

Diane Troderman has been the guiding chair of the HIRIJW board from our origins in 1997. By accepting this position, she demonstrated that she had faith in our abilities to create the first university-based research institute designed to understand and support Jewish women around the world. We continuously benefit from her vision, discipline and rigorous thinking. In fall 2001, when Diane became a bat mitzvah, the HIRIJW staff decided to launch a research project in her honor. This project, carried out by Brandeis University graduate student Beth Cousens, and supervised by Professor Sylvia Fishman, co-director of the HIRIJW, is an interview-based study of the meaning of adult bat mitzvah.

We dedicate this working paper, a study of adult bat mitzvah,  
to Diane Troderman with love, admiration and gratitude.

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## **Adult Bat Mitzvah as Entree Into Jewish Life For North American Jewish Women**

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All generations of the Jewish people should interpret the giving of the commandments as if they, too, stood at Sinai, according to Deuteronomy 29:13. This covenant between God and God's people should be understood as more than an inherited legacy. Rather, it should be experienced as personal and immediate, as a direct personal pact between each Jew and God. As a **living** covenant, this idea has helped many Jews feel a sense of ownership of the commandments, feel a desire to participate actively in them, and feel engaged in their interpretation and implementation.

There are some Jews, however who have difficulty with these ideas and do not understand what it means to stand at Sinai. Many Jews do not know Hebrew, Jewish law, or Jewish history. They may feel that they are part of a tradition in theory but are not able to participate. For many adult Jews, particularly women raised when Jewish education was almost exclusively a male arena, their inheritance of the commandments has limited practical reality; the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey revealed that that "women over age 24 are more than twice as likely as men not to have received any Jewish education" (Fishman and Goldstein 1993, 4). Throughout Jewish history, women had limited access to both secular and Jewish education (Hartman and Hartman 1996, 24). Memoirs, letters, and other sources, particularly those from Eastern Europe in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, indicate that most

women left formal Jewish education to men and gained access to Jewish texts only through their male counterparts (Hartman and Hartman 1996, 24; Fishman 2000, 54). While some groups of women received substantial Jewish education through the Bais Yaakov and other educational movements beginning in 1917, the vast majority of women received a poor Jewish education relative to their brothers. The recent rise of feminism and the proliferation of opportunities for women to participate in Jewish ritual and study have enabled some women to envision a new role in their community. Without Hebrew and liturgical literacy, however, other women remain in their old place in the Jewish community. They can feel isolated, illegitimate, “vulnerable, ignorant, naked” before the congregation (Hendler 1999, 41). Some say they do not feel authentically Jewish. Reluctant to participate because of embarrassment stemming from illiteracy, they feel as though they do not share in the commandments, as though they never stood at Sinai.

Since the late 1970s, thousands of women have remedied this situation by preparing for and becoming a bat mitzvah as an adult. The adult bat mitzvah occasion, a public ceremony symbolizing the taking of responsibility for the commandments, is helping women to fully claim the Jewish tradition as their own. Preparation to become a bat mitzvah as an adult involves substantial learning; the ceremony offers an important ritual transition for participants. Adult bat mitzvah connects participants to their congregations, to the Jewish community, and to Jewish history. In the words of one woman in the study presented below, , it creates an “indelible stamp” of Jewish commitment and identification, a way to enter formally into participation in the commandments and, moreover, to show to the Jewish community that “one is forever a knowledgeable, passionate, practicing Jew.” By participating in this normative, time-honored

ritual, women feel that they become part of the historical Jewish community. B'not mitzvah become ready to say to their communities: I am a part of you. Like you, I stood at Sinai.

### **Recent Research on Adult Bat Mitzvah**

This paper expands upon a growing body of literature focused on the adult bat mitzvah and its meaning in the lives of American women, families, congregations, and communities. Schoenfeld (1987, 1991, 1992) studied the process (from preparation to ceremony) of adult bat mitzvah of two types of students: those who undergo solo preparation and ceremony, and those who prepare and undertake the ceremony as part of a synagogue class. Schoenfeld's explanatory frameworks were feminism (1991, 217), individualism or uniqueness within a broader communal context (1987, 128-130), and rite of passage (1992, 367-371). Kahn (1993, 88) stressed the importance of ritual when attempting a life transition. Grant (2000, 5-7) examined the experiences of five b'not mitzvah, noting particularly the changes they make in their lives as a result of their experience.

This study builds on Schoenfeld, Grant and Kahn's research and reaches four conclusions:

1. Contemporary Jewish women require participation in the formal, normative procedure that is adult bat mitzvah in order to solidify their connection to Judaism.
2. Women make substantive changes their lives following their b'not mitzvah.
3. As a collective phenomenon, Adult bat mitzvah has changed the landscape of American Judaism.
4. Adult bat mitzvah can become a powerful tool in increasing the involvement of women as participants in and leaders of American Judaism, ultimately making American Judaism itself more vibrant.

This paper deals first with the study's methodological choices, then covers the evolution of the North American Adult Bat Mitzvah phenomenon and reviews the formats of adult bat mitzvah preparation. The motivations and experiences of the Adult Bat Mitzvah are presented from the research findings, drawing on quotes from interviews with respondents. The respondents' experiences of overcoming negative feelings form a large part of this study. Respondents describe the phenomenon of learning as "Jewish Mastery" and label the ceremony as a "transformative event." The impact of the Adult Bat Mitzvah, according to these informants, is a feeling of inclusion and a commitment to involvement. The women have a lot to say about their participation in the revitalization of American Judaism.

#### **Talking With Educators and With Adult B'not Mitzvah (Methodological Considerations)**

To understand the context in which interviewees chose to pursue their adult bat mitzvah, I began this study by discussing the growth of adult bat mitzvah with representatives of the Reform and Conservative movements and with teachers of adult bat mitzvah classes in Reform and Conservative congregations. Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, has created significant programming on adult bat mitzvah, and this work also informs my study.

These professionals leading the development of adult bat mitzvah within each organization suggested past participants of their adult bat mitzvah celebrations to participate in this study. I sought the widest possible demographic diversity in study respondents and ultimately interviewed ten women living in locations throughout the East Coast and Midwest, with diverse ages, employment, and lifestyles. The respondents included retirees, those in the work force, and stay-at-home mothers, and ranged from ages 27 to over 60. The women almost evenly represented the Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism. All experienced their bat

mitzvah in the past five years (since 1996). For varied reasons, no participant had celebrated her bat mitzvah as a child. Their preparations for their bat mitzvah ranged, as did their type of ceremony; some women studied alone and became bat mitzvah in a service dedicated to them, while others participated in a class and ceremony structured by their Hadassah chapter or synagogue.

I interviewed each woman by phone or in person for thirty to sixty minutes. The interview focused on the following:

- Their “Jewish journeys” (Horowitz 2000, iii), or their previous Jewish education and their Jewish experiences as children and young adults,
- Their motivations for becoming b’not mitzvah,
- Their experiences during their study,
- Their Jewish involvement after their b’not mitzvah,
- Their understanding of adult bat mitzvah in contrast to adult Jewish education,
- Their opinion of the role adult bat mitzvah can play in American Judaism,
- Their insight into the impact of adult bat mitzvah on congregations and communities.

I expected to find the following:

- Interviewees would have felt significantly out of place in and excluded from Jewish settings prior to their bat mitzvah,
- Interviewees would not have had significant Jewish involvement prior to their bat mitzvah,
- After their b’not mitzvah, interviewees would feel strongly that the commandments of Judaism also apply to them,

- Interviewees would see the ritual of bat mitzvah as crucial to their having experienced a shift in their feelings about Judaism,
- Interviewees would have taken on greater personal Jewish commitments and involvement in Jewish organizations,
- Interviewees would see their adult b'not mitzvah as important public affirmations to their families and communities of their sense of Jewish responsibility.

### **Evolution of Adult Bat Mitzvah (Historical considerations)**

I begin with the evolution of the adult bat mitzvah and the extent to which it has become a part of American Jewish life today.

As seems apparent from Jewish texts, the concept of Jewish children coming to religious maturity had emerged by the first century C.E.. Ages twelve for girls and thirteen for boys were suggested as the ages at which children would be considered Jewish adults, responsible for full participation in communal ritual. The Talmud delineates the various responsibilities that children would take on by this age. At the same time, the Talmud makes it clear that this age is not a firm demarcation between children and adults; some children, particularly boys, might take on the adult responsibilities of Judaism before their b'nai mitzvah if they are ready to do so. It is not until the Middle Ages that b'nai mitzvah comes to be a normative life cycle event within Jewish tradition that leads to a marked change in status. It is this ritual that is known to modern times, with new traditions likely suggested by communities in Eastern Europe. Upon their immigration, Eastern European immigrants likely brought these new traditions to the United States (Lipstadt 1976, 61-62).

Throughout this history, public bat mitzvah ceremonies, particularly ceremonies that included Torah reading, were almost unknown. In the United States, the bat mitzvah was introduced in America only in 1922 with Judith Kaplan's public ceremony in her father's congregation (Stein 2001, 226). Such bat mitzvah ceremonies began gaining popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in Conservative congregations. At first, Friday night services without Torah readings were most common for b'not mitzvah ceremonies. Gradually, congregations adopted a variety of ways to celebrate the bat mitzvah, with girls eventually honored by being called to the Torah on Saturday mornings (Stein 2001, 232). As Stein suggests, these b'not mitzvah then led to a demand for an increased role for adult women in Judaism. Because the bat mitzvah prepared girls to read from the Torah, it seemed logical that b'not mitzvah could and would read Torah and participate in other arenas of synagogue life when grown into adulthood (2001, 232).

Today, and particularly in the United States, public bat mitzvah celebrations are almost "universal," and bat mitzvah occurs almost as often (Schoenfeld 1987, 120; Stein 2001, 223). Specifically because these rituals foster a connection to tradition and offer a way to identity with the Jewish community without challenging American values, b'nai mitzvah are considered normative American Jewish behavior (Grant 2000, 4).

Yet, there are a variety of reasons that contemporary Jewish adults might not have celebrated their b'nai mitzvah as children. Particularly older adults, children of the immigrant generation, may have come from families who chose not to participate in synagogue life or even in Jewish life, sometimes in an effort to discard Judaism and deliberately assimilate (Fishman 2000, 24). Younger adults may have been part of second and third generation families who inherited this emphasis on integration into American society. In addition, in Orthodox affiliated

households until recently, bat mitzvah simply did not occur; only by 1960 did bat mitzvah occur in Conservative and Reform congregations (Stein 2001, 232).

Descriptions of “belated” b’nai mitzvah began to appear in the 1970s (Schwartz 2001, 20). Rabbi Albert Axelrad, then of Brandeis University Hillel, facilitated one such early event. Steve, a student, came to Axelrad disappointed that he had not celebrated his bar mitzvah as a teenager. After meeting weekly with a tutor, researching an aspect of Judaism that was of personal interest, and participating in prayer services regularly, Steve read from the Torah on a Saturday morning at Brandeis Hillel. Axelrad writes that this intellectual pursuit possibly meant more to Steve later in his life, on his own terms, than it might have as a child (Axelrad 1976, 80).

Axelrad went on to preside over approximately 150 belated b’nai mitzvah during his career at Brandeis (Schwartz 2001, 19). He asserts that such events help to build a committed, informed Jewry, a community of adults passionate about their heritage and wanting to understand what role it plays in their lives. He points out that, while technically Jewish adults become b’nai mitzvah just by turning ages twelve and thirteen, a student can feel shame, guilt, or loss without the public ceremony. The public announcement of responsibility that the ritual provides helps them to combat these feelings and feel included in their tradition (Axelrad 1976).

Particularly because adult bar mitzvah developed during the women’s movement as well as during a time of change for women in Judaism, it is likely that adult bar and bat mitzvah grew simultaneously, with equal opportunity for women to participate. In recent years, however, it is adult bat mitzvah that has flourished. Articles from Jewish newspapers in a variety of communities including Baltimore (Goldblum 1992) and Philadelphia (Ringel 1996) illustrate the prevalence and diversity of adult bat mitzvah classes and ceremonies, discussing b’not mitzvah celebrations in several synagogues and settings. Many women study in formal programs, while

others study with a mentor or friend, celebrating their adult bat mitzvah with their *havurah* or even at summer camp (Mason 1989). Hadassah and the Conservative and Reform movements have recently devoted significant resources to promoting adult bat mitzvah as a method of entry into Jewish life and leadership (Grant 2001; Schwartz 2001).

### **Adult Bat Mitzvah Within American Judaism Today**

#### ***Hadassah*<sup>1</sup>**

According to Dr. Carol Diamant, Hadassah's Director of Education, in August, 2001/Av 5761, twenty-nine American and Israeli women celebrated their b'not mitzvah with the walls of Jerusalem's Old City in view, joining the more than 500 women who have celebrated their b'not mitzvah at Hadassah's International Conventions.

Hadassah focuses on, among other things, the spiritual growth of Jewish women. Dr. Diamant explained that the organization's leadership recognized the tremendous number of its members who had not celebrated their b'not mitzvah as children. After two years of study in a formal program developed by Hadassah, 160 women publicly celebrated their accomplishments at the 1996 National Convention. Since then, five conventions have included bat mitzvah ceremonies. Because some women cannot travel to the conventions, Hadassah has recently begun to encourage regions and even chapters to begin their own programs of study and to hold their own local celebrations. Diamant stresses the extensive learning that participants accomplish as part of each b'not mitzvah project, as well as the mitzvot they adopt and begin to observe. Diamant particularly emphasizes these mitzvot as an important part of the bat mitzvah process; she explains that each individual chooses a new ritual to observe after her bat mitzvah.

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<sup>1</sup> Some information describing Hadassah's program was taken from Hadassah's website, [www.hadassah.org](http://www.hadassah.org).

Diament calls these mitzvot self-made “promises” that the b’not mitzvah will continue to raise their proficiency and involvement in Judaism after their study and celebration conclude.

***Conservative***

Edya Artz, Director of Education of the Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, explains that through the Women’s League, the Conservative movement has recently has taken significant steps toward supporting and increasing the presence of adult bat mitzvah in its member congregations. With approximately 200 of its 700 sisterhoods already sponsoring programs, it recently commissioned and published a full curriculum for its congregations entitled “Aytz Hayim He: She is a Tree of Life” (Grant 2001).

The introduction to that curriculum reveals a great deal about the evolution of adult bat mitzvah in the Conservative movement and the movement’s understanding of its potential to make a difference in the lives of adult b’not mitzvah. The Women’s League views adult bat mitzvah in the context of the growing role of women as spiritual leaders within Conservative Judaism; when women were granted the ability to have *aliyot* to the Torah and be counted in a *minyan*, they could also be *shlichot tzibbur*, but they lacked the skills to do so. The curriculum for adult bat mitzvah seeks to help women be such synagogue leaders, to be “counted as full, productive and contributing members of their synagogues and the larger Conservative movement.” It notes that to take on such positions, to “feel good about one’s Jewishness,” women must understand the roles that their faith and Jewish practice play in their lives. The activities of the two-year syllabus – a series of exercises in Jewish identity, prayer study, personal exploration of *mitzvot*, and review of Jewish history – seek to help women to feel not only knowledgeable, but also comfortable with their Jewish journeys so that they can lead others in Jewish journeys of their own (Grant 2001, introduction).

### ***Reform***

Recognizing the increasing interest in becoming an adult bar/bat mitzvah, and understanding the experience as a way to foster inclusion and therefore involvement in Jewish life, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) recently produced a guide to the facilitation of adult b'nai mitzvah programs. With this guide, the UAHC hopes to expand the existing cadre of Jewishly knowledgeable leaders who can infuse their congregations with spirituality and learning (Schwartz 2001, 16-17).

The curriculum guide itself offers a variety of resources to help temples reach their goals of Jewish learning and leadership. Francine Schwartz, UAHC Program Consultant, explains that after surveying congregations with adult b'nai mitzvah programs, the UAHC found that major components of the existing synagogue programs often include the study of Hebrew, Jewish history, Torah, ritual, and traditional texts during weekly or bimonthly meetings over a two year period. Therefore, according to Schwartz, the guide compiles bibliographies of texts and best practices in each of these areas and offers steps for program implementation within one's congregation.

It is estimated that approximately 300 Reform congregations currently facilitate adult bat mitzvah programs; with this guide, the UAHC hopes to see an increase in programs and therefore an increase in knowledge and empowered Jewish leaders within congregations and communities (Schwartz 2001, 16-17).

This overview of adult bat mitzvah today highlights aspects of the significance of adult bat mitzvah that arose again in the interviews with study participants:

- Intensive study;
- Exploration of personal Jewish identity and commitment;

- The role of ritual in the students' Jewish growth;
- Subsequent increased Jewish involvement for many b'not mitzvah and increased involvement of b'not mitzvah in synagogue and Jewish life.

These themes will now be explored using primary data.

### **Motivations and Experiences**

Rabbi Cohen asked if I wanted to practice on the bimah before it happened. I went up to the chapel with her and we opened the ark and took out the Torah. I just cried – it moved me so much to be able to do that. As we hugged and cried she said, “You’ve just had your bat mitzvah.” (Anita Moise Rosenberg)

When celebrants of adult bat mitzvah describe their experiences, they often use the highest of superlatives. The women interviewed for this project recalled their experiences as “unique,” as “very moving,” as “phenomenal.” Their faces grew wistful as they spoke of their experiences, their voices escalating with increasing emotion. They described the intensity of touching a Torah scroll for the first time. They spoke of the power of the hugs they gave each other on the *bimah* and of being wrapped in their *tallitot* that were specially chosen for this experience. Perhaps most telling, they appeared highly enthusiastic at being interviewed, commenting that the opportunity to remember and discuss the experience was “fun,” “important,” and “challenging.”

The following findings and analysis unpack these emotions, concentrating specifically on how the b'not mitzvah's motivations, prior Jewish involvement, and reactions to their experiences help the adult bat mitzvah to effectively lead women to become more connected to Judaism and to their Jewishness.

Study participants had not celebrated a public bat mitzvah for a variety of reasons. Several women were raised in “observant Reform” households; for example, two women became

confirmed but did not celebrate their b'not mitzvah, and another did not participate in Jewish study or in a public coming of age ceremony at all during her childhood despite her family's active involvement in their synagogue. Another respondent converted to Judaism at her marriage. The others explained that their parents did not consider Jewish study or bat mitzvah important, either because of their parents' deliberate assimilation into American society or because girls did not participate in such activities.

As a result, the women interviewed lacked significant Jewish skills and knowledge. They had almost no understanding of synagogue ritual, prayer, and, often, Hebrew. None had ever taken leadership roles in the prayer service or in the sanctuary. They did not participate actively in religious Judaism. In addition, they felt the absence of bat mitzvah in their lives. One woman explained that she had "always felt cheated" by her lack of a public bat mitzvah celebration. Another commented that she felt that she "wasn't part of something." Amidst their comments regarding this absence they expressed feelings of exclusion, confusion, even humiliation at their lack of ability to participate in Judaism and in their community's activity.

Their lack of Judaic skills was particularly striking in contrast with their manifest competence in other areas of Jewish life. Diane Troderman of Western Massachusetts, a prominent philanthropist and leader in a wide variety of local and national Jewish and secular organizations, spoke of this paradox.

I consider myself a leader in the Jewish community but I considered myself illiterate ... I'd always gone up to the bimah – [but] I'm the curtain puller ... One holiday afternoon, my sister and I went for a walk and passed the home for the elderly. We wandered in and went into services. We picked up books and a leader came over and turned my book right side up, then closed it and gave us the right book. We had picked up something else and needed what I now know is a *mahzor*. I knew nada! Nothing!

Troderman was the curtain puller but never the Torah reader; her illiteracy in the area of synagogue ritual meant that she could never participate in this aspect of Judaism. When she tried as she did on this holiday afternoon, she only showed her ignorance and felt inadequate. She might serve proudly and ably in the highest levels of leadership in some areas of the Jewish community, but she would always see the other areas as shut away behind a closed door.

Troderman felt so excluded that she discussed synagogue ritual as a “secret society,” explaining that she heard “mumbo jumbo” when she walked into the synagogue.

It meant nothing to me – I didn’t understand liturgy – I didn’t understand what it meant to be part of a prayerful community. I didn’t know what it could be – it was like Chaucer to me.

Her lack of literacy meant that she could not decipher prayer and so would never be part of it, never understand its meaning or its purpose. In the *siddur* she compiled for her bat mitzvah service she expressed the extent to which this lack of understanding led her to feel lost in and misconstrue the synagogue service, writing, “The service seemed to promote repetition and cultivate boredom.” She sang nonsense words to a made-up tune to describe the uncertainty and awkwardness she felt when contemplating her alienation from religious Jewish life.

Many of the other women interviewed also were not unconnected to their Jewishness prior to their b’not mitzvah. Several of the women were active in various Jewish organizations including their synagogues and synagogue Sisterhoods, serving as chairs of committees and even presidents of a variety of Jewish organizations. Most of the women had children, and they had intentionally given their children a Jewish education and active Jewish home environment. That the women interviewed showed such a strong sense of exclusion seems to be incongruous; with such long resumes filled with Jewish civic involvement, many of the women interviewed seem to be at the heart of the Jewish community rather than at its fringes.

Strong activism in institutional Jewish life accompanied by liturgical illiteracy and estrangement is not limited to women. Woocher (1986, 13-21) documents this apparent incongruity, describing an American Jewish institutional life based primarily not on the religion of Judaism, on Hebrew prayer and ritual, but based on communal involvement, on positions as president and committee chair. American Jews have developed multiple methods of participating in Jewish life. Some hold countless lay positions and seem to go from one Jewish meeting to the next, appearing to be at the center of American Judaism. However, some of them operate within only one sphere of Judaism – the leadership or civil sphere – and, as the respondents noted, never enter the religious sphere, a fact guaranteed by their lack of skill in that area and their resultant fear of ritual. In *Sacred Survival*, Woocher questions the relationship of these two Judaisms, arguing that their connection must be explored, and that civil Judaism would likely need religious Judaism to survive (1986, 160-171).

This contention seems to be borne out by these adult b'not mitzvah, women comfortable in some Jewish rooms but not in others, but who crave comfort in both places. Diane Troderman commented, for example, "It became a matter of wanting the skill." As Woocher predicts, the two Judaisms need each other to thrive. Without competency in and exploration of both, one will feel excluded from Judaism as a whole. Moreover, if they can develop these religious abilities, the most active civil leaders will be free to explore areas of Judaism previously inaccessible to them. As Anita Moise Rosenberg, a homemaker and active volunteer of Charleston, South Carolina, explained, through adult bat mitzvah, she found "a way to participate that has never been open to me before." Despite her previous presidencies of several Charleston Jewish organizations, through her adult bat mitzvah, Rosenberg was able to become

involved in this other Jewish world, to serve not only as president of her synagogue, but also serve in the sanctuary as well.

Their desire for competency and inclusion in normative Jewish religious practice therefore appears as the respondents' primary motivating factor in their pursuit of their adult bat mitzvah.

The women interviewed mentioned several additional motivations for celebrating their adult bat mitzvah. Intergenerational relationships proved to be an important part of the adult bat mitzvah process, including as a motivation. Pamela Karasik, a doctor in the suburbs of Washington, DC, explained that she and her husband had decided to raise their children in a Jewish environment, including ensuring that they received a Jewish education and publicly celebrated their b'nai mitzvah. Karasik's daughter, however, challenged her mother's desire for her to have a bat mitzvah since Karasik herself had not done the same. When Karasik saw the publicity for her synagogue's adult bat mitzvah program she realized that "she couldn't ask her children to do something I didn't do" and saw an opportunity to "do something I always sort of felt I hadn't done and to prove to my daughter its importance."

Not only women with pre-bat mitzvah daughters considered role modeling for children as a motivation. Samantha Bernstein, a homemaker in Connecticut and a bat mitzvah at age 24, also discussed the implications of her lack of a public bat mitzvah celebration for her children. Raised with no Jewish education or involvement, she became more interested in Judaism late in college. After her graduation she began to contemplate the meaning of adulthood and realized that when she married and began a family, she would want to have normative connections to Judaism, including a bat mitzvah and a Hebrew name. She accomplished both of these tasks prior to her marriage, which she feels will allow her to enter into the development of her family

as a “full Jewish adult,” able to give her children an honest Jewish education, asking them to make commitments that she, herself, had made.

Another group of adult b’not mitzvah searched for a significant life experience, and found it in adult bat mitzvah. Like Laurel Shefsky, a nurse in the suburbs of Chicago, some of the women interviewed were in their 50s and early 60s when they chose to pursue this experience. Laurel was

feeling a need for a background in religion and a closeness to it ... I felt something was lacking where I was in life – I was searching for the real me ... and this was something I couldn’t pass up.

Like Laurel, these women had raised their children, watched them begin lives of their own and then looked back at their own accomplishments, assessing what is missing and what they might add to their lives. Anita Moise Rosenberg confirmed this, noting that while she had never before contemplated celebrating her bat mitzvah publicly, she noted its absence in her life after her children’s marriages, and wondered what this ceremony might now mean to her.

In the case of Jews by choice, bat mitzvah preparation provides an additional setting to engage in enjoyable study and feel part of the Jewish people. Helen Gore, a retiree in the suburbs of Chicago, greatly valued her study for her conversion, feeling that it “cleansed her.” After her conversion, she built on her positive associations with study by taking classes at her synagogue; she also became active in Hadassah and other Jewish organizations. “There’s always something to learn,” she explained. She had not realized that older women could become bat mitzvah until she saw Hadassah’s publicity about its program. Her love of Jewish study, and her appreciation for the ritualistic aspect of her conversion to Judaism, made bat mitzvah a logical step for her.

Feminism was not a primary motivator for most women, as Schoenfeld's research (1991, 217) asserts; however, for some women, "a bit of feminism" is a motivating factor. For example, Diane Troderman explained, "Who are these people to tell me where I can and cannot be? That isn't what Judaism teaches." Her bat mitzvah was in part a proclamation to the community that she would not allow others to dictate her involvement in Judaism as well as a statement that women and men can participate in and lead Jewish ritual side by side.

### **Overcoming Negative Feelings**

Some study participants could not necessarily identify their motivations; moreover, they related their feelings about their Jewish heritage to a series of complicated connections to Judaism that they had experienced throughout their lives. Recent research in Jewish identity validates the importance of these complex journeys, explaining one's connection to Judaism as impacted by a wide number of factors including secular influences in one's immediate environment, family choices, positive and negative experiences with Jewish involvement (e.g. Horowitz 2000, iii). Study participants explained complicated stories of their Jewish pasts, shedding light on the various associations with Judaism that they had prior to their b'not mitzvah celebrations, and speaking of the emotional reactions to Judaism that they carried into their bat mitzvah experiences because of these associations. Some had negative experiences in Jewish settings. Some had tried to connect to religious Judaism and had done so unsuccessfully. These positive and negative aspects of their Jewish experiences exacerbated the participants' confused and uncertain opinions of Judaism and of ritual as they began their study. However, as can be seen from the two following stories, adult bat mitzvah effectively combated these past negative experiences, helping the respondents to reconnect to Judaism.

Annette Weinstein, an adjunct university professor in New Jersey, explains that in her early childhood, she and her sisters attended prayer services on Saturday mornings and spent time at the Jewish Educational Alliance in New York City. When her family moved into Brooklyn, however, they stopped involvement in Jewish activities; her parents did not have the resources to pay for their daughters' Jewish education, and so Weinstein did not ultimately celebrate her bat mitzvah. Later, having retained an interest in understanding Jewish tradition, Weinstein studied modern Hebrew in high school. She even enrolled in a Hebrew literature class in college, but found herself studying with former day school students and with a teacher who favored these male Yeshiva scholars. She felt nervous and even excluded from her class, an experience that led her to feel negatively about Jewish study and even to "block out" her knowledge of Hebrew and traditional Judaism. Throughout adulthood, therefore, Weinstein held a visceral, negative reaction to Hebrew, prayer, and synagogue ritual. She speaks of her bat mitzvah as combating these memories, as helping her "come back to learning."

"I was never really crazy about Judaism," recalls Edie Mueller, a university instructor in the suburbs of Boston. She describes her childhood household as unconnected, although when Edie was in her late teens, for reasons unknown to her, her mother chose to travel to Israel and Edie joined her. When Edie got off of the airplane in Israel she burst into tears of connection. She stayed in Israel for several years, coming back to the United States only when a romantic relationship ended badly and she wanted to spend time with her family. Almost immediately after returning, she met the man she would marry, a German Catholic. They chose to raise their daughter with a Jewish education, but Edie cut off her own ties to Israel, and suppressed her relationship with Hebrew and with Judaism.

After her daughter's bat mitzvah, Edie enrolled in her synagogue's adult bat mitzvah program, curious about her daughter's experience. She cannot explain her motivation further. She describes her reaction to her bat mitzvah experience as like a "dam bursting." At the ceremony, her rabbi

... held up two halves of a matzah and put them together. 'The women becoming bat mitzvah are like this matzah,' he said. 'They are being made whole.' I don't know why I chose this experience, or why it feels this way to me ...

Edie indeed became whole again at her bat mitzvah. Her relationship with Judaism clearly not ended at her return to the United States twenty years ago, she brought to her adult bat mitzvah study and ceremony more than only a childhood disconnected from Judaism. She brought a complicated relationship with her Jewish identity as well as fluctuating desires at various points in her life to know more or less about what it means to her to be Jewish.

Weinstein and Mueller felt excluded, even rejected, from settings involving Hebrew and prayer not necessarily because of their lack of knowledge but because of their emotionally charged and often negative past experiences with these aspects of Judaism. How did the process of study for adult bat mitzvah enable Weinstein, Mueller, and the other study participants to connect in new ways to Judaism?

### **Study as Entrée into "Jewish Mastery"**

First, it should be noted that the type of study undertaken for adult bat mitzvah varies with the individual and with the sponsoring institution. Some, those who began their bat mitzvah preparation already somewhat knowledgeable about history and those who studied independently, spent six months or a year preparing their Torah portion and learning to lead parts of the prayer service. Others who began with less knowledge and those who participated in an institutionally based program likely participated in a two-year weekly or bimonthly class, often

held at their synagogue. The subjects taught included biblical Hebrew, the meaning and origins of Jewish prayers, Jewish history, and Jewish theology, philosophy and thought. In addition, each sponsoring organization added material related to their organization's mission: Hadassah chapters studied the history of Jewish women, and synagogues often reviewed their denomination's unique history and philosophy. It should be noted that Women's League for Conservative Judaism and the UAHC felt it important to write adult b'nai mitzvah curricula in order to develop some standards and consistency among classes.

Adult bat mitzvah programs that successfully foster increased commitment to and involvement in Judaism do share pedagogical approaches. Alison Kur, a co-facilitator of the adult bat mitzvah class of Temple Israel in Boston, introduced these by explaining, "Adult learners have notoriously low self esteem. It is really amazing that these really smart, educated people come to the table and see the word Jewish and are totally freaked out." Kur comments that an effective curriculum, therefore, must take this fear and sense of incompetence into account, developing a safe, accessible, open classroom. The curriculum should assume no prior knowledge on the part of the learner, allowing aspiring b'not mitzvah to feel comfortable to question and discuss the material presented rather than inadequate because of their pediatric understanding of the material. Such classrooms lead learners to feel passionate about their curiosity and comfortable admitting that they know little about Judaism, but they are ready to learn more. Transformational learners, those like some respondents who are seeking to address an emptiness in their lives, particularly require such open classrooms in order to fulfill their learning needs (Schuster 1999, 19).

Moreover, Kur attempts to

Give [students] the opportunity to explore the liturgy in a personal sense ... so they feel when praying that they get it in a big picture sense. A way to get over their sense of incompetence is to help people feel a sense of ownership, feel comfortable, understand that they can get something out of the text without knowing Rashi.

In her classroom, Kur is changing the culture of how students relate to Jewish knowledge, helping them to see and be proud of what they know and to be motivated to continue to know more:

Even a woman with a Master's degree in Judaic Studies wants to learn to be a 'competent Jew.' And it's not just her – this is the message of everyone in the room. In part this is ... a feeling that there is always so much to learn. It's not clear what one is supposed to know – the sense of mastery is totally unclear.

Kur suggests that it is the job of the institution, therefore, to teach not only Torah but to change the culture of the student's relationship with Judaism. The learning that occurs in adult bat mitzvah programs consists of more than the substance of Jewish ritual, prayer, history and thought. Teachers attempt to help students integrate Judaism into their lives. Students learn to own their Jewish identities, to feel that they are a part of Judaism and it is a part of them, to develop and be comfortable with their own ideas of "Jewish mastery."

The literature regarding adult Jewish education supports these ideas. Adult Jewish learners can often become stuck on the "big questions" related to integrating an ancient religion into their modern lives (Schuster 1999, 20). Strong adult bat mitzvah curricula and teachers, however, walk adults through such questions, inspiring students to connect to Judaism personally, helping them to explore and adopt a religious lifestyle, guiding them through their exploration of God and prayer (e.g. Olitzky and Isaacs 1997).

Throughout the interviews, the respondents discussed aspects of these pedagogical strategies, attesting to the important role these ideas played in enabling the respondents' positive

b'not mitzvah experiences. For example, the women interviewed mentioned working with teachers who walked slowly through each text, "examining each word, each line." Laurel Shefsky particularly enjoyed studying with her teacher for these reasons, appreciating that, together, the teacher and class reviewed the history, explanations, and meanings of the words that they studied, making the text more than just "words on a page." She explained of her bat mitzvah program, "Anyone who wants to can get more out of the service by knowing prayer, the history of prayer, its meaning" as she did; her teacher's method of study was instrumental in her changing her attitudes about Judaism through her adult bat mitzvah.

Others supported the idea that their programs went slowly through and deeply into the material, helping them to understand the text rather than merely memorize it. Some explained that the patience of their instructors, their modeling of being a curious but not overwhelmed Jewish learner, and their ability to speak frequently about what it means to be Jewish led the participants' learning to be a positive experience and instrumental in the changes in their Jewish identities that they experienced.

Adult bat mitzvah is about more than the obtaining of knowledge. By helping participants consider various concepts of God within Judaism and new individual religious commitments and choices, by helping participants to explore their personal conceptions of Judaism within a safe learning environment, the process often helps participants make religious change in their lives.

### **Ceremony as a Transformative Event**

Like the program of study, the ceremony itself that is the adult bat mitzvah can vary greatly. The women interviewed celebrated their b'not mitzvah at Hadassah International

Conventions, within their synagogues, and at weekend meetings of lay leadership. Some designed their own ceremonies; one woman even created her own shabbaton.

Each of these paths to adult bat mitzvah has strengths. The appropriateness of each method of study and celebration is directly related to the bat mitzvah's goals; that is, one woman might want to meet other Jewish women through the adult bat mitzvah project, and so a synagogue program might work well for her. Another might have specific study goals, and so a private tutor might help her best accomplish this. For all, a crucial aspect of the effectiveness of the adult bat mitzvah is the woman's ability to not only explore but also publicly express her Jewishness in a highly personal way. In any setting, the ceremony provides this opportunity. It is an opportunity for each bat mitzvah to own and direct her relationship to Judaism.

For example, Edie Mueller, a creative writing instructor at a Boston area university, expresses herself through writing. In her Reform congregation, she ultimately constructed a great deal of the bat mitzvah service she led with her class. She helped others write interpretations of prayers and added her own poetry and liturgical interpretations to their service. This freedom to create the service "empowers you ... to be adventurous in Judaism. It adds a spiritual element," she commented. She appreciated the ability she had to personalize her service; through it, she was able to express herself and connect to Judaism through this expression.

Diane Troderman had never before found a prayer service in which she felt comfortable. Her "prayer service is music," and services she had previously attended had lacked music, had been inaccessible to some in the community, or had been hierarchical. Through her individual bat mitzvah service she created a "perfect prayerful community," something highly personal that met exactly what she craved from Judaism. "Music... finally connects me to the experience and

to community in the most profound way,” she wrote in her bat mitzvah *siddur*, expressing the extent to which her unique service helped to dissipate her previous alienation from synagogue ritual. Filled with music, troubadours, Storahtellers (performers), anyone present was able to understand and participate in what was happening. Although an expression of individualism, it was also still a communal activity, and it helped Troderman to prepare herself to enter and be comfortable in any prayer community.

In addition, because participants lead the service, they come to feel responsibility for the community that they inspire and they become comfortable with these feelings of leadership. Class facilitator Alison Kur commented, “There is something about engaging in the community in this way. It’s very different ... studying prayer than leading the community in prayer. You put yourself out there in a different way ...”. Through leadership of their service as well as through the other means described, women describe themselves as developing a feeling of belonging in the sanctuary, confidence in their Jewish knowledge, comfort with ritual and prayer, and a sense of the importance that religious Judaism should have in their lives.

### **Impact: Inclusion and Involvement**

It is a way to renew our rituals and beliefs, to dust them off a bit. To relearn ... Our commitments that are made are brought to the surface, made more clear. We become aware of commitments in a different light ... We will practice Judaism more and with more spirit. And this leads to a stronger Jewish community and stronger community, period. (Helen Gore)

Women spoke of their feelings about their b’not mitzvah with extreme passion and in the most positive of terms. Helen Gore told of a “beautiful ceremony,” a “feeling of pure joy, pride.” Edie Mueller illustrated her experience as spiritually and emotionally “powerful.” Pamela Karasik, given a large part of the service to lead, called the experience “a great challenge and feeling of accomplishment.” Having known almost no Hebrew and having rarely

participated in prayer services, Karasik explained, “It felt good to lead the congregation in prayer and actually read from Torah.” It was “satisfying” that she could “do this as an adult.”

Many adult b’not mitzvah reported that the bat mitzvah changed how they feel about Judaism. Laurel Shefsky mentions that bat mitzvah helped her feelings about Judaism be “stronger.” She “became more attached to Jewish people... [developed] more of a closeness to Judaism...” through adult bat mitzvah. Samantha Bernstein speaks of adult bat mitzvah as legitimizing her Jewish identity:

It felt like I was faking it, that my commitment and knowledge – although, what knowledge – could be questioned. I feel because I did these things ... it makes a difference for me that I did this.

This strengthened feeling of connection was true as well for those already involved in some Jewish behaviors; as Helen Gore commented, “I was always involved, but this changed how I feel.” Laurel Shefsky had observed kashrut and given her children a Jewish day school education, but adult bat mitzvah still brought her closer to Judaism. Similarly, Anita Moise Rosenberg, the immediate past president of JCC of Charleston, a past president also of her District Sisterhood, active in a wide number of synagogue activities, commented, “It increased the intensity with which I live Judaism.” She explained, “I was the president of my District Sisterhood but am now even more active.” Since her bat mitzvah, “everything grows.”

This seems to verify again the need for civil leaders to explore religious Judaism. Margo Vinney Chaitoff, a past president of her Reform congregation in Beechwood, Ohio, expressed this by saying, “Temple is truly integrated into my Jewish experience.” Rather than relying only on civil involvement to fulfill her spiritual needs, she like other adult b’not mitzvah can now connect to and benefit from Judaism on multiple levels.

In addition to experiencing changed feelings about Judaism, respondents also indicated increased involvement in Jewish activities, increased study of Judaism, and increased observance of ritual behavior. Some, particularly those who had not had significant connection to Judaism prior to their bat mitzvah experience, dove into full-scale involvement in all of these areas; Edie Mueller, for example, described her bat mitzvah as “like a dam bursting,” and began to study, to participate in services weekly, and is even writing an English translation of Torah with cantillation. She is also teaching in her synagogue’s Sunday School and is a co-facilitator of her synagogue’s adult bat mitzvah program. Others have started Rosh Hodesh groups, planned study kallot at their synagogues, become adult confirmands, began singing in their synagogue choirs, read Torah regularly at synagogue or chavurah services, and generally increased the role that Jewish ritual and activity play in their lives. Alison Kur commented that of her synagogue’s adult b’not mitzvah, “many of them are at the core of our active community.” Even those already involved in civil Judaism raised their involvement in religious Judaism; Anita Rosenberg began to observe kashrut, continued her Hebrew study, and enrolled in Judaic studies classes at her local college. Rosenberg was highly involved as a leader in a variety of Jewish communal projects, but had not been able to lead or even participate in this central aspect of Judaism.

Of course, it must be noted adult bat mitzvah is not a formula for automatic “success.” It does not guarantee an immediate and ongoing increase in Jewish ritual observance and commitment on the part of b’not mitzvah. Pamela Karasik acknowledged that she does not know that she will always maintain her current frequent synagogue attendance. She spoke of her Jewish behaviors as shifting, as part of a journey with highs and lows. She commented, “I want to be more participatory and will see where it takes me – next year, Haftorah – my kids want me to do a d’var Torah....” She saw her bat mitzvah as validation of her previous Jewish

commitment and as an important doorway into a new part of her journey, recognizing that her Jewish commitment has changed as a result of her bat mitzvah experience. Her actual involvement is secondary to this changed emotional connection. Edie Mueller commented, “The thing that I’ve learned in all of my study is how hard it is to understand what Judaism is.” Mueller described, essentially, that she cannot fully grasp Judaism now simply because she has celebrated her bat mitzvah. Rather, she is continuing to search for and explore Judaism’s role in her life. Adult bat mitzvah did not prescribe her involvement in Judaism; instead, for Mueller, it was the beginning.

### **The Role of Ritual in Adult Jewish Growth**

Moses received Torah from God at Sinai  
He transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the Prophets,  
the Prophets to the members of the Great Assembly.

Mishnah Avot I

Pamela Karasik began her adult bat mitzvah experience ostensibly because of her children, because they questioned their relationship with Judaism and particularly with Jewish learning given their mother’s lack of a public statement of Jewish commitment. Karasik, therefore, had low expectations for her reaction to her experience, anticipating that it would be simply a process that she would go through for her children. Yet, it was “much more emotional than [she] would have thought” and resulted in her now regular participation in Shabbat morning services, Torah reading, and goal of reading Haftorah next year.

Before the ceremony, she did not expect to have such a significant change in her attitude toward Judaism, but the “ceremony really pulled it together.” Without it, her foray into adult bat mitzvah would have been just “an interesting intellectual journey,” responding to her general intellectual curiosity about the substance of Judaism but not addressing her sense of Jewishness.

Through adult bat mitzvah, Karasik made a statement to her daughter and she added to her Jewish journey, with adult bat mitzvah representing a marked moment of transition and transformation on that journey. As Kahn (1993, 17) reported, the ceremony as ritual fostered an emotional and tangible transition in Karasik's life.

Others join Karasik in investing the bat mitzvah itself with significance. Mueller sees the bat mitzvah as a unique formality within Judaism, commenting that there is "no other place in Judaism where you can cross the line" into symbolic membership and involvement. Helen Gore calls it "an indelible stamp, ... a lasting commitment" to Judaism. It is such a commitment because "it says, I'm going to do Jewish daily. So I'm not just waking up, making coffee." Adult bat mitzvah helps the participant affirm one's dedication to Judaism, acknowledging that life is about "prayer ... [offering] another way to do good, to learn more."

Adult bat mitzvah differs from general adult Jewish education for these reasons. Gore commented, "Adult education is about learning for knowledge," without an ultimate purpose. Similarly, Mueller said

Adult education is just learning. Bat mitzvah means something. It marks something – it is the whole thing. With [adult education,] you're the same, beginning and end. Bat mitzvah changes you...

Several facets of adult bat mitzvah allow it to be such a symbol of lasting commitment and change. Primarily, because it is a prescribed, communally recognized ritual, bat mitzvah allows participants to formally transition to a new status under an outside, communally agreed-upon authority, their transition receiving recognition and significance from this authority that exists outside of them. The ritual helps them officially and with distinction mark a "before" and "after" period in their lives.

Moreover, its public, normative qualities help it be a symbol of membership in Jewish life, particularly in American Jewish life (Grant 2000, 4), and therefore a platform from which women can feel an official part of the American Jewish community. Many of the women spoke of bat mitzvah as something that “is done” in American Judaism. Their feelings that they lacked something because they did not celebrate their bat mitzvah publicly as children stem from this view that bat mitzvah is normative in American Judaism. Having accomplished bat mitzvah, one feels included in the community; without this celebration, one feels that one has not fulfilled the criteria of living as an American Jew. In explaining this feeling of membership, Samantha Bernstein asked, “If you’re going to call yourself Jewish and feel Jewish, can you really not take this step?”

For the participants, that they became bat mitzvah as an adult was also highly significant. As Grant’s research revealed (2000, 25), they spoke of the importance of making as adults this public affirmation of the importance of Judaism in their lives, when they are conscious of the meaning of this statement and can actually control the extent to which they do become involved in Jewish activities. Mueller explained,

Maybe it’s your chance to say yes to Judaism. It’s ... a lot more meaningful to say it as an adult. You know what you’re saying yes to.

As adults, b’not mitzvah recognized the value of and responsibility that they took on with their affirmation. Their b’not mitzvah led them to increased commitment to and involvement in Judaism because it was a conscious affirmation of something missing in their adult lives.

The ritual of bat mitzvah – reading Torah, reading the sacred history of God’s revelation to Moses on Mt Sinai, reading the origin of the laws and commandments that comprise Judaism

– cannot be underestimated. Standing on the *bimah* at one’s bat mitzvah represents standing at Sinai and receiving the commandments from God through Moses. It allows one to participate in passing on the tradition, to be a link in the chain of Torah as outlined in Mishnah Avot I.

This can be seen clearly in the motivations of Samantha Bernstein and Pamela Karasik to become bat mitzvah. Both thought consciously about the importance of ensuring that their children learn a commitment to Judaism and learn the substance of Judaism. Both recognized that they would need to participate actively, personally, in that chain of tradition if they expected their children to do the same. Adult bat mitzvah gave them the tools to do this.

Similarly, Helen Gore discussed the magnitude of being part of a “5000 year old tradition.”

Adult bat mitzvah is about making a commitment to this... I am determined, yes, I owe it to those who came before me... It is a debt, and a joy, it’s pride – it’s all mixed together. It is something I should do ...

With her words, Gore illustrates that publicly becoming bat mitzvah, affirming one’s commitment to Judaism by participating in the reading of Torah, is about participating in an inter-generational experience that is both part of and beyond any individual family. It is the passing on of tradition and responsibility from one entire generation to the next. It is highly communal, the public declaration of one’s individual commitment to the covenant on which their community is based.

This commitment to covenant manifested itself in the variety of roles the respondents’ families and communities played in helping to make their bat mitzvah experience meaningful. In many cases, the b’not mitzvah’s families and friends were with them during their ceremonies; in the cases of those who participated in individual ceremonies, often their families and friends led the service with them. Diane Troderman, for example, asked her children to read Torah. Her

grandchildren joined her on the *bimah*, and her great aunts sat in a place of honor. She wrapped herself in a tallit with handprints of her grandchildren; she wrapped herself in “their embrace.”

Anita Moise Rosenberg also discussed the importance of involving those important in one’s Jewish journey in the bat mitzvah. A “dear friend for years” stood next to her on the *bimah*, wrapping Rosenberg in her *tallit*. On her own spiritual journey, she is an “older woman” who has just become a Cantor. In asking this friend and Jewish leader to stand by her side and to physically hand to her the duty of wearing *tallit* and of being a Jewish adult with prayer responsibilities, Rosenberg illustrated the way that family and friends can help b’not mitzvah become part of a communal Jewish tradition.

Their families’ reactions were also important to the b’not mitzvah. They spoke of the pride in the voices of their husbands, sons, and daughters. They indicated that their children were surprised, amazed, and in awe of their mothers’ entrance into the covenant.

Their b’not mitzvah also allowed the women interviewed to actively participate in the teaching of this covenant to their children. Anita Moise Rosenberg laughed, “Now I can keep up with my grandchildren when they’re reading their Hebrew alphabet!” Pamela Karasik is also pleased that she can now help her children with their Hebrew homework. Moreover, her daughter who did not see the purpose in learning about Judaism because her mother had not become a bat mitzvah publicly has now “stopped complaining” about her Jewish education. In addition, she enjoys that she and her mother can “practice homework together ... She appreciates that [they] can sit down together and go through prayers.”

Edya Artz, Director of Education of the Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, confirmed this as a foremost goal of the Women’s League in promoting adult bat mitzvah. She spoke of the importance of parents helping children with homework, of understanding what their

children are learning, and of children seeing parents as models of Jewish learners. As Karasik illustrated, Artz articulated that this intergenerational exchange helps parents show their children that parents do value their children's Jewish education and that parents have the same skills that they want their children to learn. In addition, rather than parents feeling ashamed of their lack of Jewish knowledge when their children can "sing along in shul" and they cannot, parents feel excited that they can lead their children in song. Instead of dropping their children at the synagogue front door and collecting them after prayer services have ended, their excitement helps parents want to participate in prayer and in synagogue ritual, encouraging their children to do the same.

The respondents also spoke of their b'not mitzvah as a "teaching moment," as an opportunity to inspire others to take on this commitment to bat mitzvah and to increased Jewish responsibility. Several of the respondents indicated that attendants at their services shared with them their new desires to pursue their own b'not mitzvah. Troderman commented, "Had I understood what a gift it would be to the Jewish community, I would have invited more people...".

Ultimately, adult bat mitzvah allows women to feel that they are a part of the Jewish covenant because they participate in a public statement to their community that they will take on this responsibility. Gore summarizes:

I am determined – yes, I owe it to those who came before me. It is a debt, and a source of joy and pride. It's ... something I should do... I will try my best ... to live by the Jewish faith. I am proud of the way that Jews taught us to live. ...I showed the community, I am a committed Jew.

Through her bat mitzvah, Gore affirmed her commitment to Judaism. She came into a community of generations, of “5000 years,” and into a chain of tradition. She took her place as a daughter of the commandments.

### **Role in American Judaism**

I am very supportive of women embracing the tradition.... Women are now called to the Torah; we can have equal status. One of our [Sisterhood's] goals is to ensure that women can take these roles, that we can do all we can to enhance our Judaism and our lives. (Anita Moise Rosenberg)

This study's participants saw adult bat mitzvah as a tremendous opportunity for American Judaism. Alison Kur noted that adult bat mitzvah “really does foster incredible interest on the part of those enrolled,” and that such classes offer “an opportunity to create a cadre of people who will be active participants in and leaders of opportunities offered by the congregation.” Samantha Bernstein saw today's Jewish community as one of decreasing involvement and affiliation, and asked that American Jewish organizations do anything they can to raise affiliation at this time:

Kids need to see adults who wish they are more connected and who are doing something about it... Adults are not encouraged enough to ... continue learning. There are a lot of different pathways to feeling Jewish, and all paths should be open...

Because adult bat mitzvah can be so effective in impacting the next generation, in inspiring Jewish continuity, Bernstein marveled that more synagogues do not provide this unique way for adults to become more intensely involved in Judaism.

Conversely, some respondents indicated that they have seen first-hand the growth of adult bat mitzvah programs. Weinstein explained that as chair of the UAHC's initiative in adult b'nai mitzvah, she participated in two workshops at the recent biennial meeting of the UAHC. Both were filled; rabbis in particular participated overwhelmingly in one workshop focusing on

the ways to use the UAHC's curriculum in their synagogues. Weinstein understands this to illustrate the increasing emphasis of synagogues on adult b'nai mitzvah as a way into Jewish life. "Congregations are filled with hungry adult learners wanting different options," she comments. According to Weinstein, synagogue leaders want to respond.

Respondents approved of this growth. They saw adult bat mitzvah as a chance to ensure that women specifically have a greater role in and greater access to American Judaism. Many commented that they hoped that "all women" would "go and have it done." They saw their own feelings about Judaism and roles transformed through the process (Kahn 1993, 67; Schoenfeld 1992, 367-369), they considered their own newly elevated place in the community (Kahn 1993, 62) and recognized that empowered women will strengthen the Jewish community. Diane Troderman articulated:

Synagogue life should be strengthened, and with women at the helm. It shouldn't be at the exclusion of men; it has to be both. Adult bat mitzvah is a way to empower women, to constantly be a learning community.... An educated woman has to be as educated Jewishly as she possibly can. We have women with PhDs but know nothing about Judaism. Judaism can be so pediatric.

Laurel Shefsky saw the high number of women who never gain access to Jewish knowledge and participation in Judaism as important. She sees this as a "second chance to connect personally to the heart of Judaism," to connect to the giving of tradition.

Their universal affirmation of the importance of adult bat mitzvah in American Jewish life confirms their view of its importance in their lives. Equally, their increased commitment to and role in Jewish life shows the important impact adult bat mitzvah has already had on American Judaism. The women interviewed recognized that there must be additional women who felt as they did, at the periphery of the religion of Judaism, and whose status can be changed through the ritual of adult bat mitzvah. For the respondents, therefore, adult bat mitzvah can be a

crucial way of strengthening Jewish religious and synagogue life and American Jewish life as a whole.

## **Conclusions**

On the cover of Diane Troderman's bat mitzvah *siddur*, a woman holding a Torah floats high over a town, flying with the freedom that knowledge and belonging give her. Adult bat mitzvah set this woman soaring. Its program of study helps participants to explore their Jewish identities and develop an understanding of the role that they want Judaism to play in their lives. It empowers them to learn, and also to act on the things that they learn. Its substance, a generations-old ritual, connects participants to family, friends, and the American and world wide Jewish communities. Its ritualistic aspect marks a change in participants' lives, helping them to understand their Jewish status as changed. Its normative role in American Judaism welcomes participants into Judaism and helps them to show to others that they have membership and responsibility in the Jewish community. As Axelrad (1976, 80) wrote of the first belated b'nai mitzvah, adults who did not experience b'nai mitzvah as children can feel alienated and even ashamed of their Jewish status. As these study respondents illustrated, such adults can even feel like illegitimate Jews. Adult bat mitzvah, however, can help them feel comfortable and even powerful in a religious Jewish setting. Having stood on the *bimah*, having led their community, adult b'not mitzvah feel also as though they stood at Sinai.

Adult bat mitzvah is growing at a time when interest in many forms of adult education and Jewish growth is also expanding (Fishman 2000, 68; Katz 1999, 9). Katz (1999) attributes this to an increase in the Jewish community in certain populations who seek additional information about Judaism and who take learning and spiritual growth seriously. Such populations include early retirees with free time to learn, baby boomers who are known to be

seeking meaning, and women who are newly claiming their ability to study alongside men (10). Katz also cites a new accessibility to texts and learning and a general emphasis on spirituality as factors in Jewish classrooms newly filled with adults (11). The respondents in this study illustrate Katz's picture of the burgeoning field of Jewish adult learning. They also demonstrate the effectiveness of a distinctive kind of learning opportunity for adults. They possibly push the envelope of the meaning of adult spiritual growth as they suggest that both identity exploration in a classroom and ritual that fosters role transition enable increased Jewish agency among students. As the interest of American Jews in adult education likely continues to increase, adult bat mitzvah can continue be a unique opportunity for adults to become more involved in Jewish life and can be a case study for the growing field of adult learning.

## Appendix

### Interview Guide

When did you have an adult bat mitzvah?

How old were you?

What was the preparation like? What was the ceremony like?

What motivated you to do this?

If study – why an adult bat mitzvah? Why not just take classes?

If never had one – why was it important to have one?

What was the reaction of your family?

What was the impact of the event on your relationships with them?

What did they think of your having the bat mitzvah?

(if not already mentioned) Did you celebrate your bat mitzvah as a child?

What kind of Jewish education did you have as a child?

How would you describe the Jewish involvement of your family of origin (growing up)?

Tell me about your involvement in Judaism before the adult bat mitzvah.

Was Judaism important to you?

How has your adult bat mitzvah impacted your involvement with Judaism? In Jewish organizations?

Have you continued to study? Why or why not? In what ways?

I'd like to ask your opinion about adult bat mitzvah –

Is it important that this opportunity exists for women? Why?

In your opinion, how has the project impact the synagogue?

What have graduates added to the congregation?

What can adult bat mitzvah do for the Jewish community?

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