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PHOTO BY NANCY BOROWICK

SI-HN

Coming of age — as adults

13 women have immersed themselves in Judaism for the bat mitzvah celebration they missed as young girls

BY CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN
Special to Newsday

The small room feels cramped, the air stale. A large conference table fills the middle of the narrow space, and a small window provides just a smidgen of natural light. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases stuffed with volumes of literature line the walls, adding to the sense of confinement.

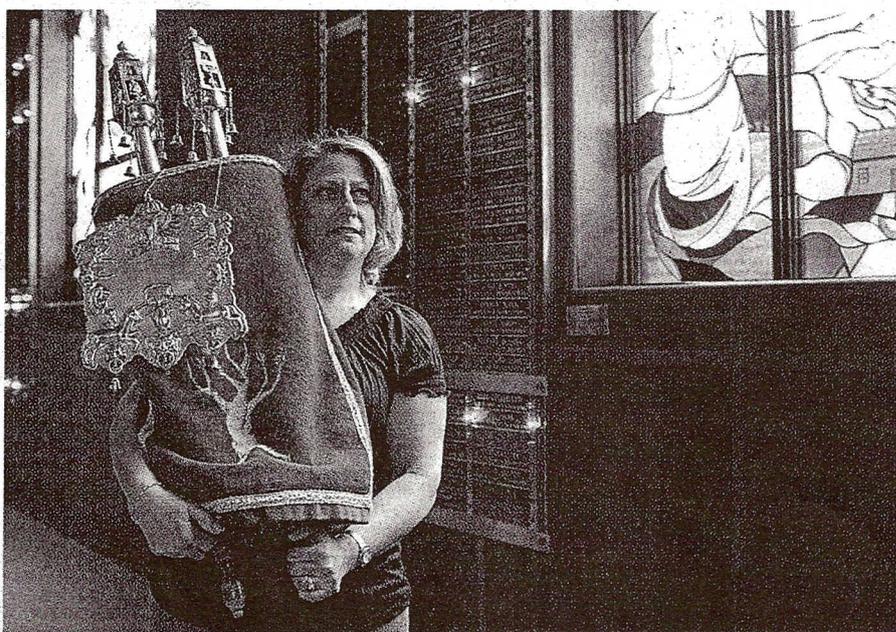
Yet, there is enough room for 13 women to spread their spiritual wings.

For the past two years they have gathered here — at the library in Temple B'nai Torah in Wantagh — every Sunday morning, come rain or shine, for the sole purpose of studying Judaism. On May 19 they will all become a Bat Mitzvah: a Jewish coming-of-age milestone each of these adult women missed as young girls.

"It's going to be such a beautiful moment," said Rabbi Marci Bellows, one of the three adult bat mitzvah program teachers at the Reform congregation. "It's going to be hard getting through it with dry eyes. This is making up for a rite of passage these individuals didn't get to experience for many reasons."

Bat mitzvah literally means daughter of commandment or God's law. A Jewish girl typically becomes a Bat Mitzvah when she turns 12; boys, at 13, become a bar mitzvah. To do so, children are required to attend Hebrew school from a young age, where they learn the language and are educated about Judaism. For both genders, the rite is a passage into maturity and adulthood, accompanied by certain rights

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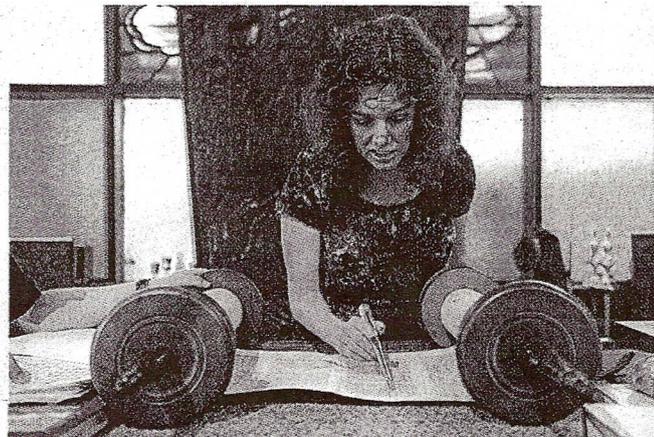


Wendy Ser of Levittown, Torah in hand, will partake in the ceremony at Temple B'nai Torah in Wantagh.

PHOTOS BY NANCY BORKOWICK



Many of the women in the adult bat mitzvah program at Temple B'nai Torah use a platform so they can see and read the Torah on the bimah — just as youngsters do on their big day in front of the congregation.



Marcia Bernstein of Bellmore takes her turn at the bimah, reading a portion of the Torah that she will read again May 19 in front of family and friend.



Big milestone for friends in faith



BAT MITZVAH from G4

and responsibilities pertaining to Judaism, such as honoring Jewish laws and practices and following the Ten Commandments. On becoming a Bat/Bar Mitzvah, a newly adult Jewish girl or boy has earned the right to lead prayer services and read from the Torah (the five holy books of the Jewish Bible).

While boys have celebrated bar mitzvahs for centuries, for Jewish girls, bat mitzvah is a relatively modern practice. In fact, this year marks the 90th anniversary of the first American bat mitzvah, which took place in New York City at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the earliest Reconstructionist synagogue in the United States. It was founded by theologian Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan on the premise that Judaism ought to be fluid, with rituals and customs changing in modern times. Putting his theories into practice, on March 18, 1922, Kaplan's daughter Judith became the first female to have a bat mitzvah ceremony in this country. It happened two years after women earned the right to vote, yet bat mitzvah was a radical concept that would not become widespread for decades.

Bat mitzvahs gain popularity

Paralleling cultural changes due to the women's liberation movement, it wasn't until the 1960s that bat mitzvahs began to gain popularity, primarily within the Reform movement, which is committed to the principle of inclusion and the equality of women in all areas of Jewish life, according to the Union for Reform Judaism website. Slowly, Conservative and even some Orthodox congregations followed suit, allowing girls to celebrate their bat mitzvah.

As children, the women studying for their upcoming ceremony at Temple B'nai Torah — who range in age from their 40s to mid-60s — were left out of this ritual. Some had no Jewish education at all growing up.

Rabbi Deanna Pasternak, who teaches special-needs children at the temple and assists Rabbi Bellows and Cantor Steven Sher with the adult bat mitzvahs, said the desire to mark the milestone runs deep.

"These women who have not had the opportunity or push to learn about Judaism in their younger years, come to it as adults because they have a need

At Temple B'nai Torah, Rabbi Marci Bellows advises her students as they practice for their bat mitzvah. "It's going to be hard getting through it with dry eyes," she says.

Fradell Serpe and Stacey Spiller share notes in their Parashat HaShavua Booklets as they follow along with classmates preparing for their bat mitzvah.



PHOTOS BY NANCY BOROWICK



The 13 women meet in the temple library to study every Sunday morning. They share a desire to participate in a meaningful way in the Sabbath and holiday services.

within themselves, to find out more about their roots, where they came from, where they're going with Judaism."

While her older brother had a bar mitzvah, "we didn't belong to a synagogue . . . we celebrated the holidays, but there was no real explanation," said Wendy Ser, 53, of Levittown. But she married into a Conservative family that kept kosher and was deeply involved in their temple. "When we got married I started going to services with my husband's family, and I'd sit there and have no idea what was going on."

The May ceremony will be the second of its kind at Temple B'nai Torah, which Bellows said has more than 500 member families. For the bat mitzvahs in training, a desire to participate in a meaningful way in the Sabbath and holiday services is a common thread among them.

"There was something missing during services, so I wanted to learn to read Hebrew," said Lynda Goldman, 48, of Levittown, who was raised in a Jewish household that celebrated all of the traditional holidays. Like the other women in

the class, she also wanted to understand the meaning behind the prayers and learn the roots of Jewish customs and rituals.

In addition, for some this is a chance at equal opportunity.

"I was very turned off that [in the past] women weren't given equal value on the pulpit," said Tina Levine, 60, of Merrick.

Alaina Walsh, 46, of Levittown, said that as a child growing up in an Orthodox home, she was, by virtue of being a girl, denied the opportunity to participate in Jewish studies. She recalled sneaking into Hebrew school classes in her brother's place, only to be promptly kicked out.

'A sense of validation'

An adult bat mitzvah enables the group to fill in the gaps in their Jewish education, giving them confidence as members of their religion and congregation.

"There's a heavy emotional component to this ceremony, a sense of validation as a Jew," said Bellows. "For a lot of women who were not allowed to have this as a child, they have always felt somewhat inferior as Jewish adults."

But there's an added, unexpected byproduct of their studies, the women pointed out.

Together for two years, "we are a diverse group that has gone through quite a bit . . . and we've all continued. There have been no dropouts," Ser stressed, even during times of crisis.

As a child, Nancy Baker, 51, of Wantagh, belonged to a congregation that did not allow her a bat mitzvah. "I was born and raised Orthodox," she noted.

After her son began Hebrew school at the temple, she learned two years ago that the bat mitzvah class was forming. But it was her husband, Jay, who encouraged her and signed her up.

Then, last September, just before the Jewish holidays, he died unexpectedly of a heart attack.

"I have to continue for him," she said, tearing up.

Baker will do it with support and encouragement from the other women in the group, who were once virtual strangers. The temple is the result of a 2009 merger between the former Suburban Temple in Wantagh and the Massapequa Jewish Center in Wantagh.

Some members are still getting

to know one another, while others are still grappling with a sense of alienation from Jewish customs and how to more fully participate in the temple experience.

The women will also have the support of their families, many of whom include sons and daughters who have already gone through what their mothers will soon experience. The parents in the group said their children are proud of them, and that their mothers are role models for accomplishing the difficult and time-consuming task of studying Judaism in midlife. Baker said her son is now studying to become a rabbi.

In between Hebrew lessons, theological discussions and Torah learning, they've forged bonds that have kept one another afloat. Next month they will be called to the Torah as a group of friends, united in a spiritual and religious mission.

"This community that developed went beyond the academic," said Bellows. "This group has solidified into something far beyond this class. Within this little group of 13 women, there's now a Jewish community."

Anniversary exhibit

"Bat Mitzvah Comes of Age," a traveling exhibition marking the 90th anniversary of the American bat mitzvah, opened March 6 and will run until Friday at the Laurie M. Tisch Gallery at the Jewish Community Center of Manhattan. After that it will travel to congregations, small museums and cultural venues around the country, said Deborah Meyer, executive director of Moving Traditions, a non-profit organization that creates gender-based programs promoting Judaism.

The exhibition, a collaboration between Pennsylvania-based Moving Traditions and the National Museum of American Jewish History, features oral recordings of personal stories of bat mitzvah and a timeline of historical milestones.

For more information, visit batmitzvahcomesofage.com.

— CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN