

Toward a Meaningful Bat Mitzvah: A Father Reflects

By Aryeh Rubin

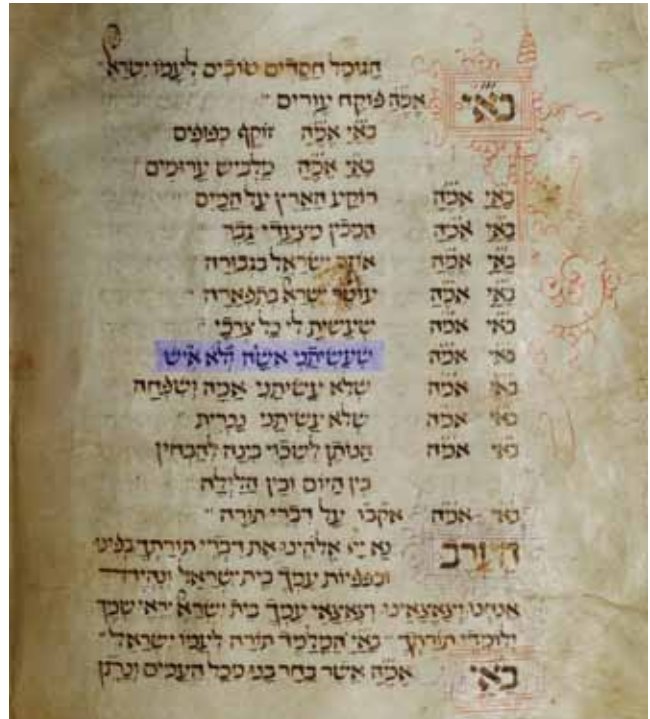
Felissa, Angelica, Maya—I am the father of three daughters, a circumstance that has led me to question Jewish tradition and ritual in ways that I never considered during the early years of my life. I was raised in a Modern Orthodox home in Brooklyn by refugee parents and attended yeshiva day school and then Yeshiva University. Although I have always been a feminist in theory, it was not until my early forties, after having daughters, that I began to refine my beliefs and, before long, to act on those beliefs—specifically my growing conviction that the limitations placed on women in the Jewish tradition must be addressed and redressed. Together with my wife, Raquel, I have endeavored to create space within the tradition for my daughters and, by extension, for all Jewish women. We have done this in the way we brought up our daughters, and we have done this in the way we celebrated the ritual of each Bat Mitzvah.

There is a blessing I came across in the fifteenth-century Italian women's *siddur* by Abraham Farissol that is housed at the Jewish Theological Seminary: “Blessed...that I was made a woman and not a man.” That simple yet profound sentence is one that I have raised my daughters to embrace both in life generally and specifically in the context of Jewish tradition and ritual. On the occasions of their Bat Mitzvahs, all three of my daughters not only addressed the congregants of the Orthodox synagogue we attend in South Florida but all three also led an off-site women's *tefillah* service in which they read from the *Sefer Torah* and received an *aliya*.

An account of how we came to observe our daughters' Bat Mitzvahs as we have begins with the *simhat bat* ceremony we held for our youngest daughter, Maya. When my first two daughters were born, we had celebratory parties. When my third daughter was born in 1996, my wife and I held a *simhat bat* ceremony to formally and ritually welcome Maya into the covenant, into our people, and into our family. Although *simhat bat* ceremonies were not unheard of at the time, they were not the norm for the members of our extended community in our new home in South Florida. At that time, our oldest daughter Felissa was nine, and I had begun to think about how to observe her Bat Mitzvah. In many ways Maya's *simhat bat* ceremony was the precursor for Felissa's Bat Mitzvah, and it was thinking about the future Bat Mitzvah that spurred us to hold the *simhat bat*.

In compiling the text of the *simhat bat* service, I relied on the ceremony of the male *brit* for structure and context, as well as on several existing *simhat bat* prototypes. I consulted noted thinkers and rabbis, including Nessa Rapoport, Dr. Devora Steinmetz, and Rabbi Yitz and Blu Greenberg. I edited existing prayers, sometimes subtly and sometimes heavily. The profound satisfaction that our family and our guests derived from the *simhat bat* was unanticipated and very rewarding, and it gave us the confidence to move forward with Felissa's Bat Mitzvah.

Our goal was to create a ceremony that allowed Felissa to participate fully in a traditional ritual service while keeping within the broad parameters set by traditional Judaism and our synagogue. Although we had attended several Bat Mitzvahs at a women's *tefillah* group in New York, our shul was not yet ready for such a service. At the same time, we wanted to go a step further than what had been done already.



Page of Blessings from Manuscript *Woman's Siddur* (Italian rite), 1471 (folio 5v).

Copied by famous scribe and scholar Abraham Farissol. Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

The text is formulated for the use of a woman. The highlighted text blesses God “for making me a woman and not a man.”

As a result, we came up with a solution that we hoped would both honor our goals for the Bat Mitzvah and include our shul's community. We used a party room at a condominium building near our shul and set it up with a *bimah* and a borrowed ark and *Sefer Torah*. Felissa led *Shaharit* and read the Torah and *haftarah* portions in front of a group of about one hundred women and several men (the men sat behind an improvised *mehitza*).

The service was profoundly moving. Some of the women called up for an *aliya* cried while reciting the traditional prayer. Afterward, one of those women said, “I had heard hundreds of boys go up to the Torah and say this prayer, so I knew it very well...but I had never been allowed to be a part of it. So when I actually uttered the words, I felt for the first time that my presence mattered, that they were counting on me to say this prayer, and I felt a spiritual connection with God that I had never felt before.”

At about 11 am, the entire group then walked to our shul in time for the Torah reading and *Musaf* service there. I had the *maftir aliya* and read the same *haftarah* that Felissa had read earlier. After the service concluded, Felissa addressed the congregation with a speech. Many of the guests left their *tallitot* on deliberately, to show that the service had not yet concluded. In her speech, Felissa said, “Earlier today I was the *hazanit* at a service. Many of you would consider this unorthodox and some would consider it non-Orthodox, but I am appreciative to have been part of it and now to share this part of my Bat Mitzvah with all of you in the shul.” Her sisters expressed similar sentiments at their subsequent *B’not Mitzvah*.

Inspired by Felissa’s Bat Mitzvah, some of the female guests chose to make a Bat Mitzvah for their own daughters. Many developed an interest in learning about Judaism and feminism, and several joined women’s *tefillah* groups or Torah reading groups. The Chabad listserv had a field day with our event and as a result was exposed to a much wider audience.

A great deal of preparation went into Felissa’s Bat Mitzvah. Felissa studied with a tutor for months. Ronnie Becher of Riverdale, a leader in the Orthodox feminist movement, and Blu Greenberg, a pioneer in Orthodox feminism, helped us conduct the service. I relied on their wisdom and feedback for guidance. However, we did depart from the guidelines of the Orthodox women’s *tefillah* movement when Felissa led the women in *kedusha*. After Blu had pointed this out, we left the decision of whether to lead the *kedusha* up to Felissa, and she chose to do so. Blu later recounted that when she listened to the *kedusha* being recited for the first time at a women’s *tefillah* service, “I felt myself torn. Inside of me was the struggle of women in Orthodoxy, a struggle between faithfulness to the rules, and coming closer to God. Faithfulness to the rules is a primary way of coming closer to God, but there are times when it would seem to create a distance and this was one of them.”

When it came time for Angelica’s Bat Mitzvah, we had more confidence, and we prepared for the service ourselves. It was similar in most ways to the service for Felissa, except that we chose to hold the women’s *tefillah* service on a Thursday morning to create a more intimate experience and so we could be with the congregation for the entire Saturday service. In addition, Angelica led a Friday night, women-only Carlebach-style *Kabbalat Shabbat* service at the shul, attended by a large group of women, including the rebbetzin, who less than three years earlier had been unappreciative of our efforts for Felissa’s Bat Mitzvah. Maya had similar Thursday and Friday services for her Bat Mitzvah.

Angelica had studied with a tutor to prepare for her Bat Mitzvah, but by the time Maya’s turn came, I was fully ready to step up to the plate—in the tradition of fathers learning with their sons, I took on the task of teaching Maya. All three of my daughters studied from the same *tikkun* that I used to prepare to *leyn* for my Bar Mitzvah. After Felissa’s Bat Mitzvah we decided to start a tradition of purchasing a *Sefer Torah* for each daughter in honor of her Bat Mitzvah. Angelica and Maya read from their own

Torahs at their services; each daughter will be given her Torah under the *huppah* when she marries.

The reaction to our family’s approach to our daughters’ Bat Mitzvahs has been mixed. At the time of Felissa’s in early 2000, our approach was revolutionary. Although many of the guests were deeply moved and inspired, there were also people present at the shul that day who were outraged, and some walked out. By late 2008, when Maya’s Bat Mitzvah took place, the context was different—women are now receiving more recognition and their roles have expanded to the point that, in 2009 we witnessed the ordination of Sara Hurwitz, under the tutelage of Rabbi Avi Weiss.

Yet, at each Bat Mitzvah there were people who refused to participate in the service, those who were uncomfortable, and those who were opposed and cited halakhic dictates of the Talmud, particularly *Kiddushin* 80b: “Women are temperamentally light-headed.” To that our response has been that we reject that statement, as do all enlightened people. Instead, we follow the dictate of Maimonides, who, in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (2:13), held that we must use our reason to guide us for when it is appropriate to accept long-held “truths” as well as to question or reject those “truths,” and who in his *Letter on Astrology* stated, specifically in terms of the Talmud and *midrashim*, that certain words of the sages “may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him.”

It has always been my hope that our family’s approach to Bat Mitzvah and to the *simhat bat* would serve as models to others. As a result, we published *Toward a Meaningful Bat Mitzvah*, a book describing the Bat Mitzvah. It includes an introduction by Blu Greenberg, a description of the service, the responses of some of the guests, a chapter of suggestions on how to add meaning to a Bat Mitzvah service, statements by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and Rabbi Saul Berman, and a checklist and list of resources. Both the book and the *simhat bat* service can be downloaded from the Targum Shlishi website.¹

Reflecting on her Bat Mitzvah two years after the event, Felissa asked, “Wouldn’t it be awesome to live in an environment where both halves of the community participate as equal partners?” Yes, it would. It is crucial for today’s rabbinic authorities to find a halakhic way to accommodate and nurture the religious needs of one-half of the Jewish population. And the Bat Mitzvah is only the beginning.

Aryeh Rubin is managing director of The Maot Group, an investment company, and founder and director of Targum Shlishi, a philanthropy dedicated to fostering positive change in the Jewish world. He was the founder and publisher of Jewish Living magazine in the late 1970s. In 2009 he edited Jewish Sages of Today (Devora Publishing).

¹ To download pdfs of the Bat Mitzvah book and the Simhat Bat service, visit www.targumshlishi.org, go to “Other Programs,” and click on “Publications.”