

Memories of a Bat Mitzva that Wasn't Schulamith C. Halevy

I was not nearly twelve years old when I was banished from the men's section of the synagogue in Moshav Hazorim in northern Israel. I remember going with my dad often to the early daily services, when the synagogue was not crowded and I was allowed my space. I would approach the ark with awe, touch the *parokhet*, the velvety, richly – but rather primitively – adorned curtain. I would touch it, caress gently and feel the softness, get my lips to touch the velvet, and sometimes the metallic thread from the embroidery, shifting it just enough to smell the unusual mix of dust and parchment within. When the ark was opened, I would touch the Torah scroll, in its velvety dress, and kiss it. During this time I made pacts with God, prayed for prophecy, or at least a sign of my purpose here on earth. Sometimes I chose certain verses or chapters from Psalms I had memorized to say there; sometimes I asked Him about my sorrows, seeking to understand their cause and purpose.

All this came to an abrupt end one early morning when some man – I have no memory of who he was – simply sent me upstairs to the ladies' section. Stunned, but obedient, I climbed up, where I was all alone – no other woman ever came – and without access. I began to try to follow the prayers of the men downstairs, who prayed very rapidly, challenging myself to actually say every word before the prayer leader reached the end of the stanza, which proved impossible with almost all prayer leaders. This is also when I began to follow the Torah readings, listening with the book open before me, trying to learn how to chant. It was not simple, because – as I soon found out – many guys go up and read unprepared, committing errors that complicated my self-imposed task. (Until today it irritates me when the guys cantillate carelessly.) But by the time I was twelve, I could read correctly both the typical "Israeli" Ashkenazi chant, and the German (*yekkish*) cantillation.

All that marked my Bat Mitzva was a small party, with the kids in my class in Jerusalem, where we were living at the time, coming to my home, and the boys making me miserable. It was not really on my birthdate, which falls just before Passover, and had nothing in it to indicate that I was coming of age. No program, nothing. Just a lousy birthday party. Although the possibility of reading the Torah before the community did not even enter my mind at that time, I had hoped to give some kind of speech, say something about the Torah, of which I was an avid reader, along with the classical interpreters and the Aggadic literature.

But eventually I did have my "Bat Mitzvah". I was three times the age: 36 years old. We were living at the time in Urbana, Illinois, where women were regularly sharing their insights on the Torah portion read in the Orthodox services of the Hillel Foundation. By then, I had spoken before countless crowds of every type and size, including the congregation before me. Yet when I went up there, before the ark, my heart was racing, and my knees were shaking. I had had no idea I would become so emotional, no idea how deeply I still longed for this closure. As I was born on Passover eve, my Torah reading is on the interim Sabbath of the holiday. In it, Moses – my favorite biblical

personality – ascends Mount Sinai yet again, to receive the greatest closeness to, and comprehension of God any human ever did or will. I spoke of Moses' journey, his isolation and mixed identity, and the mystical climax at which he finally fully identified with his charges, the people of Israel, leading him to speak of himself and the children of Israel in the inclusive third person. Then I spoke of his descent, upon which his radiance severed him from them completely. His experience on the mount, this union with God, at once won him his people, and placed a permanent barrier between them and him. When Moses went down, not even Aaron, his brother, could approach him, and, from that moment on, he would speak to his brethren from behind a veil, which he removed only when he spoke to God.

My voice was quaking, and my hands pasty with sweat when I was done, as if I was still twelve. I no longer feel the sorrow, but rather, I remember the beautiful closure that I attained when I tripled the age of my Bat Mitzva. That moment symbolizes for me the fact that I had not been hindered beyond remedy. Ultimately, whatever barriers still stand, the path to God is not in any man's hand to leave open or bar.

In my adult life, there were places that welcomed what I had to offer, and others that did not. I have read the Torah for women, at women's services, but consider all these to be small steps – means rather than an end. I have read for women on *Simhat Torah*, but few Orthodox places accept such practices as yet, innocuous as they are. When my son grew up, I taught him how to chant the Torah and *haftarah*. The synagogue I frequent in Tel Aviv declined my offer to read the Torah for the women on *Simhat Torah*, but offered me, as a “booby prize”, to speak about the Torah reading between the afternoon service and *kabbalat shabbat*. I accepted, and now the door is open to other women attending this synagogue to contribute from their insight to the community.

The access I strive for in the public arena is motivated by my inner dialogue with God. Like all members of the Jewish people, I would like the public aspect of Jewish ritual to enhance, and, at least to some extent, express or share some of my private, spiritual journey.

It is lonely out there on the road we traverse in our quest for intimacy with the Divine, and the obstacles are many. Each step closer makes us a little more different, a bit more alien to our surroundings. But the rewards are beyond words, although, to the mundane eye, they remain mostly hidden.