100th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BAT MITZVAH
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom – Vancouver BC
March 19, 2022

This weekend marks the 100th anniversary of Judith Kaplan's Bat Mitzvah, the first such ceremony to ever take place in recorded Jewish history. And this is the kippah from that service.

I'm only kidding – but wouldn't it be cool if collecting kippot from famous and consequential B'nai mitzvah of Jewish luminaries, who were then just 12- and 13-year-old children was a hobby like collecting baseball or hockey cards. In my mind I see a whole industry and museums dedicated to the collection of these rare artifacts.

Anyhow I digress…

To be precise there is evidence that some recognition of the bat mitzvah had already emerged by the late 1800s and early 1900s in traditional Jewish communities in parts of Europe and the Ottoman Empire, according to The Jewish Women's Archive.

At the turn of the century, Rabbi Yosef Hayim of Baghdad "recommended that girls mark their twelfth birthdays in liturgical fashion, with options ranging from wearing festive clothing to reciting shehecheyanu."

But it was on this date in 1922 that the first Bat Mitzvah took place in a synagogue in North America.

History records that in the 1910s and 20s, the atmosphere around the inclusion of women in all forms of North American life was changing. In 1916 women were granted the right to vote in Canada Judith Kaplan's bat mitzvah took place just two years after the certification of the 19th amendment finally granted women the right to vote in the United States.

Kaplan was the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism and a NY synagogue called The Society for the Advancement of Judaism. I think it's fair to say that she was a young woman who was in the right place at the right time.

In 1980 Kaplan told the story of how her first of its kind Bat Mitzvah came to be on this shabbat 100 years ago. Here in part is how she described it:

"It was a sunny spring day 1922. My two grandmothers, rocking gently in chairs provided for their especial comfort in our house, communed in Yiddish. Their conversation was not intended for my ears, but since Grandma Rubin was slightly hard of hearing, and since both were moved by intense emotion, I could eavesdrop without any difficulty.

"In-law," said my mother's mother, "Talk to your son. Tell him not to do this thing!"

"Mahateineste (in-law)," said Grandmother Kaplan, "you know a son doesn't listen to his mother. You talk to your daughter. Tell her to tell him not to do this thing!"

And what was this terrible deed which my father was about to perform, and which they both sought uselessly to prevent? He was planning to present me in a public ceremony in synagogue as a bat mitzvah.

The synagogue was the newly founded Society for the Advancement of Judaism. It had held services for only a few months when this new and dire occasion was contemplated. I was midway between my twelfth and thirteenth birthdays. At the time of my twelfth birthday, the age at which Jewish law recognizes a girl as a woman, subject to the mitzvot (commandments), there had been no synagogue where such a ceremony could be conducted. This was my father's first opportunity to put into practice one of the basic tenets of his then yet unnamed philosophy of Reconstructionism, namely, the equality of women in all aspects of Jewish life.

It would be less than the whole truth to say that I was as full of ardor about the subject of this ceremony as my father was. Oh, to be sure, I passionately espoused the cause of women's rights. Let us say that I was ambivalent (a word that had not entered the common vocabulary at that time), being perfectly willing to defy the standards of my grandmothers, pleased to have a somewhat flattering attention paid me, and yet perturbed about the possible effect this might have on the attitude of my own peers—the early teenagers (that word, too, was not yet in the vocabulary), who even then could be remarkably cruel to the "exception," to the nonconformist.

Everything else was in readiness. Invitations had been sent to family and friends for a party in our home on Motza-ei Shabbat (the evening following Sabbath). I had asked only one or two close friends in addition to my fellow members in the Yarmuk Club (a Hebrew-speaking club of girls who met in the Central Jewish Institute). The "club" could be depended on for sympathetic support, regardless of their precocious propensity for questioning all religious observance.

Everything was in readiness except the procedure itself. On Friday night, after Shabbat dinner, Father took me into his study and had me read aloud the blessings which precede and succeed the Torah readings. How severely he corrected my diction!...

The following morning we all went together, father, mother, disapproving grandmothers, my three little sisters and I, to the brownstone building on 86th Street where the Society carried on all its functions. Services were held in a long narrow room which led into a wider and more spacious one. In the wider room was the bimah (platform) with the Ark. The men of the congregation sat in that room and up one-half of the narrow room. Women's rights or no women's rights, the old habit of separating the sexes at worship died hard. The first part of my own ordeal was to sit in that front room with the men, away from the cozy protection of mother and sisters.

The service proceeded as usual, through shaharit (morning prayers), and through the Torah reading...I was signaled to step forward to a place below the bimah at a very respectable distance from the scroll of the Torah, which had already been rolled up and garbed in its mantle. I pronounced the first blessing, and from my own Humash (Five Books of Moses) read the selection which Father had chosen for me, continued with the reading of the English translation, and concluded with the closing brakhah (blessing). That was it The scroll was returned to the ark with song and procession, and the service was resumed. No thunder sounded, no lightning struck. The institution of bat mitzvah had been born without incident, and the rest of the day was all rejoicing.

Judith was wrong about one key aspect of her historic ceremony. While the sky may not have cracked with thunder and lightning; her "first of its kind" Jewish ritual would ultimately shake and disrupt the foundations of Jewish life like an earthquake.

But it didn't happen right away; it wasn't until the 1980s that bat mitzvah ceremonies were mainstream in American synagogues — a history that may be surprising to girls and younger women who have seen bat mitzvahs reflected in pop culture for as long as they can remember.

Next week I will attend a rabbinic conference in San Diego, there we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the rabbinate. That too was a ripple effect of young Judith's bat mitzvah 50 years prior.

As a child who grew up in the 1970s and 80s I remember my own sister's bat mitzvah on a Friday night at our reform temple; boys were on Friday nights as well at my childhood synagogue. But the event was intentionally not substantively different than that of my brother 2 years before her or mine five years later, though they insist I got more presents.

Looking at my social media feed this week it is filled with pictures of friends and colleagues posing with their rabbi and the torah at their own bat mitzvah. What makes these pictures stand out, aside from the preponderance of sailor suit bat mitzvah dresses (see picture of Rabbi Brown). Is that few are posed with rabbis who are also female. Because 36 years ago when many of these pictures were being taken there were just a few women rabbis in North America. But 36 years later; in present day, as is the nature of social circle most of the Bat Mitzvah pictures are being posted by women who are now themselves rabbis.

It is important to note that such an achievement who not have happened had Judith Kaplan not read from her chumash in front of her congregation 100 years ago this morning. Thunder and lightning and earthquakes.

Think about all of the other advances and contributions women have made to Judaism and synagogue life today.

Women hold every position of synagogue leadership, in our shul, like in most their willingness, desire, commitment and readiness to volunteer far out paces men. In a society and a city where

two income households are nearly universal we cannot say that this simply because women have more free time. If anything, in a patriarchal society that still assumes they will be the primary caregivers to children and homemakers, women probably have less free time than men. But as has long been true, “busy people get more done” I am looking at Mary Kleiner as I say that but it’s true of nearly every volunteer, female or male I have ever worked with in our congregation; and its particularly true of the moms.

Without the Kaplan Bat Mitzvah our Judaism would be unimaginable to me; even orthodoxy was influenced by her ascending the bema that morning.

Orthodoxy—which operates as a kind of Jewish Originalism—appeals to many even outside of it because it claims Judaism IS. But that is a false claim, Judaism, going back long before young Judy read from her chumash has always been an exercise in what is necessary for the moment. It has never been static, never to its benefit anyway.

Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan (Judys father) wrote about the constant "reconstruction" of Jewish thought beginning with the early rabbis up to the present. We are all reconstructionist Jews, even the orthodox.

Did Judy’s Bat Mitzvah “destroy” Judaism like many at the time said it would?

Clearly, we are not. In fact, it made Judaism healthier, stronger, wiser, kinder. We are better for it and that is maybe the most important insight and lesson we must draw on this historic day.

We need to think about that when contemplating other “radical” or “offensive-to-some” innovations *hasv’halilah* a young girl being called to Torah.

Our rabbis teach in the book of D’varim, the last book of the Torah as Moses prepare the people for his own death that we can only see what was a positive change in retrospect. So this morning we look back to celebrate how far we have come, how far we have come because a young girl took a few steps forward, stood in a place like this, before a congregation that looked nothing like this and read from her chumash. Next week the daughter of our rabbi will do the same; and it will be a big deal, not because she is a girl, not because her mother is a rabbi, but because she is like every other Jewish child of a certain age, because she is accepting responsibility for the mitzvot, the commandments of our covenant between G-d and the Jewish people. That is thunder and lightning and an earthquake all rolled into one!