Fall 2022

Daughters of the Commandment and Their Mothers: An Ethnographic Exploration of Bat Mitzvahs in Metro Atlanta

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Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
December 2022

DEDICATION

To the Jewish Moms of Atlanta.

And to the bat mitzvah girls everywhere—past, present, and future.

L'chayim and thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Sophia Stamatapoulou-Robbins, Shai Secunda, Yuka Suzuki, Maria Sonevystky, Greg Moynahan and the rest of the faculty and staff at Bard who have supported me.

Thank you to my family—Momma, Pops, Erica, Nathan, and Biscuit.

Thank you to the Erins (and the Aaron).

Thank you to my roomies—Allie, Emma, and Abby.

For cultivating my love and appreciation for learning, especially through Anthropology. I have been so lucky to get to know and to learn from you all.

For being there every step of the way, before we even knew this is where the way was headed. I love you guys so much!

For being the greatest friends, in-laws, sounding boards, and supporters.

For listening to my hyperpop and being so smart and so pretty.

I do not mean it lightly when I say that this would not have been possible without each of you.

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INTRODUCTION

A MEMORY

When I was in the seventh grade, I attended around half a dozen bat mitzvahs. Seventh grade is the year for it. It's the year that kids typically turn thirteen—the age at which they become responsible for their actions and observing commandments—a bat mitzvah. I don't think I fully understood that significance when I was a seventh grader. I understood that some of my friends were having fancy and important birthday parties that had something to do with the fact that they were Jewish.

My memories of each bat mitzvah I attended that year have emerged at different points throughout researching and writing this project, but there is one that feels particularly emblematic of that time. It must have been early spring, in the middle of second semester. I remember it that way because it seemed that most people knew what to expect from a bat mitzvah by that point—I had already been to three or four—and that certainly wasn't true at the beginning of the year. But the girl whose bat mitzvah it was, was undeniably popular. She invited a *lot* of people. So for several of my classmates, it was a new experience.

I remember getting to the temple in the late morning, like I did on each of those days. My mom would drop me off. I would wear the same dress to every bat mitzvah. It was teal and white chevron. It was sleeveless, so I would wear a cream colored cardigan over it, and if it was cold, I would wear tights. I sat in a pew with one of my friends and we watched as a group of girls who were nice but cooler than us walked into the synagogue. They giggled and not-so-discreetly took selfies and tugged on each other's arms. A few heads turned. A few people whispered. There were a few pointed looks. One of the girls was wearing a short, tight, spaghetti-strap dress with a

repeating pattern of crosses all over it. Like, the Christian kind of crosses. To be fair, it was trendy and I remember thinking she looked great, but not for this. It was the wrong thing to wear to a bat mitzvah. But she didn't know any better. A mom went out to the parking lot to get her a sweater from her car.

I don't remember much from the ceremony itself. I imagine that to be because it was much like all of the other bat mitzvahs I went to that year. The bat mitzvah girl and her family stood in front of everyone in the temple and spoke. Some of it was in English and some of it was in Hebrew. There were some moments when we were asked to stand and join in prayer. I didn't know what the prayers were, they were the Hebrew parts, but at some point I had been to enough bat mitzvahs that I knew to chant *baruch atah adonai eloheinu malech ha-olem* at the start of the prayer. I had no idea what I was saying, and I honestly wasn't *really* saying anything, just parroting sounds.

That night was the party, which I remember much more clearly. My mom dropped me off again. If I remember correctly, it was one of the first times I was allowed to sit in the front seat of her car—she was big on that rule. I remember wearing a black dress and shiny nude heels. I straightened my hair and I did my makeup. I wanted to look hot. The party was "VIP" themed and was in a hotel ballroom decorated to look like a tween nightclub dedicated to the bat mitzvah girl. Bat mitzvah parties were one of those things that were always much more fun in theory than in practice for me. I liked to get dressed up but hated to be seen dressed up. I liked the idea of dancing with my friends but the music was too loud. I loved the rituals and traditions but having people light candles or lifted up in a chair made me nervous. I ended up spending much of the party sitting on the floor, away from the action, with a friend from Girl Scouts.

Bat mitzvahs are often talked about as the day a girl becomes a woman. It's not unusual for speeches on the big day to be full of jokes about it. "Today she's a woman, *but*..." At thirteen, I felt right on the precipice of adulthood, and it made so much sense that my friends would be having ceremonies recognizing their coming of age. Little did I know I would still feel that way almost a decade later. And now, I can look back on that time and understand that so much of what was important—sitting in the front seat of the car, having lots of friends, wearing high heels—the things that made us feel grown up, were our attempts to mimic an image of adulthood, like saying a prayer in a language you don't understand.

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ON THE TITLE

The title of this paper "Daughters of the Commandment and their Mothers" is a reference to the English translation of the phrase bat mitzvah. The layers to this term are perfectly described in the preface of the book *Today I Am a Woman:*

> *Bat* means 'daughter' in Hebrew, and mitzvah means 'commandment' or 'Jewish responsibility.' A girl who has accepted her responsibilities as a Jewish adult is called a bat mitzvah. The occasion on which this occurs is also called the bat mitzvah, or the bat mitzvah ceremony, although according to Jewish law, a girl becomes a bat mitzvah regardless of whether or not there is any ceremony marking the occasion. (Reinharz and Vinick 2012, xii)

Not only is a bat mitzvah a ritual, but it is also a status a person achieves. A girl doesn't need to have a bat mitzvah to become a bat mitzvah. As I further explain in my methods section, this project morphed as I worked on it. It shifted from what I thought would be primarily about young women who were close, temporally, to their bat mitzvahs to a project that is deeply interested in mothers. Many of these women had bat mitzvahs of their own, although not all of them. Some of the reasons for this will, I hope, be illustrated in my first chapter. Regardless of

their personal experiences with bat mitzvahs, these women are raising, and have raised children of their own. Their ability to be mothers to daughters of the commandment enriched this project so deeply.

The second half of the title "An Ethnographic Exploration of Bat Mitzvahs in Metro-Atlanta" is a reference to the attempt to understand a community by the rituals that exist within it. Many of my interlocutors who did have bat mitzvahs didn't have them anywhere near Atlanta; they moved here later into their adulthood. And yet, they are members of Atlanta's Jewish community. They carry with them their experiences of their own bat mitzvahs into how they conceive of their children's b'nei mitzvahs. This along with, among many things, the geographical, historical, and social positioning of Metro-Atlanta shape what the ritual becomes. As an "ethnographic exploration," this project is setting out to learn, first and foremost, and acknowledges that there is always *more* to learn and to explore.

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

This summer, I returned home to Metro-Atlanta to conduct fieldwork for this project. The summer between Junior and Senior year is the time for it. I came into my summer of fieldwork having finished a semester of primarily text-based research, and a much different conception of this project than what I now understand it to be. This has become an ethnographic exploration of bat mitzvahs, not as they are on paper or in theory, but how the women of Metro-Atlanta understand them to be. I'm not seeking to uncover some single universal truth about bat mitzvahs. The more I come to learn about them, the less sure I am that one exists. Instead, I am exploring bat mitzvahs with the women who have had and are having them. This project asks

what we can learn, from these perspectives, about bat mitzvahs as well as the communities in which they take place.

The body of this paper is split into two chapters, “Egalitarianism” and “Expectations.” Together they explore themes of coming of age, family, and gender. The first chapter, “Egalitarianism” looks at what the word itself means in the context of women and Judaism and takes stock of how my interlocutors have engaged with that concept as it exists in practice. This is primarily a conversation about who has the right to read the Torah, and under what circumstances. Feminist Jewish scholarship, particularly that of Susan Starr Sered, provides a framework from which I began the process of unraveling and examining the nuanced relationship between my interlocutors and Egalitarianism. I look to the writings of Lila Abu-Lughod and Donna Haraway to ground my understanding of the experiences and perspectives shared in this chapter.

In “Expectations,” I visualize a community and the forces at play within it—religious institutions, family, and peers. Each of these forces has its own set of expectations, and yet, the forces overlap and coincide, forming the community. I then turn to some of the stories from my interlocutors that stood out to me most. These stories are ones that in some way subverted expectations, whether they be mine or some force within the community, and were thus revealing of some of the aspects of the bat mitzvah ritual that may seem so obvious that could easily become forgotten. Throughout the chapter, I look back and recognize the relevance of these discussions of expectations within the conversation of Egalitarianism. I also engage with the writing of Raymond Williams and his theories regarding tradition and hegemony as I look to situate what I have learned, across both chapters, within the discipline of Anthropology as well as understand the social and political stakes of writing about this topic.

Across this entire paper, I am engaging with various scholars in Jewish studies, such as Harvey Goldberg and Michael Satlow. This scholarship has not only been valuable in innumerable ways. This scholarship has helped me situate the findings from my fieldwork. But before I even started my fieldwork, starting with a foundation of knowledge, albeit a comparatively small one, in Jewish studies provided me a level of confidence going into this summer that I had the requisite knowledge to ask well informed questions and an eye honed to look for relevant details.

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METHODS

I planned for this to be a project primarily engaging with people who were either currently preparing for or who had just had a bat mitzvah. Guided by my memories of bat mitzvahs past, I was excited about a project that I saw as inextricably linked to adolescence and coming of age. At the beginning of the summer, I found a virtual Saturday morning service hosted by a temple in Atlanta, and during the very first service I attended, the rabbi said, "As b'nei mitzvah season winds down, our Saturday morning services shift to fully virtual." She said it in the middle of a list of other announcements, like it was no big deal. Didn't she know that I had a Senior Project to work on!? The service a few weeks from then was going to be a group b'nei mitzvah livestreamed from Israel, and then that was it for the summer. I knew going in that there was a distinct possibility that I would be home for a bat mitzvah dryspell; all of the bat mitzvahs I attended were during the school year. And even if there were bat mitzvahs I wasn't sure that strangers would want me in attendance or that I would be comfortable making that ask. So I started the conversations I *was* comfortable with.

Anytime someone asked me how school was going, I was sure to let them know about this project and ask them to keep it in mind and put me in touch with anyone that might be willing to talk with me. Early in the Summer, I was walking my dog with my mom one evening, and we stopped to talk with our neighbors Jody and Lisa. After explaining my project to them, not only did they both immediately express willingness to be interviewed, but they also told me about a group on Facebook called Jewish Moms of Atlanta. Despite having several thousand members, the group doesn't let just anyone join. In fact, it's a secret group (a level of security above private), meaning it doesn't appear in search results and a group admin has to approve your request to join.

I'm not a Jewish mom, so I didn't think it would be appropriate for me to even try to join. Instead, my neighbor Lisa made a post on my behalf in the group. This created a modified Snowball Sample effect, creating a network in which I directly recruited some of my interlocutors, some I recruited indirectly, and some were recruited by other participants. Together, the participants, as well as the people who helped connect me to them, formed a network with varying degrees of connection to one another.

It is, hopefully, clear that while some of these participants were strangers, none of them felt distant from me; there were very few degrees of separation between any of us. And these were not the only people I interviewed. There were several other women (mostly from the Facebook group) that I interviewed, but I ultimately felt that the pieces of conversations that I did include made for the best version of this project.

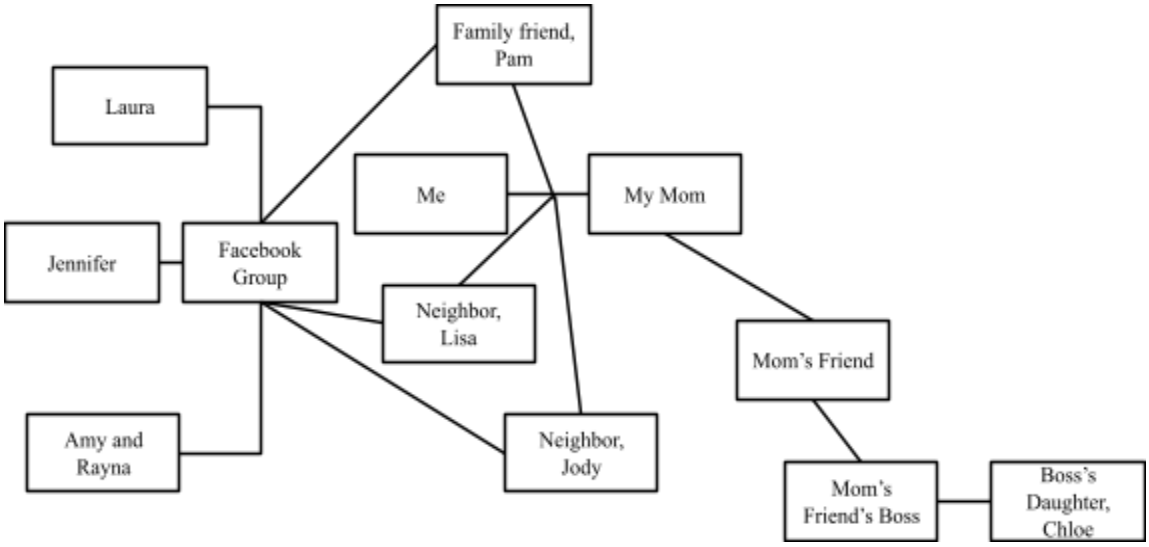

FIGURE 1: *Network of interlocutors.*

So when it came time to actually begin writing, that was something I was very cognizant of. I believe that ethnography isn't something that should be gatekept, especially not from the people that are its subjects—the very reason it exists. But in wanting to make this project accessible to the people whom it's about, I became conscious and cautious of the implications of doing so. Not only is it necessary to protect the identities of my interlocutors, but I also became concerned with how they would view the ways I wrote about them in this paper. I was very aware of what portions of interviews I chose and how that might be viewed by the subject of each interview. This tendency had its silver lining, in that I deeply considered each story that I included. The ones that are in this paper represent only snippets of a fraction of the conversations and interviews that I had this summer.

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This project is far from what I set out to create when I initially proposed it, and it is far from perfect. But imperfect work, what I see as work in progress, implies continuation. This

work has its roots in my hometown, so continuation means coming home and engaging with the people and the communities there—how exciting! I don't see ethnography, certainly not this one, as a final product. Instead, I envision this as one part of a dialogue that I really do look forward to continuing.

CHAPTER 1 – EGALITARIANISM

> While the bar mitzvah has for centuries been a rite of passage for men, the opportunity for young women to become b'not mitzvah, which began in 1922, has not only enriched women's personal lives but Jewish communal life as well. Studies in adolescence find that girls emerge from their teenage years with a poor self-image and much less confidence in their abilities than boys. Bat mitzvah is a door to self-esteem. It says that girls count, that their voice and experience are integral parts of a sacred community. As adolescent girls and increasing numbers of adult women ascend the bimah to become b'not mitzvah, they are building a home and a memory for future generations.
>
> When my own daughter became a bat mitzvah, I spoke these words to her:
>
> > "These was a time when women were told what they could not be. Then there came a time when women were told what they needed to be, if they wanted success. But I want you to know: There is nothing as a woman you cannot be, and there are two things you need to be—true to yourself and responsible to your community." (Sasso 2005, xi)

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ENCOUNTERING EGALITARIANISM

Egalitarianism is a word that I encountered repeatedly throughout conversations, interviews, and research for this project. This word has been so prevalent that it's getting its own chapter! And perhaps the reason it stuck with me every time I came across it was because I had a different understanding in my mind of what this word meant from how it was actually being used. I was working with a definition which I broadly knew to mean belief in equality for all, a seemingly impossible state to achieve. My dubiousness about the use of this word was compounded by the context in which it was being used. Bat mitzvahs as we know them have only existed for around 100 years; Judith Kaplan is often credited as having the first bat mitzvah in 1922. How did Judaism go from the start of women being included in the coming of age ritual to total equality in a century? That was, however, not the claim being made. What I had been

understanding to be egalitarianism (little “e”) had actually been Egalitarianism (big “E”) the whole time. In this context of Judaism and gender, a prayer group or synagogue, for example, would be considered Big-E-Egalitarian if women are given the right to fully participate, by reading the Torah. Today, Egalitarianism is a tenet of many Reform and Conservative congregations, but this was not always the case. The stories from my interlocutors painted an image of Metro-Atlanta’s Jewish Community, particularly through its Conservative congregations, making a shift into Egalitarianism in the mid 1990s and into early 2000s. Even in moments when they didn’t speak directly about gender or reading Torah, this notion was present in many of the conversations that I had.

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REACTING TO NON-EGALITARIANISM

One of these conversations was with Jennifer, who I met through a post made on my behalf in the Jewish Moms of Atlanta Facebook group. We emailed back and forth for a few days, and then set up a time to talk over Zoom. As was the case before all of my interviews, I felt a jolt of nervousness in my gut as I saw her join the call. After the requisite small talk and discussion of consent forms, we got down to business and started talking about her bat mitzvah.

> I joked that it took me two years to have it because it was– at the synagogue I grew up in they did a Friday night service. They put the girls, and the boys– they participated in Friday night services as well as Saturday. And Friday was December 31, 1982 and Saturday was January 1, 1983
>
> *Oh, wow!*
>
> So that was kind of special and- I was definitely a Jewish nerd. I was in– I had just gone to Jewish day school, basically all my life up to that point, and so I definitely wanted to

> have it by myself so I could do everything. And so it was a good experience. My best friend's mom was my tutor, and so it was kind of like a family thing I guess.

Jennifer's status as a "Jewish nerd" manifested itself into a career as a Hebrew tutor for Metro-Atlanta students preparing for their own b'nei mitzvahs. She's been doing this for over two decades, and describes herself as a "Jewish educator at heart." From the way she spoke about her own bat mitzvah, it seemed like a natural progression that, in her adulthood, she would have a career that involves teaching Hebrew for b'nei mitzvah preparation. Despite that path seeming to suit her well, I was still curious how she ended up there.

> *I'm curious how you feel like, maybe, having a bat mitzvah— if you feel like that has any sort of connection to the rest of your life as a Jewish educator. And how that moment in your personal history might have impacted the rest of your life.*

> Well, at that time, I wanted to… I actually wanted to be a rabbi. And I didn't know, at the time, that women had not been given the right to become rabbis in the Conservative movement. I knew there were female rabbis in the Reform movement, and I just didn't know a lot about the Conservative movement.
> Because, actually, cantors were— rabbis were ordained before cantors were, in the conservative movement. You know I just always enjoyed singing and leading prayers and the Hebrew came easily to me so I think, you know, it was definitely… Being in that world just generally, at the day school, exposed to all of that kind of tradition, in terms of music, was very… very important in my development.

As she alluded to, Jennifer's bat mitzvah was situated in a particularly dynamic time when it comes to the question of women's participation in Judaism. Her bat mitzvah took place early 1983, about five years after Linda Rich became the first woman to serve as a cantor for a Conservative congregation[1]. This was almost a decade after Reform Judaism's first woman rabbis, but still, as Jennifer noted, before the Conservative movement ordained women as rabbis[2]. These changes certainly did not come about without pushback, the role of women in

[1] "While not officially ordained, Linda Rich (b. 1952), who grew up in an Orthodox family, served as the first female cantor in a Conservative pulpit at Temple Beth Zion in Los Angeles starting in 1978" (Heskes).
[2] "In 1972 in Reform Judaism, in 1974 in Reconstructionist Judaism, and in 1985 in Conservative Judaism, the first women received rabbinic ordination" (Nadell).

Judaism would likely have been a topic of discourse, not only at the time of her bat mitzvah, but throughout the proceeding years in which she continued her education and began her career. Jennifer spoke more about this period of her life, saying:

> I definitely was always looking at going into Jewish communal work of some sort. And, so yeah, I always liked it– I didn't do a lot of service leading when I was in high school, but I did do the service– I was like (whatever the name of the person was) the religious educator person or whatever in BBG[3] so I put together the services and I led services at Hillel[4] in college.
> And, you know, when I realized that the Rabbinate was not really where I wanted to be— when I found out about the program at Brandeis in Jewish Communal Service, I was like *that's* where I feel, you know, more comfortable.

Jennifer started to take her time as she spoke. It felt as if each of her words were carefully chosen and bubbling with subtext that I just wasn't privy to. I leaned in and listened to what else she had to say.

> It seemed like there was a lot of male… domination… people in the Rabbinate and I just didn't feel like– I didn't have a tremendous amount of confidence and, you know, the Reform rabbinate sensed that and they– I think they deferred me or– I don't know what it was called at that time.

I wanted to know more, but I also didn't want to overstep. I saw potential stories that might help to round out my understanding of her point of view. I saw them in the way she paused to think. And I saw them in the way that she would reframe the questions about gender I felt we had been tip-toeing around to be about her personal abilities. Had there been gender-based discrimination in the Reform rabbinate when she was trying to become a rabbi… or did she just not have enough confidence? How many less than confident men became rabbis the year that she didn't? And was the issue in lack of confidence on behalf of her or the rabbinate? Had there been a longer precedent of women before her, would there have been less for Jennifer to prove? I was

[3] B'nai B'rith Girls. Part of a national organization: B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO.
[4] "The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life." Campus organization for college students.

well aware that she may have been speaking carefully because those stories could be painful to tell. As I thought about the reasons motivating her hesitation, I too, treaded lightly.

> *I'm curious if you– a big part of this project came about because I just wanted to hear stories of women and talk to women and write about women and I'm curious to hear more about what it has been like to make this career and this life in what has been such a male dominated field.*
>
> You know, I think at this point… I don't know for sure, but I know more female tutors than male, so it is interesting. And, I also… when I applied at [one particular temple], at that time, they were not Egalitarian, at all. Women were not called to the Torah, and I said to them, like: You're okay with having a woman train… you know- Like you're asking me to train boys to do something that I cannot do personally, as a woman, at your synagogue.
> You know, I didn't have an issue with it, like– I'm really respectful of movements and the way that they develop and all of that, so it wasn't like I was upset about it. I just found it really bizarre.

Jennifer's answer came as an honest surprise to me. I was not surprised to hear her talk about wanting, and trying, to become a rabbi, or her insinuation of the obstacles (ones that seemed, to me, to exist because of her gender) that she experienced that ultimately led to her changing career paths. But I was surprised that she was seemingly totally fine with this particular synagogue's willingness to hire her as a Hebrew tutor but deny her access to read the Torah.

As I grappled with this, I turned to anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod's article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." This article was published in September of 2002 and parses through the ethical responsibility of anthropologists during the War on Terror; discourse of the time regarding Muslim women and veiling practices is at the very center. While Muslim women and veiling is, of course, not perfectly analogous to Jewish women and Torah reading, Abu-Lughod's writing still had much to offer my understanding of Egalitarianism and how women may interact with Non-Egalitarian institutions. She writes,

> When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that which you are saving her? (Abu-Lughod 2002, 788-789).

This quotation served as a reminder that *my* idea of what was right in this situation was not particularly important, and certainly not objectively correct. I don't get to decide that I know what's better for Jennifer, and keeping that in mind helped me to think about Egalitarianism in new ways.

The "Muslim Women Don't Need Saving" article and the story from Jennifer problematized a notion of Egalitarianism that I carried prior, one that required it to be an ever-present goal that is constantly being worked towards in all instances. Of course, this is not the case, but of course we continue to find ourselves surprised at the ability of people to be complex, multi-faceted, and even seemingly contradictory! Her experience with that Non-Egalitarian obviously didn't ruin Jennifer's view of her career. Later in our conversation, she said:

> I'm proud that I have a really good reputation. I have a good rapport with the kids and I enjoy getting to know them and encouraging them and using the ceremony as a way to plan– To have a long term goal.

Jennifer is able to take pride in her work, even if it has involved institutions that aren't Egalitarian. She and even a Non-Egalitarian institution are able to recognize the value of her work regardless of her gender. It's apparent that, at least in some instances, women may not be called to read the Torah, not because it's believed they lack the requisite skills to do so, but because tradition calls for them not to. In those instances, the skills that women have—skills such as mastery of language or their ability to teach it—may still be recognized and even valued.

So long as it falls within the bounds of whatever is considered an acceptable validation of tradition.

In her chapter, *"She Perceives Her Work to Be Rewarding": Jewish Women in a Cross-Cultural Perspective*, sociologist Susan Starr Sered writes about the ways in which women experience such phenomena as "official" tradition requiring their exclusion. She writes:

> [G]ender inequality often means that men are conversant only with their own (male) traditions. Women, however, may have a separate female tradition at the same time that they are as 'committed to … [the] dominant ideologies, mystifications, and celestializations as men are.' The implications of this statement are crucial for understanding the cultural experience of Jewish women: historically, Jewish women have been cognizant of the highly patriarchal Jewish great tradition, dedicated to preserving the great tradition, yet simultaneously critical and even subversive of that tradition. Jewish women have developed a bifurcated cultural experience (Sered 1994, 173-174).

This particular quotation references the idea of the "great tradition," which is a theory from anthropologist Robert Redford that compares the ways traditions are created and written about to how they are actually practiced.[5] Great traditions often refer to the official, sanctioned ritual that is available to those who have access to the written word. The Torah, Talmud, and other rabbinic literature would be considered part of Judaism's great tradition. In many instances women do not have access to these writings, whether that be because they aren't taught Hebrew or they aren't allowed to read Torah. Sered's point is that, despite being aware of, participating in, and (in some cases) even defending the great tradition that excludes them, women may still be critical of it. For these women, this creates what Sered calls a "bifurcated cultural experience", where they engage in actions and rituals that are at odds with one another.

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[5] In *The Social Organization of Tradition,* Redfield writes: "We relate some element of the great tradition—sacred book, story-element, teacher, ceremony, or supernatural being—to the life of the ordinary people in the context of daily life"

So much of what Jennifer said during our conversation spoke to this "bifurcated experience." She both recognized the existence (and perhaps even, to some, the importance) of a Non-Egalitarian ideology and tradition, one that holds women at the bottom of its hierarchy. But this recognition does not get in the way of her ability to uphold values and engage in activities that contradict or even undermine that ideology and tradition. This bifurcated experience becomes further segmented when accounting for its relationship to time and place. Jennifer's story of being hired to teach Hebrew by a synagogue that acknowledged that she would not be allowed to read the Torah there, should she attend, highlights this. This experience took place in the past, at a synagogue at which she was not a member. These factors provide a potentially safe distance from these Non-Egalitarian spaces, and thus from the spaces that relegate her (and all other women) to a separate, lesser ritual sphere. Not only is the distance between her and that event temporal and space-based, but it also may involve matters of what Jennifer considers to be her community. There is often reference to an all-encompassing Jewish Community, across Metro-Atlanta (remember the Jewish Moms of Atlanta Facebook group?) and beyond. However, there are also conceptions of Jewish communities, plural, that exist in various different forms. Many of my interlocutors spoke about their synagogues being places of importance—central in their views of their communities. It is quite possible that Jennifer sees this instance of Non-Egalitarianism, that happened in the past, at a synagogue that she was and is not a member of, as something that happened outside of her community. It was an anomaly that is not representative of the life that she leads, but she is able to recognize and hold space in her mind that there are women for whom this type of subjugation is not anomalous, and instead a regular occurrence. Jennifer may be able to accept Non-Egalitarianism as a condition which *those* women are experiencing, and maybe even her past self is one of them, but not her today. She is

able to see her lesser status as a "bizarre" feature of a congregation—a community—that she does not belong to. Rather than this being a "bifurcated cultural experience" as suggested by Sered, I propose that this experience is multi-segmented, taking into account more than just existence in the male/female spheres of tradition but also navigating through the intricacies of past/present/future and the blurry lines of community.

Donna Haraway, in her essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective " provides an excellent scaffolding on which to build an understanding of this idea of multi-segmentation. In "Situated Knowledges," Haraway critiques and disrupts the very notion of objectivity—objectivity that exists without regard to conditions such as gender or race, because it comes from the perspective of White and Male, which is often the default, "unmarked" perspective. Harraway proposes instead a feminist, "embodied objectivity," suggesting that we turn to vision and its metaphors as perhaps our greatest assets, precisely *because* of their (and in fact our own) limits.

> Objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. [...] Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see. (Haraway 1988, 582-583)

Being aware of and then seeing *with* the multiple, maybe even seemingly paradoxical, simultaneous experiences that create a multi-segmentation, as was described with Jessica, is what Haraway is writing about in "Situated Knowledges." Keeping both Lila Abu-Lughod and Haraway, rather than looking at this as a situation that needs fixing, it's presenting a perspective from which to learn.

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AN EXAMPLE IN MODERN ORTHODOXY

With this in mind, I am reminded of Amy and Rayna. They are a mother and daughter, who, when I spoke to them, were a week away from Rayna's bat mitzvah at the Modern Orthodox[6] shul they're members of. She sat slouched in a chair, with her chin barely peeking over a table that was barely peeking over the edge of the Zoom window that was open on my computer. Her answers to my questions were short and quiet. She was hiding. After a summer of feigning confidence while interviewing people, I felt a sort of nervous kinship as she slipped almost entirely out of frame. After another nearly-whispered answer to one of my questions, her mother stepped in:

> You talk all the time… talk. Talk. Talk about what your service is going to look like. We're doing a women's only Torah reading service. It's really special and unique. With just women and moms and daughters. Come on…speak.

A women's only Torah reading service piqued my interest. I initially didn't find the "Torah reading" portion of that phrase as particularly noteworthy—the Torah is read at bat mitzvahs all the time. But it did occur to me that across Orthodox Judaism in its various forms, women reading the Torah is rather uncommon. An article for the Jewish education website *My Jewish Learning* explains gender and "the challenge of feminism" in their article "Orthodox Judaism Today":

> In Orthodox prayer services, men and women are separated by a curtain or low wall, with only men allowed to lead services and read or bless the Torah. Women are exempt from many mitzvot (commandments) and cannot become rabbis. In some Orthodox communities, women do not study Talmud.
>
> But feminism — combined with stronger Jewish education for Orthodox girls — has left many Orthodox women (and men) dissatisfied with traditional gender roles and restrictions. Being Orthodox, they retain their adherence to halacha but have sought

[6] The Modern Orthodox movement melds the commitment to *halacha* and observance of *mitzvot* with an understanding of and participation in contemporary practices.

> change within the limits of Jewish law — sometimes via creative re-interpretations — and also seek shifts in Jewish culture and attitude. (My Jewish Learning, 2016)

This article confirmed that thought—it *is* uncommon for there to be an all-women Torah reading in an Orthodox setting. A Modern-Orthodox girl reading the Torah at her bat mitzvah with a group of other women seemed interesting, and her mother placed quite a bit of emphasis on the service. Regardless of what stood out to me in the moment, I wanted to know more, so I asked Rayna.

> *I would love to hear about what your service is going to look like. And if there's anything about that– your mom said that it's a women's-only service– I would love to hear about that.*
>
> So you're not allowed to have a minyan, well for the girls, you're not allowed to have more than nine men. Only girls and nine men. And then, yeah I read Torah and we're having just snacks after. Yeah.

Rayna shared a more pragmatic view of the service than her mother. If she were to read Torah at her bat mitzvah, it was actually necessary for the service to only include women—save for up to nine men. This is so that there is no *minyan*[7] present for the Torah reading. This speaks to the types of change that come about, the creative re-interpretations, still within the bounds of *halacha*,[8] as referenced in the *My Jewish Life* article. These changes, and in this instance Rayna's bat mitzvah, are indicative of a mulitsegmented cultural experience. This multi-segmentation is similar but different from what was expressed by Jennifer. Amy and Rayna are not experiencing a one-off moment of exclusion. Non-Egalitarian policies and traditions are part of their regular encounters with Judaism. They continue to participate in this community, in a way that aligns with halachic law, but simultaneously (and maybe even unintentionally) critiques its alienation of

[7] A quorum of at least ten men over the age of 13 required for public prayer and worship.
[8] Jewish law based in the Talmud.

women. The factors of time and community that may have let Jennifer feel distant from Non-Egalitarian ideology and practices are factors that mean Rayna and Amy are up-close. This segmentation allows them to maintain the personal values that led them to feel that having a bat mitzvah at all, let alone one in which Rayna read the Torah with other women, while actively participating in a community that undermines those values. This is further evidenced by a remark made later in the conversation by Amy, Rayna's mother. She spoke about appreciating the different types of services and celebrations people at their Shul have. While describing the culture of bat mitzvahs at her shul, Amy said she felt "fortunate" to be a part of a community that placed more emphasis on the ceremony than the celebration after the fact, and she went on to explain that the ceremonies themselves differ from person to person.

This phenomena, of there not being one standard bat mitzvah service, is referenced in the book *Today I am a Woman: Stories of Bat Mitzvah Around the World*, wherein the authors write: "Unlike bar mitzvah ceremonies, however, they are not enshrined in tradition. Some observers applaud this as an opportunity to make the ceremony more personal and meaningful" (Reinharz and Vinick 2012, 5). This ability to personalize the ceremony, giving a breadth of options, may appear nice. It also seems to be, at least in part, a byproduct of the Non-Egalitarian environment that bore them. Sered writes to this point, complementing the point raised by Reinharz and Vinick:

> [S]exual segregation is a two-edged sword: it cuts women off from important and culturally esteemed spiritual venues, but it also means that women have some level of autonomy in developing their own perspectives, constructing their own value system, managing their own resources, and forging their own rituals. (2012, 173)

Because women have been (and are still) barred from participating in many rituals, whether that be through halachic law or social expectation, they create rituals of their own. These rituals, such

as the bat mitzvah itself, become recognized to varying degrees by varying individuals and institutions at various times.

The website *Torah Musings* provided an example from an Atlanta-Area Modern Orthodox rabbi, Michael Broyde, of a reaction to a ritual created by and for women. In his article about women's only Torah-Reading, although in regards to reading Torah in a slightly different context[9], he writes:

> I favor increasing women's participation in Orthodox life and in the synagogue through increased participation in Torah study and other mitzvah-centered activity. As a general rule, I believe that women should be supported and encouraged to do genuine mitzvot, and not directed to activity that only has the superficial appearance of a mitzvah. The halachic defense of women's torah reading (without brachot) is exactly that it is not a proper Torah reading at all (because no minyan is present, women are reading, etc.), and thus I think it an unwise idea because it focuses women away from the central purpose of religious conduct – the performance of mitzvot. (Torah Musings, 2012)

This particular rabbi, at the time of writing, felt that women should not be engaging in Torah reading because it becomes focused on the technicalities of the event over the mitzvah itself. The way Rabbi Broyde writes about this topic, referencing a "genuine" mitzvah and a "proper" Torah reading makes clear that he believes that by reading the Torah, women are doing something illegitimate and improper. Perhaps, as has been suggested, it is precisely *because* of the conditions of Non-Egalitarianism that women have turned away from what is officially sanctioned. And if this is so, the refusal to recognize the ritual life that women created to fill in the gaps of the one that was presented to them will only further perpetuate the divide. If the ritual history of women is never given the opportunity to become "enshrined in tradition" and officialized, not only will Egalitarianism not be a goal constantly endeavored for, it will not be a goal at all. The ritual life of women will only exist on the fringes—in the unsanctioned and

[9] The article is titled "A Brief Note about "Women's Only Torah Reading" on Simchat Torah." Simchat Torah is the holiday marking the end of the annual cycle of public Torah readings.

illegitimate segments that they find for themselves—and their position on the outside, at the bottom of the hierarchy, will be reinforced by men's ability to look at their rituals and call them wrong.

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MISTAKES AND MEANING MAKING

My neighbor, Jody, was one of the first people to hear about this project and be interviewed for it. She's a woman for whom Egalitarianism *is* an explicit goal. Her daughters' right to read the Torah during their respective bat mitzvah services was one of the first things that she brought up when I asked her about them. She told me about enrolling her children in a private Jewish day school, despite her previous plans, due to the quality of the public schools in the area. B'nei mitzvahs were a big deal at this school, but at the time of her daughters' bat mitzvahs the synagogue they attended was not yet Egalitarian. Jody was sure to make it known that it is now, saying "We fought long and hard for it." Egalitarianism is something that means a lot to her. But her daughters still had their bat mitzvahs at a synagogue at which they could not read the Torah. In fact, Jody's husband learned Hebrew in order to be able to read the blessings at his oldest daughter's bat mitzvah, something she would have been able to do herself, had the congregation been Egalitarian.

Jody was experiencing a multi-segmentation of her own. Quite similarly to how it is laid out by Sered, she found herself having bat mitzvahs for her daughters at a Non-Egalitarian synagogue, despite her personal convictions that women should be allowed to read the Torah. But she did so because belonging to a Conservative congregation was important, and there were not many (or perhaps any) Egalitarian *and* Conservative temples in Metro-Atlanta at the time. She was an active participant in this community which she, in part, critiqued and changed by her

participation. The question of identity and community in Jody's case is not as cut-and-dried as the others may have appeared. She was a member of this congregation, by choice *and* by default. Would she have been a member of this synagogue if there was a different Conservative congregation nearby that was Egalitarian? Regardless, Jody's three kids had their b'nei mitzvahs at a Non-Egalitarian synagogue. Despite the less-than-ideal environment, by the time her youngest child, Esther, was ready for her bat mitzvah, Jody felt like she knew what to do. She had two prior children to learn from. The service was on a Sunday afternoon, specifically not on Shabbat, so that cameras would be allowed to capture pictures and video. With all of the preparation, this should have been the smoothest service of her three children.

> …But the Rabbi lost his mind, on the day of her bat mitzvah. Like, literally lost his mind. I don't know what was goin– He got fired over it after, like, twenty years.
>
> *Wow*.
>
> But, the service was almost over, and my older sister kept turning around to me, saying "Jody I think he forgot to call Esther up. I think he forgot." And it still– it was not Egalitarian, so she couldn't read from the Torah. This is, let's see, it was probably about 1998, so yeah you couldn't read from the Torah. And I said to my sister "What do you mean, he forgot to call her?"
>
> Next thing I know, he's closing the end of the service and invites everyone to the food. And I'm like: Rabbi, you forgot to call the bat mitzvah girl up! Oh my god, so he calls everybody back from the food– Can you imagine? You already got your bagel!– Sits everybody back down. She's, like, sobbing. Sobbing. Because now she's like a consolation prize. Just sobbing, like (*fake sobs*) baruch atah– She could barely get through– It was just awful. I just put my arm around her and I said "Don't you worry, we're gonna to redo this in Israel." So she had, like, a disaster of a story.

This matter is connected to, and yet different, from the subversive women's rituals as described by Sered. After participating in the version of the bat mitzvah ritual that was accepted in their temple, Jody's daughter was still excluded—on accident. But they were able to rectify the situation by redoing the service. Jody described the second try, saying:

> And then we went to Israel the next year. And she read from the Torah on the top of a mountain in Jerusalem with this beautiful Torah. Watching sheep walk down the mountain and it was just so meaningful.

Despite the fact that a person does not need to have a bat mitzvah service in order to become a bat mitzvah, it's clear that the service (and what happens during it) is still important. Of course it is, or they wouldn't exist and I wouldn't be dedicating this project to them. What Jody's story illuminates is that there are levels and degrees to which a situation can be less than desirable, but still meaningful. Even if her daughters couldn't read the Torah at their bat mitzvah services, they could still show their commitment to their community. By skipping over Esther's part of the service, even by accident, the moment for meaning-making was skipped over. So when they had a "redo" service, it wasn't redundant. Rather, it was creating the opportunity for the first time to have the meaning-making moment that didn't exist during the first service. This service in Jerusalem was not a segmented experience, at least not in the same way that the initial service was, even if it had gone according to plan. Jody's daughter was able to read the Torah—she was able to have her moment.

⁂

RETURNING TO HARAWAY

After taking in these stories, I return to Donna Haraway in an attempt to do some meaning-making of my own. Each of the stories from my interlocutors offer an addition to my view of bat mitzvahs in Metro-Atlanta. I continue to return to Haraway's writing about

subjugated viewpoints. These are the particular knowledges that are, in regards to power, situated from below. She writes:

> "Subjugated" standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world. But *how* to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the "highest" technoscientific visualizations." (Haraway 1988, 584)

It's not a coincidence that I am engaging with the idea of Egalitarianism through conversations that I had with women; their perspectives on the subject provide a better view. This quotation from Haraway provides, also, the naming of the difficulty to do the exact thing she is praising. I have certainly felt this difficulty. In fact, I'm not sure that any of the women with whom I had conversations that are included in this chapter would consider themselves as seeing from below, as subjugated. It also doesn't seem like my place to label any of them "subjugated." And maybe that is part of the difficulty of seeing from below—the not wanting to be there.

Still, each of my interlocutors shared a perspective with me that deepened my understanding of bat mitzvahs as they exist in Metro-Atlanta. Just as there is no universal bat mitzvah ceremony, there is no universal perspective on them.

CHAPTER 2 – EXPECTATIONS

> I weigh more than the chicken, but as far as I'm concerned we're identical, the chicken and I. Except for our heads and our feathers. The chicken has no head and I have no feathers. But I will have hair. Lots of body hair on this nice Jewish girl that my mother will religiously teach me to pluck and to shave until my adolescent body resembles a perfectly plucked, pale young bird, waiting to be cooked to a hot, crisp, golden brown and served on the same sacred platter as my mother herself was before me.
> At thirteen I stand on the bimah waiting to address the congregation. I am also upstairs in the bathroom, alone in the terrifying wilderness of my adolescent femaleness. But I stand on the bimah and prepare to chant. On my head is a white silk yarmulke, held in place by two invisible bobby pins. For the first time in my life, I prepare my female self the exact same way she taught me in her kosher kitchen sink. *Borachu et adonai hamivorach.* I look out at the congregation of Beit Avraham. My mother is crying. I look in the mirror; I inspect my face, my eyebrows are dark brown and very thick. *Baruch atah adonai hamivorach leolam voed.* I place the tweezers as close to the skin as possible to catch the root, so the hair won't ever grow back. *Baruch atah adonai eloheynu melech ha-olam…* My parents are holding hands as I recite the third blessing in honor of being called to the Torah. And then I begin. Although my haftorah portion is long and difficult, I want it to last forever because I love the sonorous sounds of the mystical Hebrew letters. But I am surprised at how much it hurts to pull a single hair, one at a time, from under my pale young skin. When I reach the final closing blessings my voice is strong and I do not want to stop. (Felman 1996, 83-84)

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THE FORCES OF EXPECTATIONS

Expectations became the other chapter-deserving theme that arose while working on this project. In a way different from Egalitarianism, there was no single word that I could track throughout my research, but still, I encountered expectations everywhere. It's almost impossible to talk about bat mitzvahs without talking about expectations. As discussed in the previous chapter, women's rituals are largely excluded from the written tradition of Judaism, meaning there is no universal set of expectations for them. This leaves room for bat mitzvahs to take many forms.

In her essay “If Only I’d Been Born a Kosher Chicken,” Jyl Lenn Felmen beautifully explores these expectations, comparing moments in her adolescence to her mother’s precise preparation of kosher chicken. These comparisons express the tension that can exist between religious and secular expectations and highlight what I understand to be the three main sources of expectations for bat mitzvahs: religious institutions, family, and peers. These sources are not discrete from one another. Rather they can be viewed as interlocking circles or overlapping spheres that influence and inform one another, and together they form a community, at least the sense of community that my interlocutors described to me. And it’s this community that provides the social positioning and context from which the expectations are borne.

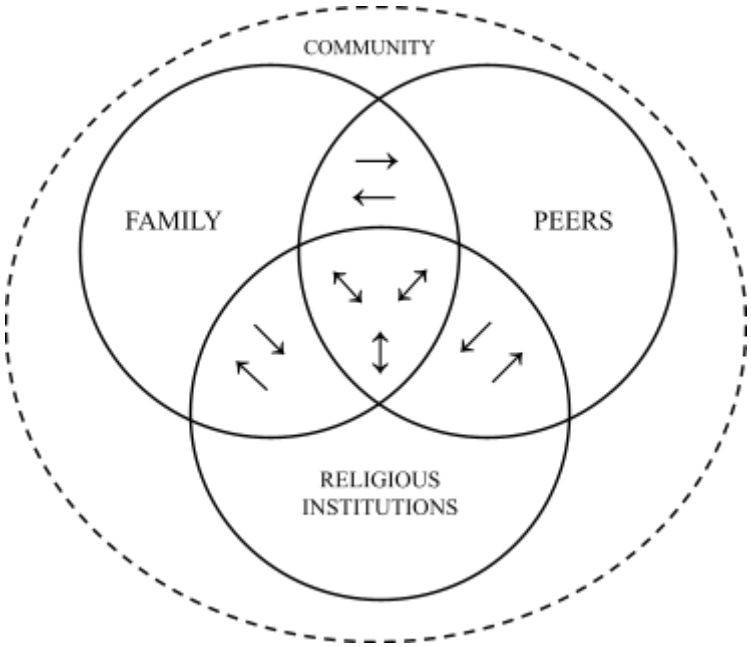

FIGURE 2: *Interlocking circles of expectation, religion, family, and peers, forming a sphere of community.*

These forces don't exist in a vacuum. They represent what is expected of *someone* and the ritual in which they are participating. The self becomes an important factor to consider in the

conversation of expectations. If the forces are overlapping spheres, I visualize the self as a plane intersecting those spheres. Different points of the self interact with different points of the overlapping sources of expectations.

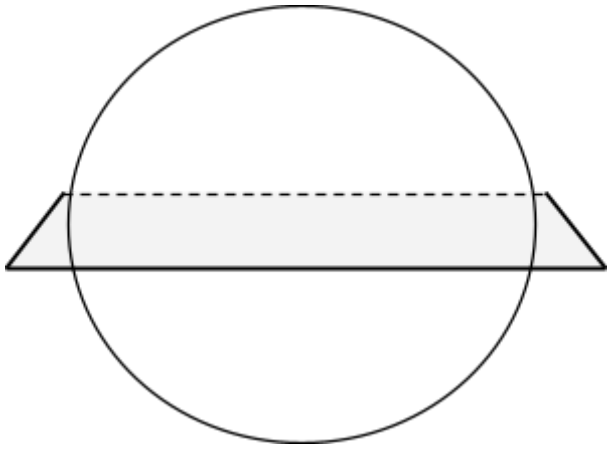

FIGURE 3: *The sphere of community is intersected by the plane of the self.*

Because these sources are so interconnected, I have found it difficult to write about each separately. Instead, this chapter will follow stories shared by my interlocutors in which expectations play a vital role, and explore the sources and manifestations of those expectations.

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A FAMILY THING

One of the first women from the Jewish Moms of Atlanta Facebook group who reached out to me was Laura. She sent me an email explaining that she became a bat mitzvah at the age of 30 after working with a cantor and a small group of women from her synagogue for about two years. We set up a time to talk over Zoom. My interview with Laura was the first I had with someone I didn't already know. I sat at my kitchen table, waiting to press "START MEETING"

on my computer, feeling waves of gratitude and nervousness and inadequacy wash over me. The interview started with Laura telling me the story of her bat mitzvah, which began to weave into a story about her sons' bar mitzvahs.

> I grew up in a culturally very Jewish home. My brother became a bar mitzvah the traditional way. My sister was given a choice and I pitched such a fit about going to religious school that my parents were like: Fine. We're done.
>
> *Yeah.*
>
> With the premise of, you have to go back for the confirmation class for the tenth grade year. So I was like, fine. So I did that. I married a Jewish man right out of college. I would say that it was important to him that our children become bar or bat mitzvahs, so when we started religious school for my oldest, I was like how can I expect my kids to go through this– You know, if I'm gonna talk the talk, I should walk the walk. So, I just kind of dove right in. And I really enjoyed it.
> So, that was my "why" I did it. And um, you know, ultimately, I knew it would make my parents so happy. You know, I kind of grew into myself and my Judaism.

Laura's story exemplifies not only the withstanding force of these expectations, but their true interconnectedness. Because she had her bat mitzvah after being confirmed, getting married, and then having children, Laura was not on the standard timeline of the Jewish ritual lifecycle.

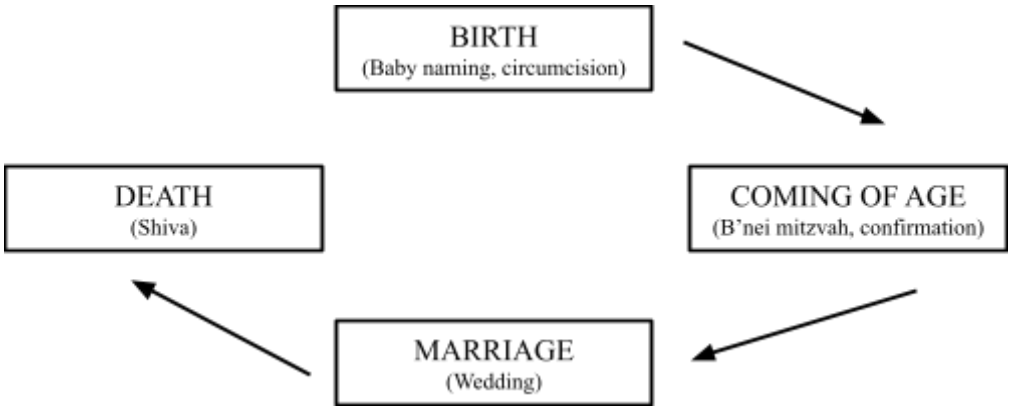

FIGURE 4: *The ritual lifecycle, birth to coming of age to marriage to death.*

Laura's bat mitzvah was not marking a coming of age. Her ritual lifecycle began to intertwine with that of other people, her husband and their children, and this put her in a unique position during her bat mitzvah. She was experiencing expectations from her community at the same time that she was a member of the community that was creating expectations for her sons' bar mitzvahs. This is expressed simply, yet so poignantly when Laura says that her "why" for having an adult bat mitzvah was her sons… and also that it would also make her parents happy. Bat mitzvahs aren't just for the bat mitzvah girl. Almost every person I interviewed included some variation of the phrase "it was a family thing" when describing their bat mitzvah. This concept is discussed in the book, *Today I Am a Woman*, where Reinharz and Vinick write, "One of the major themes shared by b'not mitzvah around the world is the involvement of the whole family. Many Jewish communities [...] are using b'not mitzvah as a way to educate the family as well as the bat mitzvah girl herself" (2012, 7). The tie between family and community is very present; many of my interlocutors mentioned their families as being something that brings them closer to their community. And in the bat mitzvah service itself, language regarding family—particularly recognizing parents, siblings, ancestors, and the future generation—is very prominent. Becoming a bat mitzvah means making a commitment to one's community, a commitment to one's family. This doesn't go away, just because the bat mitzvah girl is a parent herself.

⁂

SPEECH AND SUBVERTING EXPECTATIONS

Part of what makes stories like Laura's, and in fact the stories I've shared from each of my interlocutors, so interesting is the ways in which they subvert expectations. These moments of subversion can be revealing of the elements of the ritual that seem to be so fundamental that they often go overlooked. In the case of Laura, the expectation was age. The age of thirteen (and

to a lesser extent, twelve) has become so entwined with the bat mitzvah that the two are almost synonymous. So anytime a person has a bat mitzvah outside of early adolescence, it's noteworthy. But Laura's adult bat mitzvah was not the only encounter I had with subverted expectations.

During my conversation with Jody, my neighbor whose daughter was never called to the bimah during her bat mitzvah, we spoke about the fact that I studied Hebrew while at Bard. She was impressed that I went to a school that offered modern Hebrew and that I was taught how to read it. As we started to segue from catching up on college to the topic at hand, I brought up the virtual services I had been attending. The group b'nei mitzvah had just happened, officially marking the end of the season for the rest of the Summer. I didn't tell Jody that part. Instead, I told her about how watching the kids read their Torah portions and say their blessings took me back to being in Hebrew class, stumbling through my lessons in front of my class. Jody laughed and said: "Well, they shouldn't've been stumbling through if they were tutored!" … Right.

This comment reminded me of how language and the (at least perceived) mastery of it is often at the center of the bat mitzvah. It's expected that the bat mitzvah girl will say *something* during her service; whether it be a Torah portion or a haftarah or d'var Torah, there is an expectation of speech, often in both Hebrew and English. The expectation extends deeper than simply to speak. Bat mitzvahs[10] are expected to be *well* spoken, eloquent, and there is an, often tacit, correlation between a well spoken child and one that has put in effort. This is not always the case. For example, children with learning disabilities or speech impediments may have more difficulty reading or speaking, especially a new language, despite putting in great effort. Speech is one of those fundamental elements of the bat mitzvah that seems so inherent that it can be taken for granted. But in moments when expectations for speech aren't met or are

[10] The term "bat mitzvah" is being used here in reference to the person, rather than the ritual.

subverted—when words are stumbled over, whatever the reason may be—the role of speech has the possibility of becoming destabilized.

I experienced this destabilization when talking with Jennifer, the Hebrew tutor I spoke with in the previous chapter, about her children.

> *As a parent, is it– Has that changed your perspective on the bat mitzvah and the bar mitzvah at all?*
>
> Oh, yes. (*laughs*)
>
> *Oh, yeah?*
>
> When you become a parent, it's amazing how, like, you know, your perspectives change on everything! It's, it's really kind of freaky, actually. Um, yeah. I, uh– Yeah, actually because of my role as a tutor, it was, you know of course, important for my own kids to have that experience. And my daughter has Autism, actually. And she's nonverbal. And I– I designed her service
>
> *Oh, that's incredible.*
>
> So it was a very important piece for me because I didn't– She was certainly not going to be able to be comfortable in a traditional environment that I would see. That was a huge deal in and of itself. I spent several years planning it.

Jennifer presented a version of a bat mitzvah in which the bat mitzvah girl didn't speak at all. While this story certainly subverted *my* expectations, that may not have actually been the case for those in attendance of the bat mitzvah. The guests of the bat mitzvah, likely family and friends, would have known that Jennifer's daughter is nonverbal and likely would have had expectations that aligned with that knowledge. The willingness to deeply question and perhaps even reimagine one's expectations—to create space and to be surprised—allows for rituals to be accessible to people for whom that may not have always been the case. In the context of the previous chapter, expectations had to have been reimagined for Egalitarianism to be achieved.

This reimagination could perhaps even shift and expand the paradigm of Egalitarianism from simply a matter relating to gender and Torah reading to include matters of (dis)ability.

Jennifer also spoke about her son's bar mitzvah. She tutored him in Hebrew, and described him as being "competitive with himself" about learning his Torah portions. She went on to say this:

> It was a very, very different experience, but I was so proud of both of them. Both of them worked hard, no doubt about it. It was– her bat mitzvah was very inspirational to a lot of people. Just to see, you know, her stand– It was a forty five minute service and she stood there the whole time.
>
> *Yeah*.
>
> And if she didn't want to be there, you know she would've run away. And she never did.
>
> *Right, yeah.*
>
> So it was very special. It was like, how can I tutor all of these kids all of these years and not do something for my own daughter?
>
> *Yeah, absolutely.*
>
> Even though it was sort of hard to imagine, like, she's not gonna lead a service in a traditional way, but I want it to be somehow meaningful to her. And she loves music, so it was a good match.

Jennifer showed so much care for both of her children, just by talking about their respective b'nei mitzvahs. She also showed that she had different expectations for each of them that were guided by the child, rather than handed down from some preconceived idea of what their b'nei mitzvah *should* look like, or the idea that her daughter would be incapable of participating in one. Jennifer and her children may be an example of expectations generated collaboratively. While that notion may be subversive, and the outcome of their services may not have looked like

typical b'nei mitzvahs, it seems that her children may have actually met, or exceeded rather than subverted, the expectations set.

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NORMATIVITY

Meeting expectations brings us to the idea of normativity. If there isn't a standardized set of expectations for bat mitzvahs, what does a "normative" one look like? When asking this question, I think of Chloe. She had her bat mitzvah in August of 2021. I was connected to her through a friend of my mom. I felt a bit like a kid again, trying to schedule a phone call through our parents as intermediaries. We spoke the day after she got home from camp for the summer. She seemed less nervous than Rayna, perhaps because she was talking about her bat mitzvah on the other side of it. The questions I asked weren't raising "what if"s.

From our conversation, Chloe's bat mitzvah seemed to be pretty typical. It was reminiscent of many of the ones that I attended way back when. And almost immediately, an expectation found its way into the dialogue:

> *How long did it take for you to prepare for your bat mitzvah?*
>
> Well, with all the planning, it *should* take around a year, but I kinda started late. So about, like, six months.
>
> *Okay. Do you feel like Covid changed any of that kind of stuff? In terms of how long– preparation and that kind of stuff?*
>
> Yeah. Yeah, it was kind of on short notice, because– I'm sure you know this already, but for girls you do it at twelve and for a boy you do it at thirteen. So I had, like, that time period. The start of the planning was in Covid. So that's why I had, like, six months instead of twelve.

A bat mitzvah *should* take twelve months to prepare for, according to Chloe. I'm not sure who decides these things, but she said it with such certainty. Despite having her bat mitzvah in a (post) Covid era, the primary manifestation of that timing was in a decreased amount of time to prepare. Six months instead of twelve. Similarly to Jennifer's children, this truncated timeline represents an expectation that changed in and of itself, rather than an expectation that wasn't met.

Chloe's intra-community forces interacted in different ways than I anticipated. For example, she attended a Jewish private school, meaning that her peers and her religious institution overlapped quite a bit. There was a very real link between her social life and her religious life. We spoke about this:

> *That was another thing that I was curious about. Is how much bat mitzvahs, and bar mitzvahs even, like, were a part of your social… calendar, I guess, of that year? I remember when I was in seventh grade going to a lot of bat mitzvahs even though I wasn't necessarily at– I wasn't at a Jewish school, I was at a public school. um But, I had a lot of Jewish friends and that year, there was a lot of bat mitzvahs and they became a really– a major part of, like, socializing that year. And I was wondering if that rings true to you at all?*
>
> Yeah, definitely true. Because that's the year where everyone– it's like right before you turn thirteen or right before you turn fourteen. That's when you're supposed to have it. So that's why a lot of people have it then. And I– about it, like, being social, for sure. It's a party… and a service. That's where you're gonna have fun and stuff, so
>
> *Yeah, um. So can you tell me about what you remember from the day of your bat mitzvah? Whether it be from the service or the festivities after the service.*
>
> Um, before the service, I um– I got my hair done and my makeup done and then I put on a dress. We got there like an hour early with just my family, like all my family, my extended family. And, um, took pictures, um, afterwards, everyone started getting there, and then my service uh I could get out my schedule, it's in my closet. It's just full detail.
>
> *Um, you can just tell me what you remember.*

> Yeah, I'll just tell you what I remember. I don't think it needs to be that detailed, but we started, I think, with prayers and lighting the candles and more prayers and I did speeches and stuff and told, like, stories, and then we had *kiddush* which is the meal and we went home. And two days later I had my party.

Chloe went on to mention spending time with her family as a highlight of her bat mitzvah; they're a family thing after all. And as she talks about getting her hair and makeup done before her bat mitzvah service, I recall the kosher chicken. I think about how physical appearance becomes a major player in the expectations of a bat mitzvah. The expectation to look nice, and the myriad implications imbued in that one small word, exists at the juncture of religious and secular expectations of the bat mitzvah. It certainly isn't *required* by, say, halachic law that a girl wears makeup or a new dress for her bat mitzvah. But as is spelled out in the previous chapter, nothing about the bat mitzvah is. However, references to appearance, particularly makeup and clothing, came up repeatedly throughout my conversations. Almost like the party after the ceremony, that despite the influences outside of Judaism, it has become an undeniable part of the ritual. However a person engages with this—to get a new dress or not, to throw a party or not—their choice can be viewed in relation (or opposition, even) to whichever option they don't choose.

Keeping in mind this overlap of religious and secular expectations, I look back on what Chloe recalled about her party.

> Um, I had a cool party. It was pretty small. There was only, like… fifty people, maybe. I had a DJ um lots of food, beverages. We also had a food truck, um, a candy bar. There was dancing. You could go swimming. And, they did like limbo and stuff.
>
> *Was it uncommon to have a bat mitzvah in the summer?*
>
> Mine was actually the first week of school, so I know New York goes back in September, but–

(laughs) yeah–

So, summer, you're really not going to have people there, because everyone's busy doing other stuff. Um, yeah, it's mostly during the school year.

This story is full of the expectations that exist where religious expectations meet secular ones. The word "small" is not one that I would have initially reached for to describe the party Chloe recounted to me. And yet, her use of that word is revealing of the expectations that are created by the community around her. These expectations manifest in the material world, they show up in the bigger parties of peers, and in media depictions of bat mitzvahs. And because a bat mitzvah, at least in Chloe's sphere, is something that a lot of people attend, it's important to have during the school year.

Just in sharing the story of her bat mitzvah, speaking about the events as she recalled them, Chloe revealed her interactions with so many expectations. And while she may have had, at least from her telling, a comparatively typical or normative bat mitzvah, there is still much to learn from a ritual that meets the expectations laid out for it.

⁂

As I think about expectations, when they're met, and when they change, I turn to Raymond Williams and his writing on Hegemony. In his book, *Marxism and Literature,* Williams explains that Hegemony, which can be defined simply as the influence of a dominant group, is not stagnant. Rather Williams describes Hegemony as an "active process" and he sees tradition as a role in that process. Much of what Williams writes in his chapter "Traditions, Institutions, and Formations" begins to tie the threads of this paper together. Williams writes about tradition saying:

> Most versions of 'tradition' can be quickly shown to be radically selective. From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are neglected and excluded. Yet within a particular hegemony, and as one of its decisive processes, this selection is presented and usually successfully passed off as 'the tradition'. (Williams 1977, 115)

Williams helps us to understand how taking tradition, and I will extend to say ritual, at face value can undermine the history of how it came to be and upholds the hegemonic ideals from which the tradition was borne. This is evidenced by the ways in which Egalitarianism continues to be a consideration for the women I interviewed, and how the precedent for Non-Egalitarianism still permeates their lives. The community of Metro-Atlanta is predominantly christian,[11] so any form of religious practice outside of that could easily be seen as counter-hegemonic. However, there is still a dominant ideology and tradition within Judaism itself. "Dominant" can be a relative term, and I believe that it very well may be possible to uphold the internal Hegemony within Judaism, and in the same action, counter the Hegemony of the larger Protestant South.

Expectations play a role in this conversation of Hegemony, too. By looking, again, to the moments of surprise. These are the moments that our expectations are being subverted, and thus, perhaps, an indication that a hegemonic ideal is being countered.

[11] According to the most recent available data from Pew Research (cited in bibliography), 73% of adults in the Metro-Atlanta area define themselves as some form of Christian.

CONCLUSION

AFTER AND IN BETWEEN

I don't think I've been to a bat mitzvah since the seventh grade. I stopped getting invited to them after all of my friends turned thirteen. But the bat mitzvahs that I attended still hold such a distinct place in my memory. I remember such minute details—food that was served, songs that were played—but I also remember how I felt and the sense of importance that permeated that entire period of time.

While I was home this summer, I spent a lot of time with my friend Alison. Sometimes I forget that we lived a thousand miles apart for all of Middle School, and I can almost recall a memory of her bat mitzvah. I think I'm just remembering the idea of a bat mitzvah. We spent a lot of time in Alison's car this summer. Alison would drive and I would sit in the passenger seat. We would sit in bumper to bumper traffic on the part of the highway where 285 becomes 85. We would sit and talk. We talked about everything, but we talked a lot about growing up. How did we get here? We clung to this summer. It's the last one we knew we were going to get to spend together, unsure of our post-grad plans.

Several of my interlocutors spoke with me about the ways in which having children impacted their perspective on bat mitzvahs and with Judaism as a whole. Their love and care for their children poured through each conversation. Looking back on this summer with Alison, I can place her in this gap between her own bat mitzvah and the hypothetical b'nei mitzvahs of the next generation, as she navigates the fluidity of adolescence and adulthood. Despite the adages, a girl doesn't instantaneously become a woman on the day of her bat mitzvah, and in the time

between those two occurrences, she is faced with choices, experiences, and opportunities. Those factors shape the woman on the other side of the bat mitzvah.

I was not in attendance at Alison's bat mitzvah, but I am so lucky to be in attendance to watch her grow, and to grow with her, in this time afterwards.

⁂

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

When thinking about the implications of this project, socially and politically, I return to Lila Abu-Lughod's "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?," in which she writes:

> What I am advocating for is the hard work involved in recognizing and respecting differences—precisely as products of different histories, as expressions of different circumstances, and as manifestations of differently structured desires. We may want justice for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision as best (see Ong 1988[12])? We must consider that they might be called to personhood, so to speak, in a different language. (Abu-Lughod 2002, 787-788)

Again, the context in which she is writing is different from Metro-Atlanta area bat mitzvahs, but I do think this sentiment is still relevant, especially when keeping in mind Donna Haraway's "Situated Knowledges." Engaging with the perspectives of women, especially young women, is political. Valuing their perspectives as a means of knowledge production and learning from the knowledge produced is, I hope, a step in the right direction towards justice and autonomy for women.

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[12] The text being referenced here is: Ong, Aihwa 1988 Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-Presentations of Women in Non-Western Societies. Inscriptions 3-4; 79-93.

GOING FORWARD

There are several places I wish to see this project continued and expanded. First, in my chapter on expectations, I began a discussion of how the bat mitzvah relates to disability. This is a topic I would love to explore more thoroughly and intentionally. I think it's a topic that could get its own project and, if I began to dive as deeply into the topic as I would like, I would be starting to reach outside of the scope of this project. Another topic about which I feel similarly, is gender. In my chapter on Egalitarianism, I focused on the relationship women have with reading the Torah. Again, this is what I felt I could, in good faith, fit within the scope of this project. Going forward, I would like to explore Egalitarianism beyond the gender binary. Lastly, in future iterations of this project, I would like to investigate the roles of class, wealth, and labor. I began preliminary research about some of these topics last semester, planning to have a chapter dedicated to this. I find it a fascinating subject that is incredibly difficult to discuss. People are often only willing to share so much, and I have yet to get comfortable with asking questions about it.

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Alison and I aren't sure what our post-grad plans are, but I know that I'll be coming home this winter. Just in time to celebrate a night of Hanukkah with her family. Just in time to sink back into a routine, before we have to go play Grownups again. I'm not sure what forms this project will continue to take, but I know that I'll be coming home this winter.

Literature Review, Spring 2022

For my Midway in the spring semester of 2022, I submitted a literature review titled "An Exploration of Womanhood, Class, and Kinship through the Ritual of Bat Mitzvah in a Metro-Atlanta Reform Community." Clearly this project has changed quite a bit since then. This became a project that was not tied to a particular movement; I interviewed people who are members of Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox congregations. The themes of womanhood, specifically through the lens of Egalitarianism, and kinship, with particular care towards mothers, carried over into this version of the project. My desire to explore with and within a community, rather than extract from a community carried over as well, represented by the word's appearance in both titles.

While the project has changed dramatically, I carried with me into this "final" version of my senior project much of what I learned last semester. In an attempt to both properly credit the work that I have been engaging with and to honor the time and effort I spent with these texts, I am including my literature review below. I feel by taking this look back, the power of ethnographic methods to deeply engage and understand are on full display.

⁂

My senior project is an ethnography that is seeking to understand how the ritual of bat mitzvah shapes and is shaped by its participants' understanding of womanhood, class, and family. The community I plan to study is in Metro-Atlanta and the central location I plan to conduct research in is a Reform Temple in Midtown, Atlanta called The Temple. My goal for this ethnography is to better understand how the ritual of bat mitzvah is deeply entangled

in—informed by and informing—notions of gender, wealth, and kinship within this particular community.

This semester has been a time for me to read as much as I can in order to become well versed in my project's subject matter. This knowledge will hopefully allow me to ask deeper and more thoughtful questions, observe beyond the superficial, and write an insightful ethnography. I have found plenty to read on the history of Jewish people in the United States, coming of age in Judaism, feminist interventions in Jewish studies, and Jewish families. I have found less, but still available, literature on the bat mitzvah in particular, on Judaism and capitalism, Jewish people in the South, and even the history of The Temple. What I am curious about is the interactions of these subjects, and this is where my research would intervene.

My plan for my final paper is to have three chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. The introduction will introduce my ethnographic narrative as well as provide an overview of relevant concepts in Jewish studies, a history of bat mitzvah, and a history of The Temple. My body paragraphs will be on the following three topic areas: gender and womanhood, class and wealth, and family and kinship. The reading I've done this semester has shown me how deeply connected each of these three topics are, but I am going to attempt to keep them discrete units that each have their own analyzable list of referenced scholarship.

Introduction

One function of my introduction is to provide an overview of relevant Jewish studies theory. To do that, I started by reading Michael Satlow's *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice.* This book was the first I read this semester and it raised an incredibly fruitful question for me to think about as I continued my research; namely, what makes something Jewish? That

question, raised from Satlow's book, has stayed with me as I have come to understand what it is about bat mitzvah in Metro-Atlanta that is so interesting to me. Satlow writes, "Each community of Jews creates its Judaism anew, reading and understanding their traditions through their own peculiar and historically specific worldviews" (2006: 7).

This quotation has helped me think through the question of "what makes something Jewish," as there is (perhaps as expected) not an easy answer. For example, if we are to say that only that which is guided by specific rabbinic laws should be considered Jewish, some aspects of bat mitzvah would not be considered Jewish at all. Satlow writes,

> Puberty, which we mark today with a wide variety of religious and secular rituals (e.g., a bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation, sweet sixteen, or prom) is not signaled at all by the Rabbis. The ages of twelve for a girl and thirteen for a boy are legally important: At those ages they bear full responsibility for observance of the commandments and are equally subject to the full force of its penalties. For the Rabbis, however, the movement to this new status is a technical, legal event. Although they discuss a few rituals related to the start of formal schooling, they generally ignore childhood rituals" (2006:181).

This noted difference between spiritual, legal, and personal importance is a reminder that Judaism plays many roles, even outside of the religious sphere. This is made even more clear when Satlow argues for a "polythetic" view of Judaism, incorporating a revised version of Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of familial resemblance. Familial resemblance is a way of relating perhaps seemingly unrelated topics through a series of shared traits: "Family members can resemble each other in a variety of ways or not at all. I might have my mother's nose and my mother might have her mother's chin, but I might not look at all like my grandmother" (Satlow 2006: 6). Satlow applies a polythetic way of thinking about family resemblance when it comes to Judaism and the breadth of tradition and practice it encompasses: "there will be large overlaps of shared characteristics, but some members will have nothing in common with others. There is no

single shared component that is essential to a member's inclusion" (2006: 7). This notion, that there is not a single, inherent quality, but rather a network of shared traits that make Judaism what it is, is an idea that has informed a lot of my thinking throughout this semester.

This, then, led me to *Jewish Passages: Cycles of Jewish Life* by Harvey Goldberg. This book follows the Jewish ritual life cycle, covering birth, education, marriage, and death. On life cycle rituals, Goldberg writes:

> Life-cycle ceremonies are one of the axes around which Jewish life is organized. In marking the birth of children, celebrating bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, rejoicing at weddings, and mourning the dead, Jews feel emotions shared with humans everywhere and observe customs that parallel those found in other cultures. Jewish practice, however, is also shaped by an ancient textual tradition, expressed in the Bible and elaborated in the Talmud, which has continued through the Middle Ages up until the present. In addition, the life-cycle rituals of Jews reflect the experience of communities that have long resided in many lands of the Middle East, Europe, and, most recently, the Americas (2003: 1).

Any life could be broken into the milestones of birth, adolescence, marriage, and death. And many people recognize these moments in life with a particular ritual. In his book, Goldberg contextualizes these rituals within a full lifetime, and what stands out about adolescence, but in particular the bat mitzvah, is how little is written about it. Goldberg writes about the ritual of the *bar* mitzvah (the equivalent ritual for young men) developing into its recognizable form during the Middle Ages. He writes, "Among European Jews, the notion began to be institutionalized that boys reach religious maturity, bearing responsibility for their own actions, only at the age of thirteen. This was the context for the development of the bar mitzvah [...] From the late fourteenth century on, there is evidence of a 'bar mitzvah' ceremony" (Goldberg 2003: 90).

As for bat mitzvahs, Goldberg contextualizes them in a history of confirmation ceremonies and growing education in Judaism for girls and women during the first half of the nineteenth century. He notes discrepancies between early bat mitzvahs, and what would be

recognizable as a bat mitzvah today. It was more common for young women in that time to have their ceremony on Friday evenings or for their ceremony to include them blessing the Sabbath candles. Today, bat mitzvah ceremonies often happen on Saturday afternoons, but can happen on any day of the week and, rather than lighting Sabbath candles, girls will typically recite a *parshah,* or weekly torah portion. Goldberg notes that Judith Kaplan, daughter of well-known Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, is regarded as having had the first bat mitzvah in the United States, but also states: "We do not have a social history of the notion and forms of bat mitzvah celebration" (2003: 106). Over the past hundred years, this social history and form has been built in real-time. It is clear that life-cycle rituals are incredibly important in the lives of Jewish people. At this point, a major question I was asking was: What makes a bat mitzvah what it is?

In an attempt to better understand the historical positioning of the bat mitzvah, I read the book *American Judaism: A History* by Jonathan Sarna. This book provides a timeline of Jewish people living in what is now the United States, starting in 1588 and it concludes in the present day. In the introduction of his book, Kaplan writes:

> The history of American Judaism, as I have come to understand it, is in many ways a response to this haunting fear that Judaism in the New World will wither away. Over and over again for 350 years one finds that Jews in America rose to meet the challenges both internal and external that threatened Jewish continuity—sometimes paradoxically, by promoting radical discontinuities. Casting aside old paradigms, they transformed their faith, reinventing American Judaism in an attempt to make it more appealing, more meaningful, more sensitive to the concerns of the day (2004: xiii-xiv).

This insight from Sarna highlights a way of understanding bat mitzvah in the overarching history of American Judaism: as the values of the people practicing the religion changed, so did the practices associated with the religion. As gender parity became increasingly valued, there have been more instances of women being included in religious settings, such as the case with the bat

mitzvah. Among other things, this book covers the history of Reform Judaism, as a paradigm shift in Jewish religion and culture.

Dana Evan Kaplan dives deeper into this history in his book, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction*. This book, similarly to Sarna's, provides a timeline of sorts to the history of, in this instance, the Reform movement in America, starting with the United State's first Reform attempt seen in Charleston, South Carolina in the year 1824. It also, however, explains some of the basis in which the Reform movement was rooted. One aspect of this that Kaplan refers to is the idea of the movement being a way for Jewish people to reflect their American identities. This wasn't assimilation into American culture per se, as American culture was ostensibly Christian, but was a way for them to align with their Americanized lifestyles. About this, Kaplan writes: "Reform Jews saw their local religious involvement as paralleling Christian participation in local churches, Jewish religious activities would not only be compatible with being American, but also would make them better Americans" (2005: 35). Kaplan goes on to explain what the Reform movement actually *is*—what it is that is being reformed:

> Traditional Judaism had focused on the observance of the mitzvoth, the commandments given by God and incumbent on every adult Jew. The mitzvoth developed into a system of law referred to as halacha. Traditional Judaism viewed halacha as the core of Judaism, and observing the code of Jewish law was obligatory. The Reformers argued that if the Sages developed specific laws as a response to historical conditions, then halacha could be changed or even abrogated. The Reform movement thus viewed halacha, Jewish law, as no longer obligatory (2003: 35-36).

It is clear that the Reform movement is one of those "radical discontinuities" that Sarna was referring to in his book. In an attempt to keep Judaism accessible to people in the United States, this way of practicing and experiencing Judaism came into existence, and it called for a major reimagining of what Judaism could be. Understanding this history is integral to providing context for the community in which I will be studying—a Reform congregation. If I am attempting to

understand the, as Michael Satlow would say, "peculiar and historically significant worldview" of the people in this community, I should at least begin to familiarize myself with the ideology of the religious denomination to find where that intersects with the topic at hand.

In order to find that intersection, I wanted to learn more about the history of bat mitzvah. To do so, I read *Bar Mitzvah: A History* by Michael Hilton. This book recounts the development of the ritual, citing thirteenth century France as the location of the first synagogue ceremony indicating a bar mitzvah. Despite being largely about bar mitzvahs, Hilton dedicated a chapter in this book to bat mitzvahs. Due to the lack of consensus across time and place as to what exactly a bat mitzvah is, its history has some ambiguity. To this, Hilton writes:

> If the term *bat mitzvah* can be used more loosely to describe a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony for girls, then the first such synagogue ceremony was held for two girls in Berlin in 1817. If we are talking about a ceremony that at the time it happened, the girl was referred to as "bat mitzvah," then the first one was in Leipzig in 1847. If we define *bat mitzvah* as a ceremony for an individual girl (not a group) in which the Torah blessings are being said, then Judith Kaplan's is certainly the first well-known one, though there probably had been others earlier (2014: 107-108).

This quotation echoes the question raised from Satlow writing by making it clear that there are different definitions of bat mitzvah. Depending on which definition is used, a different origin can be found. This book, along with the article "The Conceptual and Anthropological History of *Bat Mitzvah*: Two Lexical Paths and Two Jewish Identities" by Hizky Shoham provided information on the history of bat mitzvah both as a ritual and a state of being. In his writing, Shoham traces the history of bat mitzvah as a coming of age ceremony and bat mitzvah as a "religious status" reached at age twelve—a girl can *become* a bat mitzvah even if she doesn't *have* a bat mitzvah. This article, along with other writing by Shoham, deal directly with the consumerism that seems

to have become part and parcel of bat mitzvah celebrations. In my section on class and wealth, I will address this further.

The final piece of this introduction is to provide some background on the community that I will be engaging with. This summer, I'm going home to Atlanta, Georgia to talk to people about bat mitzvahs. The central location for this research will be The Temple in Midtown, Atlanta. The Temple's website recounts its history, writing,

> In 1850, twenty-six Jews lived in Atlanta, representing just one percent of the population. Their numbers would double by the outbreak of the Civil War, prompting the fledgling community to create a loosely organized Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1860 (The Temple, History).

The congregation, originally known as the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, was founded in 1867. Today, The Temple prides itself on being the oldest and most diverse synagogue in Atlanta. This is profound messaging when looking back on The Temple's history with the civil rights movement. From the mid 1940s- 1970s Jacob Rothschild served as The Temple's Rabbi, and throughout that time he developed a precedent for activism and solidarity across races and religions. This wasn't received well by many of the pro-segregation citizens of Atlanta, and in 1958, The Temple was bombed in an act of antisemetic and racist violence. The book *The Temple Bombing* by Melissa Fay Greene opens: "October 12, 1958. 3:37 AM. Fifty sticks of dynamite in the middle of the night blew apart the side wall of the Temple, Atlanta's oldest and richest synagogue, which stood in pillared, doomed majesty on the grassy hill above Peachtree Street" (1970: 1). The bombing, luckily, didn't injure or kill anyone. But, among other things, it brought The Temple into more conversations about civil rights and social progress and those values are still upheld within the community. Part of the reason I have been particularly interested in the

community at The Temple is because of its rich history and how that impacts the people who interact with it today. What does it mean to have your bat mitzvah, to become a woman, in The Temple?

Gender and Womanhood

One of my three chapters is going to be about gender and womanhood. In this chapter, I hope to explore how having a coming of age ceremony shapes a person's idea of (in this case) womanhood and how the expectations surrounding the ceremony may also be shaped by the community's ideas about gender. One of the books I read that started this exploration was *Today I am a Woman: Stories of Bat Mitzvah Around the World* by Barbara Vinick and Shulamit Reinharz. This book is a collection of first hand testimonies of bat mitzvahs. It includes diary entries, conversations, photos, and varying perspectives on bat mitzvah. There are stories from young women who's bat mitzvahs had just happened, women who are reflecting back on a day that happened decades ago, and mothers who never had a bat mitzvah who are recounting their daughters'. The authors take time in their writing to acknowledge the wide array of ways to recognize a girl becoming a bat mitzvah. Vinick and Reinharz note that this range can largely be attributed to a comparative lack of traditional precedent: "Unlike bar mitzvah ceremonies, however, they are not enshrined in tradition. Some observers applaud this as an opportunity to make the ceremony more personal and meaningful" (Reinharz and Vinick 2012: 5).

This opportunity to make a personal and meaningful ceremony is seen throughout this book. No two bat mitzvahs are the same, nor are any two stories recounting one. This book provides a framework for me to think about how I may want to share some of the stories that I hear from people, as well as reassurance that my chapter topics would be fruitful areas to study. Many of the young women discuss the topics of gender, class, and family in their reflections on

their bat mitzvahs. That particular quotation raises and reframes this question, asking not just what makes a bat mitzvah what it is, but also is there anything inherent to a bat mitzvah?

While not necessarily inherent to bat mitzvah, food certainly plays a significant role at many bat mitzvah celebrations. In fact, food is a major way that Jewish community is created and maintained. As I prepare to discuss bat mitzvah, what it means to be a woman, and coming of age, I would be remiss to ignore the role that food plays. I turned to the book *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic*, particularly a chapter titled "Returning Food to Its Rightful Place: Eating Disorders in the Jewish Community" that was written by Ruth Zlotnick. This chapter touches on not only the significance of food to the Jewish community: "Food and Judaism are inextricably linked" (Zlotnick 2011: 367), but also on how because of this importance, it can become a fraught subject. Zlotnick writes to this idea, saying: "Because food in the Jewish community is often viewed as a symbol of our culture, it is an easy object to abuse in the quest for emotional satiation" (2011: 369). She also writes about how large family gatherings, like holidays, can be particularly hard for those who have a difficult relationship with food. I can imagine that this stress is only compounded if the family gathering is your bat mitzvah.

This book links some of my thinking about bat mitzvah as informing and being informed by notions of gender and womanhood and it being shaped by and reshaping the family. Part of this chapter on eating disorders also touches on how even one member of a family experiencing an eating disorder can affect the family as a whole. Zlotnick even quotes a parent saying that it can undermine "the myth of the perfect Jewish family" (2011: 370). This chapter, and this quotation in particular, reinforce the idea that a family unit is a part of a community and the ways

in which they relate to one another are just as important to examine as an individual or a larger group of people.

Family and Kinship

In order to have a better understanding of Jewish families and Jewish family dynamics, I read Jonathan Boyarin's book *Jewish Families*. In this book, Boyarin uses various examples from antiquity to the present day to paint a picture of not just *a* Jewish family, but a range of families situated in their own social and historical contexts, all bound together by their Jewish identities. My chapter is titled "Family and Kinship" in an attempt to account for the many ways in which significant bonds are created. Boyarin notes anthropologists' preference for the term "kinship," writing:

> Think of the term as referring to all the forms of relation that bind humans to other humans through genealogy, marriage, or sometimes both, in preceding as well as succeeding generations. Kinship still describes social and symbolic relations-that is, part of knowing who someone's kin are is knowing who she thinks her kin are. (2013: chapter 1, paragraph 12).

The idea of kin being made, at least in part, of who one thinks their kin are allows for a wider view of what could be considered kinship. When thinking about who one considers to be kin, the typical ideas of parents, grandparents, spouses, siblings come to mind. Taking into consideration the familial terms that are used when discussing Judaism, this notion of kin being made by thinking of another as kin, expands this group of people. Referring to Abraham as "our father," the theory of familial resemblance, even the term "bat mitzvah" which can be translated to mean "daughter of the commandment" theoretically positions Jewish people to consider *all* other Jewish people, past, present, and future as members of their kinship network.

This vast notion of kinship can be contrasted with a perhaps more narrow notion of family. As Boyarin would argue, this notion should by no means actually be narrow, but it likely would not include as many people. He writes: "Whatever families do, they are in the business of inclusion and exclusion" (2013: Introduction, paragraph 6). If a family is a means of including and excluding, we can think about how a bat mitzvah is a time in which a family structure or unit may be reinforced or also challenged through the ingroup/outgroup paradigm.

Class and Wealth

The last chapter I plan to write is on class and wealth. Many of the sources that I have read have made reference to money—such as referring to The Temple as the "oldest and richest synagogue" or Boyarin noting in his preface that wealthy families will be "overrepresented" in his book—but few dwell on it for long. However, when it comes to a facet of Judaism, like the bat mitzvah, that has in many ways become an indicator of wealth, money can't be glossed over. The first book I turned to in my research on this topic was *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter With American Capitalism* by Rebecca Korbin. This book provides a comprehensive history of Jewish people in various American industries, as well as how American capitalism changed Judaism. While this book does not, at least yet, have direct relevance to my project, it has been useful as one of few texts that deals explicitly with Jewish people and consumerism, and confronts the antisemetic stereotypes that often accompany that topic.

In order to deal more specifically with bat mitzvahs, I am returning to Hizky Shoham's writing. He has two articles specifically devoted to consumerism and bat mitzvahs that I have been engaging with. The first is, "'A Birthday Party, Only a Little Bigger': A Historical Anthropology of the Israeli Bat Mitzvah." This article outlines the history of the bat mitzvah in

what is now Israel and explains how Israeli bat mitzvah culture differs from American. He writes:

> Unlike the bar mitzvah, confirmation, and even the bat mitzvah in the Western Diaspora, the Israeli bat mitzvah was not the result of a cultural initiative on the part of educators and teachers, or even parents. Whose initiative was it? By way of elimination, we might hypothesize that it was the girls themselves who possibly wanted a party like their brothers had, with presents, but never demanded some accompanying rite of passage such as an aliya in the synagogue and putting on phylacteries, which did not interest them due to their diminution for the boys, too (Shoham 2015: 287).

The argument here is that the Israeli bat mitzvah has always been an, at least somewhat, secularized event, that has been increasingly impacted by consumerism. This argument is expanded in Shoham's other article, which I have already briefly mentioned: "The Conceptual and Anthropological History of Bat Mitzvah: Two Lexical Paths and Two Jewish Identities." This follows the history of the term bat mitzvah as both a rite of passage and as a state of being. Shoham argues that because of the different ways the term has been used in Israel and North America, it has developed different cultural practices and significance. Towards this idea, he writes:

> In North America, Jewish boys and girls have achieved linguistic parity: although the main referent of bar/bat mitzvah today is the party, the secondary linguistic use of the change in the youngster's status crops up here and there, because in general there is also some kind of initiation rite into the world of the synagogue and Jewish literacy. [...] On the other hand, in Hebrew, bat mitzvah has nothing to do with an initiation ceremony. [...] In the Yishuv and Israel, unlike the Western Diaspora, bat mitzvah entered the spoken language only as a designation for a girl's twelfth birthday party and did not penetrate the ritual sphere (Shoham 2018: 120).

Shoham notes that this linguistic difference highlights the way in which the meaning of "bat mitzvah" has never been concrete or stable, and that, as of right now, it often indicates a big party.

The last book that I read for this chapter was *Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah* by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin. This book speaks to the idea that the party has overtaken the religious component of the bat mitzvah, and that that is something to be fixed. The Rabbi who wrote this book dedicated it to his "students, friends and teachers at The Temple—Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, Atlanta, Georgia" (Salkin 2005). He uses several anecdotes from members of his congregation, members of the community I will be studying, to craft this guide. In the introduction of the book, Salkin writes:

> To most American Jews, bar and bat mitzvah is a product and a performance that leads to a party. It must become more of a process, part of an ongoing sense of becoming more Jewish, not only for the child but also for the family. Even more important is that we must recapture the long-lost sense of coherence between bar and bat mitzvah and the other moments of our Jewish lives. Inner meaning, spirituality, and such venerable Jewish values as study, justice, giving, sanctity, and moderation in consumption can become more real as a result of bar and bat mitzvah (Salkin 2005: xxi).

This book was able to provide a look into the ways that leadership and clergy at The Temple may be discussing topics of money and consumerism with families preparing for bat mitzvahs. While I have no stake in this argument itself—it's not my place to say what would make someone more Jewish or if that's what is best for any given person—I feel very lucky to have this look into what rhetoric around this topic exists in the community.

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