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“Beyond Bat Mitzvah: Assessing the Unique Needs of Adult Women Learners”

Introduction:

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, used part of his key note sermon at the Union’s 2007 Biennial Convention to address the tension between b’nei mitzvah families and the congregational community during Shabbat Shacharit services. He described a disturbing trend in Reform synagogues where “members now feel that they are entitled to a private, individual bar mitzvah. And this means that what should be public and inclusive has become private and exclusive, with the focus more on the child than on the community.”¹ Although speaking about b’nei mitzvah generally, Yoffie was actually describing children moving into young adulthood. When adults, who primarily consist of women, are called to read from Torah for the first time as part of adult b’nei mitzvah programs, the relationship between the bat mitzvah and congregation is much different than the situation Yoffie described above. The majority of these adults are not motivated to become a bar/bat mitzvah ‘for the party,’ but, rather, because they are “seeking a heightened sense of authenticity and belonging.”² Among adult b’nei mitzvah, community plays an integral role in the process of becoming a bar/bat mitzvah.

¹ Sermon by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie at the San Diego Biennial , December 15, 2007

² Lisa D. Grant, “Adult Bat Mitzvah: An American Rite of Continuity.” *Courtyard* (1999/2000) vol.1: 146.

Despite similarity in ritual, the b'nei mitzvah of adults and b'nei mitzvah of teenagers are different institutions. This is not to say, however, that each cannot learn from the other. Those involved in educating Jewish youth have attempted to address the issue of how to best convey that Jewish education does not end at bar mitzvah. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah does not mean transitioning immediately into adult education programs in one's community. While b'nei mitzvah ceremonies mark the beginning of the path of Jewish adulthood, Jewish educators have recognized that the post b'nei mitzvah population demands unique programming to meet their specific needs as learners. I would like to suggest in this article that similar attention should be given to 'graduates' of adult b'nei mitzvah classes. Just because this population may now feel more connected to their synagogue community and the greater Jewish community does not mean that their unique individual needs as learners should be forgotten.

Although adult b'nei mitzvah classes are generally open to both men and women, the overwhelming majority of participants are women.³ While both adult men and women who have converted to Judaism may want to partake in the ritual of a bar or bat mitzvah because they were not a member of the Jewish community at age twelve or thirteen, women have their own unique reasons why they come to bat mitzvah latter in life. While men's stories should not be discounted from the experience of adult b'nei mitzvah, I will limit my exploration in this article to the groups of women learners.

A long history of women being 'forgotten' in terms of Jewish learning created the need for adult b'nei mitzvah. Traditionally, women were excluded not only from reading Torah in public, but, in many cases, also from the study of Torah and other Jewish texts.

³ Lisa D. Grant and Diane Tickton Schuster "Adult Jewish Learning: Findings from Recent Research," 2007.

While women now play a prominent role in Jewish society, (some even argue that they play a dominant role in the liberal movements), the road to equality for women in Judaism is almost as long as the history of the Jewish people. The first public bat mitzvah ceremony in America did not occur until 1922 when Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan's daughter was called to Torah. It has only been in the last twenty years that bat mitzvah ceremonies in liberal communities that girls having equal responsibility to boys in their bar mitzvah ceremonies have become prevalent.⁴

At around this time, individual adult Jewish women first sought the experience of being called to the Torah as a bat mitzvah. While this ritual was created as a "folk" innovation, it quickly became adopted by main stream congregational Judaism.⁵ In her article "Restorying Jewish Lives Post Bat Mizvah," Lisa D. Grant notes the recent publication of adult bat mitzvah curriculum by both the Conservative and Reform movements as an indication that these ceremonies have become normative.⁶

Stuart Schoenfeld, in his 1992 article, "Interpreting Adult Bat Mitzvah: The Limits and Potential of Feminism in a Congregational Setting," explores the relationship between feminism and the adult bat mitzvah. He explains that while adult bat mitzvah groups in a way challenge the congregational establishment by voicing grievances of past inequality, that the nature of the ritual of b'nei mitzvah, supports the congregational agenda. Adult bat mitzvah is not framed as a challenge to the community, but rather as a

⁴ Grant "Adult Bat Mitzvah" 143.

⁵ Stuart Schoenfeld, "Ritual and Role Transition: Adult Bat Mitzvah as a Successful Rite of Passage," in Jack Wertheimer, (ed.) *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993: 350.

⁶ Lisa D. Grant, "Restorying Jewish Lives Post Adult Bat Mitzvah," *Journal of Jewish Education* 69 (Fall-Winter 2003): 34.

desire of these women to become more involved in community. Schoenfeld concludes that adult bat mitzvah is a cooptation of feminist sentiment. He notes, however, that

“despite cooptation, the bat mitzvahs brought out potential for further change. The women went through experiences which made them more competent, confident participants in Judaism and which encouraged them to think of Jewish issues in feminist terms.”⁷

Just because the women benefit from bat mitzvah in its co-opted state, does not mean that they could not benefit further if their unique needs, in terms of being women, were addressed by congregations.

Erica Brown, in her article “An Intimate Spectator: Jewish Women Reflect on Adult Study” assesses the experience of adult women learners. Although she does not focus exclusively on learners in the context of adult bat mitzvah, her study does address women who have historically been disenfranchised from Jewish learning. Brown found that gender played a significant role in women’s studies of Judaism.

“The majority of respondents, even those who had always felt comfortable studying with males as children, felt that women-only classes provided a safe and comfortable learning environment that had the warmth and interaction that they felt co-educational settings lacked.”⁸

Even when adult b’nei mitzvah classes are open to men, the predominately female nature of the class works to create the environment described by Brown.

Adult b’nei mitzvah classes have succeeded in giving women who had previously been disenfranchised from Jewish learning a unique and appropriate space to grow Jewishly. Recent research shows that these women “develop a strong commitment to ongoing Jewish learning and become more comfortable and connected to ritual and their

⁷ Stuart Schoenfeld, “Interpreting Adult Bat Mitzvah: The Limits and Potential of Feminism in a Congregational Setting,” *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 3 (1992): 217.

⁸ Erica S. Brown, “An Intimate Spectator”: Jewish Women Reflect on Adult Study,” *Religious Education* 98,1 (2003): 76.

synagogues.”⁹ But, perhaps these women could benefit even more if their bat mitzvah did not mean complete integration in the larger adult Jewish learning community.

Just because adult bat mitzvah is a success does not mean that Jewish educators should stop seeking to engage the graduates of these programs. Grant has started this process. She concludes her article “Restorying Jewish Lives Post Adult Bat Mitzvah,” with recommendations for adult Jewish educators when dealing with graduates of bat mitzvah classes. Although Grant’s efforts are commendable, I believe that the problem of addressing these learners goes beyond individual educators to an institutional and congregational level.

Both Grant and Schoenfeld speak of a desire on the part of graduates to continue studying with members of their adult bat mitzvah groups. This highlights these women’s desire to continue studying in an intimate, female setting. From anecdotal evidence, I have found that communities have not supported the endeavors of these women. While congregations do not prohibit these groups from meeting, they do inhibit their success by not providing financial resources.

An irony now faces this population of adult learners. While women have historically been the most disenfranchised of Jewish learners, women are now, statistically, the most involved in Jewish learning. I am not advocating turning our attention away from the groups who are currently on the fringes of Jewish society, but I do feel that attention needs to be paid to this unique group of Jewish learners, who, like every Jew, deserve the best of Jewish education. B’nei mitzvah marks the integration of an individual into the larger Jewish community. The attainment of bat mitzvah does not

⁹ Grant and Schuster “Adult Jewish Learning.”

rescue communities of the responsibility to meet the individual needs of learners, child and adult alike.

I believe that congregations need to support and encourage the continuation of banot mitzvah groups after the ritual of bat mizvah has occurred. The success of these women's learning appears to be closely linked to the unique experience of studying with other women in an intimate setting. The continuation of these groups will help to facilitate these women's continued Jewish learning. Congregations should encourage these groups by providing educational support and financial assistance. On a national level, funding should not only be allocated to engage new Jewish learners, but should also go to support those, like graduates of banot mizvah classes, who seek to continue their Jewish education.