



Bar/Bat Mitzvah Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

The literal meaning of a Bar or Bat Mitzva is the son or daughter of a *mitzva*. This connotes that there comes a point in a person's life when he sees himself as being born for the *mitzvot* he does. There's a premise in Judaism that in a certain sense we give birth to ourselves through our deeds. When a child is born, he's a creature of instinct. A baby doesn't make moral or spiritual choices. He acts on what his body tells him. But when a child reaches the age of three, he is called *hegia ledei chinuch*, a child who is educable. This age is tied to intelligible speech where a child can talk about yesterday and tomorrow and what he wants and needs. He's acquired some level of abstraction and humanization. Parents are then obligated to teach him *Torah*, the roadmap of life, to differentiate between good and bad, and to raise him according to his way.

Time passes and the child reaches Bar or Bat Mitzva. The Gra explains that when a child is born the animal self is much stronger than the spiritual self. It takes 12 and 13 years until they become more or less equal. At this point they can understand cause and effect and the

consequence of their actions. Bar/Bat Mitzva is the gate towards maturity and becoming a full member of the Jewish people.

In non-Jewish society coming of age parties celebrate freedom. A Bar/Bat Mitzva celebration implies responsibilities. *Mitzva* means commandment which means that there's a commander and that one has to listen to the commands. *Mitzva* also comes from the root word *zavta*, joining together. An immature child is not spiritually aroused yet. All he knows is what's tangible. Through doing *mitzvot*, he develops an awareness and a relationship with Hashem.

For a boy, the core *mitzva* at Bar Mitzva is donning *tefillin*. Until this point, he was exempt and not considered mature enough. *Tefillin* requires awareness and consciousness. By custom, the boy practices wearing *tefillin* thirty days beforehand. On the day of his Bar Mitzva, there's a party celebrating the fact that he can now make choices and give birth to himself by using his conscious and spiritual abilities.

In the traditional community, there are often three parties. Party one is for the boy's class. The kids are expected to make little speeches and bless the Bar Mitzva boy. Usually the teacher will accompany them to add to the momentous aura of the occasion. Party two is the main celebration which usually takes place in a hall. The highlight is the boy's speech which his parents or Rabbi will help him prepare. If the boy has stage fright, the boys might interrupt with singing which is a great kindness. The third party is usually just a family dinner, a warm welcome to the boy to the great world of adulthood. Now that he's reached maturity, he's held accountable for his deeds.

Many boys go through a huge transformation after their Bar Mitzva as the feeling of responsibility is very maturing. It's also a time when the boy begins wearing more traditional or *Chassidic* garb depending on his background. Much like a new recruit to the army, a boy at Bar Mitzva develops a new image of himself that will help him grow into his role as a worthy member of the Jewish people.



Bar/Bat Mitzvah Part II Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

A girl reaches the stage of *chinuch*, of being educable, at three years of age. Girls are often objectified so they should be trained to respect their body beginning at an early age. A mother should teach her daughter to have a sense of self-significance, self-preservation, and dignity. Girls usually begin formal schooling at the age of six. At twelve, they reach *Bat Mitzva*. Like a boy, a girl has to see herself through the lens of the future. The same way a boy becomes a member of the wider community, a girl too should see herself in terms of her future as a woman. In earlier times, there was rarely a public *Bat Mitzva* celebration. It was usually an intimate family affair. Today virtually all *Bat Mitzva*'s take place in a party atmosphere because the girl's introduction to her life as a member of the community is more communal and less family oriented than it once was.

The first party takes place at school. There may be pictures and talk of role model women meant to sensitize the girls to what it means to be significant and contributive. This is in contrast to secular society where a Sweet Sixteen is all about self-centeredness and being gorgeous. At a *Bat Mitzva* party, being a giving person is what it's about. The theme of the party will often be the mitzvot specific to women such as lighting Shabbat candles or

challah. Sometimes the school might even bring a female entertainer to sing and dance and bake challot with the girls.

The second party is not as grandiose as it is for the boys because there's no distinct visible *mitzva* that the girl will be doing. A Jewish woman's worth is related to being rather than doing. The party might feature a film of the girl's life -her school, family, and friends. Someone might compose a song for her. There's attractive food set out, usually with a theme. The elder female relatives are invited and are honored which is very different than secular society that denigrates age. There's an expectation that all who participate will offer blessings. And of course, there's the presentation of gifts. Sometimes there's a third party just for the intimate family and sometimes not.

In virtually all communities a boy will be called up to the *Torah* for his *Bar Mitzva*. Some read the entire *Parsha*, some only *Maftir*, and some the Haftorah, depending on the boy's ability, the Shul's tolerance, and the custom of the community. A boy is meant to have a part in this as an essential part of any Jewish man is learning *Torah*. Conversely, in Halachic Judaism, girls are not called up to the *Torah* as what she does is not what she is. Unfortunately, in liberal Judaism there's a feeling that

there's what you do or there's nothing. Being is a non-role which is tragic and very anti feminist. Women are about being *Torah*. When the *Torah* was given, Hashem told Moshe, "*Ko somar l'beit Yaakov v'sagid l'Bnei Yisrael.*" First, Moshe was enjoined to speak to the women and then the men because the women are the ones who affect others and integrate *Torah*. *Torah* is very much a woman's portion.

I once came to Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z'tzl with a woman who was involved in Women of the Wall. He asked her why she needed to express herself in this way. Did she have a need to pray like the men? She was honest enough to say that was not what drove her. She liked the feeling of community. It gave expression to her Judaism. Rav Auerbach told her that it says in the *Talmud* that a thousand women are never a community in a sense of that being their definition. They remain a thousand individuals.

Part of a girl's maturation at her *Bat Mitzva* is to make her aware of her value as an individual. It should not morph into communal expression. She should respect her femininity and inwardness as something positive and worthy.