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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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**Bat Mitzva**

WHAT IS THE HALACHIC SIGNIFICANCE OF BAT MITZVA? HOW SHOULD IT BE  
OBSERVED OR CELEBRATED?

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**Reaching Maturity**

What marks the transition into adulthood? The physical changes of puberty and accompanying emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth take place gradually. It's difficult to pinpoint a defining point in children's developmental processes at which they become adults, or even enter an intermediate stage.

Nevertheless, legal systems need to identify such points, because minors cannot be held responsible for their actions as adults are. So, for example, legal license to drive, drink, vote, or marry often depends on reaching a given age, even though some people attain the requisite maturity at an earlier stage, and others only later.

In Halacha, defining the beginning of adulthood is essential for determining when a young person becomes fully obligated in *mitzvot*. A minor (*katan* or *ketana*) is exempt from *mitzvot* on a Torah level. A mishna makes note of this to explain why a *katan* is not old enough to be considered a *ben sorer u-moreh* (rebellious son):

Mishna Sanhedrin 8:1

The minor is exempt, for he has not reached inclusion in *mitzvot*.

This exemption from *mitzvot* does not mean that a minor can freely ignore them. The obligation in [chinuch](#) (education for *mitzvot*) begins when a minor is old enough to perform a given mitzva, or to understand the general concept of prohibition.

Chagiga 6a

Abbaye said: Wherever an adult is obligated on a Torah level, we also educate a

minor on a rabbinic level. Wherever an adult is exempt on a Torah level, a minor is also exempt on a rabbinic level.

We can ask to what extent children are responsible for their own education. This question comes to the fore in a halachic debate as to whether the obligation of *chinuch* technically falls solely upon the parent or also upon the child. (See more [here](#).) Regardless of where we stand on this debate, a minor should strive to observe *mitzvot*, keeping in mind that there is some room for error. The minor's mitzva fulfillment, however, is not at the same halachic level as that of an adult, and this means that a minor generally cannot discharge mitzva obligations on an adult's behalf.

## A Status Shift

How do we determine when a person reaches adulthood? Halachic sources discuss both physical and cognitive development. A mishna states that boys and girls reach full obligation in *mitzvot* when they attain physical maturity, typically defined as growing two pubic hairs:<sup>1</sup>

### Mishna Nidda 6:11

A girl who has brought forth two [pubic] hairs...is obligated in all the *mitzvot* mentioned in the Torah. And, similarly, a boy who has brought forth two hairs is obligated in all the *mitzvot* mentioned in the Torah...

Various other points of a girl's development likewise function as a halachic sign of her maturity.<sup>2</sup>

### Nidda 47b

So would Rabbi Shimon say: The sages provided three signs of a woman's [physical maturing] below, and corresponding to them above.

These sources seem to relate solely to **physical maturation**, independent of age. In contrast, a different mishna (from the same tractate) discusses the point at which a young person's vow is considered binding based on age and level of understanding, seemingly regardless of physical maturity:<sup>3</sup>

### Mishna Nidda 5:6

A girl of eleven years old and a day, her vows are checked [for validity, depending on her comprehension]. At twelve years and a day, her vows stand. And we check all through the twelfth year. A boy of twelve years and a day, his vows are checked.

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<sup>1</sup> To count as a sign, each hair must be long enough that it can be folded over with the end touching the root:

Rambam, Laws of Marriage 2:16

The two hairs mentioned for a boy and a girl and in any place, their minimum measure is enough to fold the tip over to the root.

<sup>2</sup>Mishna Nidda 5:8

What are her signs? Rabbi Yosei Ha-Gelili says: From when the fold arises under the breast. Rabbi Akiva says: From when the breasts sway. Ben Azzai says: From when the areola darkens. Rabbi Yosei says: When it is enough that one puts his hand on the nipple, and it sinks and lags in returning.

<sup>3</sup> The end of Pirkei Avot cites age alone as a criterion for *mitzvot*:

Mishna Avot 5:21

He would say: A five-year-old to Scripture, a ten-year-old to Mishna, a thirteen-year-old to *mitzvot*...

A boy of thirteen years and a day, his vows stand, and we check all through the thirteenth year. Prior to this time, even though they said: "We know to Whom we vow, to Whom we have sanctified [something]," their vows are not vows and their sanctification is not sanctification. After this time, even if they said: "We don't know to Whom we vowed or to Whom we sanctified [something]," their vow is a vow and their sanctification is sanctification.

Regarding vows, the mishna specifies a cognitive measure of maturity: understanding "to Whom we vow." However, the mishna applies this standard only for one transitional year (from age eleven for girls, or twelve for boys). Outside this transitional year, the mishna indicates that we determine the validity of a young person's vows based on **age**.

What is the source for the ages twelve and thirteen? A midrash describes thirteen as the age at which a boy develops his good inclination, *yetzer ha-tov*, the ability to refrain from sin.<sup>4</sup> The Alter Rebbe puts this in more Chassidic terms. He describes thirteen and twelve as the ages at which the sacred soul takes hold within, respectively, a male or female.<sup>5</sup>

More halachically speaking, in the context of discussing how these ages apply to punishment, Rosh calls this stipulation of age a *halacha le-Moshe mi-Sinai*. That means that they are derived from Sinai with Torah-level force, though the Torah does not mention them:

#### Responsa Rosh 16:1

That you asked, from where do we know that a boy of thirteen years and one day is subject to punishment [for transgression] but less than that is not, know that it is a *halacha le-Moshe mi-Sinai*...

The "and one day" mentioned here is generally taken to mean a trivial amount of time into the birthday, on the halachic principle that a little bit of a halachic day can often be considered akin to a full day. Adding in mention of the "one day" makes it clear that the twelfth or thirteenth year must be completed in full.<sup>6</sup>

Still, we can ask why a female's minimum age should be younger than a male's. Earlier incidence of puberty for girls than for boys is one factor. The Talmudic discussion of this last mishna suggests that females have *bina yeteira*, an extra level of discernment, or perhaps this means that discernment is simply quicker to come in females.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Pesikta De-Rav Kehana, Appendices 3, Midrashic Collections

For the evil inclination is born from when he is inside his mother, and continues to grow with him, and he begins to violate Shabbat and it does not protest, he goes to a matter of transgression and it does not protest. After thirteen years, his good inclination is born, and if he violates Shabbat, it says to him: [You good-for-]nothing!

<sup>5</sup>Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav OC, Second Edition 4:2

For the final and fundamental entrance of the sacred soul in a person is at thirteen and a day for a male and twelve for a female.

<sup>6</sup>Bach OC 53

For we don't need thirteen years and one truly full day, but rather we need that they be thirteen complete years, to exclude the lack of a few hours. Therefore, immediately a little into the night, his years are complete and he is a *gadol*.

<sup>7</sup>Ritva Nidda 45b

### Nidda 45b

Rav Chisda said: What is Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nassi]'s reason? For it is written "And the Lord [God] built up [*va-yiven*] the rib." It teaches that God gave extra discernment [*bina*] to a woman, more than to a man.

Making a valid vow demands more discernment than performing many other *mitzvot*, so that relying on age makes particularly good sense in this case.

The formal halacha is that **both age and physical signs of maturity** must be present for the full halachic shift to adult status to take place. For example, even when a younger child develops hair in the pubic region, it is treated as hair growing from a mole, and not as a sign of maturity:<sup>8</sup>

### Rambam, Laws of Marriage 2:1-2

A girl from the day of her birth until twelve complete years is called a minor or called a child. And even if she brought forth some hairs within this time, they are only like a mole, but if she brought forth two hairs low in her body in the known places for growing hair and she is twelve years and a day or older, she is called a *na'ara*. And bringing forth two hairs at this point is called the lower sign. And once she brings forth the lower sign, she is called a *na'ara* for six full months, and from the beginning of the day of completing the six months and on she is called a *bogeret*, and the only difference between *na'arut* and *bagerut* is six months.

Rambam also makes note of an intermediate halachic stage between childhood and adulthood. During this stage the girl is defined as a *na'ara*. She is fully obligated in *mitzvot*, but her father still retains certain legal rights over her.<sup>9</sup>

### **Rava's Chazaka**

We've seen that, before the age of twelve or thirteen, a child is considered a minor regardless of physical development. What happens when a girl turns twelve, or a boy turns thirteen? Does the young person need to undergo an embarrassing physical inspection? Or can we assume that they have developed the requisite signs?

In the context of a Talmudic discussion of marital law, Rava teaches that we typically assume that a young woman has developed signs of physical maturity by the age of twelve:

### Nidda 46a

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"*Bina yeteira*" means that she is quick to discern.

#### <sup>8</sup> Nidda 46a

A nine-year-old who has brought forth two hairs, it is a mole...a thirteen-year-old and one day, all agree it is a sign [of maturity].

<sup>9</sup> The Mishna opens its discussion of the transition from girl to woman with a poetic parable, comparing the process to the ripening of a fruit, including the intermediate *na'ara* stage:

#### Mishna Nidda 5:7

Our sages made a parable regarding a woman: unripe, ripening, ripened. Unripe-she is still a child. Ripening-these are the days of her youth [*ne'ureha*, being a *na'ara*]. In both of these her father has rights to what she finds, and the work of her hands, and nullifying her vows. Ripened- since she has matured, her father no longer has [this] authority over her.

Didn't Rava say: A *ketana* who has reached her years does not require checking [of her signs]. There is a halachic presumption that she has brought forth signs...And regarding *chalitza* [release from levirate marriage] we are concerned [that she has not brought signs unless we check]...

The Talmud rules out relying on Rava's legal presumption, known as a *chazaka*, in the case of *chalitza*, release from levirate marriage.<sup>10</sup> Some maintain that this means that Rava's *chazaka* applies across the board, with *chalitza* as a unique exception since the Torah stipulates that it be performed by adults:

#### New Responsa Maharik 47

That we do not permit her to perform *chalitza* without checking at all, since there is a Torah level prohibition, and *ish* [man] is written in the *parasha* and we link an *isha* [woman] to an *ish* ...For [in general] we rely on this *chazaka* even regarding a Torah prohibition...

The view that Rava's *chazaka* applies in most cases is widely followed. Rema, for example, quotes it with respect to a thirteen-year-old boy counting toward a [minyan](#).

#### Rema OC 55:5

Nevertheless, we are not particular, rather whoever reaches his years we presume he is an [halachic] adult and we say that regarding this matter [of joining for minyan] presumably he has brought forth two hairs.

Some authorities, however, maintain that we can only rely on the *chazaka* that a young person has attained halachic maturity upon coming of age as grounds for halachic stringency. According to this view, we may not rely on this *chazaka* to be lenient with Torah-level *mitzvot*. Magen Avraham thus limits Rema's ruling to rabbinic *mitzvot*.

#### Magen Avraham 55:7

Regarding this matter: Explanation: since *tefilla* is rabbinic.

In this vein, Mishna Berura writes explicitly that a thirteen-year-old boy would thus not be presumed to be able to discharge an adult's Torah-level obligation:

#### Mishna Berura 55:31

For this matter: He means to say for the matter of prayer, which is rabbinic, and even according to the halachic authorities who maintain that prayer is on a Torah level, in any case counting toward the ten is not on a Torah level, perforce we rely on this and we say, since he reached his years, presumably he brought forth two hairs, for most people since they have reached their years presumably bring forth two hairs, but regarding other Torah-level obligations it [the presumption] does not work.

This ruling calls into question a thirteen-year-old boy's ability to discharge an adult's Torah-level obligation in, say, kiddush, and would seem to apply to a twelve-year-old girl's discharging others' Torah-level obligations as well.

Regarding kiddush, Ben Ish Chai assumes that such a situation (an adult relying on a

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<sup>10</sup> This could theoretically be relevant if, say, a girl married and was widowed at a very young age. Since *chalitza* would be required to enable her to remarry, the stakes of determining whether she has in fact matured physically are very high.

young person's kiddush) would only occur when the adult does not know all of the words of kiddush by heart. He therefore rules that those who are concerned can simply recite kiddush quietly along with, or immediately following each word of, the youth:

#### Responsa Rav Pe'alim I OC 10

For if a man or a woman can gather all the words of kiddush [to repeat them] from the mouth of this thirteen-year-old word for word without leaving any out, and look at the wine that is in the cup in [the boy's] hand, this is considered kiddush on a Torah and rabbinic level.

To summarize, a child who reaches her twelfth or his thirteenth birthday is halachically presumed to have attained the halachic status of an adult. We rely on this *chazaka* for rabbinic-level laws, and for Torah-level laws where it will lead to stringency (e.g., obligation in fasting on Yom Kippur). There is dispute regarding relying on this *chazaka* for Torah-level laws where this could lead to leniency. So, for example, there is debate as to whether a young person can discharge an adult's Torah-level mitzva obligation, such as kiddush, on the strength of the *chazaka*. Nevertheless, the day of coming of age marks a key change in halachic status, and is celebrated accordingly.

### **The Bar Mitzva**

The halachic presumption that a boy or girl of age has reached physical, and thus halachic, maturity paves the way for the public bar mitzva celebration. Bar mitzva literally means "subject to *mitzvot*," and the celebration marks a boy's becoming fully obligated in them. (We'll get to bat mitzva a little later.)

Some rabbis have described bar mitzva as a personal *matan Torah*, receiving of the Torah:<sup>11</sup>

#### Rav Avraham Chayyim Naeh, Ketzot Ha-shulchan 65, Badei Ha-shulchan 15

...A person's day of *matan Torah* is when he becomes bar mitzva and becomes obligated in Torah and *mitzvot*...

A Talmudic passage (often quoted with respect to women's [voluntary mitzva observance](#)) suggests that learning of one's personal obligation in observing *mitzvot* is itself worthy of celebration:

#### Kiddushin 31a

Rav Yosef [who was blind] said: At first, I would have said that were someone to say that the halacha is according to Rabbi Yehuda, who said a blind man is exempt from *mitzvot*, I would make a festive celebration for the sages, for I am not commanded and I perform *mitzvot*. Now that I have heard this [teaching] of Rabbi Chanina, that Rabbi Chanina said, 'Greater is one who is commanded and does [a mitzva] than one who is not commanded and does [a mitzva],' on the contrary, were someone to say to me that the halacha is *not* according to Rabbi Yehuda, I would make a festive celebration for the sages.

Descriptions of a celebration of this type for a boy who completes his thirteenth year

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<sup>11</sup> See also Rav Menachem Mendel Scheersohn, *Yechidut*, 15 Tammuz 5746.

first emerge in medieval Ashkenaz. In the sixteenth century, Maharshal calls this a bar mitzva meal, and defines it as a *se'udat mitzva*, a meal which is itself a mitzva.

#### Yam Shel Shelomo Bava Kamma 7

The bar mitzva meal that the Ashkenazim make, it would seem that there can be no greater mitzva meal, and its name demonstrates this. And they make a celebration, and give praise and thanks to God, that the youth has merited to become bar mitzva, and one who is commanded and performs [*mitzvo!*] is greater, and the father has merited to raise him to this point, to bring him into the full covenant of Torah. There is a clear proof in the end of the first chapter of *Kiddushin* (31a).... [Rav Yosef] wished to make a festive celebration over good news that did not become known to him until now. All the more so that it is fitting to make a festive celebration over reaching the time and occasion.

At the end of this passage, though, Maharshal notes that it is most appropriate to hold a celebratory bar mitzva meal on the very day that a boy turns thirteen. This is because we rely on the *chazaka* that he has reached physical maturity when he reaches his thirteenth birthday. After that day, it is not clear why any given time should be more appropriate than any other for a *se'udat mitzva*. Maharshal suggests that a bar mitzva not conducted at its ideal time can nevertheless still be considered a *seudat mitzva*, by virtue of the bar mitzva's *derasha*, verbal exposition on Torah matters.

The *derasha* transforms the bar mitzva meal held on a later day into a *se'udat mitzva*.

#### Yam Shel Shelomo Bava Kamma 7

...Immediately when he reaches thirteen years and one day, they should make a festive meal, and educate him to [lead] *birkat ha-mazon*, and to [lead] prayer on an occasional basis. And since it was not done at the proper time, and now we also do not know the proper time, why should it be called a mitzva meal....for perhaps the proper time has not yet come. On the strength of relying on the *chazaka*, he should have educated him immediately, and made a festive meal. In any case, it seems that where we educate the youth to expound during the meal about the occasion.

#### **Baruch She-petarani**

Regardless of its timing, the responsibility for organizing a *se'udat bar mitzva* typically falls on the boy's parents, and is considered a father's obligation.<sup>12</sup> A midrash sheds light on how the bar mitzva also marks an important transition for the parents.

#### Bereishit Rabba 63:10

Rabbi Elazar said: a person needs to care for [take responsibility for] his son until [he reaches] thirteen years, from then on he [the father] needs to say: Blessed is He Who exempted me from this one's punishment [*Baruch she-petarani me-onsho shel zeh*].

This midrash can be understood in two main ways. Perhaps bar mitzva marks the end of the time period during which a **father** is potentially punished for not doing more to

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<sup>12</sup> Magen Avraham 225:4

For it is a mitzva upon a person to make a *se'uda* on the day that his son becomes bar mitzva like the day on which he enters the *chuppa*.

prevent his **son's misdeeds**, as the son takes on responsibility for his own mitzva observance.

Alternatively, perhaps bar mitzva marks the end of the time period during which a **son** is potentially punished for his **father's sins**, as the son becomes a fully independent member of the Jewish people.

Magen Avraham presents both explanations:

Magen Avraham 225:5

From this one's punishment: Explanation—that until now, the father was punished when the son would sin, because he did not educate him. But Levush explains it as the opposite, that until now, the son was punished for the iniquity of the father, and see there.

Levush, although he raises the second possibility, suggests that reciting the *beracha* for this reason may not be coherent. Why should one celebrate at a son's reaching bar mitzva when punishment of one's descendants may extend for multiple generations?

Levush OC 225:2

There are those who say that one whose son became bar mitzva should recite the *beracha* "Blessed are You O Lord, Our God, King of the universe, who has released me from this one's punishment," but this is unclear, for if they hold [liability for] the deeds of their fathers in their hands, he [the descendant] is not exempt for a number of generations as it is written [*Devarim* 5:9] "Who visits the sin of the fathers [until the third and fourth generation...]" and it is good to recite it without [mentioning] God's name or kingship.

The question of whether to recite the *beracha* with God's name remains a matter of dispute, especially since the *beracha* appears in a midrash and not the Mishna or Talmud. Rema records both views on how to recite the *beracha*:

Rema Shulchan Aruch OC 225:2

There are those who say, one whose son becomes bar mitzva, recites the *beracha*: "Blessed are You O Lord, Our God, King of the universe, who has released me from this one's punishment," and it is good to recite the *beracha* without [God's] name and kingship.

Either way, the message is clear. The bar mitzva marks a moment of religious individuation, which in turn allows the boy to take full part in communal ritual. Indeed, early Ashkenazi sources relate that this *beracha* was recited when the bar mitzva boy would first read from the Torah, an act debuting his new religious status to the community at large.<sup>13</sup>

Orchot Chayim I, *Hilchot Berachot* 58

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<sup>13</sup> Sefer Maharil (*Minhagim*) *Keri'at Ha-Torah*

Maharil at the time when his son became a bar mitzva and read from the Torah would recite the *beracha* over him: Blessed are You O Lord, Our God, King of the universe, who has released me from the punishment of this one.



It is written in Bereishit Rabba ...One who has a son who reaches thirteen years, the father needs to recite the *beracha*: "Blessed is the One who has released me from this one's punishment." There are those who say it the first time that the son goes up to read from the Torah. The Ga'on Rabbi Yehudai stood up in the synagogue and recited this *beracha* the first time that his son read from the Torah.

## By Mothers

Should a mother recite *Baruch she-petarani* as well?

One could argue that a mother's obligations in education—and even the consequences of her sins—differ from a father's, so that a mother should not recite this *beracha*:

### Peri Megadim OC Eshel Avraham 225:5

With a woman whose son becomes bar mitzva, she is not obligated to educate him...and it is possible that the son is not punished on account of his mother's sin, and this certainly makes sense, as it is written [*Shemot* 34:7] "Who visits the sin of the fathers..."

Both these points are subject to dispute. Many authorities **do** consider a mother to be obligated in *chinuch* (see more [here](#)), and a Talmudic passage notes that children might also be punished if their mother does not fulfill her vows.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, Rav Moshe Feinstein seems to rule differently from Peri Megadim. He suggests that a mother does not recite this *beracha* for a more tangential reason: it is ideally said in front of a [minyan](#) as part of the [Torah service](#), where [women are not called to the Torah](#). If it were said under other circumstances, then she would recite this *beracha*, since it is fundamentally a *beracha* of thanksgiving, in which women are obligated:

### Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC V:14

Behold, fundamentally there is no place nor reason to distinguish between a man and a woman in the obligation of the *berachot* of thanksgiving. See Shulchan Aruch OC 219, in Magen Avraham 1. And since a man is obligated to recite the *beracha*, a woman is certainly also obligated to recite the *beracha*. But there are matters where the sages were stringent regarding the manner in which they are performed, that the one who is obligated should recite the *beracha* specifically in the presence of ten, and on the day of the [Torah] reading, and at the time that they called him up to the Torah. And only if it is impossible that they should call him up to the Torah, he recites the *beracha* on the *bima* immediately after the Torah reading. This is despite the fact that this is not associated with the *beracha* on the Torah. Like the custom with *birkat ha-gomel*, thus with the *beracha* of *Baruch she-petarani me-onsho shel zeh*, that the father of the son recites the *beracha* when they call him [the son] up for the first time, when his son becomes bar mitzva. For this isn't relevant for a woman nowadays, when we do not call a woman up to the Torah.

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<sup>14</sup> Ketubot 72a

..."She makes a vow and does not keep it," for the master said, on account of the sin of [not fulfilling] vows children die....

All of the above views leave room for a mother to recite the *beracha* without mentioning God's name or kingship, as is the practice of many fathers. She could do this in the women's section, when the father recites the *beracha*, or at any other point in the celebration, including the *se'udat mitzva*.

## For Daughters

Should a parent recite *Baruch she-petarani* when a daughter becomes bat mitzva?

Peri Meggadim seeks to explain why fathers do not recite this *beracha* for daughters. Though he concludes otherwise, he floats the possibility that the halacha could depend on which of the two reasons given for reciting it is dominant. If the obligation to educate is dominant, then we might say that a father does not recite it for his daughter, according to the view that a father is not obligated in *chinuch*. If the child's punishment for the parent's sins is dominant, then a daughter, like a son, might suffer for her father's acts.

### Peri Meggadim Eshel Avraham, 225:5

Behold, why should he not recite a *beracha* for a girl aged twelve with two hairs? According to the explanation of Levush that young children are punished on account of the father, there is no difference between males and females. And according to one who says [it is on account of completing the obligation of] *chinuch*, one can say that he [the father] is not obligated to educate his young daughter, see Magen Avraham 343:1. Even according to one who says he is obligated, she doesn't have so many *mitzvot* that he needs to educate her in her youth...

Rav Ovadya Yosef, however, quotes a number of proponents of the halachic view that *chinuch* obligations do indeed apply fully to daughters. (See more [here](#).) In this selection from his responsum, he affirms that the father should recite the *beracha* when the daughter reaches maturity, on account of the *chinuch* obligations for her.

### Yabi'a Omer VI OC 29:3

Regarding the matter of a daughter who has reached the age of twelve years and a day, that according to the explanation of Levush "who has released me from this one's punishment," means that the son would be punished until now for the iniquity of the father; if so, also for the daughter one should recite the *beracha* of "*she-petarani me-onshah shel zo*." ...Even according to [the logic of] Magen Avraham one should recite a *beracha* [of *baruch she-petarani*] also for his daughter who has reached *mitzvot*, and that which is written in the midrash "his son" is not precise, for so is the law for his daughter... So it seems to me....Especially according to what that is written that the fundamental halacha is to recite the *beracha* without God's name or kingship; if so, there is no concern at all in reciting it also for a daughter who has reached *mitzvot*. And this requires no hesitation...

In making this ruling, Rav Ovadya points out that many recite *baruch she-petarani* for boys without mention of God's name or kingship. Given that the *beracha* has not been widely recited for daughters, he suggests being sure to recite for a bat mitzva without God's name or kingship. Rav Ovadya also assumes that the *beracha* for a girl should be recited in the feminine: "*she-petarani me-onshah shel zo*." It could be recited at a time of the parents' choosing on the day their daughter becomes bat mitzva.

## Bat Mitzva

The main rituals that mark a boy's becoming bar mitzva highlight his new halachic status and entry into the ritual community.

In the synagogue, the boy demonstrates his status by being called to the Torah, after which his parents' gratitude is expressed by the *beracha* of *baruch she-petarani*. A special "*mi she-berach*" prayer is typically recited over the Torah for his welfare. It is customary for the boy to read some or all of the Torah and haftara portions, and for members of his family to receive *aliyot*.

At the festive meal, the community joins in celebrating the young man's obligation in *mitzvot*. If he is able, he delivers a *derasha* to express his own commitment to Torah and *mitzvot*, and the *derasha* elevates the meal to a *se'udat mitzva*.

What about bat mitzva? We've already discussed *baruch she-petarani*. Before we look at the other rituals, let's consider a more basic halachic question: Should we celebrate obligation in *mitzvot* for a girl as we do for a boy?

Ben Ish Chai maintains that the fundamental reason to celebrate applies to boys and girls alike. Since a festive bat mitzva meal was not widely practiced in his time (the 19<sup>th</sup> century), he writes that a girl should rejoice and wear Shabbat clothes. He also recommends reciting *she-hechiyyanu*, and that she wear new clothes in order to ensure that this *beracha* may be recited:

### Ben Ish Chai, First Year, Re'eh

Also the daughter on the day that she enters obligation in *mitzvot* even though they are not accustomed to hold a *se'uda* for her, nevertheless she should be joyous on that day and dress in Shabbat clothes, and if she has access to it she should wear a new garment and recite the *beracha* of *she-hechiyyanu*, and intend [its recitation] also over her entry into the yoke of *mitzvot*.

Indeed, Kaf Ha-chayyim (19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> century) recommends that boys and girls alike should recite *she-hechiyyanu* upon becoming *benei mitzva* (facilitated by wearing new clothing, or by eating a new fruit), as well as engage in learning Torah over the course of the day:

### Kaf Ha-chayyim OC 225 13:12

It is good [for the bar mitzva] to wear a new garment or to eat a new fruit on that day and to intend with the *beracha* of *she-hechiyyanu* that he is entering the yoke of *mitzvot*, and also a girl should do this upon entering the thirteenth year, to recite the *beracha* of *she-hechiyyanu* over a new garment or new fruit, even though we don't make a *se'uda* for her. And so wrote Ben Ish Chai Re'eh 17, and if she knows how to learn, she should learn on that day more than on other days and so the son should do thus...

What other observances should a bat mitzva include? As we've seen, synagogue custom for centuries has been to incorporate a boy's bar mitzva celebration into the

existing *keri'at ha-Torah* ritual, often on a Shabbat morning. This framework can't easily be adapted for a bat mitzva within an Orthodox context, though her relatives can still receive *aliyot*, and a *mi-sheberach* can be recited for her. (We'll discuss this further a little later.)

In nineteenth-century Italy, some communities had bat mitzvas recite *she-hechiyanu* in the synagogue after their father's being called to the Torah, while other communities held group celebrations on Shavuot. As early as the 1930s and '40s, there are anecdotal reports of Orthodox bat mitzva celebrations in America outside of regular synagogue services, whether as a group in a special program, or at a Friday night *oneg Shabbat*.<sup>15</sup> There are similar reports at this time period of group celebrations in North Africa.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, a synagogue-centered bat mitzva ceremony evolved in non-Orthodox American synagogues. Dr Norma Baumel Joseph summarizes the general history of this practice:

Dr. Norma Baumel Joseph, "Ritual, Law, and Praxis: An American Response/a to Bat Mitsva Celebrations," *Modern Judaism* 22, no. 3 (October 2002): 236.

Bat Mitsva ceremonies, apparently inaugurated in Germany, France, and Italy in the nineteenth century, have developed in twentieth-century America along denominational lines. Beginning slowly, most notably in 1922 with the Bat Mitsva of the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a ceremonial evolution in the Conservative movement. During the thirties and forties the Reform movement still concentrated on confirmation ceremonies rather than on the controversial Bat Mitsva. The ritual celebration of Bat Mitsva became ensconced within Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations in the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1970s many in the Orthodox movement sought ways to fit a Bat Mitsva into the established order of services.

What of holding a festive meal to celebrate the bat mitzva in an Orthodox context? With little historical precedent, and with a growing trend of non-Orthodox synagogue ceremonies – or, in Israel, of birthday parties often devoid of religious content<sup>17</sup> – halachic authorities have taken different approaches to bat mitzva celebrations over the past decades.

## Prohibited

In a responsum from 1988, Rav Eliezer Waldenberg rules against bat mitzva celebrations. He cites a 1927 responsum on confirmation ceremonies by Rav Aharon Walkin, which raised concerns about *tzeniut* and of violating the prohibition of *u-*

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<sup>15</sup> Zev Eleff and Menachem Butler, "How Bat Mitzvah Became Orthodox," *Torah Musings*, May 26, 2016. Available here: <https://www.torahmusings.com/2016/05/bat-mitzvah-became-orthodox/>

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Yael Levine, "Rosh Chodesh Tevet, Rosh Chodesh Ha-banot," *Kippa*, December 21, 2014. Available here:

<https://www.kippa.co.il/%D7%99%D7%94%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/%d7%a8%d7%97-%d7%98%d7%91%d7%aa-%d7%a8%d7%90%d7%a9-%d7%97%d7%95%d7%93%d7%a9-%d7%94%d7%91%d7%a0%d7%95%d7%aa/>

<sup>17</sup> Chezky Shoham, "Bat Mitzva, the Israeli Version," *Ma'amarei Reishit*, 1 September, 2020. Available here:

<https://heb.hartman.org.il/shoham-bat-mitzvah/>

*vchukoteihem lo teleichu* (Vayikra 18:3; adopting idolatrous ordinances).<sup>18</sup> Rav Waldenberg notes similar *tzeniut* concerns. He also infers from Ben Ish Chai that a *seuda* to celebrate a girl's becoming obligated in *mitzvot* is unnecessary:

Responsa Tzitz Eliezer, 18:33

I will say the truth: that also in my humble opinion I concur with the conclusion of the highest great rabbinic authorities to prohibit [bat mitzva celebrations], whether in their time, and whether in public [or] at home, since in the public celebration for a daughter, one cannot avoid stumbling with appurtenances of illicit sexual conduct in several respects, and [a hint] is enough for the wise. How much more so, since who ever mentioned such a thing, to come and call it a mitzva or to call it a *se'udat mitzva*. I was a youth and have become old, and I never saw within the Haredi camp that they would practice it, or that such an idea would arise on their holy lips, to hold a bat mitzva celebration, for they knew and understood that in any event they could not prevent inappropriate sexual thoughts from a setting like this, regardless of what will be. And I want to emphasize that even the Ben Ish Chai does not write as though it is fitting to establish the custom of making her a *se'uda*, and on the contrary, he writes in his words that they were not accustomed to make her a *seuda*, and this is a form of "go out to see what the people do," and it is almost certain that this is because of making a fence that they not come to stumble with appurtenances of illicit sexual conduct. And his honor does not suggest even with a hint to change this and to establish this custom to make a *se'uda*; rather, he writes that with all of this (even though the custom is not to make a *se'uda*) the daughter "should be joyous on that day and dress in Shabbat clothes, and if she has access to it she should wear a new garment and recite the *beracha* of *she-hechiyyanu*, and intend [its recitation] also over her entry into the yoke of *mitzvot*" as you would see there, and this is certainly desirable and accepted and no one questions it.

## Permissible and Neutral

In a series of responsa from the 1970s, Rav Moshe Feinstein describes a bat mitzva meal as a halachically neutral birthday party. He acknowledges that the reason to rejoice on becoming subject to *mitzvot* is the same for boys and girls, but argues that a *se'udat bat mitzva* is not warranted because of the relative paucity of ritual

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<sup>18</sup> Rav Walkin's responsum sets the stage for halachic objections to celebrating bat mitzva:

Responsa Zekan Aharon 1:6

Regarding your questions on three transgressions...3) Confirmation for girls (the festival of maturity) in the synagogue...In that they want to gather assemblies of men and women, young men and young women, to celebrate the festivity of maturity for girls, aside from all the rationales of immodesty and abhorrence that I explained above...there are also some additional Torah prohibitions in this, since certainly whoever does this intends to resemble non-Jews [lit. idolators] and the wicked ones of Israel, the Reform, and we already were warned about this with seven prohibitions and two positive commandments not to walk in their ordinances [*u-vchukoteihem*]...how much more so to enact a new matter of which we never heard a sound until today, and one must not do thus, to change the customs of our forefathers, even for a matter without a trace of prohibition, how much more so in this matter, whose prohibition is very severe, an appurtenance of idolatry on account of *u-vchukoteihem lo teleichu*, and also an appurtenance of illicit sexual conduct...

Rav Walkin views Jewish confirmation ceremonies, which began among Reform Jews inspired by Christian contemporaries, as an immodest deviation from established custom, which emulate a Christian practice in violation of the Biblical prohibition of "*u-vchukoteihem lo teleichu*", "You shall not follow the idolatrous ordinances." This last objection in particular would be difficult to address if it were established that the bat mitzva was simply a new version of confirmation.

opportunities for a bat mitzva to demonstrate her new status.

Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC II 97

That which his elevated honor raises the difficulty, why there is no mitzva in holding a *se'udat bat mitzva* when a daughter becomes twelve as with a son, for also a daughter now becomes obligated in *mitzvot*....And what is correct in my humble opinion is because a practical distinction is not recognizable for a girl when she becomes a *gedola* more than when she was a minor, and it is not like a boy, where it is quite recognizable that from now on we count him for every matter that requires a minyan of ten and a minyan of three. And for mere knowledge, when it is not recognizable in practice, we don't hold a *se'udat mitzva* of rejoicing, even when fundamentally the same rejoicing really applies.

This last point, that ritual opportunities should determine whether a girl should celebrate, is a new read on the earlier sources that seem to view obligation in *mitzvot* as sufficient grounds for a *se'udat mitzva*. It is more cogent if the celebration is viewed as a communal celebration of the bar mitzva's new communal, ritual role. In an article on Rav Moshe's responsa on bat mitzva, Dr Norma Baumel Joseph provides additional insight into how shifting views of the bar mitzva affected halachic approaches to bat mitzva:

Dr. Norma Baumel Joseph, "Ritual, Law, and Praxis: An American Response/a to Bat Mitsva Celebrations," *Modern Judaism* 22, no. 3 (October 2002): 236.

The recent emphasis on Bar/Bat Mitsva ceremonies is characteristically North American and symbolic of a major shift in the modern practice of Judaism. In the premodern era Jewish celebrations focused on historic and communal events. *Rites de passage* were minimal for the most part. Certainly, they did not focus on the individual in the way that today's life cycle ceremonies do. Bar Mitsva celebrations were festive communal occasions for emphasizing the integration, if not submersion, of the individual into the community. The contemporary counterpart is a celebration of the individual as an individual, focusing on her/his accomplishment and singularity. This shift naturally fits into the cultural context of American individualism. It is a personal experience that is not privatized. It may take place in the community, in the public sphere, but its purpose is the glorification and display of the individual, not the collective. The battle for the Bat Mitsva becomes comprehensible in this changed environment. It is about the religious and communal celebration of women as individuals. Opportunities for personal public ritual participation and support were once unavailable to women and unimportant for both men and women. The changed emphasis in the general Jewish community has resulted in a shift to increase women's involvement and responsibility.

In other words, the public recognition of the bar mitzva was once more focused on the aspect of a boy's religious individuation that allowed for a new communal role, demonstrated by his participation or leadership in public and communal rituals. If women do not demonstrably join such rituals or lead them, as is typical in the Orthodox community, then the bar mitzva is less appealing as a model for women, and bat mitzva makes less sense as a communal celebration.

However, once the meaning of the bar mitzva celebration for the community shifts to directing more focus on the bar mitzva boy as an individual, then the lack of a parallel

ceremony for a bat mitzva is more keenly felt, since women are fully realized religious individuals.

Rav Moshe's view of the bat mitzva as halachically neutral is also informed by his perception that the idea was borrowed from non-Orthodox denominations. He objects to this or any other halachically-neutral celebration taking place in the synagogue, and adds for good measure that he is also no great fan of the development of bar mitzva festivities of his day:

Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC I 104

Regarding the matter of those who wish to practice some observance and rejoicing for daughters when they've become *benot mitzva*, one should not do this in the synagogue under any circumstances, not even at night, for the synagogue is not a place for matters that are optional [but not a mitzva], even when they were built with a condition [that the building may be used for other purposes], and the ceremony of bat mitzva is certainly optional and inconsequential, and there is no place to permit doing this in the synagogue. And how much more so with this, that originates from the Reform and Conservative. And only if the father wants to make some *simcha* in his home he is permitted, but there is no matter or basis at all to consider this a matter of mitzva and a *se'udat mitzva*, for it is only like a mere birthday party. And if I had the strength, I'd also cancel in our lands the observance of the bar mitzva for boys, which as is known doesn't bring any person closer to Torah and *mitzvot* and not even the bar mitzva, even for one moment, and on the contrary in many places leads to violating Shabbat and other prohibitions.

In another responsum, however, Rav Moshe permits festivities in the synagogue social hall if it was built with hosting such events in mind, as long as conduct would remain within the bounds of modesty.

Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC II 30

A feast and rejoicing that they make for a bat mitzva, I have already written in my book OC 104 that it has no connection to a mitzva and it is an optional *se'uda* and rejoicing like a mere birthday party, and one should not do it in the synagogue. But if it was built from the outset to make in it parties that are prohibited [in a synagogue], that it was never made with the sanctity of a synagogue ..., it is permissible to make optional *se'udot* and *semachot* there, for it is only like all of those of a non-religious nature, but they should be held in a kosher manner and without prohibited dancing.

In yet another responsum, Rav Moshe permits a bat mitzva kiddush to be held in the synagogue, even in its sanctuary. He explains that kiddush is a mitzva, and sponsoring a kiddush in honor of various events has been widely accepted:

Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC IV 36

Regarding the matter of celebrating a bat mitzva...to make a kiddush in the synagogue when they have the custom in many synagogues in this country to make for every *simcha* a person has, this *simcha* is no worse than other *semachot* that they make.

## **A Mitzva**

Other authorities take a more positive view of a *se'udat bat mitzva*. Rav Ovadya Yosef, for example, flatly rejects Rav Moshe's argument. To Rav Yosef, the bat mitzva's new status is indeed in itself sufficient reason to hold a *se'udat mitzva*. As opposed to Rav Waldenberg, Rav Yosef also reads Ben Ish Chai as viewing a celebratory meal as correct practice:

Responsa Yabi'a Omer VI OC 29

For it certainly seems that there is a mitzva to hold a *se'uda* and celebration for a bat mitzva...and here, too a girl who becomes obligated in all the *mitzvot* in which a woman is obligated, and becomes one who is commanded and does, it is good to make it a festive celebration, and there is also a mitzva. And so I saw in Ben Ish Chai...for behold even though he wrote that they were not accustomed (in his time) to make her a *se'uda*, nowadays when we make a *se'uda* for a bat mitzva, it is good that they do so. And so it seems from the language of Ben Ish Chai, who attributed this matter simply to custom...and I saw Rav Moshe Feinstein in *Iggerot Moshe*...and with forgiveness of his honor, his words are not clear, for since she entered [obligation in] *mitzvot* and is as an adult who is commanded and does, regarding all the *mitzvot* in which a woman is obligated, certainly there is a mitzva in this, as in the words of Ben Ish Chai.

Rav Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg goes even further in the direction of encouragement, though he echoes Rav Moshe's caveat about keeping the *se'udat bat mitzva* out of the synagogue sanctuary. (In a section of this responsum that we cite and discuss below, he also calls for a rabbi to provide the *derasha* component of the meal.)

First, he refutes the claims that bat mitzva celebrations raise a concern of *u-vchukoteihem*, since there is no intent to resemble idolators here, but rather a sincere attempt to mark an important transition in a girl's life.

Responsa Seridei Eish II 39

Now let's see regarding our matter if it is permissible to celebrate a bat mitzva celebration. And there are those who wish to prohibit on account of *u-vchukoteihem* (See Responsa *Zekan Aharon* 6). And in my humble opinion it depends on this, that if we should say that a confirmation of a non-Jew is for the purpose of idolatry, one should prohibit any sort of [bat mitzva] on account of *u-vchukoteihem* ...but that according to this we should also have prohibited celebration of a bar mitzva, for they hold confirmations for males as well...And also Reform [Jews] from our people don't do this in order to resemble them [Christians], but rather for the sake of a family celebration and their joy that their son has reached maturity. And those of our brethren who have innovated the practice of bat mitzva say that they do this in order to strengthen in the heart of the girl, who has reached [obligation in] *mitzvot*, a feeling of love for Judaism and its *mitzvot*, to arouse in her a feeling of pride in her Jewishness and in her being daughter to a great and sacred people. And it doesn't matter to us that the non-Jews also celebrate a confirmation, whether for sons or for daughters.

Rav Weinberg goes on to reject the concern about introducing new customs, because times have changed in a way that Halacha has already recognized. For the same reasons that the doors of [Torah study have opened](#) wide to women, the bat mitzva is an essential opportunity to inculcate the young woman with the values of our tradition



and draw her closer to Torah and *mitzvot*.

### Responsa Seridei Eish II 39

And there are those who claim against the permissibility of celebrating a bat mitzva, since it is against the custom of earlier generations, that did not practice this custom. But in truth this is not a claim, for in the generations that came before us they didn't need to occupy themselves with *chinuch* of daughters, since everyone of Israel was full of Torah and fear of Heaven, and also the atmosphere in each and every city of Israel was full and saturated with the scent and spirit of Judaism, and the daughters who grew up in a Jewish home breathed in the spirit of Judaism without any effort and practically suckled on Judaism from their mothers' breasts. But now, the generations have changed tremendously. The influence of the street uproots from the heart of every young man or woman any spark of Judaism, and the girls are educated in non-Jewish schools or in secular schools, that don't strive to inculcate in the heart of their students love for the Torah of Israel and for the holy customs of full Judaism, now it is cast upon us to concentrate all our efforts on the education of girls...And the path of straight logic and the obligation of pedagogy practically obligates celebrating also for a girl her reaching obligation in *mitzvot*, and the discrimination between boys and girls regarding celebrating maturity deeply hurts the human feelings of the maturing girl, who in other fields has already merited the rights of emancipation, as it were...And even though I tend to permit celebration of bat mitzva, in any case I agree with the view of Rav Moshe Feinstein in his book *Iggerot Moshe* OC IV 36, that one should not celebrate this celebration in the synagogue, not even at night and even if no men are there, but only in a private home or in a simcha hall adjacent to the synagogue...but they should not forget that also those who lean toward permission for this new custom of celebrating a bat mitzva, their heart beats with anxiety to strengthen the religious education of the daughters of Israel, who in the circumstances of life in this generation especially need religious fortifying and moral encouragement upon reaching the age of *mitzvot*...One should just take care that this custom should truly serve as a strengthening and fortifying of the dominance of the spirit of Torah and *mitzvot* in the heart of the daughters of Israel.

This responsum is particularly striking for its relationship to the question of other denominations. The initial opposition and Rav Moshe's caution were animated by a sense of concern regarding the Reform and Conservative circles that first popularized the bat mitzva. Rav Ovadya Yosef, writing from Israel where these denominations were substantially less popular, did not have to contend with them as a threat to the future of Torah observance.

Rav Weinberg writes from Europe. In contrast to the others, he suggests something new, the idea that celebrating bat mitzva could be an effective educational strategy for addressing the core issues that differentiate Orthodoxy from other denominations and the core threats to religious identity of his day. Here, too, Dr. Baumel Joseph's insight serves us well. Rav Weinberg views the bar and bat mitzva from a more individual lens, and thus is keenly aware of the sense of lack of an individual rite of passage for a young woman and how this might make her feel.

### **How to Celebrate**

Now that we've looked at *baruch she-petarani* and *se'udat bat mitzva*, we can explore whether the *derasha* and ritual leadership aspects of bar mitzva could be realized by a bat mitzva in a halachic framework.

We saw above that the bar mitzva *derasha* was traditionally given by the bar mitzva at the celebratory *seuda*, and even served as part of its justification as a *se'udat mitzva* when not held on the very date of the boy's entering his thirteenth year. We also saw the idea that a bar mitzva is a sort of personal receiving of the Torah, as well as Kaf Ha-Chayyim's suggestion that a bat mitzva who knows how to learn Torah should take care to do so on her twelfth birthday.

Rav Weinberg, who saw great educational potential in a bat mitzva, conditions his support for the *se'udat mitzva* on its including a *derasha*—by the bat mitzva's rabbi:

Responsa Seridei Eish II 39

On condition that the Rabbi give an educational *derasha* before the girl who is coming of age, and caution her to keep the key *mitzvot* from this day onward in matters between her and God (*kashrut*, Shabbat, *taharat ha-mishpacha*), taking care of *chinuch* of children, and the obligation of encouraging and strengthening the husband in learning Torah and keeping *mitzvot*...

Such a *derasha* creates an additional opportunity for learning at the bat mitzva celebration, and encourages the young woman to look ahead to a life of Torah and *mitzvot*, with emphasis on future responsibilities within the family.

In Israel, where birthday-party-style bat mitzvas began to take hold in the twentieth century among the traditional public, Rav Meshulam Roth similarly rules for the religious school system that a bat mitzva *se'uda* should include a *derasha* by a teacher, but he specifies that a female teacher may also present the *derasha*:

Responsa Kol Mevasser II 44

It is possible to mark this event as a day of happiness and rejoicing, within the circle of relatives and friends in her home and in the girls' school in which she learns, and the teacher there (man or woman) can give a sermon related to the matters of the day, to clarify the obligations of a daughter of Israel who has reached the age of *mitzvot*.

Why not the bat mitzva girl herself? Rav Weinberg seems to assume that a woman's relationship to Torah will be realized primarily through her husband and children. For his part, Rav Moshe Feinstein writes that a girl's *derasha* lacks the ability to transform a *se'uda* into a *se'udat mitzva*, because she is not obligated in learning Torah:

Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC II 97

...That which his high honor raised a difficulty why there is no mitzva in a *se'udat bat mitzva* when the daughter becomes twelve years old, as with a son, for the daughter also becomes obligated now in *mitzvot*, and one can further strengthen the difficulty that [it is so] even though the daughter doesn't give a *derasha*, for even if she does give a *derasha*, there is no halachic quality [of the meal], for she is exempt from learning Torah.

The claim that a woman's Torah study cannot make a meal a *se'udat mitzva*, however, is not universally shared. For example, Rav Shlomo Wahrman rules that a woman who

makes a *siyyum* fulfills the mitzva of learning Torah and the celebratory *se'uda* that she holds is considered a *se'udat mitzva*:

Rav Shlomo Wahrman, *She'erit Yosef* 2:4

....When a woman has learned with diligence and persistence and has merited to complete a tractate, she has at least fulfilled the mitzva of learning Torah like one who is not commanded and performs [a mitzva] and receives reward for her learning Torah....Perhaps she is considered one who is commanded and performs [a mitzva] on account of the aspect of knowing the Torah, and it is clear that the joy in Torah in this is very great for the woman and her household, to the point that the entire house is full of light and joy....And since she herself did the entire mitzva, that went on for a long time, who can assess the extent of the joy of her heart...and it is considered a *se'udat mitzva*, so I see it.

In any case, in his responsum permitting celebration of a bat mitzva at a synagogue kiddush, Rav Moshe permits the bat mitzva girl to share some words at the occasion, though he does not indicate anything specific about their content:

Iggerot Moshe OC 4:36

Regarding the matter of the very celebration of a bat mitzva...to make a kiddush in the synagogue....She [the bat mitzva] is permitted also to say some words in honor of her *simcha*.

Thus, Rav Moshe leaves room for a bat mitzva's own words of Torah, or even *derasha*.

Along these lines, Rav Yitzchak Nissim, in an unpublished responsum, calls for the bat mitzva to share words of Torah. Rav Nissim then goes on to suggest some prayers and readings, in addition to *she-hechiyanu*, that she might offer at the occasion.<sup>19</sup>

Rav Yitzchak Nissim, Responsum from manuscript, Tishrei 5724 (1963) Quoted by Dr. Aharon Ahrend, "Celebrating Bat Mitzva in the Rulings of Rav Yitzchak Nissim," Weekly Torah Portion Page, Bar Ilan University 2000

It is good and fitting to make a day of rejoicing for a bat mitzva as we do for a bar mitzva, to invite relatives and friends and acquaintances and to have them join in the *simcha*, on that occasion the bat mitzva can recite a *beracha* of *she-hechiyanu* over a new garment, and if she is learned, it is fitting that she say words regarding the matter of the day, and read the song of Devora and the first two verses of *Tefillat Channa*, and the father of the bat mitzva should say *baruch she-petarani me-onshah shel zot*, and they [attendees] should bless her and say to her "our sister, you shall be to tens of thousands."

Rav Yaakov Ariel permits the bat mitzva to give a *derasha*, but stipulates that it should be only for friends and family, and certainly not in the synagogue:

Rav Yaakov Ariel, "How Should Bat Mitzvah be Celebrated," in *Traditions and Celebrations for the Bat Mitzvah*, Hebrew ed. Sara Friedland Ben Arza (Jerusalem: Matan, 2002), 143.

Regarding the girl's *derasha* – indeed, there is room nowadays for the girl to prepare

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<sup>19</sup> Available here: <https://www2.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/vayshlah/are.html>

(as independently as possible, although with the guidance of an adult) a nice idea, and express it in the presence of her friends and relatives only. *Tzeni'ut* is appropriate for a girl, and it is fitting to educate her for this. There is certainly no room for a girl to give a *derasha* in the synagogue, and how very much more so, not during the *tefilla*.

Nowadays, it is fairly common for bat mitzva celebrations to include words of Torah, often by the bat mitzva herself, though not always. Even today, when a bat mitzva chooses speak, she may opt not to present a full-fledged *derasha*. Rabbanit Oshra Koren describes some ways a bat mitzva might both learn and share Torah in preparation for her bat mitzva:

Rabbanit Oshra Koren, "Responsum," in *Traditions and Celebrations for the Bat Mitzvah*, ed. Ora Wiskind-Elper (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2005), 126.

In my opinion, the process of preparation is more important than the bat mitzvah party. The party should be the culmination of the study preceding it. In discussions held with parents before their daughter's bat mitzvah, I stress that the starting point needs to be the girl. First and foremost, her interests, inclinations, and abilities need to be recognized...It's also important to find the right topic. To a girl drawn to ecology I suggested writing an essay on ecology and Judaism; a girl who was interested in animals wrote a sermon on animal imagery in rabbinical literature...Lately, I find that more and more girls are compiling booklets for their bat mitzvah. The girl's sermon and those of her parents are printed in these booklets, along with the relevant primary sources, and sometimes including songs and Grace after Meals. Verbal-intellectual activities, though, are not appropriate for every girl; some girls do not want to give a sermon.

## Ritual

The most contentious element of bat mitzva is the ritual aspect. A bar mitzva is called to the Torah to demonstrate his new halachic status within the community. Is there a comparable ritual role available to the bat mitzva?

We just saw Rav Nissim's suggestion of some select prayers and Biblical passages for a bat mitzva to recite at her *se'uda*. Some *benot mitzva* choose to recite a prayer, introduced for bar mitzvas and for group bat mitzvas in nineteenth century Italy,<sup>20</sup> while others recite a personal *tefilla*.

In the synagogue, a *mi-sheberach*, like this one from the same milieu, in Florence, may be recited when the bat mitzva's father is called up to the Torah.

Italian Mi-sheberach Prayer for a Bat Mitzva, from Aliza Lavie, *Minhag Nashim* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2005), 71.

May the One Who blessed our matriarchs, Sara Rivka Rachel and Leah, bless the young woman [*na'ara*] \_\_\_\_ daughter of \_\_\_\_ who has reached her maturity. May our Father who is in Heaven, Merciful Father, protect her and guard her soul. May He remove from her any sickness and deliver her from all trouble and harm. May her father and mother rejoice in her and may she find grace and good understanding in

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<sup>20</sup> See Aliza Lavie, *Minhag Nashim*, (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2005), 71.

the eyes of God and people, and may the verse be fulfilled in her: A God-fearing woman, she is praised, give her from the fruit of her hand and may they praise her deeds in the gates. Amen. So may it be Thy will.

Earlier, we saw Rav Moshe's reservations that a bat mitzva's status change is less evident than a bar mitzva's, because of a lack of clearly demonstrable ritual opportunity for her. Ritual leadership opportunities for a bat mitzva would be challenging to arrange in a traditional Orthodox service under any circumstances, but they are further complicated by the opposition of Rav Moshe and Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg to bat mitzva celebration in a synagogue service.

Some synagogues have nevertheless attempted to find ways to involve a bat mitzva in part of the congregational *tefilla*,<sup>21</sup> and communities with an active women's *tefilla* group often have bat mitzvas participate in an all-[women's reading](#) or in leading prayers in the group.

This last type of celebration might seem to most closely mimic a bar mitzva's ritual components, and it can be particularly meaningful to girls who regularly participate in women's *tefilla*. However, it is halachically quite different from the bar mitzva. An all-women's reading is considered group Torah study from a Torah scroll, so that the bat mitzva girl is not discharging any halachic obligation through reading or going up to the Torah. Women's *tefilla* does not include *devarim she-bikdusha*, prayers requiring a [minyan](#), so that a bat mitzva leading prayer in that context is not usually discharging any participant's obligation. (We discuss women's readings [here](#).)

### [Should a bat mitzva be connected to the synagogue?](#)

*In one of his responsa on bat mitzva, Rav Moshe Feinstein both reiterates his objection to holding a bat mitzva in a synagogue sanctuary (as opposed to simcha hall) and makes an exception for a kiddush. This sums up a complicated tension in planning a bat mitzva. On the one hand, for many of us, the synagogue is the center of communal Jewish life and is the place to recognize life events. Thus, the persistence of the bat mitzva kiddush and, in some synagogues, the bat mitzva women's tefilla.*

*On the other hand, a bat mitzva that places a classic Orthodox synagogue service at its center is inherently shadowed by the sense of what the bar mitzva could do that a bat mitzva could not. When we center a bat mitzva outside the context of a synagogue service, we create room for the celebration to move away from paralleling a bar mitzva,*

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<sup>21</sup> United States Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan was a prominent, early example of this type of effort in the seventies:

Lisa Foderaro, "Growing up, Kagan Tested the Boundaries of her Faith," New York Times, May 13, 2010.

Elena Kagan was a star pupil in her Hebrew school on the Upper West Side. So it was not too surprising after she turned 12 that she wanted to mark her coming of age with a bat mitzvah. The only problem was that the rabbi at her Orthodox synagogue, Shlomo Riskin, had never performed one. "Elena Kagan felt very strongly that there should be ritual bat mitzvah in the synagogue, no less important than the ritual bar mitzvah," Rabbi Riskin said, referring to the rite of passage for 13-year-old boys. "This was really the first formal bat mitzvah we had." But while Elena, the brainy, self-assured daughter of a lawyer and a schoolteacher, asked to read from the Torah on a Saturday morning, just as the boys did, it was not to be. Instead, her ceremony took place on a Friday night, May 18, 1973, and she read from the Book of Ruth, which she also analyzed in a speech.

and to develop its own unique identity.

*The relative newness of the bat mitzva celebration creates flexibility, an opportunity to fine-tune each celebration. At its best, the tone and message of the bat mitzva are defined by the bat mitzva girl herself, creating a space in which especially she and her female friends and relatives naturally take the lead in celebrating her personal matan Torah and in welcoming her as a full member of both the larger community and the community of women dedicated to Torah and mitzvot.*

Other bat mitzva girls read [Megillat Esther](#), generally in a women's reading. This act does discharge an obligation for others and demonstrate the young woman's new halachic status. A bat mitzva at other times of year might similarly choose to read from a *megilla*, but this would not ritually express a new ability to discharge others' obligations.

We've heard of celebrations at which the bat mitzva [separates challa](#) at the beginning of her *se'uda*, from dough that will be baked and eaten before it ends, thereby demonstrating her new halachic status as she discharges a ritual obligation. In some cases, a *se'uda* is held for all women, or for less than a minyan of men, to bring the bat mitzva's joining the community of women into the foreground. At such events, the bat mitzva girl may lead a women's [zimmun](#).

A *chessed* project can also reflect a girl's preparation to undertake the *mitzvot* of *chessed* as an adult. And in some communities, countering the trend toward individualism, the bat mitzva is still held in groups.

Perhaps the most compelling path for a bat mitzva is to center her *se'uda* around Torah study and, when possible, for her to make a *siyyum*. In a personal communication, Rav Ezra Bick, Rav at Yeshivat Har Etzion and Halacha Editor-in-Chief of Deracheha draws on the idea of bar and bat mitzva as a personal *matan Torah* to make this case.

#### Rav Ezra Bick, Message to Deracheha 15 June 2022

Becoming bar or bat mitzva is the equivalent, on an individual level, of *kabbalat ha-Torah*, receiving the Torah, of Sinai, which was on a national level. This refers not only to *kabbalat mitzvot*, the acceptance of the obligation to fulfill the commandments, but also to receiving and acquiring the Torah itself, as a gift from God. This is equally true for men and for women (as we see from *birchot ha-Torah*, which are incumbent on men and women, and which Rav Chaim Soloveitchik explains as referring to the relationship of Jews to the Torah itself, concerning which there is no difference between men and women). Hence, becoming a bat mitzva is most properly accompanied by an experience of learning Torah, of showing an accomplishment of acquiring Torah. A *siyyum* is therefore the most appropriate and significant way to show that the bat mitzva is a member of the people of Torah, in the full meaning expressed in the daily *birchot ha-Torah*—experiencing Torah, learning Torah and knowing God, and being chosen to be the people of Torah. A *siyyum* engenders a *se'udat mitzva*, and it is customary to recite the special *kaddish de-rabbanan*.

(See more about *birchot ha-Torah* [here](#). We discuss kaddish at a bat mitzva *siyyum*

here, and plan to present the topic in greater depth in a future article on kaddish.)

This approach was taken by Rabbi Dr. Aharon and Dr. Tova Lichtenstein for their daughters' bat mitzva celebrations. In a recent interview their daughter, Rabbanit Esti Rosenberg, describes her parents' dedication to making her bat mitzva *siyyum* impactful, and the extent to which times have changed in the past forty-something years.<sup>22</sup>

Rabbanit Esti Rosenberg, Interview with Nechama (Libeskind) Rosenzweig, "Torah U-megadelet Nashi," *Nashim*, Sivan 5782, 36-37.

In honor of my bat mitzva, I made a *siyyum* on *Seder Mo'ed*, and they celebrated for me exactly as for my brothers—this is something that in my time was not done, there was not then a religious demand from daughters. My parents chose that I should say a *derasha*, that there should be invitations, a photographer, and catering. This was a meaningful event. The owner of the catering business said to us that he had never cooked for a bat mitzva, only for a bar mitzva. They invited many people, among them I remember also Nechama Leibowitz. Today when girls come here [to Beit Midrash Migdal Oz] for a Bat Mitzva day program, and I ask how they mark it, many tell that they are making a *siyyum* on a tractate or Tanach or *Sefer Ha-chinuch*. The world has changed, and this moves me.

Popular learning projects for a bat mitzva include those Rabbanit Esti mentioned and others: *Chumash* with Rashi; a book or all of *Tanach* (*Tehillim*, one or all five of the *Megillot*); Mishna (especially *Seder Mo'ed* and *Masechet Avot*), or Gemara (especially *Berachot*, *Megilla*, or *Ta'anit*); *Siddur Tefilla* with a commentary; *Sefer Ha-chinuch*; or *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*.

## Final Thoughts

Whatever path is chosen, and notwithstanding the individualism that has become a hallmark of these celebrations, it is important to focus the celebration of bar or bat mitzva as much as possible on the acceptance of obligation in *mitzvot*. Dr. Erica Brown explains:

Dr. Erica Brown, "Not Another Video, Please," *The New York Jewish Week*, Dec 30, 2014.

The story that is important — the narrative that a child joins on this occasion — is the story of the Jewish people. That's the exciting, meaningful story. A bar/bat mitzvah is not a celebration of a child....The bar/bat mitzvah is arguably not a celebration at all. It is a marker of a major transition in the life of a Jewish person: when he or she takes on the adult responsibilities incumbent upon being a member of the Jewish community. These include visiting the sick, giving a tenth of one's income to charity (yes, this includes bar/bat mitzvah checks), participating in collective prayer services, observing Shabbat and holidays, studying texts of Jewish meaning, attuning oneself to the grammar of compassion that is foundational to our faith. The list goes on...[T]hat's what the bar/bat mitzvah is all about. It's not about the child. It's about our Jewish story. If we keep telling kids through videos and speeches how wonderful they are but forget to tell them how wonderful Jewish life

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<sup>22</sup> Available here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1M712RLxYmBO7Hv6plkHhjGn66sfiBmtu/view>



is, then we will have failed them at this transitional time. Our job as Jewish adults is to welcome and inspire a new crop of Jewish adults to take their place in this majestic story. Don't tell them that they are fabulous the way they are but just how fabulous they could be if they took one great meaningful leap into their own Jewish future.

Since any ritual or learning aspects of the bat mitzva are meant to highlight the young woman's new mitzva obligations, they should set the stage for future observance of those *mitzvot*. For example, a bat mitzva's *siyyum* should be only the beginning of a lifelong commitment to serious learning, even if not always at the same level of intensity.

Yardena Cope-Yosef, "Se'udat Mitzva for a Bat Mitzvah," in *Traditions and Celebrations for the Bat Mitzvah*, ed. Ora Wiskind-Elper (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2005), 82.

...[As in the case of the *derasha*, the principal value of the *siyyum* does not lie in the one-time event of the *se'udah* itself. Rather, it is the culmination of a long and meaningful process for the girl, who has taken it upon herself to learn the Torah and to transform it into her own Torah, and has realized her goal. The importance of the ceremony is in its power to motivate and strengthen the girl to continue learning.

So, too, a *chessed* project or commitment to performing acts of *chessed* should continue following the bat mitzva. The frameworks that we create to foster a bat mitzva's fulfillment of *mitzvot* at her celebration should not end there, but rather should grow along with her.<sup>23</sup>

Sarah Esther Crispe, "Living as a Bat Mitzvah." Chabad.org

...What I can't forget is the message I want, I need, my daughter to have. This is her beginning. This is her start. As prepared as she hopefully will be, this is only her first step. Her bat mitzvah is her time to shine. It is her time to be the star. But the next morning is what really counts. When she wakes up as a Jewish woman. When she wakes up as a bat mitzvah. And when she recognizes that all the learning and development will only continue and grow.

In letting go of a certain type of responsibility for their daughters at bat mitzva, parents can encourage daughters to assume that responsibility for themselves on an ongoing basis, with their parents' and community's support. In a piece on bat mitzva, Rabbanit Shulamit ben Shaya lists some of the important discussions for parents of a bat mitzva to initiate with her at this time:

Rabbanit Dr. Shulamit ben Shaya, "Perfect Jew," *Olam Katan, Parashat Shofetim* 5771

A word to parents: Speak with your daughter about this transition. About the question of what is the meaning of the yoke of *mitzvot*. About process, ups and downs in serving God. About effort and striving and developing the ability to be careful even with *mitzvot* that flow less easily for us, about the process of rectification and *teshuva* and also about the understanding that we are not always

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<sup>23</sup> Available here: [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/2157030/jewish/Living-as-a-Bat-Mitzvah.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2157030/jewish/Living-as-a-Bat-Mitzvah.htm)



perfect. Speak with her about Torah as a way of life, share with her your personal processes at this age, and, primarily, be with her in this amazing process of her growing up and building herself as another link in the chain of the Jewish people.

Young women have been joining the living chain of Torah since Sinai. Parents, daughters, and the broader community must work together to maximize the opportunities that a bat mitzva provides to strengthen the chain and to make *mitzvot* central to each Jewish woman's life.

### Further Reading

- Dr. Norma Baumel Joseph, "Ritual, Law, and Praxis: An American Response/a to Bat Mitsva Celebrations," *Modern Judaism* 22, no. 3 (October 2002), 234-260. Available here: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236817564\\_Ritual\\_Law\\_and\\_Praxis\\_An\\_American\\_Responsea\\_to\\_Bat\\_Mitsva\\_Celebrations](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236817564_Ritual_Law_and_Praxis_An_American_Responsea_to_Bat_Mitsva_Celebrations)
- Zev Eleff and Menachem Butler, "How Bat Mitzvah Became Orthodox," *Torah Musings*, May 26, 2016, Available here: <https://www.torahmusings.com/2016/05/bat-mitzvah-became-orthodox/>
- Chezky Shoham, "Bat Mitzva, the Israeli Version," *Ma'amarei Reishit*, 1 September, 2020. Available here: <https://heb.hartman.org.il/shoham-bat-mitzvah/>
- Ora Wiskind-Elper, ed., *Traditions and Celebrations for the Bat Mitzvah*, Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2005.