

# The Bat Mitzvah Question I Wasn't Expecting: 'Are We Safe at Synagogue?'

Sarah Wildman Jan. 23, 2022



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In many synagogues in America, especially large congregations like the one my family and I attend, children receive a date for their bar or bat mitzvah years in advance. This is the day that a child stands in front of the congregation and assumes the responsibilities of an adult, reading from the Torah and offering a commentary on the week's teaching. It is a time of enormous celebration; it requires months of preparation.

So we knew, already in early 2019, that our daughter Orli would become a bat mitzvah on Jan. 15, 2022. It seemed

auspicious: It would be the week of her 13th birthday; it was Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, a time of national introspection; and the portion of the Torah assigned to that week was resonant. In it the Jews cross the Red Sea, fleeing slavery, and enter the wilderness.

In the intervening years, our family began to better understand wandering in the wilderness, not only from the endless drag of the pandemic but also because some months after Orli received her bat mitzvah date, a CT scan revealed her liver was laden with tumors. Through two years of surgeries, chemotherapy and extended hospital stays, we held on to the idea that she might still stand in front of the congregation.

In families like ours, joy has a specific urgency. It cannot be delayed. We refused to move the date, even when Covid and Omicron changed our ability to invite everyone we wanted to see. Facing morphing uncertainties and vulnerability, we adapted. We did not have to reach deep to say the prayer of thanks for allowing us to reach this moment.

In congregations like my own, we do not use our phones on Shabbat, so we were unaware that around the time Orli began to recite from the Torah, 1,300 miles away, at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, a man had taken the rabbi and congregants hostage. Later that night, when we learned what was still unfolding, my partner and I whispered to each other, hoping to shield Orli and her sister, Hana, a moment longer, to delay the inevitable question we knew we'd be asked: "Will it happen to us?" Orli had asked me the same question the week after

Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue was attacked in October 2018. She worried that we could be bombed. In other words: Are we safe at synagogue?

To these questions, I can offer no concrete answer. I do not want to lie, though I am tempted to simply insist we will be fine. I tell them: Our synagogue is well fortified. But my uncertainty in a time of hate and violence, not unlike my uncertainty in the face of illness, destabilizes me. It is unsettling to allow your children to know, early on, just how very little control you really have. Vulnerability is always jarring; it is somehow more terrible when you are meant to be a comforting presence. Plus, I have no good models for these queries.

When I was a child, I had little to challenge my belief in my parents' ability to keep us healthy. Conversations about fear were largely retrospective. We grew up with our Holocaust refugee relatives who had fled destitution and destruction to deliverance in an American promised land. The past was terrible, but we were in the present.

My children, meanwhile, are familiar with mediports, home fluids and daily pill regimens. The girls intimately know the difference between minor surgeries and major ones. They have grown accustomed to our synagogue's metal detectors, bag checks and security guards; they know by name the permanent security officer at the door. Indeed, the officer knows Orli's story well. When he saw us arrive on that Saturday morning for the bat mitzvah, he and my partner, Ian, embraced. They both cried.

In “Beshalach” (“When He Let Go”), the Torah portion read on Jan. 15, the Israelites celebrate their freedom, then panic in the face of uncertainty. They bitterly complain to Moses, who has led them out of Egypt, that they fear death by thirst or starvation awaits them in the wilderness. The portion ends with a battle with the Amalekites, a conflict, the Torah tells us, that continues from generation to generation. The Amalekites become a stand-in for a mythical eternal enemy, a symbol of any evil that subsequently arises against the Jewish community.

As the months of Orli’s illness turned into years, and even when her scans were finally clear this past summer, uncertainty remained. In her sermon, Orli pushed back against the idea of an omnipresent God, or a God that favored Jews, or even God at all. She told the congregation she understood what it meant to feel alone, even abandoned. No deity had shown up in her hospital room, she said. Perhaps, she said, divinity was in being present for each other. When one of our rabbis offered Orli a blessing, she did not say that our daughter’s life would face no further hardship, but rather that hardships would be faced with the support of her community.

Illness has, at various points in these last two odd years, displaced my kids from their home, their sense of surety in what tomorrow will bring and in their belief that we can protect them. Security breaches have shifted their sense of safety. And yet, both experiences have shown us the capacity of our hearts not just to break, but also to stubbornly repair. We are far from the only community to feel insecure; we are not the only family to have

experienced trauma. We have seen this country reckon with violence, and we recognize now it was a privilege to think we were protected. We have all felt alone in these last two illness-bounded years. Instead, we might see ourselves as together, but in a different, uncharted way, bound up in an effort to protect one another.

Orli's middle name is Chaim, for my grandfather who fled Nazi-occupied Vienna at age 26. He was known for his knack for reinvention and unmitigated joy, even in the face of unimaginable loss. Upon my bat mitzvah, some 30 odd years before Orli's, he sent me a letter: Now that I was coming of age in the Jewish community, he offered the words Moses says to Joshua as he assumes the mantle of leadership. They are words meant to gird oneself in the face of challenge and responsibility, of obstacles and uncertainty. It is a command not to back down but to forge ahead. And so he did not write mazel tov, or congratulations, but hazak v'ematz, have strength and be courageous: The expression is not an endpoint, but a beginning.

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