

## JOINING THE CHAIN OF JEWISH WOMEN: THE MATAN MOTHER-DAUGHTER BAT MITZVAH PROGRAM

*by Rebecca Linzer*

In 1995, Oshra Koren, one of the first graduates of the Matan Scholars Program and presently the director of Matan HaSharon, the Mindy Greenberg Institute for Women's Torah Study in Ra'anana, was approached by a group of local mothers to create a Bat Mitzvah preparation program. The women said that, although their sons had a recognized way to prepare for their Bar Mitzvah, their daughters did not. Instead they planned a party, chose a dress, and, at best, read a *d'rasha* prepared by someone else. These mothers were seeking ways to add meaning to the Bat Mitzvah rite of passage.

In response to these requests, Matan HaSharon created a pilot program called "Jewish Women through the Ages," geared to identifying female Jewish role models throughout history. Its underlying principle was that a successful learning experience is not based solely on the intellect, but also on the emotions and on creativity. Therefore the program consisted not only of mother-daughter *hevruta* study but also of facilitator-led group discussions and related experiential activities. Each activity created a different atmosphere and invited different modes of self-expression such as dance, music, theater, art, and guided imagery. This three-pillared paradigm—*hevruta*, group discussion, and experiential activity—forms the basis for all the versions of the program in use today.

The appeal of the Bat Mitzvah program is its combination of learning and experiential programming, in which both mothers and daughters are involved. It creates a space for mothers and daughters to join together in a spiritual journey that transforms the mother-daughter relationship. Together they explore what it has meant to be a Jewish woman in generations past and what it means today. Our program helps Jewish girls and their mothers open new channels of communication just as the girls enter the teen years, when such communication can become difficult. The fact that a mother takes the time to spend one evening a week with her preteen daughter makes the daughter feel special. The *hevruta* process teaches the pair to respect each other's opinions and to make room for differences between them. The mother learns that her daughter is maturing and can be counted on for her opinion, and the daughter learns to express her thoughts to her mother. In a recent survey of

daughters participating in the program in the United States, 88% felt they were closer to their mothers after completing the program and planned to spend more quality time together. The multigenerational draw is a strong one. Mothers who would never think of signing up for a Torah course for themselves will do so for their daughters. At the conclusion of many of our programs, the participants request continuation programs, either mother– daughter programs or programs for the mothers themselves who have rediscovered the experience of learning.

Building on the success of the pilot program, the Bat Mitzvah program has quickly spread throughout Israel and the Diaspora. Today, Matan-trained facilitators run groups in almost 100 locations in Israel and more than 60 in the Diaspora. The recent expansion of the North American Bat Mitzvah program has been made possible through a partnership with Legacy Heritage Fund. Matan works in each of the participating communities to train and empower local facilitators as educational resources and leaders. Coordinators of both the program in Israel and the Diaspora ensure that they receive constant feedback from both facilitators and participants, which enables the program to continue to evolve. Mothers with several daughters, who have done the program with each of them, find that the experience is different each time.

Although many religious schools include a Bat Mitzvah component in the year that the girls turn 12, it usually deals with *mitzvot* that are specific to women or a woman’s obligations in fulfilling *mitzvot* in general. The Matan program takes a different approach. It focuses on Jewish role models, including Rivka, Miriam, Devorah, Chana, Esther, Bruriah, Dona Gracia, Nechama Leibowitz, Rabbanit Bracha Kapah of Jerusalem, and Avital Sharansky. These female role models were selected because they embody positive attributes and values from which the girls can learn.

By learning about these role models, the participating girls gain insight into the world of Jewish women and see that there are many different models of the “ideal Jewish woman,” all of which are legitimate. As the girls reach maturity, they can develop their own unique path based on these models. Encountering these women through varied sources, both mothers and daughters are able to appreciate the uniqueness of these women’s lives in relation not only to the period in which they lived but also to modern times.

Our approach to Bat Mitzvah preparation—using role models from history and from contemporary life to teach Jewish values—means that the program can be appropriate for women and girls from all backgrounds. Matan has adapted the program to appeal to secular women and their daughters. We found that it is important to limit the number of sources presented, so as not to overwhelm participants with less experience in Torah texts. Most importantly we created a ceremony to mark the end of the course. As most of the secular girls would not have a Bat Mitzvah celebration with religious content, we felt that it was important to add a ritual to the process. The girls perform a personal presentation on the meaning of their Bat Mitzvah and recite a special Bat Mitzvah prayer. We created a special *Mi-sheberakh* for the mothers (and fathers) to bless their daughters. We have been approached by schools and community centers all over Israel to share this program. One of its early participants expressed what the program meant to her: “I learned that becoming Bat Mitzvah is not about having to

fast on Yom Kippur. It's about being a strong Jewish woman, like the women we learned about." We later developed a closing ceremony for the religious groups, similar to that for the secular ones.

Following the success of the program among Israel's secular population, we looked to offer the program for the non-day-school population in the Diaspora, which is quite different from the secular population in Israel. We made further adaptations to the program, including making accommodations for participants' lack of Hebrew knowledge and less knowledgeable Torah backgrounds. We also added a unit on the topic of *Tikkun Olam*.

There are currently five versions of the program: a religious, traditional, and secular program in Israel, and a religious and a nondenominational program in the Diaspora. More than 7,000 mothers and daughters have participated in the ten-session programs. In certain program series, following requests from fathers we have added one lesson that includes them. In response to requests, we have also incorporated a specific unit on "Women and the Land of Israel" in both Diaspora and Israeli programs.

Interestingly, although our program was started because the boys had a standard way to celebrate reaching the age of Bar Mitzvah and the girls did not, we are now receiving frequent requests to develop a parallel program for boys!

***Rebecca Linzer*** is the Overseas Coordinator of the Matan Bat Mitzvah Program.

[To read the rest of the Fall 2010 JOFA Journal, please click here.](#)