

## REFLECTIONS ON BAT MITZVAH AS AN EDUCATIONAL ENDEAVOR

*by Esther Krauss*

Twenty-five years ago the idea of celebrating a Bat Mitzvah was such a revolutionary idea that my parents refused to attend their granddaughter's day of celebration. Today most Orthodox circles celebrate a Bat Mitzvah in accordance with the religious outlook of the community to which they belong. For many, however, finding a meaningful and appropriate way to mark the occasion is a challenge.

A Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony is a rite of passage that should reflect the kind of life that the young person entering the age of religious maturity and responsibility is expected to lead. For boys, even within a diverse Orthodox community, there is a basic religious tradition that determines the general form of the celebration. In contrast, the Bat Mitzvah celebration largely lacks any such tradition and, in fact, entails dealing with sensitive and often controversial issues related to the evolving role of women in Orthodox Judaism.

Many of us who are mothers and even grandmothers are still struggling with our own religious identity in a community that is, at best, ambivalent about accepting the consequences of that struggle. In this shifting climate, how do we help our daughters find their place in a religious tradition that we want them to love and cherish as we do, yet one that even we often find frustrating?

Having gradually and tentatively identified with Orthodox feminism a long time ago, it is difficult for me to gauge how young mothers today answer this question. Many women of my generation gingerly took small steps toward acknowledging our own feelings about our place in Jewish life, and we often questioned the validity of these feelings. I am grateful that much has changed since then, and I take pride in the fact that my contemporaries and I helped facilitate that process. Yet, although it is gratifying to see confident religious young women take their Jewish practice seriously, I nonetheless suspect that the conflicts and challenges they face in raising their daughters are not so different from the ones that we experienced.

These challenges can best be expressed in educational terms. Educators are challenged to address the following question when formulating the goals of their educational program: "Should [we] develop young people to fit into the present society as it is, or do [we] have a revolutionary mission to develop young people who will seek to improve society?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 35.

Jewish educators, and parents as the primary educators of their children, feel caught between these two conflicting educational philosophies. Do we raise our children to live by values that favor traditional views of Judaism, or do we encourage them to value attempts at change? The answer is both, and therein lies the challenge. We want to help our children arrive at a personal commitment to an age-old tradition. We want our girls to be inspired with a deep commitment to the Torah that they symbolically accept at the age of Bat Mitzvah. We want them to choose a life of Torah that is meaningful to them personally, and we want them to feel a part of it. We also know that they will most likely face obstacles in achieving these goals within a tradition that has not been inclusive of women in key religious areas, and we want them to question and challenge these obstacles.

As the founding principal of a Modern Orthodox high school for girls, I was deeply committed to the goal of transmitting authentic Torah values to our students but I also grappled with a concomitant desire to address and encourage sociological changes. My dream of appointing a qualified woman to head the Talmud department—and an equally qualified man to head the *Tanakh* department— was fulfilled in short order in spite of initial resistance to a woman teaching Talmud at all. Even the students were initially uncomfortable with a female Talmud teacher, but she was able to gain their acceptance and respect through her impressive knowledge, personal integrity, and her deep devotion to Torah values and the centrality of Talmud study in Orthodox Judaism. They learned quickly to appreciate the benefits of having a Talmud teacher who, like themselves, had experienced and could identify with many of their own struggles, both textual and personal. I might add that her pride and joy in her own family that she freely shared with them helped some of the students to be more accepting of the new image of an educated religious female leader that she represented.

The inherent challenge of trying to balance these positions was brought home to me in an early discussion I had with my new Talmud chair when she chose to include in the tenth-grade curriculum a unit on the halakhic sources regarding the permissibility of women studying Talmud. She chose the topic to arm the students with source material to counter the inevitable challenges we knew they faced from older brothers, other family members, friends, or acquaintances. I reluctantly accepted her decision, but its implications were disturbing to me: not only because they illustrated the continued need to legitimate even so widely accepted a practice as Talmud study for women but, more importantly, because they ignored the damage this might do to a girl's self-image and self-esteem. How can she learn to take herself seriously as a Jewish woman if she has to defend her very right to learn Torah, a value that for men trumps so many other Jewish values? Did all the students respond to this teacher and what she represented in the same way? Definitely not. Some embraced the implications of this innovation because it resonated for them, in some cases driving them to eventually look for more progressive religious options. Others stored the experience away and came back to it in response to later life experiences. Still others, drawn to a perspective with which they were more comfortable and secure, went on to choose a much more traditional lifestyle.

It is not easy for girls today to sort out the conflicting messages they receive from their schools, communities, and society as a whole and to develop a wholesome religious identity. Significant social changes occur gradually and reluctantly in the Orthodox community and often result from small changes we make in our expectations and goals. The early introduction of such changes is important. A program such as the JOFA curriculum project, for instance, raises teachers' awareness of the opportunities inherent in the material they teach, not only to inspire students to love Torah, but also to subtly raise and address dormant gender issues in their classrooms at an early age. The example of the female chair of the Talmud department and the topics that she chose to teach similarly provides an object lesson in

teaching our daughters to revere Torah and traditional texts while challenging some of the assumptions of Torah scholarship, instruction, and leadership.

The Bat/Bar Mitzvah celebration that represents a child's transition to a more serious and responsible level of religious development should ideally be an authentic educational experience. For girls that is both more difficult and easier to achieve than for boys. As my daughter-in-law, the mother of my soon-to-be Bat Mitzvah granddaughter pointed out, the model for an authentic Bar Mitzvah celebration conveys quite clearly the religious obligations of a male Jew, particularly regarding Torah study and prayer. It also initiates him into the public arena and leaves him little room to shrink from a public role even if he is not inclined in that direction.

In contrast, for a girl, the lack of an accepted Bat Mitzvah model allows her the freedom to design a celebration that reflects her personal spiritual inclinations and that is most suited to her religious growth. However, such a celebration lacks the power of a public demonstration of fundamental religious obligations such as Torah study and prayer and assuming an active role in Jewish communal life. If we choose to incorporate into the Bat Mitzvah celebration such standard Bar Mitzvah rituals as public reading of the Bible, making a *siyyum*, or delivering a *d'var Torah*, it is important to recognize that, at this point in time, these rituals are not an authentic reflection of what most women do in the majority of Orthodox circles. However, if we encourage our young women to take on these roles, perhaps more of them will do so, and they may even influence older women to do so as well.

The choices that we make as parents and as educators of girls, as well as boys, are shaped by our most cherished principles and values, a keen understanding of our children, and the attitudes of the Jewish society that surrounds them. In the final analysis, the Bat Mitzvah celebration we choose for our daughter will either prepare her "to fit into present [Orthodox] society" or to be part of "a revolutionary mission...to improve it."

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