

בת המצווה בהלכה

מקורות עם לימוד מודרך

**Celebrating a Bat Mitzva:
What does Halakha Say?
Sources & Guided Study**



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... Those women whose hearts prompt them to draw close to God's work by choosing that which is good – it is they who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord and dwell in His holy place, for they are exemplary women. And it falls upon the Sages of their generation to glorify and adorn them, to strengthen their hands and fortify their arms... Go and succeed, Heaven will help you." (Rabbi Shmuel ben Rabbi Elchanan Ya'akov Harkevalti, *Responsa Ma'ayan Ganim* (Venice 1553))

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Goals of this Pamphlet

Though only an innovation of recent generations, bat mitzva celebrations have developed into an important social and educational rite of passage for young Jewish girls reaching the age of twelve. We shall present the views of six important halakhic authorities regarding the issue. We shall try to clarify the conflicting opinions in light of the personal history, period, and general world outlook of each authority. We shall summarize and compare the different approaches, tracing their development in the halakhic literature.

We offer here a guided study of the original sources. It is our hope that as they prepare to assume obligation in Torah and *mitzvot*, young Jewish girls will confront the halakhic issues surrounding bat mitzva celebrations, and strengthen thereby their Jewish identities.

Introduction

In recent generations, bat mitzva celebrations have developed into an important social and educational rite of passage. It is a phenomenon that has been discussed by the leading halakhic authorities of the modern period and has given rise to heated debate. There is no mention of celebrating a girl's bat mitzva in any of the earlier Jewish sources. It should be noted, however, that there is also no explicit mention of celebrating a boy's bar mitzva in the talmudic texts.

We present here the full Hebrew text of a number of responsa that deal with the issue of bat mitzva celebrations,¹ as well as excerpts from these responsa in English translation. We introduce each responsum with background information on the author and his period ("Life and Period"). We offer short comments and explanations to each responsum in order to deepen the reader's understanding and appreciation of the text and of the halakhic approach characteristic of its author ("The Responsum – Summary and Comments"). We conclude the discussion of each responsum by presenting its most salient features ("Distinctive Points in the Responsum"). Reading halakhic responsa is no easy task, and so we preface each responsum with a set of guiding questions. The texts of the responsa themselves are marked by a special border throughout the booklet.

In the last chapter, we summarize all the opinions and compare the various approaches. We hope to demonstrate how the halakhic discussion of bat mitzva celebrations developed in a continuous and logical fashion and against the background of the social changes that have occurred in the modern period.

It is important for the bat mitzva girl to deal with the halakhic issues surrounding bat mitzva celebrations and become familiar with the various positions, which reflect distinct social and educational approaches. It is not our intention to issue halakhic rulings concerning these complex matters. We merely wish to present and explain the various positions in their proper context, and to emphasize the educational significance of a young Jewish girl celebrating her assumption of

¹ Obviously, we could have widened the discussion to include other authorities as well. Our objective, however, was to focus on the main rulings which reflect the development of the entire issue. References to additional responsa may be found in the notes.

religious obligations. The study of these sources, especially the recent halakhic responsa, allows for an analysis of the development of the issue in recent generations.² It can teach the bat mitzva girl, who is now accepting the yoke of Torah and *mitzvot*, important principles connected to her Jewish identity.

This study regarding the halakhic aspects of bat mitzva celebrations was first published in 1999 in a pamphlet, *Diyyukei Torah (Sefer Shemot)*, put out in honor of the bat mitzva of our daughter Oriya, pp. 79-107. The material later *appeared* on the website www.daat.co.il. The analysis presented here has recently been discussed in two articles dealing with bat mitzva.³

In this version, the material has been arranged to allow for a guided study of the sources with preparatory and summarizing questions.⁴ We have added pictures and an English translation of selected excerpts, in order to make it easier for the reader to derive the maximum educational benefit, especially those young girls preparing for their bat mitzva.

I would like to thank Rav Yosef Tzvi Rimon (Alon Shevut, Israel) for his comments; David Strauss (Efrat, Israel) for the English translation, as well as my wife Nadine and children Yishai, Oriya and Lea for their enlightening comments.

Comments and suggestions for improvement are most welcome.

Good luck.

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² Haym Soloveitchik, *Ha-Shut kimakor histori*.

³ See Benny Lau, “*Kehila me’atzevet et chagigat bat ha-mitzva*,” in Sara Friedland Ben Arza (ed.), *Bat mitzva – kovetz ma’amarim* (Matan, 2002), pp. 69-83; Avraham Reiner, “*Ha-Yachas letiksei bat mitzva – iyyun mashve bipeskika modernit*,” *Netuim* 10 (Elul, 2003), pp. 55-78.

I. The sources for celebrating Bar Mitzva in the Talmud and later Halakhic Literature

Goals of this Chapter

There is no explicit mention in the talmudic sources of a ceremony marking a boy's bar mitzva. In later periods, however, halakhic authorities found in those texts indirect allusions to bar mitzva celebrations.

- Study the following sources and explain what may be derived from each one.
- Why didn't the Rabbis of the Talmud establish a celebration marking a bar or bat mitzva?

There is no explicit talmudic source mandating a celebration on the day a boy or girl reaches bar or bat mitzva. Nowhere is the day described as a day of joy requiring a "*se'udat mitzva*," a meal celebrating a mitzva. Various sources, however, imply – even if only by allusion – that the day enjoys great significance. We shall cite the sources and briefly note points worthy of discussion.

By way of homiletical introduction, let us consider the verse Exodus 24:5 which notes the special role played by the young men of Israel when the Torah was given at Sinai: "And he [Moses] sent the young men of the children of Israel who offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord." Ramban (ad loc.) comments: "In line with the plain meaning of Scripture, 'the young men of the children of Israel' were the youth of Israel who had not tasted of sin, and had never come near a woman, for they were the most select and holy of the people, in a similar manner to that which the Rabbis have said (Berakhot 43b): 'The young men of Israel who have not tasted of sin are destined to give forth a fragrance like the Lebanon, etc.'" The Torah notes how important it was to encourage the active participation of the young men of Israel in the making of the covenant with God at Sinai. The young men of Israel were afforded an opportunity to join with "the seventy elders of Israel" (verses 1, 9, 14) in the religious experience of assuming

⁴ Much source material is found in the aforementioned work of Sara Friedland Ben Arza (above, note 3).

obligation for the *mitzvot* and entering into a covenant with God following the revelation of the Torah at Sinai.⁵

The Mishnah in tractate *Avot 5:21* mentions the various milestones that a person passes during the course of his life, among which we find: “At thirteen for the *mitzvot*.” But no mention is made there of a celebration or *se’udat mitzva* to be observed on that day.⁶ The Mishnah in tractate *Nidda 5:6* emphasizes the personal responsibility of a boy or a girl who has reached bar or bat mitzva to fulfill the oath or vow that he or she has taken. The Mishnah in tractate *Yoma 8:4* discusses the obligation to train a child to observe the *mitzvot* a year prior to his actual obligation to observe them by Torah law.⁷ The Mishnaic sources imply that at the age of thirteen in the case of a boy and at the age of twelve in the case of a girl, a Jewish child achieves religious and legal maturity, which impacts upon various areas of his or her life. But there is no indication that the day of transition is regarded as a special occasion or a day of celebration.

Tractate *Soferim 18:7* is the earliest source to mention a particular rite marking a child’s assumption of religious obligation. The custom is attributed to the people of Jerusalem. When the young boys and girls first begin to observe the *mitzvot*, they are brought before the elders of Jerusalem who encourage and strengthen them with words of blessing, that the child “should merit Torah and good deeds.”⁸ The formulation, “each and every elder,” emphasizes the personal and individualized blessing given by each elder.⁹ This is the earliest description of a “bar

⁵ See the source cited below from tractate *Soferim*, which emphasizes the blessing of “each and every elder.”

⁶ See Yitzchak Gilat, “*Ben shelosh esreh lemitzvot*,” in his book, *Perakim behishtalshelut ha-halakha* (Ramat Gan, Bar Ilan University Press, 1992), pp. 17-31.

⁷ See *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, s.v. *chinukh*, vol. XVII, pp. 161-200.

⁸ Regarding the fortification that is specifically needed for Torah and good deeds, see *Berakhot* 32b: “The Rabbis taught in a Baraita: Four [activities] require strengthening, and they are: Torah study, good deeds, prayer, and a livelihood. From where is this derived with regard to Torah and good deeds? As it is stated: ‘Only be very strong and courageous to observe to do in accordance with the entire Torah’ (Josh. 1:7). Be strong in Torah and be courageous in good deeds.”

⁹ See for example: “‘And lay themselves down in their dens’ (Psalms 104:22) – there is not one righteous person [אין לך כל צדיק וצדיק] who does not have a dwelling place befitting his honor” (*Bava Metzi’a* 83b); “Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: Each and every righteous person [כל צדיק]

mitzva ceremony” in the sources; emphasis is given to the educational message and experience implicit in the blessing given to the bar mitzva boy by the Jerusalem elders.¹⁰

Midrash Bereshit Rabbah emphasizes the educational significance of reaching the age of thirteen, the age at which the bar mitzva boy embarks on the path of life which he chooses for himself. A father must care for his son “until the age of thirteen”; the educational influence creates a strong bond between them. On the day that the son reaches maturity, the father recites the blessing, “Blessed are You who has released me from the punishment of this one,” for the son has reached religious independence.¹¹ There is extensive discussion among the halakhic authorities whether this blessing should or should not be recited; it was not accepted in all Jewish communities.¹² There are separate discussions whether the same blessing should be recited for a daughter who has reached bat mitzva.¹³

According to the Zohar, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai hosted a *se’udat mitzva* on the day his son, Rabbi Elazar, reached bar mitzva.¹⁴ Based on this, contemporary authorities have ruled that the *tachanun* prayer is not recited on the day of a boy’s bar mitzva.¹⁵

קוּדִיָּק] has a world of his own. What is the reason? ‘Because the man goes to his eternal home’ (Ecclesiastes 12:5).” (*Bereshit Rabbah*, 96, s.v. *vayikrevu yemei yisrael*.)

¹⁰ In Isaiah 24:23, the elders of Jerusalem symbolize glory: “When the Lord of hosts shall reign in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders will be His glory.”

¹¹ For the source and meaning of this blessing, see Yitzchak Gilat, “*Barukh shepetarani mei’onesho shel zeh*,” *Sinai* 118 (1996), pp. 176-186.

¹² *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayyim* 225:2, and commentaries ad loc.; *Responsa Har Tzevi, Orach Chayyim* I, no. 114; *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer*, VII, no. 23 [4].

¹³ *Responsa Yabi’a Omer*, VI, *Orach Chayyim*, no. 29[3]; *Responsa Yabi’a Omer*, VI, *Yoreh De’ah*, no. 12[1]; *Responsa Har Tzevi, Orach Chayyim*, no. 114; see summary of opinions in *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, s.v. *bar mitzva*, vol. IV, pp. 165-168; Elyakim Ellinson, *Ha-Isha v’ha-mitzvot* (Jerusalem, World Zionist Organization, 1979), pp. 171-180. And most recently, Erica S. Brown, “The Bat Mitzvah in Jewish Law,” in M. Halpren and Ch. Safrai (eds.), “Jewish Legal Writings by Women” (Jerusalem, Urim Publications, 1998), pp. 232-258.

¹⁴ See also *Zohar Chadash* I, (Torah), Bereshit 18b.

¹⁵ See *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer*, XI, no. 17; *Responsa Yabi’a Omer*, I, *Orach Chayyim* 27[8]; IV, *Orach Chayyim* 14, s.v., *ubar min*; See also Ta-Shema (below, note 16).

The custom of celebrating a *se'udat mitzva* on the day that a bar mitzva boy assumes religious obligations is supported by a talmudic passage in Bava Kama 87a. Rav Yosef was blind, and he first maintained that his condition exempts him from obligation in *mitzvot*. When Rav Yosef was informed that even a blind person is obligated to fulfill all of the *mitzvot*, he wanted to celebrate a festival day for the Sages for the very fact that he is obligated to observe the Torah's *mitzvot*. Maharshal (Rabbi Shelomo Luria, 1510-1573, Lublin) argued that this passage supports the Ashkenazic custom of celebrating a *se'udat mitzva* for a bar mitzva.¹⁶

The talmudic sources for bar mitzva and bat mitzva celebrations are very meager. Among Ashkenazic Jews, the custom of celebrating a boy's bar mitzva was accepted already in the sixteenth century. In Christian society, it became the established practice to conduct a "confirmation" ceremony for children who completed their course of religious studies. The ceremony marks the child's decision to join the Christian faith, and the rite bestows upon him full membership in the Church.¹⁷ A bar mitzva boy's assumption of obligation in *mitzvot* does not have the same significance as Christian confirmation, for every Jew has already been obligated in Torah and *mitzvot* from the day of the revelation at Sinai. When a boy reaches bar mitzva, that longstanding obligation merely receives practical expression.¹⁸

In recent generations, certain sectors of the Jewish community have tried to introduce a parallel ceremony to mark a girl's bat mitzva. Several responsa discuss

¹⁶ See Rabbi Avigdor of Vienna, *Perushim u-pesakim al ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Avigdor ha-Tzarfati* (Jerusalem, 1997, p. 4): "To make a party for his son on the day he turns thirteen"; and I. Ta-Shema, "*Tekes ha-chanikha be-yisra'el, mekorotav, toldotav, semalav ve-darkhei hitpatchuto*," *Tarbitz* (1991), p. 594; regarding *se'udat mitzva*, see also *Responsa Chavat Ya'ir*, no. 70.

¹⁷ I.e., confirmation (= strengthening) the Christian faith. Following Acts of the Apostles 8:14-18, joining the faith requires laying of the hands upon the head of the initiate, an act performed by a priest until the sixteenth century. Beginning in the eighteenth century, a two-year course of study developed in Protestant circles, leading to the confirmation ceremony in which the children would festively announce their joining the Christian faith.

¹⁸ This factor is discussed by Rabbi Ya'akov Ettlinger, in response to the argument put forward by Rabbi Avraham Zutra. See text to note 26.

the halakhic status of bat mitzva celebrations,¹⁹ reflecting the different approaches to the issue as well as the changes that have occurred in Jewish society, as we shall see below.

I. The Sources for celebrating a Bar Mitzva in the Talmud and later Halakhic Literature

Exodus 24:5: “And he [Moses] sent the young men of the children of Israel who offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord.”

Avot 5:21: “He used to say: At five years [the age is reached] for [the study of] Scriptures, at ten for [the study of] the Mishnah, **at thirteen for the *mitzvot***, at fifteen for [the study of] Talmud, at eighteen for marriage, at twenty for the pursuit of the aim [in life], at thirty for strength, at forty for insight, at fifty for counsel; at sixty man attains old age, at seventy, the hoary head; at eighty, extreme old age, at ninety, decline, and at one hundred he is as if he were already dead and gone and departed from this world.”

Nidda 5:6: “A girl, eleven years and one day old – her vows are examined; **a girl, twelve years and one day old** – her vows are effective; and they examine throughout the twelfth. A boy, twelve years and one day old – his vows are examined; a boy, thirteen years and one day old – his vows are effective; and they examine throughout the thirteenth. Before this time, even if they say, ‘We know in whose name we have vowed, to whose name we have consecrated,’ their vow is no vow, and their consecration is no consecration. After this time, even if they say, ‘We do not know in whose name we have vowed, to whose name we have consecrated,’ their vow is a vow, and their consecration is a consecration.”

Yoma 8:4: “One does not cause children to fast on Yom Kippur, but one trains them one or two years before, in order that they will become accustomed to the commandments.”

Tractate Soferim 18:7: “And there was a good custom in Jerusalem to train their minor sons and daughters on a fast day; an eleven year old until noon, a twelve year old to complete the fast. Afterwards he would carry him and draw him near each and every elder so that he might bless and strengthen him and pray on his behalf that he should merit Torah and good deeds. Whoever had someone greater than himself in that town would rise from his place and go to him, and prostrate himself before him so that he might pray on his behalf. This teaches you that they were becoming, their deeds were becoming, and their hearts were directed to Heaven. They would not leave their small children, but rather they would take them to the synagogues in order to train them in *mitzvot*.”

¹⁹ See Elyakim Ellinson and Erica S. Brown, cited in note 9.

Bereshit Rabba 83, s.v. vayiqdalu ha-ne'arim.²⁰ “‘And the boys grew’ (Genesis 25:27). Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Levi: They were like a myrtle and a wild rose-bush growing side by side; when they attained to maturity, one yielded its fragrance and the other its thorns. So for thirteen years both went to school and came home from school. After this age, one went to the house of study and the other to idolatrous shrines. Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon said: A man is responsible for his son until the age of thirteen; thereafter he must say, ‘Blessed is He who has freed me from the responsibility of this boy.’”

Bava Kama 87a (and the parallel passage in *Kiddushin* 31a): “Rav Yosef said: At first I used to say that if someone told me that the halakha accords with [the view of] Rabbi Yehuda, who said that a blind person is exempt from the *mitzvot*, I would make a holiday for the Rabbis. What is the reason? Because I [being blind] would not be commanded [to perform the *mitzvot*] and yet I do perform *mitzvot*. But now that you heard this [dictum of] Rabbi Hanina, for Rabbi Hanina said: One who is commanded and performs is greater than one who is not commanded and performs – if someone tells me that the halakha does not accord with [the view of] Rabbi Yehuda, I would make a holiday for the Rabbis. What is the reason? Because when I am commanded, I have more reward.”

Zohar Chadash I (Torah) Bereshit 27a: “[‘Go out and look, daughters of Zion, at the crown his mother crowned him on the day of his marriage and on the day of the joy of his heart’ (Song of Songs 3:11).] What is “his marriage”? The day he becomes eligible to carry out the commandments of the Torah, a day of joy for the righteous. When does he become eligible? Rabbi Yitzchak said: From thirteen years upwards. On that day the righteous must celebrate and rejoice in their hearts just as on the day one goes under the marriage canopy. The merit of this festive celebration stirs the Holy One, who calls before them in joy: [‘Go out and look, daughters of Zion, at the crown his mother crowned him on the day of his marriage and on the day of the joy of his heart.’]”

Yam Shel Shelomo (87a, no. 37): “As for the bar mitzva banquet celebrated by the Ashkenazim, it would appear that there is no *se’udat mitzva* greater than this. This is proven by its name. A celebration is observed and praise and thanksgiving are given to God, that the boy merited to reach bar mitzva, for greater is he who is commanded to observe the *mitzvot* and does so. And the father merited that he raised him until this day so that he may bring him into the covenant of the Torah. Proof may be brought from Rav Yosef who said that he would celebrate a festival day for the Sages, even though he had already been obligated in *mitzvot*. It was for the tiding that he had been unaware of until then that he wanted to celebrate a festival day. All the more is it fitting to make a festival day for reaching the time [of obligation in *mitzvot*]. But if it was not done on its [precise] time, why should it be considered a *se’udat mitzva*? It seems, however, that if the boy was taught to deliver a *derasha* at the meal that is appropriate for the occasion, it is no worse than a meal marking the dedication of a house.”

²⁰ See also *Yalkut Shim’oni, Toledot* 110, s.v. *vayetze ha-rishon admoni*.

II. Rabbi Ya'akov Ettlinger, z"l²¹ author of "Arukh La-Ner"



Life and Period²²

Rabbi Ya'akov Ettlinger was born in Karlsruhe, Germany in 1798. He was one of the leading rabbinic figures of his day, recognized and revered throughout the Ashkenazic world. He studied with his father and with Rabbi Avraham Bing, and also attended the University of Wuerzburg. He served as the Rabbi of Ladenburg, and founded a yeshiva in Mannheim. In 1836 he was appointed chief rabbi of Altona. Rabbi Ettlinger vigorously fought against the innovative ideas and practices of the Reform movement, but opposed ostracizing its members from the Jewish community. In 1845 he founded the journal *Shomer Tziyon Ha-Ne'emana*. He is the author of *Bikkurei Ya'akov*, on the laws of Sukkot; *Arukh La-Ner*, glosses on various tractates of the Talmud; *Responsa Binyan Tziyon*; and *Minchat Ani*, a collection of homilies. Rabbi Ettlinger was active on behalf of the Jewish community living in Eretz Israel, and was crowned "Prince of Eretz Israel" by the Sephardic Rabbis of Jerusalem. His disciples include Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) and Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899), founders of the "Torah im Derekh Eretz" movement in Germany. Rabbi Ettlinger died in 1872.

²¹ In his will, Rabbi Ettlinger asked that he not be referred to as a *tzaddik*. This is why we use "z"l" instead of "ztz"l."

²² Biographical information may be found in Judith Bleich, *Jacob Ettlinger, his life and work: the emergence of Modern Orthodoxy in Germany*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1978; I. Emanuel, "Perakim betoledot ha-Rav Ya'akov Ettlinger, Ha-Ma'ayan XII, 2 (1972); *Responsa Binyan Tziyon Ha-Shalem* (ed. I. Horowitz, Jerusalem, 1989), vol. 1, Biographical Introduction.

Thus shall you say to the house of Ya'akov (Exodus 19:3):

A sermon marking the public examination in religious studies for the girls of the Great Synagogue of the Ashkenazic community in Altona on the tenth of Kislev, 1867, delivered by the chief rabbi, Rabbi Ya'akov Aharon Ettlinger.

The public examination in religious studies was opened by the chief rabbi with the following words:

Honored people, the activity for which we have gathered here is new in our community. I therefore allow myself to explain its purpose by way of a brief introduction:

The outward form [of the examination] is that of the "confirmation" ceremony observed by the believers of a different religion [the Christians, which penetrated, as a result of our sins, to certain Reform groups among our people]. In its fundamental essence, however, it is very far from it. There the purpose is that the children should accept their religion upon themselves as an obligation. Among Jews this is totally unnecessary. Our religion is closely connected to life; only death separates between man and his Judaism. For Jews there is no need for a festive religious ceremony to mark the acceptance of belief, for a person is bound from birth by all the *mitzvot* of the Torah, and there is no way for him to detach himself from that obligation.

The activity in which we are engaged here is not a religious rite, but rather an examination in religious studies. It should really not take place in a synagogue but in a school. The law, however, specifically requires that it take place in a synagogue. Nevertheless, it has an element of mitzva by Torah law: sanctification of the name of God, which we consider among our most important *mitzvot*. In the heart of a Jew, the Holy One, blessed be He, and his Torah are two inseparable ideas; without God we have no religion, and without religion we would not recognize God. Thus, one who denies the Torah, denies God.

From ancient times until the present day, the enemies of the Jews never ceased presenting the Jewish religion as foolish, God forbid, void of morality, and bereft of love for believers of another religion. We, therefore, very much desire the opportunity that permits us in a grand assembly to demonstrate that this slander is based on a lie, and to show the noble morality, the ethics and the principles of pure love of man that are included in Torah study. Already in their youth, our sons and daughters learn these principles. When we declare them in public, it is a sanctification of the name of God. It falls upon you now to sanctify Heaven's name in public...

I turn especially to you, parents of these maturing youths, with an important admonition: Our Father in heaven entrusted you with precious deposits. They were given to you, each with the pure soul of a child. Your role must be to watch over and protect them. You must see to it that only purity and modesty mark the lives of your children, that morality be evident in them, and that the love of God and His Torah always burn in their hearts. You must see to it that the special *mitzvot* binding upon the daughters of Israel be known to them and esteemed in their eyes, so that they observe them to perfection...

And one more word to you girls who are about to leave school and who are surely happy to be relieved of the burden of your studies. Do not allow yourselves to be deceived! You may become free of classes for children, but instead you will enter the school of life itself. The worries and concerns that bothered you until now will fall upon you with greater force, as they do upon all students of the school of practical life. The tests which frightened you in school will also come upon you with greater gravity in that school. But do not despair! Your Father in heaven will watch over you as long as you walk in His ways...

Your parents bless you every Friday night and festival eve in accordance with ancient tradition, and I will bless you here in this holy place: "May God make you as Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah"...

May it be Your will, O God, that the parents of these girls witness full happiness and take pleasure in them until ripe old age. May it be Your will that these splendid soft flowers grow to magnificence in Your garden, and may their pleasant scent rise before Your glorious throne throughout their lives.

Lord of the Universe, bless the government of this noble land, its advisors and officers, this city and its citizens. Bless this holy congregation and its council. Bless the people of this assembly who intently listen to Your words. Our Father in heaven, bless all men living in all parts of the world, and bring near the time that they will all serve you from the rising of the sun to its setting. Amen.

The Sermon – Summary and Comments²³

Rabbi Ettlinger opens his sermon with the words "Thus shall you say to the house of Ya'akov" (Exodus 19:3). These words are particularly appropriate for a ceremony marking the completion of a course of study by the Jewish girls in his community. For according to the Sages, the verse relates to women: "'The house of Ya'akov' – this denotes the women, to them you shall speak in gentle language" (Rashi, ad loc.). Ya'akov is also the first name of the speaker, Rabbi Ya'akov Ettlinger, rabbi of Altona, who was responsible for the Torah education of his community.

Rabbi Ettlinger's words do not constitute a halakhic ruling or responsum. Rather, we are dealing with "a sermon marking a public examination in religious studies for girls." It was only many years later that it was published by the author's descendants in *Responsa Binyan Tziyon Ha-Shalem*.²⁴

²³ Rabbi Ettlinger's position has been carefully analyzed by Avraham Reiner, "*Ha-Yachas letiksei bat mitzva - iyyun mashve bipeskika modernit*," *Netu'im* 10 (Elul, 2003), p. 55-64.

²⁴ See editor's comment in *Responsa Binyan Tziyon Ha-Shalem* (ed. I. Horowitz, Jerusalem 1989), vol. II, no. 107, and his discussion in the biographical introduction, vol. I., p. 21.

An examination of Rabbi Ettlinger's biographical background sheds light upon his unique approach to the topic. Already in 1830, while serving as Rabbi of Mannheim (1826-1836), Rabbi Ettlinger related to the issue of a bat mitzva ceremony. Fundamentally, he argued, conducting a bat mitzva ceremony in the synagogue does not violate any prohibition, provided, of course, that the regular prayer service is not compromised. Nevertheless, he objected to such a ceremony.²⁵ In 1854, Rabbi Avraham Zutra, a friend of Rabbi Ettlinger and Rabbi of Muenster, published his position regarding a bat mitzva ceremony in the Torah journal "*Shomer Tziyon Ha-Ne'eman*" put out by Rabbi Ettlinger.²⁶ Rabbi Zutra opposed such a ceremony for several reasons: 1) The ceremony constitutes a breach of the regulations of modesty and the laws governing the synagogue; 2) the ceremony is an adaptation of the Christian "confirmation" rite, and one may not imitate non-Jewish practices as do the Reformers; 3) the Christian ceremony marks the decision taken by the Christian youths to join their faith, but Jews already accepted the Torah upon themselves at Sinai for all generations.

In light of his previously stated position and Rabbi Zutra's strong opposition to any bat mitzva ceremony, we better understand Rabbi Ettlinger's attitude in his "sermon marking the public examination in religious studies for girls" that he delivered in 1867. In the beginning of the sermon, Rabbi Ettlinger relates directly to the outward similarity between the upcoming examination and the "confirmation" ceremony observed by the believers of a different religion [the Christians, which penetrated, as a result of our sins, to certain Reform groups among our people]." He maintains, however, that "in its fundamental essence, it is very far from it." At the Jewish ceremony, the children do not "accept their religion upon themselves as an obligation," for "among Jews this is totally unnecessary. Our religion is closely connected to life; only death separates between man and his Judaism. For Jews there is no need for a festive religious ceremony to mark the acceptance of belief, for a person is bound from birth by all the *mitzvot* of the Torah, and there is no way for him to detach himself from that obligation." This argument in his sermon in 1867 removes the concern raised by Rabbi Zutra in 1854, and Rabbi Ettlinger's own

²⁵ See Avraham Reiner (note 3), p. 59.

²⁶ See *Shomer Tziyon Ha-Ne'eman*, Altona, 1854, pp. 348-349.

reservations during his tenure as rabbi of Mannheim (1836-1826). The upcoming ceremony is merely “an examination in religious studies. It should really not take place in a synagogue but in a school,” for it has an educational role for the girls who have now completed their course of study. It does not involve any changes in the prayers or the synagogue service. The event was being held in the synagogue, because “the law specifically required that it take place in a synagogue.” For that reason Rabbi Ettlinger inserts a prayer and blessing both for the girls and for the government. He concludes the sermon in a festive manner as if it were a communal prayer. He includes the special blessing given by parents to children (according to Ashkenazic custom) and a prayer for the government that ends with the communal response of “Amen.” Despite his initial objection to the ceremony because it had been forced upon the community by the authorities, Rabbi Ettlinger exploits the event to demonstrate the spiritual and religious values of the Jewish community to their non-Jewish neighbors.

Even though the “examination” outwardly resembles the “confirmation” rite, its nature and objective are fundamentally different. Rabbi Ettlinger does not object to marking the conclusion of the girls’ course of study, for such an activity constitutes a sanctification of God’s name: “We very much desire the opportunity that permits us in a grand assembly” to explain Judaism’s moral content to the non-Jewish community. Even though the ceremony came into being under coercion, it was executed with the Rabbi Ettlinger’s full agreement, for it provided an opportunity to sanctify the name of God, a central mitzva of the Torah. It well suited the spirit of German Jewish Orthodoxy, which wished to present the Torah to the non-Jewish world in a dignified manner.

Distinctive Points in the Sermon

We are not dealing here with a halakhic ruling or responsum, but rather with a sermon delivered at a ceremony marking the conclusion of a course of study completed by the Jewish girls of Altona. It was the non-Jewish authorities who required that the ceremony be held, and Rabbi Ettlinger, a distinguished speaker and educator, integrated into his sermon words of blessing for the girls as well as for the government. Despite the fact that the ceremony had been forced upon the community by the authorities, and even though the outward similarity to the “confirmation” rite is striking, Rabbi Ettlinger used his rhetorical talents to turn the occasion into an educational experience for the young Jewish girls. Rather than objecting to the governmental coercion, he blessed the government and cooperated with it for the benefit of the girls’ education. The sermon does not include a halakhic discussion of the issue of bat mitzva celebrations.

Goals of this Chapter

- According to Rabbi Ettlinger, what is the importance and function of a bat mitzva ceremony?
- What internal and external factors drove Rabbi Ettlinger to mark the day on which the Jewish girls assume religious obligations?
- How does Rabbi Ettlinger deal with the prohibition against imitating gentile customs and the similarity between a bat mitzva ceremony and confirmation?
- How does Rabbi Ettlinger’s attitude to bat mitzva relate to his biographical background and to the principle of “Torah im derekh erez” championed by the Orthodox Rabbis of Germany in the nineteenth century?
- A question to be answered after studying the other responsa: How is Rabbi Ettlinger’s position different from all the other responsa?

III. Rabbi Aharon Walkin, ztz"l Responsa Zekan Aharon



Life and Period

Rabbi Aharon Walkin was born in Belorussia in 1865. He studied under Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv) in the Volozhin yeshiva, and then under Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan Spektor in Kovno. He later served as the rabbi of Pinsk. He was the author of *Bet Aharon* – talmudic novellae; *Saviv Liyere'av* – a commentary on *Sefer Yere'im*; *Hoshen Aharon* – a commentary on *Shulchan Arukh*, *Choshen Mishpat*; *Zekan Aharon* – responsa; and *Metzah Aharon* – a book of sermons. Rabbi Walkin was one of the founders of the Agudat Israel world movement, playing an active role at the Kattowitz assembly held in 1912. Halakhic questions were sent to him from all over the world, some of which were published in his *Zekan Aharon*, first published in Pinsk in 1932. Rabbi Walkin's responsa won a prize for the "finest Torah publication in the Warsaw community in the category of practical Halakha."²⁷

²⁷ For biographical information, see Dr. Hillel Zeidman, "Ha-Rav Rav Aharon Walkin," in *Ele Ezkera* (New York, *Ha-Makhon lecheker ba'ayot ha-yahadut ha-charedit*, 1957), I, pp. 64-71.

Monday, 12 Adar II, 5687 [1927].

To the honorable Va'ad Ha-Rabbanim of London, and especially to its secretary, Rabbi Zvi Ferber, shlita:

Regarding your question concerning the three transgressions which the rebels, destroyers of the city, wish to institute (endanger) and enact in your city: 1) ... To have women sing together with the chazan in the synagogue. 2) To play the organ on weekdays at wedding ceremonies. 3) Confirmation ceremony for young girls' coming of age in the synagogue. ...

Even if these practices, in and of themselves, were entirely permissible, and more than this, even if they constituted a *mitzva* – now, however, that the non-Jewish nations act in this manner, and so too the wicked sinners of Israel, namely, the Reformers, [these practices] are forbidden to us by Torah law. This is explained in *Sifrei (parashat Shofetim)*, as cited by Rashi on the verse, “You shall not set up for yourselves any pillar, which the Lord your God hates” (Deuteronomy 16:22): “Even though the pillar was pleasing [to God] in the days of the Patriarchs, now He hates it because the nations have made it an ordinance of an idolatrous character.”

... The intention of these new innovators is merely to liken themselves to the gentiles and the sinners of Israel; they behave like Zimri, and demand reward like Pinhas. They introduce a strange fire into the holy service to cause the house of Jacob to stray, and claim that they come to glorify and elevate our house of God by way of a seemly choir and a decorous service. This is certainly forbidden to us by Torah law, because of “You shall not set up for yourselves any pillar, etc.” This was true even though the practice itself involved a *mitzva*; once the wicked adopted the practice, it became hated, despised and abominated. All the more so in these matters which in and of themselves involve severe prohibitions, as will be explained. ...

And the last thing is most grievous in that they wish to assemble large groups of men and women, boys and girls, to celebrate the girls' coming of age. In addition to all the aspects of licentiousness and repugnance that I explained above, it also involves a number of Torah prohibitions. Anyone who acts in this manner, his intention is certainly to liken himself to the gentiles and the wicked Reform Jews. We have already been warned about this with seven negative precepts and two positive precepts not to follow their practices. As is explained by Rambam (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, 11:1): “One may not walk in the practices of idolaters, nor may one liken himself to them in his clothing, hair, or the like. As it says: ‘You shall not walk in the practices of the nation’ (Leviticus 20:23); ‘You shall not walk in their practices’ (Leviticus 18:3); ‘Take heed to yourself that you be not ensnared into following them’ (Deuteronomy 12:30).” ...

All the more so to institute a new practice which we never heard about until this day. Nothing may be done to change the customs of our fathers, not even when there is no trace of that which is forbidden. All the more so in this case which involves a very grave prohibition, it being an accessory of idolatry on account of “walking in their practices,” and also an accessory of licentious behavior. One who

permits this is certainly regarded as a “rebellious elder,” and one who follows such a ruling is like one who casts a stone on a Mercuris [a form of idol-worship]; he is cursed and set apart from the community of God.

And you, the children of Israel, its teachers and guides, be strong and courageous, gird your loins like warriors to stand in battle against the enemies of God who wish to tear down and breach the fences of the Jewish world. It was only separation from the nations and the fences which we had erected that have stood for us in every generation when they rose up against us to destroy us, and have saved us from the hands of all who have risen up against us. It was only separation and such fences that stood for us like a shield against calamities. All those who come to breach the wall of God’s vineyard destroy it in matter and spirit, our bodies as well as the Torah. Fear not the noise of the trampling shoes that will come down upon you, the noise of the pens in the publications of the nations, what they say and what they write. Let not your hearts grow faint from the threats and the fears with which they frighten you. For God will fight for you. ...

They have undoubtedly acted altogether out of ignorance, their desire to imitate the freethinkers stemming from a lack of knowledge that their behavior involves grave prohibitions and bans issued by the ancient Torah authorities. I wish to hope that if only you inform them of the law, they will lovingly accept it upon themselves, and not turn a stubborn shoulder, for the entire community is holy. May there be peace upon the judges of Israel and upon all of Israel, who are like a sighing soul, groaning and worrying about such reports, and waiting for the raising of the horn of the holy Torah.

With my blessings,
Aharon Walkin

The Responsum – Summary and Comments

The secretary of the Va'ad HaRabbanim of London turned to Rabbi Walkin regarding three issues. All three pertained to the growing struggle with the Reform movement: women's choral singing in a synagogue; organ playing at weddings performed in a synagogue; and "confirmation" ceremonies for young girls. The third question is not formulated in terms of a "bat mitzva celebration," "se'udat mitzva," "entry into *mitzvot*," or the like. Rather, it speaks of "confirmation," the term used by Reform Jews. The term itself reflects the fact that the proponents of this innovation aspired to resemble their gentile neighbors. Thus, Rabbi Walkin's halakhic discussion revolves around the prohibition against "imitating gentile customs": "*Bechukoteihem lo telekhu*," "You shall not walk in their practices" (Leviticus 18:3).

Rabbi Walkin forbids all three practices in a most scathing manner: "Regarding the three transgressions which the rebels, destroyers of the city, wish to institute (endanger) and enact in your city... ." The author employs a play on words readily understandable to his audience who spoke Hebrew with Ashkenazic pronunciation: The *takanot* (enactments) of the Reform movement are *sakanot* (dangers) to the Jewish people. Thus, he refers to the innovators as *mahrivei karta*, "destroyers of the city," in contrast to those who faithfully observe the Torah and *mitzvot*, who are *neturei karta*, "guardians of the city."²⁸ Rabbi Walkin immediately prohibits the three practices, basing his ruling on the prohibition: "You shall not set up for yourselves any pillar, which the Lord your God hates" (Deuteronomy 16:22). This prohibition is based on the ban against imitating gentile customs, for the Patriarchs had erected pillars with which they served God, but the Torah forbids

²⁸ The expression is borrowed from *Midrash Tehilim*, Psalm 127: "A Ma'a lot poem for Shelomo. Unless the Lord builds the house, they who build it labor in vain (Psalms 127:1).' Rabbi Yehuda Nesi'a sent Rabbi Chiyya, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Ami to pass through the cities of Eretz Israel and appoint Bible and Mishna teachers. They came to one place where they didn't find such teachers. They said to them: 'Bring the guardians of the city before us.' They brought them the city watchmen. They said to them: 'These are not the guardians of the city, but rather the destroyers of the city.' They said to them: 'Who then are the guardians of the city?' They said to them: 'Bible and Mishna teachers.' This is the meaning of the verse: 'Unless the Lord keeps the city, the watchman stay awake in vain (ibid.).'"

them because in later times such pillars had become associated with idolatrous practices.²⁹

Regarding women's singing, Rabbi Walkin relies upon a talmudic passage in *Sota* (48a) and upon a ruling of Rabbi Moshe Sofer (Hatam Sofer) who ruled stringently on the matter, leaving no room for leniency. Regarding the playing of an organ, he relies once again on a ruling of Rabbi Sofer, who explicitly dealt with the question and issued an absolute prohibition.

“And the last thing is most grievous in that they wish ... to celebrate the young girls' coming of age” [not “their bat mitzva”], for it their intention to liken themselves to the gentiles and the wicked reformers of Israel. Thus, the practice is forbidden by Torah law because of the prohibition against imitating gentile customs, as is explicit in the words of the Rambam and the rulings of the Bet Yosef. The author leaves no room for allowances: “All the more so in this case which involves a very grave prohibition, it being an accessory of idolatry on account of ‘walking in their practices,’ and also an accessory of licentious behavior. One who permits this is certainly regarded as a ‘rebellious elder,’ and one who follows such a ruling is like one who casts a stone on a Mercuris [a form of idol-worship]; he is cursed and set apart from the community of God”.

Toward the end of his responsum, Rabbi Walkin solemnly calls upon the Rabbis of Israel to fortify themselves against “the enemies of God who wish to tear down and breach the fences of the Jewish world ... Fear not the noise of the trampling shoes ... Let not your hearts grow faint from the threats and the fears with which they frighten you.” The author alludes here to the scriptural verses dealing with mandatory war: “When you go out to battle against your enemies ... be not afraid of them; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt And he shall say to them, Hear, O Israel, you draw near today to do battle against your enemies; let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, nor be terrified because of them. For the Lord your God is He that goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you” (Deuteronomy 20:1-4). Similarly, the formulation, “Fear not the noise of the trampling shoes that will come

²⁹ See *Tosafot, Avoda Zara* 11a, s.v. *ve'i chuka*. Rabbi Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg deals with this issue at length in his *Responsa Seridei Esh* (cited below).

down upon you, the noise of the pens in the publications of the nations,” is based on a passage in *Sota* 42a, which explains the aforementioned verse (Deuteronomy 20:3): “Fear not’ – the noise made by the fastening of armor and the noise of the trampling shoes.” We see then how the author borrows formulations associated with mandatory war in his vigorous struggle with the innovations introduced by the Reform movement. The Torah-true approach consists of total separation from the surrounding nations. It is not by chance that he borrows a phrase from the Passover Haggada in order to allude to the secret of Israel’s survival: “And it is this that has stood by us in every generation when they rose up against us to destroy us.”

Rabbi Walkin tries to defend those who had been drawn to the Reform practices by suggesting that there may have been mitigating circumstances for their misguided position: “They have undoubtedly acted altogether out of ignorance, their desire to imitate the freethinkers stemming from a lack of knowledge ... I wish to hope that if only you inform them of the law, they will lovingly accept it upon themselves... .” Despite his vigorous opposition to these innovations, Rabbi Walkin tries to judge their proponents favorably. He alludes to Numbers 15:26: “And it shall be forgiven all the congregation of the children of Israel, and the stranger that sojourns among them; seeing all the people were in ignorance.” The responsum concludes with words of encouragement to the rabbinical authorities that they should exert their influence upon the Jewish communities to “raise up the horn of the holy Torah.”

Rabbi Walkin adopts an extremely zealous approach to every initiative proposed by the reformers, arguing that a mandatory war must fearlessly be waged against them. His responsum gives ample expression to his experience in the communal arena, as a leader, gifted speaker, and active member of Agudat Israel. His formulations are freely borrowed from Scripture and rabbinic texts; his phraseology is exceptionally sharp.

Distinctive Points in the Responsum³⁰

The issue of “celebrating young girls’ coming of age” is discussed for the first time in this responsum of Rabbi Aharon Walkin. He views the practice as a Reform innovation that constitutes a grave danger to the Jewish people. He finds no room for leniency or allowance, arguing that the newfangled idea must be vigorously opposed.³¹

Goals of this Chapter

- Where does Rabbi Walkin live and from where does the question addressed to him arrive? What are the social and cultural differences between these two places?
- How does Rabbi Walkin refer to the “bat mitzva celebration,” and what may we learn from that designation? Why does Rabbi Walkin combine three different issues in his responsum, and what is the connection between them (“Regarding three transgressions...”)?
- What are Rabbi Walkin’s halakhic considerations? On what points does Rabbi Yechiel Ya’akov Weinberg disagree with him in his *Responsa Seridei Esh* (below)?
- What is Rabbi Walkin’s ideological position (and fear) regarding those Jews who insist on instituting a bat mitzva celebration?

³⁰ See also *Responsa Divrei Yisra’el*, II, *Yalkut Teshuvot*, no.7, who vigorously wages war against bat mitzva celebrations marked by a festive meal.

³¹ The halakhic arguments put forward by Rabbi Walkin to support his sweeping opposition to a bat mitzva ceremony are discussed in detail by Rabbi Yechiel Ya’akov Weinberg in his *Responsa Seridei Esh* cited below.

IV. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, ztz"l Responsa Iggerot Moshe



Life and Period

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was born in Russia in 1894. In 1937, he emigrated to the United States, where he was appointed *rosh yeshiva* of Metivta Tiferet Yerushalayim in New York. Rabbi Feinstein became one of the leading halakhic authorities of his time, serving as president of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis and chairman of the American branch of the Mo'etzet Gedolei ha-Torah of Agudat Israel. He vigorously opposed the Conservative and Reform movements. Rabbi Feinstein published several volumes of talmudic novellae, *Dibberot Moshe*, and numerous volumes of responsa, *Iggerot Moshe*, covering all areas of Halakha. His rulings have been accepted throughout the world. Rabbi Feinstein died in New York in 1986 and was buried in Jerusalem.³²

³² For a biography of the author, see “*Man malkhi rabanan*” at the beginning of *Iggerot Moshe*, vol. 8.

Responsa Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chayyim I, no. 104

Regarding a bat mitzva, 11 Shevat 5716 [1956], my venerable friend ...
Rabbi Baruch Aharon Poupko, shelita:

Regarding those who wish to institute a ceremony or celebration for girls reaching bat mitzva, under no circumstances should this be done in a synagogue, not even at night. For a synagogue is not the place to engage in optional activities, even if it was built on condition. And a bat mitzva ceremony is certainly an optional matter and mere nonsense, and so there is no room to allow it in a synagogue. And all the more so here where the practice originated among Reform and Conservative Jews. If the father wishes to make a celebration in his house, he is permitted to do so, but it is not regarded as a *mitzva* or as a *se'udat mitzva* (meal celebrating a *mitzva*). For it is merely a birthday celebration. Were it in my power, I would also abolish the bar mitzva celebrations conducted in this country for boys, for as we all know, they never brought anyone closer to Torah and *mitzvot*, not even the bar mitzva boy for a single minute. On the contrary, they lead in many places to Sabbath desecration and the violation of other prohibitions. In any case, that which has already become entrenched here and derives from a *mitzva* is difficult to abolish. But to establish this for girls where it does not derive from a *mitzva*, it would certainly be better to avoid doing so even in the house, even though there is no prohibition. Celebrating in a synagogue, even at night at a time when there are no services, is, however, forbidden...

Your friend and admirer, Moshe Feinstein

Responsa Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chayyim, II, no. 97

Regarding your remark about what I said in responsum no. 104 about a bat mitzva meal:

Regarding the difficulty you raised: why is there no *mitzva* in a bat mitzva meal when a girl turns twelve, as there is in the case of a boy; surely the girl also becomes obligated now in *mitzvot*? ...

In my opinion, the correct answer is that in the case of a girl there is no practical distinction between her being a minor and her having reached adulthood. Thus, there is no resemblance to the case of a boy where the distinction is clearly evident, for now he is included in all matters requiring a quorum of ten or three. But for mere knowledge that involves no visible practical distinction we do not make a meal or a celebration, even though it involves the very same joy.

Responsa Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chayyim, IV, no. 36

Regarding a bat mitzva celebration in a synagogue, 2 Sivan 5719 [1959].

To Rabbi Meir Kahana, shelita, rabbi of Howard Beach, New York:

As for a bat mitzva celebration itself, it does not comprise a *se'udat mitzva*, but merely a birthday celebration which is an optional matter. Hence it should not be conducted in a synagogue, for optional meals may not be conducted in a synagogue, even if it was built on condition. But as for making a *kiddush* in synagogue as it is customary in most synagogues in this country to make for any

joyous occasion, this joyous occasion is not inferior to others. The bat mitzva girl is permitted to say a few words in honor of her joyous occasion, and it seems that this should suffice to achieve the benefit that you see in this. She should not speak, however, from the *bimah*, but rather she should stand next to the table where the *kiddush* is being held.

As for the bat mitzva celebration which has already been planned, if you can bring it about in such a way that will not lead to your derision or to controversy that it will be changed to a *kiddush*, you should do so. If, however, it will lead to controversy or to your derision for having made a change, you should leave it as planned. In the future, however, you should establish that a bat mitzva is celebrated with a *kiddush*, which people regularly make for all joyous occasions.

As for the benefit that you have mentioned, it would appear that on the contrary it leads to Sabbath desecration and other such problems. Even in the case of boys, we have not seen any benefit of bringing them closer to Torah and *mitzvot*. Even if a particular girl is the exception to the rule, see what benefit there is in the great majority of cases. On the contrary, it leads to problems. Therefore, you should push away this innovation of bat mitzva celebrations and not draw it closer, but without arousing controversy, as I have explained.

Your friend, Moshe Feinstein

The Responsum – Summary and Comments

Rabbi Feinstein authored three responsa on the topic of bat mitzva celebrations that were later published in his *Iggerot Moshe*. All three are relatively short and free of lengthy halakhic discourse. The earliest responsum was written in 1957. Rabbi Feinstein related to the issue a second time in a responsum written in 1959. There he responds to various considerations raised by the questioner, which appear to reflect the ongoing discussion of the issue within the American Jewish community. The third responsum, also written in 1959, implies that bat mitzva celebrations were common in the questioner's community. Rabbi Feinstein warns his questioner to be careful not to stir up controversy or feelings of contempt and scorn.

Rabbi Feinstein puts forward the following arguments: The sanctity of a synagogue forbids it to be used for the celebration of a bat mitzva, because such a celebration has no halakhic validity. Having no source in early rabbinic texts, it is not classified as a "*se'udat mitzva*," a meal celebrating a *mitzva*, and so it is considered "an optional matter and mere nonsense." Rabbi Feinstein opposes the introduction of a bat mitzva "ceremony," because it is clear to him that the initiative originated among Reform and Conservative Jews, and so it involves an innovation having no legitimate source, which is forbidden ("but to establish this for girls where

it does not derive from a *mitzva*,” and similarly in the third responsum, “you should push away this innovation of bat mitzva celebrations and not draw it closer”).

Even a bat mitzva meal celebrated at home is void of any halakhic significance. It is not a “*se’udat mitzva*,” but merely a birthday party. While such a meal does not involve the violation of any prohibitions, it nonetheless should be avoided. Bat mitzva celebrations have no educational value. Even bar mitzva celebrations bring no educational benefit; on the contrary, they lead to Sabbath desecration. Ideally, they too should be abolished, but they at least have a halakhic source (*Bava Kama* 87 and *Pesachim* 116). There is a clear difference between boys and girls, for upon reaching his bar mitzva a boy may be included in a *minyan*, and thus a bar mitzva has halakhic significance that should be publicized. Bar mitzva celebrations, having already become an entrenched custom, should not be abolished; but there is certainly no reason to establish a new practice of celebrating bat mitzvas.

Attention should be paid to the difference in attitude expressed in the three responsa. In the earliest responsum, Rabbi Feinstein sees no educational benefit whatsoever even in bar mitzva celebrations. In his opinion, it would be preferable if they too were abolished, and so there is no reason to establish a similar practice for girls. After receiving a rejoinder from another Rabbi, Rabbi Feinstein deals again with the issue in two later responsa. He cites sources from the Talmud and the codes, including the well-known passage from Maharshal, from which one may prove the halakhic validity of a bar mitzva celebration, and by analogy, the validity of a bat mitzva celebration as well. Rabbi Feinstein distinguishes between bar and bat mitzva, but his distinction was not accepted by all.³³ In the later responsa, Rabbi Feinstein makes no mention of the negative influence of the Reform and Conservative movements.³⁴ He shows respectful regard for the questioner’s understanding of the educational benefit of bat mitzva celebrations: “And it would seem that this should suffice to achieve the benefit which you think this will yield.”

³³ See Rabbi Ovadya Yosef, cited below.

³⁴ The last responsum was published in Israel, where the Reform movement enjoys little influence. In contrast, the first two responsa were published in the United States, where Rabbi Feinstein vigorously fought against that movement.

In contrast to Rabbi Walkin, Rabbi Feinstein does not speak of “confirmation,” a term reflecting a non-Jewish practice, but about “a ceremony or celebration for girls reaching bat mitzva.”

On the one hand, Rabbi Feinstein makes use of many talmudic formulations, but on the other hand, we find in his responsa a number of English terms. Bat mitzva celebrations involve a conflict between the traditional world of the talmud and the aspirations of a modern generation of Jews exposed to the influences of the Reform and Conservative movements.³⁵ Rabbi Feinstein vigorously opposed these influences, as is evident in many places in his *Iggerot Moshe*.³⁶

Distinctive Points in the Responsum³⁷

Despite Rabbi Feinstein’s basic opposition to the Reform movement and to halakhic innovations suggesting its influence, his formulations regarding bat mitzva celebrations are far more moderate than those of Rabbi Walkin. Rabbi Feinstein makes no mention of the prohibition against imitating gentile practices, for according to the simple understanding of the talmudic sources, this prohibition is not applicable to bat mitzva celebrations.

Rabbi Feinstein’s three responsa show a certain development: The earliest responsum expresses sweeping opposition; the festive meal of a bat mitzva celebration is “an optional matter and mere nonsense.” In the last responsum, Rabbi Feinstein agrees that one may celebrate a bat mitzva with “a *kiddush* in

³⁵ *Responsa Iggerot Moshe, Yore De’a I*, no. 12, s.v., *velakhen midina*: “One should push away every innovation...”; *Responsa Iggerot Moshe, Yore De’a I*, no. 14, s.v., *sof davar*: “In conclusion, there is no doubt whatsoever about the matter, not according to the strict requirements of the law, and not even for the sake of stringency. The only consideration is that one should push away every innovation, as I have written... .”

³⁶ The following data based on the Bar Ilan Responsa Project demonstrate Rabbi Feinstein’s role in the struggle against the Reform and Conservative movements: *Iggerot Moshe* contain over a hundred responsa dealing with the sensitive issue of “Reform,” and over 130 discussions regarding Conservative Jewry (out of about 160 twentieth century responsa that relate to the Conservative movement).

³⁷ See the similar approach taken by Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg in his *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer XVIII*, no. 33.

synagogue as it is customary in most synagogues,” and that “the bat mitzva girl is permitted to say a few words in honor of her joyous occasion, and it seems that this should suffice to achieve the benefit that you see in this.” In his last responsum, he appears to be partially open to his questioner’s position regarding the educational benefit of such celebrations, though he himself does not accept the argument. Rabbi Feinstein wrote the last responsum in 1959, but it was only published in 1981, i.e., 22 years later. Over the course of this period, various ceremonies marking a girl’s bat mitzva had developed, and Rabbi Feinstein was now prepared to publish his permissive responsum.³⁸

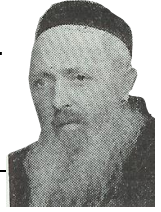
This partial recognition of the educational benefit of a bat mitzva celebration in Rabbi Feinstein’s last responsum is still far from the psychological and halakhic analysis of Rabbi Yechiel Ya’akov Weinberg in his *Responsa Seridei Esh* (below). Rabbi Weinberg there relates to the feelings of the bat mitzva girl, to problems of assimilation, to temporary rulings for the post-Shoah period, etc. Rabbi Feinstein sees no justification for or benefit to be derived from bat mitzva celebrations, and so he sees no need to deal with the subject at length.

Goals of this Chapter

- Where did Rabbi Moshe Feinstein live, and what is the background of his position regarding bat mitzva celebrations?
- What are Rabbi Feinstein’s halakhic, social and educational arguments?
- What are the differences between Rabbi Feinstein’s three responsa? Do they show development in a certain direction? How does it correlate with the social changes that took place over the course of time that the responsa were published (between 1959 and 1981)?
- What does Rabbi Feinstein prove from Maharshal? How does Rabbi Ovadya Yosef explain this source (see below), and what is the practical difference between the two understandings?

³⁸ Following the analysis of Avraham Reiner (note 3), p. 66.

V. Rabbi Meshullam Rath, ztz"l Responsa Kol Mevaser



Life and Period

Rabbi Meshullam Rath was born in Galicia in 1875. He served as the rabbi of Chernovtzy. In 1944, he settled in Eretz Israel and became a member of the chief rabbinate, serving as an advisor to Rabbi Isaac Herzog. His responsa dealing with many topical matters have been published under the title *Kol Mevaser*. Rabbi Rath's explanation for the title of his work reflects his general world outlook: "It is my prayer, following the terrible Holocaust and after I have been privileged to witness the beginning of our redemption, that God allow me to hear the voice heralding (*kol mevaser*) the completion of our redemption... (introduction to *Kol Mevaser*). Rabbi Rath died in Jerusalem in 1963.

2 Kislev, 5718 [1958], Bnei Brak
To the Director-General of the Ministry of Religions,
Dr. S.Z. Kahana, Jerusalem:

Regarding your question concerning the matter of a bat mitzva celebration program ...

See *Responsa Havot Ya'ir*, no. 222, regarding someone who died without leaving a son. Prior to his death, he left instructions that ten people should be paid to learn in his house every day of the twelve-month period of mourning, and at the conclusion of their learning, his daughter should recite *kaddish*. [Rabbi Bachrach] writes: "Even though there is no proof to refute the position that a woman is likewise bound by the obligation to sanctify God's name and please the soul [of the departed], she is being his offspring – there is, however, concern that this will lead to a weakening of Jewish customs, which also comprise an element of Torah. Each individual will construct an altar for himself in accordance with his own reasoning, the words of the Rabbis will appear foolish and ridiculous, and people will come to treat them lightly."

It is possible to mark the event as a day of happiness and rejoicing within the circle of [the girl's] family and friends at home and in the school she attends. The teacher (man or woman) may deliver a lesson on a timely topic in order to clarify the obligations of a Jewish girl who has reached the age of *mitzvot*.

Respectfully,
Meshullam Rath

The Responsum – Summary and Comments

In 1958, Rabbi Rath was asked by the Director-General of the Ministry of Religions in Israel about "a bat mitzva celebration program," that is, about the propriety of establishing a rite or ceremony through which Jewish girls could mark their bat mitzva. He does not enter into a lengthy discussion of the topic. His brief answer implies that he harbors no fundamental opposition to bat mitzva celebrations; on the contrary, he encourages marking a bat mitzva in a family or school setting as a "day of happiness and rejoicing." Rabbi Rath is hesitant, however, about establishing new customs that are liable to provoke controversy. He relies on a responsum of Rabbi Ya'ir Bachrach (*Havot Ya'ir*) about a daughter reciting *kaddish* for her deceased parent: "There is, however, concern that this will lead to a weakening of Jewish customs, which also comprise an element of Torah. Each individual will construct an altar for himself in accordance with his own

reasoning, the words of the Rabbis will appear foolish and ridiculous,³⁹ and people will come to treat them lightly.”⁴⁰ In light of these considerations, Rabbi Rath refrains from classifying a bat mitzva celebration as an instance of “rejoicing in a *mitzva*” with all the accompanying practical halakhic ramifications.

Distinctive Points in the Responsum⁴¹

Whereas Rabbi Feinstein was asked about “a bat mitzva ceremony,” that is, about a ceremony that is suggestive of non-Jewish customs and assimilation, Rabbi Rath was asked by the Director-General of the Ministry of Religions about “a bat mitzva celebration program.” The wording of the question shows no sign of any desire to do away with tradition or replace it with new innovations. Rather, it reflects the Israeli Ministry of Religions’ sincere effort to provide young Jewish girls with a meaningful Torah education. Aware of his responsibility to the religious educational system of the young Jewish state, Rabbi Rath fundamentally agrees that a bat mitzva should be marked within a family or school setting. The bat mitzva festivity should not, however, be given formal halakhic recognition as a “*se’udat mitzva*,” “a meal celebrating a *mitzva*,” because of the problematic character of establishing new customs.

In Rabbi Rath’s responsum, there is no display of zealous opposition to “the rebels, destroyers of the city” (*Zekan Aharon*), or show of reservation toward “Reform and Conservative Jews” (*Iggerot Moshe*). Instead, we find a basic agreement to mark a bat mitzva as an important educational milestone for every Jewish girl, as “a day of happiness and rejoicing.” The author concludes with a suggestion (presented neither as a halakhic ruling, nor as educational advice): “It is possible to mark the event as a day of happiness and rejoicing within the circle of [the girl’s] family and friends at home and in the school she attends. The teacher (man or woman) may deliver a lesson on a timely topic in order to clarify the

³⁹ For the expression, see *Eruvin* 68b.

⁴⁰ The issue under discussion and the attitude expressed in Rabbi Yair Bachrach’s *Responsa Chavat Ya’ir* (no. 222) are very similar to those found in Rabbi Rath’s *Kol Mevaser*.

obligations of a Jewish girl who has reached the age of *mitzvot*.” According to Rabbi Rath, it is recommended that the teacher speak about a “timely topic” in order to explain the significance of the day.⁴²

Goals of this Chapter

- Where did Rabbi Meshullam Rath live, and how does his biography account for the title of his book, “*Kol Mevasser*”?
- Who asked him about “a bat mitzva celebration program,” and what were the intentions and objectives of the questioner?
- What does Rabbi Rath prove regarding the celebration of a bat mitzva from the blessing, “Blessed are You who has released me from the punishment of this one”?
- What are Rabbi Rath’s halakhic considerations regarding Jewish custom, and what does he prove from *Responsa Chavat Ya’ir*?

What is the role of the *derasha* at a bat mitzva celebration according to Rabbi Rath and Rabbi Feinstein?

⁴¹ A similar approach was taken by the chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yitzchak Nissim; see Aharon Arend in Sarah Friedland’s book (note 3), pp. 109-115.

⁴² This contrasts with Rabbi Feinstein’s position that a *derasha* is permitted, but not necessarily recommended: “And she is permitted to say a few words in honor of her joyous occasion. And it would seem that this should suffice to achieve the benefit which you think this will yield.”

VI. Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, ztz"l Responsa Seridei Esh



Life and Period⁴³

Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov was born in 1885. He studied in the yeshivot of Mir and Slobodka under the leading rabbis of the mussar movement. After completing his studies, he served as a rabbi in Pilwiski, Lithuania. With the outbreak of World War I, he went to Germany and studied at the University of Giessen, completing his doctoral thesis on the mesorah. Rabbi Weinberg began to teach at the Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, and later served as rector of the institution until it was closed by the Nazis. After having survived various concentration camps, Rabbi Weinberg settled in Montreux, Switzerland, where he lived until his death in 1966. He combined profound talmudic scholarship and sophisticated halakhic decision making with a modern critical-historical approach. He trained a generation of Torah students in his approach. Rabbi Weinberg is the author of “*Seridei Esh*,” four volumes of responsa and essays on talmudic themes, the mussar movement, and other topics.

⁴³ See J.D. Bleich, “*Between East and West: Modernity and Traditionalism in the Writings of Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg*,” in M.Z. Sokol (ed.), *Engaging Modernity – Rabbinic Leaders and the Challenge of the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey, 1997), p. 204, n. 81; M.B. Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy, the Life and Works of Rabbi J.J. Weinberg* (London 1999), p. 209, n. 160.

To the honorable Rabbi, chief Rabbi of a large city in France:

Regarding your question whether it is permitted to celebrate a bat mitzva, and whether it involves a violation of the prohibition against imitating gentile customs (“*Bechukoteihem lo telekhu*,” “You shall not walk in their practices” [Leviticus 18:3]). The Rishonim disagree about the prohibition against imitating gentile customs. Rambam, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 11:1, writes: “One may not follow the customs of the gentiles, nor imitate them in dress or in their way of trimming the hair, as it says: ‘And you shall not walk in the practices of the nation [which I cast out before you]’ (Leviticus 20:23); ‘you shall not walk in their practices’ (Leviticus 18:3); ‘take heed to yourself that you be not ensnared to follow them’ (Deuteronomy 12:30). These texts all refer to one theme and warn against imitating them. On the contrary, the Israelite must be distinguished from them and recognizable by the way he dresses and in his other activities, just as he is distinguished from them by his knowledge and his principles. And thus it says: ‘And I have set you apart from the peoples’ (Leviticus 20:26). He shall not put on a garment like that specially worn by them nor let the lock of his hair grow in the way they do. Nor shall he cut the hair of the head at the sides, leaving the hair in the center untouched as they do – this is called ‘growing the forelock.’ Nor shall he cut the hair in front from ear to ear, leaving the hair at the back to grow, as they do. He shall not build edifices resembling idolatrous temples for the gathering of multitudes, as they do. Whoever does any of these or similar things is subject to flogging.”...

It follows from the words of Rambam that one is forbidden to imitate the gentiles in any matter, whether in matters rooted in idolatry or in matters that are not rooted in idolatry, but are unique to the gentile nations. And all this is forbidden by Torah law. And if a person acts in this manner, he violates a prohibition and is subject to flogging. And this prohibition applies to all the nations among whom the Jews live...

From *Sefer Yere'im* (*Amud Elilim*, 88, *Yere'im ha-Shalem*, no. 313), however, it would appear that the prohibition against imitating gentile customs was only stated with respect to the seven Canaanite nations and Egypt...

And *Sefer Yere'im* states explicitly that the prohibition against imitating gentile customs only applies to matters connected to their religion, that is to say, matters alluding to idolatry. And the *Hinukh* (no. 262) writes about the theaters and circuses mentioned in *Sifra*: “And these are all types of entertainment that they engage in when they gather together for licentious behavior and idolatry.” This is similar to the position of Maharik to be cited below. From the aforementioned passage in Rambam, however, it would seem that any imitation of gentile customs is forbidden...

Now all the Rishonim have noted the contradiction between the talmudic passage in *Sanhedrin* and that in *Avoda Zara*...

Various resolutions have been suggested, from which follow different opinions regarding the definition of gentile practices and the prohibition to imitate them (see *Responsa Melamed Leho'il*, *Orach Chayyim*, no. 16, p. 16). 1) The view of Ri in *Tosafot*, *Avoda Zara*... 2) Ran in his novellae to *Sanhedrin*... 3) Rabbenu Yona in his commentary to *Sanhedrin*... 4) Ritva in *Avoda Zara*... ; *Tosafot Rid* on *Avoda Zara*...

The principle that emerges from the words of all the Rishonim is ... that they agree about something that is not a practice connected to idolatry, but rather a practice connected to the gentile nation, that it is only forbidden when performed in order to imitate them. But if it is not performed for that purpose, it is permitted. According to some of the Rishonim, it is permissible to imitate gentile practices if it is not an idolatrous custom...

Now let us see regarding the matter under discussion whether it is permissible to celebrate a bat mitzva. There are those who wish to prohibit [the practice] on account of the prohibition of imitating gentile customs [see *Responsa Zekan Aharon*, no. 6). It seems to me that it depends upon the following: If we say that the gentile confirmation rite is performed for the sake of idolatry, then [celebrating a bat mitzva] should be forbidden on account of the prohibition against imitating gentile customs. According to this, however, we should also prohibit bar mitzva celebrations, for surely they do the confirmation ceremony for boys as well. We should also forbid prayer, for they also pray to their idols. Rather, [the confirmation rite] does not involve idolatry, for they merely celebrate the coming of age of their children. The Reformers from among our people also do not act as they do in order to imitate them, but rather to celebrate the family's joy that their child has come of age. Our brothers who have recently introduced the practice of celebrating a bat mitzva say that they have done so in order to strengthen in the heart of a girl who has reached [the age of] *mitzvot* her love for Judaism and its commandments, and to arouse a feeling of pride in her Judaism and in her being the daughter of a great and holy people. It is of no concern to us that the gentiles also celebrate confirmation whether for boys or for girls; they conduct their ceremony and we ours; they pray and bow down in their churches and we bow down and prostrate ourselves and give thanks to the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He...

There are those who argue against allowing a bat mitzva celebration because it runs counter to the custom of previous generations who did not follow this practice. In truth, however, this is not an argument, for in earlier generations it was unnecessary to engage in girls' education, for every Jew was full of Torah and fear of God, and the air of every community in Israel was filled with the smell and the spirit of Judaism. Girls growing up in a Jewish home breathed in the spirit of Judaism without having to do anything, and absorbed Judaism at their mother's breast. Now, however, the generations have drastically changed. Influences from the street uproot from the heart of every boy and girl any tie to Judaism, the girls study in non-Jewish schools or in secular schools which do not work at instilling in the hearts of their students a love for the Torah of Israel and the holy customs of perfect Judaism. Now it falls upon us to focus all of our efforts upon girls' education. It pains the heart that with regard to general education – the teaching of languages, secular literature, natural sciences, and humanities – people are concerned about girls in the same way that they are concerned about boys. But religious education – the study of Scripture and the ethical literature of the Sages, and training in the practical *mitzvot* that are binding upon women – they totally neglect. Fortunately, the leading authorities of the previous generation saw the problem and established institutions of Torah and religious strengthening for Jewish girls. The establishment of the great and comprehensive network of Bet Ya'akov schools is the noblest demonstration of our generation. Common sense and pedagogical principle almost

demand of us to celebrate a girl's reaching the obligation of *mitzvot*. The distinction made between boys and girls regarding the celebration of their maturity seriously offends the sensitivities of the girl who comes of age, who in other areas has already achieved emancipation, as it were.

Even though it is my inclination to permit bat mitzva celebrations, I nevertheless agree with the position of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein in his work *Iggerot Moshe (Orach Chayyim)*, that the celebration should not be held in a synagogue, not even at night when there are no people there, but rather in a private home or in a hall adjacent to the synagogue. And only if the Rabbi delivers a speech before the bat mitzva girl, admonishing her that from that day on she must observe the principle *mitzvot* between her and God [kashrut, Shabbat, family purity]; and that she must involve herself in the education of her children, and encourage and strengthen her husband in the study of Torah and observance of the *mitzvot*, and set her eyes on a man who is a Torah scholar and God-fearing man. All these are great reasons to allow this celebration, even according to the view of the Vilna Gaon, who is very stringent in these matters...

I have written all this in order to clarify the Halakha. In practice, the matter depends upon the intentions of those who wish to create this new practice of celebrating a bat mitzva, whether they are acting for the sake of a mitzva, or God forbid, for the sake of imitating the gentiles. It does not escape me that among the God-fearing there are those who are stringent and forbid the practice, who regarding questions of religious practices, pay no attention to logical considerations nor even to halakhic clarifications. Rather, they decide according to the feelings of the heart alone. The Jewish heart that clings to the traditions received from parents and teachers recoil from any change in religious practice. I advise them to see what Rambam wrote in his commentary to Mishna *Gittin* 5:8: "And these are the things that they said for the sake of peace."

However, they should not forget that even those who allow the new practice of bat mitzva celebrations, their hearts tremble for the strengthening of the religious education of the daughters of Israel, who in the circumstances of life in this generation desperately need spiritual reinforcement and moral encouragement when they reach the age of *mitzvot*. And it is especially important to remember the words of Rivash in the aforementioned responsum, that even regarding that which is absolutely forbidden, the Sages say that if people will not accept [instruction], it is better that they should transgress unknowingly, rather than knowingly. And that one should not be exacting in such matters if one wants to live in peace with them. Since you have written that that the majority of the congregation wishes to follow this custom of celebrating a girl's bat mitzva, you should not go out against them. Rather you should see to it that this custom truly strengthens and fortifies the planting of the spirit of Torah and *mitzvot* in the hearts of the daughters of Israel.

Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg

The Responsum – Summary and Comments

Rabbi Weinberg's responsum regarding a bat mitzva celebration is the longest responsum on the topic, and as we shall see below, it effected a significant change. The responsum is not dated. It was written in response to a question raised by "the chief rabbi of a large city in France," who undoubtedly struggled with the problem of assimilation plaguing the French Jewish community at large.

The responsum is constructed in a very systematic and logical manner. It opens with a comprehensive talmudic and halakhic examination of the topic of the prohibition against imitating gentile customs, a discussion regarding Rambam's position in his *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, and an analysis of five proposed resolutions of the contradiction between the talmudic passages in *Sanhedrin* 52b and *Avoda Zara* 11b. Only after completing these analyses does Rabbi Weinberg approach the issue of bat mitzva celebrations in our times, considering the matter within the broader context of the problems facing the Jewish community in the post-Holocaust period.

Rabbi Weinberg relates to the challenges posed to Jewish education in the Diaspora. He regards the Torah education and Jewish identity of the bat mitzva girl as critical factors. According to Rabbi Weinberg, "the circumstances of our times demand" that Jewish educators of the post-Holocaust generation see to it that every Jewish boy and girl receive a strong Torah education. In his opinion, therefore, there is a "pedagogical obligation" to celebrate a girl's bat mitzva. Obviously, there must be strict adherence to the standards of modesty, and he agrees with Rabbi Feinstein that the celebration should not be held in a synagogue.

Rabbi Weinberg's responsum discusses a number of issues, which she shall try to summarize in brief.

The halakhic discussion opens with the following rulings of Rambam:⁴⁴

1. We should not follow the customs of the gentiles, nor imitate them in dress or in their way of trimming their hair, as it is said: "And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation (which I cast out before you)" (Lev. 20:23); "neither shall you walk in their statutes" (Lev. 18:3); "Take heed to yourself that you should not

be ensnared to follow them” (Deut. 12:30). These texts all refer to one theme and warn against imitating them. The Israelite shall, on the contrary, be distinguished from them and recognizable by the way he dresses and in his other activities, just as he is distinguished from them by his knowledge and his principles. And thus it is said: “And I have set you apart from the peoples” (Lev. 20:26). He shall not put on a garment like that specially worn by them nor let the lock of his hair grow in the way they do. Thus, he shall not cut the hair of the head at the sides, leaving the hair in the center untouched as they do – this is called “growing the forelock.” Nor shall he cut the hair in front from ear to ear, leaving the hair at the back to grow, as they do. He shall not rear edifices resembling idolatrous temples for the gathering of multitudes, as they do. Whoever does any of these or similar things is punished with stripes.

2. When a gentile has his hair cut by an Israelite, the latter must leave three finger breadths on each of the forelock, uncut.
3. An Israelite, having access to royalty, who has to appear before gentile sovereigns, and to whom it would be a disgrace not to look like gentiles, is permitted to put on apparel like theirs, and cut his hair in front, after their fashion. (Rambam, *Hilkhos Avoda Zara* 11:1-3)

The contradiction between *Sanhedrin* 52b and *Avoda Zara* 11a

Rabbi Weinberg offers a thorough analysis of the prohibition against imitating gentile customs. He systematically cites and analyzes five resolutions proposed by the Rishonim to the contradiction between *Sanhedrin* 52b and *Avoda Zara* 11a on the matter, in order to draw halakhic conclusions applicable to bat mitzva celebrations. He deals with the positions of: 1) Ri (*Tosafot*, *Avoda Zara* 11a); 2) Rabbenu Nissim (Novellae to *Sanhedrin*; *Ran* on *Alfasi*, *Avoda Zara* 11b); 3) Rabbenu Yonah (Novellae to *Sanhedrin*); 4) Ritva (Novellae to *Avoda Zara*); and 5) *Tosafot Rid* (*Avoda Zara* 11a).

As Rabbi Weinberg mentions several times in the course of his responsum, many authorities dealt with this issue before him, including Rabbi David Zvi

⁴⁴ A vast amount of material on the topic may be found in *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, s.v., *chukot ha-goyim*, vol. XVII, pp. 305-325.

Hoffman (1843-1921) in his *Responsa Melamed Leho'il*, no. 16, with respect to playing an organ in the synagogue. The entire discussion, including the five resolutions of the contradiction between the two talmudic passages, is found already in Rabbi Hoffman's responsum. After consulting with the leading rabbinic authorities in Germany, including Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899) who had founded the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary in 1873, Rabbi Hoffman ruled that organ playing in the synagogue is forbidden.

The Torah world's encounter with European culture was undoubtedly a topic of great concern for these authorities, who sought a way to reconcile Torah values with western thought. Their educational outlook included the principle that "if someone tells you there is wisdom among the gentiles, believe it" (*Eikhah Rabbah* 2, 13; see discussion in Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters*). Rabbi Weinberg's rabbinic tradition drew upon the Ashkenazic authorities who had preceded him, including Rabbi Hoffman and Rabbi Hildesheimer, the previous rectors of the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary where Rabbi Weinberg also taught, as he attests in his preface to *Seridei Eish*, vol. I. All three studied in German universities, earned academic degrees, and authored numerous investigations into rabbinic and halakhic literature. It is not surprising then that it was precisely these three rabbinic figures who struggled with the prohibition and allowances regarding imitating gentile customs. While Rabbi Hoffman prohibited the playing of an organ in the synagogue, Rabbi Weinberg ruled that bat mitzva celebrations are permitted. He allowed the practice in order to meet the educational needs of the generation of Holocaust survivors (see below our discussion of the wording "almost demand").

Bat mitzva celebrations and the prohibition of imitating gentile customs

Following his lengthy discussion regarding the prohibition of imitating gentile customs, Rabbi Weinberg addresses the issue of celebrating a bat mitzva. He begins by citing the responsum of Rabbi Walkin:⁴⁵ "Now let us see regarding the matter under discussion whether it is permissible to celebrate a bat mitzva. There are those who wish to prohibit [the practice] on account of the prohibition of

⁴⁵ Interestingly, Rabbi Walkin succeeded Rabbi Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg as the rabbi of Pilvishki, Lithuania; see Avraham Reiner (note 3), p. 69, n. 38.

imitating gentile customs [see *Responsa Zekan Aharon*, no. 6)...” Rabbi Weinberg rejects this position using the following logical argument: “According to this, we should also prohibit bar mitzva celebrations, for surely they do the confirmation ceremony for boys as well. We should also forbid prayer, for they also pray to their idols... It is of no concern to us that they celebrate confirmation whether for boys or for girls, they conduct their ceremony and we ours; they pray and bow down in their churches and we bow down and prostrate ourselves and give thanks to the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.” Hence, bat mitzva celebrations should not be considered in light of the prohibition of imitating gentile customs.

The intentions of “our brothers who have recently introduced the practice of celebrating a bat mitzva” should be respected. For they “do so in order to strengthen in the heart of a girl who has reached [the age of] *mitzvot* her love for Judaism and its commandments, and to arouse a feeling of pride in her Judaism and in her being the daughter of a great and holy people.” Since they are driven by a desire to improve the Jewish education of their children, Rabbi Weinberg is ready to support their endeavors. In his day in Europe, the practice of celebrating a bat mitzva had already become widespread even among observant Jews. Despite the fact that bat mitzva celebrations had first been instituted by Reform Jews, Rabbi Weinberg focuses on the intention and on the educational benefit to be derived from such celebrations. He does not automatically object to anything originating within the Reform movement as does Rabbi Feinstein. Rabbi Weinberg views the bat mitzva celebration as an excellent opportunity to strengthen Jewish education.

Educationally and ideologically, Rabbi Weinberg disagrees with Rabbi Feinstein. Nevertheless, when it comes to practical Halakha, Rabbi Weinberg cites the position of Rabbi Feinstein: “Even though it is my inclination to permit bat mitzva celebrations, I nevertheless agree with the position of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein in his work *Iggerot Moshe (Orach Chayyim)*, that the celebration should not be held in a synagogue, not even at night when there are no people there, but rather in a private home or in a hall adjacent to the synagogue.” Rabbi Weinberg does not wish to institute new practices, but rather to emphasize the educational value of the celebration. He, therefore, adds that this is “only if the Rabbi delivers a

speech before the bat mitzva girl, admonishing her that from that day on she must observe the principle *mitzvot* between her and God...”

Special social & educational considerations for the post-Holocaust generation

Even though he totally rejects the view of Rabbi Walkin, he is aware of the difference between his generation and the generations that preceded the Holocaust: “In earlier generations it was unnecessary to engage in girls’ education, for every Jew was full of Torah and fear of God, and the air of every community in Israel was filled with the smell and the spirit of Judaism. Girls growing up in a Jewish home breathed in the spirit of Judaism without having to do anything, and absorbed Judaism at their mother’s breast. Now, however, the generations have drastically changed. Influences from the street uproot from the heart of every boy and girl any tie to Judaism, the girls study in non-Jewish schools or in secular schools which do not work at instilling in the hearts of their students a love for the Torah of Israel and the holy customs of perfect Judaism. Now it falls upon us to focus all of our efforts upon girls’ education. It pains the heart that with regard to general education – the teaching of languages, secular literature, natural sciences, and humanities – people are concerned about girls in the same way that they are concerned about boys. But religious education – the study of Scripture and the ethical literature of the Sages, and training in the practical *mitzvot* that are binding upon women – they totally neglect. Fortunately, the leading authorities of the previous generation saw the problem and established institutions of Torah and religious strengthening for Jewish girls. The establishment of the great and comprehensive network of Bet Ya’akov schools is the noblest demonstration of our generation.” Differentiating between boys and girls with regard to the celebration of their coming of age is liable to hurt the girls’ feelings: “Common sense and pedagogical principle almost demand of us to celebrate a girl’s reaching the obligation of *mitzvot*. The distinction made between boys and girls regarding the celebration of their maturity seriously injures the feelings⁴⁶ of the girl who comes of

⁴⁶ Rabbi Weinberg’s consideration of human feelings is unique in halakhic literature. He relates to such feelings as a halakhic consideration in other contexts as well: “Whether a person may erect a tombstone for his first wife after he has already remarried... Every understanding and

age, who in other areas has already achieved emancipation, as it were.” The factor demanding the celebration of a girl’s coming of age is “common sense and pedagogical principle.” Since, however, this is not a generally accepted halakhic source, Rabbi Weinberg adds the word “almost.”

Rabbi Weinberg studied in the Lithuanian yeshivot associated with the Mussar movement and devoted comprehensive studies to that movement and its founders. His ability to analyze the special problems facing his generation and give expression to the spiritual and religious feelings of his time are clearly evident in those studies (see his studies in *Responsa Seridei Eish*, pt. IV). This responsum regarding bat mitzva celebrations illustrates his unique ability to analyze the educational and sociological problems facing the Jewish people after the Holocaust. In order to fully understand Rabbi Weinberg’s position on bat mitzva celebrations, it is advisable to compare this responsum with his responsum concerning mixed youth groups. There too he deals with “the need of the hour” to deal with girls’ education (“a time to act for God”). He compares the educational approach of German Jewry⁴⁷ to the approach prevailing in more Charedi circles; his primary emphasis is upon the feelings of the youths themselves.⁴⁸ According to the best of my knowledge, nowhere else do we find a rabbinic position paper, which combines educational, social, and sociological considerations with halakhic analysis and decision-making in this manner.⁴⁹

Rabbi Weinberg’s Conclusion – “the matter depends upon the intentions of those who wish to create a new practice”

intelligent woman prefers that her husband show respect to and remember the wife of his youth. On the contrary, if the husband eradicates the memory of his first wife from his heart, [his second wife] regards him as a crude man, lacking basic human feeling... (*Responsa Seridei Esh*, II, no. 113).

⁴⁷ This brings to mind Rabbi Ya’akov Ettlinger’s description of girls’ education, though he does not deal in his festive sermon with the halakhic aspects of the issue.

⁴⁸ See also Rabbi Weinberg’s exquisite words in his *Responsa Seridei Esh*, II, no. 8.

⁴⁹ Rabbi Weinberg relates in his rulings to social and political changes. This leads him in certain cases to unusual rulings. With regard to autopsies in Israel, for example, he rules differently than most of the halakhic authorities of the pre-state period. See his ruling published in *Techumin* (Makhon Tzomet, Alon Shevut), XII, pp. 382-385.

Rabbi Weinberg allows the celebration of a bat mitzva when conducted in accordance with the required standards of modesty, and on condition that the educational aim with regard to the young Jewish girl is apparent. But he has certain hesitations regarding the matter, as he writes at the end of his responsum: “However, they should not forget that even those who allow the new practice of bat mitzva celebrations, their hearts tremble for the strengthening of the religious education of the daughters of Israel, who in the circumstances of life in this generation desperately need spiritual reinforcement and moral encouragement when they reach the age of *mitzvot*.” In practice, the matter depends upon the intentions: “In practice, the matter depends upon the intentions of those who wish to create this new practice of celebrating a bat mitzva, whether they are acting for the sake of a mitzva, or God forbid, for the sake of imitating the gentiles.” Before the author lay the responsum of Rabbi Walkin, who forbade the celebration of a girl’s bat mitzva because of the “intentions” of the Reformers: “The entire intention of the new innovators is to liken themselves to the gentiles and the sinners of Israel ... Anyone who acts in this manner, his intention is certainly to liken himself to the gentiles and the wicked Reform Jews.” Rabbi Weinberg disagrees with Rabbi Walkin not only in his understanding and application of the prohibition against imitating gentile practices, but also in his interpretation of the “intentions” of those who wish to institute bat mitzva celebrations. It is clear to Rabbi Weinberg that in the end the disagreement is ideological – “according to the feelings of the heart.” As he writes in the end of the responsum: “It does not escape me that among the God-fearing there are those who are stringent and forbid the practice, who regarding questions of religious practices, pay no attention to logical considerations nor even to halakhic clarifications. Rather, they decide according to the feelings of the heart alone. The Jewish heart that clings to the traditions received from parents and teachers recoil from any change in religious practice...”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ According to Avraham Reiner (note 3), p. 71, Rabbi Weinberg is relating here to Rabbi Feinstein’s responsum on the matter. In my opinion, however, he is not relating to any individual authority, but to the tradition of Eastern European Jewry in general.

Distinctive Points in the Responsum

Rabbi Weinberg devotes more attention to the topic of bat mitzva celebrations than did any authority preceding him. His analysis of the issue is lengthy. He deals with the halakhic foundations of the prohibition against imitating gentile practices, a topic which especially vexed the rabbinic authorities in Germany prior to the Holocaust (Rabbi David Zevi Hoffman, Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer), who struggled with foreign cultures. Rabbi Weinberg disagrees with Rabbi Walkin not only in his understanding and application of the prohibition against imitating gentile practices, but also in his analysis of the influence of the Reform movement. It should be remembered, however, that the social reality underwent a dramatic change during that period as a result of the Holocaust, assimilation, and the problem of Jewish education.

In the course of the discussion, Rabbi Weinberg relates to the intentions of “our brothers,” who have established the practice of celebrating a girl’s bat mitzva. He respects their basic educational goal. He is not interested in fighting the Reform and Conservative movements; he identifies with their common problem – strengthening Jewish education, especially in the post-Holocaust generation (which explains the title given to his work, “*Seridei Eish*,” “Remnants of the Fire”). This approach is also characteristic of other responsa written by Rabbi Weinberg, who is aware that his positions are not based solely on purely halakhic considerations, but on ideological considerations as well. As the last director of one of the most important educational institutions in Germany, the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary, Rabbi Weinberg is the only authority who seriously relates to the feelings of the bat mitzva girl, and is aware of the danger of discriminating between boys and girls.

Goals of this Chapter

- Where was Rabbi Weinberg born, and where did he live? From where and when did the question about celebrating a bat mitzva arrive? Why did Rabbi Weinberg call his book “*Seridei Esh*”? What do these questions tell us about Rabbi Weinberg’s general approach?
- What are the halakhic issues discussed by Rabbi Weinberg?
- How does he relate to the other authorities who dealt with the issue of bat mitzva celebrations?
- What is unique about Rabbi Weinberg’s treatment of the issue?

VII. Rabbi Ovadya Yosef, shelit" a Responsa Yabi'a Omer and Yechave Da'at



Life and Period

Rabbi Ovadya Yosef was born in Baghdad in 1921. He grew up in Jerusalem, where he later served as Rabbi and *dayan*. He was appointed Chief Rabbi of Tel Avi-Jaffe, and later Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel (1972-1983). Rabbi Yosef is the author of *Responsa Yabi'a Omer* (8 volumes) and *Responsa Yechave Da'at*. He is recognized as one of the leading rabbinical authorities in Israel today, the moving force behind the slogan "to return the crown to its former glory" (restoring the preeminence of the Sephardic tradition). His halakhic analyses and responsa are characterized by the presentation of a wealth of relevant sources in a clear and systematic order. Rabbi Yosef addresses many contemporary issues and inclines to leniency to the extent halakhically possible.⁵¹

⁵¹ For Rabbi Ovadya Yosef's approach to halakhic decision-making, see reference in footnote שגיאה! הסימניה אינה מוגדרת.

I have been asked about the recently developed custom of celebrating a girl's bat mitzva when she reaches the age of 12 years - whether there is a place for this in Halakha. And whether [the father] should recite the "*barukh shepetarani*" blessing, just as he would recite for a son upon his reaching the age of bar mitzva.

a) In *Midrash Rabba*, beginning of the section of *Toledot* (63,10): "Rabbi Elazar said: A person must care for his son until he is thirteen. From then, he must say: 'Blessed are You who has released me from the punishment of this one.'" And this is what a disciple of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg says in *Sefer Tashbetz* (no. 390): It is stated in *Bereshit Rabba*: "Rabbi Shimon bar Tzaddok says: A person must care for his son until he is thirteen. From then on, he must say: 'Blessed are You who has released me from the punishment of this one.'"...

b) The *Magen Avraham* explains (225:4): Who has released me from the punishment of this one. Until now the father would be punished when his son would sin, for failing to teaching him. But from now on, he is not punished. The *Levush*, however, explains this in the opposite manner: Until now the son would be punished for the sin of his father...

c) There is a practical difference between the explanations of the *Magen Avraham* and the *Levush* regarding a girl who reaches the age of twelve years and a day. For according to the *Levush*, that "who has released me from the punishment of this one" means that until now the son would be punished for his father's sins, the blessing "who has released me from the punishment of this one," should be recited even for a daughter, for a daughter is also punished for her father's sins... But according to the one who says on account of the [obligation] to educate, one might say that [a father] is not obligated to educate his minor daughter...

d) Now let us come to the matter of the first question whether it is proper to celebrate a bat mitzva for a girl who has reached the age of twelve years and a day. It seems that there is certainly a mitzva to arrange a joyous meal for the bat mitzva, according to what Maharshal says in *Yam shel Shelomo* (*Bava Kama*, chap. 7, no. 37) that there is no *se'udat mitzva* greater than a bar mitzva banquet, where praise and thanksgiving are given to God that the boy merited to reach bar mitzva, for greater is he who is commanded to observe the *mitzvot* and does so [than one who observes them without being commanded to do so]...

I saw that Rabbi M. Feinstein wrote (*Iggerot Moshe Orach Chayyim*, no. 104) that there is no basis to consider the celebration and party made for a bat mitzva girl as a *se'udat mitzva*, it being merely a birthday celebration. Nevertheless, if the father wishes to arrange a celebration in his house for the bat mitzva, he is permitted to do so, but not in the synagogue. But meaning no disrespect, his words are incorrect, for since she becomes obligated in the *mitzvot*, and she is like an adult who is commanded to perform the *mitzvot*, regarding all the *mitzvot* that are binding upon a woman, [the celebration] is certainly a mitzva, as was stated by Rabbi Ben Ishi Chai. It has become the widespread custom in our times to arrange a bat mitzva celebration for a girl who has reached [the age] of mitzvot... In any event, it is certainly a *se'udat mitzva* when there are words of Torah and songs of praise to God. All the more so when a son or daughter reach [the age of] mitzvot so that they are included in the rule, "One who is commanded and performs is greater, etc." Leave Israel be for they are the children of prophets. I have written that which seems correct to me.

Question: Regarding a girl who reaches the age of bat mitzva, having completed twelve years and a day – according to Halakha, is there room to conduct a festive celebration and meal? Or should this only be done for a boy who reaches the age of bar mitzva, who dons tefilin when he reaches the age of *mitzvot*?

Answer: In tractate *Kiddushin* (31a): “Rav Yosef said: At first I used to say that if someone told me that the halakha accords with [the view of] Rabbi Yehuda, who said that a blind person is exempt from the *mitzvot*, I would make a holiday for the Rabbis. What is the reason? Because I [being blind] would not be commanded [to perform the *mitzvot*] and yet I do perform *mitzvot*. But now that you heard this [dictum of] Rabbi Hanina, for Rabbi Hanina said: One who is commanded and performs is greater than one who is not commanded and performs – if someone tells me that the halakha does not accord with [the view of] Rabbi Yehuda, I would make a holiday for the Rabbis. What is the reason? Because when I am commanded, I have more reward.”

And it was from here that Rabbi Shelomo Luria, the Maharshal, in *Yam Shel Shelomo* (*Bava Kama*, chap. 7, no. 37) learned regarding a bar mitzva meal and celebration for a boy who has reached the age of thirteen years and a day there is no *se'udat mitzva* greater than this. For it is a meal of thanksgiving to God who allowed the boy to reach the age of *mitzvot*, for greater is he who is commanded to observe the *mitzvot* and does so than one who performs the *mitzvot* without being commanded. For Rav Yosef rejoiced merely upon hearing that the Halakha is in accordance with the Sages, and he planned to celebrate a festival day in honor of the Sages of Israel. All the more is it fitting to make a festival day when a boy reaches the time that he is actually obligated in all the *mitzvot*.

And in similar fashion the *Magen Avraham* wrote (225:4) ... that there is a mitzva to make a [celebratory] meal on the day that one's son enters under the yoke of the *mitzvot*, as on the day he enters under the *chuppa*...

According to this, it would appear that also for a girl who reaches the age of twelve years and a day and becomes obligated in all the *mitzvot* that fall upon a woman ... it is fitting to celebrate her entry into *mitzvot* with a meal of thanksgiving and joy, for in this respect there is no difference between a boy and a girl when they reach the obligation in *mitzvot*...

And it would seem from his words that if a celebratory meal is held in her honor as is done for a bar mitzva boy when he reaches the age of *mitzvot*, it is good and fitting, and it is considered a *se'udat mitzva*. (With the proviso that they behave in accordance with the rules of modesty required by the Torah. See *Responsa Zekan Aharon, Orach Chayyim*, no. 6).

And in similar fashion, Rabbi Avraham Musafiya wrote ... And so it is customary in the cities of France and in other cities to make a day of rejoicing and *se'udat mitzva* for a boy when he reaches bar mitzva, and so too for a girl when she reaches bat mitzva. And this is a correct practice, the ramification being that if a person is invited to participate in such a celebration, he is required to attend...

However, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was asked about this in his *Responsa Iggerot Moshe* (*Orach Chayyim*, 104), and he wrote that there is no basis or foundation to consider the celebration and party made for a bat mitzva girl as a *se'udat mitzva*, it being merely a birthday celebration. But his words are

astonishing, for the very reason that Maharshah mentions in the aforementioned *Yam shel Shelomo* regarding a bar mitzva meal applies equally to a bat mitzva celebration. And later I saw in *Responsa Iggerot Moshe II (Orach Chayyim 97)* that he cites an authority who questioned him about this, and he wrote in response that this is not the same as the law applying to a bar mitzva boy ... But his words are halakhically incorrect, for why should we make such distinctions without firm foundation. The matter depends upon [the boy's] becoming commanded to perform the *mitzvot*, and so the same thing applies to a girl who reaches the age of *mitzvot*. Therefore, it is as we have written above, that even with regard to a bat mitzva girl, there is room to make a meal of rejoicing and thanksgiving to God for her having reached the obligation of *mitzvot*...

In truth, opposing bat mitzva celebrations allows sinners to accuse the Sages of Israel of depriving the daughters of Israel and discriminating between boys and girls. So did I find [is the position] of Rabbi Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg, in his *Responsa Seridei Esh*, III [no. 93, p. 288ff.]... He proves regarding those who wish to make a celebration and party for a bat mitzva girl, that there is no concern of violating the prohibition against imitating gentile customs, for their intention is not to be like the gentiles...

In summary: the practice of making a celebration and meal of joy and thanksgiving in honor of a bat mitzva girl on the day she reaches twelve years and a day is a good and fitting practice. And it is preferable that they speak there words of Torah, as well as praises of God. One must be meticulously careful to observe the rules of modesty according to our holy Torah, as it says: "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" – where there is joy there must be trembling (*Berakhot 30b*). And God will not withhold good from those who walk uprightly.

The Responsum – Summary and Comments

Rabbi Yosef relates to the bat mitzva issue in two different responsa: 1) *Responsa Yabi'a Omer VI, Orach Chayyim*, no. 29 (1976), a responsum containing a comprehensive and detailed discussion which clarifies many important halakhic issues. 2) *Responsa Yechave Da'at II*, no. 29 (1979), a responsum which had originally been presented to the public in a radio broadcast and was therefore written in a more concise and popular style.

Responsa Yabi'a Omer

The responsum opens with the sources for the "*barukh shepetarani*" blessing and continues with a halakhic discussion whether or not the blessing should be recited with the name of God (section a). The later halakhic authorities propose two alternative ways to understand the meaning of the blessing (section b). The two understandings have different halakhic ramifications (section c). According to Maharshah, there is definitely room for a *se'udat mitzva* to celebrate one's

assumption of a Torah obligation to perform the *mitzvot*, especially when the meal is accompanied by words of Torah and songs of praise of God. This conclusion contradicts that of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, “but meaning no disrespect, his words are incorrect.” In conclusion, Rabbi Yosef rules in favor of bat mitzva celebrations: “One may well make it into a festival day, and there is even a mitzva [to do so].” When a girl reaches bat mitzva, her father should recite the “*barukh shepetarani*” blessing, but because of the uncertainty, the blessing should be recited without the name of God, following the rule that in cases of doubt regarding blessings we rule leniently.

Rabbi Ovadya Yosef cites and bases himself on the words of the Hakham Yosef Chayyim, author of “*Ben Ish Chai*” (Baghdad, 1832-1904), one of the greatest Sephardic halakhic authority. In his *Ben Ish Chai*, he relates to bar mitzva celebrations. At the end of that discussion, he adds a short piece about bat mitzva celebrations: “The day that a girl becomes obligated in *mitzvot*, even though it has not been the customary practice to make a festive meal, she should nevertheless rejoice on that day and wear Shabbat clothing. If possible, she should wear a new garment, and recite the *Shehecheyanu* blessing, and have in mind to relieve herself [of the obligation to recite a blessing over] the joy of entering under the yoke of the *mitzvot*.” He seems to be making a simple equation between bar and bat mitzva. *Ben Ish Chai* does not relate at all to the struggle with Reform Judaism or Christian practices in light of the prohibition against imitating gentile practices, for in his geographical and cultural milieu there was no need to address these issues. Rabbi Ovadya Yosef cites *Ben Ish Chai*’s ruling in a number of his responsa.⁵²

Rabbi Ovadya Yosef’s responsum discusses the sources and validity of various blessings, the laws governing the mention of God’s name in blessings, and, briefly, the halakhic status of birthdays. The entire discussion is constructed in accordance with the principles of the laws of blessings, the approach being very technical. The responsum makes no attempt to confront the contemporary problems of assimilation, boys’ and girls’ education, imitating gentile customs, and the like.

⁵² See Daniel Tuito, “*Chagigat bat ha-mitzva – iyyun biderakhim shel chakhmei doreinu*,” in Sarah Friedland (note 3), pp. 40-68.

Responsa Yechave Da'at

Even though there is no unequivocal source for a bat mitzva celebration, Rabbi Yosef bases his position on the talmudic passage in *Kiddushin* 31a, together with the comments of Maharshal (in his *Yam shel Shelomo*) and other authorities. He infers from these sources that a bat mitzva celebration should be considered a “*se’udat mitzva*” – “It is a correct practice, the ramification being that if a person is invited to participate in such a celebration, he is required to attend.” He cites Rabbi Moshe Feinstein in his *Iggerot Moshe*, who opposed bat mitzva celebrations because of the Reform influence (see above), but totally rejects his halakhic arguments or societal considerations (“his words are astonishing”, “his words are halakhically incorrect”). It is precisely in consideration of societal circumstances and in response to the sharp criticism of the non-religious world that he advocates bat mitzva celebrations: “Opposing bat mitzva celebrations allows sinners to accuse the Sages of Israel of depriving the daughters of Israel and discriminating between boys and girls.” Though he cites the “*Seridei Esh*,” he makes no reference to the educational consideration raised there – the benefit for the bat mitzva girl (see above) – but the social ramifications for Israeli society, i.e., the accusations raised against the rabbinic establishment. It should be remembered that the responsa printed in “*Yechave Da’at*” were first presented to the public in a weekly radio show broadcast on Friday afternoons that was aimed at the general Israeli audience. In conclusion, he advocates the celebration of a girl’s bat mitzva (“it is a good and fitting practice”), and classifies the accompanying banquet as a *se’udat mitzva*.

Special attention should be paid to Rabbi Yosef’s closing words: “And God will not withhold good from those who walk uprightly,” which are based on Psalms 84:12: “For the Lord God is a sun and a shield; the Lord will give grace and honor; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.” This expression is found frequently in Rabbi Yosef’s writings.⁵³ Both in the original context in the book

⁵³ 23 times in *Responsa Yechave Da’at* and *Responsa Yabi’a Omer*. This stands in sharp contrast to the total of 9 times that the expression is used in all of the responsa written by the medieval authorities (according to the Bar Ilan Responsa Project, version 9).

of Psalms, as well as in the context of Rabbi Yosef's rulings, the phrase points to the great importance of intention in the observance of Halakha.

The following citations from the responsum are deserving of special attention:

"It seems from his words that if a celebratory meal is held in her honor as is done for a bar mitzva boy when he reaches the age of mitzvot, it is good and fitting, and it is considered a *se'udat mitzva*. (With the proviso that they behave in accordance with the rules of modesty required by the Torah. See *Responsa Zekan Aharon, Orach Chayyim*, no. 6)."

When Rabbi Yosef comes to prove, on the basis of the Talmud and early commentaries, that a bat mitzva celebration is "good and fitting, and considered a *se'udat mitzva*," he directs the reader to *Responsa Zekan Aharon*. This is quite astonishing, for there is no halakhic authority who objected to bat mitzva celebrations more vehemently than the author of the "*Zekan Aharon*," Rabbi Aharon Walkin. How then can an authority as sharp and knowledgeable as Rabbi Yosef rely on his "hostile" opponent as if he were his "loving" ally in Halakha?⁵⁴ Is this reference meant to mislead the reader in his understanding of Rabbi Walkin's position on the issue?

Rabbi Yosef is well aware of Rabbi Walkin's zealous opposition to bat mitzva celebrations, and has no intention whatsoever of confusing the reader. He insists, however, that an halakhic authority's words be understood in their proper context. Rabbi Walkin opposes bat mitzva celebrations on two levels: the breach of modesty occasioned by the mingling of men and women at the bat mitzva party, and the violation of the general prohibition of "imitating gentile customs" that applies to all Reform innovations. These two levels of opposition are clearly evident to anyone who gives Rabbi Walkin's responsum a careful reading.⁵⁵ Rabbi Yosef argues that

⁵⁴ These expressions are taken from *Kiddushin* 30b: "Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said: "Even the father and son, the master and student, who study Torah together become hostile to each other, but do not quit the field until they come to love each other." See our discussion at the end of the "Summary and Conclusion" section.

⁵⁵ For he says: "And the last thing is most grievous in that they wish to assemble large groups of men and women, boys and girls, to celebrate the girls' coming of age. In addition to all the aspects of licentiousness and repugnance that I explained above, it also involves a number of Torah prohibitions. Anyone who acts in this manner, his intention is certainly to liken himself to the gentiles and the wicked Reform Jews. We have already

the prohibition against imitating gentile customs does not apply to bat mitzva celebrations, and so, were this the sole consideration, it would be permissible to celebrate a bat mitzva. The laws of modesty, however, certainly apply. Since the laws governing modest conduct are pertinent, Rabbi Yosef sends the reader to Rabbi Walkin's responsum. As a moderate and responsible halakhic authority, Rabbi Yosef knows how to confront his "hostile" colleague with the great respect that is due him, even though he disagrees with his halakhic conclusions. Relating to Rabbi Walkin as if he were his "loving" ally, Rabbi Yosef learns important halakhic considerations from him, "and does not quit the field until they come to love each other."⁵⁶

"Opposing bat mitzva celebrations allows sinners to accuse the Sages of Israel of depriving the daughters of Israel and discriminating between boys and girls. So did I find [is the position] of Rabbi Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg, in his *Responsa Seridei Esh*, III [no. 93, p. 288ff.]."

Comparing Rabbi Yosef's words regarding "sinners" with those of Rabbi Walkin on the same topic illustrates an interesting change. Rabbi Walkin declared war on "the sinners of Israel," and therefore zealously rejected any attempt to introduce a change in Halakha or common practice. "The intention of these new innovators is merely to liken themselves to the gentiles and the sinners of Israel; they behave like Zimri, and demand reward like Pinhas" (introduction to his responsum, cited above). In total contrast, Rabbi Yosef in his capacity as Chief Rabbi of Israel sixty years later, aspired to unite the Jewish community and "return the crown to its former glory" through halakhic rulings acceptable to all sectors of Israeli society,⁵⁷ especially those presented to the public by way of radio broadcast

been warned about this with seven negative precepts and two positive precepts not to follow their practices. As is explained by Rambam (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, 11:1): 'One may not walk in the practices of idolaters, nor may one liken himself to them in his clothing, hair, or the like. As it says: "You shall not walk in the practices of the nation" (Leviticus 20:23); "You shall not walk in their practices" (Leviticus 18:3); "Take heed to yourself that you be not ensnared into following them" (Deuteronomy 12:30).'"

⁵⁶ See our discussion at the end of the "Summary and Conclusion" section.

⁵⁷ See for example *Responsa Yabi'a Omer*, IV, *Orach Chayyim* no. 21: "And God will restore our judges as at first in order to return the crown to its former glory with clear

(*Responsa Yechave Da'at*).⁵⁸ The accusations put forward by the sinners of Israel required Rabbi Yosef to consider their arguments as an halakhic factor and recommend bat mitzva celebrations.

Rabbi Yosef brings support for his position from the words of Rabbi Weinberg: “So did I find [is the position] of Rabbi Yechiel Ya’akov Weinberg, in his *Responsa Seridei Esh*, III.” Outstanding educator that he was, Rabbi Weinberg was concerned about offending the sensitivities of young Jewish girls: “This discrimination between boys and girls is a serious offense to a girl’s feelings, and therefore there is reason to permit a celebration in the home for bat mitzva girls” (“*Seridei Esh*”). Rabbi Yosef cites Rabbi Weinberg word for word (“... and discriminating between boys and girls. So did I find [is the position] of Rabbi Yechiel Ya’akov Weinberg...”). However, he does not relate to what Rabbi Weinberg said as an educational factor, but as a social factor explaining the accusations leveled by the sinners of Israel against the halakhic authorities: “Opposing bat mitzva celebrations truly allows sinners to accuse the Sages of Israel of depriving the daughters of Israel and discriminating between boys and girls.”

Distinctive Points in the Responsa

Rabbi Ovadya Yosef’s approach to Torah study and halakhic decision-making is characterized by his bringing together and systematic arranging of a vast amount of source material that he culls from the entire body of halakhic literature across the generations. The presentation of the material in *Responsa Yabi’a Omer* differs from the presentation in *Responsa Yechave Da’at*.

In *Responsa Yabi’a Omer*, Rabbi Yosef starts with the talmudic sources, and moves on to the works of the halakhic codifiers, searching for the golden path that

halakhic rulings. And they will all blend into one brotherhood to do Your will with a perfect heart. Amen.” It should be noted that the expression “to return the crown to its former glory” (taken from *Yoma* 69b: “Why are they called ‘men of the Great Assembly’ – because they returned the crown to its former glory”) is found in the responsa since the sixteenth century a total of seventy times, 36 of which in the responsa of Rabbi Ovadya Yosef.

⁵⁸ See introduction to *Responsa Yechave Da’at* I, where Rabbi Yosef explains the popular nature of the work in contrast to *Responsa Yabi’a Omer*.

leads to the correct halakhic conclusion (see his introduction to *Responsa Yabi'a Omer I*). Utilizing his amazing mastery of halakhic literature, he cites and analyzes the responsa of his predecessors, and applies them to the practical cases under discussion in accordance with his discretion.

In *Responsa Yechave Da'at*, Rabbi Yosef addresses the public at large. He brings only a few talmudic proofs, and limits his analysis of the later authorities. Serving as Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, he tries to distance himself from the ideological controversies and political considerations of the earlier authorities regarding bat mitzva celebrations, and rules that such celebrations are indeed permissible. His aim is to minimize controversy – even that originating with “the accusations of the sinners of Israel” – and to strengthen the Torah education of Jewish youth – “to return the crown to its former glory.”

Goals of this Chapter

- Where does Rabbi Ovadya Yosef live? How did he see his role and mission as Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel?
- What is the Sephardic tradition concerning bat mitzva and how is it different from the Ashkenazic tradition?
- What is the primary difference in nature and purpose between *Responsa Yabi'a Omer* and *Responsa Yechave Da'at*? How do these differences express themselves with regard to the issue of bat mitzva celebrations?
- How does Rabbi Yosef relate to the positions of Rabbis Aharon Walkin, Moshe Feinstein, and Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg?

VIII. Summary and Conclusion

Having studied each of the responsa, we shall now try to demonstrate that despite the practical disagreement between the various authorities, the issue is marked by logical and continuous development, which can best be explained on the basis of the changing social and historical circumstances. We shall try to show the dynamics and essential unity in the development of the halakhic discussion, which becomes most evident when the various approaches are presented in a chronological and harmonizing order.⁵⁹ The question of bat mitzva celebrations was brought before the halakhic authorities in different contexts and periods, and so it is only natural that the various authors relate to different aspects of the problem. The social considerations raised by the authorities should be understood in light of the community that asked the question and the period during which the responsum was written. When we compare the various responsa, we see gradual and logical development that accords with the changing circumstances of the community raising the question:

The sermon delivered by Rabbi Ya'akov Ettlinger and published in his *Responsa Binyan Tziyon Hashalem (1867)* is not a responsum that offers a halakhic analysis of the talmudic sources, but rather a speech delivered at the graduation ceremony of a Jewish girls' school. Despite the coercion of the ruling authorities and the striking similarity to the confirmation rite, Rabbi Ettlinger conducted the ceremony based on Jewish considerations, such as the sanctification of God's name, educational goals and the like.

The responsum of Rabbi Aharon Walkin in his *Responsa Zekan Aharon (1927)* is the first true halakhic discussion of the issue. In his day, Orthodox Judaism was still strong and flourishing in Lithuania. There was little need to compete with the Christian environment, and the Reform movement had not succeeded in making inroads. The Rabbis of London had asked Rabbi Walkin

⁵⁹ There are, of course, recent authorities who continue to oppose bat mitzva celebrations, some of whom we have mentioned in the notes. Presenting the issue in "chronological and harmonizing order" helps us better understand the general development. It does not follow, however, that every authority and all sectors have accepted the allowance.

about a “coming of age celebration” for Jewish girls. The ceremony’s proponents were clearly motivated by a desire to adopt the practices of their Christian neighbors. Rabbi Walkin declared war on these “sinners of Israel,” strongly and zealously opposing the innovation.

According to Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, in his Responsa Iggerot Moshe (1956-1959), bat mitzva celebrations have no positive value (the same may also be said about bar mitzva celebrations). On the contrary, they only lead to Sabbath desecration – “a bat mitzva ceremony is certainly an optional matter and mere nonsense.” He does not, however, raise the issue of imitating gentile customs. When the matter was brought before him for a second time, and in light of the fact that the practice had become widespread in many communities, so that any attempt to abolish it might cause serious controversy, Rabbi Feinstein, while adamant in his refusal to recognize a bat mitzva celebration as a *se’udat mitzva*, accepted the possibility that bat mitzva celebrations may have certain educational value. In actual practice, however, he did not advocate adopting the innovation, and wherever possible, it is preferable to abolish it.

Rabbi Meshulam Rath, in his Responsa Kol Mevasser (1958) agrees in principle that bat mitzva celebrations have educational value and that the event should indeed be celebrated in the girl’s school or in a family setting. Since, however, long standing Jewish practices are not to be changed, the celebration should not be treated as a *se’udat mitzva*.

Rabbi Yechiel Ya’akov Weinberg (died in 1966), in his Responsa Seridei Esh, deals at length with the halakhic principles underlying the issue, arguing that the prohibition against imitating gentile practices does not apply. In light of the special problems facing our generation in the aftermath of the Holocaust, we are “almost demanded” to celebrate a girl’s bat mitzva in order to strengthen the Jewish education given to girls. Discriminating between boys and girls in this matter is liable to seriously offend a young Jewish girl’s feelings.

Rabbi Ovadya Yosef, in his Responsa Yabi’a Omer (1976) and in his Responsa Yechave Da’at (1979) discusses the talmudic sources and halakhic details of the issue. According to him, the prohibition against imitating gentile customs does not apply to bat mitzva celebrations. He does not relate to

educational considerations or social analyses, but as Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel he cannot ignore the communal ramifications: “Opposing bat mitzva celebrations truly allows sinners to accuse the Sages of Israel of depriving the daughters of Israel and discriminating between boys and girls.” Practically speaking, therefore, a bat mitzva should be celebrated as a *se’udat mitzva*.

If we compare the various approaches, we see the following development (see chart below): At first, celebrating a bat mitzva was regarded as forbidden by Torah law (*Zekan Aharon*); then it was considered “optional and mere nonsense” (*Iggerot Moshe*); then it was seen as “possible to mark the event as a day of happiness and rejoicing” (*Kol Mevasser*); afterwards it was argued that “common sense and pedagogical principle almost demand of us to celebrate a girl’s reaching the obligation of *mitzvot*” (*Seridei Esh*); until finally bat mitzva celebrations were accepted as “a good and fitting practice” (Rabbi Ovadya Yosef). The term that was used to describe the event also changed in accordance with the halakhic position of each of the authorities. The bat mitzva celebration was variously described as “confirmation” (*Zekan Aharon*); “a ceremony or celebration for girls reaching bat mitzva” and “merely a birthday party” (*Iggerot Moshe*); “a bat mitzva celebration program” (*Kol Mevasser*); “a bat mitzva celebration” (*Seridei Esh* and Rabbi Ovadya Yosef).

The significance of the *derasha* and the celebratory meal also varies in according to the position: The issue is not discussed in light of the fact that the celebration is absolutely forbidden (*Zekan Aharon*); “[the bat mitzva girl] is permitted to say a few words...,” but we are not dealing with a “*se’udat mitzva*” (*Iggerot Moshe*); it is suggested and advisable that the teacher “deliver a lesson on a timely topic in order to clarify the obligations of a Jewish girl who has reached the age of *mitzvot*,” even though it is not exactly a *se’udat mitzva*” (*Kol Mevasser*); according to the distinguished educator, Rabbi Weinberg, the *derasha* is the educational message of the bat mitzva, and therefore a “condition” for the entire celebration (*Seridei Esh*); as a ruling directed to the public at large, a bat mitzva celebration is a *se’udat mitzva*, “and it is preferable that they speak there words of Torah, as well as praises of God” (Rabbi Ovadya Yosef).

The issue of bat mitzva celebrations cannot be decided on the basis of strict halakhic principles and considerations. In the end, both those who allow the practice as well as those who forbid it justify their halakhic positions by invoking other considerations.⁶⁰ Even though to this very day there are those who oppose the celebration of a bat mitzva as a *se'udat mitzva*, the clear tendency of the halakhic authorities over the past fifty years has been to allow – and even to encourage and obligate – bat mitzva celebrations. This tendency follows from the many changes that have transpired in recent generations: the danger of the influence of the Reform movement upon Orthodox circles has diminished; now that bat mitzva celebrations have gradually struck roots in many communities, the non-Jewish origins of the practice is no longer evident; the need for strong Jewish education following the Holocaust, both in assimilating communities in the Diaspora as well as in many circles in Israel. These considerations justify exploiting the bat mitzva celebration as a unique educational opportunity for Jewish girls.

Halakha's position regarding bat mitzva celebrations has crystallized over the course of recent generations. While dissenting opinions exist to this day, that position has developed in a harmonious manner: Despite the negative and zealous attitude of Rabbi Walkin at the beginning of the controversy, the matter took shape and developed over the course of the coming generations. The zealous attitude toward the sinners of Israel disappeared in favor of Jewish education, avoiding controversy and promoting unity among the Jewish people. The earliest halakhic approach to bat mitzva celebrations was zealous and aggressive, in the category of

⁶⁰ For example, what Rabbi Weinberg says at the end of his responsum: "Common sense and pedagogical principle almost demand of us to celebrate a girl's reaching the obligation of *mitzvot*. The distinction made between boys and girls regarding the celebration of their maturity seriously offends the sensitivities of the girl who comes of age, who in other areas has already achieved emancipation, as it were.... It does not escape me that among the God-fearing there are those who are stringent and forbid the practice, who regarding questions of religious practices, pay no attention to logical considerations nor even to halakhic clarifications. Rather, they decide according to the feelings of the heart alone. The Jewish heart that clings to the traditions received from parents and teachers recoil from any change in religious practice."

“hostile to each other,”⁶¹ but as a result of “love for Judaism and its *mitzvot*”⁶² there emerged a fruitful halakhic confrontation with the issue. Even the authorities who permitted the celebration of a girl’s bat mitzva made use of the halakhic considerations raised by those authorities who forbid the practice.⁶³ It was in this way that the custom of celebrating a bat mitzva was accepted in most Jewish communities as a “good and fitting practice.”

The crystallization of Halakha’s position on bat mitzva celebrations over the course of recent generations may, therefore, be summarized with the following idea:

Kiddushin 30b: “Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said: Even the father and son, the master and student, who study Torah together become hostile to each other, but do not quit the field until they come to love each other.”

⁶¹ See *Responsa Zekan Aharon*: “And you, the children of Israel, its teachers and guides, be strong and courageous, gird your loins like warriors to stand in battle against the enemies of God who wish to tear down and breach the fences of the Jewish world... Fear not the noise of the trampling shoes that will come down upon you, the noise of the pens in the publications of the nations, what they say and what they write. Let not your hearts grow faint from the threats and the fears with which they frighten you. For God will fight for you...”

⁶² See *Responsa Seridei Esh*: “Our brothers who have recently introduced the practice of celebrating a bat mitzva say that they have done so in order to strengthen in the heart of a girl who has reached [the age of] *mitzvot* her love for Judaism and its commandments, and to arouse a feeling of pride in her Judaism and in her being the daughter of a great and holy people.”

⁶³ See Rabbi Ovadya Yosef in his *Responsa Yechave Da’at*, where he “relies” on *Responsa Zekan Aharon* as proof for his position.

Author	Se'udat Mitzva and Derasha	Terms used to describe the event and its objective	Halakhic conclusion and reasoning
Rabbi Ya'akov Ettlinger – <i>Responsa Binyan Tziyon</i> (1867)	----	"A ceremony marking the completion of a course of study by the Jewish girls in the community of Altona."	He does not deal with bat mitzva celebrations, but rather with a ceremony marking the completion of a course of study in a school for Jewish girls.
Rabbi Aharon Walkin – <i>Responsa Zekan Aharon</i> (1927)	Does not relate to the issue.	"Confirmation ceremony for young girls' ... Their intention (Reform) ... is merely to liken themselves to the gentiles ..."	<u>Absolutely forbidden by Torah law</u> , because of the prohibition against imitating gentile customs; zealous opposition to "the sinners of Israel" (Reform).
Rabbi Moshe Feinstein – <i>Responsa Iggerot Moshe</i> (1956-1959)	"And she is <u>permitted</u> to say a few words in honor of her joyous occasion." "But it is not regarded as a <i>mitzva</i> or as a <i>se'udat mitzva</i> ."	" <u>A ceremony or celebration for girls reaching bat mitzva</u> " and "merely a birthday party."	Should not be permitted, and preferably should be abolished. " <u>Optional and mere nonsense</u> ." If the practice has already been accepted in a certain community, and abolishing it would lead to controversy, it should not be abolished.
Rabbi Meshulam Rath – <i>Responsa Kol Mevasser</i> (1958)	"The teacher... <u>may</u> deliver a lesson on a timely topic in order to clarify the obligations of a Jewish girl who has reached the age of <i>mitzvot</i> ."	" <u>A bat mitzva celebration program</u> ."	It is neither obligatory nor a fixed custom, but rather a permissible option: " <u>It is possible to mark the event as a day of happiness and rejoicing</u> ."
Rabbi Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg (d. 1966) – <i>Responsa Seridei Esh</i>	" <u>Only if</u> the Rabbi delivers a speech before the bat mitzva girl, admonishing her that from that day on she must observe the principle <i>mitzvot</i> between her and God."	" <u>A bat mitzva celebration</u> ." "Love for Judaism and its commandments, and to arouse a feeling of pride in her Judaism and in her being the daughter of a great and holy people."	The prohibition against imitating gentile customs is inapplicable; "common sense and pedagogical principle almost demand of us to celebrate a girl's reaching the obligation of <i>mitzvot</i> "; "a girl's feelings will be hurt if we discriminate between boys and girls, for they should be treated equally."
Rabbi Ovadya Yosef – <i>Responsa Yabi'a Omer</i> (1976) and <i>Responsa Yechave Da'at</i> (1979)	"There is no <i>se'udat mitzva</i> greater than this." "And it is <u>preferable</u> that they speak their words of Torah, as well as praises of God."	" <u>Bat mitzva celebration</u> ." Educational objective.	The prohibition against imitating gentile customs is inapplicable; celebrating a bat mitzva is " <u>a good and fitting practice</u> "; "Opposing bat mitzva celebrations truly allows sinners to accuse the Sages of Israel of depriving the daughters of Israel and discriminating between boys and girls."

Goals of the Chapter

Having examined the talmudic and later rabbinic sources dealing with bar and bat mitzva celebrations (chap. 1) and the various positions of recent halakhic authorities on the matter (chaps. 2-7), we shall now review and summarize the main points that have arisen over the course of our investigation:

- What are the reasons for and against arranging a ceremony or celebration in honor of the bat mitzva boy or bat mitzva girl on the day that they reach the age of *mitzvot*?
- Summarize the views of the halakhic authorities with the help of a chart. Note the biographical details of each authority: when did he live and where did his works have the greatest impact. Record the principal arguments of each authority.
- What are the relevant halakhic factors and what additional considerations must be taken into account? How did the various authorities deal with each of these factors and considerations? Try to identify the considerations common to the various authorities and note the different approaches adopted by them.
- How did the various authorities relate to each other? What are the points about which they agree and disagree?
- What is your own personal position regarding the matter under discussion? What is the most appropriate and meaningful way for a girl to celebrate her bat mitzva in our society? How will bat mitzva celebrations develop in the future?
- What significance do bar and bat mitzva celebrations have for you? What is the most effective way to emphasize those values?