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## ONE STEP ALONG MY WAY

Eva Metzger Brown, Ph.D.—September 28, 1991  
(written by Eva Metzger Brown, Ph.D.)

*Ten years later, I can see more clearly than I could when I began my studies where my Bat Mitzvah fits into the progression of my life. More than an end point, it was a beginning that started me on a journey of Jewish study, which continues; it furthered my dream to become a full-fledged writer, communicating thoughts on my experiences, and perhaps teaching along the way; it helped me reconnect with my four grandparents, in four cemeteries, where I laid*



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And when my father died, I said Kaddish for him for he had survived:

He and my mother had survived the Holocaust with one child, a daughter;

And I asked myself, if he had survived with one child, a daughter

It must mean that girl children can say Kaddish;

And so I said Kaddish for him—"in transliteration."

And I wondered what I was saying.

My grandmother had often said to me of German writings, "Read them in the original." That is what she would say to me.

And so one day, a year ago, I listened to her voice and started learning Hebrew and studying texts and studying prayers and studying for my Bat Mitzvah.

I said these words ten years ago on the occasion of my Bat Mitzvah. I was 53 years old. I was a wife, mother of three, new grandmother, daughter, and practicing psychologist. Why had I decided to celebrate my Bat Mitzvah as an adult? Why had I decided to celebrate at this time? There were no expectations from parents, friends, or my community that I do this. There were no guidelines that said, "Now." There had to be additional motivations to the inner voice of my grandmother that told me, "You are ready to take this on." Today, I offer you, the reader, some thoughts on the questions "Why?" and "Why now?"

As with all people who celebrate their Bar or Bat Mitzvah as adults, mine was based on events that had and had not occurred earlier in my life. In 1950, when I was 12, most young girls did not celebrate their Bat Mitzvah, even though Judith Kaplan, daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, had broken the ice by celebrating her Bat Mitzvah in 1922. Instead, young girls got confirmed; I did not get confirmed. Though we felt strongly identified as Jews, my parents were not affiliated with a synagogue, I did not attend Sunday school, and I did not learn Hebrew. There was no practice of Judaism in my home. Instead, the focus was on recovery from the Holocaust. All of my father's energies were directed toward recreating a life that felt financially secure, again; my mother's efforts were directed toward regaining her strength and spirit; I was guided to "fit in," become Americanized. Our time in Europe appeared to have been forgotten.



Only decades later would I put together my Holocaust story. I was born in Nuremberg, Germany, on July 13, 1938: Hitler was in power. On November 9, 1938, *Kristallnacht*, Nazi thugs broke into our apartment and with clubs in hand, smashed everything in sight. Two days later we left for Paris. With the outbreak of war in 1939, the French rounded up all male “foreign aliens,” including my father, and sent them to detention camps. My mother and I left Paris for Angers, a smaller—we hoped, safer—town. This did not prove to be the case. In 1940, the Germans bombed Angers while my mother and I were walking in the street; we were both wounded; my mother’s left leg was shattered and later amputated. I was stitched up and sent to a Catholic orphanage, while shrapnel in my brain remained undetected. For four months, I was separated from both my parents; I was not yet 2 years old. As France began to fall into the hands of the Nazis, the ever-expanding web of detention camps collapsed. Once freed, my father contacted the French Red Cross and requested that they find my mother and me. Miraculously, we were reunited. The family then made its way toward the Pyrenees, for the ports of Portugal, only to learn that no ships were taking refugees. Retracing their steps, my parents headed back to France and the port of Marseille. There, visas awaited us. Our luck had turned; we had made the American quota. My parents secured passage on one of the last boats to leave France and, finally, we escaped the chaos in Europe for good. On August 6, 1941, we arrived in the United States.

Six million Jews were to die in this war, 1.5 million of these being children. My parents and I had to live with this knowledge; we had to live with the death of my paternal grandmother and my maternal great-grandmother in Theresienstat, we had to live with the loss of generations of family life as my parents had known it; we had to live with a family dispersed on three continents. I had to live with the loss of a childhood, the loss of my first language, and the loss of a Jewish education. Panic had marked the first three years of my life; silence would define the next fifty.

When I was growing up, no one spoke about what I had lived through in Europe—no one in my family, no one in my school, no one on television, no one in the movies, no one in the newspapers. Holocaust museums did not exist; there were no pilgrimages back to Europe to visit the scorched earth of the past and no days commemorating the *Shoah*. I grew up in a world of silence about why things



were the way they were and what had happened to my family and to my grandparents. As I remember it—for ten years, at least—there was no talk of things Jewish. Parts of our lives were shut down, in hibernation; parts of myself were shut down, too. I had no words, no feelings that I let surface about “those times”; there was only denial. The denial in my childhood years helped me to adapt to a new world, a new life, but in the long run it hindered me from healing from the psychic wounds of the war.

During my high school years, my parents re-awoke to things Jewish. They learned Hebrew, traveled to Israel often, and joined a Conservative synagogue. But in some ways, it was too late for me; my most formative years for Jewish education were over and Holocaust silences still haunted the family. For many years, my past remained disconnected from my present everyday life. I was busy. I got married, had three children, and completed my doctorate and postgraduate training in psychology—a sign, perhaps, that I was preparing myself for the day when I would investigate my past.

When my children came of nursery-school age, my husband and I joined a synagogue and enrolled them in Sunday school. We shared a wish that they begin their Jewish education early, and with theirs, I began my own. I was not conscious of this at the time, and yet I was aware that as I read Jewish storybooks to my children, I read them also to myself. As my children began preparations for their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, I read the Torah and the commentaries. As my children learned to chant the traditional melodies, I started to hum the tunes. As I put together Bar and Bat Mitzvah booklets, sequentially, for David, Carolyn, and Michael, I learned the order of the Sabbath service. Yet it never occurred to me that I might study for my own Bat Mitzvah. Looking back, I can see now that certain other things had to happen before I would feel ready to take this step.

When my father died in 1984, I was devastated. He had talked about himself very little; I did not really know him well. Yet I decided to meet with a psychiatrist to try and find the words to make sense of the impact of my father’s death on me, my sense of loss, my sense of the many traumatic losses in my life. It took me a long time to share my Holocaust story with him, and when I started to open up, it was not words I found . . . but tears. I thought I would never stop crying; he reassured me that I did not have to. He understood something that I had not allowed myself to feel. He let me know, in not so many words,



that Holocaust losses are worth remembering, worth grieving, and worth working through even decades later. As I began to talk with him about the war and about the years after the war, the walls of silence began to crumble. I began to speak with him from the core of my innermost self, and I began to talk with others, too.

In 1988, I was asked to speak to my Jewish congregation on the occasion of Rosh ha-Shanah. I retold the story of the *Akeda* and I shared how I understood the meaning of the survival of Isaac. Then, I talked publicly for the first time about my own Holocaust survival. The response to my talk was overwhelming. Friends, acquaintances, people I did not even know came into the aisle, as I returned to my seat, to press my hand or give me a hug. I felt overwhelmed; I could have cried, but I did not. However, the experience changed something for me; I saw, I learned, I felt that some people out there were not as afraid of my past as I was and they had the kindness to show me. I had taken the critical step in coming out as a Jew, as a survivor, and as a writer. I had given words to my story and had shared it with others. A year and a half later I began to study for my Bat Mitzvah.

The news that I was to become a grandmother was an additional force pushing me in this direction. I had broken my silence, and I had become aware of what I did not know of Jewish ritual and tradition. Now, with the anticipation of a new life, a new generation, I had an immediate calling: Jewish continuity, the antidote, as I saw it, to the murder of millions of Jews and their next generations. I thought that if I should live long enough for my grandchild to ask me questions about Judaism, I would like to be in the position of having studied and reflected upon the wisdom of the Sages so as to give him, and the ones that might follow, meaningful answers. The steps of Bat Mitzvah preparation struck me as providing a structure and a goal upon which I could do these things and, simultaneously, build up my Jewish education. I became committed; I learned many, many things on my journey, but the most important one was that Judaism is not a religion that directs us to find answers (for our grandchildren) but a religion that transforms us to look for the right questions to ask ourselves about our feelings of faith, the reasons for our existence, and the choices between good and evil in our everyday lives.

My teacher was my rabbi, a woman who had come, the year before, as the first rabbi of our congregation. Her presence was a gift to me at this time in my life. She was a resource who became a friend.



She proved more than willing to share what she knew and loaned me materials to research and understand the deeper meanings of my Torah, *Maftir*, and Haftorah portions. Sukkot is a festival based on the harvest, the ingathering of the peoples from exile, *tzedakah*, peace, joy, and the hope of a better world to come, through actions taken today. What better *parsha* for a Holocaust child survivor than one that celebrates life, faith in an invisible God, and *tikkun olam*.

Generally a late riser, I began to set my alarm for 6:00 A.M., every morning, seven days a week, for a year and a half—during Jewish holidays, on vacations with my husband, and on weekends when family or friends came to visit. Incrementally, I learned to read Hebrew and graduated from humming the tunes to reading the words of the melodies: I made my own Bat Mitzvah booklet and wrote introductory statements for each portion of the service for the benefit of those who were as unfamiliar with the service as I had been; I debated the design of my *tallit*, until I settled on its theme—“life,” weaves of eighteen bands of alternating sand-colored threads. My library of Jewish texts and Holocaust memoirs began to grow, with the *Encyclopedia Judaica* becoming a staple of everyday life, as did Holtz’s *Finding Our Way* and Greenberg’s *The Jewish Way*.

My Bat Mitzvah would be a mix of a traditional service interspersed with memories of the Holocaust. To the *Hallel*, I added personal statements from four women: Anne Frank and Ruth Westheimer, children during the war, who recognized the good in the world despite their own suffering; and Hannah Senesch and Henrietta Szold, who devoted themselves to saving lives, at great expense to themselves. I expanded the *Kaddish* with remembrances of my grandparents, each one buried far away from their partners due to the war’s dispersion; and I asked the entire congregation to rise and recite *Kaddish* for their loved ones and for those who no longer had loved ones to say *Kaddish* for them. Despite the threads of mourning and remembrance, my Bat Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah preparation was a time of great joy for me: joy in learning, joy in connecting with my Jewish historical roots, and joy in solidifying my Jewish sense of self. I had never lost my faith, but now it was better grounded in a foundation of Jewish knowledge.

Before my big day arrived, my rabbi said to me, “You don’t want the gifts we give to the children—a *Kiddush* cup, a certificate, do you?” “Oh,” I said, “I absolutely do,” and we both burst out laughing. She told this story to the congregation as she handed me my *Kiddush*



cup on the *bimah*, and I have had it told many times to me again, with a smile and with an understanding that it does not matter how old you are when you celebrate your Bat Mitzvah, a part of you is still a kid at heart. Next to these, one of my greatest gifts was a letter written to me by one of my children. He said, "I will never forget the first time I sat next to my mother in a synagogue and heard her reading Hebrew and singing the *shiroi* with words. . . . I am very proud of you, Mom. It is not because of what you are doing . . . but how you have done it. The ability to hear one's inner voice and then to honor it is a remarkable gift."

As I neared the end of my Bat Mitzvah studies, I asked my Jewish community if I could establish, with my husband, The Children's Fund. In lieu of gifts, I asked that donations be made to fund scholarships for Sunday school tuition, underwrite child care for parents attending services, and subsidize payments for the community's day camp. I had learned the hard way that it is a great loss if you are denied early exposure to things Jewish. I hoped that the fund would change this for some children.

Ten years later, I can see more clearly than I could when I began my studies where my Bat Mitzvah fits into the progression of my life. More than an end point, it was a beginning that started me on a journey of Jewish study, which continues; it furthered my dream to become a full-fledged writer, communicating thoughts on my experiences and perhaps teaching along the way; it helped me reconnect with my four grandparents, in four cemeteries, where I laid stones for them from their next generations. It helped turn my professional attention to the study of the impact of war on the next generations; it helped lead me to create, in my living room, a "Holocaust table," where my visa and that of my parents, a photo album of Nuremburg—before and after the war—and more recent articles are displayed. At holiday times, this table is filled with an array of books from which I studied. And when my grandchildren have a question, we go to these books and search together for answers and new questions. I count my blessings.

I have lived sixty years beyond the Holocaust. I have had the time to redress and repair some of my losses. And I have found that each time I do, the rewards are greater than I ever imagined. For all the reasons I have given for wanting to study for my Bat Mitzvah and all the inhibitions I have had to overcome, I never foresaw the gifts that I



would be given: the gift of being heard and feeling embraced, and the gift of a wandering Jew come home—“gathered-in.”

Adapted from an unpublished memoir on healing.

Bat Mitzvah on the Intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot-Tishrei  
20, 5752.