

More Than Just a Party: Bat/Bar Mitzvah, Then and Now

Lesson plan for youth (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.

Using the introductory essay for this edition of *Go & Learn*, (which also can be found on the above website), provide 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.
- Then read aloud the letter written by Paula Rachlin Gottesman, Sally’s mother. (You can read the letter yourself, or have another student or classroom aide read it.)
- 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?
- Why do you think Sally and her mother felt this was an important issue? What specific phrases led you to think this?
- What similarities and differences between the two letters do you see? What stood out for you?
- How do you think members of the Ritual Committee would have reacted to the letters?

- How do you think the Ritual Committee's reaction might have been different if only Sally or only her mother had sent a letter?
- In her statement for the Jewish Women's Archive's online exhibit, *Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution*, Sally Gottesman writes, "My letter is the product of my 12-year-old self: I chose not to translate Hillel's quote 'If not now, when?' reasoning, 'If they are on the ritual committee, they should know Hebrew.'" What do you think this tells us about Sally?

In most non-Orthodox congregations today, girls have the same responsibilities for their B'not Mitzvah as boys for their B'nai Mitzvah. (In many Orthodox congregations, the Bat Mitzvah is marked with a special ceremony or celebration.) Yet young people—girls and boys—may still see room for other changes to the Bat/Bar Mitzvah ceremony and experience.

- What ideas do you have for ways the Bat/Bar Mitzvah could—or should—change over time? How could it become more meaningful?
- Why do you think these changes would (or wouldn't be) important?
- (If relevant) Do you think your Bat/Bar Mitzvah experience has affected or will affect your Jewish identity? If so, how?

As an adult, Sally Gottesman co-founded an organization called Moving Traditions, which runs *Rosh Chodesh: It's a Girl Thing!*, a monthly program for pre-teen and teenage girls to build self-esteem, leadership skills, and Jewish identity. Moving Traditions also has a project called *Bat Mitzvah Firsts*, which surveys women and girls who were the first in their synagogue or community to have a Bat Mitzvah or a new version of the Bat Mitzvah (as was the case for Sally, who was the first girl in her synagogue to have her Bat Mitzvah on a Saturday morning).

Gottesman describes herself as having been a committed Jew and feminist at age 12, following the role of her mother and grandfather.

- How do you think Sally's experience petitioning for her Saturday morning Bat Mitzvah may have influenced her work as an adult?
- What other questions do you have?

Option 1: Congregation's History

Have students investigate the history of the Bat Mitzvah in their congregation (or community). You may want to interview a longtime congregant, the rabbi, cantor, or school principal. If your synagogue or community has a museum, library, or other historic records/archives, set aside time to take advantage of these resources. Have your students look through photographs, newspaper articles, Shabbat service programs, minutes from meetings, letters, synagogue records, or other items that might help them discover the history of the Bat

Mitzvah—and women's roles more generally—within your synagogue. If your congregation is relatively new and/or has never made a distinction between Bat and Bar Mitzvah, you may want to investigate the history of the Bat Mitzvah within the local community instead.

Questions to investigate might include:

- When was the congregation founded? By whom?
- What were women's roles in the synagogue when it was founded?
- What are women's roles now?
- Were girls in the congregation always allowed to have a Bat Mitzvah? If not, when did the first Bat Mitzvah happen?
- What are B'not Mitzvah like at the synagogue now? Do they differ at all from boys' B'nai Mitzvah?
- How have Bat Mitzvah ceremonies at the synagogue changed over time? (Did they start out on Friday nights and move to Saturday mornings? Do girls read from the Torah? Do they give speeches? After Bat Mitzvah, are women allowed to be called to the Torah for *aliyot* and counted in a *minyan*? Are some of these questions still being debated within your congregation?)
- Are adult B'nai Mitzvah common at the synagogue? Are they more common among women?

Option 2: Interview

At home, have each student interview an adult Jewish relative or family friend about what it was like to have or not have a Bat Mitzvah. (Examples of possible

interview subjects include: a mother who had a Bat Mitzvah, a Jewish grandmother who was not allowed to have a Bat Mitzvah, an aunt who converted to Judaism as an adult and recently became an adult Bat Mitzvah.) Students can use the questions listed in the appendix as a guide for their interviews. Feel free to add your own questions, or ask students to brainstorm questions in advance. For further guidance on conducting an oral history, including tips for additional questions and how to make a recording, visit <http://jwa.org/discover/oralhistory> and view the free Google Books version of the Jewish Women's Archive's publication *In Our Own Voices: Conducting Life History Interviews with American Jewish Women*. Students can introduce the project by saying "My class is studying stories about Bat Mitzvah—women who have had a Bat Mitzvah and women who haven't—and I want to learn your story."

Sharing Interviews:

In the class session following their interviews, ask students to break into smaller groups (ideally 4-6 students) to share what they learned. Students should go around and have each member of the group spend 5 minutes saying who s/he interviewed, where and (approximately) when that individual grew up, whether she had a Bat Mitzvah or not, and what that experience was like for her. Each student should also share the most surprising thing s/he learned during the interview. After everyone has had a turn, have each group use a large piece of paper to brainstorm similarities and differences between the experiences of the women they interviewed. With these notes in mind, the group should come up with a list of at least three new things they learned about the Bat Mitzvah experience.

Each group then selects a speaker who will take this list and represent the group. While the remainder of the group stays in their seats, the speaker moves to another group to report. (For instance, the speaker from group A joins group B, the speaker from group B joins group C, and the speaker from group C joins group A.) The speaker then shares what s/he learned with the new group, and in return, the group tells the speaker about the experiences of the women they interviewed. If time permits, have the speaker move to a second group and repeat the exercise. (If you have a small class or are short on time, you can also do a traditional share-out.)

Reflection:

Guide the group in reflecting on the interview process.

- What did you learn that surprised you?
- What new questions do you have?
- How, if at all, did learning about these Bat Mitzvah experiences change the way you are thinking about your own Bat/Bar Mitzvah? (if relevant)

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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 and/or other Jewish organizations? If so, what were they called? What, if any, denomination were they affiliated with?
- Did you have a Bat Mitzvah at that time? (around age 12/13) Did you have an adult Bat Mitzvah?

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

A. Tell me about your Bat Mitzvah.

- What do you remember most about how you felt that day? About preparing for your Bat Mitzvah?
- Tell me a story that will help me understand what your Bat Mitzvah was like.
- What Bat Mitzvah customs or traditions were most meaningful for you?
- What customs or traditions did you not like?
- How, if at all, was your Bat Mitzvah different from other girls' B'not Mitzvah at the time?* Were B'not Mitzvah common in your community?
- Were you involved in any new ritual practices in your community, e.g. the first girl to wear a *tallit*?*
- How, if at all, was your Bat Mitzvah different from boys' B'nai Mitzvah at the time? (Think about when it was [e.g. Friday night vs. Saturday morning], whether you read from the Torah, or any special traditions you added.) If gender did play a role, did that bother you? Why or why not?
- Did your Bat Mitzvah experience impact your Jewish identity? If so, how?
- If you became a Bat Mitzvah as an adult, what made you decide to do it? What circumstances in your life growing up led you to not have a Bat Mitzvah at age 12/13? How did you feel about it at the time? How do you feel about it now?
- (If the interviewer has an upcoming Bat/Bar Mitzvah) What advice do you have for me when I become Bat/Bar Mitzvah?

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

- Were you aware of *not* having a Bat 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 Mitzvah? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about it now?
- Why didn't you have a Bat 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.)
- 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?
- Did the absence of a Bat Mitzvah impact your Jewish identity? If so, how?
- Are there other ways that you have expressed your identity within the Jewish community?
- 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*?
- Is there an important Jewish experience in your life that you would like to share? Tell me a story that can help me learn more about you.
- (If the interviewer has an upcoming Bat/Bar Mitzvah) What advice do you have for me when I become Bat/Bar Mitzvah?

*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. These stories will also be shared with Moving Traditions' Bat Mitzvah Firsts project (movingtraditions.org).