

POST BAT MITZVAH: A FAMILY LOOKS BACK

The Marcus-Schwartz family celebrated Shalhevet's Bat Mitzvah this past winter. Here, Shalhevet, a 7th grade student at Hunter College High School in Manhattan, her mother, Dr. Bat Sheva Marcus, clinical director of the Medical Center for Female Sexuality in New York and a founding member of JOFA, and Yishai, her older brother, a SAR graduate and student at Yale University, reflect on the occasion and its significance.

SHALHEVET

My Bat Mitzvah celebration was almost identical to my brothers' *B'nei Mitzvah* and very similar to the Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations of many of my friends. The fact that I was a girl didn't make any kind of significant difference. It was only after the Bat Mitzvah when I really felt the difference between my religious observance and that of the boys I know.

I know that, in recent years, the gap between the ritual participation of men and women has become much smaller. At this point, the only place where I feel the distinction is in *tefillah*, where there is a huge difference between the public roles men and women can take. When my brothers go to shul during the week, they are often asked to *leyn* or *daven*, and even when they aren't, people always notice and appreciate the fact that they're there. On the other hand, I'm stuck in a box in the corner, either by myself or with a handful of other women. My role in shul hasn't changed at all since my Bat Mitzvah, except maybe that I'm there more often now.

But I think that can change and is changing already. Every few *Shabbatot* there's a partnership *minyán* in my neighborhood where I can take a more active role in *tefillah*, and I know that's something that women in my mother's generation couldn't have done after their Bat Mitzvah. We've come a long way, but there's still much further to go.

BAT SHEVA

The Bat Mitzvah is over. Like any family *simha*, it was a whirlwind of activity, and my husband and I had to fight hard not to lose sight of the big picture while being caught up in handling all the necessary details. But time gives a chance to reflect, and one of the important issues for me as an Orthodox feminist is how my daughter's Bat Mitzvah (both the celebratory events themselves as well as the much more difficult to define "status change") reflected or

shifted away from the model of the *B'nei Mitzvah* of her older brothers six and eight years earlier.

In some ways all three celebrations were much the same. In other ways the Bat Mitzvah was very different, and those differences are a bit painful.

The celebration echoed our older boys' model exactly. Shalhevet *leyned* her *parashah* on Shabbat at a partnership *minyan*. It was long, really long: the *maftir* on Shabbat Hanukkah ensured that. She read the *haftarah*. A *kiddush* followed the *tefillah*. On *Motze'i Shabbat*, she made a *siyyum* on *Seder Nezikin*. There was a party, with music and dancing.

Then, what was so different?

- Shalhevet was 12, not 13, and I remember thinking that it seemed unfair to burden her with so much prep work a year earlier than the boys. Yet on further reflection, I truly think that she was at just the same maturity level as the boys were at their *B'nei Mitzvah*. I remember saying at my older son's Bar Mitzvah that the preparatory year had been a crazy time of growth, and that I felt as though I was watching one of those fast-speed nature films in which a flower grows and blooms right before your eyes. I felt exactly the same way watching Shalhevet this past year. So, if indeed, part of what we want to do is capture that fragile, almost ethereal moment in time when our children begin to explore adulthood, the age discrepancy felt right to me. I don't think a Bar or Bat Mitzvah should be seen as the full flowering of adulthood, but rather as the celebration of the shoot poking its head from the ground. And 12 felt as right for a girl as 13 did for a boy.

- Another key difference is the level of community support for a Bar Mitzvah versus a Bat Mitzvah. Shalhevet is lucky enough to live in a community where what she chose to do for her Bat Mitzvah celebration—*leyning* her *parashah*—was not unique. There are other girls who *leyn* and other girls who make a *siyyum*. But it was still unusual. Many of her friends are still solely interested in their dress and the cotton candy machines—and their parents are okay with that in a way I don't think they would be for their sons. In addition, when I told people there was a list of *sefarim* at the local Judaica store that Shalhevet wanted as gifts, they seemed very surprised. She received more jewelry than my boys did and far fewer *kiddush* cups! It seems as if the community has a difficult time adjusting to the idea of a Bat Mitzvah as a meaningful rite of passage into the adult Jewish world, spiritually and intellectually, on a par with a Bar Mitzvah.

- The expectations following a Bat Mitzvah also differ. Someone recently asked my daughter what the biggest difference in her life has been since her Bat Mitzvah. I was amused by the question and was very curious about how she would respond. (I thought she would say something about the burden of writing thank-you notes.) She thought for a moment and answered, "I guess the fact that now I *daven Ma'ariv* every day as well." I smiled. Somehow she had integrated the message that her status had, in fact, changed dramatically now that she was a Bat Mitzvah and that, for all but a very few *mitzvot*, she holds responsibility equal to that of her brothers. However, it is unfortunately very hard

to hold onto that idea for very long because the *mitzvot* where her responsibility does diverge from her brothers are so public: counting for the *minyan*, *davening* from the *amud*, putting on *tefillin*. Yet in so many more ways, her status has shifted just like theirs had, including her *hiyyuv* in *tefillah*, her needing to take part in a *zimmun*, her *hiyyuv* in *tzedakah*, fasting, and fulfilling hundreds of other pertinent *mitzvot*. We are so quick to say that a girl's status doesn't change, and I live with a disquieting fear that we may communicate that message to her.

Through this process of planning for and celebrating my daughter's Bat Mitzvah, I have come to realize that, although we have done a fairly good job focusing on equalizing the girls' celebrations (and that is a very good thing because it sends a not-so-subtle message that we value the girl's transition as we do a boy's), we have been significantly less successful at equalizing the transition that we want them to make when becoming a Bat Mitzvah. I suppose that should not come as a surprise as it is a more difficult and much more fundamental change. But I do believe that these shifts will occur over time, and in the meantime she got some great jewelry!

YISHAI

My kid sister, Shalhevet, with whom I have always been close, was 10 years old when I left to study in yeshiva in Israel. When I returned, I was stunned by just how much she had matured in the span of only a year. She was suddenly grown up and in the midst of completing her study of *Seder Nezikin* and learning to *leyn* her Torah portion in preparation for her Bat Mitzvah.

Observing her preparations caused me to reminisce about my own feelings at the time of my Bar Mitzvah. In the first few months after turning 13, I took pride in my legal eligibility and liturgical preparedness. I looked forward to vacations and days off from school when I could attend the latest weekday *minyan*, primarily attended by elderly retired men, and could count on being called on to *leyn* or to lead the *davening*. The youthful pride has since worn off, but proper intent often follows from repeated performance, and I now have a profound sense of comfort in performing roles of active and genuine service to the community and worship of God.

During my last few years in high school, Shalhevet used to wake me up and drag me out to Sunday and vacation morning *minyanim*. But one *hol hamo'ed* morning as we walked home from shul, she turned to me and said plainly, "That was you who *leyned* this morning, right? I won't ever be able to do that." Of course, she was right. We live in a community where a partnership *minyan* meets often, and I'm sure that her flawless *keri'at haTorah* will be a frequent blessing to that *tzibbur*. But I don't think there is an Orthodox community anywhere that could support a late weekday morning *minyan* where, when a girl age 12 and two weeks walks in, the congregation can look up relieved that there is someone who knows the *leyning*. We have trained individual women who can truly maximize their gifts in the service of God, but we have not yet developed the communal framework to make these women feel ritually needed.

Most of us barely experience the formal status change that occurs the moment we become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Before the age of *mitzvot*, we are obligated to keep them for educational purposes. Afterward, although the source of obligation changes, our practice really does not. For me, becoming a Bar Mitzvah meant the ability to be the *minyan* go-to guy, responsible not only for myself but for others as well. Both Shalhevet and I know that, for her, this public ritual responsibility will occur far less frequently. But we can hope for a generation when young women will feel both the call of communal responsibility and the thrill of answering that call because, ultimately, commitment to God and community comes from both.

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