

## How a coming-of-age ritual for Jewish girls aided the rise of women's rights

The bat mitzvah, 100 years old this month, was a 'landmark and steppingstone' for equality.

By Menachem Wecker March 1, 2022



A century ago, Jewish American girls gained the right to come of age ritually as their male counterparts do: with sheer terror delivering speeches and chanting biblical Hebrew in their squeaky voices before family, friends and entire congregations. Like bar mitzvah boys, they too could receive the sorts of gifts “you’ll appreciate when you’re older,” like trees planted in Israel in their names.

Today bat (or bas) mitzvahs are commonplace — and occasions for major celebrations — although for many years they were looked upon skeptically by traditional Jews. As it turned out, the bat mitzvah helped pave the way — slowly — for equal rights for women. Congregations seeing and hearing women’s voices in synagogue made American Jews more comfortable with the idea. It took 50 years after the first bat mitzvah in March

1922 until the first female rabbi was ordained in the United States, and the first female American cantors followed. But even then, many congregations refused to hire female rabbis and cantors.

The bat mitzvah, with young women conspicuously leading the congregation and dressing in similar ritual attire as men, proved an important “landmark and steppingstone,” Lauren Strauss, an American University Jewish studies historian, told me. “The bat mitzvah really normalized and increased the level of comfort with the idea of women wearing this garb and leading in prayer.”

Although a bat mitzvah was proposed at Washington’s first synagogue, Adas Israel, in 1940, the idea was rejected as radical, according to Rabbi Stanley Rabinowitz’s “The Assembly,” a book on the Conservative congregation. Adas Israel held its first bat mitzvah in 1962 — four decades after the rite was introduced in America in New York City.

Confusion often surrounds the very institution of bat mitzvah — Hebrew for “daughter of the commandment” — says Strauss, who gently corrects people who refer to a bat mitzvah “theme” or say a bat mitzvah will be at a dance space: “Oh, you mean the party. Not the bat mitzvah,” she instructs. Strauss points out that bat mitzvah is much more important than partying.



A Torah and microphone sit on a table with confetti after Yvonne Reiter's at-home bat mitzvah in Redmond, Wash., in April 2020. The ceremony was conducted virtually because of the pandemic. (Lindsay Wasson/Getty Images)

Young women demonstrate command of reading and explicating that week’s Torah portion and readings from Prophets (called haphtara), and most lead the congregation in prayer, according to Strauss. Orthodox communities, which American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna, director of Brandeis University’s Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, says came around to bat mitzvahs “very grudgingly,” are rather different. Orthodox girls tend to become bat mitzvah at 12, not 13, and only those at the most progressive Orthodox congregations read from the Torah and address the congregation.

On March 28, 1922, renowned rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who founded Reconstructionist Judaism, recorded in his diary that two Saturdays prior, on March 18, “I inaugurated the ceremony of the Bat Mitzvah” at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism meeting house in New York City. “My daughter Judith was the first one to have her Bat Mitzvah celebrated there.”

That bat mitzvah came to be seen as the first public celebration of its sort in the United States.

European Jews were already celebrating bat mitzvahs, and the Reform Jewish movement had done away with bar mitzvahs for 13-year-old boys in the 19th century, opting instead for co-ed communal confirmations. The real story, to Sarna, is that bat mitzvahs began proliferating after World War II, when Conservative — rather than Reconstructionist — leaders saw it as a way to energize Jews who were moving from urban Jewish enclaves to the suburbs, where they lived alongside gentiles. Bat mitzvah was part of the rabbinic arsenal for keeping newly trick-or-treating Jews in the fold.

By 1953, Agudath Achim Congregation (Orthodox) of Quackenbos Street NW hosted a bat mitzvah, according to The Washington Post. The following year, The Post noted that B’nai Israel (Conservative), in Sixteenth Street Heights, hosted its first bat mitzvah. Over the years, bat mitzvahs have made their mark on Washington and the nation. Late last year, former congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords celebrated her bat mitzvah at age 51; “It is never too late to explore faith,” she wrote to the Forward, a Jewish media outlet. In 1973, Elena Kagan became the first girl to have a bat mitzvah at Lincoln Square synagogue (modern Orthodox) in Manhattan; the future associate justice of the Supreme Court insisted on it, because her older brother had a bar mitzvah. The late associate justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who did not have a bat mitzvah, once told the Forward that she was jealous of the bar mitzvah gifts her cousin received.

Extensive political coverage in 2000 cast Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman as a feminist for his daughter Hana’s bat mitzvah. In 1997, Rep. Chuck Schumer, then bidding for U.S. Senate, took a bus tour across Israel, where the family was celebrating his daughter Jessica’s bat mitzvah. In her authorized biography, Monica Lewinsky noted that Beverly Hills bat mitzvahs tended to be lavish, “like a wedding for one.” But her father offered \$500 for a backyard party, which he believed, according to the book, was “quite sufficient to celebrate an event that was supposed to be religious.” Daughter and mother prevailed to include entertainment, and the celebration included a DJ and hot dog stand.



Yvonna Raiter performs a Torah reading before family, friends and members of Seattle's Congregation Beth Shalom during her bat mitzvah ceremony, held over Zoom. (Lindsey Wesson/Getty Images)

Three recent developments are shaping bat mitzvahs, Strauss told me. Many families, particularly those with shy girls, hold less-public ceremonies, as on Monday or Thursday morning, when the Torah is read with fewer people in attendance. Environmentally conscious bat mitzvahs are on the rise, including rustic ones at summer camps, and Strauss thinks pandemic-necessitated Zoom bat mitzvahs, which were liberating to many, will endure.

Judith Kaplan's bat mitzvah 100 years ago was quite different from today's ceremonies. Her father chanted from the Torah scroll, after which Judith did so from a book. She did not stand at the central bimah podium. "No thunder sounded no lightning struck," she [wrote](#) later. "The institution of *Bat Mitzvah* had been born without incident." She added that both of her grandmothers sought to persuade her father not to hold the ceremony, which was much more important to the father of the bat mitzvah than it was to Judith.

Sarna, the historian, says he believes that the postwar period was important for American bat mitzvahs but that 1922 was crucial. "Maybe that's how change happens," he says. "It's only in fairyland that the first person does it, and then it becomes normative. It takes a lot of time."

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