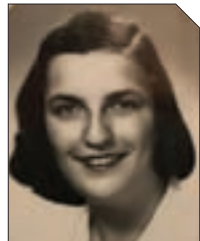


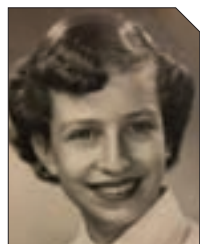
70 years later, Park recalls history-making bat mitzvah

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When a young Harriet Rosenblatt came to the age at which Jewish law recognizes a girl as a woman, there had not been a bat mitzvah ceremony in Cleveland.



Rosenblatt



Shapiro

The first bat mitzvah to take place in the world happened at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York City, exactly 27 years before Rosenblatt stepped in front of her congregation at Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights on March 18, 1949, to recite the Haftorah for that particular Sabbath.

During that Friday night service, she set a precedent for the community, which has evolved into the current bat mitzvah ceremony.

"At first it was a new thing, but there had been women who had been inquiring

about it and once that happened, then we started to see the proliferation of that," said Rabbi Joshua Skoff of Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights and Pepper Pike.

The 70th anniversary of Rosenblatt's ceremony will be commemorated March 16 at Park Synagogue, where Shayna Berke of Solon will celebrate her bat mitzvah. Women who had bat mitzvah ceremonies in the following decades since Rosenblatt's will also be honored during the service and will have an aliyah.

Around the time the bat mitzvah, then called bas mitzvah, ceremony was introduced in Cleveland, it was being established as a traditional phase of Jewish life, particularly in Conservative congregations, according to the Cleveland Jewish News Archive (cjn.org/archive). Skoff explained the addition of the bas mitzvah was within Jewish law, despite people's assumption at the time that when things are changed, that it breaks Jewish law.

"The law actually always allowed it, but local custom started to prevent it, but the law itself permits a woman to do these things," he said. "We think of modern problems as if today is the only time we have modern problems. In 1922, they had modern problems, also. Their modern problem was women wanted to participate



Tzvi Gordon with his grandmother, Rhoda Shapiro, at Park Synagogue. | Submitted photo

and they realized the law allowed it so they pushed back against the custom, but they held on to the law."

The requirements to have a bas mitzvah ceremony at Park Synagogue stated the girl must be a member of the graduating class of the Hebrew school or have the equivalent learning of the class, and will have reached her 13th birthday by the end of the semester, according to the CJN Archive.

Park Synagogue had recently moved to Cleveland Heights from East 105th Street in Cleveland, where it was the Cleveland Jewish Center. However, Rosenblatt's ceremony was not under the sanctuary's dome many associate with Park Synagogue's Cleveland Heights location, but still took place on the main campus. The honor of having the first bat mitzvah under the dome was given to Rhoda Shapiro, who had her ceremony Jan. 26, 1951, a month after the sanctuary building was dedicated.

Neither of Shapiro's parents had their own bar or bat mitzvah, but her mother was confirmed when she was older at Park Synagogue. When her father was of age for a bar mitzvah, his family was still in the process of settling into Cleveland and he didn't have the opportunity to have one. Yet, Shapiro's parents encouraged her to have a bat mitzvah ceremony.

"It was something my parents wanted because they didn't have much training ... they didn't know Hebrew," she said. "They wanted me to feel comfortable in the synagogue."

Shapiro, a lifelong member of Park Synagogue, said there were three girls total in that year's class. At the time, her bat mitzvah did not seem like a "shockeroo" for the congregation. Instead, it was an idea the congregation was "at peace" with. Skoff added it was also something it took pride in.

"It was good that women kind of got some kind of recognition, (they) were working toward equality in the synagogue," Shapiro said. "It was a good thing that they were accepted in synagogue services and it was Rabbi (Armond) Cohen's doing. He was always forward thinking."

However, Shapiro remembers the weeks leading up to her bat mitzvah as intense.



A bulletin from Park Synagogue announcing Rhoda (Tanzman) Shapiro's bat mitzvah, which was the first bat mitzvah to be held under the dome sanctuary at Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights. | Submitted photo

Her teacher was Sylvan Ginsburgh, who was the ritual director of Park Synagogue at the time. She met with him often to go over her Haftorah portion and "repeat and repeat" until she had it right.

While she felt she was well prepared, she could feel her nerves building as she entered under the dome.

"It was scary," she said. "It's awe-inspiring to be in there at that time, and even today. I was the first one, nobody had ever done it before in that building. ... I guess being the first put a lot of responsibility on my head to do a good job, and to do it right."

Over the years, the bat mitzvah service changed since Shapiro had hers. For starters, hers was on a Friday night instead of Saturday morning as it is now. She also only read a Haftorah and did the candle blessings as opposed to reading the Torah, Haftorah and conducting the service. Since her bat mitzvah, Shapiro has seen more women being able to participate in the service and it gave girls an equal opportunity to do what boys are able to do.

"I'm proud of that," she said. "I know my parents were extremely proud, and my grandfather."

The precedent Rosenblatt set and Shapiro followed paved the way for future girls, including Shapiro's younger sister who had her bat mitzvah four years later:

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