

Making a Meaningful Bat Mitzvah



*Bruria delivering a devar Torah at her Bat Mitzvah
Photos courtesy of the Bleich family*

Good from girls don't make Bat Mitzvahs—such was the prevailing view when I was growing up. And so when I turned twelve, I was proud to mark the occasion by doing *nothing*. At the Australian day school I attended, this gave me the status of a draft dodger (or conscientious objector). The other girls missed months of Jewish studies classes rehearsing for their Bat Mitzvah pageants in which they dressed up in white wedding-cake dresses to sing and prance in a sanctuary before a mixed audience.

The Shabbat after my twelfth birthday, I separated from my father at the shul door and climbed the stairs to the ladies' gallery. I had sat next to my father with the minyan most mornings since I was a toddler, but now I was grown and belonged upstairs. I re-

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member thinking as I stood at the threshold, "I'm a Jewish adult now, responsible for my deeds, both good and bad." I was so relieved that I was not obliged to read from the Torah in front of all those men. A private coming of age was a mercy.

My attitude toward the Bat Mitzvah celebration was not a mere idiosyncrasy: Rav Moshe had denounced it in a famous responsum written in 1959.

About the matter of those who want to make it customary to make some kind of . . . celebration with girls when they become bnot mitzvah. This should not be done in a synagogue under any circumstances. . . because a synagogue is not a place to do reshut [optional matters], and the ceremony of Bat Mitzvah is certainly only a matter of reshut [optional] and hevel b'alma [futility]; there is no source to permit this in a synagogue. How much more so this is the case since the source comes from Reform and Conservative [movements]. Only if the [girl's] father wants to make some kind of simchah at his home, it is per-

mitted. But there is no concept or basis to consider this to be a . . . seudat mitzvah, because it is only like the simchah of an ordinary birthday party . . . [He discusses how he would eliminate Bar Mitzvah celebrations as well, but cannot because there are halachic sources for it], but to innovate the practice for girls, where there is no source at all to consider it a mitzvah, even in the house, certainly it would be better to prevent it, even though there is no prohibition.'

In the era when Rav Moshe penned his responsum, the Bat Mitzvah celebration was linked to the Conservative and Reform movements' efforts to modernize and Christianize ritual in an attempt to "normalize" Jews in America. Orthodoxy was engaged in a battle for authenticity, fiercely preserving its distinctiveness. The prevailing opinion in *frum* circles was that it was better to avoid celebrating the Bat Mitzvah altogether. Certainly a pageant with white wedding dresses was far too close to the Catholic confirmation for comfort.

We began thinking about our daughter Bruria's Bat Mitzvah nearly fifty years after Rav Moshe wrote his responsum. Today, the Jewish world is transformed; Orthodoxy is ascendant.² It has triumphed in its struggle against the other denominations, and no

So the decision to do *something* was an easy one. The difficult question was what to do. The constraints were formidable. My husband is stringent on matters of Jewish law and would not agree to participate in anything with the slightest halachic taint.

our daughter after the preeminent female scholar in the Talmud, and envisioned a learned future for her. But despite much coaxing, we could not tempt her to study any text. Negotiations swirled unproductively until my mother intervened. "What about a

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longer has to judge itself based on the practices of others.

Prominent *posekim* published responsa disagreeing with Rav Moshe, sometimes vociferously, permitting and even encouraging the Bat Mitzvah celebration.³

In his zeal to stem the post-war flight from Orthodoxy, Rav Moshe apparently believed that the community was best served by doing nothing for girls reaching maturity. By maintaining this position, he discounted the Orthodox tradition of celebrating the Bat Mitzvah that existed in the early part of the twentieth century in Ashkenazic communities in Russia and Lithuania, as well as in Sephardic communities in Egypt.⁴

My husband and I believe that the spirit of the current era is expressed well by the Seridei Eish, Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, who wrote passionately in support of Bat Mitzvah festivities.

*The logical and straight way and the principle educational obligation almost requires [that we] celebrate also for the girl her becoming obligated in mitzvot, and this division made between boys and girls in connection with the celebration of coming of age has a harsh impact on the sense of humanity of the maturing girl, who, in other areas, has already been emancipated . . .*⁵

While Rabbi Weinberg's words were written in the early part of the twentieth century, they are even more relevant today.

The Bleich family at Bruria's Adar Bat Mitzvah

Bruria resisted the idea of a celebration altogether and certainly objected to a large party or public event. And I wanted to find a way for Bruria to distinguish the day she became a Bat Mitzvah from any day that came before it.

The first order of business was finding a learning project. We named

chesed project?" she asked. The impasse broke; Bruria was happy with the idea and we began looking for an opportunity where she could really contribute.

I found a couple with a baby who cried incessantly because of a chronic illness that made it difficult for her to fall asleep. For a year and a half Bruria cared for the baby on Sundays so the parents could get some rest. But although the volunteer work was a fitting prelude to Bruria's Bat Mitzvah, it did not solve the problem of recognizing, in some way, her transformation from girl to woman.

When a boy reaches Bar Mitzvah, the halachah offers a myriad of opportunities for signaling his change of status. At thirteen, he becomes obligated in *mitzvot* and can discharge the obligations of the community. He can represent the minyan in prayer, read the Torah and blow the shofar for others. A boy's transformation to man can be immediately broadcast to his community.⁶

How could the same kind of announcement be effected for a girl? Upon becoming Bat Mitzvah, she too becomes obligated in *mitzvot* that never applied to her before, but these *mitzvot* are expressed exactly the same way they were before she turned twelve. Most halachic authorities conclude that before her Bat Mitzvah, a girl observes halachah as part of her father's obligation to educate his children.⁷ After Bat Mitzvah, she observes the *mitzvot* on her own account. The halachic system made it difficult to find an *observable* way to mark



Bruria's change of status at twelve, but I was determined to keep trying.⁸

Then I learned the laws of mourning, which are unique in halachah because a parent is not obligated to educate a child regarding those laws.⁹ This principle extends to the rules regarding mourning the Destruction of Jerusalem, which require Jews to tear their garments if thirty days have elapsed since they have seen the desolation of the cities of Judah and the site of the *Beit Hamikdash*. Minors are exempted from mourning for the Destruction, including the requirement to tear their garments.¹⁰

After learning these laws, I had the inspiration that if Bruria viewed the Temple Mount on the day of her Bat Mitzvah, not having seen it in the previous month, she could publicly manifest her coming of age by tearing her

both her learning project and the Bat Mitzvah speech she delivered during the celebratory meal we prepared the evening she turned twelve.

The morning after the meal, we drove to the Mount of Olives, which provides a panoramic view of the Temple Mount. As we ripped our garments and recited Tehillim, we were inundated with offers for camel rides and souvenirs. It was a marvelous Israel moment. Afterwards, we descended to the Kotel and *davened* with my parents, who had traveled from Australia for the occasion.

That Friday, Bruria's great-aunt offered to make challah with her. Only an adult is obligated in "taking challah," and Bruria was now able to exempt us all by performing the mitzvah. Coincidentally, she had just learned the Rashi which discusses that taking

beaten into ploughshares and missiles into windmills. Every hour we anticipate that day. ■

Notes

1. Rav Moshe, *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chaim*, vol. 1, p. 104. My translation.
2. See "The Orthodox Moment," Jack Wertheimer, *Commentary* (February 1999).
3. Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, *Seridei Eish, Yoreh Deah* 39; Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, *Yabia Omer* 6:29, *Yechave Da'at* 2:29; Ben Ish Chai, *Shanah Rishonah: Reah* 17.
4. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky is reported to have held a family *melaveh malkah* in honor of each of his daughters' Bat Mitzvahs—one in Lithuania and one in Toronto; Rabbi A.N. Schwartz, founder of the Talmudical Academy in Baltimore, held a *melaveh malkah* for his daughter when he was *rav* in Ukraine. See Margie Pensak, "Raising the Bar on Bas Mitzvas," *Where What When* 19:10 (May/Sivan 5764):102; Rabbi Eliahu Hazan held a shul celebration for *bnot mitzvah* in Alexandria, 1907. See

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clothes in mourning. The day before her Bat Mitzvah she could not perform this act of mourning, but on the day of her Bat Mitzvah, it was her obligation to do so.

Honoring Bruria's Bat Mitzvah around this observance appealed to us all. We would celebrate in Jerusalem. We would temper our joy with sadness over the *Churban*, and Bruria would avoid a big party and public performance. I planned a family stay in Israel for a few weeks and even arranged for Bruria to attend school in Jerusalem.

Once we had settled on a meaningful focus for the Bat Mitzvah, Bruria felt comfortable participating in a modest celebratory meal. Inspired by her volunteer work, she asked that our efforts be made within the framework of *chesed*. We sent out invitations that were hand-made at a workshop employing individuals with special needs, and Bruria chose two Israeli charities to which guests could donate instead of bringing gifts. The themes of *chesed* and *tzedakah* also became the core of

challah in Israel is a Biblical commandment, whereas in the Diaspora it is rabbinic. Suddenly, the theoretical discussion came alive in her aunt's kitchen, and that *Shabbat* we had the pleasure of being the beneficiaries of the first mitzvah Bruria performed on behalf of others.

And so Bruria's Bat Mitzvah was transformed from a single ritual into a season of celebration. Following her lead, we emphasized the Jewish tradition of *chesed*, helping others in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel, intermingling our joy with remembrance of our losses. Bruria was rewarded with an unexpected welcome from the Jerusalem school that hosted her during our visit.

Soon after we returned to the States, I started to think about our son's coming Bar Mitzvah. It will be hard to create any event as complete and as perfectly suited to our dreams as the Bat Mitzvah celebration was. Unless, of course, our son is called to the Torah in a rebuilt Jerusalem, where swords are

"Bat Mitzvah" entry *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2004, Norma Baumel Joseph.

5. *Seridei Eish, Yoreh Deah* 39.

6. See how this plays a role in the Bar Mitzvah rituals: Magen Avraham, *Orach Chaim* 225:4; Rav Moshe, *Orach Chaim*, vol. 2, p. 97, makes this the lynchpin of the difference between the Bat and Bar Mitzvah.

7. For further discussion of a father's obligation to educate his daughter, see Moshe Bleich, "Responding Amen to the Blessing of a Minor," *Ten Da'at*, vol. XV (December 2002): 29-31. It is a matter of controversy whether a mother is obligated to educate her children. See, for example, Rabbi David Auerbach, *Halichot Baita*, chap. 27, no. 4, 5 (Jerusalem, 5743).

8. For a similar analysis, see Rav Moshe, *Orach Chaim*, vol. 2, p. 97.

9. *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 396:3; cf., comments of Taz *ad locum*, and *Pitchei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah* 396:2.

10. *Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim* 561:17. In fact, children might be forbidden to tear their clothes because of *ba'al tashchit*, the prohibition against wanton waste! See, for a related analysis, *Minchat Chinuch* 264:34 (Machon Yerushalayim edition, [Netanya, 5748]).

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