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# Toward a Meaningful Bat Mitzvah

Edited by Nancy Wolfson-Moche



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Photos by Maurice Weiss

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# Parents' Blessing to Felissa

*“That if you were shown tolerance  
You will be patient with others  
That if you were treated fairly  
You will be a seeker of justice  
That if you were shown commitment to causes and issues  
Then you know you can make a difference  
That if you felt friendship  
You will find love in the world*

*May you know the difference between being smart and being wise  
May you be strong but not tough, gentle but not weak  
May you always remember your Chasidic roots from where you came;  
they will help you in where you're going  
May the spirit and song of our collective past, Felissa, dance forever in your soul.”*

Some of these blessings were adapted from those included in Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin's Putting God on the Guest List:  
How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah (Jewish Lights, 1996)



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"While the pace may be different, and while the processes of interpretation are different from one denomination to another, Judaism is open to change across the board."

- Blu Greenberg



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## Preface

by Aryeh Rubin

**T**he goal of this booklet is to share with the Jewish community-at-large our family's solution in creating a bat mitzvah that allowed our daughter to participate fully in a traditional ritual service while at the same time keeping within the broad parameters of the branch of traditional Judaism that our family affiliates with. Our flexible approach also allowed the non-participating community to share in our celebration.

While we had attended several bat mitzvahs at a Women's Tefillah group in New York that was pioneered by Rabbi Avi Weiss, there was no precedent for it in South Florida, our adopted home for the last several years. Our solution was created out of necessity. Our synagogue was not yet ready for a Women's Tefillah; so we created our own makeshift synagogue. How we accomplished this is beautifully described by Nancy Wolfson-Moche; yet it is only part of the story detailed herein.

Blu Greenberg's poignant history of the development of the bat mitzvah and the spiritual development of Jewish women will enlighten readers across the religious spectrum. Rabbi Saul Berman's comments on why Women's Tefillah groups can and cannot include certain prayers break new ground. The responsum of Rabbi Yitz Greenberg on the issue of *Kol Isha* -- the age-old prohibition of women singing in the presence of men -- is a major breakthrough in the evolution of Jewish law. His *halachic* ruling is bound to have widespread and long lasting effects on the Jewish feminist movement and inspire the rest of us with his courage in coming out forcefully on this sensitive issue.

Perhaps my advocacy on the part of women's issues in Judaism is partially motivated by my three daughters; desiring to assure them a participatory role in the traditions and rituals of our people. Perhaps it's because I have seen the effect of these newfound freedoms on the self-confidence of women. I vividly recall a scene some twenty-five years ago in New York in which the women were offered a scroll on Simchat Torah to dance the *hakafot*. The centuries of conditioning have had their effect. Many of the women held back; there was an awkward sense of unfamiliarity and discomfort. The next generation, their very own daughters, however,



have no such reservations. They sit on religious councils, serve as congregational interns (*de facto* assistant rabbis) and read from the Torah with a confidence and assurance that would have been unimaginable to their parents.

In the span of one generation, these women have migrated from the home to the study halls, from the *mikveh* to administering religious courts of law. And yet, much work needs to be done. Access to rituals in Jewish life remains fragmented, with some rabbis and synagogues including women in many aspects of the service, others denying any access at all.

Change is inevitable, but its path is slow and laden with stumbling blocks. Whether these stumbling blocks are the canards of a rabbinical board in Queens or the outlandish gender parables told by the heads of yeshivot, they continue unabated in some segments of our religious society much to the detriment of *Klal Yisroel*. Adhering to a ritual process designed by men for men, these zealots operate behind the cloak of halachic standards. I believe they are often motivated by a fear of the unknown – that the traditional feminists are changing the very fabric of Jewish life, altering the communal structure and affecting the community in ways far more significant than just adapting old rituals as their own. What these rabbis should be concerned about is elevating the holiness of their communities and not with equivocating on the minutiae of Jewish law. And it is the feminists who are raising the bar in the realm of spirituality. When I told a prominent local rabbi that I witnessed more holiness and serenity in the Women's Tefillah of my daughter Felissa's bat mitzvah than in any quorum that I ever attended anywhere in the world, he replied, only half in jest, "It will be that way for the first five hundred years and then they will pray like the rest of us".

I look to the Jewish feminists not only to advance the participation of women, but also anticipate their contribution to keeping traditional Judaism centered, both spiritually and halachically. As an ever larger swath of Orthodox Jewry regresses and harkens back to prohibitions emanating from the sixteenth century, the simmering tensions of gender equality will help infuse a sensible approach to halachic Judaism.

We often underestimate our abilities to effect change. Our rabbi, who is among the most respected emissaries of Chabad-Lubavitch, has in the last several years, evolved with the women's movement. It was clear that if he did not get in front of it, it would have overtaken him. He has allowed Bat Mitzvahs to address the congregation from the pulpit in the men's section of the main sanctuary on Shabbat mornings. (It occurs at the end of services, and Kiddush is made first so that it's technically not considered the "actual" service). They rely on an unpublished response of the Lubavitcher Rebbe that they claim permits this practice. He has allowed a Bat Mitzvah to lead a Kabbalat Shabbat service for women only on Friday evening (without the recitation of Kaddish or Borchu) in the synagogue itself. Following his lead, scores of Chabad congregations have permitted similar activities. From here, it is destined to spread to Orthodox synagogues across the country.



Ever since they were babies, our daughters' nightly blessings, in addition to the *Shema*, have included our family-created benedictions. "I am strong, I am powerful, I am intelligent, I am unique, I am sensitive, I am special, and I can do anything." Later add-ons include: "I will care about the poor, etc." Little did I know when Felissa mouthed these sentences with words whose meaning she did not well comprehend, that a decade later she would radiate the holiness, the spirituality and confidence as she led the Women's Tefillah at her own bat mitzvah. As she studied from the same Tikkun that I used for my own bar mitzvah, I took pride in her learning and in her role as a trailblazer. We created a framework within which she had the option to participate in the rituals, no less than in a bar mitzvah. It was her decision to go forward. She worked hard. She gave up a lot. She made it all worthwhile and made me a believer -- a believer that our daughters' granddaughters will be full participants in all aspects of religious ritual practice. Amen.

- Golden Beach, Florida  
Rosh Chodesh Tamuz 5762  
10 June 2002

"I am strong, I am powerful,  
I am intelligent, I am unique,  
I am sensitive, I am special,  
and I can do anything."









# Introduction

by Blu Greenberg

**T**he history of Jewish women's ritual is being written in our lifetime, and perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in celebration of bat mitzvah. But like all good ritual, it must be put into its proper context: the covenant.

Judaism is a covenantal religion, its essence being a covenant between God and the Jewish people. Each partner pledges to be faithful to the other unto eternity and to work in partnership towards the covenant goal of creating a better world. We carry a vision of the future in which life, goodness and human dignity will be chosen over death, evil and degradation. The universe will be free of all war, hunger, pain, sickness and even death. "And death shall be swallowed up unto eternity," (25:9) the prophet Isaiah teaches.

It is easy, however, to lose sight of this grand vision. One needs markers and reminders along the way, and a clear set of guidelines. The Torah offers both. It presents God's design for the world and a working blueprint for the partnership. The prophets, rabbinic teachings and daily prayers also keep the vision at the center of human consciousness and establish guidelines.

Yet Judaism looked beyond text and teachings. Jewish tradition seized every opportunity to invest itself with meaning and symbols of the covenant. Stages of biological growth were drafted to the covenantal cause. Thus, birth was less about entry into the world than entry into the people of the covenant as a *ben brit*.

Puberty was the next covenantal opportunity. In contrast to involuntary acceptance of covenant at birth, puberty rites marked the voluntary acceptance of conditions of the covenant. Over time, the rabbis developed ceremony and formulae for this rite of passage and named it "bar mitzvah," child of the commandments.

It was a work of genius! The rabbis chose an arbitrary date of thirteen for boys and twelve for girls. Fixing the day without regard to the fact that children reach puberty at different times



served to divert attention from biological growth and place emphasis on spiritual and theological maturation. Rituals associated with Torah, the prime expression of covenant, were lifted up: the privilege of reciting blessings over the Torah and the heady new responsibility of donning *tefillin* for daily prayer. In time, a "*seudat mitzvah*," a communal feast, was added, and other accouterments of celebration.

From the perspective of what we know about thirteen-year-old boys, this was a brilliant puberty rite. It caught a child at the important transition stage of child-man and focused his energies in the direction of Torah, synagogue, prayer, community, commandments, faith and covenant.

*What about girls?* Nothing, really. Just as girls entered the covenantal community at birth with barely a whisper, so they entered Jewish womanhood with not even a private ritual. Although I have considerable recall of special events in my youth, I have none whatsoever of my bat mitzvah. There was simply nothing to recall. It passed like any ordinary day in my life, and I was none the sadder for it. No expectation, no loss. In fact, as my friends and I sat in the balcony on Shabbat mornings during the 1950's, and celebrated the bar mitzvahs of our male friends, we experienced not envy but relief. We were grateful to be spared this public ordeal, though surely we were aware that 'our boys' relished their moment in the communal eye.

In truth, bat mitzvah was an anathema in my community. It signaled that someone had stepped over the boundaries of tradition, had violated *halachah*. I understood this as a young child, growing up in Seattle, Washington, where the occasional bat mitzvah celebrated at the large Reform Temple de Hirsch evoked contempt in the Orthodox community, and probably in the Conservative community of the 1940's as well.

The very first bat mitzvah took place in Philadelphia in 1922 in honor of Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionism. For a very long time, few followed. By the 1960's, however, bat mitzvah celebration had almost become a norm in Reform and Conservative Judaism.

In the 1960's, the public bat mitzvah slowly began to enter Orthodoxy. A few daring Orthodox families celebrated it and a few brave rabbis permitted it. Still, the word 'bat mitzvah' was hardly used. "*Bat Torah*" was the first coinage, followed by the bolder "*Bat Torah U'mitzvah*." Within Orthodoxy, these early bat mitzvah celebrations generally took the form of group events. The whole class of twelve-year-olds in the synagogue, or the whole seventh grade in the day school marked the day together. Rarely were the celebrations connected in any way to a communal liturgy.

Instead, they took the form of a party with speeches, recitations and blessings by the rabbi.

It is an irony of history that bat mitzvah ritual is now observed more universally in Orthodoxy than in any other denomination.



In their own right, these were moving and path-breaking ceremonies, and were well accepted where they took place. Still, the family norm was not to do anything remotely equivalent to the hallowed bar mitzvah. Centuries of conditioning combined with a desire to distance Orthodoxy from the other denominations were a powerful force. By the 1970's, the situation had changed. It is an irony of history that bat mitzvah ritual is now observed more universally in Orthodoxy than in any other denomination. While celebrations may differ -- from a family *kiddush* to a full scale Women's Tefillah with Torah reading... everyone has one.

**F**rom this brief history of bat mitzvah flow several lessons:

**First**, traditional Judaism is dynamic, unfinished, and open to correction. In theological terms, the covenant is simultaneously eternal and unfolding. Women, always partners in covenant, and indeed carriers of the covenantal gene through maternity, have now become more publicly and exuberantly welcomed as such.

**Second**, bat mitzvah testifies to the fact that change is a matter of degree and not of kind between the denominations. This refutes two widely held stereotypes about Orthodoxy: the first comes from those within the community who hold the view that "anything new is forbidden from the Torah"; the second, from those who believe that Orthodoxy is static, pre-modern and closed. Neither is true. While the pace may be different, and while the processes of interpretation are different from one denomination to another, Judaism is open to change across the board.

**Third**, covenant is not impervious to cultural influences. The ethical value of women's equality was not the original force behind bat mitzvah ritual, but it has had a great deal to do with its wide acceptance. Feminism has made women-and-community-celebration a good fit in our times.

**Fourth**, combining the fact of dynamic change within Orthodoxy with the fact of influence by the broad cultural value of gender equality holds out much promise for traditional women in other areas of Jewish law, such as resolving the *agunah* problem (when a woman remains legally bound to a man who has either divorced her or disappeared), accepting women in rabbinic leadership roles, and creating more inclusive space and roles for women in the synagogue. If these issues are treated like the bat mitzvah, without compromising, the journey will continue.

**Fifth**, bat mitzvah teaches a lesson in the value of pluralism. All would agree now that communal celebration of a girl's Jewish maturity is a wonderful thing, deepening and enhancing not only her life, but the community's as well. Yet we should remember that bat mitzvah entered the community through the liberal denominations, well before the women's movement arose.





Because of our greater assumption of *halachic* responsibility for observance of the *mitzvot*, Orthodox Jews like to think that we can only teach others. Yet bat mitzvah reminds us that it is a two way street. Another example: four years ago, reciting *Kaddish* for my father, of blessed memory, I came to understand the wisdom of the rabbis in creating this incredible, healing ritual. As there were then few models in the Orthodox community, I realized that this was a gift to me not only from the rabbis of ancient times, but also from women in Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism. I owe them a debt of gratitude, not only for providing models but for opening up issues and creating the cognitive dissonance necessary for me to begin reexamining Jewish women's roles.

The great flowering of women's learning in our times is another example of the fruits of pluralist exchange. In this instance, the ripple effect largely flows in the other direction. It was Orthodox women who set the standard of women and Torah study, raising it year by year. This exhilarating model of learning and learned women has had a powerful impact on liberal Jewish women, so that now we can say with surety and pride that this is the most learned generation of women in all of Jewish history.

Finally, and more significant perhaps than any of these lessons, bat mitzvah teaches us anew the power of community ritual: that each covenantal experience of one individual or one family enlarges every other one of us. A brit has always reminded us that this new child is really the child of all of us. As a small people, we are grateful to have our numbers increased by one more. Similarly, a bar mitzvah has always reminded us of how precious is the yoke of the covenant that this youngster now lovingly and willingly adopts on this day.

Bat mitzvah now doubles the frequency of that experience, each additional one connecting us to covenant and community. How? Through the overarching idea of course, but also through the special moments of each *simcha*: conversations with friends, a grandparent speaking to the third generation, a scene of aesthetic beauty that we call *hiddur mitzvah* (enhancing the performance of a mitzvah), the pride of watching the inevitable stage of biological growth pointed in a direction that ensures our continuity, expressions of family love, or the surge of a peak spiritual moment in prayer or knowledge. These are the things we take with us, a palpable feeling of affirming life and choosing goodness, of loving family and bonding with community. These are the precious events, images and voices that stay in our minds' storehouses, ideas that we grow from, memories that make up our lives as Jews.

How fortunate we are to live in times when the daughters of our people, like the sons, also bring these blessings to us!

- Riverdale, New York  
Erev Shavuot 5762  
16 May 2002

"Traditional Judaism is dynamic, unfinished, and open to correction. In theological terms, the covenant is simultaneously eternal and unfolding."





## Chapter One

by Nancy Wolfson-Moche

# One Family's Solution

**I**t is nine o'clock on a windy January Shabbat morning. About one hundred women and twenty men are gathered in a second floor meeting room at the Majestic Towers, a condo in northern Miami's Bal Harbour. All have come to celebrate Felissa's bat mitzvah.

They are gathered here because it is directly across the street from the Shul of Bal Harbour, where Felissa and her parents normally *daven* (pray) on Shabbat. What is about to take place, however, could not happen at the *shul*, run by a Chabad rabbi, across the street.

The room faces the ocean, which is in an unusually rough and agitated state this particular Saturday morning. Inside, the women sit in chairs arranged in a horseshoe shape around a makeshift *bimah* (borrowed from a local Orthodox day school) and ark (from a local Conservative day school). Inside the ark is a Torah, on loan from a local Orthodox "Carlebach" feminist who wishes to remain anonymous. The man bought the Torah with the intention of lending it to Orthodox bat mitzvah girls such as Felissa, who might otherwise never have the opportunity to read from the Torah.

Among the women are Colombians (Felissa's mother is originally from Colombia), Costa Ricans, Panamanians, Israelis, Brazilians, Swiss, New Yorkers and Floridians. Their clothes reflect their far-flung origins: some wear suits ranging from subdued gray to hot pink; others, silk dresses in solids and prints; and a few, long "frum" skirts topped with long-sleeved boxy jackets. Hemlines run the gamut. Shoes range from clunky oxfords to sexy stilettos. There are straw hats in many different shapes and sizes.

Off to one side and closer to the entrance to the room, the men sit behind a trellis covered with rented greenery. This serves as a makeshift *mechitza*. Some of the men are fidgeting, looking this way and that, as they might do in a foreign city, when experiencing something for the first time. This reaction is not surprising, however, because for many, Miami is a foreign city, and for most, it is their first time sitting behind a mechitza.



Felissa is wearing a light blue silk shantung suit. Her shiny shoulder-length brown hair, which had been topped with a stylish velvet hair band the night before, is pulled back, clamped in a big butterfly clip, the way she might wear it while studying or taking a test. This is one sign that Felissa is serious about what she is about to do. She stands up at the bimah next to her teacher, Miriam Rube, who motions for her to begin. With her back to the guests, Felissa faces the ark as she sings, "*Shochen ad marom ve kadosh shemo*."

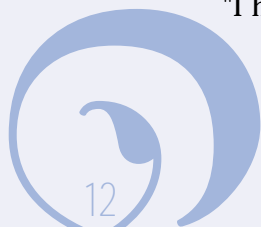
She gains speed and strength as she continues, reciting the Psalms. Felissa focuses her attention on each word of the *Shacharit* service. The room is hushed while everyone present concentrates on the act of praying. Noticeably absent is the usual movement among the women in shul – the perpetual stepping out, coming back in and whispering that are commonplace in many synagogues. During the *Amidah*, or Silent Prayer, Felissa turns to the crowd like an experienced leader, gauging who has finished praying and who has not, and when it is time to get on with the service.

When it is time for the Torah service, Felissa looks around at her mother and grandmother, as if to remind them that they are up next. Ronnie Becher, a leader in the Orthodox feminist movement who has come from Riverdale, New York, steps up to the bimah to be the *gabbai*. Becher prepares everyone present for what will follow, explaining how the service will proceed as women come up for aliyot while Felissa reads Parshat Bo from the Torah.

Still, no one is quite prepared for what actually happens. The first person called up is JoAnne, a native of Miami who is a Levi (chosen because of "Bimkhom Kohen," the practice of calling up a Levi for the first aliyah in the absence of a Kohen). This is the second time she has come up to the Torah (the first was at her own daughter's bat mitzvah, almost two years before, in Israel). JoAnne compares the experience to the magic of her wedding day: "Standing next to Felissa and watching her pray to God, with the words of the Torah falling off of her lips, was really an indescribable moment," she says. "I felt closer to the Torah, closer to God and spiritually uplifted. I felt my soul, and I found that happening throughout the service, not only when I went up for my aliyah."

Felissa's grandmother, Matilda, and her mother, Raquel, come up to the Torah for the third and fifth aliyot. Jaya, a friend of the Rubins who was raised in Costa Rica, is called up for the sixth aliyah. Dressed in a fashionable navy blue chalk-striped suit, she is a tall woman who approaches the bimah with confidence. She begins in a loud voice, "Barkhu et Adonai ha-m'vorakh." The congregation responds, "Barukh Adonai ha-m'vorakh l'olam va-ed." This is her cue to repeat those words. But her voice cracks, and tears rush to her eyes. For a moment, she is unable to speak.

"I had heard hundreds of boys go up to the Torah and say this prayer, so I knew it very well," Jaya says afterwards. "I was in the same Orthodox setting that I grew up in, and that was dear to me, 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. I was overcome with emotion. This experience was very powerful." In fact, Jaya's experience had an effect on everyone, creating an electric energy that was almost palpable and leaving hardly a dry eye in the room.

Several weeks later, Jaya, who has since become a part of a monthly Women's Tefillah group, says, "From this experience I learned that Judaism is a religion of action. The meaning comes from the action. *Na'aseh v'nishma* is the Hebrew way of expressing this concept: no matter how you try to apply meaning to things, they won't resonate until you do them."

Felissa reads the entire Torah portion without hesitating or making an error. Laura, Felissa's aunt from Colombia, does *hagbah* (lifting the Torah scroll), and Debby, a family friend, does *gelila* (redressing the scroll before it is returned to the ark). Felissa reads the Haftorah easily, just as she had read the Torah portion. The women then dance through the makeshift shul carrying the Torah. They take it across the mechitza into the men's section.



At about eleven o'clock, after the Torah reading but before Musaf, the Women's Tefillah service is over. The wind howls as the crowd crosses Collins Avenue and files into the main sanctuary of the Shul of Bal Harbour, in time for the Torah reading and Musaf service there. Felissa's father, Aryeh, gets the *maftir* aliyah and reads the Haftorah, the same words that his daughter had read minutes before across the street.

Afterwards, Felissa is called up to the bimah to give a *D'var Torah*. She begins by explaining that the first part of her bat mitzvah took place across the street. "While I know that to some this may be somewhat unorthodox, I appreciate having been a part of it, and am equally appreciative to be able to share *this* part of my bat mitzvah with all of you in the shul," Felissa smiles, having just outlined her family's solution to one of the biggest dilemmas facing the modern Orthodox world.

Then, everyone is invited to a big *kiddush* in the shul's social hall.







## Chapter Two

# Alternatives

The Women's Tefillah service across the street was the solution forged by Felissa's mother and father. Steadfast in their conviction that their daughter should be given the opportunity to mark her bat mitzvah by leading the Shacharit service and reading from the Torah on Shabbat, yet also committed to keeping within the context of the Orthodox movement, they arrived at a compromise.

Following are some suggested options on how to add meaning to the bat mitzvah ritual.

### RELIGIOUS SERVICES

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#### Women's Tefillah Service

A women's prayer service can occur on Shabbat or on a weekday. The bat mitzvah girl may *layen* (read from the Torah) either part of or all of the week's Torah portion, and she may read the Haftorah. Sometimes she will also give a d'var Torah. In addition, or alternatively, she might lead part or all of the Shacharit service, part or all of Musaf, or both. She may also invite family, friends and community to share some of these roles. The bat mitzvah girl is called up for an aliyah and given a special blessing by the *gabbait*. Blu Greenberg, president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance JOFA, and author of several books on women and Judaism, says, "When a girl is called up to the Torah everything is connected to her identity with Torah. No more the shy twelve-year-old sliding silently into Jewish adulthood."

Some Orthodox rabbis allow women's tefillah groups to meet and pray inside the synagogue and others don't. If your rabbi will not, you can rent a space near the synagogue or do it in another location separate from the synagogue. Renting or borrowing a space may, of course, mean borrowing or renting a bimah, an ark, a Torah, *siddurim* and *Humashim*, as well as chairs (see Checklist for suggestions on where to find these).



One family decided to have the bat mitzvah outdoors, in a Biblical nature reserve in Israel. Says the mother of the bat mitzvah girl, "It was extremely powerful. First to see my daughter read from the Torah, and then to do it in the land of Israel – the whole experience was dreamlike and magical."

There are about 43 Women's Tefillah groups across the country. The first Orthodox synagogue to house a women's prayer group was the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, in New York. The group began in 1988 and has hosted over 50 *b'not mitzvah*. Men may attend the Torah reading, but not the rest of the service. For more information on Women's Tefillah groups, contact JOFA or the Women's Tefillah Network (see Resources for contact info).

## Kabbalat Shabbat Service

The *Kabbalat Shabbat* prayers, not considered obligatory, originated in Tsfat by a group of Kabbalistic scholars during the middle of the sixteenth century. On *Erev Shabbat* they would go out into the fields and marvel at the beauty of nature and the blessings bestowed upon them by *Hashem*. They would chant Psalms of David and other poems to greet the holy day of Shabbat. Synagogues around the world have adopted the custom of chanting and praying as a welcoming gesture to initiate the observance of Shabbat.

The bat mitzvah girl can start by leading a community-wide women's candle lighting ceremony. Since lighting the candles is the way every Jewish woman officially inaugurates the holy day of Shabbat, this is an appropriately symbolic way to celebrate a bat mitzvah, a girl's beginning of her covenant with God and the teachings of Torah.



After candle lighting, the bat mitzvah girl can lead the Kabbalat Shabbat Psalms and songs, which include eight Psalms of David and *Lekha Dodi*. Some rabbis may permit men to be present for some or all of the service and others may not.

## Havdalah Service

The literal meaning of the word *havdalah* is "separation," for this is the service that officially ends the day of Shabbat and ushers in the new week. This is another ritual that seems appropriately symbolic of the bat mitzvah, which signifies the passage from girlhood to young womanhood, and the acceptance and assumption of new religious responsibilities.

The bat mitzvah girl can lead the Havdalah service in the shul or at home. Traditionally recited by the husband/father of the house, the Havdalah service begins with the lighting of the havdalah or multi-wick candle. Then eight short verses, from Isaiah, Psalms and the Book of Esther, are recited. The main part of the service consists of four blessings: over wine, over spices (*besamim*), over the candle and over divine acts of separation, or the distinguishing of one thing from another.



## D'var Torah

Many b'n't mitzvah study the Torah portion of the week of their bat mitzvah, and deliver a sermon to the congregation. Some girls are called up to the bimah after the Torah reading, and others come up to the bimah after the Shabbat morning service is over. The rabbi listens and often responds directly to the speech.

The bat mitzvah girl may deliver her *D'var Torah* at the *Seudah Shelishit* (the third Sabbath meal) in the synagogue. Or, she might speak at a kiddush following services, at her family's home or in the shul. Some girls give their D'var Torah after Shabbat has ended, at a celebration.

## Megillah Reading

The recitation of the *Megillah* (the scroll of Esther) is the one Torah reading where the tradition permits a woman reader to fulfill a man's obligation. On Purim in 1991, a twelve-year-old Orthodox girl read all ten chapters of the Megillah in front of the entire congregation in the main sanctuary of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York. Afterwards, she gave a D'var Torah, followed by *Divre Torah* by several Orthodox rabbis.

## LEARNING AND STUDY

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Some bat mitzvah girls use this passage into a new stage of life as a time to reflect on where they have come from and where they are going. Many girls select some topic to study in depth for a year. At the end of the year, some girls write and deliver a speech on what they've studied; others write about what they've learned and distribute it to the guests at their bat mitzvah. Others complete a *siyyum*, a formal ending to study of a tractate of *Talmud* and *Mishnayot*, with a quorum of women.

Below are some suggested themes to explore:

### Your roots

Learn the story of your parents', grandparents' and great-grandparents' lives.

### Your name

Discover the meaning of your name and study something in the liturgy connected to it. For example, a girl named Sarah may study the biblical Sarah, as well as famous Sarahs throughout Jewish history.

### The season

Explore the moment of your bat mitzvah or your birthday as it relates to the Jewish calendar. If your bat mitzvah falls around Pesach, study the laws and meaning of Pesach. If it falls near a fast day, investigate the laws pertaining to fast days.





## Jewish women

Get to know your foremothers. Familiarize yourself with women in *Tanakh*, Talmud, and medieval and modern Jewish history. It is important to acknowledge the women who have come before you and to develop role models.

## WRITTEN MATERIALS

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Writing about something you have learned helps you to record and remember it. It is a way of sharing the ideas you have developed with others and getting your message out there. Many b'n't mitzvah write poems and prose on the process of preparing for their bat mitzvah and on what they have learned. Others write prayers, goals, self-expectations and reflections on what they are grateful for.

Some families put together programs that can range from a one-page handout to a booklet of twenty-five pages. These may include the order of events and participants; texts of prayers and psalms, including translations and transliterations; and reflections on the event and its meaning. Some include original poetry, drawings and songs created by the bat mitzvah girl, her family and friends. In some communities where this type of bat mitzvah is rather new, programs are useful guides.

Families may send letters to guests before the bat mitzvah, explaining the rationale behind it and advising them of what to expect. The parents can inform guests of their choices on which events to attend or not to attend (if there are men who are uncomfortable at a women's tefillah service, for example, they may be given the option to attend the shul's main service).

## MITZVOT, TZEDAKAH and COMMUNITY SERVICE

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Becoming a bat mitzvah is becoming a "daughter of *mitzvot*" (daughter of blessings). It is important to recognize this and it is customary to perform at least one *mitzvah* as part of the bat mitzvah celebration.

Some suggestions:

### Adopt a Mitzvah

Choose a mitzvah that is meaningful to you (perhaps it is visiting an older person weekly, or walking a disabled person to shul) and perform it throughout the year.

### Participate In or Initiate A Community Service Project

Feed the homeless or help out in a local shelter. If you see a need for a community service project that does not already exist, perhaps you can get one off the ground with the support of family and friends.



### **Donate a Portion of Your Bat Mitzvah Money to Tzedakah**

It is a mitzvah to give *maaser* or 10% of the money you receive, as a gift to a charity of your choice. Select one that has a special meaning to you or your family. For example, if someone in your family is ill with heart disease, you may want to contribute to an association funding heart research.

### **Foster Learning In Your Community**

One generous family sponsored a lecture series at their shul in honor of their daughter's bat mitzvah. Felissa's parents invited three prominent scholars to discuss topics including "Feminism in the Orthodox World," "Hunting for Nazis of the Holocaust," and "A Rabbi's Millennium Message." A lecture series might also be organized as a community-wide gift: all the families of the b'not mitzvah of the year could pool their resources to coordinate such an event.

### **Give Your Guests the Gift of Learning**

If you have discovered interesting and useful Jewish publications on a particular topic, you might want to prepare a list of them and distribute it to your guests. Felissa's family sent their guests gift subscriptions to *Lilith*, the Jewish Women's Archive, and the JOFA newsletter. (See Resources for more publications of interest and contact information).





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## READING OF THE TORAH

**BOR'CHU** *our Adonay Eisan voroch*  
*Bliss II*

Hornsea.



## Chapter Three

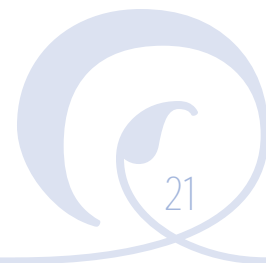
# Legal Considerations

### The Evolution of Revolution

Yesterday's heresy is today's orthodoxy. When Sarah Schnirer founded the Bais Yakov school movement in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century, the first to give Jewish women a formal education, there were calls for her excommunication. In time, not only was her vision tolerated by the very orthodox, but it has become *de rigueur* for girls, even within sub-sects of the *haredi* system, to receive a thorough education.

The upheaval began with the first day schools for girls in Europe, the revolution started with the first Women's Tefillah groups in the 1970's, and the evolution continues with our daughters' generation. As Blu Greenberg has stated, history shows that where there has been a rabbinical will there has been a *halachic* way. When the prevailing customs or laws were deemed in need of change, be it either for catastrophic financial or sustenitive reasons, the ruling elite of rabbinical decision makers found the means to alter the halachic status quo.

The early part of the twentieth century saw the introduction of the *heter mechira*, that permitted the selling of land in Israel to a non-Jew in order to bypass the laws of *Shemita* that required the land to lay fallow for one year. In earlier times, the *prozbul* was invented to avoid the automatic forgiveness of debts during the Shemita year. The *heter iska* allowed interest to be paid and collected on loans, the *mechirat chometz* allowed the selling of leaven to a non-Jew over Passover to avoid the losses of ridding one's household and business of chometz. The "*besdin d'sharia misha*" permitted the use of olive oil made by non-Jews that had previously been subject to rules that governed wine made by gentiles. And there are others. All these modifications to the then existing Jewish laws were constructed to meet the needs, primarily financial, of the Jewish people. It is that much more crucial for today's rabbinic authorities to find a halachic way to satiate the religious needs of one-half the Jewish population, whose spiritual sustenance is at stake. —Aryeh Rubin





## Two Rabbis' Opinions

Is it within the letter of Jewish *halachah* (law) for a woman to lead a group of women in prayer, and to read from the Torah? There are no simple answers to these hotly debated questions, as there is a great diversity of opinion within the Orthodox community. Some are steadfast in their conviction that this is simply not allowed; others not only believe it is legal, but are convinced that there will soon be Orthodox women rabbis. Here, two highly esteemed and liberally oriented Orthodox rabbis explore ways to approach the salient legal issues.

### *Kol Isha* The Question of Women's Singing

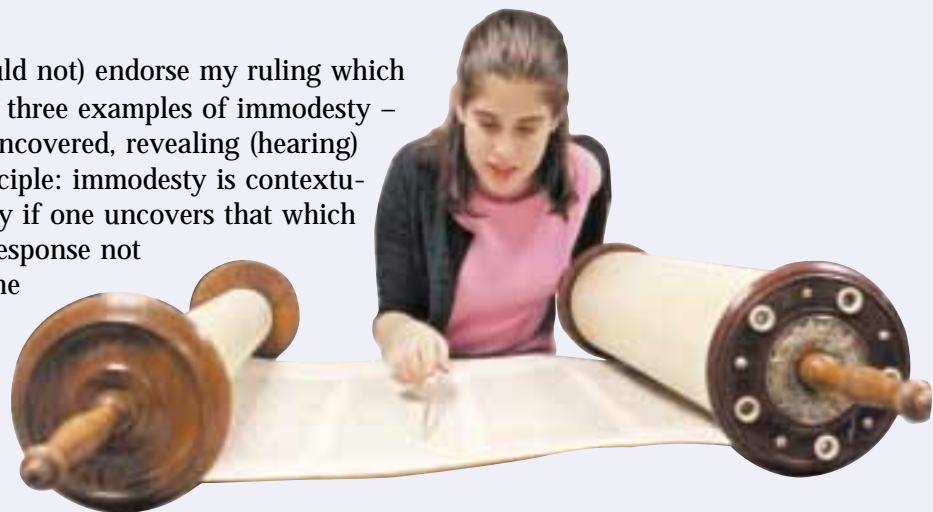
By Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

I was asked if a young woman may chant the *parshah* or haftorah for her bat mitzvah as an act of celebration and commitment upon becoming an adult Jewess. If men are in attendance at the bat mitzvah, is hearing the young woman not prohibited under the principle of "*kol isha ervah*?" Is hearing the voice of a woman singing forbidden because it is *ervah* – meaning an act of immodesty, or an act that arouses sinful lusts in a man who hears it?

#### *My Reply*

In 1955, I sat in the home of the Rav, Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, *zecher tzaddik livracha*. In the course of a warm and reflective conversation about a number of my religious questions, I felt so humanly touched and respected by his listening that I impulsively asked him a question. How was it that Rebbetzin Tonya Soloveitchik, *zichronah livracha*, did not cover her hair? Was this permitted by the *halachah*, or was it not prohibited on the grounds of modesty? He took out a *Gemara Berachot*, opened it to page 24A and showed me the Talmudic statement. "Said Rav Sheshet: [showing] hair by a woman is *ervah* (an act of immodesty)." Smiling, the Rav said that immodesty (*ervah*) is contextual and that in this society and time, showing hair was not immodest (*ervah*).

I report this story not to claim that Rabbi Soloveitchik would (or would not) endorse my ruling which follows, but rather to point out that in *Berachot* 24A the Talmud lists three examples of immodesty – revealing a woman's shoulder uncovered, revealing a woman's hair uncovered, revealing (hearing) a woman's voice directly. All three cases should follow the same principle: immodesty is contextual, not abstract and timeless. An act or state of dress is immodest only if one uncovers that which is normally covered – if thereby one arouses a sexual response not validated by any connection or relationship with the person who uncovers. Inasmuch as women singing are heard all the time in our society, it is not immodest to sing nor does it constitute arousing lust to hear such singing – all the



more so when the context is singing holy words of Torah and/or prophecy, in a situation of taking on the commandments.

In the present atmosphere of social withdrawal and *chumra* (stringency) Ashkenazi Orthodox rabbis are reluctant to state openly the principle that modesty is contextual. However, when modernization came to Sephardic communities, many Sephardic married women were quick to uncover their hair in the modern style over the objections of rabbis. Their behavior was denounced as sinful. Over time, a number of important Sephardic *poskim* (decisors) stepped up to redeem the honor (and right) of women to be legitimately fashionable and totally visible in the community.

Rav Yehoshua Babad wrote, "The principle whether or not an act of uncovering constitutes immodesty (*ervah*) is: if it is the practice of women to cover [their hair] and she uncovered it, then this is immodesty (*ervah*). But if it was not the regular practice [of women] to cover [their hair] then [going uncovered] is not in the category of immodesty at all. If they uncover one hand's breath in a place where they are habituated to cover then it is [a case of] uncovering immodesty and it is prohibited to read the *Shema* prayer in their presence... But if their (ladies') custom is to uncover their hair (or a hand's breath of the body) – as single women do who by custom walk around with head [hair] uncovered - then this [action] does not constitute immodesty (*ervah*)."

Rabbi Joseph Mashash ruled that the prohibition of uncovering a married woman's hair was "because of the custom of the women in ancient times to cover their hair, then a woman who uncovered her hair was considered to be a promiscuous woman...[but] in this time when all the women of the world nullified the previous custom and went back to the simple practice of uncovering their hair, then there is [in this action] no shortcoming of immodesty or of promiscuity, God forbid" (Responsa *Mayim Chaim*, volume 2 #110).

In one of his letters, Mashash wrote that the arrival of women from France led the Sephardic women to follow the modern practice and uncover their hair also. "Now, [that] all the women are going out openly with uncovered hair... then I turned my heart to justify their behavior for it is inconceivable that we can return the matter to status quo ante." His conclusion was: "now when all the Jewish women have agreed that in covering [or in uncovering] the hair there is no immodesty and all the more so there is no besmirching in uncovering the head... then the prohibition [against uncovered hair] is uprooted and the matter becomes permitted."

The Israeli Rabbi R. Moshe Malka adds that only hair which is normally covered can run afoul of the principle "uncovering hair is immodesty – but if it is regularly not covered there is no immodesty." The reason apparently is, he says, "whenever hair is normally covered and then is uncovered, then this brings on lustful thoughts. Not so if this is a place when hair is always uncovered, then people are used to seeing [uncovered] hair all the time so the sight brings on no lustful thoughts..." (Responsa Vehayshiv Moshe #34).



I rule that the same guideline applies to women's voices singing. In our time, women sing all the time and in all settings so there is no reason to prohibit women's singing on the grounds of lustful thoughts or immodesty.

By this principle (that what is conventional in the community sets the context for modesty or immodesty), then *Haredim* have every right to prohibit women's singing in the presence of men. However, in our community, modern Orthodoxy, women's presence and women's singing in the company of men is accepted and affirmed as a customary expression of women's dignity and natural place in life. Following this *psak* then is the affirmation of the dignity and legitimacy of the modern Orthodox as a halachic community.

There are many great poskim who can be cited as rejecting the concept of contextual modesty and who prohibit women singing. However, it is my ruling that it is enough that we have some great Rabbis who have given us a precedent to follow for us to permit singing. This permission is doubly important because the right to appear in public, to sing in public in mixed company, to be present without being shut up or shut away on the grounds that men must be protected against lustful thoughts, is essential to the accomplishment of full equality and dignity for women in our time. Since equality is an intrinsic dignity of men and women in that both were created in the image of God (Genesis 1: 27) [See the *Mishnah* in Sanhedrin 37A and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Man of Faith in the Modern World, Reflections of the Rav*, Volume 2, pages 84-85], this long overdue realization of equality is an historic fulfillment of one of the *Torah's* central doctrines and principles.

Furthermore, to deny such women's dignity and to suppress the beauty of their voice from being heard constitutes a *chilul Hashem* (desecration of God's name) in that it suggests that the Torah wishes to keep women sequestered, unequal and "invisible." This would link the Torah to the benighted attitudes toward women now publicly associated with extreme fundamentalist Islam. Such a step would particularly alienate Jewish women who, *b'ezrat Hashem*, are more educated, more independent, and more aware of their own dignity and God-given capacity than almost any other group of women in the world.

Finally, I would rule that the splendor and dignity of the *Torah* which is revealed when a Bat Mitzvah (or other women) sings prayer or Torah passages so beautifully is a *mitzvah* to experience. The joy we taste reminds us of Miriam and the women of Israel singing the very same song of liberation and redemption that Moses sang after the crossing of the Red Sea. By the merit of the women who study and chant Torah for their bat mitzvah and at other times – a special contribution of this generation to the cumulative *mesorah* (chain of tradition) – may we be worthy to bring an equal event of redemption to the Jewish people in our time.



## Invitation to Communal Sanctification of God

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

When Jews gather for communal prayer, most of what they recite is identical to that which they pray when standing alone before God. There are three distinctive prayers unique to communal liturgy; they are *Barchu* (the opening invitation to communal praise of God), the whole and the partial *Kaddish* (dividing the service into its component parts), and the *Kedusha* embedded within the repetition of the Amidah (in which the community enacts the role of angelic hosts singing of the Holiness of God).

These three prayers can only be recited in the presence of a *minyan*, and can only be led by men. The distinctive character of these three prayers is that they are an invitation issued by the leader to the gathered community to offer group praise of God, and the response of the community in declaring that God, as source of all Blessing, is eternal. This invitation and response is a re-enactment of the communal worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, when the Kohen would call upon the gathered community, representing the entire Jewish people, to worship God through sacrifice and prayer. Therefore, to this day, this responsive enactment can only take place when the community is gathered for prayer in *Mikdash Me'at*, a minor sanctuary such as the synagogue.

The ineligibility of women to issue this invitation in communal liturgy is the consequence of a powerful insistence in Jewish law that rights and privileges follow duties. Men, who have the *duty* to help, constitute the minimum quorum of ten (the *minyan*) necessary for the representation of community to be deemed to be present, then bear the correlative privilege, as the representative of that gathered community, to issue to them the invitation to praise God. Women, while they constitute part of the *Tzibbur*, the community gathered for prayer, were not *obligated* by rabbinic law to help form the *minyan*, and, therefore, were also not the bearers of the privilege to lead the community in this distinctive invitation and response.

In an interesting contrast, when the invitation to the community to praise God is not issued by a representative of the community, but by an individual engaged in a personal act of praising God in the presence of the community, then women too can issue the invitation. For that reason, women may recite the *Birchat HaGomel*, in praise of God for her rescue from danger, and the mourner's *Kaddish*, in praise of God and acceptance of Divine judgment. Despite the fact that these prayers are also in the form of invitation and response, and that they too may only be recited in the presence of a *minyan*, they are individual rather than communal prayers, and can therefore be led by women.

Whether issued by a woman or by a man, these occasions of *Davar Shebekedusha* provide an opportunity for intense spiritual awareness; awareness of the individual blended into a spiritually engaged community, awareness of God as a source of blessing in our lives, awareness of the eternity of the Covenant between God and the Jewish people, and awareness of the capacity of a single individual to evoke from, and invest Holiness in, an entire community.







## Chapter Four

### Perspectives

Following are comments from participants in Felissa's bat mitzvah:

Sitting at the Shabbat dinner table the night before Felissa's bat mitzvah, I learned that Felissa intended to lead the women in recitation of the Kedusha at the women's prayer service the next morning. The Kedusha is the prayer that the leader recites in unison with the congregation during the repetition of the silent prayer, the *shmoneh esreh*. The Kedusha is said only in the presence of a minyan.

Listening to the plan explained by Felissa's bat mitzvah teacher, Miriam Rube, an esteemed educator and principal of a local day school, I thought there must be some mistake. Previously, I had understood that the prayer service would follow the established guidelines of the Orthodox Women's Tefillah movement and those guidelines omitted anything that required a minyan. No other Orthodox women's tefillah service recited the Kedusha. I could be present at the service but could not take a public role such as having an aliyah. Moreover, I already had enough controversy on my plate to go against my own sub-community of Orthodox feminists. Miriam then spoke to Felissa, raising my concerns and the possibility of Felissa omitting the Kedusha.

But to Miriam's surprise and mine, Felissa was firm. I suggested we consult Felissa's father, Aryeh, to make sure we were all on the same plane, and the four of us stood in the hallway in conversation. I explained the issue again. When I finished, Aryeh turned to Felissa and asked: "What do you want to do?" She said that she wanted to lead the women in Kedusha.

And so it was. The next morning, as I stood and listened silently to the Kedusha recited for the first time at a women's tefillah, 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. There would have been no question in my mind, had I not experienced the previous hour of participating in a prayer led by a beautiful young woman with the voice of an angel, a girl-woman who had just read

flawlessly and was somehow wordlessly able to communicate a feeling of being in love with Torah. Those were the feelings that swept over me as I listened to this twelve-year-old girl, still a child, yet exhibiting the confidence that comes of years of study of Torah. She was vested with a moment of authority by her adoring father, and with the love and pride of every person listening to and led by her.

During the past few months, there has been a great deal of conversation amongst women of the Women's Tefillah Network on the subject of reciting Kaddish and Kedusha in a Women's Tefillah. I sense that we are coming closer to it, closer to finding halachic sources to be interpreted as permitting instead of disallowing. Each time I read about or hear of another conversation, I think of Felissa, leading the way.

– Blu Greenberg, *president of JOFA, and author of several books on women and Judaism*

Because Felissa's bat mitzvah was a communal event... it opened so many women's eyes [to the possibility of having a women's tefillah service]. There were women who said, "I just want to make sure we're not doing anything that's against the halachah." And I said, "With the exception of a few prayers, that can be omitted, it is completely permissible halachically. Some people feel they're not within the spirit of the law, but certainly they're in keeping the letter of the law."

If an Orthodox girl does get bat mitzvahed, afterwards, there's no forum, no place for her to be able to do what she's just learned, so my idea in forming this [Women's Tefillah] group is not just for myself, but to create a cadre of women in this community who can be supportive, who have the ability to help other women, to help others like their daughters. There really aren't enough Orthodox women who can teach.

– JoAnne, *initiator of a Women's Tefillah group in North Miami*

There was a part of me that didn't want Felissa to do this because I couldn't be as involved as I wanted to be. (I couldn't really help her study because I don't know it myself). I took care of the party part, and my husband took care of the Tefillah. Now I have the motivation to learn, so I can help with the tefillah part for my next daughter's bat mitzvah.

The experience taught Felissa a lot. It helped with her character development because she learned the difference between wanting to accomplish something and the work you really have to do to accomplish something. She learned that some things won't happen just because you want them to happen – you really have to work hard to accomplish important things. I hope this experience will serve to remind her of this with everything she wants to do in life, that she'll remember what it really takes.

– Raquel, *Felissa's mother*



I made a decision a long time ago that if I was going to have an effect within the Jewish community, I was going to do it my way. You can do one of two things: you can join a board and take ten or twelve years to effect change or you take action and serve as an agent of change. So that's the role I assumed for myself. There is nothing holy about the status quo. I think you live life to the fullest, you do things and you rock the boat. In this situation, I felt that it was more than my daughter's bat mitzvah -- that this was going to open up a can of worms and it was going to effect change for the better. I'd like Felissa's experience and what she accomplished, to serve as a model. I believe that in every generation there are always people who push the envelope -- otherwise we would still be stuck in the ghetto.

The only way I could justify the party and all the expense, and some of the frivolity of the event was to make it meaningful. I've chosen to transmit to my daughters a somewhat traditional lifestyle, and I'm going to do whatever I can within my power to make sure that there's room for them in there.

If I had had a son, I would not have encouraged him to become a rabbi. But if my daughter wants to become a rabbi... that's another story!

—Aryeh, *Felissa's father*


When I was practicing with the Torah, it was so heavy I practically dropped it. I was worried that I might drop it on the day of my bat mitzvah. But on that day, the Torah felt like a stuffed toy version: it was as light as a feather!

When I first started thinking about what it meant to become a bat mitzvah... I thought it meant taking on more responsibilities and at the same time receiving more privileges, with something more behind it, something I couldn't put my finger on just yet. Becoming a bat mitzvah is a ceremonial way of stating that you are now an adult in the Jewish world, which requires you take care of your own soul and do your own mitzvot. The fact that the mitzvot of the Torah are now obligations and not options is just the beginning of my Jewish adventure, so I can't tell you where it's taking me.

— Felissa, *The Bat Mitzvah*

"I experienced... a prayer led by a beautiful young woman with the voice of an angel, a girl-woman who had just read flawlessly and was somehow wordlessly able to communicate a feeling of being in love with Torah."





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"... this long overdue realization of equality  
is an historic fulfillment of one of the  
Torah's central doctrines and principles."

- Rabbi Yitz Greenberg



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# Chapter Five

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## Checklist and Resources

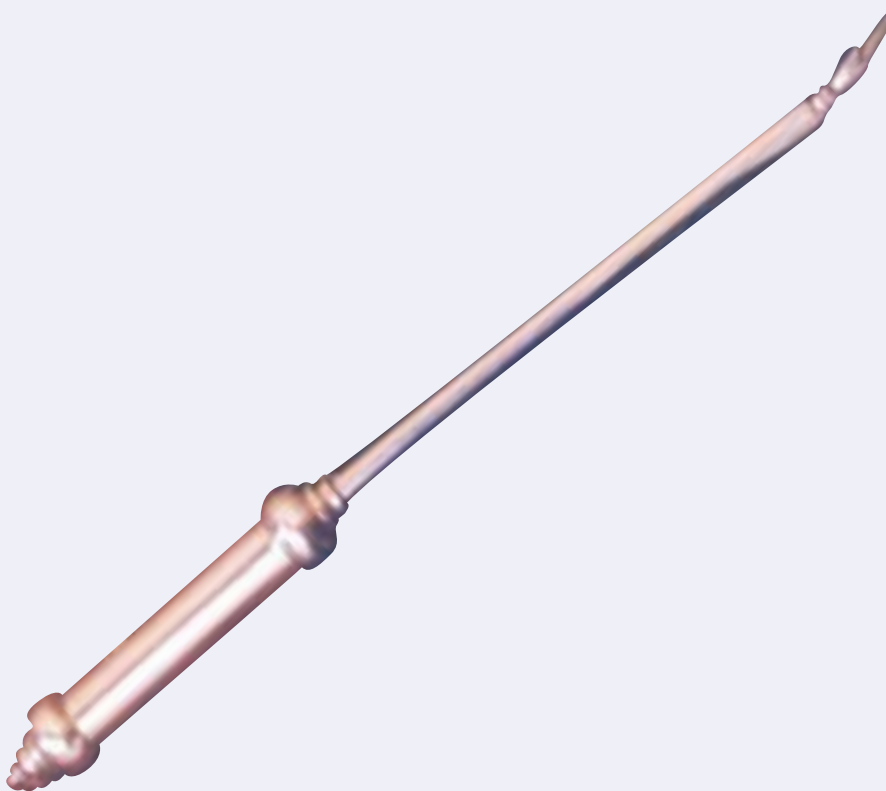
### CHECKLIST FOR A WOMEN'S TEFILLAH SERVICE

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If your synagogue is not yet ready to host a Women's Tefillah service, and you wish to do it on your own, below is a list of what you will need and where to find it.

- ☐ **Aron Kodesh (Ark):** This is usually difficult to locate. Felissa's family borrowed a somewhat portable one from a conservative Jewish day school. Some shuls (and if you can handle it, funeral homes) have portable arks for home services. Ask around. Alternatively, a cabinet with a velvet curtain could make do.
- ☐ **Bimah (Table from which Torah is read):** You can find a bimah at many of the same places you will look for a Torah. Felissa's family rented a table upon which they placed a slant board borrowed from the Orthodox community day school. If you can't find one, get a sturdy table and ask a carpenter or a handyman/woman to build one from a piece of plywood and 2' by 4's. Cover it with red or blue velvet.
- ☐ **Hummashim (Bibles):** These can be found at any local Judaica store or from Judaica catalog retailers like The Source for Everything Jewish (see Resources.) Felissa's family printed the weekly portion from a CD that they bought from Davka (see Resources).
- ☐ **Mechitza (Divider):** If you are going to have men present (how many may halachically be permitted to attend is a complex issue that cannot be covered here), then you will need a *mechitza*. Felissa's family rented plants for the occasion. (Be sure to order the trees higher than you really need; like real estate space, there tends to be shrinkage prior to delivery). You could also use Japanese screens or office cubicle dividers that can be rented in most metropolitan areas.

- ☐ **Siddurim (Prayer Books):** Find these through a local day school, Judaica store or Judaica catalog retailers (see Resources). Alternatively, Davka (see Resources) offers software programs that include the prayer services that you can print and distribute. Some people buy the siddurim and distribute them to guests as a memento.
- ☐ **Torah:** This is usually the most difficult item to get. Sometimes, a sympathetic rabbi will lend one for a bat mitzvah service (particularly when the rabbi is in favor of synagogue participation, and the Board isn't). In Felissa's case, a young Carlebachian feminist had bought a Torah specifically for the purpose of lending it to bat mitzvahs. Ask around; there are individuals within the community who own *sefer Torahs* and may be willing to lend one. If they are reluctant, give them a copy of this booklet. Other sources include day schools in your community (particularly community and non-Orthodox day schools). A sympathetic Conservative or Reform synagogue may be willing to help out, though it's wise to check to make sure that it meets your halachic standards.
- ☐ **Yad (Pointer):** Often draped on the Torah, it is used by the reader to guide him/her in their chanting. If you can't borrow one, you can buy one from \$25 and up from a local Judaica store or Judaica catalogue retailers (see Resources).



## RESOURCES

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### Bibliography

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*Jewish Women: A Resource Guide to Books in Print*

Annotated bibliography by Carolyn Starman Hessel. Available from the Jewish Book Council for \$5.00.

617.232.2258.

[jbc@jewishbooks.org](mailto:jbc@jewishbooks.org)

### Books

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Greenberg, Blu, *On Women And Judaism: A View from Tradition*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1998.

Salkin, Jeffery, *Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah*, Jewish Lights, 1996.

Weiss, Avraham, *Women at Prayer: A Halakhic Analysis of Women's Prayer Group*, Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1990.

Wolowelsky, Joel B., *Women, Jewish Law and Modernity: New Opportunities in a Post-Feminist Age*, Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1997.

### Education

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Drisha Institute for Jewish Education

131 West 86 Street

New York, NY 10024

212.595.0307 fax. 212.595.0679

[inquiry@drisha.org](mailto:inquiry@drisha.org)

International Research Institute on Jewish Women

Brandeis University

415 South Street

Waltham, MA 02454

781.736.2064

[www.brandeis.edu/hirjw](http://www.brandeis.edu/hirjw)

### Judaica Catalog Retailers

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Davka

3601 W. Devon Avenue, Suite 110

Chicago, IL 60659

800.621.8227

[www.davka.com](http://www.davka.com)





The Source for Everything Jewish  
Hamakor Judaica, Inc  
P.O. Box 48836  
Niles, IL 60714  
800.476.2388  
[www.jewishsource.com](http://www.jewishsource.com)

### Online Resource

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[www.Ritualwell.org](http://www.Ritualwell.org)  
Holiday and life cycle event guide,  
including contemporary rituals, ceremonies and prayers

### Organizations

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JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance)  
459 Columbus Avenue, Suite 329  
New York, NY 10024  
212.752.7133 fax. 212.753.6054  
[jofa@rcn.com](mailto:jofa@rcn.com)  
[www.jofa.org](http://www.jofa.org)

Jewish Women's Archive  
68 Harvard Street  
Brookline, MA 02445  
617.232.2258 fax. 617.975.0109  
[www.jwa.org](http://www.jwa.org)

Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies  
1299 Church Road  
Wyncote, PA 19095-6143  
215.576.0800 ext.149 fax. 215.576.6143  
[www.kolot.org](http://www.kolot.org)

The only way I could justify the party and all the expense, and some of the frivolity of the event was to make it meaningful. I've chosen to transmit to my daughters a somewhat traditional lifestyle, and I'm going to do whatever I can to make sure that there's room for them in there.

-Aryeh Rubin, *Felissa's Father*



Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project  
212.580.0099  
www.mayan.org

Women's Tefillah Network  
145 Central Park West #9C  
New York, NY 10023

## Periodicals

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### *Lilith*

A not-for-profit independent Jewish women's magazine  
250 West 57 Street, Suite 2432  
New York, NY 10107  
www.lilithmag.com

### *Moment*

An independent bi-monthly covering Jewish culture, politics and religion  
4710 41st Street NW  
Washington, DC 20016  
www.momentmag.com

### *Re://collections*

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"... when Women's Tefilot are more widely practiced in traditional communities, women will no longer be satisfied with their status quo and begin to delve further and deeper into Jewish learning, raising the bar for women's involvement in Judaism."



"Wouldn't it be awesome to live in an environment where both halves of the community participate in the majesty of our traditions as equal partners?"

-Felissa, *The Bat Mitzvah*





# Afterword

by the Bat Mitzvah

**M**ore than two years have passed since my bat mitzvah and the events discussed herein. The tragedy of September 11th, the ongoing uprising and the suicide attacks in Israel, have made the world of January 15, 2000 (the date of my bat mitzvah) seem very different.

One might question one's priority in focusing on women's rights in today's topsy-turvy world. But for me it is a time when Jews should be seeking to strengthen their connection with God, to reinforce the intense faith that is required of Judaism. The bat mitzvah ceremony provides such an opportunity to pre-teen girls, laying the foundation for a more complete relationship with our religion that should result in a stronger Jewish community.

Many may assume that my bat mitzvah was motivated by feminist politics. It was not. The Women's Tefillah served as a conduit for my evolving Jewish awareness and provided a link between the rite of passage of the bat mitzvah and myself. It allowed me the opportunity to participate in the community on a grander scale. I gained a newfound appreciation for the importance of tefillah and the reading of the Torah, and became enlightened and transformed by the bat mitzvah ceremony.

To most boys, the bar mitzvah is a given; for some, the experience may leave them spiritually hungry, while for others the experience causes them to delve deeper into their Jewish roots. More often than not, it has little effect. But because my bat mitzvah was so special and because it was so spiritually intense, it quenched my spiritual thirst (for the time being). Perhaps, in the near future, when women's tefilot are more widely practiced in traditional communities, women will no longer be satisfied with their status quo and begin to delve further and deeper into Jewish learning, raising the bar for women's involvement in Judaism.

As a result of women having occupied a secondary role in the religious setting throughout the history of Judaism, the Jewish women's psyche harbored feelings of self-doubt in the realm of public display of religious ritual. And laying (reading) from the Torah, was not even a consideration. My bat mitzvah proved to the community and to myself that not only is it possible for women to layen like guys, but they can layen like girls!



No longer feeling slighted by the male dominance of most of traditional Judaism, I was able to be uninhibited in my love for the ritual. The freedom to do the mitzvot on my own, the freedom to read the Torah, the freedom to raise my voice in prayer, was and is liberating. As a product of a society that empowers women, my two worlds are connected and my community of girl friends is now able to participate in ways considered unattainable by previous generations of women.

Girls have been afraid to take that first leap, to break the glass mechitza and to make waves. Now that more young women are leading the way by peering around and through that glass mechitza, various women's tefilot are springing up all around the country.

Enjoying my bat mitzvah for what it was and riding its high, I was temporarily blind to the impact of it. But now that the moment of glory has passed and there are no more flashing marquees to mark this event, I am proud to have been able to participate in a service that is special and holy. Almost two and a half years have passed and people still approach me and comment on the intense spiritual atmosphere of our tefillah. They tell me that they would like to pray at a service that would duplicate that sort of spirituality. So would I.

My bat mitzvah continues the weaving of a tapestry begun by girls of valor generations ago. As today's generation of young Jewish women add their own colors and their own design to the fabric of Judaism of their own vision, so will future generations continue the process of refining the role of women. It's all part of our march for equality and an active and participatory role in Jewish life. Wouldn't it be awesome to live in an environment where both halves of the community participate in the majesty of our traditions as equal partners?

-Felissa Rubin  
Golden Beach, Florida  
Rosh Chodesh Tamuz 5762  
10 June 2002





## Contributors

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**Rabbi Saul J. Berman** is Director of Edah (an organization furthering the vision and values of modern Orthodoxy) and Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women, where he served as the Chairman of the Department of Judaic Studies from 1971 to 1984. He is also Adjunct Professor at Columbia University School of Law, where he teaches seminars in Jewish Law. Rabbi Berman is a leading Orthodox teacher and thinker who has made extensive contributions to the areas of women's Jewish education, social ethics, and the applicability of halachah to contemporary society. Rabbi Berman was ordained at RIETS, an affiliate of Yeshiva University and completed a JD at New York University School of Law and an MA in Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley.

**Blu Greenberg** is President of JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. She is the author of *Black Bread: Poems After the Holocaust*, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*, and *On Women and Judaism: A View From Tradition*. She holds an MS in Jewish history from Yeshiva University Revel Graduate School, an MA in Clinical Psychology from City College, a BRE from Yeshiva University's Teachers Institute, and a BA from Brooklyn College. She has served on the boards of numerous Jewish organizations including Edah, the Covenant Foundation, the Jewish Book Council, Federation Commission on Synagogue Relations, US/Israel Women to Women, and the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. She was co-founder of the Dialogue Project, and is active in the Jewish Women's Dialogue. She is a member of the Editorial Board of *Hadassah Magazine*, and is on the Advisory Board of *Lilith*.

**Irving "Yitz" Greenberg**, PhD, is an Orthodox rabbi and received his doctorate from Harvard University. Rabbi Greenberg is the president of Jewish Life Network, and formerly was founding president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL). Earlier in his career he served as rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish Center, as associate professor of history at Yeshiva University, and as founder, chairman and professor in the Department of Jewish Studies of City College of the City University of New York. In the book, *Interpreters of Judaism in the Late Twentieth Century*, Professor Steven T. Katz wrote, "No Jewish thinker has had a greater impact on the American Jewish community in the last two decades than Irving (Yitz) Greenberg." From 2000 to 2002 he served as Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, a position to which he was appointed by President Clinton.




**Maurice Weiss** is a freelance photographer based in Berlin, Germany. He is a founder of Ostkreuz, a European photographic agency. A German born in France, he specializes in portraits of political figures. His work has appeared in *Newsweek* and many of Europe's leading publications including *Stern*, *der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, *Figaro* and others. He has photographed the Jews of Rostock and Odessa for many different publications.

**Nancy Wolfson-Moche** is an international journalist specializing in lifestyle, travel, fashion, art and collecting. She has been an editor on staff at Style.com, *Parents*, *Redbook*, *Glamour* and *Seventeen* magazines. As a writer she has contributed to books and magazines including *Good Housekeeping*, *Departures*, *Bride's* and *Travel & Leisure*. She holds a BA from Trinity College.

Men, their rights and nothing more; women, their rights and nothing less.

-Susan B. Anthony, American women's suffrage advocate, from *Womens Rights to Suffrage* (address, 1873)

A photograph of a young woman with brown hair, wearing a white sleeveless dress with a subtle pattern, dancing in the center of a crowded room. She is smiling and waving her right hand. The background is filled with other people, mostly women, some of whom are also dancing. The room is dimly lit with warm, golden light, and there are pink and blue light effects visible in the background, suggesting a festive atmosphere.

*I do have a bit more Torah I would like to tell you about now, but my parents said that my speech was getting too long. So you'll have to wait until the next time I will be able to speak from the pulpit in the shul -- that should happen at my aufruf when I get married.*

- from Felissa's Shabbat  
D'var Torah Speech

