



Penina Adelman

Creating a Mother–Daughter Bat Mitzvah Group

Penina Adelman is the most famous name in the first wave of the adult Rosh Hodesh American revival several decades ago. Her book, Miriam's Well, a year's record of her women's Rosh Hodesh group, became our generation's Sourcebook. Where is she now? She is celebrating Rosh Hodesh with mothers and daughters. Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing! invited Penina Adelman to tell you about that project.

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When preparing for my son Daniel's bar mitzvah, I was moved to see how the men in our modern orthodox community mobilized around him tightly, already knowing the choreography. My husband, Steve, asked one man to teach him to *leyn* (chant the Torah portion); he asked another man to study the Torah portion with Daniel in preparation for the *d'var torah* (speech about an issue raised in the Torah portion or in the Torah, generally); he asked the rabbi to help purchase *tefillin* (prayer phylacteries worn during daily morning prayers) and Steve would teach Daniel how to put them on. All these men were willing and enthusiastic. There seemed to be an automatic circle of men who formed around Daniel to induct him into the Jewish brotherhood of observant men.

In the egalitarian communities we had traveled in before Daniel was born, an equal fuss would have been made over a girl becoming a bat mitzvah. However, two things were clear in this observant community. First, even though a girl could become a bat mitzvah in the context of a "Women's Tefillah Group," she would only be able to demonstrate her prowess once a month at *mincha* (afternoon prayers) when our group regularly met. This would be very different for Daniel who could lead prayers and read from the Torah daily once he became a bar mitzvah. Second, the bat mitzvah ceremony in Modern Orthodox and egalitarian communities was styled after the bar mitzvah ceremony. There was nothing inherently feminine about bat mitzvah rites. Even in egalitarian groups where a girl became an adult member as she became a bat mitzvah, where and how would she learn to become a Jewish woman?

For my daughter Laura's bat mitzvah, I wanted to create a different kind of preparation from what Daniel had encountered. Hence, the mother-daughter bat mitzvah group. A friend of mine, Nechama Cheses, whose daughters had both become b'not mitzvah in the past several years, helped brainstorm about our first meeting.

With our daughters agreeing to participate, we invited several of their friends and their mothers to participate. We met in the *sukkah*, a fitting place to build a community of women and girls who wanted to explore what it means to become a Jewish woman.

Following the family custom of Suri Levow, a friend from New Jersey, we created *ushpizot*. These are guests who are customarily invited into the sukkah from the heavenly realms, such as the Patriarchs, Moses, Aaron, and David, but that night our guests were female. We made the *ushpizot* out of pumpkins, gourds, yarn, glitter, and markers. Inviting guests, both heavenly and earthly, into the sukkah is the essence of Sukkot. We also invited our female ancestors into the sukkah, our great-grandmothers,

aunts, sisters, and mothers who were not physically there, but whose presence became palpable as we called them in. Since many of their names were biblical, we were also welcoming our Jewish foremothers from the Torah. Most important, we experienced a sense of inviting ourselves into this small, rustic dwelling. By invoking female guests, we made the sukkah a comfortable place to be girls and women. Here, in this “sukkah of our own” we were free to ask questions, tell stories and histories, laugh and be silly, all while invoking the strong and exemplary spirits of our female ancestors.

Over the course of the next two years, we engaged in the following activities, among others: we studied Torah together; we went on a Shabbaton for girls and women in the Connecticut mountains; we baked hamentashen; we enacted the story of Judith and Holofernes at Hanukah time; we participated in a meditation workshop; we created a quilt which was used as a Torah cover at each girl’s bat mitzvah.

Now we plan to take on a *hesed* (literally, lovingkindness or social action) project working with seniors in an assisted living community or with children in the hospital. In the meantime, other mother-daughter groups have formed as well to prepare more girls for bat mitzvah.

Our group continues, taking new forms and assuming new meanings. As each girl became bat mitzvah, the group changed and matured. Now, our question is slightly different: What does it mean to be a Jewish woman?

Penina Adelman is the author of Miriam’s Well: Rituals for Jewish Women around the Year and The Bible from Alef to Tav. She is a Visiting Scholar at the Brandeis University Women’s Studies Research Center, where she is writing about Jewish girls and biblical women.

