

The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual: Options and Opportunities

Bat Mitzvah

JOFA Bat Mitzvah Guide

Twelve Ways to Make Your Bat Mitzvah Meaningful

1. **Make a Siyyum** A *Bat Mitzvah* is a time to solidify your commitment to Torah study. So start now! Many *Bat Mitzvah* girls have made *siyyumim* of a *seder* of Mishna, a chapter of Gemara, or a book of Tanach as a way of entering into Jewish adulthood.
2. **Have a Women's Tefilla** Learn to *layen*, and celebrate this coming of age among female family and friends as you are called to the Torah.
3. **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.
4. **Learn about your Ancestors** Use this new stage of life to reflect on where you came from. Ask your parents and grandparents about their lives growing up, and learn about your roots.
5. **Speak up in Synagogue** Many *Bat Mitzvah* girls now deliver the sermon in synagogue on the Shabbat they celebrate their *Bat Mitzvah*. The Rabbi often calls the *Bat Mitzvah* girl to the pulpit and responds to her speech.
6. **Do a Community Service Project** What better way to prepare for acceptance of the *mitzvot* than to actively engage in them? In preparing for their *Bat Mitzvot*, girls have adopted community service projects, such as visiting old age homes, or feeding the homeless.
7. **Learn About Female Role Models** As you become *Bat Mitzvah*, it is important to have female role models to identify with. *Bat Mitzvah* girls have studied women in *Tanach*, *Talmud*, and Medieval and Modern Jewish history.
8. **Write a prayer** Use this occasion to write a *tefilla*. What are you thankful for? What are your hopes for the future? You can share it with others at your celebration, or keep it for yourself.
9. **Donate a percentage of your Bat Mitzvah Money to Tzedakah** You can start keeping *mitzvot* right away by giving *maaser*, 10% of the money you receive as gifts for your *Bat Mitzvah* to a *tzedakah* that you choose. It will make you feel richer!

10. **Study Something Connected to your Name** Many *Bat Mitzvah* girls learn something connected to their name for their *Bat Mitzvot*. A girl named Ilana may study laws related to trees in *Tanach*, and a girl named Sarah may study the biblical Sarah, as well as famous Sarahs throughout Jewish history.
11. **Write it Out** After spending time studying a particular text or issue, write it up, and distribute it to the guests at your *Bat Mitzvah*. You and they will have it forever.
12. **Study Something Connected to the Time of your Bat Mitzvah** Develop a special connection with the Jewish calendar. If your *Bat Mitzvah* falls around *Hanukkah*, study the laws and meaning of *Hannukah*. If it falls near a fast day, study the laws pertaining to fast days.

Mishaberach Prayer For a Bat Mitzvah Girl

Various Congregations in Israel now recite a prayer for a *Bat Mitzvah* girl in synagogue. The following has been adapted from the prayer for a *Bar Mitzvah* boy in the *Siddur Rinat Yisrael* (Ashkenaz).

May the One who blessed our forefathers Abraham, Issac and Jacob, and our foremothers Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, bless _____ daughter of _____ who is twelve years old and has reached the age of the commandments. She gives praise and thanksgiving to Almighty God for all the good that God has done to her. May God keep her and sustain her, and direct her heart to be whole, and to walk in God's ways and follow God's commandments all of her days. And let us say Amen.

Bat Mitzvah and Women's Tefila

Dr. Sharon Penkower Kaplan

On June 18, 1994, Shabbat Parshat Chukat, my daughter Raquel celebrated her *Bat Mitzvah* at the Teaneck *Women's Tefillah*, held at the home of friends. It was six years after her sister Daniele and seven years after her sister Micole had done likewise. Some things had changed and some had stayed the same. I believe that's a hallmark of our tradition.

What made the service special was the opportunity for female family and friends to be actively involved in the proceedings; two of my friends acted as *Gabbaiot*, Micole led *shacharit*; I led *mussaf*, and the honors of opening and closing the *aron* were carried out by relatives, including sisters, aunts and cousins. Raquel, after being escorted to the Torah by her two grandmothers, *layned*, recited the *haftarah* and delivered a *Dvar Torah*.

Sounds like a Gilbert and Sullivan Operetta? Not quite. Surrounded by loving family and friends, Raquel marked the coming of religious age with a public achievement demonstrating ritual skills and textual dexterity toward which she had worked diligently for many months. The communal nature of *Women's Tefilla* shaped this rite of passage as a shared religious event. We joyfully

welcomed all our guests; those who embraced *Women's Tefilla*, some for the first time, and others who attended only to honor Raquel.

In addition to the *Women's Tefilla* service, there were two other critical pieces to Raquel's preparation — a visit to a cemetery and a learning project. About three weeks before her *Bat Mitzvah* she and I visited the cemetery where her namesake, my husband's maternal grandmother, is buried. I wanted Raquel to get a sense of her past as she embarked on this new stage of her life. Raquel found her grandmother's headstone and excitedly read the inscription. We talked about Babee as I tried to teach Raquel to know from where she came and to where she is going. Standing in the *Beit Olam*, we were faced at once with the past and the future, with the self as the bridge between the two.

Finally, one of the most important things Raquel did for her *Bat Mitzvah* was to undertake the study of the mitzvah of *tzedakah* and to carry out a project based on her learning. We chose *tzedakah* because of its prime importance in Judaism, because of its communal nature, and because I wanted to teach her that no matter what choices she will have to make in juggling her roles as a woman, she must always plan time for *tzedakah* and *gemilat chesed*.

She and I began by reviewing the biblical sources of the *mitzvah*, and proceeded to examine its importance in the *Mishna* and *Talmud*. We then moved on to a study of the codification of the laws of *tzedakah* by *Rambam*, who delineates eight different levels of giving charity. Moving from the theoretical to the applied, we designed an experiment to examine the effects on the donor of giving at some of the levels delineated by *Rambam*. Raquel made *tzedakah* donations on four of the levels; where neither she nor the recipient knew the other's identity (our Rabbi's discretionary fund); where she knew the identity of the recipient but he was unaware of her (a sleeping homeless man); where both she and the recipient were aware of the other (a man who directly solicited alms); where she was helping the recipient to become self-sufficient (a contribution to *Amit*). In each instance she examined how she and the recipient felt about that act of charity, and in this way was able to connect learning with practice, and truly become a "*Bat Mitzvah*," one who studies and observes the commandments.

I have a fourth daughter, Gabrielle, who will become a *Bat Mitzvah*, with God's help, in three years. Assuming she wants to celebrate with a *Women's Tefilla*, I expect there will be changes. My husband Joseph and I have been evaluating possible changes to stress the *limud Torah* aspect of the *layning*, such as reorienting the *shulchan*, reciting verses before and after the *layning* portions, and inserting small *Divrei Torah* throughout the *layning*. I have no illusions that we are redefining the model of how to celebrate a *Bat Mitzvah*. *Halacha* gives its adherents the leeway to be creative at times, albeit within limits, thus allowing us to fulfill our needs in various ways. In fact, I can't wait to see what my daughters, God willing, will someday structure for their daughters. Though they may choose a different route I plan to respect and support them, and bathe in the *nachat* that their grandparents enjoyed at my daughter's celebrations.

Sharon Penkower Kaplan has a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Columbia University, which she puts to use as a management consultant. She lectures on Jewish topics and is involved in her community's chevra kadisha.

My Bat Mitzvah

Shira Becher

Three years ago I celebrated my *Bat Mitzvah*. As I was born in the month of *Adar*, I decided to celebrate my *Bat Mitzvah* on *Purim*. For about a year prior to my *Bat Mitzvah*, my family's good friend, and the *baal kore* of our *shul*, Bernie Horowitz, taught me to *layen Megillat Esther*. I worked very hard at it, going to his house after school, and even practicing while at summer camp. The *megilla* I read from was a special present my parents decided to give me for the occasion. We met with a *sofer* in our neighborhood and discussed with him different designs we wanted incorporated in the *megilla*. It is filled with different symbolic and colored pictures related to my name, my family, and *Purim*. At the end of the *megilla* there is a family tree starting with my grandparents. We also added on extra parchment so that hopefully more names can be added on when I pass the *megilla* down to my daughter.

In addition to *layning* the *megilla* for both men and women, I also *layned* three *aliyot* for *Purim* day in a Women's Tefilla. Following the service we had a party to which everyone came in costume, including adults. The party was a lot of fun, with a lot of dancing. Looking back on my *Bat Mitzvah*, I feel extremely proud of being able to acquire the skill it took to *layen* the *megilla*. It is something I can do for the rest of my life, and can hopefully teach to others one day. My *Bat Mitzvah* was special to me because my whole family took part in it. It was more than a party; it was a religious event with spiritual significance and personal meaning to me.

The Mother of Two Bat Mitzvah Girls Looks Back

Jennifer Breger

My younger daughter celebrated her *Bat Mitzvah* a few months ago, three years after her older sister celebrated hers. Looking back now on the two celebrations, I realize that I expected a great deal of them. I felt very strongly that the events should mark a meaningful religious stage in my daughters' lives — the beginning of their responsibilities as adult Jews. As I did not celebrate my *Bat Mitzvah* in any public way, I tried not to project my desires too strongly, in order to somehow compensate for what I had missed! I wanted their voices to be heard, and for them to remember their entry into the adult Jewish community with joy.

In preparation for their *Bat Mitzvot*, I spent a year engaged in serious learning with my daughters. The material we studied was completely separate from what the girls were studying

in school. This would form the basis or springboard for their *Divrei Torah*. We enjoyed the flexibility inherent in the ritual; we not only chose the formats of the celebrations, but also the content of the learning.

My elder daughter Sarah decided to focus her learning on the “seven prophetesses.” We learned together, delving into *Midrashic sources* that were often confusing. Indeed, to learn that sources can contradict each other was already a very valuable lesson! We discussed the biblical characters, the idea of role models and heroism. For fun we explored the concept of “seven” in Judaism. We also learned *Mishna Shabbat* every week, and then focused on issues relating to types of jewelry that could be worn and carried on Shabbat. By studying the parsha of *Ki Tezei*, which is so full of *mitzvot*, we were able to spend time talking about the role of *mitzvot* in Judaism. It was a heavy and wide-ranging program of study and led to a wealth of interesting discussions.

My younger daughter Esther also learned throughout the year before her *Bat Mitzvah*, both with me and with a Rabbi in the community. Because her *Bat Mitzvah* was on 17 *Tammuz*, a traditional fast day, she studied *Mishna Ta’anit* and the *halachot* of fasting, and explored the role of discipline and asceticism in Judaism. It was very moving to hear her talk about the *Beit Hamikdash* as she stood on Har Tzion in Jerusalem. Because of her name, she also chose to study *Megillat Esther* and *Mishna Megilla*, and developed her own views of her biblical namesake. Our studies of *parshat Ki Tavo* led us to far reaching discussions of Divine providence in Jewish history in the light of our travels in Eastern Europe this past summer.

What really made the learning experience special was that it was personalized; the girls chose their topics for study based on their own names, *Bat Mitzvah* dates, and individual interests. Even our discussions of their *parshiot* revolved around the topics that spoke to them. For each I produced a book with their *Divrei Torah*, sources, and other related materials on which they and I had worked, a tangible reminder of this rite of passage. Through this learning experience the girls developed a feeling for the richness of Jewish tradition, and the importance of study and text within that tradition.

I was immensely proud to see how they could develop arguments, use sources, and then stand up and deliver a variety of *Divrei Torah* with confidence. Jewish women take on public roles in many aspects of their lives, and it was important to me that my daughters be able to do so on such special religious occasions. Indeed, what was most moving to me at Esther’s *Bat Mitzvah* was hearing her older sister direct her *Dvar Torah* to her, expressing with great warmth a feeling for Judaism from a fifteen year old vantage point.

One of my concerns was that my daughters experience the adoption of the adult responsibilities of Judaism as a blessing and not as a burden. When Sarah and I studied her *parsha*, laden with *mitzvot*, we spoke of how the commandments are God’s gift to us, and represent opportunities to draw closer to God. In a way, I saw the celebrations as an opportunity to introduce the girls to the tensions and balances of life. They were both celebrating newfound freedom, but also entering a life of structure and discipline. They were becoming individuals, but within a

community. In particular, in becoming “modern” Jewish women, they received a strong message that this in no way negated the importance of the traditional virtues of *tzniut* and *chesed*, which are vital for all Jews today, male and female.

Shaping and crafting a *Bat Mitzvah* celebration is a public statement as well as a private one. It was important to me that this be a very serious milestone and that there be no element of “posturing.” Looking back, both celebrations were very special. With God’s help, both girls were beginning on their path to adult Jewish life. The myriad of celebrations with peers, family, and community were a spiritual experience for us as parents and for all who participated. More importantly, we hoped they marked for my daughters the beginning of a life of Torah and mitzvot, of learning and of observance, of commitment to *Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael*.

Jennifer Breger writes on Jewish women’s liturgy and literature, and on Hebrew printing. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Reflections of a Bat Mitzvah Tutor

Ilana Fodiman

This year I had the privilege of studying Torah with Jenny Feldstein in preparation for her *Bat Mitzvah*. Jenny and her family strongly felt that the *Bat Mitzvah* primarily represents initiation into the world of Torah and *mitzvot*. What better way to prepare for such an experience than by intense study of Jewish texts? Jenny and I spent approximately four to six hours a week studying a chapter of Talmud. We chose the Drisha *Beit Midrash* as our place of study, as it was important for us to be surrounded by other women studying Torah. I wanted Jenny to be introduced to the sense of ownership and connectedness with Jewish texts that full time students at Drisha experience after years of study.

We studied Talmud for no other purpose than to explore what our ancient traditions and laws offer. In preparation for the event, many girls choose to focus upon female role models, or upon topics relating to the time period in which their *Bat Mitzvah* falls. Jenny and I strongly felt that a *Bat Mitzvah* represents the embracing of an entire tradition of law and interpretation, and thus chose to study Talmud, a strong link in the chain of transmission of *halacha*. Our one-on-one study sessions afforded us the opportunity to question, reflect and internalize the material. We did not focus upon the *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony or speech, but upon our role as students and interpreters of traditional texts. My primary goal was to instill in Jenny a sense that learning is fun, exciting and interesting. We celebrated occasions on which we found solutions to difficult problems, remembered difficult words, or recognized a *tanna* or *amora* whom we had met before.

One of the greatest problems of many *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* preparation programs is the sense that the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* celebration is a culminating event, a sort of graduation experience to

which there is little or no follow-up. The *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony all too often ends up representing the celebration of the conclusion of a learning process, rather than celebration of its beginning. Jenny's *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony was true testimony to the fact that a *Bat Mitzvah* represents entrance into a tradition and acceptance of life-long commitments. Jenny made a *siyyum*, a ceremonial conclusion of the chapter of Talmud we had studied by presenting a well constructed lesson on the last topic we had dealt with. However, the most important element of a *siyyum* is recitation of the *hadran*, a text which affirms our eternal commitment to study; "we have concluded this text, but we will return to it, and it will return to us." Returning to study became the theme of Jenny's *Bat Mitzvah*, as she completed one text, but reaffirmed her commitment to study more and delve ever deeper.

The seriousness of her commitment was evident in the first week following Jenny's *Bat Mitzvah*. I received a phone message from her mother explaining that despite Jenny's busy schedule of piano lessons and extra-curricular activities, Jenny was anxious to get back to her Gemara. Jenny truly viewed her *Bat Mitzvah* as an introduction to the world of Torah study, and initiation into a community of women who are actively engaged in Torah texts. In a sense, Jenny had learned the path to the *Beit Midrash*. And so months after her "official" *Bat Mitzvah* celebration the real ceremony takes place; Jenny and I continue to study with the promise of "*hadran aalach v'hadrach alan*" — if you return to the text, it will return to you.

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Jenny Feldstein is a sixth grade student at the Ramaz School in Manhattan.

The Voice of a Mother: Excerpts From A Mother's Speech At Her Son's Bar Mitzvah

Renee S. Septimus

I must admit a great deal of ambivalence as I planned my son's *Bar Mitzvah* because, as a woman, I am once again relegated to obscurity despite my obvious importance in my child's life. I could not see his face as he *layned*, could not touch or kiss him when he finished, and I have never had access to the ritual object, the Torah, which is central to the experience. My name was not allowed to be included in his *aliyah*, as it was not at his *bris*, and I had no role to play, nor *bracha* to say. And I am struck yet again at the failure of ancient rabbinic authority, as well as by contemporary rabbis, to include women in religious ritual.

But I needed to make this a religious and spiritually meaningful event for myself. So I turned to my books of *tchinas*, religious devotional literature written by and for women over the centuries to provide religious context and spiritual dimension.

And yet, interestingly, but not surprisingly, I could find only one *tchina* for a mother to say at her son's *Bar Mitzvah* even though there are many for just about any experience you can imagine a woman having — lighting candles, *mikvah*, pregnancy, birth, nursing, weaning, finding a child's first tooth, taking a child to school for the first time... Apparently, for our foremothers too, this was a non-event, one which they felt unconnected to physically, spiritually or emotionally.

Adding my own words to those of our foremothers, I wrote my own *tchina*, for my son who gives me so much joy and shows me so much *kibud aim*, and I would like to share it with you today.

A Tchina in Honor of the Bar Mitzvah of Andrew Septimus, Dec. 18, 1999

Translated from the Hebrew

Ribono Shel Olam, I stand humbly before you, a mother like *Sorah, Rivkah, Rachel, Leah* and *Chana*, watching her son take steps towards adulthood and towards assuming his role and responsibility for the Jewish people. Always I've felt intimately our partnership in the creation and maintenance of the children you have blessed me with. But as they leave my womb and the womb of our household, I feel and need your presence ever more as I confront the limitations of my own ability to protect them.

From the moment I knew he lived inside me, this son has inspired joy in my life and the lives of those around him. *Ribono Shel Olam*, help him maintain his love of life and laughter, his integrity and honesty, his sensitivity and compassion. Guide him to think for himself with an open mind, seeking truth and goodness. And keep him always safe from harm, ready to do your sacred work, his desire and motivation always towards *Torah* and *Mitzvot*.

Keep him strong in body, soul and spirit so that he will have an easy life without strain or struggle. Give him the will to do your bidding so that he will never need to depend on anyone and so that all his material needs will be fulfilled all his life.

Grant him a good old age, blessed with children who he will see achieve good marriages, committed to *Torah* and *Mitzvot*.

Ribono Shel Olam this humble mother is filled with gratitude for all of life's blessings which you have bestowed upon me. Watch over my beloved husband, keep him safe from any harm or illness. Grant us long life filled with love and peace so that we may see and enjoy our children, children's children and their children. Keep them as close to you and as protected as a child in her mother's womb, against her mother's breast, wrapped in her mother's arms. Help my son to grow to be a good man with fine qualities, aware always of your presence, wise and dedicated to good works, charity and acts of loving kindness.

Dear God, I believe and trust in you and I come before you, my soul in my hands and I beg you, my creator, the force which sustains all life, to accept my prayer with mercy, this prayer which comes from the depths of my heart. Amen.

Renee Septimus is a social worker, and lectures and teaches on various Jewish topics. She has four children, and is currently writing a tchina in honor of her daughter's forthcoming marriage.