

The Jewish Backpack
A Bar Mitzvah Odyssey through the Jewish World
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Why is a Bar/Bat-Mitzvah Such a Big Deal?

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A colleague at Bar Ilan celebrated receiving tenure with a bat-mitzva ceremony, praying for the first time in her life, including a text traditionally recited by bat-mitzva girls in Torino and Milan. What is a bar/bat-mitzva? Why was there opposition to these ceremonies for girls? Why are bar/bat-mitzvas so popular today among secular Israeli Jews? We'll look at this new/old ceremony and texts that have accompanied it over the generations.

1. Age at which the commandments become obligatory

“At the age of twelve years and one day, (a girl’s) vows are binding...
At the age of thirteen years and one day, (a boy’s) vows are binding” (Nidda 45b)

“Young girls are not to be afflicted (i.e., made to fast) on Yom Kippur,
But they are to be educated a year or two before (they become obligated), in order that they will be accustomed to the commandments.

... At the age of eight or nine, he is taught to fast for some hours;

At the age of ten or eleven he should complete the fast – according to rabbinical decree.

At the age of twelve, a girl should complete the fast – according to biblical law.

... At the age of thirteen, a boy should complete the fast – according to biblical law.”
(Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 82a)

2. Girls:

“At the age of twelve years and one day, her vows are binding” (Mishna, Nidda, chapter 5, mishna 4).

Generations of Jewish women have occupied themselves with the transmission and inculcation of the commandments among girls. However, the custom of celebrating the occasion of a girl reaching the age of bat-mitzva (literally, “one who is commanded”) originated in Italy, in the mid-19th century.

According to Binyamin ha-Shani, who visited North Africa around this time, it was customary in Algeria to hold a celebration for a bat-mitzva, but not so in Morocco. In Egypt (1907), Rabbi Eliyahu Bekhor Hazan, the spiritual leader of the community in Alexandria, would hold a celebration for bat-mitzva girls in the “Eliyahu ha-Navi” synagogue, “and he himself would teach the girls lessons in religion and Jewish history”.

Over the course of the years, Ashkenazic and Sefardic rabbis alike came to address the issue of the bat-mitzva celebration.

The “Ben Ish Hai” (Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1834-1901) wrote, a century ago, that “likewise a girl, on the day when she becomes obligated with regard to the commandments – although it has not been customary to hold a festive meal for her... and if she is able to, she should wear a new garment and recite the “shehehiyanu” blessing, intending it (for the new garment and) also for her entry into the obligation of the commandments.”

Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim suggested that it was proper that the girl should pray in the synagogue, and deliver a speech on a subject pertinent to the occasion – for example, Deborah’s song, or Hanna’s prayer. The girl’s father should recite the blessing, “Blessed... Who has exempted me...”, and the participants should offer the celebrant the blessing, “Our sister – may you become thousands of myriads” (Gen. 24:60). Rabbi Ovadia Yosef also endorses holding this ceremony.

Following the Second World War, sensitive to the spirit of the times and the abject state of the Jewish people, Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg (known as the “Seridei Eish”, after his book; one of the greatest of the Lithuanian rabbis), wrote: “Now we must concentrate all of our energies on the education of the girls... and common sense and the pedagogic principle make it almost obligatory to celebrate for a girl, too, her reaching the obligation of the commandments. This discrimination which is practiced between boys and girls, with regard to celebrating their maturity, severely offends the human feelings of the adolescent girl...”.

3. Boys:

The bar-mitzva ceremony is not obligatory: it is not commanded by the Torah, nor by the Oral Law. Even the most important book of halakha (Jewish law) – the Shulhan Arukh, authored by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the 16th century – makes no mention of it.

The most ancient source that makes reference to the age where the commandments become obligatory, is the Mishna (Avot, chapter 5, mishna 21), which teaches: “At the age of thirteen - (he attains) the commandments...”.

4. **Donning tefillin in the Debrecen ghetto (June, 1944) – Moshe Porat**

“I awaken: someone has touched my shoulder and shaken me gently. Now I see my uncle bending over me. He whispers to me in a soft but determined voice: “Moisheleh, you know that today is your bar-mitzva day?... Are you ready to put on tefillin today and to pray?...”

“I’m ready!” I whispered clearly to my uncle.

I took the tefillin out of the rucksack. These were the tefillin that my father had purchased on his last holiday, before the Germans invaded the city and closed us into the ghetto, from which we had been thrown out two days earlier. They were new tefillin; tefillin for a boy who had reached the age of the commandments. In the preceding weeks, in the cramped and crowded ghetto where we had been staying, I had studied the special laws pertaining to tefillin – what to do with them, how to don them, kiss them, remove them. I had practiced winding the tefillin straps around my exposed arm and around the fingers of my left hand. And although I could have started putting on tefillin during the weeks before I became bar-mitzva, as most boys

do, I had refrained from doing so, for I wanted to wear the tefillin for the first time with my father at my side. But father had been taken from us, and now the day had come when I was obligated in the commandments, and I could no longer postpone donning the tefillin.

However, there was a problem: upon our arrival in the Debrecen ghetto, the camp commander had announced various prohibitions, including the possession of ritual objects, religious dress, and prayer practices. This included Torah scrolls and religious books, *tallitot* (prayer shawls), and tefillin. An accompanying “punishment” had been stipulated.

I placed the tefillin bag inside my shirt, and slipped my prayerbook inside, too. With my uncle holding my hand, we made our way among the masses of our Jewish brethren laying all about. We progressed towards our destination – the brick-burning oven. We went down into the dark cellar, and in an alcove illuminated slightly by a small window, we came to a halt. With great reverence I took out the tefillin for my arm, removed the protective box, placed my arm inside the loop, and recited the blessing- “Blessed are You... Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to don tefillin” – in a whisper, but enunciating clearly. Dear Peter Zissman answered me with a silent “Amen”, like those who had sanctified God’s Name during other times of persecution. My excitement gradually subsided; I wound seven times around my arm. Then, the head tefillin and the blessing, “concerning the commandment of tefillin”, and again, a sweet, wonderful “Amen”, and windings around my finger: “And I shall betroth you unto Me forever, and I shall betroth you unto Me in righteousness, in justice, in kindness and in compassion, and I shall betroth you unto Me in faith.”

...

My mother was already waiting for us... From a packet in the rucksack she took out a handful of cooked, dried chickpeas – “arbes” – and served it to all of the family members who had gathered around us. What a bar-mitzva celebration...

5. Prayer of a Boy on the Day He Becomes Bar-Mitzva

“Master of the universe – I stand before You with great joy that You have kept me alive and sustained me and brought me to this time. How auspicious this day is for me, as I become bar-mitzva. From now onwards, all of Your commandments are incumbent upon me. For this my heart rejoices and my esteem is exalted. For this, too, I rejoice: we have been taught by Your servants, the sages of Israel, that when a Jewish man reaches the eve of his fourteenth year, an upright spirit is renewed within him, and a positive inclination comes to aid him and to benefit him to perform the will of our Father in heaven. For all this, Lord our God, we give thanks to You and praise Your name. May the Name of the Lord be blessed and exalted beyond all blessing and praise.....

I pray You, “I am Who I am”: be my aid amongst all of Israel, Your people. Assist me, God of our salvation, for the sake of the glory of Your Name. Help us to strengthen ourselves in Torah, and in fear of You, and to perform Your service continually, and to fulfill Your will according to Your will, for all of our lives. Let us not sin against you, nor against others. Our King, grant us good counsel from before You, that we may be whole in our traits and our thoughts and in every manner of wholeness, and let no mishap arise from our actions, nor anything that is not proper. May we find grace and good understanding in the eyes of God and man.

May we merit to complete the perfection of our life-force, spirit and soul in this incarnation, that we may not be put to shame; Amen, so may it be His will.

Our Father in heaven – You know the inclination of man’s heart, which is evil from his youth. It is fire, and we are flesh and blood. I pray You – behold our affliction, and remember that we are dust. See how our strength is gone, and there is none shut up or left, and there is no savior but You; we have no king, aid or support but You. Help us for the sake of the glory of Your Name, and cause us to walk in Your statutes and to observe Your ways. May we perform Your will as our will all the days of our lives. And may we merit to live and inherit goodness and blessing for the life of the World to Come, in order that my soul may sing to You and not be silent; Lord my God – forever I shall give thanks to You. And from Your blessing may the household of my father, my shepherd, be blessed. Lengthen my days in goodness and my years in pleasantness, and may I not toil for nothing. May my father rejoice in his offspring and may my mother be glad for the fruit of her womb, when they see that I am whole in my traits and my thoughts and in every manner of wholeness.

And as You have kept me alive and brought me to this time, so may You give me life and sustain me and bring me to the marriage canopy and to good deeds, and do not forsake me until old age and the end of my life. Answer me, O Lord, answer me; turn to me and be gracious towards me; grant Your strength to Your servant and save the son of your maidservant. Treat Your servant in accordance with Your kindness, and teach Me Your statutes. You are good and beneficent; teach me Your statutes. Guide me in Your truth and teach me that You are the God of my salvation. I long for You all the day. Open my eyes, that I may observe wonders from Your Torah. Act for the sake of Your great mercy and for the sake of our holy forefathers – Abraham, Isaac and Israel, Your servants, and for the sake of all of the righteous and pious ones, may their memory protect us, Amen.

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favor before You, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen; so may it be His will.

(Melitz Tov)