

The Meaning and Calling of Bat Mitzvah

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on the Occasion of Gabriela Noemi Rodriguez's Bat Mitzvah

Gabriela, today is your *Bat Mitzvah* celebration but (and I hope this does not shock you), you are already a *Bat Mitzvah*. In fact, you have been a *Bat Mitzvah* for almost a year now because you turned twelve years old on August 24 of last year. You see, *Bat Mitzvah* is not a ceremony or a celebration, but rather a coming of age. It is the moment in time when the Jewish Community considers a twelve-year-old girl personally responsible for her conduct – for keeping the Commandments of God and participating in Jewish life. Before that, responsibility for her conduct before God is assumed to fall on her parents but, once she reaches the age of twelve, that responsibility becomes hers and hers alone. That's why we call you a *Bat Mitzvah*, which means "Daughter of Commandment." So, the *Bat Mitzvah* we celebrate here today – your *Bat Mitzvah* – is not this service or this ceremony – it is YOU! You are the *Bat Mitzvah*.

Before I get more deeply into your responsibility to the Commandments of God, I should like to give you some historical background on *Bat Mitzvah* within Judaism. The ceremony of *Bat Mitzvah* first made its appearance in other parts of the world, and was unknown here in the United States until 1922. It was in that year that Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, made provisions for his daughter Judith to celebrate her *Bat Mitzvah* in a synagogue, similar to the way you are celebrating yours here today.

There is nothing in Scripture that denotes age 12 for girls and age 13 for boys as the age of *Mitzvah* accountability, but Scripture does suggest that, by age 20, at least the men were fully accountable. We see this in Numbers 32:11-12, where God said to Moses:

"Surely none of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and above, shall see the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because they have not wholly followed Me, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, the Kenizzite, and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the LORD."

Scripture also mentions age 20 as the age for giving offerings and for being eligible to go to war:

So where does age 12 for a girl and 13 for a boy come from? Age 13 comes from *Mishnah Avot 5:25*, in which Yehudah ben Tema is quoted as saying:

"A five- year- old begins Scripture; a ten-year-old begins Mishnah; a thirteen-year-old becomes obliged to observe the commandments .."

Age 12 was later chosen for girls because of their earlier physical development.

As I said before, "*Bat Mitzvah*" means "Daughter of Commandment." There is no article of grammar in "*Bat Mitzvah*," so it doesn't mean "Daughter of **the** Commandment"; it means

"Daughter of **all** the Commandments of God." The common Jewish understanding is that the *Bat Mitzvah* is responsible for keeping all 613 Commandments of the *Torah*. But how can that be? Some of the Commandments are directed to men. But you are not a man. Some of the Commandments are directed to priests. But you are not a priest. Some of the Commandments are directed exclusively to Jews. But you are not a Jew. So why then are you voluntarily taking on the responsibility of a *Bat Mitzvah*?

Well, as I often do, I will endeavor to answer my own questions. Even had you lived during the time of Moses, you could not have kept all of the Commandments given through him because, as I have already pointed out, some of them were meant to be kept by only certain persons. Had you, for example, attempted to perform a commandment intended for a priest and you were not a priest, you would have committed sin. The matter is even more complex today because no one can comply with the numerous Commandments that require sacrifice; there is no Temple in which to sacrifice. So the concept of anyone today having to keep all 613 Commandments cannot mean keeping them literally. You are, of course, to keep those Commandments literally that apply to you literally, but you are to do more than that, because 2 Timothy 3:16-17 instructs us that:

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God [in your case the woman] may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Since all of the Commandments of *Torah* are also Scripture, even those that you cannot keep literally have relevance, so you have to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal their relevance to you. But not only the Commandments of "the *Torah*" meaning the first five books of the Bible. The word "*Torah*" broadly means "teaching," and God's teachings, expressed as Commandments, are found in many places the Bible, including in the New Testament. These you are required to comply with as well – of course, with the interpretive assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Now what about you're voluntarily taking on the responsibility of being a *Bat Mitzvah*? One way or another, God's Commandments are for everyone but, it is true, that some of them are specifically commanded to Jews. So what about you? You Gabriela, and each of your family members, are who we call *K'rov Yisrael*, or "Family of Israel that have drawn close." Throughout the Scriptures, we read about *gerim* – sojourners among the Israelites who lived among and shared their lives with the Jewish people. They were even among the Israelites at Mt. Sinai when the *Torah* was given, for we read in Deuteronomy 29:9-12:

"Therefore keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. All of you stand today before the LORD your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives – also the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water – that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath, which the LORD your God makes with you today, .."

You notice that all those who stood before the Lord at Mt. Sinai, including the *gerim*, were exhorted to keep the words of His Covenant, and the Scripture might even be interpreted as their

having been invited to enter into His covenant as proselytes. That discussion is for another day but, for now, suffice it to say that you and your family are among those who have "drawn close to Israel," as Ruth of the Bible did when she spoke those famous words to her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi:

"Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me." (Ruth 1:16-17).

Gabriela, you have taken upon yourself the same responsibility as Ruth – of living among the Jewish people, and walking in the same Covenants that God made with Israel; and you have also taken upon yourself the responsibility of helping your Jewish brothers and sisters to do the same.

In Romans 3:1-2, the Apostle Paul spoke of a particular Jewish responsibility when he said:

"What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God."

Gabriela, you as a *K'rov Yisrael Bat Mitzvah* share in this responsibility for the oracles of God which, we understand to mean, God's Commandments. Not only are you to keep the Commandments that apply to you personally, but you are charged with preserving all of God's Commandments, and passing them on to others. Each time you pray the *Sh'ma* (traditionally several times a day) you are being reminded of this responsibility, for the words of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 say:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Gabriela, although you are not ready to marry and have children, you can comply with parts of the *Sh'ma* right now, beginning with loving "*the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*" That is the part of the *Sh'ma* that Yeshua quoted when he was asked: "*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?*" And He added a second commandment that He said was like it: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

And He also said:

"On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:36-40).

Now, that is a profound statement that should speak to every *Bat Mitzvah*, because it ties God's commandments to loving Him and to loving our fellow man. It is a statement that tells us that

merely doing what a Commandment says to do is not good enough. It tells us that our motive counts, and that whatever actions we take in response to God's Law must be based on love. We read something similar in

1 John 4:19, which says:

"...let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

So, Gabriela, the very first commandment of Jewish Law with which a *Bat Mitzvah* must come to terms, is to love God with all her heart, soul and strength. And related to it is God's second most important commandment, that she must love others as well. If you keep these two commandments solidly in front of you, you will have the rest of what you need to fulfill the responsibilities of a *Bat Mitzvah*, to be a blessing to your family, and to be a light to those around you.

My prayer for you, Gabriela, is this:

"God, in the Name of Yeshua, I ask that you grant Gabriela long life, health, happiness, a godly and loving husband in her future, dutiful children, and Your peace that surpasses all understanding. Guard her heart and mind in Messiah her entire life."

Amen.