Bat Mitzvah at Forty-Five

by Phyllis Berck

Dans cet article, l'auteure explique l'importance de «mitzvah» dans sa vie.

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On August 31, 1996, one month after my forty-fifth birthday, in the month of *Ellul*, I will celebrate my *bat mitzvah* at the First Narayever Synagogue in Toronto, Ontario. After preparing for almost two years, I will stand on a *bimah* and read from the *Torah* for the first time in my life. This will be the most identifiable "Jewish" act of my life. It might also be construed as the most radical.

Why, now, do I choose to do "Jewish"? And why, after having been raised in a secular household and lived as a non-observant Jew, do I decide to do such a religious observance? Is this a regression, a reflection, a capitulation to the conservatism of the times, or is the decision to have a *bat mitzvah* the most radical action I have ever taken. The *Torah* portion is *Ki Thavo*, about the exodus from Egypt, to where Jews can be free persons. I am particularly fond of the *Haftorah* portion. It is about the need for light in a world of darkness, a timely metaphor for our times.

I grew up in Winnipeg. My recollection of religious observance is connected to my *Baba*[1] (Malka Koffman) and joining her, with my mother and sister, upstairs in the women's section at the orthodox Ashkenazi[2] *shul* (synagogue) on Burrows Avenue in Winnipeg's north end. While she was alive, we attended synagogue on the high holidays. When she died, we stopped. *Pesach*[3] was celebrated at my cousins, Katie and Joe, who always hosted the first *seder*.[4] I recall only one *seder* at home, when I was very young. My Jewish education was secular. I attended an after school program at the Sholem Alecheim School in Winnipeg, where I learned to speak, read, and write Yiddish and where I dressed up for *Purim*[5] parties. When we moved to another part of the city, I stopped going. Holidays were acknowledged, not celebrated.

While I was growing up, I identified with the mainstream, and "it" apparently, with me. I lived much of my life surrounded by Jews but being told by non-Jews that I "was not like them." At times, it seemed to be true. I was very athletic and played on many school teams, while other Jewish females did not. I read a lot, and engaged in political discussions. These were the heady days of the mid '60s and there was lots to talk about. I did not feel Jewish-identified, nor was I encouraged to. I was encouraged to have "worldly" interests, not Jewish ones. My parents, who had been involved with secular Jewish and left-wing organizations in their youth, drew away from them during my adolescent years. I suspect that this was a consequence of McCarthyism. My father, a scientist with the Government of Canada, was frightened by the implications of the Rosenberg trial.[6]

However, I did have a variety of connections to the Jewish community. I was a member of the Young Men's Hebrew Association in Winnipeg, and it was at my one session of B'nai B'rith summer camp that I learned what little I have known until very recently, about religious observance. I also joined the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization for a few years. But I felt alienated from the social activities of these organizations. My friends were mostly non-Jewish, especially in grade school, where the Bible was read daily and only Christmas carols were learned for the holiday season. It was awkward and embarrassing for me to explain that I did not receive Christmas presents and that I would be taking days off in the autumn to observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, names that few of my friends or teachers could pronounce, let alone understand. I recall arguing with my mother, because I desperately wanted to be back at school with my friends.

Yet when I moved to Calgary in my mid-twenties, I missed the visible Jewishness which I took for granted in Winnipeg. The Jewish community in Calgary was very small, wealthy, family-focused, and conservative, and I could not identify with it. In many ways, I loved the 15 years I lived in Calgary. I still yearn for the Rockies, the big blue skies, and the exceptional friends I made that still live there. But while Calgary was a city one was expected to belong to and identify with—and I did, through my work with the women's community, the Calgary Olympics—I never did as a Jew.

I have always celebrated Christian holidays with my friends. I work hard at getting appropriate Christmas presents, sending cards, sharing in festive dinners. I even remember going to different churches to see what they were like. But I never took anyone to a synagogue. I wouldn't have known what to tell them.

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When I moved to Toronto in 1988, my perception of multiculturalism

changed dramatically. Never before had I experienced such diversity, nor more significantly, such expression of difference. Perhaps even more significantly, I had never experienced the support and enthusiasm for difference. For example, the City of Toronto officially recognizes seven different languages, signage is often in languages other than English, and there are film and music festivals in every conceivable language. There are groups and associations for over 100 different racial and cultural minorities. This seemed to be a city where difference is valued and accommodation expected, rather than everyone being the same (although clearly there is pressure to speak English). I was fascinated by the "politics of identification."

Not so long ago, at a Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women conference, I found myself stymied by an uncertainty about how to identify myself. An afternoon session listed groups according to experience or race/culture. My dilemma choosing between the session for Jewish women or for white women (as opposed to sessions for women of colour, incest survivors, lesbians, etc.). I was embarrassed at how perplexing a choice it was. Ultimately I was "saved" from making a decision because most of the workshop sessions were combined into one dealing with racism. Long after, I thought about how did I describe myself, with whom did I identify?

Letty Cottin Pogrebin's book *Deborah, Golda and Me* was particularly significant for me. While her upbringing was far more religious than mine, I was struck by her experience of having dedicated so many years of her life to the women's movement in the United States, only to find that when the issue of Zionism came up, she was marginalized as a Jew. After decades of commitment and involvement with women for women, being Jewish was "her problem." There was no place for her as a feminist in the Jewish community with which Ms. Pogrebin had been raised, and there was, for a time, no place for her as a Jew in the women's community. I was very struck by her experience. I had never considered the Jewish community as a location for my activism, although I was well aware of the lengthy and illustrious history of Jewish activists in many, many progressive movements. My mother was actively involved in the trade union movement in the garment factory where she worked. Both my parents were involved with Jewish youth organizations. But as I grew up, I was encouraged to engage in "the world." And I did that in ways that were important to myself and the women's community that I was a part of. But in no way did I identify with being Jewish or was being Jewish a part of my activism. I was very comfortable with identifying myself as a feminist, but never would identify myself as a Jew. At the time, there seemed to be no need.

When I came to Toronto, I maintained my involvement with LEAF (Women's Legal Education and Action Fund) and eventually became its National Chair. As well, I became involved with the issue of gender equity in sport, an intersection of my love of physical activity and my now 20 years of involvement in some aspect of the struggle to establish women's rights in Canada. I was effective in lobbying the provincial government to establish the first ever policy on full and fair access for girls and women in sport and physical activity. The work has been hard and at times discouraging, but there have been many successes and I feel enormous pride in the programs and initiatives that I have been involved in developing. At the same time, there was a sense of belonging that was absent from my life. While my life seemed full, and certainly was busy, there was an absence of connectedness. I knew intuitively that some day, I would need to resolve my issues around being Jewish.

I have a male friend and colleague who is African Canadian and with whom I have had lively discussions about culture, remembrance, and belonging. These discussions were the final impetus for me to "do something." I heard about a synagogue that was traditional and egalitarian, and I joined. I finally got the courage to go and was thrilled. It felt wonderful. I then decided to have a *bat mitzvah*. This meant I had to learn Hebrew, from scratch. I thought very little about why I wanted to do this, or the work involved. However, I knew that it was the right thing to do.

Since that decision two years ago, I go to a wonderful teacher, Dorrie Levine, most Saturdays. Most evenings I spend at least an hour doing "homework." I moved through the two "how to" books, and then started on my *Haftorah* and finally my *Torah* portion. This has forced me to be more disciplined than I am have been about absolutely anything in my life. I have travelled less (a big love of mine), read less, socialized less. I have repeated words and verses for days until I "got" them. I'd get bored listening to myself, I couldn't understand how my husband could stand it. Yet, two years later, I have achieved something quite remarkable. Beyond learning the language and preparing for the reading Torah, I am doing Jewish.

While preparing for a *bat mitzvah* is engaging in religious ritual, I wouldn't say that I have become, or intend to become, more religious. Instead, this act has made me more connected to other Jews while my day-to-day life has changed very little. The most notable difference is how "public" I have become about being Jewish. Telling people about a prior commitment on Saturday afternoon, about my "personal project," inviting them to be in attendance in August, has meant that I have had to not only tell people about something that I'm doing, but also, about why. I have had to be publicly Jewish to people that I might not otherwise have done so.

At a recent conference for Jewish women, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz presented a concept she called "diasporism." She developed this term to refer to all the millions of Jews for

whom Israel was essential but not the centre—their own countries were. Diasporism is about being connected to other Jews as central, and being active in the issues where one lives, where one will always live. This was a very provactive notion for me, and also a helpful concept in the sense of belonging to a community "within" my country.

Although there is enormous cultural/racial/ethnic diversity in Toronto, I grew up in a world that was (and in so many ways, still is) relentlessly Christian. The struggle to determine my place in this society has been waged by so many Jews before me—Germany in the '30s, Spain in the thirteenth century—are just two episodes I reflect upon frequently. How do we belong to the larger society? How do we stay a community of Jews?

I have answered the question by staking my place in both communities.

My *bat mitzvah* will confirm my choice to become a visible Jew.

Phyllis Berck is now a resident in Toronto, after living in various parts of Canada. She recently received the "Herstorical Award" from CAAWS (Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport) for her work in gender equity in sport.

[1]Grandmother.
[2]A Jew originally from central or eastern Europe.
[3]The Hebrew word for the spring holiday commemmorating the exodus from Egypt.
[4]The festive meal during which the story of the flight from slavery in Egypt to freedom is read from the *Hagada.*
[5]The holiday which commemmorates the rescue of the Jews of Persia by Queen Esther.
[6]Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were both left-wing Jews who were executed in 1953 as Soviet spies on what many still regard as trumped-up charges. Julius was an electrical engineer for the United States Army Signal Corps.

FOGEL

enough

the shul is small, but much larger than this child dressed for her mother. her childhands large and wide. not the little girl hands mother wants them to be.

she is suddenly standing, the awesome arc opened. man-cradled torahs float along and are kissed. the mother, absolute lady, maker of rules reaches across to touch and to kiss. love unconditional. this little girl's dress clings to moist skin, fabric hardly lifting in stale air of religion. and the sweltering heat of midday shabbas.

the home, family like lord-god: punitive, wrathful maker of laws. dictates of identity, wiry and thin pull across the girl's throat. the mother weeps them tighter. and this girl, now 13 is forbidden desired dungarees and big boots. she stands still in the necessary dress, acquiescent after hours of combat. but it is never enough. and she is reprobate: false woman, false jew. she stares at pieces of sky, languid blue through high rectangular windows. generous clouds moving out of frame. creaking of wooden shul bench returns her. to the back of mr. goldberg's head; he will pinch her cheeks red and white, affectionately sadistic, and promise the mother a jar of his herring. to the sneezing of mrs. cohen, just a tiny emitted gasp, under cover of kleenexed palm. to large bony knees, through the trousers of men. where hair is allowed to grow unshaven. accepted. to the mother who will cry at her later and love her like mr. goldberg's pinches.

there will be funerals, more metal leaves in shul foyer, noting the purchase of trees in israel. more names, one her sister's. but this little girl will turn 18. and she will tear up stockings shifting gears on her motorbike. roaring up to shul in the midday prairie sun. that glares off aluminum siding, and blinds the good small-city jews. who stand surreptitiously staring. tacit condolence to the mother, whom she will stand beside sometimes; yarzheit, pesach, rosh hashanah. all are days of atonement. for this girl is apostate as woman, as jew. and this world will tear at her self until it is only hinged to her.

years later there is chosen family. women who invite her to seders. she will tattoo her bicep, sleep only with women, observe sabbath in the dyke bar. under benediction of big city disco ball. lights dancing. and she will be one of the jews. at a seder, with loved ones. dayenu. because it is enough.

Fogel lives, writes, and teaches in Toronto.