
Reviewed by Susan Landau-Chark, Concordia University, Montreal

As noted in the introduction, this collection of essays, with the Bat Mitzvah as the unifying theme, grew out of a need to provide parents “with readable and accessible material” that would enable them to create a positive Halachic experience “to mark” their daughters entry into Jewish adulthood.

This anthology contains 25 chapters of varying lengths. The fact that it is an anthology and each chapter is a self-contained unit makes it an excellent resource as one is not required to read it from beginning to end in order to gather the useful information contained herein. Perhaps because this is a unique publication there was a concern to ensure that everything that needed to be said about the Bat Mitzvah and about the place of women within Judaism was welcomed to be said within these pages.

The anthology opens with an introductory chapter by Baruch Kahana reminding the reader of the value of this rite of passage. The book is then divided into three major sections: Part I is “Marking the Day and Celebrating the Occasion”, Part II is “And Above All, Study Torah”, and Part III (not shown in the Table of Contents) is titled “Meaningful Preparation Through Active Participation.” Kahana points out in his essay that the Bat Mitzvah has several components that stress different aspects of the individual’s identity. Aside from marking the young girl’s personal, and spiritual Jewish identity, it acknowledges and places her as an adult Jewish woman “able to take charge of her own destiny” (20) and able to confidently maintain her familial, social and communal obligations while making her “own unique contribution” (28).

Part I contains ten essays all directly related to the Bat Mitzvah. One only needs to turn to these pages both for insight and further sources regarding the halachic issues. Part II also contains ten papers: even though the essays are diverse — further perspectives on Eve, on Chana and prayer, on Nehama Leibowitz, and on Holidays rituals – the underlying theme is women and their place in Judaism, be it in Torah, in teaching and learning, or in communal participation. The material in this section, is enriching, and provides yet another perspective concerning women’s roles. The inclusion of this more general material illustrates the difficulty in separating out one rite of passage from all other aspects of Jewish practice, especially where women are concerned. The book could have benefitted from a concluding essay to address and reconcile the main issues surrounding the celebration of the Bat Mitzvah, as well as an introductory essay to Part II to clarify (for the untutored layperson) how this section related to Part I as an extension and a continuation of issues relating to women’s involvement in ritual and Torah study. Part III is a mix of five essays describing both personal experience in the preparation of a young woman for her Bat Mitzvah, and commentary on Torah study for women. This section
“reads” like an afterthought and its essays could probably have been distributed amongst the first two sections without any loss of coherence.

I have chosen only to examine more closely the section on “Marking the Day.” As already indicated the section “And Above All, Study Torah” covers readings and rituals that have been addressed and explored in any number of commentaries concerning women. The articles are thought-provoking in themselves and worthy of reading, but they did not add (for this reader) to the main intent of the book: the Bat Mitzvah.

It is possible that the main reason for their inclusion in a MaTaN publication is that, while the gist of these articles is “well-known” to the “reading Jewish feminist” in fact, this one book might be one of the few acceptable sources available to its readership to access essays that are “women-dedicated”.

The first section “Marking the Day and Celebrating the Occasion” is further divided into three parts: “Celebrating the Bat Mitzvah”, “Responsa on Ways to Mark the Bat Mitzvah Day, and “Derashot in Honor of the Bat Mitzvah”. Rabbi Lau provides a very readable and balanced discussion concerning the halachic issues that surround Bat Mitzvah celebrations. The article is re-assuring to the reader who might be somewhat confused by the halachic issues raised concerning the Bat Mitzvah celebration and the attendant contradictory rabbinical commentaries. Rabbi Lau lays out the arguments for and against the notion of the Bat Mitzvah as a worthy halachic celebration quite clearly, while all the time emphasizing that most Orthodox communities today “do celebrate the Bat Mitzvah of their daughters in one form or another” (39), and that each community, in consultation with its rabbi needs to “work together in mutual understanding .. for developing a ... joyous event that will encourage the Bat Mitzvah girl” (54).

The next three contributors both build on and incorporate some of Rabbi Lau’s commentary in their essays. Yardena Cope-Yossef further explores whether the Bat Mitzvah celebration qualifies as a seudah mitzvah, and if so, which form of preparation is most appropriate for a young woman: a derasha or a siyyum? Once it has been decided that the celebration is to be considered a seudah mitzvah, Cope-Yossef notes it must include a deroshah directed to the invited guests as a group, and the contents of that deroshah must be devoted to the event itself. (73).

She quotes Rabbi Nissim that even though a rabbi should be present and speak in honor of the event, the Bat Mitzvah herself should “prepare a short talk concerning the event and the importance of the day” (75). Cope-Yossef suggests that for the young woman, making a siyyum, completing a unit of Torah study, in preparation for the event “has the power to motivate and strengthen the girl to continue learning” (82).

Rabbi Wolowelsky revisits Rabbi Yehiel Y. Weinberg’s Responsa Seridei Esh, concerning the issue of “establishing ceremonies that seem to imitate those of the non-Jewish world” (84). He notes how Bat Mitzvah observances “flow naturally from our everyday Torah assumptions and life-style” (87), and that opposition to these celebrations today based on the notion of ‘imitation of non-Jews’, “have little resonance in our...
modern Orthodox world” (84). Rabbi Wolowelsky also takes issue with the notion that the Bat Mitzvah ceremony should be kept out of the synagogue. He comments that almost all synagogues today are now built with an explicit intention of using it for other purposes, thereby allowing them to be used for a whole range of reshit activities, including lectures (85).

Given this situation, he argues there is no real reason to prohibit a Bat Mitzvah girl from holding her event in the synagogue, as long as it is after services. In his essay, Rabbi Wolowelsky succinctly raises the issues, and then demonstrates how within the context of family and community, these concerns over halacha, propriety, and modesty, can be transformed into a valuable learning experience for the young girl, her family and their community.

Erica Brown takes a different tack to the issues raised by Bat Mitzvah celebrations. Drawing on the Shulchan Arukh and Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, she first explores how Jewish law assesses maturity in both boys and girls, before addressing the issues already raised by the previous authors: blessing of the parents, deroshah, the seudah mitzvah, modesty, and imitation of the Gentiles. The main difference between Brown’s commentary and those of Lau, Cope-Yossef and Wolowelsky, is that she draws on the writings of Carol Gilligan. Brown turns from what has been mainly a legalistic approach to the Bat Mitzvah to entertain concerns regarding a young woman’s psychological response to her female status within her family and community. Brown challenges the Orthodox rabbinate not to ignore the spiritual and intellectual needs of today’s young Jewish women to participate actively in their own rite of passage. Drawing on anecdotes of older women with whom she has spoken, Brown admonishes the rabbinate that they must not get drawn into issues of feminism and materialism, but must consider ... what will most enhance her chances of growing into an observant, spiritual, and humanitarian Jewish adult (118).

The section on Responsa contains four brief essays, each giving suggestions, with both personal, and anecdotal examples, on how the day can be made a memorable and joyous occasion. The third section of Part I provides the derashot given by four young women at their Bat Mitzvah celebrations. This section closes with a description written by the father of a Bat Mitzvah as to how he saw her learning and preparation in terms of her move towards her own independence and obligations.

I found much to learn from these chapters. The anthology is well-thought out, and makes me wish I had had access to such a book when my eldest was preparing for her Bat Mitzvah many moons ago.