

PREPARING FOR A BAT MITZVAH: A CELEBRATION OF A LIFETIME

by *Rabbi Benjamin J. Sameuls*

A year and a half or so before a girl's twelfth birthday, I meet with her and her parents in my study at our shul. The goal of this initial meeting is to discuss the child's upcoming Bat Mitzvah and to help her outline a program of educational preparation. Our conversation begins and ends with the girl herself. This meeting is not about her parents and their expectations, however important they may be. It is not about our community's celebrative norms, although standardized practices can positively shape our communal religious culture. It is certainly not about what her friends plan for their own Bat Mitzvah celebrations, even though we must be guardedly respectful of peer pressures. "*Hanokh la'na'arah al pi darkah*—Train a child in accordance with her way" (cf. Proverbs 22:6)—instructs us that education begins with the teacher understanding the student. Our initial meeting, therefore, aspires to excite and empower the ten-and-a-half year old sitting in the rabbi's study with the beginnings of a personalized Bat Mitzvah development plan.

During the conversation that ensues, we briefly study the beloved teaching in *Avot*, "The world stands on three things: *Torah, Avodah, v'Gemilut Hasadim*—study, prayer, and acts of kindness" (1:2). This tripartite Jewish mission statement serves as the curricular frame for Bat Mitzvah training. In preparing for a purposeful life of *Torah u'Mitzvot*, for becoming a Bat Mitzvah—literally, the daughter of *mitzvah*—every girl should undertake a Torah learning project, a commitment to grow in her appreciation and experience of *tefillah*, and a *hesed* activity, all independent of her formal schooling and individually tailored to her strengths and interests.

Kinyan Torah—that is, achieving a sense of relevant relationship to and personal ownership of our sacred literary tradition—guides our Torah learning project. For some, this is best accomplished, though not exclusively so, through learning to read from a *Sefer Torah*, and our shul proudly supports an active women's *tefillah* group at which many young women celebrate their Bat Mitzvah through *leyning*. Learning *ta'amei haMikra*, memorizing unpunctuated text and singing the words of the Torah in sync with the natural rhythms of biblical Hebrew, uniquely connects a person to Torah.

For other girls, studying *Tanakh* or *mishnayot* toward a *siyyum* with her mother or father may be their preferred project. The gift of shared study time with a parent can have an enduring impact on both child and parent. For the past few years, our community's women's learning organization, *Ma'ayan* (www.maayan.org), has hosted the Matan Mother-Daughter Bat Mitzvah learning project, which provides a wonderful opportunity for such shared Torah learning. (*Editor's note: See the article by Rebecca Linzer in this issue.*) For children with specialized learning needs, an individually tailored

learning project focused on a topic of interest taught through an appropriate pedagogic modality works best. (*Editor's note: See the article by Howard Blas in this issue.*)

In our shul of approximately two hundred families, I offer to make the time for a weekly *hevruta* with every child preparing for her or his Bat/Bar Mitzvah. Spending a half-hour each week with each child adds up to a considerable investment of time, but provides me an immeasurable privilege and opportunity to inspire and connect with my young congregants during this formative period of their lives.

For the vast majority of *B'not Mitzvah*, the learning project culminates in the creation of a *d'var Torah* that she will deliver from our pulpit after *tefillah* on the Shabbat morning of her celebration. With poise and confidence, the young woman becomes our community's teacher of Torah. In most cases, delivering a Bat Mitzvah *d'rasha* is an esteem-building and religiously empowering experience. However, during the year-long Bat Mitzvah preparation, I emphasize that the purpose of the Torah learning project is not to write a speech. The *d'var Torah* emerges from an autonomous encounter with Torah; the speech should be treated as a secondary outcome, not a primary objective.

For observant Jews, *tefillah* serves as a personal spiritual practice that connects us to God, self, and community. It is a regularly exercised rite during which we aspire to match attention and intention with our words and gestures. It is not an easy discipline for an adult, let alone for a young adolescent. Yet, it is crucial for religious communal socialization and advancing spiritual growth for each child on the cusp of Jewish adulthood to find her place within the *davening* community. Our Shabbat morning youth services work toward this goal, beginning at an earlier developmental stage. During the year before a Bat Mitzvah, concerted attendance by mother and daughter at regular *minyan* and, if so inclined, also at women's *tefillah* comprises an important component of the emerging young woman's preparation for Jewish religious communal life. Sharing these *tefillah* experiences in shul with friends her age contributes to the healthy formation of a supportive religious youth culture.

Finally, I encourage each Bat Mitzvah girl, as I do every Bar Mitzvah boy, to develop a plan for a significant *hesed* project to be carried out with a member of her family or through partnership with a friend or two. Although I am of course an advocate of *tzedakah*, I generally discourage money-raising projects, preferring hands-on, person-to-person acts of *hesed*. For example, young women in our shul have regularly visited Jewish nursing homes and performed with their musical instruments for the residents. Another young woman and her mother furnished a room at a battered woman's shelter and visited the shelter weekly to read to the children in residence. Yet another young woman played chess and discussed Torah with an elderly, home-bound couple in our community. Whereas *tzedakah* aspires to anonymity, *hesed* knowingly knits people together through acts of kindness, as *Tehillim* teaches: "*Olam hesed yibaneh*—the world is built through *hesed*" (89:3). Thus, the young woman emerges into the age of Jewish responsibility by building up community.

After outlining the recommended curriculum and interactively constructing an individualized Bat Mitzvah plan, I reiterate that becoming a Bat Mitzvah is about a serious, yet fun, program of preparing for a life of *Torah u'Mitzvot*. Being a Bat Mitzvah ultimately is not about a day of celebration, however glorious we will work to make it. Becoming a Bat Mitzvah begins a wonderful, new stage of religious status, ennobling obligation, and joyous responsibility in a young woman's life. To highlight this idea and de-emphasize the performance aspect of the Bat Mitzvah celebration further still, I recommend that the family plan to celebrate the young woman's "*bo bayom*"—the exact Hebrew date on which she will turn 12 and halakhically transform into a Bat Mitzvah. This can easily be accomplished by arranging for a

small family *se'udat mitzvah* on the night of her twelfth Hebrew birthday, at which she can perform her first *mitzvah* as a Bat Mitzvah and lead the family in the recitation of the evening *Shema*.

All of this can be quite daunting for a ten-and-a-half year old, though in my experience it is most intimidating for parents organizing their eldest child's Bat Mitzvah. It is hard for a young girl, and even for her parents, to anticipate all of the changes—emotional, developmental, and biological—that will transpire over the next 18 months. I always remind the pre-Bat Mitzvah girl and her parents that we don't have to worry right now about what the girl will actually perform at her Bat Mitzvah. Let's start by beginning with her preparations. A sense of achievement and progress in her preparations will assuredly build her confidence in her own skills and knowledge and put her at greater ease with the performative elements of her Bat Mitzvah festivities. More importantly, a positive experience during preparation for the Bat Mitzvah will teach that becoming a Bat Mitzvah is not about a performance or a party for a day, but a celebration of a lifetime.

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