

FINDING HER RIGHT PLACE IN THE SYNAGOGUE

The Rite of Adult Bat Mitzvah

LISA D. GRANT

Adult bat mitzvah is a uniquely American phenomenon. Reports suggest that thousands of American Jewish women have studied for and celebrated a ceremony of bat mitzvah over the past thirty years. For more than fifteen years sociologists of religion, social workers, psychologists, educators, historians, and journalists have all been drawn to explore how this adolescent rite of passage has been adapted to serve adult Jewish women's needs. This research tells us that women seek out this opportunity in order to publicly affirm their Jewish and, more particularly, their religious identity.¹ These women are looking for greater comfort and connection in their synagogue communities. They want to become literate and confirm their legitimate place in the public arena of Jewish ritual practice. Though they are learning normative synagogue "skills" in order to actively participate in and even lead parts of the service, their very participation can have a profound impact on reshaping the norms for worship in their particular synagogue community and ultimately American Judaism.

There is scant documentation regarding when the phenomenon of adult bat mitzvah began, but from all accounts it appears to have gained its initial momentum as a grassroots initiative, most likely arising out of the Havurah movement of the 1960s. One of the earliest records of "belated" b'not mitzvah (plural) appears in the *Jewish Catalog*, first published in 1971.² Similarly, one of the earliest studies on adult bat mitzvah pointed to countercultural influences that supported this form of "do-it-yourself" Judaism.³ Other reports from the 1970s and 1980s describe private, individual ceremonies that mostly took place outside synagogues at college Hillels, Jewish summer camps, and hotel conference rooms.⁴ In a relatively

short time span, however, this do-it-yourself approach was co-opted by many Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogues as rabbis and educators began to see adult bat mitzvah as a way to strengthen attachment to the congregation and Jewish practice in general, and to increase attendance and participation in worship.

While no definitive statistics have been gathered, an estimated five hundred synagogues across North America offer adult b'not mitzvah classes among their array of adult learning and religious offerings. In general, both men and women are welcome to participate in these programs in Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations. In practice, however, the vast majority of participants are women. In addition, the adult bat mitzvah phenomenon is far more prevalent in the liberal movements of American Judaism, though it is not unheard of in Modern Orthodox congregations. For instance, Chana Kotzkin cites Liberty Jewish Congregation, a Modern Orthodox synagogue in suburban Baltimore, as having initiated an adult bat mitzvah class in 1976.⁵ Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that other forms of women's study are more common in Modern Orthodox circles than is adult bat mitzvah, which typically focuses on building synagogue "skills," competencies that a much higher percentage of Orthodox women already possess.

The curriculum and ceremony differ quite significantly from synagogue to synagogue and across denominational lines as might be expected. Hebrew reading literacy is almost always part of the program. Despite these differences, the programs share a common goal, which is to help women become more comfortable and "literate" within their particular synagogue setting. To that end, in recent years both the Women's League for Conservative Judaism and the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) have published curriculum guides⁶ for adult bat mitzvah that have been sold or distributed to over eight hundred congregations.⁷ Perhaps the largest group of women who collectively participated in a ceremony of adult bat mitzvah was at the 1996 National Hadassah Convention in Miami Beach, with 122 women as celebrants and over 1,000 in the congregation.⁸ Hadassah held such megaceremonies at their national gatherings for several years. Since 2000, many of the Hadassah regions now facilitate adult bat mitzvah programs and ceremonies, sometimes in partnership with a local synagogue.⁹ These programs may appeal to women who are more strongly connected to Hadassah than they are to a synagogue, or to women who belong to a synagogue that does not offer an adult bat mitzvah program. The nondenominational nature of Hadassah and its focus on peer leadership and Jewish peoplehood

are other features that distinguish Hadassah's program from a synagogue-based experience.¹⁰

Various studies and journalistic reports¹¹ suggest that women who participate in a ceremony of adult bat mitzvah range in age from their early twenties to their nineties. However, the majority appear to fall within the mid-life years of late thirties to early sixties. Most of these women begin their studies without being able to read Hebrew and with almost no understanding of synagogue ritual. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey showed that women were more than twice as likely as men not to have received any Jewish education.¹² Though the gender gap in Jewish education is narrowing, there are still large numbers of Jewish adults, both men and women, who have had minimal Jewish education as children and did not become bar or bat mitzvah at age twelve or thirteen. For example, a family education survey conducted in 1999 of almost 2,000 individuals from 38 congregations in metropolitan Chicago showed that 49 percent of respondents did not become bar or bat mitzvah as a child. Seventy-six percent of the survey respondents were women.¹³

How can we understand the adult bat mitzvah phenomenon in the context of ritual innovation and change? What are the elements of this ritual? Why is it so meaningful for the participants? What impact are the women "graduates" of adult bat mitzvah programs having on ritual life and practice in their synagogues? What are the implications of these changes for Jewish life in America?

This chapter addresses these questions by building on the existing literature and adding new voices to the stories of women who choose this path of Jewish learning and observance. It showcases the experiences of fifteen women who celebrated an adult bat mitzvah in the last several years to illustrate the impact of the experiences on them as individuals and on their synagogue communities. They range in age from their mid-thirties to their late seventies. The data come from interviews with five women from a Conservative synagogue who were interviewed one year and again three years post-bat mitzvah,¹⁴ plus interviews and/or written testimony from four other women from Conservative congregations, four from Reform, and two from unaffiliated congregations. These fifteen women represent a diverse group. Three are Jews by choice; seven are mothers of school-aged children; two are lesbians; and three had no children at the time of the study. As part of this research, interviews were also conducted with rabbis and educators from three Conservative congregations, three Reform congregations, and one Reconstructionist congregation that offer adult bat

mitzvah programs.¹⁵ These numbers are relatively small, but the themes that emerged in these stories are wholly consistent with research conducted by many others across disciplines. The impacts described in all of these studies can be summarized into three key points. In virtually all cases, women who participate in a program of learning leading to a ceremony of adult bat mitzvah feel a stronger sense of Jewish identity and become more comfortable in worship in their synagogues. In addition, in many but not all cases, women develop a strong commitment to ongoing Jewish learning. Thus, adult bat mitzvah is a powerful learning and ritual experience that has the potential to redirect women's lives and change the culture of worship in their synagogues.

EVOLUTION OF ADULT BAT MITZVAH

For most of history, study and prayer, central elements of Jewish experience, were practiced and enacted in public almost exclusively by men. Jewish women expressed their piety and marked their experience privately, at home, in ways quite different from those of their male counterparts. In effect, men owned the Great Tradition, while women developed their own small traditions that were generally understood as peripheral to "authentic" Jewish experiences.

In the twentieth century, though study and worship were still held up as exemplars of Judaism, they were not a significant part of the lives of the majority of American Jews, either men or women. Public Judaism was expressed much more frequently through communal involvement, not ritual practice.¹⁶ Even Jewish communal leaders were typically Jewishly illiterate and disengaged from most ritual activity and religious practice.

Over the last few decades Jewish communal leaders have increasingly recognized that Jewish learning is essential to sustaining a vibrant and meaningful American Jewish community. As a result, we have witnessed a burgeoning growth of adult Jewish learning in synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, and independent institutions. In most cases, women populate these classrooms in far greater numbers than men.¹⁷ Women want to claim their place at the study table to deepen their knowledge, to strengthen their own Jewish identity, to learn how to be better transmitters of Jewish tradition, and to enrich the ritual observances they choose to perform.

The rise of feminist consciousness and the impact of the Jewish countercultural movement in the latter part of the twentieth century primed women to seek access to the study table of the Great Tradition and to demand that this tradition respond to their experiences.¹⁸ As women's reli-

gious roles expanded over the last part of the twentieth century, so did their desire to mark their experience through ritual. This impulse for ritual creativity is as much a product of general American cultural influences as it is a response to perceived gaps in Jewish religious practice. The feminist movement led women to demand that what might once have been private spiritual expression should take place in the public domain. In fact, religious feminists created, improvised, and reinterpreted ritual because they found “the performance of long-suppressed rituals and the making of newly improvised rituals to be invaluable for maintaining their solidarity, courage, and imaginative resource.”¹⁹

Thus, over the last thirty years, we have witnessed a flourishing of Jewish ritual innovation to mark women’s life experience, adding female voices and gender-neutral language to liturgy, creating new rituals such as brit bat (baby naming) ceremonies for girls, mid-life passages, healing services, and ceremonies to ritualize divorce, and reclaiming old ceremonies for new purposes, such as using *mikvah* (ritual bath) to help heal the emotional pain of miscarriage, sexual abuse, and abortion. There is an abundance and seemingly ever-expanding number of women’s centers, books, journals, and Web sites that document and support these innovations.²⁰

In some ways adult bat mitzvah seems to represent a perfect outgrowth of these impulses toward increased Jewish learning and ritual innovation. It provides a way for women to find their place in the Great Tradition of study and worship, while at the same time acknowledging women’s experience and elevating it to the public realm. However, whereas the ritual innovations described above are all attempts to make Judaism more responsive to women’s experience, adult bat mitzvah is not about changing the system but about seeking legitimacy within an existing framework.

Adult bat mitzvah emerged out of the spirit of American innovation and individualism, but the impetus for engaging in it for most women is toward conformity rather than change. There is a paradox in the outcome, however. While the women are searching to master the liturgy and feel competent and authentic in a particular religious community, their involvement ultimately can lead to reshaping what is normative and authentic for that community.

WHO ARE THE WOMEN WHO BECOME ADULT BAT MITZVAH?

The research on adult bat mitzvah provides us with a rich portrait of the women who embark on a course of study culminating in a public

religious expression of their commitment to Judaism. They come from diverse backgrounds and have different initial motivations. Some women come from assimilated backgrounds; some are converts who are discovering Judaism for the first time. Others are looking to fill in the gaps in their education and to find answers to questions about identity and belonging. Some are inspired to start the process by the Jewish educational accomplishments and ritual performance of their daughters and granddaughters. Some are looking for meaning after experiencing a life transition or challenge—a birth, a death, a child entering school, a career change, and so forth. Others are seeking to resolve “unfinished business” that may have left them feeling alienated or betrayed by their family and their tradition. Regardless of starting point, all are seeking to become fully enfranchised participants in Jewish ritual life.

In most synagogues, women who choose to undertake an adult bat mitzvah participate in a lengthy course of study prior to the ceremony. Clearly, they have made a sincere and serious commitment to Judaism. They are also making a clear statement of need. They are goal-oriented learners who embark on a course of study in order to participate more actively, comfortably, and confidently in worship. In some cases, it is the motivation to learn rather than the actual ceremony that brings them to classes initially. Such women seemed almost reluctant to associate their decision with a spiritual need. Typical remarks among informants include: “Remember, I didn’t come for the bat mitzvah. I wanted to learn trope,”²¹ or “It wasn’t the bat mitzvah per se. I was looking to figure this all out in a safe way.”²² Occasionally, women would speak about the social needs that were their initial impetus. For example, Ann, an audiologist with two young daughters, said, “At first, I did it on a dare. My friend and I challenged each other to see if we could learn to read Hebrew.”²³ Similarly, Linda, a mother of children enrolled in day school, wrote that she signed up “because so many of my friends from Schechter were doing it so I decided I might as well do it also.”²⁴

It may be that these women were reluctant to attribute their initial motivations to a desire for some sort of ritual marking of their religious identity. Many American Jews may be uneasy with ritual expression, especially when the liturgical language is foreign and unfamiliar. But, as the learning process progresses, even the most hesitant seem to report having great excitement about and deriving deep meaning from the ceremony. They begin to appreciate publicly marking a transition and an affirmation of their commitment to Judaism.²⁵ As Beth Cousens notes in her 2002 study,



Marian Weissman, who had an adult bat mitzvah, went on to become an active member of her congregation and a Judaic artist. Used with the permission of Bill Aron, <http://www.billaron.com>.

“the ritual helps them officially and with distinction mark a ‘before’ and ‘after’ period in their lives.”²⁶

The women highlighted here used similar words to describe their experiences. Rachel, a former stage manager, described her bat mitzvah ceremony as a “goal post, marking the beginning of a journey toward greater involvement in religious life.”²⁷ Louise, a stay-at-home mom, called it a “turning point in my life.”²⁸ Karen, a synagogue administrator who had recently moved, said, “It was my entrée into the community. It served as a

launching pad for my involvement in a wide range of activities at the temple.”²⁹

ADULT BAT MITZVAH: RITUAL OR CEREMONY?

Scholars have long noted the important role ritual plays in defining relationships and transmitting family and group values.³⁰ Life cycle rituals in particular are intended to connect individuals to one another and to their common heritage. They commemorate continuity with the past and play a critical role in shaping collective memory, which in turn builds group cohesion and reinforces a sense of communal affiliation.³¹

“Ritual” is a term that can have a variety of different usages and meanings. It is commonly understood as something that follows a set of formal, predictable, repeatable behaviors. In the broadest sense, ritual is a way of bringing symbolic meaning into everyday reality. In a religious context, these choreographed actions are usually preceded or accompanied by liturgical language.³² When effective, the ritual moment not only marks a transition from one state to another but also connects the performer to God and community.

Victor Turner, one of the pioneers in ritual studies, distinguishes between *ritual* as a transformative rite and *ceremony* as a rite that confirms the existing social structure rather than transforming it. Ceremony is performative; ritual is *transformative*. As elaborated by Ronald Grimes, “[W]hen effective rites of passage are enacted, they carry us from here to there in such a way that we are unable to return to square one. To enact any kind of rite is to *perform*, but to enact a rite of passage is also to *transform*.”³³

The political scientist Charles Liebman applied this distinction to a Jewish framework. He notes the difference between *ritual*, which is stylized, repetitious behavior that is explicitly religious, and *ceremony*, which is designed to affirm the individual’s membership in a particular religious community.³⁴ Ritual, he claims, is fixed by tradition, while ceremony is more flexible and adaptable to changing needs and expectations. Ritual is controlled by the elite, whereas ceremony is more of a grassroots, folk expression. Writing in the 1990s he noted a decline in ritual practice among American Jews, but a flourishing of ceremony as an American expression personalizing and customizing Judaism to suit individual preferences and needs.

This impulse toward personalization and customization has grown even stronger in the past two decades. Americans of all religions have moved away from the institutionally based “dwelling-oriented” spirituality of the

1950s to a “seeking-oriented” spirituality where faith is no longer inherited but negotiated, sought out not within a single religious tradition but patched together from many. The notion of religious freedom has become equated with the consumer’s right to pick and choose religious behaviors based on what is meaningful at any given time.³⁵

In this consumer-oriented society, contemporary Jews choose their level of engagement based on what they feel is meaningful much more often than they do out of a sense of commitment to an obligatory, normative tradition.³⁶ As Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen write, “If they have come to a particular observance, it is because of an experience of its meaning. In most cases, that significance is highly personal in the most basic sense; wrapped up in biography and family. If the meaning disappears over time, the observance will cease.”³⁷

In this context, adult bat mitzvah fits within Liebman’s conception of ceremony. Like the adolescent ceremony it imitates, many women perform the rite and affirm their Jewish identity and belonging. Although they may feel more comfortable with worship, they all do not necessarily increase their level of observance or go on to become active in ritual or other aspects of synagogue life. The rabbis and educators interviewed were unequivocally positive about what the adult bat mitzvah experience means for the participants and their synagogues, but they also acknowledged that not everyone is equally affected. As profound and wonderful as the experience may be, for some the meaning simply does not stick. Like their adolescent counterparts, they engage in an intensive spate of learning that culminates in a meaningful ceremony, and then they resume old patterns of marginal affiliation. The voluntary and fluid nature of this commitment is reflected in the remarks one adult bat mitzvah made about some of her classmates: “For some of the women in my class, I feel almost as if it was an expediency thing. They wanted to become bat mitzvah because it was the thing to do. And get it over with. When I see some of them, I can’t even remember that they were in the class! Because they never ever come to Shabbat services. I guess that’s the way with anything.”³⁸

In such cases, adult bat mitzvah is an affirmation of the status quo. As one rabbi said, “It’s a way to make your Jewish adulthood official.” This is no small thing. The fact that women feel the need for this public statement is solid proof of how significantly women’s status has changed. As women claimed equal status in other aspects of American life, they felt equally entitled to publicly claim their connection to Judaism through this rite of initiation.

By all reports, standing on the bimah, reading from Torah, and leading

a congregation in prayer are deeply moving moments in time. But for some women, the experience exists in the moment and then seems to fade. For many others, however, the experience moves from being simply performative to transformative. Women do indeed change their behaviors, observing more mitzvot personally and increasing leadership roles in their synagogue. In such cases, the ceremony becomes ritual. The rite of affirmation does become a rite of passage. As one rabbi observed, "I think it's a transforming and transcendent moment in the life of a person." It is these women who are so personally transformed who are making an impact on their synagogues as well.

CEREMONIAL DETAILS

The exact details of the experience itself vary depending on the denomination, size, and culture of the synagogue. Some synagogues have large group classes of twenty or more with a single ceremony once every two years. Others have smaller groups where individual women or groups of two to five may celebrate together after a lengthy period of study. Since the goal is for participants to be able to comfortably and confidently participate in the worship experience, the service structure of their ceremony conforms to what is normal for that particular synagogue community. These features are driven by denominational affiliation and the specific cultural norms of each congregation. Despite variations in group size and preparation, there are many shared dimensions. Typically, students learn about the key elements of the worship service. Most women in Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogues learn how to chant Torah and/or haftarah as well. As the date of the ceremony approaches, participants are often asked to write a personal narrative that chronicles where the bat mitzvah experience fits into their "Jewish journey." In some cases, the rabbi will use these statements to craft an individualized blessing for each woman. In other cases, they are put together in a booklet for guests and congregants. In Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations, the ceremony almost always takes place in the Shabbat morning service. In Reform synagogues, the ceremony may be on a Friday night or Saturday morning.³⁹ In large groups, participants often divide up and lead different parts of the service. All are called up for an aliyah to the Torah. Many chant from the Torah and/or haftarah (Prophets), and some even deliver a *dvar Torah* (homiletic discourse on the Torah portion).

As we saw earlier, the grassroots beginnings of adult bat mitzvah largely gave way to the institutionalization of the experience as more and more rab-

bis and educators realized this was a way to build critical mass and set a standard for achievement through the adult bat mitzvah ceremony that many others will strive to emulate.⁴⁰ As one rabbi remarked, “Adult bat mitzvah is a great way of getting people on the bimah. Getting them to give *Divrei Torah* and read Torah.” Indeed, the goal seems to go beyond simply filling the pews to getting women to be active leaders in worship.

Given the turn inward toward self-definition of religious values and practice, there still are women who seek to celebrate an adult bat mitzvah outside an institutional framework. Cousens notes one such case where the woman “had never found a prayer service in which she felt comfortable,”⁴¹ so she created her own and held the ceremony in her home. Such an approach fits well within American values of individualism and subjective ordering of one’s own independent religious expression. Similarly, an Internet site called *adventurerabbi.com* offers a wilderness-based “invigorating approach to Judaism,” and will customize retreats and life cycle events, including adult bar or bat mitzvah, to suit individual needs. Interestingly, *adventurerabbi.com* appears to target Jews who are not affiliated with congregations. They are not seeking to build affiliation and critical mass but to meet each individual’s personal needs. As such, their program appears to be quite short—six sessions plus the ceremony, as compared to a synagogue-based program, which is typically two years or longer.

IMPACT ON THE WOMEN THEMSELVES

What characterizes the differences in these women after they have culminated their adult bat mitzvah studies? Three themes dominate the research conducted over the last several years. As a result of their study and ceremonial marking of their accomplishments, participants feel a stronger sense of Jewish identity, they develop a strong commitment to ongoing Jewish learning, and they become more comfortable and connected to ritual and their synagogues.

The first two themes occur frequently as a result of any positive experience of adult Jewish learning. Learning builds meaning, which leads to a stronger sense of self as a Jew. This may not result in any outward change in behavior, but it does build self-confidence and commitment to Jewish practices the women choose to observe. As Audrey, a musician who had never felt comfortable with her Judaism, wrote, “There is also no question that being able to read Torah and Haftarah gives me a stronger sense of identity and of my membership within the community, my synagogue ‘family.’”⁴² Others, such as Stephanie, spoke in more general terms: “Taking

this class has made me feel more Jewish.”⁴³ Similarly, Linda wrote, “I can’t say enough about how the bat mitzvah class changed my Jewish life. I felt after the bat mitzvah a true sense of belonging to the adult community.”⁴⁴

Likewise, many women develop an excitement about and commitment to ongoing Jewish learning. Here, we do note a behavioral change. Of the fifteen women represented in this study, nine were involved in some form of ongoing adult Jewish learning after the bat mitzvah experience. For some, this entailed learning additional prayers and new parts of the service, such as chanting haftarah. Others attended weekly Torah study sessions, and spoke of taking a variety of short- and long-term topical classes of adult Jewish study. One chose to work for a Jewish educational institution after becoming bat mitzvah and is now considering applying to cantorial school.

The third theme is what distinguishes this experience from many other forms of adult Jewish learning: its emphasis on ritual. The rabbis and educators who teach in these programs do not just teach *about* Judaism; they teach the students *how* to be a Jew. A review of different published curricula demonstrates that adult bat mitzvah courses focus not just on providing students with a basic foundation in Jewish literacy but teaching behavioral aspects of Jewish life, particularly public worship and the performance of mitzvot. For example, the Hadassah *Eishet Mitzvah Curriculum Guide*, their program of adult bat mitzvah, sets out three goals: to gain Jewish knowledge; to improve Hebrew language fluency; and to observe mitzvot.⁴⁵ The curriculum published by the Women’s League of Conservative Judaism describes two different types of classes. One set focuses on the development of Hebrew reading proficiency and synagogue skills so that students can not only participate but also lead parts of the Shabbat morning service. The other set of classes focuses on building Jewish literacy, enriching the commitment to participating in prayer, and creating “a community of learners that will serve as a role model for adult learning and engagement throughout the synagogue community.”⁴⁶ Similarly, the course of study outlined in *Rediscovering Judaism*, a bar and bat mitzvah guide for adults, includes behavioral components that address personal religious practices and observances, family relationships, an individual’s obligation to engage in social action, and to make a commitment to ongoing Jewish study.⁴⁷

Women who enroll in these classes want to be full participants in worship. They want to know about Judaism and how to practice being Jews in the public arena of the synagogue. Many are also expressing a commitment to increased religious observance. Learning to read Hebrew and to chant Torah and haftarah, standing on the bimah, wearing a tallit, and perform-

ing ritual all make these women feel more connected to their synagogue community and more complete as Jews.

These activities can be described as spiritual practices, “a cluster of intentional activities concerned with relating to the sacred.”⁴⁸ In contrast to a “seeking-oriented” spirituality that focuses more on self-interest and meaning than it does on behavior, this practice-oriented approach demands action. According to the sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow, a practice-oriented spirituality requires a commitment to prayer and reflection on one’s relationship to God.⁴⁹ This form of religious expression allows room for personal exploration but also demands participation in a religious tradition. There is a moral dimension to these practices, meaning that rather than letting “desire be one’s guide,” an individual commits to following a “set of rules and tries to do what is right.”⁵⁰ In other words, a practice-oriented spirituality requires the individual to buy in to a normative religious community.

THE IMPACT OF ADULT BAT MITZVAH ON SYNAGOGUE RITUAL LIFE AND PRACTICE

As we have seen, for many women, the adult bat mitzvah marks their embarkation into such a practice-oriented spirituality that results in increased involvement both in worship and other aspects of synagogue life. The rabbis and educators interviewed estimated that more than half of each graduating class goes on to become synagogue regulars, meaning they continue to attend services almost every week after celebrating their b’not mitzvah. Written and oral testimony shows the adult bat mitzvah “graduates” often go on to assume significant leadership positions in their synagogues, serving as board and various committee members, sisterhood officers and presidents. One woman became a youth group advisor; another became the chairperson for the change initiative at her synagogue. Two helped establish healing services. Most continued their Jewish learning in some significant and ongoing way. All of these activities serve the congregation, but they also have the potential to change it in subtle and obvious ways from simply increasing the ranks of women in leadership positions to actually changing synagogue programs and practices.

The type of ritual activity adult bat mitzvah graduates pursue seems to depend largely on the culture of their particular synagogue. For example, women in synagogues that have a strong culture of lay participation in services will often continue to take on service leadership roles. Rachel, who celebrated her adult bat mitzvah in June 2002, belongs to an eight-hundred-

member unaffiliated, egalitarian synagogue that relies heavily on lay leaders in worship. Members who want to become service leaders are required to take a course. Rachel completed this class and led her first service within six months of celebrating her adult bat mitzvah. Audrey, Linda, and Louise belong to a large Conservative synagogue where many members regularly read Torah. All three of them spoke about having read several times since they became bat mitzvah. Louise, who became an adult bat mitzvah in 1996 and has continued Jewish study, chants Torah on a monthly basis. Audrey, who celebrated her ceremony of adult bat mitzvah by reading Torah in the summer of 2000, chanted haftarah for the first time in April 2003, on the occasion of her husband's sixtieth birthday. Linda, who was in the summer 2002 class from the same synagogue, wrote, "Since the bat mitzvah I have read Torah twice and am always asking for another reading. I did a reading prior to the bat mitzvah also. My goal is to read at least seven times and I am hoping that will be in time for Shavuot 2004!"⁵¹

Even synagogues where laypeople do not read routinely from the Torah or take on other leadership in worship note an increase in attendance at services and involvement in other aspects of synagogue life. The educator at a six-hundred-member Conservative synagogue said, "Almost without exception the people have become more involved in synagogue programs. They go on to learn more. They participate more actively in services. They join the committees and the board, and it has rubbed off on their kids."⁵²

As suggested by this last remark, the adult bat mitzvah experience can have an impact on other family members as well. Linda noted how her involvement inspired her husband to want to read Torah as well. She wrote, "The bat mitzvah was the best thing I have ever done and it has enriched my life and our family life as well. I used to think just because my kids attend Schechter that was enough, but I realize how much more there is for us to do and achieve. My husband now wants to read Torah. Of course like most adults he hasn't read since his bar mitzvah, but he sees so many of our friends and his wife doing it and he feels inspired!"⁵³

This impact also spills over to other members of the congregation. One rabbi of a Reform congregation noted that the sanctuary on the date of the adult bat mitzvah ceremony is as full as it is on the high holy days. The seats are filled not only with family members of the five or six participants but with members of the community who come to support and celebrate with their fellow congregants.

Along with their increased synagogue roles and engagement in Jewish learning, many women begin to feel ready and capable of confronting questions of meaning. For some women, the adult bat mitzvah experience has

a profound impact on emerging or evolving systems of belief. For instance, for Susan, a music librarian, and Louise, a community volunteer, both in their early fifties, the bat mitzvah classes awakened long dormant reflections about God. As Louise said, "I think [the class] very much affected my belief in God. Because there was a time that I questioned it, that I wasn't sure, and now I'm sure. It's something that's so empowering—that feeling that it's not random."⁵⁴ Other women find more powerful emotional connections to the Jewish people and Jewish history. Nina, a woman who felt alienated from Judaism since childhood when her family decided girls did not need to attend Hebrew school, came back to Judaism through the encouragement of her adult son. One year she went to her son's synagogue for Yom Kippur services, and as she wrote in her adult bat mitzvah statement, "To my amazement, it was the most beautiful service I ever attended. The rabbi was incredible. I felt as if she were speaking only to me. My entire Jewish life changed that night. I started to think about myself as a Jew and started to learn about the history I had long since dismissed."⁵⁵

CHANGING ROLES AND CHANGING PRACTICES

Over the past several decades, the feminist movement has had a profound impact on American Judaism, which is demonstrated by women achieving equal rights in public expression of ritual, as well as the influence they have had on the nature of public ritual itself. However, the initial impetus for adult bat mitzvah did not derive from activists pushing for change, nor was it strongly promoted by mainstream leadership, at least for the first two decades. Indeed, few if any of the women whose voices we hear in the research and reports described their decision to become adult bat mitzvah as a feminist statement. Likewise, scholarship on women's ritual innovation in Judaism generally does not point to adult bat mitzvah as a new form of spiritual expression. Women who enroll in adult bat mitzvah programs are not seeking to innovate and reinterpret Jewish ritual; they are seeking to fit into existing ritual patterns. These existing ritual patterns, however, were changed through feminist activism. In other words, adult bat mitzvah could not have been conceived of as an option without the pioneering accomplishments of many early feminists who became the first rabbis, scholars, and Jewish communal service professionals.⁵⁶ As more and more of these elite women assumed public roles, other women began to feel that they, too, could be legitimate participants in public ritual. The problem, however, was that as women claimed their egalitarian rights, they began to realize that they lacked the knowledge and skills to perform them.

Hence, the motivation for adult bat mitzvah. Thus, this quiet folk revolution not only changes the lives of American Jewish women, it also is changing the nature of Jewish ritual practice.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the sociologist Stuart Schoenfeld conducted the first studies about adult bat mitzvah. His research reflects a contemporary and widely expressed feminist belief that full equality for women can only be achieved “when the informal conservatism which keeps women out of positions of real influence is overcome and when mainstream Judaism incorporates new ideas and rituals which reflect the female as well as the male experience.”⁵⁷ Complete egalitarianism remains illusive, but the nature of the informal conversation has changed dramatically and irrevocably since that time. Women have indeed made deep and lasting marks on American Judaism, claiming their place on the bimah and in the boardroom, and marking significant moments in their lives through public ritual expression. Certainly in liberal Jewish communities and even in Orthodox ones as well, American Jewish women understand they are entitled to full citizenship and all its rights therein. But they want to exercise these rights with a sense of authenticity. In essence, they perceive adult bat mitzvah as their citizenship exam. As one rabbi remarked, “After the bat mitzvah, they tell me when they’re participating in services or on the bimah (even an aliyah) they don’t feel as fraudulent. It’s as if they are saying, ‘I’m doing it right and I have every right to do it.’”⁵⁸

Adult bat mitzvah is about fitting into a normative Jewish framework. However, as more women achieve this milestone, they change what is normative for their given community. Through the performance of this ritual, they strengthen the existing system and group structure. But as they become stronger, more confident, and more informed as Jews they also effect subtle changes in the system. As Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff write, “Ritual may do much more than mirror existing social arrangements and existing modes of thought. It can act to reorganize them or even help to create them.”⁵⁹

For example, an earlier study focused on five women from a suburban Conservative synagogue who became adult bat mitzvah in the summer of 1996.⁶⁰ They were among a class of eleven. Since that time at that synagogue new classes are formed every two years, ranging in size from twelve to twenty, so that over seventy women have celebrated adult bat mitzvah in the past eight years. More than twenty of these women are now among the regular Torah readers at this congregation. Every year more women wear *tallitot*, read from the Torah, and serve in significant leadership roles. They

start new program initiatives. They inject new life into old practices. Every class has a mix of ages. As women see the accomplishments of their peers, they imagine the possibility for themselves. By virtue of numbers alone, they shift the status quo. More members are more active in ritual and know how to pray, which can change the nature of congregational singing. More people see a commitment to religious practice as something normal and fulfilling as well.

It is not just in terms of increased numbers that the impact can be felt. The women who participate in adult bat mitzvah classes are not among the elite. They are ordinary people who go from marginal involvement to become strong, active, and more knowledgeable participants. They want to claim a place within normative Jewish tradition, but they also bring a feminine ethic to the public sphere. This influences organizational structures and how decisions are made. It empowers women whose voices would have been totally excluded or silenced a short while ago. Rachel, for example, is a lesbian who had no Jewish education as a child. She was reluctant to join a synagogue for many years, feeling alienated from the mainstream. Through a friend she learned about a congregation that was fully welcoming to gays and lesbians and joined the choir. Shortly after that, she signed up for the adult b'not mitzvah class and spent three years in intensive study. At her ceremony, which she celebrated with two other women, she spoke these moving words about her new relationship with Torah study and her sense of belonging to and participating in an evolving tradition:

Ultimately, what I think is important—is that we can read a Torah portion and engage in a dialogue about it. When we study and struggle over such important ideas with others, a sense of community develops. . . . This study keeps our tradition alive. It is truly awesome to think that shortly I will be reading from the Torah in the same words, with much the same melodies that my ancestors for over two thousand years have done before me. But remember that I am a woman and a lesbian . . . and I realize that if it were not for the tradition of struggling with the Torah and allowing our tradition to evolve, that my standing here today would be an impossibility.⁶¹

The more knowledgeable women from all backgrounds and perspectives become the more self-confident and assertive they become. As more women gain the skills and increase their comfort in prayer and public ritual performance, the more likely they are to embrace the practice-

oriented spirituality that Wuthnow proposes. This makes them more committed and engaged, both in personal meaning making and public ritual expression.

The life course of one of the women interviewed for this research provides evidence of this trend. Karen, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, grew up as a Reform Jew. She attended Reform Jewish summer camp and was involved in her synagogue youth group as a teen but, as she describes it, “really didn’t know much at all.” She served as an administrator at a Conservative synagogue for several years. When she and her young family moved to a new community, they decided to join another Conservative synagogue. As we learned earlier, Karen signed up for the adult bat mitzvah class almost immediately; she saw this as her way into this new community. After celebrating her adult bat mitzvah in 1998, she became involved in sisterhood and enrolled in a two-year program of adult Jewish learning. In 2001, she was appointed chairperson of her synagogue’s change initiative. She attends Shabbat services weekly, wears a tallit, reads Torah every few months, and is considered an influential and well-respected lay leader.

Karen’s reflections on her growth since the bat mitzvah focuses on two things. First, she notes how her increased Jewish knowledge and comfort with Jewish ritual practice makes her more confident and perhaps more critical of the worship experience. She no longer feels the need to conform precisely to the status quo at her synagogue; she is empowered to make informed decisions about how and where she wants to worship. As a new leader in the community, she may indeed be on the path toward shaping change in the nature of services at her congregation. She said, “I’m more secure in who I am as a Jew as a result of the adult bat mitzvah experience. I have a much better sense of what I like and don’t like and feel comfortable expressing my opinions. I’m starting a process of fanning out to see what other kinds of Jewish religious experiences there are to help shape what I want for myself.”⁶²

This newfound independence was evident in her reflections about the next steps she wanted to take. She said, “I’m taking an online writing course right now. I’d really like to travel and write about Jewish life in different communities around the world. Also, I’d like to do some *hevrutah* study, something more self-directed.” Consistent with her sense of empowerment, Karen also seemed to be thinking seriously about the nature of her involvement in the synagogue. She felt she was spending too much time supporting organizational and program initiatives for the synagogue and not enough time on her own religious life. As she said, “Learning to chant Torah was an awesome experience. I wanted to do it my whole life. By now,

I thought I'd be onto the next rung. I think I would get a lot more spiritually out of the synagogue if I learned to *daven* than I do arranging meals and flowers for the sick people. I wish it could be more balanced."⁶³

Karen embodies the rabbinic precept that study leads to action. She is thoroughly identified as a Jew, but not complacent. She has adopted a practice-oriented spirituality and sees herself as a full participant in Jewish life. Her musings about where she wants to direct her energies and her yearnings for a more meaningful religious life represent the confluence of her American individualism and her Jewish sense of belonging. She is deeply rooted in the community, but now sees herself as having a voice in how this community will continue to grow to reflect her needs.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook is often quoted as saying, "Let us renew the old and sanctify the new." The American rite of adult bat mitzvah affords Karen and thousands of women like her the opportunity to do just that. These women have "renewed the old" by adapting a rite intended to mark the chronological transition to adulthood, infusing it with new meaning. Through bat mitzvah, they are saying that becoming a Jewish adult means developing certain basic skills and competencies in order to participate fully in community. They are also saying that this can happen at any point in the life cycle. Though the public affirmation of belonging sometimes is enough, for most, the adult bat mitzvah ceremony marks a step along a longer journey. These women "sanctify the new" as they deepen their religious lives through ongoing Jewish learning, *and* stronger connections, *and* more varied contributions to community. As their own lives are changed, they too change their communities (in their families, their synagogues, and the larger Jewish community). The full extent of these changes has yet to be realized, but the signs suggest that the trajectory will represent a blending of American individualism with Jewish practice. As these women strive to find personal meaning within Judaism, they will make sure that their needs as women are met and that their place as public and full participants in Jewish ritual life will endure.

NOTES

1. Stuart Schoenfeld, "Integration into the Group and Sacred Uniqueness: An Analysis of Adult Bat Mitzvah," in *Persistence and Flexibility: Anthropological Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience*, ed. Walter P. Zenner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Schoenfeld, "Ritual Performance, Curriculum Design and Jewish Identity: Towards a Perspective on Contemporary Innovations in Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education," *Bikurim* 6, no. 2 (1989): 19–22; Schoenfeld, "Interpreting Adult Bat Mitzvah: The Limits and Potential of Feminism in a

Congregational Setting,” in *Jewish Sects, Religious Movements, and Political Parties*, ed. Menachem Mor (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1991); Schoenfeld, “Ritual and Role Transition: Adult Bat Mitzvah as a Successful Rite of Passage,” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992); Nancy Ellen Kahn, “The Adult Bat Mitzvah: Its Use in Female Development” (Ph.D. diss., Smith School of Social Work, 1993); Lisa D. Grant, “Adult Bat Mitzvah: An American Rite of Continuity,” *Courtyard* 1 (Winter 2000): 142–71; Grant, “Restorying Jewish Lives Post Adult Bat Mitzvah,” *Journal of Jewish Education* 68 (Fall–Winter 2003): 34–51; Beth Cousens, “Adult Bat Mitzvah as an Entrée into Jewish Life for North American Jewish Women” (working paper for Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women, 2002); Chana Kotzin, “Ascending the Bimah: Jewish Women ‘Come of Age’: The Growth of Adult Bat Mitzvah in America during the 1970s” (paper delivered at the Jewish Feminist Research Group, New York, February 18, 2002).

2. Albert Axelrad, “Belated Bar/Bat Mitzvahs,” in *The Second Jewish Catalog* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971).

3. Schoenfeld, “Ritual and Role Transition.”

4. Schoenfeld, “Integration into the Group and Sacred Uniqueness”; Ruth Mason, “Adult Bat Mitzvah: Changing Women, Changing Synagogues,” *Lilith* 14 (Fall 1989): 21–24.

5. Kotzkin, “Ascending the Bimah.”

6. Lisa D. Grant, *Aytz Ha'yim He: She Is a Tree of Life: Adult Bat Mitzvah Curriculum* (New York: Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, 2001); *Adult B’nei Mitzvah: Affirming Our Identities* (New York: UAHC Press, 2002).

7. These estimates are based on correspondence with Francie Schwartz, URJ adult learning coordinator, Department of Lifelong Jewish Learning, February 17, 2004, and Lisa Kogen, program director of the Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, February 5, 2004.

8. Charles Strouse, “Mazel Tov,” *Sun-Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL), July 16, 1996.

9. Dr. Carol Diament, national director of education for Hadassah, e-mail correspondence with the author, January 28, 2004.

10. Claudia Chernov, senior editor, National Jewish Education, Hadassah, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 2004; Barbara Spack, Hadassah National Chair of Jewish Education (1993–99), telephone interview by the author, August 24, 2004.

11. Reports of adult bat mitzvah ceremonies appeared regularly in the Jewish press from the late 1980s onward. See, for example, Mason, “Adult Bat Mitzvah”; Robert Goldblum, “Daughter of the Book,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, August 14, 1992; Strouse, “Mazel Tov”; “At 28, a Woman Finally Feels Like a Jewish Adult,” *Forward*, January 24, 2003; “UConn Student Turns to Judaism,” *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, November 29, 2002; Ellen Jaffe-Gill, “Adult Bar and Bat Mitzvah: Meaningful at Every Age,” available at <http://www.ujc.org> (accessed February 12,

2004). An article on the subject even appeared in the secular press in the summer of 2003; David Van Biema, "A Ritual for All Ages," *Time*, July 7, 2003.

12. Sylvia Barack Fishman and Alice Goldstein, *When They Are Grown They Will Not Depart* (Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 1993).

13. Linda Seidman and Sharon Milburn, *Family Education Survey* (Chicago: Community Foundation for Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago, 2000).

14. Grant, "Adult Bat Mitzvah"; Grant, "Restorying Jewish Lives."

15. Pseudonyms are used for all informants.

16. Jonathan Woocher, *Sacred Survival: American Jewry's Civil Religion* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1986).

17. Steven M. Cohen and Aryeh Davidson, *Adult Jewish Learning in America: Current Patterns and Prospects for Growth* (New York: Florence G. Heller/JCC Association Research Center and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2001); Lisa D. Grant, Diane T. Schuster, Meredith Woocher, and Steven M. Cohen, *Journey of Heart and Mind: Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2004).

18. Hasia R. Diner and Beryl Lief Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

19. Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 9.

20. Among the many examples of published works of creative ritual are Penina Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women around the Year* (Fresh Meadows, NY: Biblio Press, 1986); Debra Orenstein, ed., *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1994); E. M. Bronner, *Bringing Home the Light: A Jewish Woman's Handbook of Rituals* (San Francisco: Council Oak, 1999); Debra Nussbaum Cohen, *Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter: Creating New Jewish Ways to Welcome Baby Girls into the Covenant* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2001). The journal *Kerem: Creative Explorations in Judaism*, ed. Gilah Langer and Sara Horowitz, also includes articles on new ritual in virtually every issue. <http://www.ritualwell.org>, sponsored by Ma'yan, the Jewish Women's project of the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, posts rituals and material to support women in creating and using them.

21. Interview with Roberta, October 19, 2001.

22. Interview with Rachel, February 6, 2003.

23. Interview with Ann, September 30, 2001.

24. Written testimony from Linda, March 9, 2003.

25. Kahn, "The Adult Bat Mitzvah."

26. Cousens, "Adult Bat Mitzvah as an Entrée into Jewish Life," 16.

27. Interview with Rachel.

28. Interview with Louise, September 25, 2001.

29. Interview with Karen, March 3, 2003.

30. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (1909; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960);

Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

31. Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Dutton, 1989); Paul Conneron, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

32. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

33. Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 121.

34. Charles Liebman, "Ritual, Ceremony and the Reconstruction of Judaism in the United States," in *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Roberta Rosenberg Farber and Chaim I. Waxman (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 308.

35. Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

36. Bethamie Horowitz, *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity* (New York: UJA-Federation, 2000); Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

37. Cohen and Eisen, *The Jew Within*, 93.

38. Interview with Louise.

39. The Modern Orthodox synagogue cited in Chana Kotzkin's research also held the adult bat mitzvah ceremony on a Friday evening. Here, the ceremony consisted of English readings only and a communal Oneg Shabbat celebration after services.

40. Joy D. Levitt, "Embracing the Tradition: Changes for Jewish Women in Religious Life," in *Voices for Change: Future Directions for American Jewish Women* (sponsored by Hadassah: The Women's Zionist Organization of America and the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies Institute for Community and Religion, Brandeis University, 1995); Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice* (New York: UAHC Press, 2001).

41. Cousens, "Adult Bat Mitzvah as an Entrée into Jewish Life," 13 (page refers to offprint edition).

42. Written testimony from Audrey, March 6, 2003.

43. Written testimony from Stephanie, March 13, 2003.

44. Written testimony from Linda.

45. *Eishet Mitzvah Curriculum Guide* (Jewish Education Department, Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, 2001).

46. Grant, "Aytz Ha'yim He," iv.

47. Kerry Olitzky and Ron Isaacs, *Rediscovering Judaism: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Guide for Adults* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 1997), xiii.

48. Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 170.

49. *Ibid.*, 178.

50. *Ibid.*, 184.

51. Written testimony from Linda. At this synagogue, anyone who has read from

the Torah at least seven times is presented a Tikkun during Shavuot services each year.

52. Eleanor Fried, education director, interview by the author, March 11, 2003.
53. Written testimony from Linda.
54. Interview with Louise.
55. Narrative statement, Nina, June 1, 2002.
56. Rela Geffen Monson, "The Impact of the Jewish Women's Movement on the American Synagogue," in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, ed. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992).
57. Schoenfeld, "Interpreting Adult Bat Mitzvah," 207.
58. Interview with Rabbi B., March 2003.
59. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Secular Ritual* (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), 5.
60. Grant, "Adult Bat Mitzvah."
61. D'var Torah delivered at her ceremony of adult bat mitzvah, Rachel, June 2002.
62. Interview with Karen.
63. Ibid.