

## LEYNING MEGILLAT ESTHER: THE ULTIMATE BAT MITZVAH GIFT

by Alyza D. Lewin

I will always be indebted to my parents for the Bat Mitzvah they gave me. I do not mean the party (although it was a wonderful celebration) or the presents. I mean the skill they provided me. For my Bat Mitzvah, my father taught me how to *leyn Megillat Esther* from a *klaf*—a handwritten parchment scroll. What began as a highly unusual Bat Mitzvah celebration has developed over the years into an annual practice that enhances my celebration of the Purim holiday, deepens my understanding of *Megillat Esther*, and has solidified my attitude toward women’s participation in religious services.

I became a Bat Mitzvah when Jimmy Carter was president. At that time, the standard Bat Mitzvah celebration in my Orthodox Jewish community was a party (often at the Bat Mitzvah girl’s home) during which she gave a *d’var Torah*. I attended an Orthodox Jewish day school, but only one classmate *leyned* from the Torah for her Bat Mitzvah—and that was because she (unlike the rest of the girls in my class) belonged to a Conservative synagogue. It was simply unheard of for a young woman from the Orthodox community to do such a thing.

Maybe my father (as a parent of two daughters and no sons) felt a particular challenge to devise for his girls, Bat Mitzvah celebrations that would provide for them, within a halakhic framework, what a Bar Mitzvah celebration provides for a boy. Maybe that is why he taught me to *leyn Megillat Esther* and then taught my sister how to *leyn Megillat Ruth*. Why, after all, should a boy learn to *leyn* and gain the self-confidence that comes with mastering his Bar Mitzvah *parashah*—but not a girl? Why should a son master a skill he will be able to use time and again as he participates in and leads part of a religious service—but not a daughter? My Hebrew birthday is four days before Purim, so linking my Bat Mitzvah to the holiday seemed obvious. Having me *leyn Megillat Esther*, however, was novel.

At the time of my Bat Mitzvah, there was only one kosher restaurant in the Washington, DC area—the “Kosher Kitchen.” We held my Bat Mitzvah celebration there on Purim at noon. I *leyned* the *Megillah*, a Purim *se’udah* followed, and in the spirit of the day, I also gave a humorous *d’var Torah*. I invited my entire class (including the boys) and my family’s close friends and relatives—both men and women. I was blessed to have all four of my grandparents attend and cheer me on, including my maternal grandfather, Rabbi Morris E. Gordon—an

American-born rabbi who received *semikha* from the Mir and Kamenetz yeshivot in Europe and gave *shi'urim* at Chaim Berlin and Yeshiva University's Talmudical Academy—and my paternal grandfather, Dr. Isaac Lewin, who was a leader of Agudath Israel, principal of Yeshiva University's Central Yeshiva High School for Girls, and son of the “Reisha” Rav.

The year after my Bat Mitzvah, I taught another young woman how to *leyn Megillat Esther* for her Bat Mitzvah. I remember feeling as if I had started a trend. I thought women's *Megillah* readings would soon become commonplace. But I was mistaken. It took a long time for the Orthodox Jewish community to truly embrace women *leyning Megillat Esther*.

I have *leyned* the *Megillah* nearly every year since my Bat Mitzvah. Initially, I organized a late morning reading for women at our family's synagogue (Beth Sholom in Potomac, Maryland), which was held in a room other than the sanctuary. Our efforts to do this—and a telephone conversation that Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, Rabbi Bertram Leff and my father had with Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on the topic—are memorialized in an article by Rabbi Aryeh Frimer on the *halakhot* of women's *Megillah* reading.<sup>1</sup>

When I went to Israel for a year after high school, I *leyned Megillat Esther* for my classmates at Michlelet Orot, the women's seminary I attended. Having a woman *leyn Megillah* was so unusual that most of the women who came to my reading taped me *leyning* the first chapter and sent home the cassettes so that their parents could hear it. In college, at Princeton, I arranged a late morning reading for students who did not hear the *Megillah* at the morning *minyan*. (Some respected *pos'kim* say that a woman's *Megillah* reading can be a man's obligation to hear the *Megillah* if he does not attend a regular *minyan*.) And 16 years ago, when I moved back to Washington, DC I organized a women's *Megillah* reading on Purim morning at Keshet Israel Congregation. When I first suggested the idea, the synagogue rabbi was not eager to embrace it and gave only his cautious consent, but he has since become a strong supporter of our annual women's *Megillah* reading—particularly when he discovered that it regularly attracts women who, if not for the women's service, would not hear the *Megillah* at all on Purim day.

Our women's service (and others like it) have led many women to learn to *leyn* the *Megillah* on their own, enabling them to become active participants in the reading for the first time. Over the years I have made numerous cassette tapes for women who wanted to learn individual chapters so they could participate in women's *Megillah* readings. This year, I graduated to digital recordings.

Five years ago, my parents gave me another gift. Each year when I would *leyn*, I would arrange to borrow a *Megillat Esther* from my father. I finally asked for my own *Megillah*. My father then commissioned a highly regarded *sofer* in Israel to write a beautiful *Megillah* on a *klaf* especially for me. However, the *sofer* was never told that the *Megillah* was for me. My father told him it was for his son-in-law.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/English/tfila/frimer2.htm>.

Today my Purim celebration is not complete unless I am able to *leyn* at least part of the *Megillah*. It may sound overly sentimental to some, but my personal “*simha v’sason*” on Purim is *leyning* Megillat Esther. When I *leyn*, I am not just reciting words to an audience that is half-listening. Instead, we are all participating. I share an amazing tale, the women drown out Haman’s name, and we all celebrate the miracle of Purim together.

My experience with women’s *Megillah* readings—and the impact that they have on both the women who *leyn* and those who listen—has shown me the importance of women’s religious services. There is a qualitative difference in the experience for women when they listen to another woman *leyn* or lead the service as opposed to when they listen to a man *leyn* or lead the service. A Bat Mitzvah is an opportunity to provide a young woman with the skills she needs to fully engage in and experience such a service (just as a Bar Mitzvah is an opportunity to provide a young man with the skills he needs). I recognize that not every young woman will have the same reaction to *leyning Megillat Esther* that I have had. But as I begin thinking about what to do as a Bat Mitzvah celebration for each of my daughters, I find few alternatives that will provide them with the skills, the religious content, and the sense of accomplishment and self-confidence that my Bat Mitzvah provided me.

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