

PARENTS AND SCHOOLS: PARTNERING TO CREATE MEANINGFUL *SEMAHOT*

by Rabbi Jeffrey Kobrin

I currently find myself uniquely poised to comment on the school's role in the Bat Mitzvah experience. On the one hand, I am a principal with dozens of Bat Mitzvah girls in my charge; on the other, I am a frequent carpool driver for my own middle school daughter who is living through the years of the *simha*-of-the-week club. It is in the latter role that I often feel I gain more insight into the experience of the Bat Mitzvah girl and her peers. Do the young women take note of the *divrei Torah*, or do I just receive minute-by-minute descriptions of ball gowns, tiaras, and which DJ was hired? What thought and preparations go into each event? I am then thankful for my day job, where I can explore how our schools can help parents and girls ensure that Bat Mitzvah celebrations are meaningful and positive arenas for spiritual growth.

Ideally, the role of a school in the life of a Bat Mitzvah girl has several dimensions. The school should serve as a resource for young women and parents seeking guidance as they plan for the Bat Mitzvah. Both girls and their parents often have many questions as they prepare for the Bat Mitzvah day. At such moments, a school has the opportunity to educate and work with the entire family. It should also serve as a venue for part of the celebration itself.

The school's role should begin well before the Bat Mitzvah event is more than a twinkle in the family's collective eye. On the practical front, it should provide a calendar coordinator (whether a member of the staff or a parent volunteer) to keep events from conflicting or being too close in time to each other. I also greatly admire schools that prevent extravagant gift-giving among classmates by collecting a set amount from each student and presenting each student with identical collective gifts from their classmates. The gifts can be presented at a small ceremony held mid-year, which can be an enjoyable "girls only" event.

Because there are so many available options for marking a Bat Mitzvah, the need for guidance and advice is that much more necessary. Many parents have never planned such an event before and have never thought of their daughters as entering adulthood. Often they ask me what is the "right way" to mark their daughter's official acceptance of *mitzvot*. Schools should offer such guidance to both students and their parents, whether in group or individual settings. Schools need to offer thoughtful guidelines that cover both practical (how late should the party run?) and hashkafic considerations (what learning goal is attainable for a young teen?). Educators should meet with families to discuss appropriate ways to celebrate the Bat Mitzvah, tailoring the preparations to each family and student. As part of those conversations and presentations, students and their families should be exposed to the myriad options available for the Bat Mitzvah girl to publicly demonstrate her acceptance of *mitzvot*.

Many families correctly see their celebrations as reflections of their values, status, and taste. A school can guide families to craft a child-centered celebration that reflects religiously age-appropriate values. In school, we try to help children actualize their potential. We are therefore well-positioned to help their parents do the same before and during the Bat Mitzvah event. We all want our daughters to gain a positive sense of meaning, an appreciation of the gifts God has given them, and a degree of lasting spiritual and psychological growth from their Bat Mitzvah experiences. To that end, schools and parents alike should push our young women to engage in serious text study; to make a *siyyum* on what they have learned; to learn to read from the Torah, *Navi*, or *Megillah*; and to do all types of *hesed* work as well.

Schools should also provide resources for parents looking for additional Torah learning opportunities for their daughters. I keep a list of inspiring and knowledgeable teachers and tutors for parents seeking recommendations. In addition to individual learning that young women undertake, schools should co-sponsor some of the wonderful learning programs (some geared for mothers and daughters learning together) run by such organizations as Drisha and Matan. (*Editor's note: See the articles by Elissa Shay Ordan and Rebecca Linzer in this issue.*)

For students seeking ideas for *hesed* programs, schools should also organize “*Hesed Fairs*,” inviting various organizations to showcase their work and volunteer opportunities. Organizations such as Areyvut (*Editor's note: See the article by Daniel Rothner in this issue*) and UJA's “Give a Mitzvah—Do a Mitzvah” help students connect with a variety of community service opportunities in both the United States and Israel. Schools can provide the forum for Bat Mitzvah girls to present their *mitzvah* projects to their classmates and collect funds or specific goods. We encourage the young women to pitch their projects to their fellow students, an opportunity that often takes place after *tefillah*. Many girls find the chance to speak to the entire school, about what was previously a private family idea, one of the most thrilling moments of their entire Bat Mitzvah experience.

Schools should also educate their students about what becoming a Bat Mitzvah means. What does *kabbalat ol mitzvot* mean? How will their lives now be different? Will the learning and *hesed* that they do end with their celebration, or will it continue thereafter—whether through the same project or through new ones? After all, the goal of Bat Mitzvah preparation is not merely to gain one-time skills, but to embark on a life of learning and *mitzvot*. Schools also need to instruct their students how to behave at Bat Mitzvah celebrations. One school required students to sign a behavioral contract that included promises to bid *mazal tov* to the family and to refrain from talking or sending text messages during the speeches.

As the date of the Bat Mitzvah approaches, a celebration in school can further reinforce the message of this milestone. One hopes that the young woman understands that the emphasis is on her reaching the age of *mitzvot*, not reaching the age of high heels, a ball gown, and a tiara. At the school celebration, the anxiety of the big-scale event is reduced. After all, this is but one moment in a crowded school day; the young woman is in school clothing, rather than a fancy outfit; and the collation that may follow is a modest breakfast rather than a lavish meal with dancing. It is our school policy for all collations to have nearly identical menus, which further helps focus attention on the *mitzvah* aspects of the event rather than on its material aspects.

If a school has a women's *tefillah* service at which girls can lead or read Torah, Bat Mitzvah girls may lead in that forum; ideally, though, I think that they ought to have the same audience as the boys. I therefore encourage Bat Mitzvah girls to deliver a *d'var Torah* to the coed *minyán* in school. The young

women then receive the same gift as do the boys, with the same public approbation and the same healthy pressure to publicly enter the world of adult *sh'mirat hamitzvot*.

Parents and Bat Mitzvah girls alike take great joy in celebrating this stage in their lives, both with friends and family as well as in school. The school, in turn, has an important role to play in encouraging families to celebrate the right things and to celebrate them appropriately. Partnering with families at such moments helps ensure a positive and meaningful experience for our daughters. Most importantly, perhaps by so doing we can shift the focus away from one moment in time—the party—to a family conversation about how the elements of learning and *mitzvot* can be integrated by both daughters and families into their daily lives.

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