



ICJW Online Study Program

“Women's Lifecycle Events”

Woman's Life Cycles from a Jewish Perspective Session I - History and the Impact of Modernity

In this course we hope to be able to show how the Life Events of Jewish Women were celebrated in past times, and also to describe part of how modern Jewish Women are meeting the challenges of partaking more fully in our heritage and learnings. We will try to describe the attempts of modern Jewish women and their husbands to live a more complete Jewish Life, while following the dictates of Jewish tradition and teachings.

In general, through the ages, the main obstacle to celebrating women's events publicly has been the decided viewpoint of the teachers that women's place was in the home and only there. Their patriarchal attitude and the fact that the law was written by men for men stifled any attempts to celebrate women's life cycles outside of the confines of the home and a close circle of female relatives. There were, of course, individual female scholars in the past, but their learning was met by amazement and protest by the scholastic community.

Before attempting to go into the individual events, we would like to set out here the sequence of Jewish law teachings.

1. The Torah consisting of the 5 Books of Moses, containing the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs and including the Laws which were given (or passed on) to the Jewish People by Moses.
2. Neviim (the Books of the Prophets and Judges), setting forth the history of the children of Israel in the Land and the teachings of the major and minor prophets of Israel.
3. Ketuvim (the Books of Writings), containing, among others, the Proverbs, Psalms and the Megilloth (Scrolls). These three, the Torah, Neviim and Ketuvim are referred to as the Tanach (Bible).
4. The Mishnah (the Oral Law), a systematization and expansion of, as well as commentary to, the written laws of the Torah and the application of those laws to a post-Biblical age. The Mishna summarized the norms which had developed and codified them for use in a pastoral environment. Up to the time of the destruction of the 2nd Temple these laws were transmitted orally by the Tana'im (early Sages) and thus subject to adoption and change. Only at the end of 200 BCE did Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi commit them to writing, in fear of them being forgotten. According to the Sages, the oral tradition also stems from Moses.
5. The Gemara (Talmud), written in both Babylonia and Jerusalem after the dispersion of the Jews from the Land of Israel as a commentary and expansion of the Mishna. This contains discussions by the Rabbis on the laws given in the Torah and the Mishna and their application to life in the early centuries after the dispersion. The Gemara is a compendium of interpretations, extensions, discussions, comparisons and stories.



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6. The Halacha derived from these many discussions, interpretations, comparisons, and stories and was conceived as a method of applying these laws to the lives of the children of Israel wherever they lived. Usually the law was set according to the majority decision of these Rabbis and Sages, but sometimes the opinion of the leading, most renowned Rabbi was adopted as law. The actual English translation of the Hebrew word Halacha is “the Path” or “going”.
7. The development of Halacha continues from the time of the early Sages until the present day, but several major compendia of the Halacha have determined much of the accepted practice. These are primarily the Mishne Torah of Rambam (Miamonides) and the Shulchan Aruch of Rabbi Josef Caro together with its Glosses (Amendations) for the Ashkenazic world by Rabbi Moshe Isserlis.

Our aim is to open a window on our lives as Jews and those of our mothers and daughters. If we look at ourselves in a mirror, what do we see?

Birth of a Girl Child

Although the birth of a child has always been a source of great joy, Jewish fathers, and vicariously mothers, shared the preference for a son with many other peoples. The advent of a “Kadishel” – a boy who could say the Kaddish after his parent’s death, was of paramount importance, and so the many and varied customs of celebrating the birth of a son only served to highlight the paucity of similar celebrations at the birth of a daughter. In contrast to the public welcoming of boys (Shalom Zachar, Brit Milah, Pidyon haBen), the birth of a female child from Talmudic times through the middle ages until fairly recently was confined to the naming of the girl in the synagogue by the father. Even the Birkat Hagomel (Benediction of Deliverance from Danger) which the woman was supposed to say in the presence of a Minyan (a prayer quorum of ten) was often said for her by her husband in her hearing. In response to queries, we have been told of one Iranian Jewish woman whose conscience plagued her after bearing only one son to her four daughters. “Despite my mother’s fear of not pleasing my father with the birth of so many daughters, he was always careful to give her a beautiful present after the birth of my sisters and myself” writes one young woman. A baby is a baby, after all!

Despite the fact that the birth of one son and one daughter fulfilled the Almighty’s decree “Be fruitful and multiply” the traditional concept of having many children and the pronounced preference for boy children continued. What has been passed down to us on birth celebrations for girls is little but among them are the following:



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Planting a Tree

One lovely custom originated in the village of Betar in the land of Israel in Talmudic times. On the birth of a girl, a pine tree was planted by the family and a cedar tree on the birth of a boy. When the time for marriage came, the Chupah (marriage canopy) was built of the branches of these two trees combined.

Zeved haBat

In the Sefardic and Italian tradition, a ceremony was/is held for girls called Zeved haBat (gift of the daughter). This stems from the matriarch Leah's statement in Genesis 30:20 in which she thanks God for a goodly gift. This occurs before the birth of Dina, the one girl among all the sons of Jacob. In this ceremony, which dates back to the 17th Century, the Rabbi held the baby on his lap while reciting a blessing and saying her name. The baby girl was then passed to all the guests, who each blessed her in turn. In Turkey an embroidered silk veil was laid over the heads of mother and daughter, the veil being worn by the mother after the ceremony, and then by the daughter at her wedding ceremony. The beautiful blessing said during the ceremony of Zeve haBat is to be found in the Sefardic prayer books to this day.

During the last 35 years, an explosion of learning by Jewish women has occurred, and through newly-found knowledge more and more wonderful customs have been/are being developed to celebrate the advent of a girl child.

Birkat Hodaah (Blessing of Praise)

How many of us knew that it was incumbent on a woman after childbirth to say this formal prayer to God after a successful delivery? The husband says it at the same time, if he is present at the birth. Otherwise, when he first hears of the birth.

Naming the Baby

The baby's naming usually takes place in the synagogue, where the father (or both parents outside of the orthodox framework) is/are called to the Torah and name the baby in Hebrew. This could be a good time for both parents to say a Shehechyanu (prayer of thanks for the happy event) and for the wife to recite the Birkat ha-Gomel (thanks for deliverance). Today in more and more synagogues (even Orthoprax), the woman recites the Birkat ha-Gomel out loud in the congregation of men.

Should the couple decide to make an extended celebration with friends and family, the girl could be named then and these benedictions can then be said.



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Simchat Bat (Celebration for the Birth of a Girl)

This is a celebration which, although relatively recent conception, has become widespread among young couples of every religious persuasion. It is held either at home or in the Jewish community hall. The timing of this ceremony is also the parent's choice, with many significant time frames being offered. A particularly nice custom is to celebrate the Simchat Bat on Rosh Chodesh (the first of the Hebrew month), a holiday traditionally connected to women. Other choices are when the baby is 8 days old (to parallel the Brit for a boy), or on the 30th day after birth, when a Pidyon haBen (redemption of the first born) is celebrated for a first-born boy, and marking the age at which a child was counted as part of the census.

Since there are no halachically dictated procedures, the parents are free to construct their own ceremony and celebration in the manner they see fit. The ritual can contain blessings, recitations from the Psalms, the beautiful Sefardic Misheberach, special recitations by the grandparents and explanation of the name of the baby and the reason for giving it. The first published collection of Simchat Bat ceremonies dates back to 1977, when the New York Jewish feminist group Ezrat Nashim published their booklet of welcoming rituals. Now there are also many sample ceremonies available on the internet. JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) as well as the Conservative and Reform Movements in the United States and England are excellent sources for further examples of these ceremonies. The New York section of our Affiliate NCJW has a large collection of Simchat Bat ceremonies, among others, in their library. The name which we give to a ceremony is in itself important. The ceremony described above is known by many other names as well. Perhaps the most significant is Brita or Brit haBat which puts the emphasis upon the entrance of the girl child into the Covenant. Since according to traditional thought, women are born into the Covenant without needing an outward sign on their bodies that they are Jewish, the name is sometimes confusing.

Haut la Crèche (Raising the Cradle)

This is a custom developed in the Alsace region of France, southern German and Swiss Jewish communities, mostly for girls. First described by Simcha of Vitry in the 13th century, the ceremony was influenced by local folk customs. When the baby was a month old, it was brought to the Synagogue by the mother. There it was welcomed with song and the father was called to the Torah. After services, family and friends went to the home to celebrate. Children surrounded the cradle, raising it three times and calling Hola, Hola, Hola – what shall the baby be called? The parents called out the secular name of the baby and distributed sweets to the children. Another custom, more related to superstition, was the binding of a red string around the girl's wrist for the first few years (as a protection against the evil eye).



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Jewish Education

Many of the women asked said that they had attended daily or weekly Hebrew School. On the other hand, many older women in Eastern European countries were only able to learn at home, with their mothers or grandmothers. They are compensating for this in attending adult classes and expanding their Jewish learning now.

Onset of Menarche

Despite various efforts, we were not able to trace any specific customs occurring when the girl's first period happened, although several remembered being lightly slapped on the face by their mothers or a neighbor at the time. Most often thought to be an eastern European custom, we have since heard that it occurred also in Iranian Jewish families, with the exclamation by the mother “The trouble has started!”. There the customs for a girl menstruating seemed to be quite stringent. Separate sheets, bed covers, clothes and eating utensils, as well as a separate covering for the chair she sat on were required, explanation being that the father and brothers learned Torah in the room.

Bat Mitzva

Here we find a large variety of customs. Traditionally speaking, there is no prescribed ceremony for either the Bar or Bat Mitzva. The boy was simply allowed to read from the Torah on reaching his 13th birthday, and the father spoke the blessing of Baruch Sheptarani (blessed be God who has absolved me from further responsibility for the sins of this child). This blessing could also be recited by the mother at her daughter's reaching the age of 12.

However it has finally penetrated into even the most orthodox circles that girls (as well as boys) deserve a marking of their “coming of age”, and there are again a host of varied rituals that can be followed. Outside of the usual celebration, it has become accepted for the girl to give a *D'var Torah* speech in the synagogue during or after the service. She is blessed by the Rabbi and her parents before the congregation and in more open synagogues is called up to and allowed to read from the Torah. For more stringent congregations, the formula of a women's prayer service has developed, with the girl, her mother and female relatives and friends sharing leading the prayers and the Torah reading. There are even congregations where the father and other male relatives and friends sit behind a mechitza (separating curtain), if they wish to hear the Torah reading by the young woman.

Although the practice of a large party has taken hold in many circles, it is important to hold fast to the original reason for the celebration. The girl has entered maturity and is responsible for her own religiosity. Even where she declines learning to read from the Torah, she should complete a course of study as a sign that she has become a serious and committed Jewish adult.