

Celebration of the Bat Mitzvah

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The Bar Mitzvah celebration in America has come in for more than its share of ridicule and caricature. Commercialization of this religious milestone and its mindless exploitation have managed to dim the lustre of a very beautiful and ancient Jewish tradition, one admired and encouraged even as far back as the Tannaitic age almost two thousand years ago. A festive meal to mark life's milestones has long been considered appropriate — a *seudah* is prepared at a *Brit Milah*, also for a bride and groom during the seven days after their marriage, and by many persons on the occasion of moving into a new house. Already in the Torah¹ we find mention that Avraham our Patriarch tendered a great feast when his son Yitzchak was weaned. Consequently, the concept of the Bar Mitzvah does deserve our more serious attention to uncover its educational and ethical message.

Moreover, the new popularity of the feminist movement has made celebrations of Bat Mitzvah increasingly favored; even in quite traditionalist circles, it is not uncommon for the Bat Mitzvah date to be taken notice of in some manner. However, a great deal of controversy exists as to the proper or religiously valid and acceptable way to mark this rite, and that is the subject of the present enquiry. To do justice to the topic, we will investigate not

1. בראשית כא:ח

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only the rabbinic teachings about Bat Mitzvah but try also to put it in the context of the broader topic of Bar Mitzvah.

There are a number of questions which need to be explored: First, what is the halachic basis, if any, of making a celebration upon a boy's reaching the age of thirteen. Is it a universally approved tradition of long standing among all classes of Jewish society? Furthermore, since we shall see that indeed the Bar Mitzvah held considerable importance in the eyes of our sages, we have to question why there should be any differentiation in practice between the coming of age of boys and girls. On the face of it, the widespread neglect of marking a girl's passage into adulthood is a practice which requires justification. In addition, there remains the very sensitive issue of whether a Bat Mitzvah celebration, although possibly totally innocuous, might be disallowed because it smacks of imitation of non-Jewish practices or the innovations of non-observant Jews.

Nowhere in the Torah do we find indicated the specific time when a boy or girl reaches majority, the age of religious adulthood and full responsibility. However, the Mishnah² teaches, "The vows of a girl of twelve years and a day are valid and those of a boy older than thirteen years and a day." Rashi comments that, until that time, they are "*ketanim*", legally minors. The Gemara³ also indicates that a girl should begin fasting on Yom Kippur from the age of twelve and boys from the age of thirteen. Before that time, it is the parents' obligation to train them in fasting.

There is no question that throughout the centuries the arrival of a boy at the age of Bar Mitzvah, becoming responsible for his own deeds and full observance of mitzvot, was an occasion of rejoicing. The author of *Kaf Hachaim*⁴ mentions a number of rabbinic texts, including the *Zohar*, who laud the practice of marking the occasion with a festive meal to which were invited the

2. נדה מה:.

3. יומא פה:.

4. בקף החיים רכב: יא.

luminaries of the community. In his gloss to *Shulchan Aruch, Magen Avraham*⁵ rules that it is the religious obligation of a father to tender a festive meal in honor of his son's becoming Bar Mitzvah, just as he ought to do when the son marries.

The extent and lavishness of the Bar Mitzvah celebration, however, have not always been the same. In Europe, the event was commonly marked by the boy's being called to the Torah on a Monday or Thursday morning, and the family's offering a modest collation afterward. By contrast, in America some people have gone overboard in lavishing upon their celebration extravagances of gargantuan proportions. But whether the celebration consists of a modest kiddush of *kichel* and *schnaps* or a tremendous financial undertaking, it is a custom which is virtually universal.

Why should the attainment of full responsibility for mitzvot call for a celebration? We may look for the answer in an exchange recorded in the Talmud:⁶ Rabbi Yosef, who was blind, is quoted as saying that he would make a great party if anyone were able to prove to all the rabbis that a blind person is obligated to perform mitzvot. What was behind his making this fervent offer? The talmudic sages, after considerable debate, had concluded that a person who performs a mitzvah even if he is not required to do so does not receive a reward equal to that of a person who is mandated to do a mitzvah and does it. Although one might argue conversely, that a person who doesn't have to do a mitzvah and does it anyway deserves a greater reward, the rabbis took into account that a person who is required to do something has to overcome the negative pull of his *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) which tries to induce him not to do it; thereby, he merits a greater reward. Rabbi Yosef, as a blind man, was exempt from doing mitzvot; had someone been able to change the rabbinic ruling, the mitzvot that he did would have earned him a greater reward. Therefore, he would have tendered a party to celebrate his new status.

5. מִגַּן אֲבֵרָהֶם א"ח רכב ד'. See באור הלכה תרס"ו about having a *seudah* for the Bar Mitzvah in a succah.

6. קדושין לא.

On the basis of this talmudic discussion, Rabbi Shlomo Luria⁷ rules that the festive meal made for a Bar Mitzvah is itself a mitzvah (the meal is a *seudat mitzvah*), for we are thanking G-d that this child has attained the landmark of becoming obligated to fulfill all mitzvot, being now a true adult. Now that he is under full obligation, he is considered on a higher level than someone who performs the mitzvah even though he does not have to do so. Furthermore, Rabbi Luria reasons that Rabbi Yosef was going to make a party just to celebrate receiving the news that indeed he, as a blind person, was qualified to merit the same reward as everyone else; then certainly in the case of a child who actually undergoes a change in status, and does not just become informed about it, he would be far more obligated to make a celebration!⁸

Bat Mitzvah

As has been shown, the rationale for making a celebration for a boy who reaches the age of thirteen arises from the fact that a person has to give thanks for achieving a higher level of religious responsibility. Since a girl at twelve undergoes the very same elevation in status, progressing to a level where she has to observe all the mitzvot incumbent upon a Jewish woman, does it not follow that there should be the identical obligation to make a party for her? The historic reality that it is not a widespread custom to do so is perplexing; *Dagul Mirevavah*⁹ succinctly expresses his wonder: "Why, indeed, don't people make a festive meal for a girl?"¹⁰

There is a compelling logic to the argument that a girl's Bat Mitzvah is a significant attainment deserving some notice. As a matter of practice, there are a number of Orthodox communities where this is done. It is reported that many old Jerusalem families have the custom to mark the Bat Mitzvah of their daughters with a small feast; here in the United States, numerous members of the

7. ים של שלמה ב"ק זל"ז.

8. לב אברהם ס"ע.

9. דגול מרבבה יו"ד קע"ח.

10. discusses making a celebration on the Friday evening following the birth of a daughter.

Washington Heights Jewish community in New York also do make a party. However, some of their spokespersons deny that there is any halachic basis for such a custom, brushing it off as "just a birthday party." The administration of the Beth Rivkah Schools has informed this author in a letter that the Lubavitcher Rebbe has instructed them to make a Bat Mitzvah celebration for their students "at either a *Mesibat Shabbat* or *Melave Malka*."

The former Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic community in Israel, Rabbi Ovadiah Yoseph, fully accepts the logic of the situation:

Accordingly, it is proper that also for a girl who has attained the age of twelve years and a day, and has become responsible for all the mitzvot which are incumbent upon a woman, since she has now become "obligated and does" these mitzvot, it is fitting to celebrate her entry into mitzvot with thanksgiving and a joyful feast, for in this regard there is no difference between a boy or a girl, when they reach [the stage of] obligation in mitzvot.¹¹

He also cites an earlier Sephardic authority, the *Ben Ish Chai*, who wrote that although it was not their custom to hold festivities, it would nevertheless be appropriate for the girl to wear her finest Sabbath attire to mark the importance of the day. In addition Rav Yoseph cites other authorities who consider that there exists the same obligation to accept an invitation to a Bat Mitzvah celebration as there is to attend a *Brit Milah* if invited.

Despite its straightforward logic, his argument has not won total acceptance. Rav Moshe Feinstein viewed the subject differently; in a responsum on the subject, he ruled that a Bat Mitzvah should not be celebrated in a synagogue, for since "it is clearly nothing more than celebration of a birthday, it has no place in a shul."¹² His focus is on disallowing the party in a shul,

11. יחזק דעת חלק ב, כ"ט.

12. אגרות משה או"ח ק"ד. In an aside, Rav Feinstein went on to offer the observation that if it were in his power, he would put an end also to cognate Bar Mitzvah

for a shul is not the place to engage in activities which are permissible [but not required], even if it were built on the condition [that the building could be used for activities other than prayer.] The celebration is certainly only a permitted matter, and just nonsense.

However, Rav Feinstein makes no objection to the father's marking the occasion by a party in his home if he wishes, since it is nothing more than a birthday party.

This was not to be his last word on the subject. In another responsum,¹³ he addressed the question of why there should be any difference between a boy and a girl on this matter. His opinion is that when a boy attains the stage of being a Bar Mitzvah, everyone can readily observe the change that has taken place — now he is counted for a *minyan*, now he is called up to the Torah, now he can lead Grace after meals. It must be noted, however, that Rav Feinstein offers no rabbinic source to support his argument.¹⁴ Indeed, Rav Ovadiah Yoseph does not accept this position.¹⁵

Later, Rav Feinstein returned to this topic again;¹⁶ after reiterating his view that celebration of a girl's Bat Mitzvah is definitely optional, Rav Feinstein permits making a kiddush in shul in honor of the occasion, which he concedes is certainly no less auspicious than other joyous occasions which are celebrated with a kiddush. (In his letter to the rabbi who sought his advice, Rav Feinstein cautioned him that it was not worth making a fuss about it; if he had already agreed to permit the Bat Mitzvah celebration in shul, there was no need for him to retract, if it would cause him any embarrassment.)

celebrations for boys, for they seldom enhance the boy's religious observance and very often lead to *Chilul Shabbat*.

13. אגרות משה או"ח ח"ב צ"ז.

14. However, מן אברהם תכ"ה ס"ק ד' does apply the same reasoning in explaining why a father recites the blessing "*asher petoranie*" (Who has freed me from the burden of punishment I had for this child when he was a minor) when his son becomes Bar Mitzvah, but not when his daughter reaches adulthood.

15. יחזק דעת ח"ב, כ"ט.

16. אגרות משה או"ח ח"ד, ל"ו.

Let us leave this aspect of the question and examine another side of the problem. Regardless of all the logical arguments which can and have been offered to support making a festivity at the time of Bat Mitzvah, there is no question that throughout our history the Bat Mitzvah has not been celebrated in the same way as was the Bar Mitzvah. Tradition is a very important feature of Judaism, and if something has never or seldom been done, we ought to give serious thought whether it is advisable to institute it at this time. Particularly this type of innovation should be undertaken with trepidation because there does not appear to have been any change in circumstances which would justify our disregarding thousands of years of tradition. Then as now, boys and girls reached the age of maturity; in centuries gone by, the rabbis were undoubtedly equally aware of the lack of any cogent reason for differentiation between the ceremonies made for a boy or a girl — and yet there was a differentiation.

Possibly this distinction arises from a factor outside the question of the Bar Mitzvah. Rabbi Feivel Cohen suggests that the difference may be a feature of the basic philosophy Judaism has towards women, which stresses *Tzniut* (modesty in behavior, dress, and speech) as a highly desirable quality. It has never been our way to put women in the forefront of public attention; this accounts for many instances wherein we treat boys and girls, or men and women, in different ways. Having a girl be the center of attention in a synagogue celebration of her attaining maturity would be antithetical to our concept of *Tzniut*, but one can readily appreciate that a celebration for her at home, with her family and friends, is more appropriate within the context of *Tzniut*.

It may be that the very fact that the Bat Mitzvah was not traditionally celebrated with any great festivity is sufficient reason not to institute such a celebration at this time.

Not so, argues Rabbi Yaakov Yechiel Weinberg;¹⁷ he

17. שרידי אש חלק ג, צ"ג, דף רצ"ז. However, many rabbis have opposed making changes in age-old customs. Following is a partial list of such instances: *לב אברהם חשובה פ"ה* forbids affixing a mezuzah flat on the doorpost instead of rolled up, in part based of his contention that "an innovation is biblically

emphatically rejects the claim that there is no basis for allowing this innovation. Drawing on the historic precedent of the Beth Jacob girls' schools which represented a radical innovation when they were introduced earlier in this century, he postulates persuasive reasons for introducing a change which he deems vital to our future:

In the generations before us, they did not have to be concerned with education and training of girls, for every Jew then was full of Torah...and every city of Jews was full of the spirit of Judaism. Girls who

forbidden." However, note that the Gemara reports that recitation of *Hallel* on *Rosh Chodesh* was an innovation of the talmudic rabbis (תענית כח).

See also ש"ך יו"ד א: א: ש"ך חו"מ ל"ז ס"ק ל"ח.

In the *שדי חמד* there is a long discussion about making modifications in the traditional method of drawing blood by mouth suction from the circumcision incision, due to the modern scientific finding that the many germs in the mouth may cause infection in the cut. (See קונטרס מצוה בפה). Some approve it, but others are opposed to "changing the form of a mitzvah from the customary and accepted way of generations."

פ"ד תשובה ח"ג, discusses a request by butchers in a town to begin *nikur* (withdrawal of certain veins which may not be eaten) in the hind quarters of slaughtered animals, although it had always been their custom not to bother with *nikur* but to discard that portion. Although they had never been accustomed to do it previously, Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski found nothing objectionable in their undertaking it now.

The question of changing an old custom or instituting a new one occurs in many situations. Most recently, Rav Moshe Feinstein was approached on the issue of women's prayer groups. In the as-yet unpublished letter which he wrote on it, he referred to an earlier responsum of his (ח"ד מ"ט) concerning women donning the *tallit* during prayer. There he had indicated that the crux of the matter was really the motivation of the person who wants to make some innovation in the accepted practice. If women are donning the *tallit* or attending special prayer groups in an implied rejection of Torah values which consider these things unnecessary, or doing it as an act of rebellion against rabbinic rules, then their mitzvah is actually an *aveirah*. On purely intellectual or halachic grounds, he concedes that there is nothing wrong per se with a women's *minyan*. However, he continues, it is difficult to find at these prayer groups many women who are motivated by a sincere desire to be able to pray more effectively; most come out of a sense of rebelliousness or rejection of tradition.

were raised in a Jewish home absorbed the spirit of Judaism without any active deed, almost taking it in with their mothers' milk.

Although once it sufficed for girls to be trained by their mothers to be good Jewish women, now times have changed. The home may no longer be adequate or sufficient to assure that Jewish daughters will be committed to Torah values and observance. Changes have to be made.

Fortunately, the leaders of our people in the previous generation became aware of this and established institutions of Torah and religious strengthening for girls.

Rabbi Weinberg considers the establishment of a network of schools for girls to be "the most magnificent demonstration of our generation." He then proceeds to argue that other changes also must be made in recognition of the radically different status women enjoy today, as compared to previous generations.

Clear logic and principles of pedagogy virtually require equal celebration for a girl when she reaches the age of responsibility for mitzvot.

Moreover he warns of dire consequences if we do not face up to the impact which neglect may have upon girls' attitudes:

The difference which is made in the celebration for a boy and a girl upon reaching maturity makes a very hurtful impression on the feelings of the maturing girl, who has in all other areas attained equality.¹⁸

There is yet another component which carries great weight in

18. However in a responsum a few pages later (נ"צ), he rejects the suggestion that a baby be anesthetized prior to circumcision, for this was never done in the past, and "one ought not to denigrate a Jewish custom." Thus we see that he is not prepared to establish innovation as desirable in all circumstances.

deciding on the question under study. Even were all to concede the desirability of commemorating a girl's reaching maturity with a joyous celebration similar to a boy's, even if superceding age-old traditions might be justified, we would yet have to contend with another issue quite apart from the Bat Mitzvah question proper.

In the Torah there is a specific prohibition that Jews should not copy the customs of other nations — "*bechukoteihem lo teileichu*", "you shall not follow their ways." A Jew should be proud of his heritage and must not mimic the ceremonials of others.¹⁹ An otherwise innocuous practice may be forbidden simply by virtue of its actual or implicit imitation of a non-Jewish custom. It is necessary, therefore, to determine whether the impetus for investing the Bat Mitzvah with greater significance might not arise from a source other than Torah Judaism, as has been the case with other changes introduced into Jewish synagogue practice in the course of the preceding two centuries.

About two hundred years ago, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, known by the name of his magnum opus *Noda Biyehudah*, was asked if a synagogue structure could be built in a circular shape rather than the usual rectangular one.²⁰ In his responsum he indicates clearly there is absolutely no halacha requiring a shul to be rectangular nor forbidding it to be round. However, he notes, if the people who want to undertake this project are doing this

Nevertheless, there are times when he is prepared to allow modification of past custom, particularly when he perceives a great need. Thus, he permits girls to join with boys in singing *zemirot* at a communal Sabbath meal, for he sees it as part of an essential program to make Jewish observance more attractive to them. See שרידי אש חלק ב"ח.

19. The central issue in the halacha of *bechukoteihem* is definition of the term, about which there is some disagreement. Most rabbis understand the prohibition to apply only to customs which have no rational basis and/or are taken up by Jews in imitation of Gentile ways. However, the Vilna Gaon describes it as any custom, fashion, or institution which Jews would not on their own have done, but do out of imitation of Gentile ways.

For a full exposition of this topic, see the article by Rabbi H. Teichman in Volume I, No. 2, of this Journal (Fall 1981).

20. נודע ביהודה א"ח י"ח

because they want to imitate the architectural style favored by those who build churches, they should be stopped forthwith.

In a somewhat different context a century later, Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman discusses the question of placing an organ in a synagogue.²¹ After an exhaustive survey of rabbinic sources on the matter, he forbids the practice, basing his decision on a mishnah²² which forbids certain things because "it would strengthen the hands of scoffers," explaining that if the Orthodox continue a custom which was initiated by Reform Jews, it gives these scoffers a certain amount of status and legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and *for that reason alone it should not be done*.²³

Based on these teachings, it would appear that even if an individual were personally confident that he has no desire to imitate the Christian confirmation ceremony when he makes a Bat Mitzvah for his daughter, it is probably true that the popularity of the Bat Mitzvah celebration in recent decades does proceed from the innovation of non-observant Jews, whose major purpose was to mimic the non-Jewish confirmation ceremony. If not the letter, then at least the spirit of the law seems to dictate that we not continue their practice.

The halachic rulings of the *Noda Biyehudah* and *Melamed Leho'il* pose a difficult hurdle for Rav Weinberg, but one which he attempts to overcome in seeking justification for making the Bat Mitzvah an important occasion.²⁴ He argues that since the Bat Mitzvah celebration takes place at home and not in the synagogue, this itself is an affirmation of our own positive desire to instill in

21. מלמד להועיל ח"א ט"ז.

22. חולין מא.

23. גמרא מדרש"א יו"ד רמ"ז specifically states that "a good custom which was instituted by a wicked person should not be practiced."

Concerning the custom of decorating the Shul for Shevuot, which was approved by the Ramo (אורח חיים חצ"ד), the Vilna Gaon ruled that it should be discontinued because it resembled the non-Jewish custom of bringing decorative wreaths (חיי אדם כלל קל"א"י"ג and משנה ברורה, אות י). However, the *Chatam Sofer* angrily berated the new *Gabbai* in his congregation for failing to decorate the synagogue in accordance with custom (חוט המשולש עמוד קכ"ח).

24. שרידי אש, ח"ג צ"ג.

our daughters pride and commitment upon their attaining majority; celebration at home is quite clearly not an imitation of the church ritual of confirmation.²⁵

It is very interesting to note that, almost casually, Rabbi Weinberg and Rabbi Hoffman have extended the prohibition of imitating the Gentiles to include imitation of non-observant or even heretical Jews as well; this is quite a leap halachically. Possibly, this reasoning is the implicit basis for Rabbi Feinstein's reluctance to allow a Bat Mitzvah observance in a shul. Rav Ovadiah Yoseph, however, not having to confront this kind of problem in Israel, does not accept the premise. He does not accept these considerations and feels comfortable with a lenient ruling.

Innovation often arouses controversy in Jewish circles, for sad experience has shown that there is always the danger it may have an impure origin or an unfortunate outcome. Even when that great *tzaddik* Rabbi Israel Meir Hachohen, the *Chafetz Chaim*, approved the establishment of a school to teach girls Torah and Judaism, he met with a storm of opposition.²⁶ Nevertheless, the project continued and in the ensuing decades more than proved its essential worthiness. If the impetus to give more importance to a girl's reaching Bat Mitzvah arises from a similarly pure motivation, the verdict over a period of time may affirm its acceptability and importance. At the present it is difficult to give a definitive answer as to the appropriateness of making a major celebration for a girl's reaching Bat Mitzvah. Perhaps we need the experience of time to render the final decision on this vexing halachic question.

25. Rabbi Weinberg recommends to those who are concerned about his ruling, a perusal of the teaching of Rambam, מ"ח פ"ה: גיטין, פרוש למשניות.

26. אהרון סורסקי, תולדות החינוך התורני (בני ברק 1967); ספר תיקון עולם נדונה. p. 423