



"Ideas" June 1964

About Bas Mitzvah

I INTRODUCTION: THERE ARE STILL MANY INHIBITIONS IN ORTHODOX CIRCLES ABOUT THE PERMISSIBILITY AND THE ADVISABILITY OF HAVING GIRLS BAS MITZVAH. IN MOST CASES, OUR COLLEAGUES ONLY GRUDGINGLY INSTITUTE BAS MITZVAH CEREMONIES IN RESPONSE TO OVERPOWERING PRESSURES. THE MOST FREQUENT OBJECTION TO THE PRACTICE IS THAT IT IS "KE-CHUKAS HAGOYIM," A DIRECT IMITATION OF NON-JEWISH AND REFORMIST GROUPS.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, WE PRINTED A RATHER ELABORATE CEREMONY AND MATERIAL ABOUT BAS MITZVAH IN "IDEAS". WE HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT IT IS PRESENTLY IN USE IN VERY MANY CONGREGATIONS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. ITS ESSENTIAL MERIT IS THAT ITS MANNER OF PRESENTATION OBIATED ALL POSSIBILITIES OF VIOLATION OF TRADITION. WE FEEL THAT BAS MITZVAH CEREMONIES WILL ACHIEVE MORE WIDESPREAD ACCEPTANCE WITH THE PASSAGE OF YEARS, PARTICULARLY AMONGST NON-YESHIVA GIRLS.

II RECENT RULINGS WE NOW HAVE SEVERAL BASIC IMPORTANT RULINGS ABOUT THE PROPRIETY OF BAS MITZVAH. IN A LETTER TO A 12 YEAR OLD TEL AVIV GIRL WHO HAD ASKED FOR A RULING ON THE SUBJECT, ISRAEL'S CHIEF RABBI ITZHAK NISSIM WROTE AS FOLLOWS: (PUBLISHED IN YEDIOT AHARNOT)

"THE REASON WHY IN ALL JEWISH COMMUNITIES A BAR MITZVAH HAS ALWAYS BEEN MADE FOR A BOY IS THAT FROM THE DAY HE ASSUMES THE COMMANDMENTS, HE FULFILLS AN IMMEDIATE MITZVAH, THE PUTTING ON OF TEFILIN. A GIRL, THOUGH SHE ASSUMES THE OBLIGATION OF THE MITZVOT, DOES NOT HAVE AN IMMEDIATE AND SPECIAL COMMAND TO PERFORM.

THIS DOES NOT IMPLY THAT A GIRL SHOULD NOT REJOICE ON THE DAY OF HER ENTERING THE WORLD OF MITZVOT. ON THE CONTRARY, IT IS GOOD AND PROPER TO MAKE A CELEBRATION IN HONOR OF THIS OCCASION IN HER LIFE. THE CELEBRATION SHOULD BE IN HER HOME IN THE COMPANY OF HER FRIENDS AND RELATIVES AND WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF A RABBI. THE RABBI SHOULD MAKE A SPEECH IN HONOR OF THE OCCASION AND SHOULD SPEAK ON THE VIRTUES OF THE LAW, ON KEEPING THE MITZVOT AND OF THE REWARD FOR THOSE WHO KEEP THEM.

IT IS FITTING THAT THE GIRL SHOULD WEAR A NEW DRESS AND MAKE THE BLESSING OF 'SHEHECHEYANU'. SHE SHOULD PREPARE A SHORT SPEECH ON THE OCCASION AND THE MEANING OF THE DAY. HER FATHER SHOULD SAY THE BLESSING OF 'BARUCH SHEP' TARANI."

IN HAPARDES (NISAN 5723), THE GAON RABBI YAAKOV YECHIEL WEINBERG, ONE OF THE FOREMOST RABBINICAL AUTHORITIES OF OUR AGE, WRITES:

"THERE ARE THOSE WHO SPEAK AGAINST CELEBRATING THE BAT MITZVAH SINCE IT IS AGAINST THE CUSTOM OF PREVIOUS GENERATIONS. HOWEVER, THIS IS NOT A VALID CLAIM AS IN THE PAST IT WAS NOT NECESSARY TO GIVE GIRLS A JEWISH EDUCATION AS EVERY JEWISH HOME

WAS FILLED WITH TORAH AND AWE OF G-D. NOW, HOWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN AN IMMENSE CHANGE; THE INFLUENCE OF THE STREET REMOVES FROM THE HEART OF EVERY BOY AND GIRL THE ENTHUSIASTIC DESIRE FOR JUDAISM AND THE GIRLS ARE EDUCATED IN A GENTILE OR SECULAR SCHOOL. SIMPLE LOGIC AND PEDAGOGIC PRINCIPLES REQUIRE THAT THE REACHING OF THE OBLIGATION OF THE MITZVOT FOR GIRLS SHOULD ALSO BE CELEBRATED. THIS DISCRIMINATION THAT WE MAKE BETWEEN THE BOYS AND GIRLS ON REACHING PUBERTY IMPINGES HEAVILY ON THE FEELINGS OF THE ADOLESCENT GIRL WHO HAS IN OTHER FIELDS REACHED FULL EQUALITY."

RABBI WEINBERG DISMISSES THE ARGUMENT OF "CHUKAS HA-GOYIM", SINCE ON THIS BASIS MANY JEWISH PRACTICES WHICH HAVE CORRELATIONS IN OTHER FAITHS WOULD HAVE TO BE PROHIBITED. THE IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION IS OUR MOTIVATION, WHICH IN THIS INSTANCE IS NOT TO BE IMITATIVE BUT "TO STRENGTHEN IN THE HEART OF A GIRL REACHING THE AGE OF MITZVOT A FEELING OF LOVE FOR JUDAISM AND ITS COMMANDMENTS AND TO AROUSE IN HER A FEELING OF PRIDE IN HER JEWISHNESS AND HER BELONGING TO A GREAT AND HOLY PEOPLE".

RABBI WEINBERG OBJECTS TO SUCH CELEBRATIONS IN THE SYNAGOGUE BUT WOULD CONSIGN THEM TO A SOCIAL HALL, AUDITORIUM OR THE HOME. HE FURTHER STIPULATES THAT THE RABBI SHOULD ON THIS OCCASION GIVE THE CELEBRANT "AN INSTRUCTIVE ADDRESS, URGING HER FROM THAT DAY ONWARD TO CHERISH THE PRINCIPAL COMMANDMENTS...SUCH AS THE SABBATH, KASHRAS, FAMILY PURITY, JEWISH EDUCATION AND THE OBLIGATION TO SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE A HUSBAND IN TORAH STUDY AND OBSERVANCE AS WELL AS HER EVENTUAL DETERMINATION TO SET HER EYES ON A LEARNED AND G-D-FEARING MAN." RABBI WEINBERG'S BASIC SENTIMENT IS THAT NOWADAYS IT IS "ALMOST IMPERATIVE TO CELEBRATE THE ATTAINMENT OF THE AGE OF MITZVAT FOR GIRLS."

IN THE IGEROS MOSHE (TESHUVA 104) THE GAON RABBI MOSHE FEINSTEIN IS CONSIDERABLY LESS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT CELEBRATING BAS MITZVAH. HE BEMOANS THE MANY DESECRATIONS WHICH PLAGUE US WITH THE BAR MITZVAH AND HE QUESTIONS THE NEED FOR ADDITIONAL HEARTACHES. HE CONCLUDES, HOWEVER, THAT IF IT NEED BE, IT SHOULD NOT TAKE PLACE IN THE SYNAGOGUE SINCE IT IS AN OPTIONAL (RESHUS) CEREMONY, NOT AN OBLIGATORY RELIGIOUS SERVICE. RABBI FEINSTEIN'S OBJECTIONS SEEM ESSENTIALLY TO BE DIRECTED AT BAS MITZVAH OBSERVANCES ON THE SABBATH DAY.

III CONCLUSION: IT IS OUR FEELING THAT WE NOW HAVE MANY ACCREDITED OPINIONS TO SANCTION OUR INSTITUTION OF BAS MITZVAH WHERE THE NEED SEEMS TO DEMAND IT. THE OCCASION, TIMING AND MANNER OF THE CEREMONY, HOWEVER, ARE CRUCIAL CONSIDERATIONS. WE DON'T FEEL THAT OUR GIRLS SHOULD APE THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS WITH A HAFTORAH AND BLESSINGS, EVEN WITHOUT THE "SHEM". THESE ARE SKILLS WHICH A GIRL WILL NEVER HAVE TO DUPLICATE AND ITS IMITATIVE CHARACTER IS OBJECTIONABLE AND HALACHICALLY QUESTIONABLE.

INSTEAD WE RECOMMEND A CEREMONY OR EXERCISES WHICH SHOULD NOT EVEN BE CALLED A SERVICE, TO TAKE PLACE ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON. THIS CAN BEST BE ACHIEVED IF WE ARE DEALING WITH A GRADUATING GROUP OF GIRLS, SOMETIMES IN MAY OR JUNE, NOT ON SHEVU-OS. THERE IS, THEREFORE, NO "CHILUL SHABBOS", NO FACSIMILE IMITATION OF A BAR MITZVAH, AND NO PRETENSE WHATEVER OF A RELIGIOUS OCCASION.

THE CEREMONY MAY INCLUDE GOWNS, FLOWERS, INSCRIBED BIBLES, PRINTED INVITATIONS, PROGRAMS, PICTURES, MUSIC, CANTATAS, ETC. INSTEAD OF A SYNTHETIC PIETISTIC PERFORMANCE ON THE SABBATH, WE HAVE INSTEAD A CEREMONIOUS AND ELABORATE BAS MITZVAH EXERCISE WHICH IS ESSENTIALLY AN ELABORATE GRADUATION.