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## Having a Bat Mitzvah in Their 90s Because It's a Hoot

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David Ahnholz for The New York Times

Ten women close to or in their 90s have been preparing for a bat mitzvah in their suburb of Cleveland. Fay Kadis, 94, practicing her reading.

By CHRISTOPHER MAAG  
Published: March 21, 2009

BEACHWOOD, Ohio — Ann Simon is worried she might forget all the Hebrew words she has memorized to become a bat mitzvah, a Jewish girl marking the transition into religious adulthood.



David Ahnholz for The New York Times

The first thought Millie Danziger Fromet, 90, had about the service was that it would be fun.

Ms. Simon is no 12-year-old, though. At 94 she can be forgiven her fear that she might be seized by a senior moment or two as she stands on the bimah on Sunday to recite the section of [the Torah](#) that was read in synagogue on the Saturday closest to her 12th birthday. So can the other nine women who will take part in the bat mitzvah ceremony at the service in the synagogue of the Menorah Park senior residence in this Cleveland suburb.

The youngest, Mintsy Agin, will turn 90 in July. The oldest, Molly Kravitz, will celebrate her 97th birthday in August.

August.

The women grew up in the shadow of [the Great Depression](#), when bar mitzvah ceremonies for boys were weekly affairs but Jewish girls came of age without notice or fanfare.

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David Ahnholz for The New York Times  
Belva Singer, 91, spoke on the power of the Birkat Kohanim, the ancient Priestly Blessing.

A bat mitzvah was rare in the United States until the 1950s and '60s, said an associate rabbi at Menorah Park, Howard Kutner. Since then, many adult women have decided to make up for what they were denied as children, but most who do so are in their 50s and 60s, Rabbi Kutner said. A septuagenarian is rare and a nonagenarian nearly unheard of, he said, but only those in or near their 90s showed up when he offered bat mitzvah instruction to Menorah Park women of any age.

“Most people in their 90s, they just eat their three meals a day and are happy to be alive,” Rabbi Kutner said. “I think this shows that at any age you can set a challenge and meet it.”

A challenge, perhaps, but not all the women see it quite that way. “My first thought was boy, what a hoot!” said Millie Danziger Fromet, 90.

A self-described “feminist all my life,” Evelyn Bonder, 90, said she “always thought girls should have the chance to participate” in something that Conservative, Orthodox and Reform congregations embraced in stages.

Ms. Agin said: “My daughter had a bat mitzvah. But it was on a Friday instead of a Saturday. It wasn't held inside the synagogue, and she wasn't allowed to read from the Torah.”

The women have met weekly with Rabbi Kutner to study Hebrew and the Torah in preparation for the service, which is scheduled for Sunday.

The rabbi had planned to hold the ceremony in January, but he bumped it back to give the women more time to prepare. “The joke went around the room: Let's not do it after March,” he said. “Who knows if we'll still be here!”

On a recent Monday, the women entered Menorah Park's synagogue for a dress rehearsal. Three used walkers. Another carried a small oxygen tank. As they rose to speak, they left their medical gear by their seats. They approached the bimah unassisted, some limping, and steadied themselves at the lectern with both hands.

Practice began with prayers in Hebrew. Some women stumbled and stuttered through the complicated scrum of consonants. Those who had taught Sunday school for decades spoke more fluidly.

“One generation to another praises thy works,” said Eva Rosenberg, 91, reading from Psalm 145. “They speak of thy awe-inspiring might, and I tell of your greatness.”

Next came the speeches, which traditionally respond to the Torah passage read in synagogue that week. Rabbi Kutner had consulted old calendars to determine the week in which each woman would have spoken at age 12. He asked them to prepare messages based on the passages they would have addressed eight decades ago.

When Ms. Bonder was a child during the Depression, her parents lost their life savings in a bank failure. She later served as an aide to a United States senator. Her speech drew parallels to her Torah reading about Joseph, who rose from slavery to become a pharaoh's chief adviser.



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Belva Singer, 91, meditated on the power of the Birkat Kohanim, the ancient Priestly Blessing.

"This is one of the oldest and most beautiful prayers," Ms. Singer said. "It is only 15 words, and it has been repeated by our people for thousands of years."

Class members argued intensely over whether to limit each woman's speech to three minutes. The concern was not whether aging bladders could handle a ceremony that lasts an hour and a half, but whether relatives, some of whom are flying in from as far as Boston and California for the event, might be bored.

"These women have spent their entire lives nurturing other people, and now the spotlight is finally on them," Rabbi Kutner said. "They were afraid of burdening their audience."

They were not, however, afraid of telling the rabbi to pipe down.

"You're overpowering me!" Ms. Simon yelled during a period of singing.

"Really?" the rabbi said with an embarrassed smile. "I'm sorry."

The singing resumed. Rabbi Kutner followed along, silently mouthing the words.

"You're doggone right we're feisty," Ms. Agin said at one point.

After Sunday's ceremony, each woman is to receive a certificate with words from Psalm 92: "They shall be fruitful even in old age; vigorous and fresh they shall be to proclaim that the Lord is Just. He is my strength."

The new "adults" of Menorah Park may beg to differ.

"We're not old people," Ms. Bonder said. "We're senior adults."

Ms. Fromet looked over and frowned. "No we're not," she said. "We're adult seniors."

A version of this article appeared in print on March 22, 2009, on page A14 of the New York edition.

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