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THE JOFA journal

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FROM OUR OUTGOING PRESIDENT

# A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

*By Carol Kaufman Newman*

This issue of the Journal has brought a rush of memories to me about the Bat Mitzvah experiences of my three daughters.

My first daughter had her Bat Mitzvah more than 30 years ago. When she turned 11, we began conversations about what she would do to celebrate this milestone. I wanted it to be something significant—something that would involve deep and committed learning. I met obstacles at every turn. The first was finding a female teacher. Thirty years ago there weren't many women studying Jewish texts. The limited number of names I was given were mostly of women studying at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), a Conservative institution. Most of them were so involved in their own learning that they had no time to devote to teaching an 11-year-old. I finally found someone, a wonderful young woman named Judy Weinberg. She taught my daughter for a year, as they studied how to make one's prayer meaningful when it is already set (the issues of *keva* and *kavvanah*). I remember taking my daughter up to JTS to meet with Dr. Judith Hauptman, a professor of Talmud, who tested her orally to see that she really understood all she had learned.

Our thought was to have her present her learning on Shabbat morning after regular services. The women would be invited down from the balcony to join the men on the main floor. We thought this would present no problem. But when I asked to have her speak from the pulpit so she could be both seen and heard, I was told that only rabbis and visiting male guests spoke from the pulpit. The rabbi was adamant. Lucky for us, the senior rabbi allowed it.

Would it be inappropriate to say how great my oldest daughter was, as she taught from the Talmud and from Rambam and took questions from the audience? When she was finished, the rabbi who had originally resisted her speaking from the pulpit stood up and said, "If you learn only one thing from a person they are allowed to be called your teacher, and for a teacher you rise." The whole congregation then stood as my daughter descended from the *bimah*.

My second daughter also began studying at age 11 with a female teacher. I'm big on role models! They learned together for the year and compiled a 70-page Tu B'Shevat *seder*. She wrote all the Hebrew quotes by hand and did the illustrations. At the ceremony she led our guests through the *seder*, using the book she wrote as the guide. She was funny and charming. She had been my most shy child, but during the year of learning I watched her grow in an incredible way. She owned this

*continued on page 3*

## Transition at JOFA

At a recent Ramaz graduation, my great nephew Sam Feldstein gave the *d'var Torah*. He quoted Rabbi Jonathan Sacks saying: At some point everyone, teacher or leader, reaches their Jordan River which they will not be able to cross. After serving as president of JOFA for the last six years, I have reached that point. It has been a special privilege to work with Robin Bodner, our executive director and Karen Sponder and Tamima Wyszkowski, our current professional staff and all those who have served on our office team. The board of JOFA is made up of a unique group of dedicated women and working with them and with all of you towards our common goals has been an incredible experience.

Our new president, Judy Heicklen, is the next generation. She is smart, capable, full of new ideas and has an enormous amount of energy. Knowing Judy, I think in these next years she might be the one to take us across the Jordan.

חזק ואמץ

*Carol Kaufman Newman*

## In this Issue:



### EMERGING VOICES



### FROM THE EDITOR




# THE JOFA Journal

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## From Our Outgoing President, *continued from cover*

learning. She spoke with such poise and confidence. We had so many requests to print more copies that we finally had the book copyrighted.

My youngest daughter was born right after Shavuot. For her Bat Mitzvah, once again I found a female teacher, and together they studied the origins and laws of Shavuot. She too wrote a book of almost 100 pages filled with sources and commentary. Her teacher told her that if she ever wanted a PhD in Jewish studies she could use this as her thesis. She taught our invited guests for close to an hour—and there was not a bored person in the room.

This past October I watched as my first granddaughter, Erica, celebrated her Bat Mitzvah by making a *siyyum* on *massekhet* Rosh Hashanah. When my granddaughter turned 11, my daughter called and asked me to suggest a teacher who could work with Erica. How the landscape had changed. There were now so many learned women to choose from. Can you imagine my joy when I saw the importance the next generation was giving to learning?

So back to the beginning. More than thirty years ago when this saga began, there were very few Bat Mitzvah ceremonies. I think our daughter's ceremony was the first one in our shul. Parents used to ask their daughters if they wanted a Bat Mitzvah, and if they didn't that was accepted—though we never asked the boys if they wanted a Bar Mitzvah. The landscape continues to change. In the Modern Orthodox world the celebration of a Bat Mitzvah now seems to be a given. And I hear that even in the *haredi* world there is something done to acknowledge a girl reaching *gil mitzvot*—even if only a family dinner.

My oldest daughter's son just turned 11, and she has begun to think about his Bar Mitzvah. I recently spoke to her about it, and I would like to share with you some of her thoughts:

> I think that, because of the varieties of rituals that were crafted for girls for their Bat Mitzvahs, everyone now thinks more creatively about how to celebrate and mark this important moment in a child's life. Because I "taught about" a subject, and my sisters did too, because more girls study texts and make a *siyyum*, I think the traditional idea of reading the Torah as the only standard for a Bar Mitzvah boy in the modern Orthodox community is being rethought. Creative rituals inspired by Bat Mitzvah ceremonies are a tremendous help in planning a Bar Mitzvah for a creative and non-traditional son.

JOFA too has just celebrated its Bat Mitzvah year. We are proud to have reached this milestone and to have accomplished so much. However, there is still more work to be done. May we continue to grow, to be creative, and to fulfill our mission of enriching and uplifting individual and communal life for all Jews.

# Bat Mitzvah: Creating a Communal Space

*By Giti Bendheim and Barbara Gochberg*

Thinking about what the Bat Mitzvah experience means to today's 12-year-old girls raises important issues. For most girls, this rite of passage comes somewhere around the onset of puberty or adolescence, a long period of cognitive, emotional, and physical development that culminates in adulthood with the achievement of full psychosexual maturity. It is very clear that today's 12-year-old girls, who are in the sixth or seventh grade, are far removed from adulthood, let alone from the possibility of marriage or parenthood. Arrival at the age of Bat Mitzvah, although still signaling something about sexual maturity, no longer signals a readiness for marriage, as it may have in earlier times. It is thus no longer an inherently signifying moment, but rather a somewhat arbitrary marker set within a developmental zone whose physiological reality has long ago lost most of its functional purpose. This situation offers us the opportunity to make meaning of traditional demands in a modern setting.

The lack of symmetry between girls' changing halakhic status and psychosocial development produces a peculiar kind of dissonance. How do we help these young members of our community make sense of achieving Jewish womanhood while being deeply entrenched in twenty-first century girlhood? For a boy, reaching the age of Bar Mitzvah signals a change in formal public status in matters of making a *minyan*, putting on *tefillin*, and other public time-bound ritual practices. However, for a girl, arrival at this age does not bring many new public obligations, and those obligations that it does bring—like fasting or hearing the *megillah* and *shofar*—do not constitute changes in the ongoing flow of daily life. Unlike boys, who are suddenly "counted" as one of the adults when they reach the age of 13, girls do not tend to feel particularly "grown up" on becoming a Bat Mitzvah in the Modern Orthodox world. More than that, becoming a Bat Mitzvah can be somewhat confusing since whether a girl has reached puberty or not—whether she still feels like a little girl or has already become immersed in teen culture—she is officially an adult in the eyes of halakha, though she lacks any external symbols within which to ground her status. The fact of her having passed through a boundary is not visible to the community.

The question of making meaning of the Bat Mitzvah passage is complicated by the realities of the general culture as they affect the typical Modern Orthodox 12-year-old girl. On the one hand, cognitive theory tells us that a girl's intellectual development is congruent with the change in status that the Bat Mitzvah brings, coming precisely at the time when a girl's reasoning ability takes a quantum leap, allowing her to absorb information on a more abstract level than in previous years. This expanded intellectual ability has many, sometimes conflicting, implications. It brings her squarely into a general culture that beckons in new and provocative directions, and in the arena of her Jewish learning, it opens up the capacity for deeper intellectual exploration just when the Bat Mitzvah girl needs to commit herself to formal and informed religious practice.

This congruence is not true of a girl's psychosexual development. By sixth or seventh grade, American girls may

*continued on page 19*

# Bat Mitzvah: Historical and Halakhic Aspects

*By Dr. Norma Baumel Joseph*

The facts, just the facts, ma'am." Those were the oft-repeated words spoken by the detective in Dragnet, a popular TV show in the 1950s. They appeal to me as appropriate in exposing the many layers of misrepresentation that have created confusion in discussions concerning Bat Mitzvah in the Orthodox world. So let me begin with some surprising facts.

In every sector of the Orthodox Jewish world today, there is some form of Bat Mitzvah celebration or public recognition. In 1956, the year I turned 12, there was no Bat Mitzvah experience in Orthodox North America.[1] The Bat Mitzvah celebration seems new, and its spread in Orthodoxy today is feminist inspired. However, the original Bat Mitzvah celebrations were not inspired by feminism, nor were they Reconstructionist, as many people think.

The term "Bat Mitzvah" is a juridical category known in rabbinic literature and cited in the Talmud. Various sources refer to a girl who, at age 12 and one day, becomes legally obligated under Jewish law as an adult by virtue of her age alone.[2] There is no difference between Bar and Bat Mitzvah in categorical terms except that boys do not reach this age until 13. The rabbis discuss the classification for boys and girls in social, legal, and physical terms. There is no question or disagreement; a girl is a Bat Mitzvah at twelve and one day. She assumes legal and ritual responsibility at that age.

**A girl is a Bat Mitzvah at twelve and one day. She assumes legal and ritual responsibility at that age.**

There is no rabbinic discussion of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration for boys or girls, but the recognition of the change in their status varies.[3] Boys are recognized as members of the *minyan*. They can have an *aliya*. They wear *tefillin*. Thus, their coming of age has a public cast to it. It is visible and has a special significance. As *minyan* members they now represent the community, and they count publicly.

What exemplifies a girl's obligation? She must fast on Yom Kippur and is absent from the men's section of the synagogue.[4] These are private, publicly invisible acts. But there was one significant and possibly public act for a 12-year-old. At that point her father could no longer make betrothal arrangements for her without her consent. Furthermore, at 12½, she was considered a *bogeret*, able to make her own marital choices without her father's involvement at all. This radical change in a female's dependency was mostly communally unobserved.

But our current concern is with celebrations. Celebrations for boys probably did not begin until the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries in either the Ashkenazic or Sephardic milieu. And for girls? Most historians date the first Bat Mitzvah at 1922—that of Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, in New York.

But the facts are otherwise.

Aside from the detail that celebrations were possibly held in the United States around 1907,[5] Jewish celebrations of a girl's coming of age, or a puberty rite of passage, were known in Egypt, Italy, Baghdad, and Europe as early as the nineteenth century.[6] The early sources indicate some form of recognition, such as a private blessing, a father's *aliya* to the Torah, a rabbi's sermon, or the girl's public examination on Judaic matters, to mark a girl's coming of age.

The earliest reference to a Bat Mitzvah ceremony is from Italy in 1844. This was not a replica of a contemporary Bar Mitzvah, but there was a public recognition of the girl's attainment of maturity. We have similar anecdotal information from Warsaw, Lvov, France, and Berlin. (The oft-cited example of Rabbi Ettlinger in Germany is incorrect as he did not allow any such confirmation or Bat Mitzvah. Although he was forced by the state to examine the Jewish girls as to their competency on religious matters, he refused to allow this to be called a confirmation or a Bat Mitzvah.)[7] In 1907, Rabbi Eliahu Hazan held a synagogue celebration for *B'not Mitzvah* girls in Alexandria, Egypt. It was a celebration for those girls who had completed studies in religion and Jewish history.

Perhaps the most inspiring example of halakhic recognition for the validity of a celebration for girls is found in the writings of Rabbi Joseph Hayyim b. Elijah of Iraq, the Ben Ish Hai (1834-1909). In his text we have a rabbinic authority proclaim that it is a good idea for a father to make sure that there is some form of celebration for his daughter's Bat Mitzvah. Significantly, he advocates that there should be a liturgical element rather than only a party. He writes that the girl should wear a new garment so that she can say the blessing *shehehiyanu*. He then goes on to say that there is an equal sense of *simha* for the girl as there is for the boy.

This pronouncement is surely unprecedented and historic. First, the father should see to it that the girl's coming of age is appropriately celebrated. Then, by giving her a blessing to recite, he assures that the girl herself has a role to play rather than merely listening to a sermon on her new juridical status. Finally, he notes that, although this celebration is not practiced in his community it is a good idea. So internal sources serve as precedents for the Bat Mitzvah to take place.

The battle of contemporary Orthodoxies over Bat Mitzvah celebrations depends on a number of factors.

Primarily, decisors are split on the nature of the obligatory festive meal (*se'udat mitzvah*). A number of sources suggest an equal obligation on families of boys and girls. The clearest reference to a festive meal for a boy on his thirteenth birthday is found in the work of Rabbi Shlomo Luria (sixteenth-century Poland), *Yam Shel Shlomo* (*Bava Kama*, 7:37). Twentieth-century decisors in favor of a *se'udat mitzvah* in honor of a girl's Bat Mitzvah on her birthday are Rabbi Y. Nissim (*No'am* 7:4), Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (*Yabia Omer* 6:29.4, *Yehaveh Da'at* 2:29, 3:10), and Rabbi Chanoch Grossberg (*Ma'ayan* 13:42). Moreover, Rabbi Abraham Musafia, writing in the latter part of the nineteenth century (first printed in *No'am* 7 [5724, 1964] p. 4), claims that there is no difference between a boy and a girl in terms of the obligatory nature of the festive meal and that this festive meal was customarily held for boys and girls in France. These sources have been lost in Orthodoxy's current debate.

in 1922—appears to have been copied from Italian Orthodox communities. Additionally, that first celebration was not an egalitarian ritual at all. What Judith Kaplan did was to read from a printed Bible. She did not have an *aliya* to the Torah in a full traditional ritual sense. The ceremony was a precursor to today's Bat Mitzvah ritual in the Conservative and Reform movements, a ritual that was not instituted until the middle of the twentieth century, and even then there was much opposition to such celebrations within each movement. Most important, as we have seen, the facts indicate that there were halakhic sources that approved of Bat Mitzvah celebrations before any American versions were developed in the mid-1950s.

There is no evidence from his writings that Rabbi Feinstein was aware of these historical precedents. What would Rabbi Feinstein have ruled had he known the full origins of the Bat Mitzvah? Would he have agreed with


**Sharon Binder, Jerusalem, *Ki Ner Mitzvah veTorah Or*— For the commandment is a lamp: the teaching is a light. (Proverbs, 6:23)**

***Print for Bat Mitzvah to celebrate achievements in Torah study and reaching responsibility for the* mitzvot.**
***The artist uses the symbolism and colors found in traditional Sephardic jewelry, which often have rectangular cases with* p'sukim *placed inside. Icons of birds, wheat kernels and the "evil eye" symbolize fertility and good luck.***

The other factor informing the debate about Bat Mitzvah celebrations has been the fear of the source of the ritual or celebration (i.e., fear of non-Jewish practices or fear of copying non-Orthodox Jewish practices). For Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the Bat Mitzvah celebration is forbidden in part because it comes from the Conservative and Reform communities.[8] In fact, he equally disdained the Bar Mitzvah: "If I had the power, I also would cancel the celebration of the Bar Mitzvah for boys in our country since it is obvious it does not bring anyone closer to Torah and commandments."[9] Yet he allows that the Bar Mitzvah has its source in the laws of Torah study and obligations, whereas the Bat Mitzvah "is not in anyway prescribed and is merely an optional celebration like any birthday."[10] He emphatically refuses to allow it to be held in the synagogue: "The Bat Mitzvah ceremony is surely optional and worthless and there is no room to allow it in the synagogue. Especially since the source is from the Reform and Conservative."[11]

However, according to historical sources, the first recognized Reconstructionist celebration—that of Judith Kaplan

the Ben Ish Hai as Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef does? It is important to remember that Rabbi Feinstein spoke directly to the issues of Bat Mitzvah celebrations and rituals in five separate *teshuvot* in *Iggerot Moshe*. In one very interesting decision dated 1959, Rabbi Feinstein would seem to allow the girl on her twelfth birthday to say words of Torah in the sanctuary and have a *kiddush* to celebrate the *simha* there.[12] After clearly stating that a Bat Mitzvah celebration cannot take place in a synagogue because it is not an obligatory festive meal and optional feasts are not allowed in the synagogue proper, he consents to the following: "However, it is quite permissible to celebrate by sponsoring a *kiddush* in the synagogue since that is the custom for all such joyous occasions in this country. This *simha* is not of less import than any other such event. Moreover, the girl is permitted to say some words (*milim*) in honour of her *simha*." He considers that her birthday is a *simha*, and her father can celebrate that as any birthday. He just will

*continued on page 49*

# My Zeyde's Gift

*By Tammy Jacobowitz*

In my memory, I am nine years old, maybe ten. I am sitting close to my Zeyde at the shiny wood dining room table in my grandparents' home, poised at the edge of my chair. He sings a *pasuk* to the *trop* and I repeat it:

אלא תולדת נח, נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדרתיו
את האלקים התהלך נח.

This is the lineage of Noah: Noah was a righteous and whole-hearted man in his generation; Noah walked with God (Genesis 6:9).

"A little higher, Tamele. Try again. Yes, like that."

Now my Zeyde was no feminist; in his last years, when I was studying at and then graduated from Drisha, he could never quite make sense of what "this Drisha" was all about. He always filtered his reality through the prism of a shattered, Old World. The gymnastics lessons, Mishnah study, and colorful barrettes of my youth always seemed to baffle him. Yet, it was my Zeyde, my father's father, who introduced me, his young granddaughter, to the sing-song of Torah reading.


**Papercut for Bat Mitzvah. Debra Band, Potomac, Maryland.**

*The papercut presents symbols associated with the virtues we wish the Bat Mitzvah. The palm tree is associated with righteousness in Psalm 92. Grapes, representing joy and sanctification, curl around the base of the palm, while the roses and lilies symbolize beauty, modesty and the sweetness of the* mitzvot. *The two tablets represent those brought down from Sinai by Moshe and the pool of water symbolizes the Torah.*

Why did he teach me those first few *p'sukim*?

The very notion of a women's *tefillah* service or of women's *leyning* had never intersected with his world, and besides, he never taught my older sister. I wish I could tell a story about how Zeyde recognized a flicker of a spark inside of me and seized the opportunity, and how my enthusiasm for learning obscured the inconvenient fact that I was a girl. But the truth is that Zeyde's initiative remains a mystery to me.

Nevertheless, on the day of my Bat Mitzvah, Zeyde proudly listened to my strong voice, from the "men's gallery" in the kitchen of our family friend's home. He had ignited the spark, and my father had carried me through to the end; I read the entire *parashah* and *haftarah*. I was his student and my father's as well; Zeyde must have recognized the Pittsburgh and Piotrokov melodies that permeated the Teaneck home.

Celebrating my Bat Mitzvah liturgically—although it was many unfamiliar miles away from Zeyde's world—traversed the distance between his world and mine. The immediate *kahal* around me was made up of women and girls, but in my memory, I felt stronger ties to the men in the kitchen, whose traditions I channeled.

**The gift my father and *Zeyde* gave me only grew with time.**

(Memory is a tricky filter; I am sure my 12-year-old self would have said something entirely different. But looking back on it now, my Bat Mitzvah experience is contested ground—between my emerging identity as a Jewish woman and a deep rootedness to a traditional, male world that would never be as much mine as it was at the age of 12.)

In the years following my Bat Mitzvah, the gift my father and Zeyde gave me only grew with time. In many new settings, knowing how to *leyn* opened leadership doors for me, enabling me to create space for women to connect with each other and with God. It would not be a stretch for me to say that the *leyning* literacy I gained at the age of 12 did not just translate into my teaching others how to *leyn*: it fed my desire to become a teacher of Jewish texts.

Since I began teaching more than ten years ago, I have worked with many pre-Bat Mitzvah girls. Some decide to learn how to *leyn* for their Bat Mitzvah celebrations; others elect to spend the year learning a topic of their own choice in depth, one on one. Many are exceptional young women—highly intelligent, outspoken, dedicated—and I have enjoyed watching them develop into their full personalities as the years pass.

Yet, as much as the girls have made lasting impressions on me, it is increasingly the mothers who grab my attention. I notice the way they observe their daughters emerge as thinkers, doers, scholars—holding their own. I watch them marvel at their daughters' abilities, joyously observing

*continued on page 17*

# Preparing for a Bat Mitzvah: A Celebration of a Lifetime

*By Rabbi Benjamin J. Samuels*

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.

**The gift of shared study time with a parent can have an enduring impact on both child and parent.**

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

*continued on page 41*

**HELP BUILD JOFA'S BAT MITZVAH RESOURCE**

JOFA is building a resource for creative Bat Mitzvah practices.
Please share your unique Bat Mitzvah project ideas. Email jofa@jofa.org

# Blessed with Options: The Special Bat Mitzvah

*By Howard Blas*

Becoming a Bat Mitzvah has the potential to be affirming, celebratory, and a wonderful welcome into the Jewish community as a whole and into the community of Jewish women in particular. Yet, planning a Bat Mitzvah can be confusing and stressful, given the various practices accepted and the options available today. This stress is compounded for parents of daughters with special needs, who face additional issues and potential limitations. What if the young woman cannot read Hebrew, cannot learn a complete book of the Bible or *massekhet* of the Talmud, has difficulties writing or speaking publicly, or is unable to stand, speak, focus for long periods of time, or see the words on the page? Intellectual, physical, and developmental disabilities come in so many shapes and sizes, making it impossible to suggest a "one-size-fits-all" template for special-needs celebrations. How can families of girls with special needs start the process of marking a Bat Mitzvah?

**We are blessed with a range of meaningful options for marking a Bat Mitzvah.**

Families should begin with an honest look at what Bat Mitzvah means to them and to their child. They should ask themselves how they would feel if their daughter didn't celebrate her Bat Mitzvah in a fashion similar to her siblings and other girls in the community. Would this different kind of celebration be stressful or even embarrassing, or might it be an opportunity to showcase their daughter's unique strengths and talents? Families should continue with an assessment of their daughter's strengths and weaknesses. Are teachers always praising her artistic ability? Her good ear for music? Her *neshama* and compassion for others? Does *leyning* (or *leyning* more than a few verses, which she can learn, thanks to her good ear) seem like a huge challenge? Does the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Gemara make learning Talmud difficult? Does she need adaptive technology like an augmented communication device? Would a PowerPoint presentation or microphone make delivering a *d'var Torah* easier?

As a teacher of Bar and Bat Mitzvah students with a range of special needs and circumstances, I like to remind parents of the minimum requirement for Bat Mitzvah—turning 12! I then take it to the extreme, telling them, "If your daughter stays in bed, in her pajamas, on her 12th birthday, she will still become Bat Mitzvah, automatically. Now, let's look at what Bat Mitzvah means to you and your family and think of some wonderful options." I always remind parents that the process is much more important than the product ("the day") and that the child shouldn't get a stomach ache when the teacher arrives for the lesson; rather, she should be excited about the discussion or project that awaits. And the bar should always be set at the right height—not too high and not too low. I have worked with students who spent eight months learning to read (through transliteration) three verses of Torah. I have also worked with children with severe learning issues who had such amazing "musical ears" that they picked up pages of Torah reading without a problem.

We are blessed with a range of meaningful options for marking a Bat Mitzvah, ranging from Shabbat morning or afternoon services in the shul to celebrations on Sundays, Rosh Hodesh, Purim, and government holidays, outside (or inside) the shul. A non-Shabbat Bat Mitzvah may be less stressful because fewer people will attend, and one can use sound systems and computers for PowerPoint presentations. It can be helpful to have a discussion and brainstorming session with your rabbinic leader or Bat Mitzvah teacher. Tell him or her about your daughter and about your vision. You may be pleasantly surprised to learn what is possible!

Let me share some stories of special-needs *B'not Mitzvah* and their creative practices.

Shira's family began the process of planning a Bat Mitzvah for their daughter with learning issues by having Shabbat dinner with the female assistant congregational leader of their synagogue. They discussed Shira's love of the family's weekly Shabbat dinner and its associated rituals of *kiddush*, washing, *hamotzi*, and *birkat hamazon*. They decided to celebrate Shira's Bat Mitzvah with close family and friends enjoying a Shabbat dinner "narrated" by the Bat Mitzvah girl. Shira spent several months learning the Torah's story of creation and various laws and customs of Shabbat. After Friday night services in her shul, she eloquently welcomed her Shabbat dinner guests by saying,

> I would like to talk about Shabbat so you will have more information about Shabbat. I love Shabbat. I enjoy drinking grape juice and eating hallah. I like lighting Shabbat candles with my mom and Allie (my sister). We have Shabbat because God made things for six days and rested on the seventh day. On the seventh day, it is called "Shabbat." Shabbat starts on Friday evening when the sun goes down. Shabbat ends on Saturday night when the stars come out. Shabbat is fun. My favorite part of Shabbat is having Sharon's Sorbet for dessert! And being with my family.

Shira then led the guests in the lighting of the Shabbat candles, gave more detailed explanations of the *kiddush* and *hamotzi*, and shared details about her Bat Mitzvah learning and her upcoming family Bat Mitzvah trip to Israel. Looking back, Shira's mother reflected, "The best part of it was that in addition to her true feeling of pride and accomplishment, the intimacy of the dinner captured

Shira's true essence and that of our family."

Lindsay also celebrated her Bat Mitzvah with familiar Shabbat rituals playing a central role. Lindsay, who has cerebral palsy, had been participating twice a month in Chabad's Friendship Circle where she and her Friendship Circle Buddies socialized and learned about and took part in (mock and "real") Shabbat and holiday celebrations. Lindsay especially loved the matzah factory. In addition, her Friendship Circle Buddies regularly came over her house to play games, bake, and enjoy arts and crafts projects.

To mark Lindsay's Bat Mitzvah, the Chabad rabbi and rebbetzin hosted a Shabbat dinner and party for Lindsay and her Friendship Circle Buddies in their home. They gave her a special gift—Shabbat candle holders. Lindsay lit the candles and said the *berakha*. Lindsay's parents continue to be delighted when Lindsay lights candles each Friday night because "it reminds us of her special night—her Bat Mitzvah."

**Papercut. Archie Granot, Jerusalem.**

***Y'simekh Elohim k'Sarah, Rivkah, Rahel v'Leah.*** **Prayer of the Matriarchs**

Ilana goes to a school for children with learning disabilities. Because their synagogue and community are so central to them and important to Ilana, her family chose to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah by having Ilana deliver a *d'var Torah* in their shul on a Sunday morning. While her two brothers attended day schools, Ilana spent years learning privately about the *parashah*, Hebrew, Jewish history, ethics, and holidays, in addition to doing *hesed* projects. At her Bat Mitzvah, Ilana spoke eloquently about her *parashah—Kedoshim*—and what it means to be holy. She also spoke about counting the *omer*, a ritual observed nightly in her home. Her mother confessed that she, her husband, and most of their guests cried when they saw how confident Ilana was speaking from the *bimah* of their shul, saying, "We watched her assume the mantle of Bat Mitzvah before our eyes." The rabbi's wife spoke about Ilana's Hebrew name, Esther, which means "hidden," and observed, "Today is the time and place where Esther's *neshama* has been revered publicly!"

Some families like the idea of marking a Bat Mitzvah within the context of a prayer service. Jessica, a young woman with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning issues, delivered a *d'var Torah* on social justice and led several prayers in a Shabbat afternoon service. She learned her prayers through transliteration, as decoding Hebrew was difficult for her. Synagogues can also create a service at a non-*minyan* time and offer the Bat Mitzvah girl the opportunity to chant biblical verses and lead such prayers/songs as *Ashrei* and *Ein Kelokeinu*.

Children with cerebral palsy, articulation issues, and other physical disabilities have participated in non-Shabbat prayer services using adaptive technology, including augmented communication devices, computers, and PowerPoint presentations. Sarah, a young woman with cognitive and developmental disabilities, minimal verbal abilities, and some difficulty walking, participates in the *Jewish Gateways: Access to Jewish Education* program in Boston. Sarah helped lead services on Memorial Day in a very creative way: she sat next to her teacher and operated a large projector and speakers. As the teacher said, "Sarah will lead us in the *Shema*," Sarah pushed the buttons, covered her eyes, and the *Shema* was sung! When it was time for the *Torah* service, Sarah slowly walked up to the ark where she held the *Torah* (Sarah loves her plush *Torah*, which she holds at home every day). Sarah delivered her *d'var Torah*—about how she loves *Shabbat*, and how that day she was becoming a Bat Mitzvah—through a PowerPoint presentation.

Many families of children with special needs have discovered the benefits of holding a service in Israel, arguably the best multisensory learning environment in the world! In general, families can gear an Israel trip to the specific interests and abilities of their children. Girls who love nature can celebrate a Bat Mitzvah at Ne'ot Kedumim, the biblical nature preserve; history lovers can experience an archaeological Dig for a Day; and there are numerous *hesed* opportunities, such as picking fruit and vegetables through *Leket*: From Table to Table.

Some families choose to highlight their daughter's artistic strengths. Lisa displayed her artwork in her shul lobby, and guests were treated to an artist-led gallery tour and cocktails. Others highlight their daughter's musical and theater talents through actual performances at her Bat Mitzvah.

Through my experience, I have been impressed with just how much children with special needs actually understand about what it means to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. They truly understand that something profound happens, that something important is changing in their lives. Bat Mitzvah can be a wonderful opportunity for families to celebrate their daughter, her strengths, and her interests. The challenge for parents, rabbis, teachers, and the Jewish community is to continue searching for creative, meaningful ways for all girls to celebrate this important life-cycle event.

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# 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?"[1]

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.

**...finding a meaningful and appropriate way to mark the occasion is a challenge.**

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?

[1] Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 35.

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.

**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.**

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

*By Sheryl Robbin and Rabbi Daniel Landes*[1]

## 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.

**We consider that the reading of *Shir HaShirim* aloud by a Bat Mitzvah is a way of giving an ancient custom new meaning**

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 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 Luhot Ha-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 Caro[3] 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 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 the 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*.

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*.

*continued on page18*

## Rabbi Yehiel Ya'akov Weinberg's Argument in Favor of Bat Mitzvah Celebrations

The importance of the *teshuva* on Bat Mitzvah by Rabbi Weinberg in the early 1960's is that this major 20th century halakhic authority considered that Bat Mitzvah ceremonies can have value, regardless of whether there is any precedent for them in Orthodox communities. One must remember, however, that in this responsum, Rabbi Weinberg stated that a Bat Mitzvah should not take place in a synagogue, even at night, but rather in a private home or in a hall adjacent to the synagogue. His emphasis was on the educational aspect, and he stresses that the rabbi should give a *d'rasha* about the traditional responsibilities of a Jewish woman.

Some authorities oppose the Bat Mitzvah celebration on the grounds of: "You shall not follow their ways." (Lev.18:3)... However the initiators of this practice claim that they intend thereby to inculcate in the girl's heart a feeling of love for the commandments and pride in their Jewishness... It makes no difference to us that non-Jews celebrate their own confirmation ceremonies... There are those who oppose celebration of the Bat Mitzvah in the grounds that it goes against the practice of generations past, who did not follow that practice. Their contention, though, is really not legitimate, for previous generations did not have to deal with girls' education... Girls who grew up in Jewish homes inhaled the Jewish spirit effortlessly... Now, though, the generations have changed drastically... Straight logical reasoning and basic principles of pedagogy nearly compel us to celebrate girls' reaching the age of obligation in *mitzvot* as well. The distinction that is made between boys and girls on the issue of celebrating their maturation deeply injures the human sensibilities of the young woman who, in other domains, has already been awarded with so-called emancipation.

(*Seridei Esh*, 3:93, Mossad Harav Kook. Jerusalem, 1966. The responsum was written at the end of 1962 or early 1963 and first appeared in *Hapardes*, Nissan 1963. Rabbi Weinberg died in 1966.)

## Triplets 4 A Cause

Anna, Julia, and Noah Greenblatt recently finished fifth grade at Rosenbaum Yeshiva in River Edge, New Jersey, but these enterprising triplets have already begun their *hesed* component for Julia and Anna's *B'not Mitzvah* this coming winter and Noah's Bar Mitzvah the following year. Though these siblings will not celebrate reaching *gil mitzvot* at the same time, they have found a perfect way to work together: the three 11-year-olds have set up their own website (www.triplets4acause.com) to publicize *tzedakah* and *hesed* projects they have initiated. This is how they describe their effort:

> We did not want to start a project just for our Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. We wanted to use this time as a bridge to perform *hesed* throughout our lives. While we believe in the importance of taking our own money to place in a *tzedakah* box, we also believe strongly in action and working to help others. We agreed that we would find many different causes and put a lot of effort into them. Whether the cause is large or small, the person being helped benefits. Even by doing the smallest thing, you can brighten someone's day. We know how good we feel when someone is kind to us, and we want to be able to spread that feeling. As Hillel stated in *Pirkei Avot*, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if I am only for myself, what am I and if not now, when?" You have to be kind to everyone, because every person was created in the image of God (*b'tzelem elokim*). You can give *tzedakah* which is great, but if you inspire others to give as well, you can accomplish even more.

They have already planned and carried out a number of projects. Touched by horrific stories about genocide in Darfur, they prepared and hosted a "cookie and cocoa" sale, raising more than $1,800 to send to the Tel Aviv Foundation, an organization that provides shelter, food, clothing, and other needs for young refugees from Darfur who live in Tel Aviv. For their second project, they worked in a Manhattan soup kitchen on Thanksgiving as a way of expressing their gratitude for their good fortune in being able to afford food and helping those who cannot. Describing their day in the soup kitchen, the triplets noted the importance of talking to the people who came to get food and learning a little about their lives.

This summer the Greenblatt triplets decided to raise money to buy a special bike for a 12-year-old Teaneck boy with cerebral palsy. By assembling and selling care packages for kids in camp and promoting the project on their website, they hope to raise even more than the cost of the bike. Any extra proceeds will go to the Friendship Circle of Bergen Country, New Jersey, which helps families of children with special needs.

Although incorporating *hesed* into the celebration process is not a new phenomenon, with new generations and new technologies come new possibilities. The Greenblatts are using the Internet to make their efforts as successful as possible; donations have come in from far afield, as have suggestions for new projects and appeals for worthy causes. The website also serves as an example for people of all ages to see what can be accomplished by a Bar or Bat Mitzvah or certainly by three of them together.

## *HaTov Ve HaMeitiv*: Good for Oneself and for Others

*By Daniel Rothner*

A *mitzvah* or *hesed* project can provide young people celebrating their Bar or Bat Mitzvah with the perfect opportunity to reflect on who they are, who they want to be, and how they can best have an impact on the world. The self-reflective process of choosing, designing, and implementing a *mitzvah* project can serve to establish personal development goals and should be driven by the celebrants' individualized interests and the needs of the community that they are looking to enrich.

Areyvut, a nonprofit organization founded in 2002, offers Jewish day schools, congregational schools, synagogues, community centers, and families a variety of opportunities to empower their youth by creating programs that make core Jewish values real and meaningful to them. As the director of Areyvut, I work with *B'nei Mitzvah* celebrants and families to help them develop innovative and challenging projects that enhance their celebrations and ignite a lifelong commitment to the core Jewish values of *tzedakah*, *hesed*, and *tikkun olam*.

**_Mitzvah_ projects are vitally important for both young men and women.**

The idea that *hesed* projects are important for girls and not for boys is clearly misguided. *Mitzvah* projects are vitally important for both young men and women. Nevertheless in this article I focus on Bat Mitzvah projects with which Areyvut has been involved.

To be personally meaningful, a Bat Mitzvah *hesed* project should be driven by a hobby, concern, or passion that inspires the celebrant. While parents, families, and teachers can and should play a role in supporting the project, the Bat Mitzvah girl should begin the planning process with a brainstorming activity that identifies several activities that are important in her life, such as acting, art, cooking, movies, music, reading, shopping, or sports. She should then identify several causes that she feels passionate about; for example, animals, the environment, literacy, poverty, Israel, education, or children with special needs. Finally, she should consider how her interests, knowledge, and skills can be used to support one or more of the causes. In doing so, she will be able to elevate her everyday activities by employing them to help others.

Abby spent a long time deciding how to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah. She wanted to incorporate meaningful acts of *hesed* into the experience, to involve friends and family, to make

other people happy, and to learn a skill that she would be able to use again in the future to help those in need. After researching many possibilities, Abby chose to help organize a Mitzvah Clown training at her synagogue at which the participants—mainly her friends—learned how to apply clown make-up, make balloon animals, and bring joy to local seniors. For her first performance, she brought her parents and siblings to a senior center where her grandmother was a resident. While all the residents were excited by the performance, Abby's grandmother was overwhelmed with joy and pride.

In lieu of a Bat Mitzvah party, Abby planned to take her family and friends on a bus trip to perform at local community agencies. She looked forward to "clowning around" on an ongoing basis after the celebration. By using her dramatic talents, Abby was able to bring an additional level of meaning to her coming-of-age experience. By sharing her project with her family, friends, and neighbors, she was able to elevate her entire community through these acts of kindness.

While planning her Bat Mitzvah, Victoria realized that she had a strong interest in family, history, and community. She decided to use her family's roots in Jewish Harlem as an inspiration for her *mitzvah* project. She sponsored a guided Jewish Tour of Harlem and used the proceeds to donate a Talmud to the Old Broadway Synagogue, which has served the Jews of Harlem since 1911. This project enabled participants—many friends and families from her school—to learn a different perspective on modern Jewish history and to see a community they may never have encountered. Most of them did not know about the role that Jews had played in the history of Harlem. Through her project, she educated those around her and increased the potential for tolerance and partnership between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors.

Another student, Ayelet, decided to use her interest in baking to educate others about hunger and poverty in Israel and to raise money to support Israel's national food bank. She organized a cake-decorating class attended by more than 65 people, despite the snowy weather, and which raised more than $6,000. At the class, Ayelet explained the importance of doing something concrete to address hunger and poverty and shared literature about Israel's national food bank, as well as several other related agencies. Ayelet used her thank-you notes to reinforce the ideas that she discussed in the cake-decorating class, and is still actively involved in raising awareness about hunger and poverty in Israel.

We have found that partnering with an organization, as Ayelet did, often has the benefit of working with a representative who can provide education about the specific cause, and describe which related community needs remain unfulfilled and which volunteer opportunities are available. Additionally, the organization can offer the celebrant important information that can be shared with family and friends through invitations, speeches, thank-you notes, information videos, or handouts.

It is important to select a project that the Bat Mitzvah girl will continue to be involved with and to advocate for after the celebration. For example, Cheli raised money for Yad Sarah, the volunteer organization in Israel that facilitates home care for the disabled and elderly in Israel, by selling bracelets that said "*Ten Yad L'Yad Sarah*" (literally 'Give a hand to Yad Sarah') on them; she also volunteered with her family to build walkers at the Yad Sarah facility in Jerusalem. She then decided to create another fundraiser to help those affected by Israel's war with Lebanon. Cheli organized a play and all the proceeds were donated to Yad Sarah. Overall, Cheli raised about $2,300. After her Bat Mitzvah, she has continued to stay in contact with the staff and volunteers at Yad Sarah and even volunteered at the facility again this past summer.

**It is important to select a project that the Bat Mitzvah girl will continue to be involved with.**

Finding opportunities for ongoing involvement in a chosen organization greatly enriches the Bat Mitzvah experience. We therefore encourage young people, before they have chosen a *mitzvah* project, to speak to representatives from a variety of organizations and learn more about the agencies that are of particular interest to them. Areyvut creates *hesed* and volunteering fairs for this purpose, and they can be replicated in many communities.

At Areyvut, we have found that there are limitless ways to enhance a Bar or Bat Mitzvah through a *mitzvah* project that may be integrated into every aspect of the celebration: information can be included in invitations and thank-you notes; the theme can be reflected in centerpieces and party favors; and it can also be the topic of a speech at the party. In some cases, a fundraiser or volunteer opportunity can take the place of a formal party.

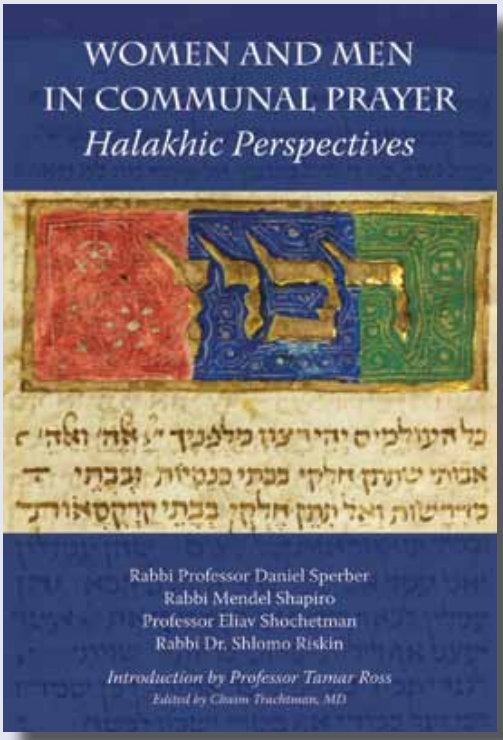
Bat Mitzvah girls who carry out a *mitzvah* project and share their experience with others create a celebration that continues well beyond the event itself. By involving others in acts of kindness, educating them about needs in the world, and setting an example for others to follow, they are able to have an impact that will not be forgotten.

At Areyvut we have a variety of programs and resources and would be more than happy to help celebrants and families with projects. We are also happy to provide schools, synagogues, and youth groups with information and assistance. Visit our website at www.areyvut.org or send us an email (info@areyvut.org).

***Daniel Rothner** is the founder and director of Areyvut. Previously he taught Judaic studies at the HAFTR and Heschel Middle Schools.*

# JOFA presents
# Women and Men in Communal Prayer: Halakhic Perspectives

The role of women in the synagogue is a major issue in contemporary Jewish life. This year, JOFA published a book dealing with the halakhic arguments relating to women *leyning* from the Torah in synagogue and receiving *aliyot*. These are complex issues, and in this volume, meticulously edited by Dr. Chaim Trachtman, JOFA presents a balanced review of the relevant halakhic literature, including contributions that argue that halakha does allow for women's *aliyot* and *keri'at haTorah*, as well as those that oppose that view. The centerpiece of the book is an extensive essay by Professor Rabbi Daniel Sperber of Bar Ilan University, which is an English adaptation of his Hebrew book, *The Path of Halakha: Women Reading the Torah: A Case of Pesika Policy* (Reuven Mass, 2007).




The book also includes the seminal essay, (originally published in *The Edah Journal* in 2001) by Rabbi Mendel Shapiro, an attorney living in Jerusalem, that explores the conditions in which women could have *aliyot* and read from the Torah in a "*mehitza* synagogue." In the words of Dr. Trachtman, this article provided "the practical impetus for the introduction of partnership *minyanim* around the world and represents a landmark paper in modern Orthodoxy." Shapiro analyzes the talmudic and rabbinic texts that use the concept of *kevod hatzibbur*—congregational dignity—to militate against allowing women to receive *aliyot*. The text that is used as a springboard for the discussion—the *baraita*[1] in *Megillah 23a*—is a complicated one. In addressing the argument that calling up a woman to the Torah disgraces the community by implying that there are no men who know how to read the Torah, Shapiro asserts that *kevod hatzibbur* is a context-related principle that can be waived by an individual congregation, and therefore there is a halakhic basis for women engaging in *keri'at haTorah* in contemporary synagogues. Shapiro also addresses many other issues raised by women reading from the Torah and receiving *aliyot*, such as the nature of the *mitzvah* itself, the role of established custom in inhibiting change, and *kol isha*. Based on his analysis, none of these factors should prevent the adoption of partnership *minyanim* in communities that choose to do so.

In his article, Rabbi Sperber explores the concept of *kevod hatzibbur* in a larger context by framing it against the halakhic principle of *kevod hab'riyot*—the principle of human dignity—that he believes can trump considerations of congregational dignity. Sperber presents examples to show that *kevod hab'riyot*, which he applies in this case to the sensibilities of Orthodox Jewish women today, has often been used by halakhic authorities in their decision making.

This book also gives voice to those who disagree with the arguments of Sperber and Shapiro, including articles by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Efrat, founder of Ohr Torah Stone educational networks in Israel, and Professor Eliav Schochetman, professor of Jewish law at Shaarei Mishpat College and professor emeritus of the Law Faculty at the Hebrew University. Both writers stress the power of existing customs in arguing that a congregation cannot relinquish its dignity with regard to women's *aliyot*. Riskin further argues that women do not have a *hiyyuv* with respect to public Torah reading and therefore cannot discharge that obligation for male members of a community.

Professor Tamar Ross provides an extensive and far-ranging introduction to the volume, skillfully situating the halakhic discussion about partnership *minyanim* in the context of feminist legal thought and the development of the halakhic process.

This book explores an important issue of key interest to those who wish to increase opportunities for women to participate in Jewish ritual life to the fullest extent possible within halakha. It is evident that not all readers will be of the same opinion on the issue of women's *aliyot*—indeed not all the writers are. Yet through this book, readers can learn about the

**Women and Men in Communal Prayer: Halakhic Perspectives**

*(ed. Chaim Trachtman, JOFA, 2010, KTAV Publishing House)*

Available from Amazon.com and local booksellers.

Rabbi Mendel Shapiro

Rabbi Daniel Sperber

halakhic sources used on both sides of the debate and can see an example of respectful disagreement between students of halakha.

What is especially valuable about this book are the important issues it raises regarding the halakhic process itself. In his essay, as well as the book's appendices and excurses, Sperber argues that halakha has always been dependent on context, both historical and sociological, and has always adjusted to the needs of the community. Sperber expands the scope of his query to explore issues of halakhic methodology and provide sources on issues of halakha particularly relevant to women—menstruation and *niddah*, women and *kaddish*, the blessing *she'lo asani isha*, and, of particular relevance to this JOFA Journal issue, Bat Mitzvah (pp. 180-183).

## What is the importance of changing norms in assessing the weight of halakhic precedent and custom?

The book raises many important questions. How should halakhic authorities today approach modernity in general and changing notions of gender relations in particular? To what extent should or must women's sensibilities be taken into account in halakhic development, particularly when we are not talking about all women? What is the importance of changing norms in assessing the weight of halakhic precedent and custom? How much can one rely on a minority opinion of the past to support a current position? In a religion that stresses the importance of accessibility of texts and serious study, what changes can be advocated by an individual person or congregation after serious study of the sources, what by a community rabbi, what only by rabbinical consensus, or what only by the acknowledged leaders of the generation, if they exist? What are the implications of incorporating the sensibilities of contemporary women into halakhic decision making for other areas of women's ritual participation—in the synagogue and outside of it?

These are significant questions for all of us who are dedicated to living our lives in accordance with halakha.

[1] Our Rabbis taught: All may be included among the seven (called to the Torah on Shabbat), even a minor and a woman, but the Sages said a woman should not read in the Torah because of the dignity of the congregation.

**My Zeyde's Gift**, *continued from page 6*

the girls surpass them in knowledge, skills, or experiences. Some of these mothers never had the opportunities that their girls assume are rightfully theirs. Their love of learning and their desire to give their daughters all that they never had have continually inspired me to give all I can to these girls: skills, knowledge, a sense of their place in our tradition, a role model. And when the mothers would close the door and my lesson with their daughters would begin, I would often feel the mothers' pain of separation—and their yearning to be close by and to be included.

In recent years, I have had the distinct pleasure of inviting mothers into the learning relationship, teaching mother-daughter pairs during that fragile, pre-adolescent period before the Bat Mitzvah celebration when communicating through learning is still fruitful and interesting to both parties. As I see it, my role is to facilitate learning between mother and daughter and to give them the tools and experience so that Torah learning may bond them to one another, long after our lessons are over. When our triangle of learning is at its best, we all take turns as the teacher.

When our son turned three, we celebrated his birthday with an *upsherin*, cutting his hair for the first time. Speaking at the party, I reflected on the difference between the *brit* and the *upsherin*, as well as the emotional distance we had traveled from celebrating the gift of his life to the milestone of differentiation, in which our son fully knew the difference between himself and his parents. As his mother, the *upsherin* was an important marker for my letting go, something that was only asked of me briefly at the *brit*, but that was demanded more fully as he shed his baby curls and baby attachments.

Now that we are halfway to our eldest daughter's Bat Mitzvah, I wonder how we will mark her milestone—which will also be ours, of course—and I wonder what my role may be in her preparation. Will it be time for me to let go even more and allow her to take the path she chooses? How will my husband and I model our values for her, without smothering her in our own visions? Will I encourage her to learn a skill that, even today, so many years after my Bat Mitzvah, is still underappreciated and undervalued in our communities? Will I be setting her up for disappointment or creating a new source of hope for her and our future?

For the time being, I take comfort in the thought that, at the heart of things, a Bat Mitzvah celebration brings together the old and the new, generation to generation, linking them in an overlapping chain of dreams, hopes, anxieties, and prayers.

*Tammy Jacobowitz is a teacher and scholar living in Teaneck, NJ. A co-writer of JOFA's Shemot curriculum, she graduated from the Drisha Scholars Circle and is currently completing her doctoral dissertation in Midrash at the University of Pennsylvania.*

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

*continued from page 13*

### 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 reading[12]—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 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*.

***Rabbi Daniel Landes** is the Rosh HaYeshiva of Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies. **Sheryl Robbin** is a social worker and writer. They are married and live in Jerusalem.*



[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.

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

[3] *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim*, 260.

[4] *Yadayim*, 3:5.

[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 Ovadiah 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, Orah 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 *Orah Hayyim* 146:2. See also *Pri Megadim* (R. Joseph Te'omim, 1727–1792).

[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 Maharshal 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).

## Bat Mitzvah: Creating a Communal Space

*continued from page 3*

know far more about sex and sexualized relationships from the media than their psyches can handle. While we like to hope that things are proceeding at a slower, more age-appropriate pace in the yeshiva and day school environment, the reality is that Modern Orthodox girls have access to and are interested in more aspects of modern teen culture than we would often like or care to admit. At a time when a girl is beginning to reach out in many directions to sample elements of experience that will ultimately allow her to consolidate an identity, the points of dissonance between Jewish and secular culture are—and should be—striking and jarring. This clash of values gives us and our girls an additional, very challenging dimension to negotiate, as we figure out how to live our modern lives by a sacred code.

In fact, in a secular culture where sexual activity is seen by many as the entry card to maturity and is largely disconnected from the notion of marriage, the Bat Mitzvah celebration takes on the potential significance of clarifying the distinction between being the daughter of the general culture and, literally, the "daughter of *mitzvah*." The job of emphasizing the gravity of this moment, which falls to parents, school, shul, and the Bat Mitzvah girl herself, is both sobering and exhilarating. The Bat Mitzvah celebration provides an opportunity to articulate a position that embraces a girl's nascent sexuality—something to celebrate—while not linking it to sexual activity. It marks a girl's progress, although she is nowhere near the finish line, in the process of separation and individuation, while not releasing her from parental supervision. It privileges her emerging ability—which has not yet been well-honed—to learn, judge, and make good choices in the defining context of strong Jewish values and practices. A Bat Mitzvah observance that takes note of a young girl's position along these developmental lines will afford her the maximum opportunity to experience joy, meaning, and satisfaction from this rite of passage.

Twelve-year-olds bring a predictable range of individual and developmental characteristics to this process of separation. The transfer of power from parent to peer has begun to take hold at this stage of adolescence. A girl of this age starts to move away from acknowledging her parents as the repository of power and arbiter of right and wrong toward a dependency on—and temporary identification with—her peers. Parental approval, though still important, takes a back seat to the approval of peers. This thrust toward the peer group serves the interest of separation, a crucial step in the process of identity formation.

Because their central concerns often revolve around their experience of themselves within their peer group, girls at this age look toward each other for moment-to-moment confirmation. They spend a considerable amount of internal energy on finding a place in the social group and calibrating subtle and more particular evaluations of the self and of others. At this age girls vary widely in their willingness to step forward in leadership roles and in their confidence and capacity to tolerate being different from their friends. Accordingly, some girls relish the performance aspects of current Bat Mitzvah celebrations, whereas others participate more reluctantly or are eager to opt out. These fraught and exciting developments are not a negative consequence of growing up, but rather part of a natural developmental progression.

It is important to note that daughters and mothers reach the moment of a daughter's Bat Mitzvah from opposite directions and that Modern Orthodox mothers, in turn, have their own "developmental" issues. Because our religious culture has left the Bat Mitzvah moment unscripted, it is often left to mothers to work out its particulars with their daughters. Planning a Bat Mitzvah may stir up memories for mothers of their own less meaningful Bat Mitzvah observance, reaffirm their more low-key Bat Mitzvah experience, or raise resentment that they had no celebration at all. For both parties, this moment can arouse deep feelings about what it means, or has meant, to be a female in the Modern Orthodox community.

Together, however, both peer pressure and adult experience can have a synergistic effect on the establishment of Bat Mitzvah observance when the peer group has already accepted for itself a positive and active model of observance. This happens most clearly when the community demonstrates a commitment to marking this rite of passage in an expected public way. Although girls of this age look to each other for the parameters of self-definition, they are also on the lookout for role models and images of strength and power as they explore possibilities for themselves. (This is why they love movie stars.) Resolute and empowering action on the part of adults in the community, most of whom are not their parents, gives these girls an idea of the strong, active, committed, and unique individuals they can become even as they are moving away from the parental adulation of their early years.

We can learn from the experience of boys that the ritualization of communal observance at a Bar Mitzvah is grounding, precisely because it is expected and generally non-optional. True, this expectation may feel pressuring and overwhelming for even the sturdiest young teenager, and there may be something to learn for both sexes from our current freedom to tailor a Bat Mitzvah observance to fit the individual girl. To raise daughters who have strong identities in the face of the complexities of Modern Orthodox life, communities, like parents, can set up disciplined but flexible expectations. However, failure to mark this halakhic developmental milestone through communal recognition risks conveying a lack of clarity about its meaning, and a consequent difficulty in transmitting the values it represents with honesty and coherence.

When a community articulates a formal framework for the Bat Mitzvah, it grasps the opportunity to harness the energy of the adolescent push toward self-differentiation and to use it to fuel the emergence of a Jewish identity. Providing choices that are commensurate with the powerful gravity of having arrived at halakhic maturity ensures that this rite of passage is not lost or trivialized in the face of the compelling claims of secular culture or the turmoil of early adolescence. Such a defining moment requires particular action grounded in a religious and psychosocial reality that affirms for a girl that she has arrived at a place that has been set for her by a welcoming community.

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# Celebrating the Opportunities, Lamenting the Limits

*By Amy Newman*

Soon after my eleventh birthday, I began learning to chant the extremely long *Parashat Naso*. I marked my Bat Mitzvah by *leyning* the *parashah* at the egalitarian shul my family joined after we became frustrated by the limited opportunities for women's participation at the traditional *minyan* where I had grown up.

Ten years later, I began studying Torah full-time at Drisha. My Zionist education had equipped me with excellent Hebrew skills, but I had little experience with religious texts. I was awed by my classmates' proficiency in halakha and Gemara. In the first week of our class on *kashrut*, we studied a section of Tractate *Hullin* that quotes excerpts of biblical verses on the laws of the Nazirite. When our teacher asked if anyone could quote these verses in context, I was immediately able to do because the laws of the Nazirite appear in *Parashat Naso*, which I have known by heart since I was 11 years old. Although I had not yet mastered (or even fully understood) the talmudic text that cites these verses, I felt proud to know their original context so intimately.

**...learning to *leyn* gives girls a sense of ownership of our holy texts.**

It was a transformative experience. In the decade since my Bat Mitzvah, I had made a series of religious choices that led me away from the egalitarian shul where I first *leyned* and toward a more traditional community. This moment in my halakha *shiur* reminded me how much I cherish the intimate relationship one develops with a text by learning to chant it. It affirmed my desire to include *leyning* in my Jewish practice, even though I had entered a community in which the opportunities for public *keri'at haTorah* do not usually extend to girls and women.

I soon discovered my niche. I became a Bat Mitzvah teacher for girls who were preparing to *leyn* in the women's *tefillah* group of a Modern Orthodox synagogue where most Bat Mitzvah celebrations consist of a party, a *d'var Torah*, and a *hesed* project, but where a few girls in each cohort do choose to *leyn*. Because I often teach the same girls in two different capacities—as their private *leyning* tutor and as a *Tanakh* teacher at the school they attend—I have a multifaceted perspective on their experiences. I have found it fascinating to observe both how the students respond to me as their female *leyning* teacher and how they navigate the process of learning to *leyn* in a setting where most girls do not do so.

I have been mostly delighted, but occasionally also troubled, by the ways in which the girls relate to me—delighted because most of them, even those who do not learn to *leyn*, think that it's cool that I know how to—and troubled because they seem to think this skill is unique to me. When one student heard that I was moving away, she asked, "Now who will teach my daughters to *leyn*?" She was being intentionally dramatic, but there was sincerity behind the drama. I worry that my students perceive that I am the only woman who can fill this role. I hope to convince them that there are many other women who can teach *leyning* and that, more importantly, they themselves are now equipped with the skills to teach their friends, mothers, and sisters.

***Megillah* Covers, Adina Gatt, Efod Art Embroidery, Nahariya.**

*From left to right,* **Megillah** *covers for* **Shir HaShirim** *(decorated with doves, apples and roses),* **Ruth** *(decorated with the Seven Species) and* **Kohelet** *(decorated with Hebrew letters). At the bottom of each is a verse from the Megillah for which it was designed.*

My *leyning* students know they are part of a small minority; 11-year-olds are acutely aware of their friends' choices, and any girl who learns to *leyn* knows that her women's *tefillah* Bat Mitzvah ceremony will be different from most of her peers' celebrations. For the small (but growing) group of girls at our school who mark their Bat Mitzvah by *leyning* Torah, the process serves to deepen their engagement with Judaism. In the Orthodox world, where there is often great distance—both literal and figurative—between women and Torah, learning to *leyn* gives girls a sense of ownership of our holy texts. In the weeks before a student's Bat Mitzvah, she and I spend a few lessons in the synagogue chapel, where she practices *leyning* from a *Sefer Torah*. By the second or third session, the student is usually comfortable removing the Torah from

the *aron kodesh*, placing it gently on the *shulhan*, and opening it to the appropriate place. It is inspiring to watch an almost 12-year-old girl prepare to take on the Torah's obligations by holding the scroll tightly in her arms and then expertly scanning its words to find the beginning of the *parashah* she has spent a year mastering. These girls are accustomed to seeing the *Sefer Torah* from across the *mehitza*, where it is carried and read by their male classmates. The experience of holding the Torah themselves, even if only a few times, is a powerful one.

Not only does learning to *leyn* bring a student closer to Torah, both physically and symbolically, but it also helps her learn Torah better. When teachers ask students to read and explain previously unseen passages, the girls who recognize the cantillation marks are able to punctuate the verses, pausing in the right places and emphasizing the right words, which are important steps in helping them decipher their meanings. They also experience for the first time the thrill of knowing a text with absolute proficiency, just as I experienced in my first week at Drisha.

**The sense that one is being concurrently pulled in and pushed away is a familiar tension for Orthodox feminists.**

One day last October, during a sixth-grade class on *Parashat Noah*, the teacher pointed out the verse in which the people of Babel say to each other, "*hava nivneh lanu ir*"—"let us build ourselves a city." She asked if anyone knew where else in the Torah someone says "*hava*"—"let us." This word appears in *Parashat Shemot*, which every student in the room had studied in my fifth-grade *humash* class, but Talia—who was preparing to *leyn* that *parashah* at her Bat Mitzvah—was the only student who knew that it was Pharaoh who said "*hava*, let us deal wisely with *B'nei Yisrael*." I was not in the room during that lesson, but heard about it from Talia's classmates, who were so impressed by her knowledge that they found me at lunch to tell me about it. I imagine the experience was as exciting for Talia as my moment at Drisha was for me. I hope it will motivate her—and her friends who admired her for her knowledge—to continue to pursue the same proficiency with other texts.

For the minority of girls at our school who mark their Bat Mitzvah by *leyning* Torah, the experience also seems to deepen their engagement with Jewish practice; it pulls them closer to Torah observance. I find great joy in seeing this positive effect. However, it is not always easy to be one of the girls who take on this project in a community where there are only limited opportunities for girls and women to *leyn* publicly. It is alienating for a girl to discover that the skill she has worked hard to master is not one that her school and shul will give her occasion to use. At the same time that learning to *leyn* pulls these girls closer to Torah, it also, paradoxically, pushes them away.

I am always proud when I hear that my students have continued to *leyn* after their Bat Mitzvah, but our school's women's *tefillah* group meets infrequently, and my students usually only experience Torah reading from across the *mehitza*. Exactly a year after one student's Bat Mitzvah, she listened to a male classmate *leyn* the *parashah* she still knew by heart. "He made mistakes," she told me afterward, and I could feel her frustration. She and the boy had grown up as equals, but now only he was allowed to participate fully in a ritual she felt just as qualified to perform.

I struggle to find the words to comfort students in situations like this one, because their feelings mirror my own. They simultaneously experience the excitement of being included in a ritual that was not open to Orthodox girls when their mothers were their age, and the alienation of learning that they will only be included in this ritual on rare occasions. The sense that one is being concurrently pulled in and pushed away is a familiar tension for Orthodox feminists. I suspect it is a defining emotion for many of us. Every new opportunity that is extended to women has its limits, and I invest great emotional energy in seeking a balance between celebrating the opportunity and lamenting the limitations. In the partnership *minyan* where I daven on Shabbat mornings, I love seeing the *sh'lihat tzibbur* assume her spot at the *amud* to lead *p'sukei d'zimra*, but I feel a pang when she takes her seat and a man replaces her there to lead *Shaharit*.

Watching my Bat Mitzvah students navigate this tension for the first time, I am aware that they are likely to experience it again and again, just like I do. Perhaps that explains my uncertainty in how to comfort them. I encourage my students to channel the same confidence that led them to choose to *leyn* when most of their friends did not and to direct it toward advocating for more opportunities for girls' participation. My wish for them is that the engagement that comes with learning to *leyn* will outweigh the alienation that sometimes accompanies it. I hope their enhanced Torah study skills and their increased sense of ownership of our holy texts will motivate each of them to carve out the role that best suits her in her school and her community. For the students who choose to pursue the Orthodox feminist path, I look forward to their joining me as my colleagues and—one day—as my teachers.

***Amy Newman*** *is a graduate of Drisha's Scholars Circle Program. Until this summer, she taught* Tanakh *at Ramaz Middle School and was co-chair of Darkhei Noam, a partnership* minyan *in Manhattan. She is now starting a master's program at Harvard Graduate School of Education.*

# *Leyning Megillat Esther*: The Ultimate Bat Mitzvah Gift

*By Alyza D. Lewin*

I will always be indebted to my parents for the Bat Mitzvah they gave me. I do not mean the party (although it was a wonderful celebration) or the presents. I mean the skill they provided me. For my Bat Mitzvah, my father taught me how to *leyn Megillat Esther* from a *klaf*—a handwritten parchment scroll. What began as a highly unusual Bat Mitzvah celebration has developed over the years into an annual practice that enhances my celebration of the Purim holiday, deepens my understanding of *Megillat Esther*, and has solidified my attitude toward women's participation in religious services.

I became a Bat Mitzvah when Jimmy Carter was president. At that time, the standard Bat Mitzvah celebration in my Orthodox Jewish community was a party (often at the Bat Mitzvah girl's home) during which she gave a *d'var Torah*. I attended an Orthodox Jewish day school, but only one classmate *leyned* from the Torah for her Bat Mitzvah—and that was because she (unlike the rest of the girls in my class) belonged to a Conservative synagogue. It was simply unheard of for a young woman from the Orthodox community to do such a thing.

Chani Shalev reading Megillat Esther on the occasion of her Bat Mitzvah.
*Hoshaya, Israel. Purim, 2010*

Maybe my father (as a parent of two daughters and no sons) felt a particular challenge to devise for his girls, Bat Mitzvah celebrations that would provide for them, within a halakhic framework, what a Bar Mitzvah celebration provides for a boy. Maybe that is why he taught me to *leyn Megillat Esther* and then taught my sister how to *leyn Megillat Ruth*. Why, after all, should a boy learn to *leyn* and gain the self-confidence that comes with mastering his Bar Mitzvah *parashah*—but not a girl? Why should a son master a skill he will be able to use time and again as he participates in and leads part of a religious service—but not a daughter? My Hebrew birthday is four days before Purim, so linking my Bat Mitzvah to the holiday seemed obvious. Having me *leyn Megillat Esther,* however, was novel.

At the time of my Bat Mitzvah, there was only one kosher restaurant in the Washington, DC area—the "Kosher Kitchen." We held my Bat Mitzvah celebration there on Purim at noon. I *leyned* the *Megillah*, a Purim *se'udah* followed, and in the spirit of the day, I also gave a humorous *d'var Torah*. I invited my entire class (including the boys) and my family's close friends and relatives—both men and women. I was blessed to have all four of my grandparents attend and cheer me on, including my maternal grandfather, Rabbi Morris E. Gordon—an American-born rabbi who received *semikha* from the Mir and Kamenetz yeshivot in Europe and gave *shi'urim* at Chaim Berlin and Yeshiva University's Talmudical Academy—and my paternal grandfather, Dr. Isaac Lewin, who was a leader of Agudath Israel, principal of Yeshiva University's Central Yeshiva High School for Girls, and son of the "Reisha" Rav.

**I have *leyned* the *Megillah* nearly every year since my Bat Mitzvah.**

The year after my Bat Mitzvah, I taught another young woman how to *leyn Megillat Esther* for her Bat Mitzvah. I remember feeling as if I had started a trend. I thought women's *Megillah* readings would soon become commonplace. But I was mistaken. It took a long time for the Orthodox Jewish community to truly embrace women *leyning Megillat Esther*.

I have *leyned* the *Megillah* nearly every year since my Bat Mitzvah. Initially, I organized a late morning reading for women at our family's synagogue (Beth Sholom in Potomac, Maryland), which was held in a room other than the sanctuary. Our efforts to do this—and a telephone conversation that Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, Rabbi Bertram Leff and my father had with Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on the topic—are memorialized in an article by Rabbi Aryeh Frimer on the *halakhot* of women's *Megillah* reading.[1]

When I went to Israel for a year after high school, I *leyned Megillat Esther* for my classmates at Michlelet Orot, the women's seminary I attended. Having a woman *leyn Megillah* was so unusual that most of the women who came to my reading taped me *leyning* the first chapter and sent home the cassettes so that their parents could hear it. In college, at Princeton, I arranged a late morning reading for students who did not hear the *Megillah* at the morning *minyan*. (Some respected *pos'kim* say that a woman's *Megillah* reading can be

[1] See http:/www.daat.ac.il/daat/English/tfila/frimer2.htm.

*motzi* a man's obligation to hear the *Megillah* if he does not attend a regular *minyan*.) And 16 years ago, when I moved back to Washington, DC I organized a women's *Megillah* reading on Purim morning at Kesher Israel Congregation. When I first suggested the idea, the synagogue rabbi was not eager to embrace it and gave only his cautious consent, but he has since become a strong supporter of our annual women's *Megillah* reading—particularly when he discovered that it regularly attracts women who, if not for the women's service, would not hear the *Megillah* at all on Purim day.

Our women's service (and others like it) have led many women to learn to *leyn* the *Megillah* on their own, enabling them to become active participants in the reading for the first time. Over the years I have made numerous cassette tapes for women who wanted to learn individual chapters so they could participate in women's *Megillah* readings. This year, I graduated to digital recordings.

Five years ago, my parents gave me another gift. Each year when I would *leyn*, I would arrange to borrow a *Megillat Esther* from my father. I finally asked for my own *Megillah*. My father then commissioned a highly regarded *sofer* in Israel to write a beautiful *Megillah* on a *klaf* especially for me. However, the *sofer* was never told that the *Megillah* was for me. My father told him it was for his son-in-law.

Today my Purim celebration is not complete unless I am able to *leyn* at least part of the *Megillah*. It may sound overly sentimental to some, but my personal *"simha v'sason"* on Purim is *leyning* Megillat Esther. When I *leyn*, I am not just reciting words to an audience that is half-listening. Instead, we are all participating. I share an amazing tale, the women drown out Haman's name, and we all celebrate the miracle of Purim together.

My experience with women's *Megillah* readings—and the impact that they have on both the women who *leyn* and those who listen—has shown me the importance of women's religious services. There is a qualitative difference in the experience for women when they listen to another woman *leyn* or lead the service as opposed to when they listen to a man *leyn* or lead the service. A Bat Mitzvah is an opportunity to provide a young woman with the skills she needs to fully engage in and experience such a service (just as a Bar Mitzvah is an opportunity to provide a young man with the skills he needs). I recognize that not every young woman will have the same reaction to *leyning Megillat Esther* that I have had. But as I begin thinking about what to do as a Bat Mitzvah celebration for each of my daughters, I find few alternatives that will provide them with the skills, the religious content, and the sense of accomplishment and self-confidence that my Bat Mitzvah provided me.

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## The Importance of Creativity

For committed families, a Bat Mitzvah is a time to mark achievement in studies, the development of public ritual roles, and the taking on of responsibility for observance of *mitzvot*. Yet as Joyce Klein points out, "A Bat Mitzvah is also a celebration—it should be fun! The challenge is to put religious meaning into the celebration." Coming at a time when most girls are dealing with the insecurities of adolescence, the Bat Mitzvah is also an opportunity for them to shine.

A drama consultant and Jewish educator living in Jerusalem, Klein considers it important for Bat Mitzvah girls to find their own voices and express their knowledge and talents in different ways. She works with girls to bring Torah portions and rabbinic texts and culture to life—often including sounds and tastes—incorporating interactive drama into the celebration. She has written raps for girls to perform based on their *divrei Torah* or on the texts they studied, sometimes with family members as back-up rappers. One girl's "rap" was based on *Massekhet Megillah*, which she had studied with her father. (In addition to being fun and unexpected, rapping has the additional benefit that it is considered by many families not to raise issues of *kol isha* because rapping is not singing.) For one Bat Mitzvah girl whose text study and *d'var Torah* had focused on *Megillat Ruth*, Klein planned a play based on the story of Ruth for the girl to perform along with relatives, her friends, and her parents' friends. This play was a true multigenerational experience, and performing in it became a way for friends and relatives to do something special for the Bat Mitzvah girl.

Klein makes clear that a Bat Mitzvah celebration is more than just a party. Developing strongly Jewish experiential aspects of achieving *gil mitzvot* can have long-term impact.

# 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 Schwartz making a *siyyum* at her *Motze'i Shabbat* Bat Mitzvah celebration, *Hanukkah 2009***

**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 *minyan* 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.

# The JOFA Conference: join the conversation

Sunday Plenary Speakers: (L. to R.) Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Erin Leib Smokler, Lisa Schlaff and Laura Shaw-Frank

***By Audrey Axelrod Trachtman**, JOFA Conference Chair*

Will Orthodoxy retain the devotion of all its members if it is perceived as discriminating against women? How do we challenge, resist, and adapt tradition to foster new rituals that adhere to halakha but belong to women as well as men? How do we keep our spiritual selves vibrant in an Orthodox environment where halakha is valued above all else? Do Orthodox feminists have a distinct viewpoint that can aid the fight for social justice?

These questions helped frame the meaningful conversations at the heart of this year's JOFA Conference, held at Columbia University on Saturday evening, March 13th and Sunday, March 14th. It was attended by over 1,000 women and men and featured more than sixty sessions.

At the opening plenary on Sunday morning, Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Lisa Schlaff, Laura Shaw-Frank, and Erin Leib Smokler shared their visions and reflections on the conference's four "pillars": Women in Leadership, Expanding Ritual Opportunity for Women, Spirituality, and Social Justice. These dynamic young women leaders provided a meaningful frame for the day's conversations and energized attendees as they moved on to the individual sessions. The leadership pillar included sessions on whether women's leadership will change the system and what the future holds for women in Orthodox communal leadership positions. Using JOFA's *Ta Shma*: Come and Learn halakhic source guide series, the ritual inclusion pillar featured sessions on women touching a Torah scroll, saying *kiddush*, and reciting *kaddish*. Other topics included women reading Torah, the inclusion of women's names in legal documents, challenges to the traditional wedding ceremony, and an exploration of Bat Mitzvah practices. Sessions about prayer, *mikveh*, and finding one's own covenantal texts were included in the spirituality pillar. The social justice pillar had sessions on the Women of the Wall, modern-day sex slavery, and many sessions on the *agunah* crisis. Twelve lunch sessions, featuring diverse discussion groups and text studies, provided attendees with additional ways to network with like-minded individuals.

Many world-renowned activists, scholars, and rabbis participated in the day's conversation. For the first time at a JOFA Conference, the president of Yeshiva University, Richard Joel, addressed participants, speaking about Jewish education for the next generation. Blu Greenberg spoke passionately about the need for halakhic justice for the *agunah*. Rabbi Dov Linzer discussed the *mehitza* and its meaning for marginalization and membership. Professor Tamar Ross challenged participants regarding their ways of thinking and talking about God. And Rabbi Daniel Sperber questioned whether the Rambam's views on women's leadership are applicable in today's world of learned women.

In planning this conference, many efforts were made to reach out to younger attendees. Significant discounts were offered to students and those under thirty. A first-ever Middle School Track was organized. (See the article on the opposite page.) Two sessions focused on high school students, and a lunch session was organized for them so they could meet each other. At another session three college students discussed being Orthodox women on campus, and there was a lunch session specifically for college students. On the Shabbat before the conference, students organized the first JOFA *Shabbaton* for college women; it was held at the Hebrew Institute at Riverdale where the students were able to hear from, talk with, and be inspired by Blu Greenberg and Rabba Sara Hurwitz.

Saturday evening featured JOFA's first film festival, "Chick Flicks Redefined." Thirteen films—documentaries, dramas, and comedies of different lengths—touched on issues relevant to JOFA's mission and constituency. More than 400 people filled the halls on a stormy night, enthusiastically discussing the films they had seen and participating in Q & A sessions with three of the filmmakers.

JOFA appreciates the contributions of our seventy presenters and all the committee members that made this conference so successful, so inclusive, and so enjoyable. We look forward to continuing the conversation.

Audio recordings of more than forty conference sessions are now available for free download from www.jofa.org

Rabba Sara Hurwitz addressing the Middle School Track

"Orthodox Women on Campus" panel

Crowd at Conference Film Festival (Rabbi Sperber, center)

# Join the Conversation—Only Louder! The JOFA Conference Middle School Track

*By Amy Newman and Daniela Bellows Schreiber, Middle School Track Co-Chairs*

JOFA launched its first-ever Middle School Track at its 2010 Conference, providing an opportunity for male and female students to engage openly with topics central to their Jewish lives. The twenty-seven participants came from fourteen schools.

The guiding themes of the day were authority and empowerment. The conversation began with questions like: Who influences the decisions we make? What happens when different sources of authority in our lives guide us in different or even conflicting directions? How do we go about making choices that are different from the ones set out for us?

The day continued with a session about *tzniut* as a concept above and beyond school dress codes for girls. The participants thought about the considerations involved in making a school dress code and what a dress code they created themselves might look like. Aaron Steinberg, representing Moving Traditions, led a session that addressed finding and listening to your inner voice, as well as the importance of occasionally "unplugging" and reveling in silence.

Dyonna Ginsburg of Bema'aglei Tzedek had made reservations for the participants at the best "mock" restaurants in town! The students had to decide where to eat, but tasty food was not the only criterion. They also had to consider how the restaurant staff was treated and paid and whether the restaurant paid its taxes. Dyonna introduced the students to ethical seals for kosher restaurants such as the Tav Chevrati of her organization in Israel and the Tav Hayosher of Uri L'Tzedek in America. Everyone was eager to see which of their favorite restaurants bear these certifications and offered to help bring the symbols to their respective communities.

Daniel Rothner of Areyvut (*Editor's note: See his article in this issue*) led the lunch session on "social action in action." The students came up with ideas and outlined action plans to help their various communities. Wendy Amsellem, director of the Dr. Beth Samuels High School Program at the Drisha Institute, taught the final session. Several parents of participants joined in to learn about the education of Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a Jewishly illiterate man who burned with the desire to study Torah. They explored Eliezer's decision-making process and how he navigated thorny familial issues to become one of the great scholars of the Mishnaic period.

The highlight of the day was the "Ask the Rabba" session with Rabba Sara Hurwitz. For many participants it was their first time hearing about Rabba Hurwitz, and they responded with openness, honesty, sincerity, and curiosity. Questions ranged from the practical (Should women wear short sleeves?) to the theological (Do you think Hashem wants women to be rabbis?). The students and parents were captivated by Rabba Hurwitz's thoughtful, graceful answers.

A month after the JOFA Conference, two middle school students from different states who met at the gathering wrote a joint letter to the Rabbinical Council of America in support of Rabba Hurwitz. They wrote, "We are two 13-year-old Jewish girls who heard Rabba Hurwitz speak, and were extremely moved by her cause… As young Jewish women, we find it exceedingly important that women play roles in clergy and Jewish Orthodoxy, so they can be our role models."

Overall the middle school track was a great success. Feedback from the participants was positive and inspiring and included the following comments:

- "I really enjoyed the talk about *tzniut*, but even more than that, I thought that it was super interesting to meet other kids and hear their take on events."
- "I especially loved the Rabba session, but I would have preferred it to be longer."
- "I really liked the *shiur* on *tzniut* and the "Ask the Rabba" session. They were gr8!!! I took lots of notes!"

# Toward a Meaningful Bat Mitzvah: A Father Reflects

*By Aryeh Rubin*

Felissa, Angelica, Maya—I am the father of three daughters, a circumstance that has led me to question Jewish tradition and ritual in ways that I never considered during the early years of my life. I was raised in a Modern Orthodox home in Brooklyn by refugee parents and attended yeshiva day school and then Yeshiva University. Although I have always been a feminist in theory, it was not until my early forties, after having daughters, that I began to refine my beliefs and, before long, to act on those beliefs—specifically my growing conviction that the limitations placed on women in the Jewish tradition must be addressed and redressed. Together with my wife, Raquel, I have endeavored to create space within the tradition for my daughters and, by extension, for all Jewish women. We have done this in the way we brought up our daughters, and we have done this in the way we celebrated the ritual of each Bat Mitzvah.

There is a blessing I came across in the fifteenth-century Italian women's *siddur* by Abraham Farissol that is housed at the Jewish Theological Seminary: "Blessed...that I was made a woman and not a man." That simple yet profound sentence is one that I have raised my daughters to embrace both in life generally and specifically in the context of Jewish tradition and ritual. On the occasions of their Bat Mitzvahs, all three of my daughters not only addressed the congregants of the Orthodox synagogue we attend in South Florida but all three also led an off-site women's *tefillah* service in which they read from the *Sefer Torah* and received an *aliya*.

An account of how we came to observe our daughters' Bat Mitzvahs as we have begins with the *simhat bat* ceremony we held for our youngest daughter, Maya. When my first two daughters were born, we had celebratory parties. When my third daughter was born in 1996, my wife and I held a *simhat bat* ceremony to formally and ritually welcome Maya into the covenant, into our people, and into our family. Although *simhat bat* ceremonies were not unheard of at the time, they were not the norm for the members of our extended community in our new home in South Florida. At that time, our oldest daughter Felissa was nine, and I had begun to think about how to observe her Bat Mitzvah. In many ways Maya's *simhat bat* ceremony was the precursor for Felissa's Bat Mitzvah, and it was thinking about the future Bat Mitzvah that spurred us to hold the *simhat bat*.

In compiling the text of the *simhat bat* service, I relied on the ceremony of the male *brit* for structure and context, as well as on several existing *simhat bat* prototypes. I consulted noted thinkers and rabbis, including Nessa Rapoport, Dr. Devora Steinmetz, and Rabbi Yitz and Blu Greenberg. I edited existing prayers, sometimes subtly and sometimes heavily. The profound satisfaction that our family and our guests derived from the *simhat bat* was unanticipated and very rewarding, and it gave us the confidence to move forward with Felissa's Bat Mitzvah.

Our goal was to create a ceremony that allowed Felissa to participate fully in a traditional ritual service while keeping within the broad parameters set by traditional Judaism and our synagogue. Although we had attended several Bat Mitzvahs at a women's *tefillah* group in New York, our shul was not yet ready for such a service. At the same time, we wanted to go a step further than what had been done already.

**Page of Blessings from Manuscript Woman's Siddur (Italian rite), 1471 (folio 5v).**

*Copied by famous scribe and scholar Abraham Farissol. Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The text is formulated for the use of a woman. The highlighted text blesses God "for making me a woman and not a man."*

As a result, we came up with a solution that we hoped would both honor our goals for the Bat Mitzvah and include our shul's community. We used a party room at a condominium building near our shul and set it up with a *bimah* and a borrowed ark and *Sefer Torah*. Felissa led *Shaharit* and read the Torah and *haftarah* portions in front of a group of about one hundred women and several men (the men sat behind an improvised *mehitza*).

The service was profoundly moving. Some of the women called up for an *aliya* cried while reciting the traditional prayer. Afterward, one of those women said, "I had heard hundreds of boys go up to the Torah and say this prayer, so I knew it very well…but I had never been allowed to be a part of it. So when I actually uttered the words, I felt for the first time that my presence mattered, that they were counting on me to say this prayer, and I felt a spiritual connection with God that I had never felt before."

At about 11 am, the entire group then walked to our shul in time for the Torah reading and *Musaf* service there. I had the *maftir aliya* and read the same *haftarah* that Felissa had read earlier. After the service concluded, Felissa addressed the congregation with a speech. Many of the guests left their *tallitot* on deliberately, to show that the service had not yet concluded. In her speech, Felissa said, "Earlier today I was the *hazanit* at a service. Many of you would consider this unorthodox and some would consider it non-Orthodox, but I am appreciative to have been part of it and now to share this part of my Bat Mitzvah with all of you in the shul." Her sisters expressed similar sentiments at their subsequent *B'not Mitzvah*.

Inspired by Felissa's Bat Mitzvah, some of the female guests chose to make a Bat Mitzvah for their own daughters. Many developed an interest in learning about Judaism and feminism, and several joined women's *tefillah* groups or Torah reading groups. The Chabad listserv had a field day with our event and as a result was exposed to a much wider audience.

A great deal of preparation went into Felissa's Bat Mitzvah. Felissa studied with a tutor for months. Ronnie Becher of Riverdale, a leader in the Orthodox feminist movement, and Blu Greenberg, a pioneer in Orthodox feminism, helped us conduct the service. I relied on their wisdom and feedback for guidance. However, we did depart from the guidelines of the Orthodox women's *tefillah* movement when Felissa led the women in *kedusha*. After Blu had pointed this out, we left the decision of whether to lead the *kedusha* up to Felissa, and she chose to do so. Blu later recounted that when she listened to the *kedusha* being recited for the first time at a women's *tefillah* service, "I felt myself torn. Inside of me was the struggle of women in Orthodoxy, a struggle between faithfulness to the rules, and coming closer to God. Faithfulness to the rules is a primary way of coming closer to God, but there are times when it would seem to create a distance and this was one of them."

When it came time for Angelica's Bat Mitzvah, we had more confidence, and we prepared for the service ourselves. It was similar in most ways to the service for Felissa, except that we chose to hold the women's *tefillah* service on a Thursday morning to create a more intimate experience and so we could be with the congregation for the entire Saturday service. In addition, Angelica led a Friday night, women-only Carlebach-style *Kabbalat Shabbat* service at the shul, attended by a large group of women, including the rebbetzin, who less than three years earlier had been unappreciative of our efforts for Felissa's Bat Mitzvah. Maya had similar Thursday and Friday services for her Bat Mitzvah.

Angelica had studied with a tutor to prepare for her Bat Mitzvah, but by the time Maya's turn came, I was fully ready to step up to the plate—in the tradition of fathers learning with their sons, I took on the task of teaching Maya. All three of my daughters studied from the same *tikkun* that I used to prepare to *leyn* for my Bar Mitzvah. After Felissa's Bat Mitzvah we decided to start a tradition of purchasing a *Sefer Torah* for each daughter in honor of her Bat Mitzvah. Angelica and Maya read from their own Torahs at their services; each daughter will be given her Torah under the *huppah* when she marries.

The reaction to our family's approach to our daughters' Bat Mitzvahs has been mixed. At the time of Felissa's in early 2000, our approach was revolutionary. Although many of the guests were deeply moved and inspired, there were also people present at the shul that day who were outraged, and some walked out. By late 2008, when Maya's Bat Mitzvah took place, the context was different—women are now receiving more recognition and their roles have expanded to the point that, in 2009 we witnessed the ordination of Sara Hurwitz, under the tutelage of Rabbi Avi Weiss.

Yet, at each Bat Mitzvah there were people who refused to participate in the service, those who were uncomfortable, and those who were opposed and cited halakhic dictates of the Talmud, particularly *Kiddushin* 80b: "Women are temperamentally light-headed." To that our response has been that we reject that statement, as do all enlightened people. Instead, we follow the dictate of Maimonides, who, in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (2:13), held that we must use our reason to guide us for when it is appropriate to accept long-held "truths" as well as to question or reject those "truths," and who in his *Letter on Astrology* stated, specifically in terms of the Talmud and *midrashim*, that certain words of the sages "may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him."

It has always been my hope that our family's approach to Bat Mitzvah and to the *simhat bat* would serve as models to others. As a result, we published *Toward a Meaningful Bat Mitzvah*, a book describing the Bat Mitzvah. It includes an introduction by Blu Greenberg, a description of the service, the responses of some of the guests, a chapter of suggestions on how to add meaning to a Bat Mitzvah service, statements by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and Rabbi Saul Berman, and a checklist and list of resources. Both the book and the *simhat bat* service can be downloaded from the Targum Shlishi website.[1]

Reflecting on her Bat Mitzvah two years after the event, Felissa asked, "Wouldn't it be awesome to live in an environment where both halves of the community participate as equal partners?" Yes, it would. It is crucial for today's rabbinic authorities to find a halakhic way to accommodate and nurture the religious needs of one-half of the Jewish population. And the Bat Mitzvah is only the beginning.

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[1] To download pdfs of the Bat Mitzvah book and the Simhat Bat service, visit www.targumshlishi.org, go to "Other Programs," and click on "Publications."

# 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

***Keva* (l) and *Kavvanah* (r), Oil Paintings. Tanya Fredman, New York.**

*Two panels relating to the struggle between* keva *(fixed ritual) and* kavvanah *(intention/feeling). The artist sees Bat Mitzvah as a critical point at which a young woman has the opportunity to meld* keva *and* kavvanah *into a whole uniquely hers. Each panel is a self portrait of the artist saying the* Shema. *A detailed grid system in* Keva *evokes a detail-oriented life focused on action and requirements. In* Kavvanah, *the fluidity, using color and light, portrays inner meaning and spirituality. Incorporated into the paintings is text from the Talmudic discussion on whether* mitzvot *require* kavvanah. *Originally from St Louis, Missouri, Tanya Fredman was a 2009/10 Drisha Art Fellow. She teaches art at the Abraham Joshua Heschel High School in New York.*

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 need to offer thoughtful guidelines that cover both practical... and hashkafic considerations**

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 *minyan* 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.

***Rabbi Jeffrey Kobrin*** *is the principal of the North Shore Hebrew Academy Middle School in Great Neck, New York. He received his* semikha *from REITS and his BA and MA from Columbia University, where he is currently pursuing a doctorate in English education.*

# Joining the Chain of Jewish Women: The Matan Mother-Daughter Bat Mitzvah Program

*By Rebecca Linzer*

In 1995, Oshra Koren, one of the first graduates of the Matan Scholars Program and presently the director of Matan HaSharon, the Mindy Greenberg Institute for Women's Torah Study in Ra'anana, was approached by a group of local mothers to create a Bat Mitzvah preparation program. The women said that, although their sons had a recognized way to prepare for their Bar Mitzvah, their daughters did not. Instead they planned a party, chose a dress, and, at best, read a *d'rasha* prepared by someone else. These mothers were seeking ways to add meaning to the Bat Mitzvah rite of passage.

In response to these requests, Matan HaSharon created a pilot program called "Jewish Women through the Ages," geared to identifying female Jewish role models throughout history. Its underlying principle was that a successful learning experience is not based solely on the intellect, but also on the emotions and on creativity. Therefore the program consisted not only of mother–daughter *hevruta* study but also of facilitator-led group discussions and related experiential activities. Each activity created a different atmosphere and invited different modes of self-expression such as dance, music, theater, art, and guided imagery. This three-pillared paradigm—*hevruta*, group discussion, and experiential activity—forms the basis for all the versions of the program in use today.

**...a successful learning experience is not based soley on the intellect, but also on the emotions and creativity.**

The appeal of the Bat Mitzvah program is its combination of learning and experiential programming, in which both mothers and daughters are involved. It creates a space for mothers and daughters to join together in a spiritual journey that transforms the mother–daughter relationship. Together they explore what it has meant to be a Jewish woman in generations past and what it means today. Our program helps Jewish girls and their mothers open new channels of communication just as the girls enter the teen years, when such communication can become difficult. The fact that a mother takes the time to spend one evening a week with her preteen daughter makes the daughter feel special. The *hevruta* process teaches the pair to respect each other's opinions and to make room for differences between them. The mother learns that her daughter is maturing and can be counted on for her opinion, and the daughter learns to express her thoughts to her mother. In a recent survey of daughters participating in the program in the United States, 88% felt they were closer to their mothers after completing the program and planned to spend more quality time together. The multigenerational draw is a strong one. Mothers who would never think of signing up for a Torah course for themselves will do so for their daughters. At the conclusion of many of our programs, the participants request continuation programs, either mother–daughter programs or programs for the mothers themselves who have rediscovered the experience of learning.

Building on the success of the pilot program, the Bat Mitzvah program has quickly spread throughout Israel and the Diaspora. Today, Matan-trained facilitators run groups in almost 100 locations in Israel and more than 60 in the Diaspora. The recent expansion of the North American Bat Mitzvah program has been made possible through a partnership with Legacy Heritage Fund. Matan works in each of the participating communities to train and empower local facilitators as educational resources and leaders.

## FOR FURTHER READING ON BAT MITZVAH

There are many readings now on the topic of Bat Mitzvah. We particularly recommend the volume issued by Matan, *Traditions and Celebrations for the Bat Mitzvah* edited by Ora Wiskind Elper (Urim Publications, 2003). It includes many valuable pieces, among them those by Rabbi Benny Lau, Rabbi Joel Wolowelsky, Erica Brown and Yardena Cope-Yossef. See also: Rabbi Daniel Sperber, "Appendix IX. Bat Mitsvah: Pro and Con Views" in *Women and Men in Communal Prayer: Halakhic Perspectives* (JOFA, Ktav 2010) pp.180-183. In 2000, JOFA issued a booklet entitled *Bat Mitzvah* in the series, *The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual: Options and Opportunities*, which is available at www.jofa.org. The JOFA website contains information about, and links to, many other important sources on Bat Mitzvah.

Coordinators of both the program in Israel and the Diaspora ensure that they receive constant feedback from both facilitators and participants, which enables the program to continue to evolve. Mothers with several daughters, who have done the program with each of them, find that the experience is different each time.

Although many religious schools include a Bat Mitzvah component in the year that the girls turn 12, it usually deals with *mitzvot* that are specific to women or a woman's obligations in fulfilling *mitzvot* in general. The Matan program takes a different approach. It focuses on Jewish role models, including Rivka, Miriam, Devorah, Chana, Esther, Bruriah, Dona Gracia, Nechama Leibowitz, Rabbanit Bracha Kapah of Jerusalem, and Avital Sharansky. These female role models were selected because they embody positive attributes and values from which the girls can learn.

By learning about these role models, the participating girls gain insight into the world of Jewish women and see that there are many different models of the "ideal Jewish woman," all of which are legitimate. As the girls reach maturity, they can develop their own unique path based on these models. Encountering these women through varied sources, both mothers and daughters are able to appreciate the uniqueness of these women's lives in relation not only to the period in which they lived but also to modern times.

Our approach to Bat Mitzvah preparation—using role models from history and from contemporary life to teach Jewish values—means that the program can be appropriate for women and girls from all backgrounds. Matan has adapted the program to appeal to secular women and their daughters. We found that it is important to limit the number of sources presented, so as not to overwhelm participants with less experience in Torah texts. Most importantly we created a ceremony to mark the end of the course. As most of the secular girls would not have a Bat Mitzvah celebration with religious content, we felt that it was important to add a ritual to the process. The girls perform a personal presentation on the meaning of their Bat Mitzvah and recite a special Bat Mitzvah prayer. We created a special *Mi-sheberakh* for the mothers (and fathers) to bless their daughters. We have been approached by schools and community centers all over Israel to share this program. One of its early participants expressed what the program meant to her: "I learned that becoming Bat Mitzvah is not about having to fast on Yom Kippur. It's about being a strong Jewish woman, like the women we learned about." We later developed a closing ceremony for the religious groups, similar to that for the secular ones.

Following the success of the program among Israel's secular population, we looked to offer the program for the non-day-school population in the Diaspora, which is quite different from the secular population in Israel. We made further adaptations to the program, including making accommodations for participants' lack of Hebrew knowledge and less knowledgeable Torah backgrounds. We also added a unit on the topic of *Tikkun Olam*.

**Our approach to Bat Mitzvah preparation...means that the program can be appropriate for women and girls from all backgrounds.**

There are currently five versions of the program: a religious, traditional, and secular program in Israel, and a religious and a nondenominational program in the Diaspora. More than 7,000 mothers and daughters have participated in the ten-session programs. In certain program series, following requests from fathers we have added one lesson that includes them. In response to requests, we have also incorporated a specific unit on "Women and the Land of Israel" in both Diaspora and Israeli programs.

Interestingly, although our program was started because the boys had a standard way to celebrate reaching the age of Bar Mitzvah and the girls did not, we are now receiving frequent requests to develop a parallel program for boys!

*Rebecca Linzer is the Overseas Coordinator of the Matan Bat Mitzvah Program.*

# Orthodox/Feminist: No Longer an Oxymoron

***By Suzanne Friedman Hochstein***

A few months ago, we celebrated our oldest granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah. Of course, it was wonderful, but more than that, it was an affirmation of my aspirations as an Orthodox feminist, and as such, it brought tears to my eyes. I think my children thought they were tears of emotion at my granddaughter's perfect, self-assured, and confident *leyning* of the *parashah*, which she read from the *Sefer Torah* that my father had written (when I was a budding feminist and he a male chauvinist, could either of us have imagined this?), but really, they were tears of joy at the knowledge that I had helped move a mountain.

*Tallit* for Bat Mitzvah Girl,
Adina Gatt, Efod Art Embroidery, Nahariya.

When I was growing up in New York, my family celebrated my twelfth birthday just as they celebrated every birthday—with an atonal rendition of "Happy Birthday to You," sung with loving alacrity, and a somewhat more special present: a gold Jewish star on a chain, my first "piece" of jewelry. The difference of this birthday was captured in the sentence, "Now, when you fast, it's for real." That was it. A Bat Mitzvah celebration wasn't for us, the Orthodox. A Sweet Sixteen party was more appropriate! In retrospect, years before Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*, my covert feminism was already at play—I refused to have a Sweet Sixteen party.

I read Betty Friedan's book in college in one sitting and was absolutely blown away. However there was nothing in the book to help me make the connection between being a feminist and being Orthodox, and I lived with that dichotomy for decades. After we made *aliya* almost 40 years ago, I went to meetings of feminists in Israel; I joined the Israel Women's Network; I learned enough to make me realize that a lot of what we accept as givens are actually a matter of interpretation; and I discussed, argued, and shouted my frustration with my family, my friends, and anyone I could buttonhole into listening to my sometimes strident expressions of anguish. But the feminist and the Orthodox remained two separate compartments of my life.

**...it was an affirmation of my aspirations as an Orthodox feminist**

Together with friends, in 1988 I helped to found Matan: The Women's Institute for Torah Studies in Jerusalem. We took the first small steps toward changing perceptions in Israel of what women could accomplish by demonstrating that women are not only allowed to learn but that they also have the intellectual capacity to learn Talmud as well as *Tanakh*, Jewish philosophy, and halakha. The hole in my soul began to shrink.

When my daughters were in elementary school, some of their teachers were from Beis Yaakov schools. In contrast, none of the teachers teaching my granddaughters today are from Beis Yaakov schools; some are Matan graduates, and all are university graduates. For the most part, my granddaughters can differentiate between what is written

## Elena Kagan: Twelve Year Old Trailblazer

Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan was the Lincoln Square Synagogue's first Bat Mitzvah in May 1973. Then it was called a Bat Torah ceremony. While Kagan wanted to have her Bat Mitzvah on a Shabbat morning and to *leyn* or chant the *haftarah*, the Bat Mitzvah crafted by Shlomo Riskin, the congregation's rabbi, took place on a Friday night and Kagan *leyned* selections from *Megillat Ruth*. Cantor Sherwood Goffin, *hazan* at Lincoln Square then and now, taught the Bat Mitzvah girl, who attended Hebrew school at Lincoln Square for three to four years. Kagan, at her Lincoln Square celebration, also spoke about the figure of Ruth, analyzed the biblical text and explored what being a Bat Mitzvah meant to her.

in the text and what is *midrash*. When I was a child, text and *midrash* were all jumbled together, and many things I thought were textual were not.

When my older daughter was 11, I took her with me to a community that had separate *hakkafot* and readings for and by women on Simhat Torah morning. She was there for my *hakkafa*, danced with the Torah, and was beside me when I had an *aliya*. But that experience couldn't erase the memory of the night before, when we were in our own shul. For the first time my husband had brought a Torah into the women's section, and some women and many of the girls danced. A number of women from my husband's family were there—and they turned their backs on us.

A few months later, I began my campaign. My daughter was born on the 15th of Av, which is traditionally perceived as the day of women, when, according to Mishnah *Ta'anit* 4:8, rich and poor girls exchanged clothes and danced in the fields and the men could choose a bride without consideration of her wealth or family *yichus*. I tried to persuade my daughter to put off her Bat Mitzvah celebration until Simhat Torah so that we could have a separate reading for and by women. I told her that she would be the star, the center of attention, as befits a girl coming of age and becoming part of the *kehilla*. At one point she looked at me and said, carefully and politely, "Why would I want to have a Bat Mitzvah to which most of my family wouldn't come?" And then I knew the fight was over. She had a wonderful Bat Mitzvah, she gave two *divrei Torah* that she wrote after months of learning with a young woman, and I was filled with pride—but it wasn't the Bat Mitzvah celebration that it could have been.

My younger daughter was born between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, eight years later. By that time there was Matan, and people—even in Israel and even in my husband's family—were more aware of women as learned members of the Modern Orthodox community. Of course she would have the Bat Mitzvah celebration that I wanted. But no. It was what I wanted; it wasn't yet what she wanted. The most I was able to wring out of the family—and the shul—was that she gave a *d'var Torah* in shul, standing at the slightly opened *mehitza*, and our sons (under duress) and my husband threw candies at her from the men's section. My husband and our sons got the *aliyot*.

Years later this same daughter invited us, her siblings, and a handful of friends to her *minyan* in Jerusalem to hear her read the *haftarah* for the first time. Afterward, she said she felt like it was her Bat Mitzvah.

In 1998, I was part of the group that founded Kolech: The Religious Women's Forum, in Israel. At the first exploratory meeting I discovered that there were many others like me. There was a world of women out there who wanted to expand the box into which the rabbis and Orthodoxy had put us, so that we could grow and stretch to the limits of what halakha actually allowed. My husband, our daughters, our sons, and even my late father, who was then in his nineties, attended the Kolech conferences. They heard, and they internalized what they heard.

When I asked my older daughter what her daughter would do to mark her Bat Mitzvah, she gave me a look of barely concealed pride and said, "She wants to read the whole *parashah* and the *haftarah*." When I asked where, she said that of course it would be in their shul, in a separate room, with the door open so that the men in the next room could hear her. There would also be a reading by a man in the main shul for those who couldn't or wouldn't go to hear a woman read. And, as I described earlier, it was amazing. She read the *parashah*; her mother, grandmothers, and aunts got the *aliyot*; and she gave the *d'var Torah*.

I asked my daughter what her second daughter would do for her Bat Mitzvah. By then, she explained, every girl would take at least a part in reading the *parashah/haftarah*. By then it would be a given.

So now I know—there is such a thing as Orthodox feminism, and I am an Orthodox feminist. Even now, I worry that the struggle to expand women's roles in Orthodoxy is still a minefield and vigilance remains the watchword. Yet, even if my daughters won't define themselves as Orthodox feminists, I am not disturbed. They won't define themselves as feminists because to them it's passé. It would be ludicrous to tell them they can't—they know that they can. God willing, so will my granddaughters.

***Suzanne Friedman Hochstein*** *graduated from Ramaz, Barnard, Columbia, and NYU and made* aliya *with her family in 1972. She lives in Jerusalem and is a co-founder of Matan: The Women's Institute for Torah Studies and of Kolech: The Religious Women's Forum.*

# From Generation to Generation: A Special Bonding

*By Rae Drazin*

When I was growing up in San Francisco, my parents made a simple *kiddush* in shul to celebrate my becoming a Bat Mitzvah. There were so few Orthodox families in our community that I had no real friends with whom to celebrate. As there were no boys in our family, I didn't feel cheated in any way, but I didn't feel particularly special either. In fact, what I remember most about the occasion was how unhappy I was that I could no longer sit with my father in shul.

When I moved to Los Angeles in 1968, I became involved with the women's liberation movement and began thinking about feminism, especially as it related


**Bronze Bat Mitzvah Medal, 1978.** Israel Government Mint. Inscription: "Arise, shine for your light has come." (Isaiah 60:1)
*Yeshiva University Museum. Gift of Charles Feingersh.*

to my religious observance. In the early 1970s, a group of women decided to form a women's prayer group. We consulted with local rabbis, but none would sanction our reading from a *Sefer Torah*. So we met in one of our homes, davened, studied, and read the *parashah* together. One of the leaders of the group, Ada Sharfman, *z"l*, was a Hebrew teacher who offered to teach each of us to chant the *haftarah* associated with our birthdays. We excitedly learned the *haftarah* trope, and each of us had another Bat Mitzvah. I remember bringing my oldest son, Noam, who was then 2 or 3 years old, with me for my Bat Mitzvah celebration. I chanted my *haftarah*, the women sang and celebrated with me, and of course, we had refreshments. It was wonderful!

When it was time for Noam to have his Bar Mitzvah, we decided to go to Israel to celebrate the event; his best friend came along. Noam's Bar Mitzvah took place at the Kotel on Thursday morning, and the celebration, which was intimate and attended mostly by family, continued over Shabbat. Our second son chose to have his Bar Mitzvah in Los Angeles so that he could be surrounded and supported by all his friends. With no daughters, there were no decisions to be made about marking the age of *mitzvot* for a girl.

I continued to pursue Jewish feminist ideas and began to attend Shirat Chana, the women's *tefillah* group at B'nai David-Judea. An opportunity arose to take a class in reading Torah, and I enrolled in it. I learned the *t'amim* for the Torah quickly and began *leyning* for Shirat Chana. I grew to love *leyning*, as it afforded me an intimate contact with the Torah.

When it came time to plan the Bat Mitzvah of Jennie, the daughter of my son Noam, he suggested that she consider having her celebration in Israel, as he had. Jennie jumped at the opportunity, and I was thrilled when she asked me if I would teach her to read her *parashah*. Since she was 5 years old, Jennie and I had been spending time together after school, "hanging out" and doing homework. Preparing for her Bat Mitzvah would be a very special opportunity for me to share my passion for *leyning* with my oldest granddaughter.

**A special bond was created between us, and I cherished every learning session.**

Jennie's *parashah* was *Tol'dot*, an especially rich one. We began our study before the summer, first by reading the *parashah* in English, then learning the *t'amim*, and finally by memorizing the *t'amim* for each *pasuk*. We studied together once a week, and Jennie practiced between sessions with a recording she listened to on her MP3 player. It was hard work, sometimes frustrating for both of us, but mostly it was wonderful. A special bond was created between us, and I cherished every learning session.

My son and daughter-in-law had arranged for Jennie to have her actual Bat Mitzvah in Jerusalem on Thursday morning, at Robinson's Arch. The site is secluded, removed from the main Kotel area and the hubbub of locals and tourists, and it is a place where women are permitted to read from the Torah. Our group, approximately 50 men and women, consisted of family, as well as a few friends who had made *aliya* and were thrilled to be a part of our *simha*. We set up a *mehitza* and placed the Torah on a table that straddled the men's and women's areas. It was early morning and birds flew overhead: there was a palpable sense of spirituality. This was indeed a special, holy place. Jennie's father led *Shaharit*.

When the time came for the Torah service, the *Sefer*

*continued on page 39*

# Makom: Finding a Place for Our Growing Girls

***By Aliza Sperling***

Is this a familiar story? A young woman studies for her Bat Mitzvah and does a wonderful job reading from the Torah and/or delivering a well-thought-out, interesting *d'var Torah*. Yet the next year, when you look around the synagogue, she is not there. After her time in the spotlight, she stops attending services and uses her talents elsewhere. Without a forum (besides the important exception of women's *tefillah* services) in which to participate in synagogue life, she looks to use her abilities in places where her talents are always welcomed and appreciated.

At Ohev Sholom in Washington, DC, our goal is to make sure that our girls grow up with markedly different experiences. Our rabbi, Shmuel Herzfeld, recognized early on that we needed to find avenues for our growing girls' participation and leadership within the shul throughout the year, and not only at the time of their *B'not Mitzvah*. We did not want our girls to grow up feeling isolated as their male counterparts prepared to lead synagogue services and read the Torah for the community on a consistent basis, while they watched from the other side of the *mehitza*. We were afraid that this experience would lead them to seek spiritual fulfillment through other avenues, resulting in a true loss to the synagogue and the Jewish community. Equally important, we did not want our boys growing up to think that girls do not have a place in the synagogue or feeling religiously superior to them.

To integrate girls' talents and leadership into shul life, we launched Makom: Finding A Place for Our Growing Girls. Makom's goal is to give girls the tools to increase their participation and sense of belonging in an Orthodox synagogue. Ultimately, the program seeks to provide girls with an important role in the synagogue as Torah scholars and educators. We are indebted to the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project and the Tikkun Olam Women's Foundation, along with several individuals, for helping fund Makom.

The Makom program consists primarily of two *Shabbatot* a year in which girls of all ages do all the teaching in our shul. A teenage girl delivers the main sermon before *Musaf*. Other girls deliver *divrei Torah* in between *aliyot*. Girls also teach the congregation at a special Friday night dinner and at *se'udah shlishit*. Young girls, starting from age 5, deliver *divrei Torah* in the youth groups. Any teaching that takes place on a Makom Shabbat is done by our girls.

The Makom *Shabbatot* are amazing. Girls deliver beautiful *divrei Torah* with confidence and poise. They focus on the *parashah* or a *mitzvah* and, in their own unique styles, tell us exactly what they think about it and the lessons they have drawn from their study.

Leading up to the *Shabbatot*, we have monthly *melaveh malka* study sessions for preteen girls and their mothers or the significant women in their lives. Usually, these sessions involve some text study and a hands-on project like baking hallah or making a craft. In addition, a speech coach leads public speaking workshops for the girls to assist them in delivering their *divrei Torah*.

What are the effects of the Makom *Shabbatot*?

- Unlike other programs that provide separate activities and study sessions for girls, the Makom program brings the girls into the congregation and spotlights their abilities there. In this way, the entire shul sees the girls in a position of leadership and understands how important they are to the well-being of the congregation. The girls too realize that their abilities are needed and desired by the entire congregation.
- In the Makom model, girls begin to teach the youth groups when they are five or six years old and may already teach the main congregation when they are age seven. As a result, when they become preteens or teenagers, these girls are not self-conscious or embarrassed to teach the congregation. Our aim is to create a culture where it is normal and expected for girls to get up in front of the congregation and teach.
- A girl's Bat Mitzvah celebration is no longer the only time in which she is expected to participate in shul or deliver a *d'var Torah*. Instead, it is part of a continuum of girls' participation and leadership in the shul. In this way, we hope to avert the phenomenon of the girl who celebrates her Bat Mitzvah and then drops out of shul.
- The impact on the congregation is profound. Rabbi Herzfeld has said that Makom generates the most overwhelmingly positive feedback of all our programs. Grown women break down in tears, remembering their childhood shul experiences and marveling at how things have changed. Little girls watch their older friends and picture themselves standing in front of the congregation one day. Men and boys learn from the incredible insights of the girls and adjust their expectations of what girls can and cannot do.

The Makom program is obviously not the answer to women and girls' ritual exclusion from shul. At times I worry that the program actually promotes their ritual exclusion by giving them a specifically non-liturgical role in front of the congregation. It is not my aim to create a culture of separate spheres in which men and boys participate ritually and women and girls participate only through teaching Torah.

Despite these doubts, I do believe that Makom is a valuable way for our girls to become Torah scholars and leaders in the shul. These girls are our future, and it is imperative to show them—and the rest of the congregation—how much we value their knowledge and leadership in shaping the Jewish lives of the next generation.

***Aliza Sperling** is an educator at the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning and director of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School of Greater Washington. She is also director of the Women's Beit Midrash and of Makom: Finding a Place for Our Growing Girls at Ohev Sholom Congregation in Washington, DC.*

# Becoming a Serious Jew

***By Sari Abrams***

When a baby boy is born into an Orthodox Jewish family, his ritual path to Jewish adulthood is more or less laid out for him, and there is little question as to how his Bar Mitzvah will be celebrated. Since the thirteenth century "the Bar Mitzvah rite has not changed… An *aliya* to the Torah is at the heart of the ritual."[1]

However, when a baby girl is born into that same family, there is no such single ritual path to Jewish adulthood that the parents are sure to follow. When that family desires to celebrate the Bat Mitzvah of their daughter, there is no set Orthodox ritual to which they can turn. In writing about Bat Mitzvah three decades ago, Abraham Bloch stated, "No ritual has as yet crystallized for this occasion… Bat Mitzvah celebrations are held in some Orthodox congregations in Israel. The girl receives a congregational gift and the sermon is addressed to her. The religious ritual, however, is confined to the male members of the family."[2] Though we have made much progress in the past 30 years in developing and creating religious rituals for girls celebrating their Bat Mitzvah, it is still far from universally accepted in Orthodox communities that girls should celebrate their Bat Mitzvah in a ritual manner.

One option that exists for girls in some communities is celebrating their Bat Mitzvah in the context of a women's *tefillah* group (WTG). I have been teaching girls to read Torah, in preparation for celebrating their Bat Mitzvah, in a WTG in Los Angeles for the past dozen years. WTGs have been praised by some as progressive and groundbreaking and criticized by others as pale imitations of services run by men. In fact, some have questioned whether a new generation of girls and women will have any interest in WTGs. To explore this issue, I asked mothers and daughters to describe their motivations for celebrating their Bat Mitzvah in our WTG and how they felt afterward. Additionally, I explored with the girls whether they had experienced conflict resulting from their decision to celebrate their Bat Mitzvah in a way that was different from most of their friends.

The most striking, but not surprising, theme to emerge from these discussions is that, in every case, the families were seeking a religiously and communally meaningful experience for their daughters through direct interaction with the Torah. The decision to celebrate their Bat Mitzvah in the WTG came from the conviction that a "Bat Mitzvah should be first of all a religious occasion, rather than simply a party, and that it should reflect in some way the accepting of *mitzvot*." One of the girls, now a college student, talked about how her friends planned very different celebrations from hers. Theirs "revolved around expense and show: rented hotel dance floors with blaring music, themes, never-ending party favors… I really could not understand how they connected to learning and teaching Torah." The sentiment that a Bat Mitzvah should be more than a party was repeatedly emphasized, by both mothers and daughters. One mother said that the WTG provided a "wonderful alternative to just giving a speech… and represents a way to equalize boys and girls in Orthodoxy."

Some of the mothers who also have sons felt strongly that they wanted their daughter's Bat Mitzvah to have as much meaning as their son's Bar Mitzvah. As one of those mothers stated, she wanted her daughter "to have her own meaningful transition into Jewish adulthood." Another mother, whose two daughters had celebrated their *B'not Mitzvah* in the WTG, said, "Bar Mitzvahs tend to be public events and I wanted my girls to have some sort of public event as well... We teach our children to love and live Torah and in order to do that we must be able to connect to a *Sefer Torah*." One young woman, who has two older brothers, said that celebrating a Bat Mitzvah in the WTG "makes you feel like you are becoming a member of the community, which being a Bat Mitzvah is all about."

Writer with student Danielle Lowe practicing before her Bat Mitzvah.

The experience of *davening* and learning together in a WTG can be a very spiritual one—and different from the experience of *davening* with men and women together. In reflecting on her decision to celebrate her daughter's Bat Mitzvah in the WTG, one mother shared this: "If women have their own religious world, their own separate thought world and particular spiritual camaraderie and outlook, why not celebrate that and initiate (my daughter) into that? That's what I love about the WTG, the women's religious connection, connection over text, over ritual, over a physical closeness with the Torah. The fact that it is all women is what's neat."

The girls and young women also shared some negative feelings that they had experienced before their Bat Mitzvah. Twelve-year-old girls can be particularly susceptible to peer pressure and may be painfully self-conscious

[1] Bloch, Abraham P. *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies* (New York: Ktav, 1980), p. 20.

[2] Ibid. p. 22.

and shy. Getting up in front of a room full of people to read from the Torah or to lead services was difficult for many of the girls. Additionally, learning how to *leyn* can be a time-consuming endeavor. Some of the girls were concerned about doing something that was different from their peers, imagining that it would lead to negative evaluation, perhaps even ridicule, by their peers. The mother of one of those girls shared that her daughter was initially very resistant to celebrating her Bat Mitzvah in a WTG. In large part that resistance was due to a heightened awareness that such a celebration did not "represent the norm for their class or their family and for an 11-year-old girl whose worst nightmare is to be different than her friends that can be a very powerful negative message."

**it is crucial to me that our collective daughters have the kind of opportunities that did not exist when I was growing up**

However, most of these same girls described feeling a great sense of pride and accomplishment after their Bat Mitzvah and talked about how, in the end, their friends enjoyed being at the WTG service and were impressed with all they did. Several of the young women who once were my students have become Bat Mitzvah teachers themselves. One young woman, who recently taught her own sister to read Torah for her Bat Mitzvah, expressed that being "able to pass on my passion for learning and *leyning* to my own family has been the sweetest reward for my original efforts." Another young woman paid her experience the ultimate compliment: "I would definitely encourage my own daughter to have a Bat Mitzvah similar to my own."

A difficult issue with which parents sometimes have to grapple is how much to push their daughters to celebrate their Bat Mitzvah with more than just a party. One mother stated emphatically that "I don't buy 'my daughter doesn't want to do this' attitude. Parents don't give their boys a choice. By parents not taking a Bat Mitzvah as seriously as the boys they are just promoting complacency in the girls." It is certainly not easy to force your child to do something she does not want to do. However, it is important to evaluate the reasons why she does not want to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah in a religious ceremony. If we can "normalize" the experience for our young girls so they grow up attending women's *tefillah*, observing women and teenage girls taking on roles that have traditionally been left to men and boys, there is a good chance that they will assume from a young age that, just as an *aliya* to the Torah is the heart of the ritual for a Bar Mitzvah, so too, an *aliya* to the Torah is the heart of the ritual for a Bat Mitzvah.

I myself have no daughters. Nevertheless I have invested my heart and soul in running and maintaining our WTG because it is crucial to me that our collective daughters have the kind of opportunities that did not exist when I was growing up, to feel they are valued members of the Jewish community. They must be able to stand before the congregation, as our sons do, and declare, "I am a serious Jew."

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### From Generation to Generation: A Special Bonding,

*continued from page 36*

*Torah* was placed in my arms so that I could take it around to the women. They greeted me with broad smiles! The *Sefer Torah* was then placed on the table, and Jennie *leyned* flawlessly. Could it get any better than this? My heart was so full! My only regret was that my mother, Jennie's great-grandmother, did not live to witness this extraordinary event. After *keri'at haTorah* and the conclusion of the service, it was clear that Jennie felt that she had been transformed from a girl to a Jewish woman.

Jennie's Bat Mitzvah celebration did not end with the morning service. She led a tour of the Temple excavations after *davening*, and then on Shabbat, at a private *minyan* at Nevel David on Har Tzion, she *leyned* the entire *parashah* of *Tol'dot* while I stood at her side. It is difficult to articulate the feelings I experienced throughout that weekend. I was so proud of Jennie and knew I would count this special time with her among the highlights of my life.

With God's help, I will teach Jennie's sisters as I taught Jennie. The next Bat Mitzvah will take place in three years. I look forward to experiencing this special bonding again with Lily and with Marlee.

When I compare my own Bat Mitzvah experience with Jennie's, it seems like two different worlds. I hope that the "partnership" model of a Bat Mitzvah service will become more normative, and girls will know that they, along with their brothers, can mark the age of accepting *mitzvot* through an intimate relationship with the Torah. In the same way as boys are often taught their *parashah* by their fathers or grandfathers, a Bat Mitzvah girl can study her *parashah* with a significant female figure in her life. The special bonding that results through this learning experience adds an additional layer of meaning to this coming-of-age ceremony.

***Rae Drazin** is a microbiologist and president of a consulting company catering to medical device and pharmaceutical companies. She lives in Los Angeles.*

# Mothers & Daughters Learning Together: Drisha's Bat Mitzvah Program

***By Elissa Shay Ordan***

It was with great excitement and anticipation that my husband and I began planning for our daughter's Bat Mitzvah celebration. Although specific aspects of the event were not yet determined, we were certain of a few things. First, our daughter's reaching the age of *mitzvot* would not be marked by a party alone, but would demonstrate achievement in Torah study, *tefillah*, and Torah reading or possibly a combination of the three. We would also include a *hesed/mitzvah/tzedakah* component for our daughter and her friends, as is encouraged by her school. Second, she would need to prepare for this milestone under the guidance of instructors who have a breadth of knowledge and are experienced in teaching Jewish texts to girls of this age. Third, ideally she would study with female *limmudei kodesh* (Jewish religious studies) scholars who would serve as positive role models for our daughter. Fortunately, it was not difficult to find such a source of instruction at Drisha.

Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York City, founded in 1979, is the first and leading center for the advanced study of Jewish texts for women. As a student at Drisha for more than 20 years, I have found the impact of the weekly classes that I attend to be transformative. Studying Torah and *Tanakh* on a regular basis, with learned instructors and in a community of women, has shaped my life and deepened my observance enormously. Actually, my daughter began attending Drisha *in utero*.

A pioneer in this area, Drisha has long offered group classes for Bat Mitzvah age girls (ages 11–13) to attend with their mothers (or other learning partners) on topics including prayer and women in the Bible. In the course that my daughter and I attended last fall, six pairs of girls and their mothers, along with one girl and her father, gathered at Drisha on four Sunday mornings to discuss prayer in the Bible and in our lives. One mother was attending with her fourth Bat Mitzvah age daughter!

The small class size and diversity of backgrounds of the students led to lively discussions and stimulating sessions, which were guided by Shuli Sandler, a Drisha Scholars Circle graduate and clinical psychologist. There was no lecturing by the instructor; instead, girls took turns reading the source materials in Hebrew or in English, analyzing forms and examples of prayers, and sharing their insights. In the final session, each girl addressed the group and their invited relatives on a topic of her choice related to becoming a Bat Mitzvah and received a gift of a *siddur* and a certificate as part of the group celebration.

My daughter and I also attended Drisha classes in Riverdale, New York, for Bat Mitzvah age girls and their mothers. These one-hour classes, which focused on women's roles in the history and observance of the festivals, as well as specific festival prayers, were taught by Tammy Jacobowitz, a Drisha Scholars Circle graduate pursuing a PhD in Midrash. (*Editor's note: See her article in this issue.*) They were delightful opportunities for the mothers to connect with their daughters and explore themes of the holidays before we celebrated them together.

One cannot overstate the value and importance of learning with one's daughter in the company of other girls at this age. It is a pleasure to share ideas and discuss new concepts with girls on the cusp of this new chapter of their lives. The instructors' warmth and encouragement also greatly enhanced their scholarship. One would be hard pressed to find better role models of intelligent young women who have chosen a path of Torah scholarship, education, and leadership.

Furthermore, it is beneficial to expose our children to different perspectives and approaches to Torah study. The Drisha programs provide an opportunity for girls and their mothers to experience Torah study in a new way, with new people, and in an environment different from their shul and school. It is good to "mix it up" a bit. The girls may feel freer to ask questions and discuss matters at Drisha than in their school or synagogue setting.

For a girl preparing for her Bat Mitzvah, Drisha also offers the opportunity for private study and will find an appropriate tutor. In addition to the group classes, my daughter studied privately with her teacher, Dina Najman, an early Drisha Scholar who also serves as *Rosh Kehilla* of Kehillat Orach Eliezer on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Like a number of her friends and classmates, my daughter received private instruction in *ta'amei haMikra* (cantillation) and learned to *leyn* her Torah portion precisely and beautifully. Together she and her teacher studied her *parashah* in depth and developed the themes of her *d'var Torah*. There are no words that can adequately describe how incredible a teacher and role model Dina Najman is for her students, dedicated to teaching the Bat Mitzvah age girls in our community not only the actual texts that they study but also the significance of being an observant Jewish girl reaching the age of *mitzvot* and assuming a place in the larger Jewish community.

It is very important for a girl to understand that a Bat Mitzvah celebration is not the culmination of a course of study of a few months or even a year followed by a party. Reaching the age of *mitzvot* means the beginning of a life of Torah study and observance that should intensify, grow, and deepen in commitment over a lifetime. At Drisha, classes are offered for girls and women of all ages and backgrounds, and the class experience is enhanced by the exchange of ideas contributed by those present. I am thrilled that my daughter has begun studying at Drisha where she can see that there is a *mekom Torah* created specifically for women and girls and where programs are available for her to attend during the high school years and beyond.

Children are acute observers and follow what they see. If they see that their parents learn Torah consistently and that the values of this learning infuse their home and their lives, then they will follow suit and as *B'not Mitzvah* continue in the path of Torah and *mitzvot*.

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***Elissa Shay Ordan** lives with her family in New York. She is an officer of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education.*

## Preparing for a Bat Mitzvah: A Celebration of a Lifetime, *continued from page 7*

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.

***Rabbi Benjamin J. Samuels** has been the rabbi of Congregation Shaarei Tefillah in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, for the past fourteen years.*

# from the archives

In her article in this Journal issue, Norma Baumel Joseph refers to Orthodox Bat Mitzvah ceremonies in Brooklyn in 1944. I followed up on the lead and found fascinating detailed descriptions by Rabbi Jerome Tov Feinstein of Congregation Anshe Emes in the October 1944 copy of "Orthodox Union," one of the forerunners to "Jewish Action", thanks to Sharon Horowitz of the Library of Congress and finally the New York Public Library, Dorot Division. The article by Rabbi Feinstein is reproduced below. It is worth noting perhaps, that these ceremonies took place at the end of WWII. The rabbi's reference to the "unfortunate general absence of the husband from the Sabbath and Festival table" should presumably be seen in relation to the mobilization of the men in the community. If any readers have personal knowledge of these early Bat Mitzvahs, please let us know at jofa@jofa.org.

# The Bas Mitzvah Comes To Our Synagogue

***By Rabbi Jerome Tov Feinstein**, Congregation Anshe Emes, Brooklyn, NY, October 1944*

One Saturday morning after services a mother approached me and said: "Rabbi, I liked the Bar Mitzvah ceremony very much. But, tell me Rabbi, why don't you do something for the girls? Doesn't the Jewish girl ever become, so to say, a full fledged Jewess, obligated to carry out whatever commandments are incumbent upon an adult Jewish woman?"

"Of course there is such a time," I responded. At the age of twelve a Jewish girl becomes religiously mature. However, since a girl does not have to put on *Tefilin*, is not counted for a *minyan* etc., no public ceremony has been created for her to make the fact of her religious maturity known. I believe, however, that you are absolutely right in suggesting that some public ceremony be introduced for the girl when she becomes a Bas Mitzvah so that she may realize her responsibilities in a religious sense, as well as in order to eliminate the feeling that in the Orthodox Synagogue the girls do not count. I shall try to figure out a way to give the girls a Bas Mitzvah ceremony without infringing upon the Shulchan Aruch."

This happened in the late spring. I brought up the question at meetings of the Congregation and the Sisterhood and received unanimous assurances that they would aid me in every way in carrying out the program. I also talked the matter over with the men who come to daily services as well as with our daily Shulchan Aruch class. Their reaction was also very favorable and encouraging.

Early in the fall, we organized our Bas Mitzvah class. The members of the class were pupils of the Talmud Torah and stayed on Sundays after their regular classes were over. The girls were made to realize the increasing importance of the Jewish women in the religious life of our people in this country. The points made were as follows:

1. The young American Jew will rarely interfere with his wife in her religious conduct of the home. If she will conduct a Kosher home he will not at all object. It is, therefore, most essential that the Jewish girl receive training in the management of a Kosher home.

2. The unfortunate general absence of the husband from the Sabbath and Festival table places the responsibility for creating and maintaining the religious spirit in the home on these occasions upon the mother, who very frequently must say the Kiddush, sing the Zmiros with the children, etc. If she will receive the kind of training that will inspire her to carry on alone, there is some chance that she will attempt to conduct a reasonably Jewish home.

3. The girl must receive a very vivid picture of the Jewish Sabbath, the Holidays, the preparations for these occasions and the joy with which they were conducted in the home in the past, so that she may try to recapture some of this atmosphere in her own home.

4. The girls received thorough instruction in the prayers they might need as Jewish wives and mothers, as for example:
   a) Prayers for candles—all occasions
   b) Kiddush for all occasions
   c) Various blessings

With these general aims in mind, the curriculum was gradually developed. The girls took notes, studied and discussed them. We used as our text-book: "What Every Jewish Woman Should Know," by Miriam Isaacs; and as supplementary material: The Jewish Woman and Her Home" by Hyman E. Goldin, "The Ways of Her Household" by Harris M. Lazarus, "The Jewish Home Beautiful" by Betty A. Greenberg and Althea O. Sullivan, and "The Three Pillars" by Deborah M. Melamed.

After a few months of work, the first Bas Mitzvah was ready. The girl promised to continue attending the class after she became Bas Mitzvah. The entire group completed the full year's course, even though towards the end all but one girl had already become Bas Mitzvah.

In order to obviate any possible criticism, I decided to conduct the ceremony at our Late Friday Evening Oneg Shabbat. With a little bit of publicity in our Bulletin and special Post Cards, we had a record crowd for the Friday of

the first Bas Mitzvah and for every other Friday on which we had a Bas Mitzvah. People from neighboring congregations came to see what it was all about. Relatives appeared in large numbers. The parents of the Bas Mitzvah were hosts for the evening and served refreshments. The girls began receiving Bas Mitzvah gifts from their relatives. Occasionally we had a Bas Mitzvah in the evening and a Bar Mitzvah in the morning. Both were treated equally and our girls and women began to feel that they were given a "square deal." Remarks were uniformly enthusiastic and complimentary.

People who had generally kept away from the synagogue were attracted by what they considered evidence of a progressive point of view. The ceremony generally consisted of the following:

1. Before sundown the girl who was to become Bas Mitzvah on that evening would come to Shul and light a pair of large candles in the vestry rooms where the ceremony was to take place later in the evening. She would light these candles in a pair of beautiful candlesticks presented to her by the Sisterhood. She was to light candles thereafter every Friday and Holiday in her home in these candlesticks.
2. Remarks by the Rabbi introducing the ceremony, with some reference to the significance of the Bas Mitzvah or the place of women in Jewish religious life.
3. The girl would sing the Kiddush for Friday Evening or for one of the Holidays. Some would also translate the Kiddush to the delight of all present.
4. The candidate was asked questions based on the curriculum for Bas Mitzvah by the President of the Sisterhood or another appropriate person, who would upon the satisfactory completion of the test, congratulate the Bas Mitzvah and install her as a member of the Junior Sisterhood.
5. The Rabbi would then introduce the Bas Mitzvah who would make a speech along the lines of a Bar Mitzvah.
6. The Rabbi responded by giving a message from the Portion of the week, Midrash, etc., and concluded in the same manner as for a Bar Mitzvah.

# Mi'Sheberakh Prayer for Bat Mitzvah Girls in Florence

Italy was the site of many early Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for girls in the 19th century. Since then, there have been traditions of Bat Mitzvahs in the synagogues of different Italian communities. We include a prayer on behalf of a Bat Mitzvah girl in the community of Florence. The Hebrew text is taken from the book, *Zeved Habat* by Aaron Cohen (Jerusalem 1990).

מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אִמּוֹתֵינוּ שָׂרָה רִבְקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה
הוּא יְבָרֵךְ אֶת הַנַּעֲרָה ..... בַּת .....
שֶׁהִגִּיעָה לִפְרָקָהּ.
אֲבִינוּ שֶׁבַּשָּׁמַיִם אַב הָרַחֲמָן יָגֵן בַּעֲדָהּ וְיִשְׁמֹר
אֶת נַפְשָׁהּ. יָסִיר מִמֶּנָּהּ כָּל מַחֲלָה וְכָל צָרָה
וְנָזָק יַצִּילֶהָ. יִשְׂמְחוּ בָּהּ אָבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ וְתִמְצָא חֵן
וְשֵׂכֶל טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי אֱלֹהִים וְאָדָם וְיִקַּיֵם בָּהּ (בָּהֶן)
מִקְרָא שֶׁכָּתוּב אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת ה' הִיא תִּתְהַלָּל
תְּנוּ לָהּ מִפְּרִי יָדֶיהָ וִיהַלְלוּהָ בַשְּׁעָרִים מַעֲשֶׂיהָ
אָמֵן כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן.

*May the One who blessed our foremothers, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah, bless the young girl.....daughter of..... who has reached the age of twelve. May our Father in Heaven, Merciful Father, protect her and guard her spirit. May He remove from her all illness and save her from any distress and harm. Let her father and mother rejoice with her, and let her find favor and good understanding in the eyes of God and Man. Let the words of Scripture be fulfilled through her: "A woman who fears God shall be praised. Give her the fruit of her hands. And let her deeds praise her in the gates." Amen. May this be Thy Will.*

Emerging voices

We welcome future submissions from all high school students. Please email jofa@jofa.org

# *Mi'dor l'dor*: Being Connected to the Past and Future

***By Tamar Lindenbaum***

It hit me when I was standing in front of the congregation at Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, ready to *leyn*. For the past year, I had been going through all the motions of getting ready for a Bat Mitzvah. I had learned to *leyn* with Tammy Jacobowitz, studied *berakhot* throughout *Tanakh* with Judy Heicklen, and prepared some *hesed* projects.

It wasn't that I had not enjoyed it—it's just that I hadn't really felt anything.

So I was standing there, ready to *leyn*, when I heard my grandfather, my Zaide, being called up for an *aliya*. "Yosef ben Hillel v'Bina." Bina, I realized—that's my middle name. That's when it hit me.

Names have always been important in Judaism. Avraham and Sarah, Yaacov and Yehoshua—they all had their names changed. Changing one's name or taking on a new name symbolizes our ability to accomplish things we have not yet accomplished and to be a part of something we have not yet been a part of.

When I was born, my parents named me after my mother's grandmother, Bina Appleman. Although I never met her, I grew up with stories that made me feel like I did. My great-grandmother was an amazing woman, and I always felt a little under her shadow carrying her name. I felt that people expected a lot from me, to live up to the standards she had set.

My great-grandmother lived in a small town called Evarts in Harlan County, Kentucky. As a member of the only Jewish family there, she fought to remain observant and keep her four children that way as well. Harlan County was coal mining country, and the hours were long, the work for the miners physically debilitating and harsh, and the pay little. The workers, as did many of their time, attempted to unionize, but the mine owners did not let them. The miners went on strike in 1932. At the same time, my great-grandparents, who ran a general store, were saving up for the newest fad—an automobile. But it was hard for my great-grandmother to go out in the streets and see the starving children of the striking workers, knowing that she was saving up for a luxury that she could easily live without.

So she made a decision. She placed an ad in the paper saying, "IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE JEWISH CUSTOM TO REMEMBER THE NEEDY DURING THE PASSOVER SEASON, MR. AND MRS. HARRY APPLEMAN WILL GIVE AWAY ON FRIDAY APRIL 17 A CARLOAD OF FLOUR. ALL THE NEEDY FROM EVARTS AND SURROUNDINGS ARE WELCOME REGARDLESS OF COLOR OR CREED."

And so they were. The family gave away flour in 24-pound bags as long as it lasted. They used the money they were saving for a car to buy flour for the striking miners, and they opened a soup kitchen.

The mine owners, needless to say, were not pleased. They shot out the windows of the soup kitchen, tried to kidnap my then-six-year-old grandfather, and, as a last step, had my my great-grandfather indicted for helping the strikers—what they called criminal syndicalism. The matter moved up the state judicial system until finally reaching the governor of Kentucky. My great-grandmother went to defend her husband, and when asked why they would disobey the law, she said something along the lines of, "Is it truly a free and moral country, where one can go out to the street and see starving children, and then turn and walk away knowing that it is illegal to help them?" The governor was persuaded, the indictment against my great-grandfather was dismissed, and the next day the governor's declaration of my great-grandmother as a "woman of valor"—an *Eshet Hayil*—was in the newspapers.

**Becoming a Bat Mitzvah is more than just becoming an adult. That part is important, but what is truly essential is understanding how important it is to be a part of, and to take care of, your community.**

The miners were very grateful to my great-grandparents. In fact, if you go to Harlan County today, you might just see some non-Jewish grandmothers and grandfathers named "Harry" and "Bina" after them. They had made a decision, at great personal risk, to not stand by and watch others suffer when there was something they could do about it and to continue along the path that Jews have followed for generations of caring about others.

When my parents came for visiting day at my sleepaway camp, Moshava, the summer before my Bat Mitzvah, they sat me down with a list of charities and told me to choose my favorites. I could raise money for them for my Bat Mitzvah, they said. Let's be honest, I thought—donations instead of presents?

I humored them anyway. Reading the stories of these charities, I began to connect with them. When Clara Hammer, the "Chicken Lady" in Jerusalem, saw a girl in front of her at the butcher being given a bag of skin and bones because she could no longer afford a chicken for Shabbat, she told the butcher next time to give the girl a whole chicken and put it on her bill. At the time of my Bat Mitzvah, she was feeding more than 200 families a week in Israel and also lending out around forty wedding gowns to brides in need. Just before Pesach this year, Clara Hammer passed away just short of her 100th birthday. May her memory be for a blessing.

Beit HaYeled provides a home for children who for one reason or another can no longer live in their own homes. The children in Beit HaYeled live in a warm setting and get everything they need.

Through Big Brothers and Sisters of Israel, teens spend time with younger children from troubled homes once a week, doing regular things like playing sports and baking.

I was in a situation, though I did not realize it then, similar to my mother's Savta. I felt for these children. I didn't want to sit around while I could be doing something to help them. And so I attached a note to my Bat Mitzvah invitation asking that, in lieu of gifts, people should donate to those charities.

So going back to where I was, ready to *leyn*, I realized that, without even knowing it, I had already accomplished what becoming a Bat Mitzvah is all about. It is about two things. One—becoming a full part of the community. That was accomplished through my *leyning*, as I couldn't do that before my Bat Mitzvah, and through my *hesed* project—realizing that as an adult member of the community it was my duty to be there and help those who need it. Two—realizing what it means to be a full part of the community. That's the part that I came to understand on the day of my Bat Mitzvah.

Becoming a Bat Mitzvah is more than just becoming an adult. That part is important, but what is truly essential is understanding how important it is to be a part of, and to take care of, your community. I realized that I had taken my great-grandmother's name and made it mine. I had taken everything that she stood for and wanted and made it part of my own life.

But there is more to it. It's about remembering that you are part of *sharsheret hadorot*, a link in a chain of generations. You are a part of something so much greater than yourself, a part of a people thousands of years old, with customs and ideas that you must now carry on. You are a tiny yet invaluable part of your family, community, and people. It's about making a lifelong commitment to be there and to continue on.

So my Zaide came up to the Torah and said the *berakha*, and I *leyned*. As an adult. A member of my community. A link in *sharsheret hadorot*.

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***Tamar Lindenbaum** is entering her sophomore year at SAR High School in Riverdale.*

# The Real Meaning of Bat Mitzvah

*By Eliana Lorch*

## THE INITIAL DECISION

Two summers ago, four months before my Bat Mitzvah, I started thinking about a *hesed* project that I could do. I had three criteria in mind: I wanted to actually do something and not just contribute money, I wanted it to be a cause that I understood and felt was important, and I wanted to really help. I looked for a cause that not many people know about or are helping. As I began looking up organizations on the Internet, I discovered that most of them already had *B'nei Mitzvah* programs. When I looked up JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, its website didn't mention such projects. That was the group for me!

I got a lot of help from JOFA, and especially from Rori Picker, then JOFA's Program Coordinator, in getting organized. First, she helped me decide that my project should be about the *agunah* problem. My goal was to learn as much as I could about the history of the problem and the halakhic issues involved. I wanted to explore possible solutions to help women who are *agunot* and, most important, to find out what I could do to help. Rori sent me articles to read and arranged interviews for me with five people actively helping *agunot*. As I got more deeply involved in my project, I interviewed other people, including an *agunah*-activist in England. As I read the articles, I was particularly interested in the approach taken by one of the authors, Rabbi Michael Broyde, and so I made contact with him and made a deal to interview him after I had read his book on the subject. In my Bat Mitzvah speech, I recounted the results of my research and outlined the approaches I explored to solve the problem.

## WHAT I DID

**Raising Awareness:** There are two main ways I tried, as part of my Bat Mitzvah, to raise people's awareness that *iggun* is a serious problem in our community: first, by including the *tefillah la'agunot* in my Bat Mitzvah service, and second, by distributing to the guests at my celebration bracelets with a few names of *mesar'vim* or recalcitrant husbands inscribed on them. I encouraged the guests to wear the bracelets so that they, as well as other people who saw them, would be aware that there are real cases of *iggun* that affect the lives of real people. I also distributed a handout with descriptions of each of the cases.

**Pressuring Husbands:** I worked with two organizations and started working with a third to try to increase the pressure on husbands to give their wives a *get*. I requested donations in lieu of Bat Mitzvah gifts and raised a total of $6,000 to help ORA, the Organization for the Resolution of *Agunot*, which uses nonviolent ways to apply community pressure to convince husbands to give their wives a *get*. I encouraged JOFA to list the names of *mesar'vim* on their website and in their journal. In addition, I met with Gary Rosenblatt, the editor of the Jewish Week, and asked him to consider publishing the names of *mesar'vim* in the paper and on the website. I followed up by sending a letter to the editor, which appeared in the paper, publicly urging the Jewish Week to act.

**Educating Couples:** I learned from my research that it is much harder to solve an *agunah* problem once the couple has reached the end of their marriage. We have to do everything we can to help the women who are caught in this trap, but we have to do even more to help women avoid getting caught in the first place by always insisting on their using a prenuptial agreement. It is important to note that different prenup options exist so that every couple can find one that fits them. To encourage everyone to use a prenup, I spoke to my rabbi, Haskel Lookstein, about requiring a prenup before every wedding at which he and the other rabbis at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun officiate, and I found out that Rabbi Lookstein had been using prenups for more than 20 years. In my Bat Mitzvah speech I asked all my guests to use a prenup before they got married, and for those married guests without a prenup, I explained that they could use a "postnup" covering the same situations.

## REFLECTION

I was nervous before I started interviewing important people. Would they really take the time to answer my questions? Would they listen to my ideas? Or would they treat me like a little kid? I tried to be as prepared as possible for each interview and to listen carefully and ask good follow-up questions. I discovered that if I take myself seriously other people will take me seriously too.

Whenever people heard about the topic I had chosen for my *hesed* project, they initially seemed surprised that I was working on such an "adult" problem. However, once I told them more about it, they appreciated what I had already learned and expressed their support. After I spoke about the *agunah* issue at my Bat Mitzvah, many of my guests told me that they had learned something new.

When I started the project, I hoped I could actually help *agunot* and not just learn about them. But I wasn't sure what could be done and whether I could do it. I discovered that if my ideas were good and I presented them well, people would accept them and do something about them. I realize now that one person can make a difference.

I already knew from my parents and my school that, as important as the Bat Mitzvah day is, the real meaning of the day is what happens next. I understood this lesson again during this project, because I realized that the work I have done so far is just a start. I plan to continue working on this project and trying to help *agunot*.

*Eliana Lorch graduated from the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan. She is entering SAR High School in September.*

# Learning on One's Own

*By Tzipporah Machlah Klapper*

People ask me why I decided to make a *siyyum* on *Seder Nezikin* for my Bat Mitzvah this past June. It all started one Monday in March when my mother took my brothers, my sister, and me to the Israel Book Shop. I looked around, found that they did indeed have the Artscroll-translated Mishnahs *(Mishnayos Yad Avraham*), and begged my mother to buy them for me. We'd already been considering getting me a set for a while because I really wanted to learn Mishnah on my own, so this wasn't an unreasonable request.

"How much will you learn each day?" she asked, after looking at the price.

"An hour," I promised.

"It's going to come out of your reading time," she warned. "You can't stay up later."

"I know," I told her.

**I learn a lot from my Mishnah learning, and not all of it is about halakha… I learn more about the nature of human beings… about loyalty, goodness, and understanding Hashem and life in general.**

So we bought them.

I decided to study *Seder Nezikin*, which is the fourth of the six main divisions of the Mishnah. I chose *Nezikin* (literally Damages), which deals mainly with laws, testimony, oaths, and witnesses. I had wanted to learn *Mo'ed* but my mother thought I would be more challenged by *Nezikin*. Besides, I had previously learned some of *Makkos* (the *massekhet* or tractate in *Nezikin* dealing mainly with trials and punishments for noncapital and unusual criminal cases).

My ambitions of learning an hour each day soon turned into a *perek* (or chapter) a day. Naturally, I set out to discover how long it would take me to complete *Nezikin* at this rate. After checking and rechecking my math, I concluded that the answer was 74 days because there are 74 *perakim* in *Nezikin*.

And still I wasn't satisfied. I learned all the time, more than my promised hour a day, and soon raced many *perakim* ahead.

Later, I realized that the finishing date would be near my Bat Mitzvah, and since I hate planning parties, I decided to have a *siyyum* for my Bat Mitzvah celebration.

Around the same time, I decided to try to learn all of Mishnah (i.e., all six *sedarim*, which consist of 63 *massekhtot*). This might seem like an unrealistic goal, but I think I will finish in about a year, even though some of the material is boring and other parts I can't understand at the moment because the Mishnah uses measurements and currency that I know nothing about. For instance, a *perutah* is equal to half a barleycorn. What is a barleycorn anyway, and how small is this compared to other coins?

Sometimes I think that I'm going too fast, but I have the rest of my life to learn and I want to make this year count. Mostly before this, I read *Midrash* or asked my father to tell me stories from the Gemara, and this is really the first learning I've done entirely on my own.

When I read a *mishna*,[1] I read it in Hebrew, then English, and then I read the commentary, because this gives me the reasons I so badly need to understand why. Why Jews aren't required to recompense Gentiles for the loss of their property although Gentiles are required to compensate Jews. Why we try so hard to acquit murderers. If the commentary can't answer my questions, I try to understand the text by asking myself why I would rule this way, or if the reverence the nation shows its king is essential to its survival, or would being acquitted by the Sanhedrin change a person's view of the *mitzvot* and life in general. By placing myself in the mind of one of the people involved in the case, I feel I can understand it better.

That I am the only one of my friends who learns for a hobby doesn't bother me so much, although I have attempted on numerous occasions to involve them in my learning. When I ask other girls to learn with me, I get answers such as, "I wouldn't be any help to you; I can't learn" from my classmates (which is perfectly ridiculous because we learn Mishnah in school) or "No, thanks. I don't learn Mishnah" (from people who aren't in my school). I think I learn a lot from my Mishnah learning, and not all of it is about halakha. By attempting to understand the whys of the Mishnah and exploring questions such as "How do you know your blood is redder?" I think I learn more about the nature of human beings. I also feel I've learned about loyalty, goodness, and understanding Hashem and life in general. I hope my learning has made me a better person, and I intend to start a Mishnah class on Shabbat because I also feel that would be helpful in my number-one Bat Mitzvah goal: to get to know myself.

My Bat Mitzvah *siyyum* in June began with dinner, after which I taught some of my favorite *mishnayot* and the last *mishna* in *Seder Nezikin*.

Then I continued with my larger project…

[1] The basic structure of the Mishnah in ascending order is *mishna* (the smallest unit, either a sentence or a paragraph), *perek* (chapter), *massekhet* (tractate), and *seder* (order).

***Tzipporah Machlah Klapper** is entering seventh grade at Maimonides School in Brookline, Massachusetts.*

# Twelve Suggestions for Making Your Bat Mitzvah Meaningful

**1. Adopt a Special *Mitzvah*** As you become a "daughter of *mitzvot*," choose a *mitzvah* that is special to you, learn about it, and take extra care in performing it throughout the year.

**2. Learn about your Family History** Use this new stage of life to reflect on where you came from. Ask your parents and grandparents about their lives growing up and about your family history, and learn about your roots.

**3. Learn about Female Role Models** As you become Bat Mitzvah, it is important to find female role models to identify with. Bat Mitzvah girls can study women in *Tanakh*, Talmud, and Medieval and Modern Jewish history. Connect with female role models in your own community such as scholars, teachers and communal leaders.

**4. Study Something Connected to your Name** Many girls learn about the significance of their names and focus on learning themes which are connected to their names. An Ilana may study laws related to trees in *Tanakh*, and a Sarah may study the biblical Sarah, as well as famous Sarahs throughout Jewish history.

**5. Study Something Connected to the Time of your Bat Mitzvah** Connect with the Jewish calendar. If your Bat Mitzvah falls around Hanukkah, study the laws and meaning of Hanukkah. If it falls near a fast day, study the laws pertaining to fast days. If it falls near a holiday when a *megillah* is read, study that *megillah*.

**6. Write a Prayer** Use this special occasion to write a *tefillah*. What are you thankful for? What are your hopes for the future? You can share this *tefillah* with others at your celebration, or keep it for yourself.

**7. Make a *Siyyum*** A Bat Mitzvah is a time to solidify your commitment to Torah study. Many Bat Mitzvah girls have made a *siyyum* on a *seder* of Mishnah, a tractate of Gemara, or a book of *Tanakh* to mark their entry into Jewish adulthood. At the end of the *siyyum*, recite the *hadran*, the text affirming future commitment to study.

**8. Write it Up** After spending time studying a particular text or issue, write up your thoughts and conclusions, and distribute what you have written to the guests at your Bat Mitzvah. You and they will have it forever.

**9. Be Part of a Women's *Tefillah* Group or Partnership *Minyan*** Learn to *leyn* and lead a prayer service and mark your Bat Mitzvah at a women's *tefillah* service or at a partnership *minyan*.

**10. Speak up in Synagogue** Deliver the *d'var Torah* or sermon in synagogue on the Shabbat you celebrate your Bat Mitzvah. The rabbi may call you to the pulpit and respond to your speech.

**11. Undertake a Community Service Project** What better way to prepare for acceptance of the *mitzvot* than to actively engage in them? In preparing for your Bat Mitzvah, undertake a community service project such as visiting old age homes, feeding the homeless, or working with special-needs children.

**12. Donate a percentage of your Bat Mitzvah Money to *Tzedakah*** You can start keeping *mitzvot* right away by giving *ma'aser*, 10% of the money you receive as gifts for your Bat Mitzvah, to a *tzedakah* that you choose. It will make you feel richer!

## After Your Bat Mitzvah

Bat Mitzvah marks the adoption of the adult responsibilities of Judaism. It is important to continue the learning and study of Jewish texts and to share your knowledge. A Bat Mitzvah should celebrate the beginning of learning at a higher level, not the culmination. Continue to attend shul services regularly and on time. Girls who have learned to *leyn* and *daven* from the *amud* should look for opportunities to continue to use these skills at partnership *minyanim* and women's *tefillah* groups. Consider learning to *leyn Megillat Esther* for Purim and *Megillat Eikha* for Tisha B'Av and seek out places to do this publicly. Use your skills and talents to mentor and teach younger girls who are approaching Bat Mitzvah. Learn to lead and respond to a *zimmun* after a meal, as three women who eat together do constitute a *zimmun*. Know that there is a halakhic consensus that a woman can discharge a *mitzvah* for another person, male or female, for which she has an equal or higher responsibility and that, accordingly, a post Bat Mitzvah girl can therefore make *kiddush* or *hamotzi* for others. Ask your school to support causes such as *agunah* advocacy and domestic abuse programs, and help to initiate and organize these. View your Bat Mitzvah as the beginning of participation, learning, and leadership, and it will continue to illuminate your experience of Judaism and the experience of those around you long after the celebration has ended.

## Bat Mitzvah : Historical and Halakhic Aspects,

*continued from page 5*

not allow it to take place in a synagogue as a Bat Mitzvah celebration because it is not necessary and because of the taint of the Conservative and Reform movements.

However, if we look at the permission given, then we have a serious question to ask. If a girl gets up in the synagogue proper—and there seems to be no doubt that Rabbi Feinstein is talking about a place where there is a Torah—and she can say words of Torah and there can be a *kiddush*, is that not a Bat Mitzvah celebration? I believe that he just will not let us call it that because of its source. Had he been aware of the traditional Orthodox precedents, would he have allowed the term to be used? I do not think he would have changed his opinion about the *se'udat mitzvah*, because for him the level of obligation was different, as only boys must learn Torah. But he often claimed that the *simha* was the same. In effect, although Rabbi Feinstein officially forbade a Bat Mitzvah celebration in the synagogue, as shown in *Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 1:104 written in 1956—the source that is his most negative and most often cited—looking at the 1959 responsum (*Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 4:36), one sees he permitted the trappings of such a celebration. In fact, there he opens the door to a new format with a synagogue celebration of the Bat Mitzvah. His prohibition stemmed from fear of forbidden assimilation. He did not see the celebration of Bat Mitzvah as an internal development within halakhic Judaism. But we can see it that way.

Rabbi Feinstein disliked the celebration for boys and girls equally. He saw no *to'elet*, purpose, for either. But I think we can see a great purpose. Children cement their relationship with community, with Judaism, through such initiations—if they are done right. In today's world, the absence of such a celebration for girls sends its own message of invisibility and communal disinterest. The purpose of such a rite is to link a girl's growth with her study of Torah and ritual responsibility—and to make sure she knows her family and community are proud of her. The Bat Mitzvah celebration keeps that link strong and viable.

So would knowledge of the historical facts change legal opinion of the permissibility of the Bat Mitzvah celebration? And should it? How should we celebrate the Bat Mitzvah of our young women?

We now have some more facts and know some history. For more than a century, traditional Jews struggled to celebrate their daughters' juridical status. We should too—in full Orthodox tradition, without apologetics or superficial symbolism, and in synagogue, with words of Torah from the *bimah* and with a festive meal. The *simha* is the same as for a boy; so too should be the celebration.[13] That should be our tradition!

*Norma Baumel Joseph is associate professor and graduate program director in the Department of Religion at Concordia University in Montreal. She has written on Jewish law and gender and been active on Jewish feminist issues since the 1970s.*

[1] To keep the historical record accurate, in 1944 Rabbi Jerome Tov Feinstein of Anshe Emes in Brooklyn created a Friday night Bat Mitzvah service. Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America," in P. Nadell & J. Sarna, eds., *Women and American Judaism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2001), p. 227. (*Editor's note: See the article by Rabbi Jerome Tov Feinstein reproduced in this issue.*)

[2] See my entry "Bat Mitzvah" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd Edition, 2006). The Talmud mentions Bat Mitzvah in TB *Bava Kama* 15a. See further, *Niddah* 5:6 and *Yoma* 85. Maimonides (*Yad, Ishut* 2: 9-10) completes the equation and specifies that a girl's signs of adulthood are those that appear only after her twelfth birthday plus one day.

[3] The clearest reference to a festive meal for a boy on his thirteenth birthday is found in the work of Rabbi Shlomo Luria (sixteenth-century Poland), *Yam Shel Shlomo* (*Bava Kama* 7:37).

[4] Note that in most rabbinical and historical texts the men's section is the synagogue proper and the women's section is not the synagogue, but the *weibershul*, separate and not equal. Most girls abandon or are dislodged from the men's section long before their twelfth birthdays.

[5] The information about a Bat Mitzvah held in the Midwest came in a personal communication from Gilad Gevaryahu (May 30, 2002). Dov Sadan "Bat Mitzvah," *Dat u'Madda* (*Tevet*, 1949), pp. 59–61.

[6] See my entry in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd Edition, 2006), "Bat Mitzvah."

[7] The confusion about his position has continued despite Judith Bleich's refutation in her PhD dissertation, *Jacob Ettlinger, His Life and Works* (New York University, 1974) and her "Between East and West: Modernity and Traditionalism in the Writings of Rabbi Yehi'el Ya'akov Weinberg," in Moshe Sokol, ed., *Engaging Modernity* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1997), pp. 169–273. However, it is clear in Ettlinger's *Binyan Tzion* 107 (1867) p. 145, that he opposed confirmation and any similar celebration.

[8] For a full analysis of Rabbi Feinstein's responsa on Bat Mitzvah, see my "Ritual Law and Praxis: Bat Mitsva Celebrations," *Modern Judaism* 22(3): 231–260.

[9] *Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 1:104.

[10] Iggerot Moshe, *Orah Hayyim* 2:30

[11] *Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 1:104.

[12] *Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 4:36. It seems clear in the group of five decisions dealing with issues relating to Bat Mitzvah that for Rabbi Feinstein, "synagogue" means the place of prayer and not the place of parties or as he calls them "halls." In a later responsum (*Iggerot Moshe, OH* 2:40 dated 1961), he addresses the issues of celebrating a Bat Mitzvah in a social hall of the synagogue.

[13] By this I mean that there should be a celebration with equal significance, not necessarily that the rituals must be identical to the male pattern. Indeed, it might be possible to view a Bat Mitzvah as an opportunity for innovative liturgical development to mark the *simha*.

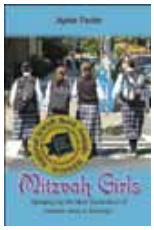
# bookCORNER

By Jennifer Stern Breger

## Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn

***By Ayala Fader***

Princeton University Press, 2009
$55.00 hardcover/$22.95 paper




This ethnographic study by Ayala Fader, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Fordham University, won the 2009 National Jewish Book Award in the category of Women's Studies, as well as a New York City Book Award given by the New York Society Library.

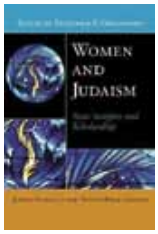
Fader spent ten years studying how Hasidic girls in the Boro Park neighborhood of New York, mainly from the Bobov community, grow up, focusing on the everyday interactions of women and girls. In particular, she explored the girls' use of language, which she sees as differing from that spoken by boys in the community. Girls combine Yiddish and English into what she terms "Hasidic English" (English transformed into a Jewish language), in contrast to the Hasidic Yiddish spoken by the boys. According to Fader, girls use Hasidic English so that they can "better" mediate the outside world, while the men are studying: in her terms, female engagement with the outside world "protects" the community's men and boys. At the same time this engagement must be controlled so that the girls are not "contaminated" by the outside world. According to Fader, the Hasidic mothers liked to show her that "they were fluent in much of North American popular culture but rejected its values nonetheless." Fader also explores how the women respond to girls who refuse to fit in or who ask what are considered inappropriate questions and challenge authority.

This book is a fascinating read. Its details help us understand the texture of female life in the Hasidic society she studied. The writer's approach is scholarly and analytic, but respectful of the women whom she characterizes as "busy, active, strong, and most of all pious, certain that their way of life is the only one with any real meaning." She beautifully describes her relation to her fieldwork as a nonobservant Jewish woman from New York, who also confesses "to harboring romantic notions about shared history and identity because her great-grandparents had been Orthodox." Fader finds that for many of the women she was studying, her very choice of doctoral subject was God's way of helping her return to her faith, and therefore served to legitimize their critique of the secular world.

## Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship

***Edited by Frederick E. Greenspahn***

New York University Press, 2009
$52.00 hardcover/$21.00 paper




In recent years there has been a wealth of scholarship on topics relating to Jewish women. This volume aims to make this scholarship more generally accessible. Its ten essays are by leading scholars, including Sylvia Barack Fishman, Judith Hauptman, and Chava Weissler. They are all clearly written, present a survey of the academic work done in each area, and offer many interesting insights.

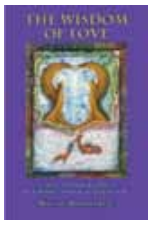
Topics include Jewish feminist approaches to the Bible, the spirituality of Eastern European Jewish women, women's transformation of contemporary Jewish life, women in Jewish law, and the treatment of women in Jewish American and Israeli literature. Renee Levine Melammed introduces the reader to documents from the Cairo Genizah, as well as records of the Spanish Inquisition, to portray the nature and texture of women's lives in medieval Mediterranean society and in 15th- and 16th-century crypto-Jewish society. Sylvia Barack Fishman draws attention to the current decline in involvement in religious life of Jewish men and boys outside the Orthodox community, raising intriguing questions about the implications of distinctively defined gender roles in our religious life. The extensive introductory chapter and epilogue suggest a framework for looking at Jewish women's studies that sets the stage for future research and conversation.

It seems obvious that students of Jewish history and indeed of all aspects of Judaism should incorporate the experiences of Jewish women into their thinking and writing, but we must remember that this has only been done in a sustained way since the 1970s. This book covers a vast range of material in an engaging way.

## The Wisdom of Love: Man, Woman and God in Jewish Canonical Literature

***By Naftali Rothenberg***

Academic Studies Press, 2009
$50.00 hardcover/$29.00 paper




Naftali Rothenberg, senior research fellow and Jewish Culture and Identity Chair at Jerusalem's Van Leer Institute and town rabbi of Har Adar, explores the concept of love in all its manifestations, both spiritual and physical, in an extensive survey of Jewish sources. He shows that, contrary to what many may expect, interpersonal love, spiritual development, and holiness are completely compatible within Judaism.

One section of this thought-provoking book focuses on Rabbi Akiva, who believed that all expressions of love, including love of one's fellow, love of wisdom, and love of God, ultimately flow from a single source—the love between man and woman. In this context Rothenberg examines the story of Akiva and his wife Rachel, which many of us find difficult because Akiva seems to have callously abandoned his wife, and argues that Rachel's love was the driving force in the story. Rothenberg analyzes Akiva's assertion that "Love your fellow as yourself" is the greatest principle in the Torah, and describes how Akiva defended the place of *Shir HaShirim* in the biblical canon not by interpreting it allegorically but by emphasizing the holiness of the love between men and women. In another section, Rothenberg, who stresses that we must be honest and see

canonical sources as "a body of literature written by men for men, from which women are wholly excluded," explores the extent to which we can nevertheless ascribe feminist innovations to these texts. At the beginning of the book, the author draws freely on Greek and Christian as well as Jewish sources in the Midrash, Talmud, and Zohar to discuss androgyny and the legend of the androgyne—an ancient bisexual creature, incorporating male and female in a single body.

### The Life of Gluckel of Hameln Written by Herself

***Translated from the original Yiddish and edited by Beth Zion Abrahams***

Jewish Publication Society, 2010
$35.00


There are few autobiographies of Jewish men or women in medieval and early modern history. The memoir of Gluckel of Hameln is unique for opening up the life and world of a woman who was born in Hamburg around 1645, was betrothed at the age of 12 and married at 14; worked with her husband in their pearl trading business, and continued to run the business after his death. Twelve of her fourteen children survived into adulthood, and she worked assiduously to arrange suitable matches for them in different communities. Proud of her traditions, she wanted to pass them on to her children and so wrote a manuscript in Yiddish in seven sections. Basically a book of *musar* for her children, it also is a story of her life, its joys, and its sorrows.

First published in 1896 in Yiddish with a German introduction by the famous scholar, David Kaufmann, Gluckel's memoir has become a classic and has been translated into German, Hebrew, and English. This 1962 translation by Beth Zion Abrahams, the only English translation from the original Yiddish text, has been out of print for a long time, and the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) has done a valuable service by reprinting it together with the translator's introduction. Readers of Hebrew would do well to read it together with the Hebrew critical edition (Yiddish and Hebrew text on facing pages), with an extensive introduction and notes by Yiddish scholar Chava Turniansky, which was published in 2006. In addition, there has been much Gluckel scholarship in recent years such as the work by the eminent historian, Natalie Zemon Davis, in *Women at the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives* (Harvard, 1995).

For those who do not already have Gluckel's memoir on their shelves, this JPS volume is a great introduction to the most famous female Jewish writer of all time.

### Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism

***By Dvora E. Weisberg***

Brandeis University Press, 2009
$50.00

The author, an associate professor of rabbinic literature at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, uses the topics of *yibbum* and *halitza* as a window into both the role of the Jewish family in talmudic times and rabbinical interpretation and shaping of the biblical law found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. The tractate, *Yevamot*, in the Mishnah and Tosefta, is devoted almost completely to levirate marriage and what happens when a husband dies, leaving his widow childless. If the husband has a brother, he is obligated to marry her or else to release her by the ceremony of *halitza*. Is the goal of the law to produce a posthumous heir for the husband or to protect the widow? Weisberg shows how the status of the *yevama* is totally different from that of an ordinary widow because, while no longer married, she is not independent but is bound to her brother-in-law. Weisberg also introduces a cross-cultural perspective, showing how different societies have practiced levirate marriage.

In this book, which was a 2009 National Jewish Book Award finalist in the category of Women's Studies, Weisberg's close analysis of the rabbinic texts gives us a fascinating view of how the rabbis looked at family structure, kinship, and inheritance. She considers some of the rabbis' responses to the situation of the *yevama*, especially the increasing willingness to employ *halitza* rather than levirate marriage, as attempts to regularize the situation and possibly protect women from the abuses inherent in the biblical law. For readers who see the position of the Jewish woman as bride or as recipient of a *get* in case of divorce, as a passive one, it is interesting that in the ceremony of *halitza,* it is the woman who takes the active role—removing the sandal, spitting, and reciting the appropriate formula—and the man who is passive. (For more about levirate marriage, see articles in the Shavuot 5767 issue of the JOFA Journal, pp. 18–20).

### If We Could Hear Them Now: Encounters with Jewish Heroines of the Past

***By Alice Becker Lehrer***

Urim Publications, 2009
$19.95


Many recent novels have focused on the lives of women of the Jewish past, including female biblical figures. In this volume, Alice Becker Lehrer, who teaches at the David Weissman Institute of Montreal's Bronfman Jewish Education Center, "conducts interviews" with a range of women from Tanakh and Jewish history. The author's focus is to show how the stories can serve to inspire us today. Her fictionalized interviews allow each woman to, as it were, "relate her own story from an individual standpoint." The "subjects" span biblical figures including Tamar and Tzipporah, women from the rabbinic period such as Rachel, wife to Rabbi Akiva, and women from later centuries such as Rashi's daughters and Henrietta Szold. Each imaginary interview is preceded by a short introduction that puts the interviewee in textual and historical context. The biblical interviews skillfully draw upon traditional commentaries and midrashic texts to bring the chosen subjects to life.

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