

New Models for Bat Mitzvah Celebrations in the Synagogue and in the Community

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Introduction

Recognizing the need for a meaningful Bat Mitzvah ritual, some members of modern Orthodox communities have typically chosen one of two kinds of celebrations. In the first type, the Bat Mitzvah gives a *d'var Torah* in the synagogue after the service or at the reception hall. This *d'var Torah*, presented on a subject that is of special interest to the Bat Mitzvah or one taken from the weekly Torah portion, symbolizes her commitment to and achievement in Torah study. In the second type of ceremony, the women of the congregation join the Bat Mitzvah for a Torah reading service that takes place at the same time as the men's Torah reading. Often, only a few men from the celebrant's family hear the reading from outside the room. In this type of ceremony, the Bat Mitzvah may also give a *d'var Torah* for the entire congregation, either before or after the Torah reading.

Although each of these rituals has many advantages, each also has drawbacks. Giving a *d'var Torah* may not necessarily represent a significant effort or achievement in Torah learning for the Bat Mitzvah. Furthermore, this model lacks any public liturgical aspect, which is so prominent in a Bar Mitzvah ceremony. And the "Torah reading" model, which is intended to represent full participation in the congregation as a Jewish man or Jewish woman, does not involve the entire congregation.

In this article, we offer two models that seek to rectify the deficiencies in these typical ceremonies while still following halakhic principles. Both situate the Bat Mitzvah ceremony within the entire *tzibbur* or community, and both parallel Bar Mitzvah celebrations in containing elements of communal participation and Torah study. In the first model, the Bat Mitzvah reads *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs), either from a scroll or a Bible, on Friday night at the synagogue. In the second model, the weekly Torah portion is read twice on Shabbat

¹ An expanded Hebrew version of this paper, *Modellim Hilkhatiyim Hadashim laHagigat Bat Mitzvah B'Vet HaK'neset* was published in *To Be a Jewish Woman, Vol. II: Proceedings of the Second International Conference: Woman and Her Judaism* (Jerusalem: Kolech, 2001). We began to use these models in the mid-1990s when we served as rabbi and rebbetzin at B'nai David-Judea Congregation, a member of the Orthodox Union, in Los Angeles. We have continued to develop these models since our *aliya*. These Bat Mitzvah celebrations, which predate and do not engage the issue of mixed Torah readings, have been attended by those on both sides of that debate.

morning—once by men and once by the Bat Mitzvah—within a community structure, often convened especially for the celebration.

The Shir HaShirim Model

The seventeenth-century *siddur* of the *Shelah* (*Shnei LuhotHa-Brit*²) attests to the importance and the setting of *Shir HaShirim*, citing an established custom to read from it on Friday night, when the congregation is already dressed in their Sabbath finery. Rabbi Joseph Caro³ held that the time just prior to the evening service before Shabbat is the holiest time of the week, because that is when the sanctity of the Sabbath is evident and apparent in a person. According to our Sages, “All of Scripture is holy, and *Shir HaShirim* is the Holy of Holies.”⁴ Therefore, reading *Shir HaShirim* on Shabbat is quite appropriate. In many Ashkenazic communities, *Shir HaShirim* is read individually; thus, because it is not read by the community as a whole, there is no issue of a “public obligation” resting on men alone that would prohibit a girl from reading it aloud for the whole congregation. Even in Sephardic communities in which the entire congregation reads *Shir HaShirim* together, individuals take turns reading sections out loud. Because a blessing does not precede the reading of *Shir HaShirim*, there should be no halakhic problem with this model.

The reading of *Shir HaShirim* on Friday night takes place at a time that is particularly suited for a Bat Mitzvah. Sabbath Eve services, with all the connotations regarding the Sabbath Bride and the Sabbath Queen, are replete with feminine allusions. In addition, according to the accepted custom, *Shir HaShirim* is recited between *Minha* and *Kabbalat Shabbat*—a time when we yearn for the sanctity of the Sabbath, when we leave the workday behind us and immerse ourselves in Sabbath holiness. By reading *Shir HaShirim* during that transition from profane to holy, the Bat Mitzvah leaves behind her “weekday” life and enters a life of commandments, as she dedicates her soul to the service of God.

In our model, the Bat Mitzvah reads *Shir HaShirim* as is customary, without a blessing. The entire reading takes about 20 minutes. After the young woman finishes her reading, the congregation can proceed with the Mourner’s *kaddish*, and then the *shaliah tzibbur* continues with the service as usual. Before the singing of the closing *Yigdal* or *Adon Olam*, the *shaliah tzibbur* stops once again, and the Bat Mitzvah or either her father or her mother can give a *d’var Torah* or *d’var halakha*.

We consider that the reading of *Shir HaShirim* aloud by a Bat Mitzvah is a way of giving an ancient custom new meaning and even reviving it in communities where this custom is not followed, thereby “restoring it to its former glory.”

The Torah Reading Model

In the second model, the congregation gathers on Shabbat morning for regular services in a *mekom tefillah*—either one that is permanent or one that has been convened for the

² R. Isaiah HaLevi Horowitz, seventeenth century, Prague/Eretz Israel.

³ *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim*, 260.

⁴ *Yadayim*, 3:5.

occasion. After the Torah is removed from the Ark, the men and women separate. The men read the Torah portion, while the women study with the Bat Mitzvah. This gives the Bat Mitzvah an opportunity to demonstrate her ability in Torah study, and it creates an interactive connection with those participating in the celebration.

When the men and women conclude their respective *leyning* and learning, they come back together, and the reading table moves to the women's side of the *mekom tefillah*. The Bat Mitzvah reads from the Torah, with the *aliyot* going to her friends and female relatives.⁵ Because the men have already read the Torah and therefore fulfilled their obligation, they may remain and listen to the reading by the Bat Mitzvah.⁶ After she reads the *haftarah*, the Torah scroll is returned to the Ark and the *Musaf* service continues as usual.

According to our teacher, the late Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, Torah reading comprises two aspects: it is certainly the communal form of Torah study but it is also the renewal of the giving of the Torah to the Jews at Mt. Sinai.⁷ Rabbi Soloveitchik links several aspects of halakha to this insight, including the obligation to stand during the reading of the Torah, and quotes from the Rambam, "The translator may not rest on a stand or upon a beam, but rather stands in fear and awe."⁸ This understanding is based on the Jerusalem Talmud: "Just as it [the Torah] was given in fear and awe, so must we treat it [Torah reading] with awe."⁹

In addition, the reading of the Torah must be of no less than ten verses, which parallels the Ten Commandments that comprised Revelation. According to the Vilna Gaon, once the Torah reading commences one may not speak even if one has already heard the *keri'ah*.¹⁰ This prohibition includes *divrei Torah* between *aliyot*. All these practices of awe and respect stem from the renewed Sinai experience that is *keri'at haTorah*.

⁵ This discussion does not deal with the wording of Torah blessings for women, or with the issue of the *Barukh Shep'tarani* blessing.

⁶ In addition, in our opinion, there is no problem with the prohibition of hearing a "woman's voice" (*kol isha*). The objection based on *kol isha* is spurious, as today it is commonplace for a man to hear a woman's voice (*Yam Shel Shlomo*, R. Solomon Luria, Poland, 1510–1574); this is especially the case as ritual Torah reading is not a love song and the listener has no specific intention of enjoying the Bat Mitzvah's voice when she sings praises to God (*S'dei Hemed*, R. Hayim Medini, 1832–1904, Eretz Yisrael) within a place where the *Shekhinah* is present (Rav Ovadia Yosef, Responsa *Yekhaveh Da'at*, vol. 4, no. 15). Although we have found that some male opponents to this model complain that a second *keri'ah* is a violation of *tirkha d'tzibbura* (bothering the congregation) for the men, we consider that this argument is also spurious because the Bat Mitzvah reading occurs at a juncture in the service that is often used for a break, such as for learning, a sermon, or even an appeal. Indeed, by hearing the Bat Mitzvah read, the men fulfill their own, often neglected obligation to "read twice, translate once." *Kevod hatzibbur* (respect for the community) is also not a problem. Violating *kevod hatzibbur* is defined by R. Yosef Kapah (mid to late twentieth century, Yemen, Jerusalem) as someone who is not obligated performing a *mitzvah* for those who are. In our model, because the men have already fulfilled their formal obligation in the men's reading, there can be no violation by listening to the Bat Mitzvah. (See our expanded discussion on these issues in *Modellim Hilkhatiyim*).

⁷ *Uvikashtem Misham* in *Ish Hahalakha*, Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 227–228. See also D. Landes, "The Theory and Halakhah of Reading Torah," in *My People's Prayer Book*, vol. 4 (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), pp. 29–31.

⁸ Rambam, *Laws of Prayer*, 12:11.

⁹ Jerusalem Talmud *Megillah* 4:1. According to the *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim*, 141, only those situated near the reading table must stand. Implicitly, listeners who voluntarily stand during the Torah reading enhance their own fulfillment of the commandment (*hiddur mitzvah*).

¹⁰ Elijah Gaon of Vilna (the Gra), Lithuania 1720–1797. *Bi'ur HaGra* on *Orach Hayyim* 146:2. See also *Pri Megadim* (R. Joseph Te'omim, 1727–1792).

Our young women, therefore, enter a special experience when they read from the Torah at their Bat Mitzvah; they are provided with an opportunity “to stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai.” Given that the Sinai experience exists only when the Torah reading is carried out in public (that is, with a *minyan*, which represents a microcosm of the Jewish people), it is important that the reading take place as part of a *minyan*. Careful attention to the logistics of the dual Torah readings can make the difference between a meaningful event and chaos. We suggest that at the men’s Torah reading service there be a minimum number of *Mi-sheberakhs* and no extra *aliyot* as a protracted men’s *keri’ah* makes listening to a double reading difficult. If the men’s Torah reading finishes before the women’s learning session, as it often does, the men can recite and have *kiddush* before the women come back to the service. Similarly, it is important that the *gabbaiyot* for the Bat Mitzvah’s reading ensure that the *aliyot* move along at a good pace, and the *Mi-sheberakhs* for the Bat Mitzvah and her family should be limited. We have found that when the service flows smoothly, the Bat Mitzvah will not be pressured to rush her *leyning*.

Learning and Celebration

In either model, the Bat Mitzvah can decide if she wants to give a *d’var Torah* or, alternatively, to complete a tractate of *Talmud* or *Mishnah* in celebration of becoming a Bat Mitzvah. If she chooses the latter, the *siyyum* can be made either on Friday night or Shabbat morning, before or after the service. Copies of the text to be discussed can be distributed to the congregation. After completing the tractate, the Bat Mitzvah recites the *hadran* and the Rabbi’s *kaddish* (either the expanded version if she finishes an actual tractate of *Talmud* or order of *Mishnah* or the standard version if she completes the *Mishnah* of one tractate), which is yet another liturgical expression of her becoming a Bat Mitzvah.

A festive meal can be served either Friday night or the following morning. Note that, according to the *Magen Avraham*,¹¹ a festive meal is obligatory for a Bar Mitzvah, as an expression of thanks that the boy has reached the age of Torah and commandments, regardless of whether or not there is a Torah reading¹²—just as it is required to have a festive meal for a bride and groom entering the covenant of marriage. Because the meal marks the boy’s joining the congregation of Jews who are required to uphold the commandments,¹³ there is no logical reason to differentiate between boys and girls. The Ben Ish Hai explicitly wonders why Bat Mitzvah celebrations are not held for girls, given that the obligation—and therefore also the joy—are equal.¹⁴

Conclusion

In both of our models, locating the Bat Mitzvah ceremony in the synagogue or in the midst of an entire congregation that includes both men and women demonstrates that the Bat

¹¹ R. Abraham Gumbiner, seventeenth century, commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*.

¹² R. Ya’ir Hayyim ben Moses Samson Bacharach (Germany, 1638–1702) supports the custom that if the Bar Mitzvah celebration does not fall on 13 years and one day, then only the Torah exposition makes it a festive meal of commandment—*se’udat mitzvah* (Responsa *Havvot Ya’ir* no. 70).

¹³ See the comments by the Maharshah in *Yam Shel Shlomo, Bava Kama 7:37*; see also the Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kama 87a*.

¹⁴ The Ben Ish Hai (1833–1904, Baghdad) ultimately bases the issue on local custom (*Re’eh*, 17).

Mitzvah is assuming her place in *Avodat HaShem*, the service of God, before the entire *tzibbur*. When the congregation provides girls with an opportunity to express their religious commitment in public, the *tzibbur* affirms their spiritual aspirations and channels them toward the next phase of a life of *Torah* and *mitzvot*.

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