to pursue Jewish feminist ideas and began to attend Shirat Chana, the women's *tefillah* group at B'nai David-Judea. An opportunity arose to take a class in reading Torah, and I enrolled in it. I learned the *t'amim* for the Torah quickly and began *leyning* for Shirat Chana. I grew to love *leyning*, as it afforded me an intimate contact with the Torah.

When it came time to plan the Bat Mitzvah of Jennie, the daughter of my son Noam, he suggested that she consider having her celebration in Israel, as he had. Jennie jumped at the opportunity, and I was thrilled when she asked me if I would teach her to read her *parashah*. Since she was 5 years old, Jennie and I had been spending time together after school, "hanging out" and doing

homework. Preparing for her Bat Mitzvah would be a very special opportunity for me to share my passion for *leyning* with my oldest granddaughter.

Jennie's *parashah* was *Tol'dot*, an especially rich one. We began our study before the summer, first by reading the *parashah* in English, then learning the *t'amim*, and finally by memorizing the *t'amim* for each *pasuk*. We studied together once a week, and Jennie practiced between sessions with a recording she listened to on her MP3 player. It was hard work, sometimes frustrating for both of us, but mostly it was wonderful. A special bond was created between us, and I cherished every learning session.

My son and daughter-in-law had arranged for Jennie to have her actual Bat Mitzvah in Jerusalem on Thursday morning, at Robinson's Arch. The site is secluded, removed from the main Kotel area and the hubbub of locals and tourists, and it is a place where women are permitted to read from the Torah. Our group, approximately 50 men and women, consisted of family, as well as a few friends who had made *aliya* and were thrilled to be a part of our *simha*. We set up a *mehitza* and placed the Torah on a table that straddled the men's and women's areas. It was early morning and birds flew overhead: there was a palpable sense of spirituality. This was indeed a special, holy place. Jennie's father led *Shaharit*.

When the time came for the Torah service, the *Sefer Torah* was placed in my arms so that I could take it around to the women. They greeted me with broad smiles! The *Sefer Torah* was then placed on the table, and Jennie *leyned* flawlessly. Could it get any better than this? My heart was so full! My only regret was that my mother, Jennie's great-grandmother, did not live to witness this extraordinary event. After *keri'at haTorah* and the conclusion of the service, it was clear that Jennie felt that she had been transformed from a girl to a Jewish woman.

Jennie's Bat Mitzvah celebration did not end with the morning service. She led a tour of the Temple excavations after *davening*, and then on Shabbat, at a private *minyán* at Nevel David on Har Zion, she *leyned* the entire *parashah* of *Tol'dot* while I stood at her side. It is difficult to articulate the feelings I experienced throughout that weekend. I was so proud of Jennie and knew I would count this special time with her among the highlights of my life.

With God's help, I will teach Jennie's sisters as I taught Jennie. The next Bat Mitzvah will take place in three years. I look forward to experiencing this special bonding again with Lily and with Marlee.

When I compare my own Bat Mitzvah experience with Jennie's, it seems like two different worlds. I hope that the "partnership" model of a Bat Mitzvah service will become more normative, and girls will know that they, along with their brothers, can mark the age of accepting *mitzvot* through an intimate relationship with the Torah. In the same way as boys are often taught their *parashah* by their fathers or grandfathers, a Bat Mitzvah girl can study her *parashah* with a significant female figure in her life. The special bonding that results through this learning experience adds an additional layer of meaning to this coming-of-age ceremony.

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