

## **Change and Meaning in Bat/Bar Mitzvah Experience**

Lesson plan for family education (grade 5 and up)

*This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Taking Risks, Making Change: Bat Mitzvah and other evolving traditions,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/mar09/>. Visit this website to access the featured audio clip and download the featured letters by Sally Gottesman and Paula Rachlin Gottesman.*

Begin your session with everyone together. Using the introductory essay for this edition of *Go & Learn*, (which also can found on the above website), provide families with a brief overview of the history of the Bat Mitzvah and how it has evolved.

Listen:

- Listen to the audio clip of Sally Gottesman reading the letter she wrote to her synagogue’s Ritual Committee, or ask a female student to read the letter aloud.
- Ask a female parent (or student) to read aloud the letter written by Paula Rachlin Gottesman, Sally’s mother.
- Distribute copies of both letters so visual learners can follow along as they listen, and everyone has the chance to revisit the text.

Questions for discussion:

- What is Sally’s main argument? What is her mother’s?
- What, if anything, did you find surprising about Sally’s letter? About her mother’s letter?
- How do you think members of the Ritual Committee would have reacted to the letters?

Below are three program options. You may choose one or more, depending on the time available to you.

**Option 1: Write a Letter—Issues in Your Community**

In 1974, when Sally was preparing to become a Bat Mitzvah, the American Jewish community was divided on the roles girls and women should play in synagogue life. For example, the Conservative movement, with which Sally's synagogue was affiliated, had recently ruled that women could be counted as part of a *minyan*—the group of at least ten individuals that make up a formal prayer service—but that it was up to the leadership of each congregation to decide whether to adopt this policy in their own synagogue. Today, most non-

Orthodox synagogues have few, if any, rules that prohibit women from doing the same things as men in the congregation. So what *are* today's divisive issues in your community? Do you think it is important to address these issues? As individuals? As a community?

Break into two groups, one for adults and one for students. Within each group, brainstorm “hot button” issues that your community is still grappling with. Examples might include gay/lesbian marriages, policies for conversion, roles played by non-Jewish members of interfaith families, relationships with Israel, relationships with the local community, membership dues, treatment of employees at the synagogue, and levels of observance. If your congregation has taken a unique stance on an issue, or made strides on a particular front, you can also reflect on what that has meant for your community.

Come back together as one group and compare the brainstorm lists. As a group, choose one issue to focus on for this session.

Ask students and parents to imagine that they are in the position of Sally Gottesman or her mother, raising their voices about an issue that is important to them. Now ask each person to write a letter explaining her/his belief and how s/he thinks the community should respond to this issue. (Be sure to explain in advance whether individuals will be required to submit/share their letters, or whether those who wish to keep them private will have that option.) Students and adults can use the following questions as a guide, if needed.

- Why do you think this is an important issue?
- What is your position on the issue? (Which side do you agree with?)
- Explain your position to people who might disagree with you.
- What aspects of this issue are you unsure how you feel about, or do have questions about?
- How, if at all, have other groups/communities (that you know of) responded to this issue? [Note: you may want to pose this question to the group before starting the letter writing process, so participants can learn of various responses and discuss them together.]
- What should your synagogue/community do to respond to this issue? (Are there rules or policies that should be adopted?)
- What can you personally do to help make this happen?

Depending on the dynamic of the group and the issue chosen, you may want to take this opportunity to have members of the group exchange letters or to call on volunteers to share what they wrote. Parents and children may want time to discuss their letters privately as a family. You also could stage a pro/con debate, have a more structured discussion about the issue, or bring in guest speakers. As by definition these are sensitive, “hot button” issues, be aware of the situations you set up.

Have students and parents discuss what they would like to do with the letters now. For instance, letters could be shared with other members of the synagogue (perhaps with the ritual committee, Board, or clergy), the school, or the community. Select letters could be submitted to the synagogue newsletter, or even to a local newspaper as “Letters to the Editor.”

In closing, reflect with the group:

- What have you learned about this issue that you didn't know before?
- Has your opinion changed or been strengthened through this process? How, if at all, have you come to better understand others' perspectives on this issue?
- Think back to the letters Sally and her mother wrote. Did writing your own letter change how you view their letters? If so, how?

## **Option 2: Write a Letter—Evolving B’nai Mitzvah Traditions**

Split adults from youth.

Ask **youth** to think about ways the Bat/Bar Mitzvah has evolved since the time of Sally Gottesman’s Bat Mitzvah (not limited to issues of gender and egalitarianism). What changes do they think are still needed? Students will write a letter in response to one or more of the following questions:

- What changes or additions would you like to see in the Bat/Bar Mitzvah ceremonies in your community? What about changes or traditions you would like to start for your own Bat/Bar Mitzvah? Why?
- OR, if there is nothing in particular that you would like to do differently, which aspects of the Bat/Bar Mitzvah do you already appreciate?
- Which Bat/Bar Mitzvah traditions unique to your family, school, or community will be especially meaningful to you? Why? What else about your own Bat/Bar Mitzvah ceremony are you looking forward to?

Ask **adults** to think about what other ways the Bat/Bar Mitzvah has evolved since the time of Sally Gottesman’s Bat Mitzvah (not limited to issues of gender and egalitarianism). What changes do they think are still needed? Adults will write a letter in response to one or more of the following questions:

- In addition to changes for girls in many communities, what other shifts have you noticed in Bat/Bar Mitzvah ceremonies?
- What changes or additions would you still like to see in the Bat/Bar Mitzvah ceremonies in your community? What about in your own child(ren)’s Bat/Bar Mitzvah in particular? Why?
- OR, if there is nothing in particular that you would like to do differently, which aspects of the Bat/Bar Mitzvah do you already appreciate as a parent?
- Which Bat/Bar Mitzvah traditions unique to your family, school, or community will be especially meaningful you? Why? Which traditions or customs do you find less meaningful or problematic?

- As a parent, what else about your child(ren)'s Bat/Bat Mitzvah ceremony are you looking forward to? What concerns do you have? How can you alleviate some of these concerns?

Once the letters have been written, ask students and parents to talk about what they would like to do with these letters. For instance, students' and/or parents' letters can be shared with members of the synagogue (perhaps with the ritual committee), school, or community. Alternately, the letters can be sealed and saved to give back to the families when their Bat/Bar Mitzvah preparations begin, if the participating youth are still a few years away from their B'nai Mitzvah. Though letters will provide your students and their parents with an opportunity for personal reflection, this activity can also be adapted for a group discussion or a brainstorming session.

If you are working with a Bat/Bar Mitzvah class specifically, you may want to use this activity to spark conversation within individual families. After the youth and adults complete their letters, split the group up into family units. Ask family members to share their letters with one another, so that youth are reading what their parents wrote and parents are reading what their children wrote. Provide ample time for families to discuss their letters and talk about how any changes/additions/particular traditions could be incorporated into the upcoming Bat/Bar Mitzvah. Encourage family members to note any similarities or contradictions among their letters.

To close the session, bring everyone back together. Call on volunteers to share their ideas with the larger group. Guide the group in reflecting on the process of writing their letters and talking about the Bat/Bar Mitzvah ceremony.

- Did this affect the way you think about the Bat/Bar Mitzvah ceremony? If so, how?
- What new questions do you have?

### **Option 3: Interviews**

Students will now have the chance to learn about their parents' experiences relating to the Bat/Bar Mitzvah. Let parents know in advance that this will be a topic of discussion and that one parent will to be interviewed about her/his own Bat/Bar Mitzvah or the experience of not having one. (Use your judgment in deciding whether to group a few families together if there are students in your class who do not have a parent that either had a Bat/Bar Mitzvah or has a strong memory of what it was like to *not* have a Bat/Bar Mitzvah.)

Instruct each family/group to decide which adult is going to be interviewed. Then ask students to use the questions in the appendix as a guide for their interviews, and to note down the answers to each question. (If families are paired together, have one student write down notes from the conversation while another asks the questions.)

When the interviews have been completed, guide the group in reflecting on the interview process:

- What did you learn that surprised you?
- What new questions do you have?
- For students: How, if at all, did learning about parents' Bat/Bar Mitzvah experiences change the way you are thinking about your own Bat/Bar Mitzvah?
- For parents: How, if at all, did talking about your generation's Bat/Bar Mitzvah experiences change the way you are thinking about your children's B'nai Mitzvah?

## APPENDIX: Interview Questions

- In what year did you turn age 12/13? (or in what decade?)
- Where did you live? How would you describe that community?
- Was your family involved with a synagogue or another kind of Jewish community? What was its name? With which denomination, if any, was it affiliated?
- Did you have a Bat/Bar Mitzvah at that time? (around age 12/13) Did you have an adult Bat/Bar Mitzvah?

If yes to either question, go to set A. If no, go to set B.

### A. Tell me about your Bat/Bar Mitzvah.

- What do you remember most about how you felt that day? About preparing for your Bat/Bar Mitzvah?
- Tell me a story that will help me understand what your Bat/Bar Mitzvah was like.
- What Bat/Bar Mitzvah customs were most meaningful to you?
- What customs or traditions did you not like?
- How, if at all, was your Bat/Bar Mitzvah different from other B'nai Mitzvah at the time?\*
- Were you involved in any new ritual practices in your community, e.g. the first girl to wear a *tallit*?\*
- For women, did being a girl determine what your Bat Mitzvah looked like (when it was, whether you read from the Torah, any special traditions you added) or would it have been the same if you were a boy? If gender did play a role, did that bother you? Why or why not?
- Did your Bat/Bar Mitzvah experience impact your Jewish identity? If so, how?
- If you became a Bat/Bar Mitzvah as an adult, what made you decide to do it? What were the circumstances when you were younger that led you to not have a Bat/Bar Mitzvah then?

**B.** Think back to what it was like to be 12/13 years old.

- Were you aware of *not* having a Bat/Bar Mitzvah, or was it not an issue for you?
- If you were aware, what was that experience like? Did you want to have a Bat/Bar Mitzvah? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about it now?
- Why didn't you have a Bat/Bar Mitzvah? (Possibilities might include: I didn't grow up Jewish; my family didn't belong to a synagogue; girls did not have Bat Mitzvah ceremonies in my community; I didn't want to have one; it wasn't even something we thought about.)
- For women, if you didn't have a Bat Mitzvah because girls in your community weren't allowed to (or typically didn't), did that bother you? Why or why not?
- (if relevant) Did the absence of a Bat/Bar Mitzvah impact your Jewish identity? If so, how?
- Are there other ways you have expressed your identity within the Jewish community?
- (if relevant) Have you ever pushed the boundaries in expressing yourself Jewishly? For example, were you ever involved in new ritual practices in your community, e.g. the first woman to wear a *tallit* or the first interfaith couple to have an *aliyah*?
- Tell me about a ritual experience (religious or secular) that you consider a defining moment in your life.

\*Did you hear a story of a Bat Mitzvah First? Send us your stories of B'not Mitzvah that broke new ground—whether the first Bat Mitzvah in a synagogue, first on a Saturday morning, first to lead services, first Bat Mitzvah with a tallit or with torah reading—to [education@jwa.org](mailto:education@jwa.org). These stories will also be shared with Moving Traditions' Bat Mitzvah Firsts project ([movingtraditions.org](http://movingtraditions.org)).