

Tzav 5782 - 100th Anniversary of Bat Mitzvah
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This Shabbat marks a momentous occasion in Jewish history. One hundred years ago today, on March 18, 1922, Judith Kaplan became the first American girl to have a Bat Mitzvah ceremony, held at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (now known as SAJ) in New York. This synagogue had been founded only weeks earlier by Judith's father, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, after his "increasingly bold and controversial ideas could no longer find a home in established Jewish communities."¹ Kaplan would also go on to found the Reconstructionist movement.

In 1922, just a couple of years after women won the right to vote in America, it was Judith who began asking her father questions about the Jewish world around her: "Why do men and women sit separately? Why don't women read the Torah?" Kaplan's response to his daughter surprised her: "Two years ago, women won the right to vote in this country. Now more women are working in stores, offices, and hospitals. They are learning to drive, too. But not much has changed in the synagogue... That's not right."² And so, to celebrate Judith as she turned 12 and became a Bat Mitzvah, he decided that she would also publicly celebrate this coming of age moment by reading Torah in their synagogue on Shabbat morning. According to Judith Kaplan's account, her father, despite having thought about this idea of girls having B'not Mitzvah, only told her she'd be chanting in the synagogue the night before her Bat Mitzvah. In fact, Kaplan had already proposed the idea of Bat Mitzvah for all girls at SAJ, and received approval from his Board of Directors,³ but he wanted Judith, his eldest daughter, to be the first.

In Jewish tradition, the Sages designated 13 as the age of maturity for males⁴ and 12 as the age of maturity for females. In this gender-binary system, there was less emphasis on a public ceremony, and was instead about a change in status and legal obligations within the Jewish community. As a Bar Mitzvah, a son of the commandments, or Bat Mitzvah, a daughter of the commandments, a 13-year-old boy or a 12-year-old girl were seen by the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, so somewhere around the 2nd or 3rd century CE, as now being independently responsible for following the *mitzvot* - sacred obligations or commandments.⁵ This change in legal status happens automatically when one wakes up on their 12th or 13th birthday, regardless of whether or not they hold a ceremony to mark this coming of age moment. While there may have been some celebrations of a moment to mark a girl's becoming Bat Mitzvah,

¹ <https://saj.nyc/connect/history-of-saj/>

² From *Judy Led the Way*, by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

³ You can read the minutes from that meeting (see pages 3-4) at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61f01a5b57232757d9f6e59c/t/622f4e41c2eed331b3b2b172/1647267395400/Bat+Mitzvah%2C+Board+Meeting+minutes%2C+Feb.+5%2C+1922.pdf> . For further background, I'd also recommend an episode of the Podcast, *Chutzpod*, "Episode 1.10 celebrating 100 years of the bat mitzvah", at <https://chutzpod.com/blog/110-celebrating-100-years-of-the-bat-mitzvah-with-rabbi-lauren-grabelle-hermann>

⁴ See Pirkei Avot 5:21

⁵ For more information on this history, see <https://reformjudaism.org/bar-and-bat-mitzvah>. Based on Mishnah Niddah 5:7.

perhaps with a festive meal, and maybe even including the young girl giving some sort of talk or teaching, before Judith Kaplan, these celebrations did not make their way into the sanctuaries of synagogues.

In the Reform Movement, even with its early emphasis on egalitarian values and shared roles of men and women, there really was no practice of celebrating girls with a Bat Mitzvah. Instead, in a push to create a more egalitarian practice, the Reform Movement introduced the Confirmation Ceremony, in which young men and women could participate, and tried to de-emphasize the Bar Mitzvah, as there was no real consideration for the idea of a Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls. Even after Judith Kaplan's Bat Mitzvah one hundred years ago, it took a long time for the rest of the Jewish world to consider making B'not Mitzvah regular occurrences in the synagogue. It's believed that the Reform Movement didn't begin holding Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for girls until the middle of the 20th century.

In reflecting on the experience of her Bat Mitzvah later in life, Judith Kaplan Eisenstein wrote:

It would be less than the whole truth to say that I was as full of enthusiasm about the subject of the ceremony as my father was. I was worried about the attitude of my own peers, the early teenagers who even then could be remarkably cruel and disapprove of the "exception," the person who does not conform to the normal practice.

On the Shabbat morning of my bat mitzvah , we all went together—father, mother, disapproving grandmothers, my three little sisters, and I—to the brownstone building on 86th Street [in New York City] where the Society for the Advancement of Judaism carried out all its functions.

Women's rights or no women's rights, the old habit of separating the sexes at worship died hard. The first part of my own ordeal was to sit in that front room among the men, away from the cozy protection of mother and sisters.

...When we finished the haftarah, a reading from the Prophets, I was signaled to step forward to a place below the bimah at a very respectable distance from the scroll of the Torah, which had already been rolled up and garbed in its mantle. I pronounced the first blessing, and from my own Chumash, the Five Books of Moses, read the selection that my father had chosen for me, continued with the reading of the English translation, and concluded with the closing berakhah, "blessing."

That was it. The scroll was returned to the ark with song and procession, and the service resumed.

No thunder sounded, and no lightning struck. The institution of bat mitzvah had been born without incident, and the rest of the day was all rejoicing.⁶

⁶ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-first-bat-mitzvah/>

That's her story. I'd like to invite some of *you* to share *your* stories of becoming a Bat Mitzvah. I recognize that many women of a certain age in our community weren't given the opportunity to celebrate in this way at 12 or 13, but for those of you who were able to do so, I'd love to hear a memory of that experience you'd be willing to share tonight.

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Today, it's an honor to share the bimah with all of our B'nei Mitzvah (whether a Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah, or B'mitzvah or B'nei Mitzvah for non-binary or gender-fluid students) - who represent a broad diversity of interests and identities and genders - as they each take their place as teachers of Torah in our community. Each and every time, they rise to the occasion, and offer a profound reminder of the importance of this beautiful Jewish tradition we are each tasked to carry and pass on to the next generation. As the Cantor often explains at our B'nei Mitzvah, each of these students is loved and appreciated for all of the wonderful uniqueness that they represent, and valued as the newest link in a long chain of tradition that stretches way back into our past, and extends way out into our future, passed *l'dor vador*, from one generation to the next. On this day in particular, we also honor the vision and bravery of one girl who paved the way for future generations of women to continue to imagine and expand what was and is possible in the leadership of the Jewish people.