"What Makes a Bat Mitzvah Blossom": Pre-Bat Mitzvah Rituals for Daughters and Mothers

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The Bat Mitzvah ceremony, the coming of age ritual for Jewish females, is actually quite recent. In over 5,000 years of Jewish history, the first evidence of a Bat Mitzvah rite may have occurred in nineteenth century Baghdad. Rabbi Joseph al-Hakam observed that if a twelve-year-old girl received a dress as a gift and made the appropriate blessing for wearing a new garment, she automatically became a Bat Mitzvah.[1] That is, she performed a mitzvah at the age of Jewish female majority and thus became a Jewish adult in the eyes of her community.

As with so many rituals for Jewish girls and women today, there is wide latitude in the creation of new rituals and innovation in traditional ones. This is due to the blank slate that is most often the starting point for rituals for Jewish females. Those women who came of age in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s now have daughters[2] who are reaping the benefits of their struggles to be seen and heard in the synagogue, the home, and other arenas of Jewish life. For three decades, I have been observing and documenting many of these extraordinary rituals performed by Jewish women and girls along the entire spectrum of the life cycle and year cycle.[3]

The blank slate in regard to rituals for Jewish women and girls has worked to their benefit. Necessity being the mother of invention, as women in the mid-twentieth century were faced with life-transforming situations with nothing traditional to mark them, they took up the gauntlet and devised their own rituals and ceremonies. One example of such created ceremonies is the girl's baby naming, sometimes called *Simchat Bat* or *Zeved HaBat*, which was unheard of before the 1980s.[4] When women who had grown up between 1945 and 1960 experienced pregnancy or pregnancy loss, infertility, or the onset of labor, these momentous events demanded ritual.

Then came ritual practices based on old traditions or the remnant of a tradition, such as *Ushpizot*, *Rosh Hodesh*, or *Miriam's Cup*. In the case of *Ushpizot*, the medieval practice of inviting guests into the Sukkah, women noticed the absence of female guests and began inviting the matriarchs or other biblical women, historical women, female ancestors, and women who just could

not attend the meal in the Sukkah on that particular night. These were the *Ushpizot*, the feminine version of *Ushpizin*, or male guests. *Rosh Hodesh*, the monthly New Moon celebration, was originally given to women as a reward for not having contributed any of their gold to the making of the Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai.[5] As recently as the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Rosh Hodesh* was marked by individual Ashkenazic Jewish women by refraining from certain domestic chores. In the 1970s it was revived in a new form in North America as a time for Jewish women to gather and learn about the upcoming month—through story, song, prayer, art, dance, and text study. *Miriam's Cup* is a completely new ritual object with accompanying practices for the Sabbath, Passover, and menarche; it was created by a Boston Rosh Hodesh group in the context of one of their gatherings.[6]

In 1922 Judith Kaplan Eisenstein became a Bat Mitzvah at the insistence of her father, Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement in Judaism. In her memoir, Eisenstein recalls how hard her father pushed for the Bat Mitzvah ritual. She felt that he seized her coming-of-age in order to "put into practice one of the basic tenets of his then unnamed philosophy of Reconstructionism, namely, the equality of women in all aspects of Jewish life."[7] The Bat Mitzvah ritual that Mordecai Kaplan enacted with his daughter was made to highlight not her adult femaleness but rather her adulthood. Only decades later, with the advent of secular and then Jewish feminism in the 1970s, was femaleness emphasized.

According to Riv-Ellen Prell, "Jewish feminists, over more than three decades, have *reenvisioned* Judaism, they have *redefined* Judaism, and they have *reframed* it."[8] In my recent observation of how the Bat Mitzvah ritual is being transformed by girls and women, I have witnessed all three of the above taking place. The result has been an expansion of the Bat Mitzvah into what is now being called by those participating in it a "process" rather than a mere event. With this change in the perception of Bat Mitzvah from a static, one-time occurrence to a flow of development in terms of physical as well as emotional, spiritual, and intellectual changes the girl undergoes, several new aspects of Bat Mitzvah are emerging. I would like to identify and characterize these.

Arnold Van Gennep has distinguished three phases of ritual. The first is the separation of the individual from his or her present peer group. The second phase is the transition from one state (childhood/boyhood/girlhood) to another (adulthood/manhood/womanhood). These two culminate in the final phase, called incorporation, during which the one who has been separated returns to the community, transformed forever.[9] However, in my

observation of pre-Bat Mitzvah girls and their mothers since 2001, I have witnessed the emergence of a new phase in the coming-of-age process for Jewish girls, which I call the preparation phase. In addition, among the girls I observed, there was no separation phase; if anything, the first phase was the coalescing of the peer group. This change may be due to the fact that a new demographic has been identified by the marketplace and the media: 'tweens. These are girls age nine through twelve who strive to be adolescents even though many of them have not even reached puberty yet. They choose to wear clothes and makeup to emphasize their budding sexuality; they choose to listen and dance to popular music; they sometimes begin to test limits with their parents to see how far they can go in terms of staying out late or experimenting with alcohol and drugs.

Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, who created programs for pre-Bat Mitzvah girls at Ma'yan, the Jewish Women's Project of the JCC of Manhattan, contends:

> The pre-bat mitzvah year is a perfect time to focus on girls' growing awareness of themselves, in relationship to their peers, their families, and the various communities of which they are a part. The preparation for the Bat Mitzvah itself can be seen in the larger context of preparing our daughters for lives of intentional choices, thoughtful commitments, and joyful service.[10]

Some parents, especially mothers of Jewish girls, are finding that the Bat Mitzvah ritual is an effective way to slow down the accelerated maturation process of their 'tween daughters driven by the media, music, clothing, and cosmetics industries. From 2004 to 2008, I helped create and lead four groups of pre-Bat Mitzvah girls and mothers. Two groups were sponsored by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (HBI) in Waltham, Massachusetts. Two groups took place at Mayyim Hayyim Community Education Center and Mikveh in Newton, Massachusetts, in a program called "Beneath the Surface."

In the groups from the HBI, girls and mothers met monthly for about ten months in two separate groups with two separate programs. The girls' program was based upon *The J-Girl's Guide: The Young Jewish Woman's Handbook for Coming of Age*[11] and led by a pair of college women. The mothers' program was led by me and was a combination of support group and text study.

Girls and mothers joined together in pairs for the last group meeting. During this session, the pairs had some private time during which they gave each other blessings. All in all, the girls were quite enthusiastic about their meetings with the two college women, comfortable with having their mothers in the same house but not in the same room. The mothers stated that they wished they had had more time with their daughters over the ten months during which the groups met. The separation seemed to be doubly difficult

for them because they were, in fact, experiencing the loss of the "little girls" their daughters had been until quite recently both in their lives and in the context of the group.

The group sessions at Mayyim Hayyim were designed with significant time for mothers and daughters to be together as well as separate. Participants seemed to thrive on the different groups, one with their peers and one with their family member. The separate time was devoted to topics that participants could speak more freely about without a mother or daughter present. The topics covered were "Dealing with My Parents/Being the Parent of a Girl"; "What I wish my Bat Mitzvah to be/My Bat Mitzvah or non-Bat Mitzvah experience"; "What does it mean to be Jewish?"; and "The most important female figure in my life and why." During the last two sessions, mothers and daughters were to create a special short ritual that could be done using the water at the *mikveh* [ritual bath]. A description of one such ritual follows, created by a mother and her adopted daughter.

It was important for this mother and daughter to celebrate the girl's roots, physical and spiritual, because, in becoming a Bat Mitzvah, she reached into adulthood the way a tree reaches toward the sky. Therefore, this pair decided to buy a tree native to the land where the girl was born, water it with water from the *mikveh*, and then plant it in their backyard. They wrote a poem together for the occasion:

Prayer for
Tree Giving
Girl Growing

Seed. Soil. Water. Light.
Is what a tree needs for life.
God. Girl. Torah. Study.
Is what makes a Bat Mitzvah blossom.

Living. She. Beauty. Trunk.
This is my tree.
Living. She. Beauty. Soul.
This is me.

She is a tree of life to hold onto.[12]
Cherish them forever.

This ritual allowed the mother and daughter to reaffirm their relationship with each other in the context of a Jewish sacred space representing birth. The *mikveh* ritual is often compared to a rehearsal of birth in the warm waters from which the person emerges after total immersion. In the mother-daughter

program, "Beneath the Surface," there was no total immersion because that experience was to be set aside for the time that the girl actually became a Bat Mitzvah. In this pre-Bat Mitzvah phase, the idea of birth was hinted at in the use of water to refresh the tree, the participation of mother and daughter together, and the notion of Bat Mitzvah representing the girl's "birth" into Jewish womanhood.

Two more pre-Bat Mitzvah rituals will further demonstrate the importance of this new preparation phase of the Jewish coming-of-age celebration. The first ritual was created by Andrea Cohen-Kiener for her daughter, Sarah, in the late 1990s in West Hartford, Connecticut. It took place in the kitchen of the synagogue where Sarah would become a Bat Mitzvah before the whole congregation of men and women the following week. The immediate goal was to bake *challot* [loaves of ritual Jewish bread] for lunch after the Bat Mitzvah. The ultimate goal was to welcome Sarah into the community of Jewish women.

Cohen-Kiener deliberately chose one of the traditional "women's" mitzvot—namely, challah baking—for this pre-Bat Mitzvah ritual.[13] Her aim was to go deeply into this mitzvah with Sarah and the other women who comprised this challah-baking community for the day. Therefore, as forty women and girls took turns forming the dough, letting it rise, punching it down, braiding it, and baking it, they also sang, shared wisdom about baking and cooking and other "women's" work, joked, and reminisced about their own Bat Mitzvah and coming-of-age experiences.

When asked about her goal in creating this ritual, Cohen-Kiener stated, "I have to do this in a way that feels open to women, women's knowledge, that feels like you're being initiated into the community of Jewish women."

She also said it was necessary to transform the challah baking from a mundane household task to a communal spiritual activity and celebration. She wanted to incorporate her oldest living relative's know-how and her grandmother's baking tips into the ritual as well. After forty women had baked fifty *challot*, imbuing the loaves with the earthy holiness she hoped would grow in her daughter, Cohen-Kiener observed privately, "*This* was the Bat Mitzvah, not the ceremony in the shul!"

The third pre-Bat Mitzvah ritual was one I created for my daughter, Laura, in 2001 in the living room of our home in Newton, Massachusetts. I called it "Make Your Own Midrash/Make Your Own Sundae."[14] With Laura's permission and help, we came up with a list of her closest female friends and their mothers, my closest friends, and some of her teachers. I sent out invitations, and with each one I included the name of a woman from the Hebrew Bible and some instructions. Each guest was to bring a blessing for

Laura in the form of poetry, art, music, story, dance, or any other medium they chose. However, this blessing was to be one that the particular biblical woman would give to Laura. The flesh-and-blood women and girls attending the ritual were embodying the biblical women, giving Laura gifts of ancient and contemporary wisdom. My goal for this ritual was to impart women's knowledge and experience to Laura, thereby affirming her uniqueness and empowering her to become an adult who would stand on the firm foundation of generations of Jewish women who preceded her and stood with her. In a remark paralleling what Cohen-Kiener had observed about the pre-Bat Mitzvah ritual for her daughter, one of Laura's teachers said, "This is the most beautiful Bat Mitzvah I've ever been to!"

What is common to these three preparation rituals is their location outside the synagogue proper. They took place in the synagogue kitchen, the *mikveh*, and the home. All of these are women's domains, places that, although not part of the public sphere of Jewish practice (mostly in synagogue or school), are part of the private, more historically typical women's sphere. The synagogue kitchen, *mikveh*, and the home even point to the three "women's" mitzvot: *challah, niddah,* and *hadlaqat nerot*.[15] However, these preparation rituals transform the mitzvot assigned to women into experiences meaningful to girls coming of age.

The *challah* ritual brings Sarah's and Andrea's particular community of women together to welcome Sarah as a new adult. The *mikveh* ritual of mother and daughter watering the tree symbolizes the unique mother-daughter bond that the two share as well as the path of Torah upon which the girl is embarking with her mother and with the entire community of Jewish women. The home-based ritual of women and girls creating midrash demonstrated the power of women's interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, which have historically remained undocumented until now. This ritual gave Laura the mandate from our community of women to interpret Torah for herself and, in so doing, to perpetuate her heritage of living the Torah.

These three rituals also share a sense of birth/rebirth. In each, the girl is being initiated by her mother and the community of women around her into the adult world of Jewish women. One could say that this is the girl's second birth; this time she is born into a women's community shared by her mother. She is also born into the adult Jewish world shared by men and women. Initiation in the women's world will give her the foundation she needs to thrive in the larger Jewish and secular worlds.

In conclusion, I would like to propose naming the pre-Bat Mitzvah phase of the Bat Mitzvah ritual "the *kavanah* phase." *Kavanah* comes from the Hebrew root meaning "to arrange, direct, be firm." A *kavanah* is an utterance before

prayer, before blessing, before embarking on a transformative experience. Women and girls are making the process of becoming a Bat Mitzvah more meaningful by sanctifying space and time for "the *kavanah* phase" in this coming-of-age ritual.

NOTES

[1] Ben Elijah al-Hakam, Joseph Hayyim, *Ben Ish Hai* (Baghdad: nineteenth century).
[2] Understand "daughters" to signify a girl in a close relationship with an older woman and not referring only to biological or adopted daughters.
[3] See Penina Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year* (New York: Biblio Press, 1986, 1996). See also Penina Adelman, "A Drink from Miriam's Cup: Invention of Tradition among Jewish Women," in *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture* ed. Maurie Sacks; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).
[4] Chavva Weissler, "New Jewish Birth rituals for Baby Girls," unpublished paper delivered in an earlier version at the 1977 annual meeting of American Folklore Society.
[5] Adelman, *Miriam's Well*, 1996 edition, 1-2.
[6] See note 3.
[7] Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, "A Recollection of the First U.S. Bat Mitzvah," http://www.ritualwell.org.
[8] Riv-Ellen Prell, *Women Remaking Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 11.
[9] Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1960).
[10] Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, "Bat Mitzvah: Preparing Girls for Womanhood in a Changing Judaism," http://www.ritualwell.org.
[11] Penina Adelman, Ali Feldman, and Shulamit Reinharz, *The J-Girl's Guide: The Young Jewish Woman's Handbook for Coming of Age* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005).
[12] From the Torah Service liturgy, referring to the Torah as a "tree of life," Proverb 3:18.
[13] They are *challah, niddah* [observance of the laws of family purity including refraining from contact with one's husband during menstruation], and *hadlakat nerot* [lighting Sabbath candles].
[14] For a fuller description of this ritual, see Penina Adelman's introduction to *Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005). "Midrash-making" is a creative process the Jewish people have been engaged in since Sinai, a way of making meaning from the biblical text in each generation.
[15] See note 13.