



Jewish
Women's
Archive 

Did Bubbe Have a Bat Mitzvah?

UNLOCKING THE POWER OF FAMILY STORIES

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WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Jews have always been storytellers. But there is a difference between the past, comprised of our collective memories, and what we call “history,” which is the record that people (mostly those in positions of power) have created, preserved, and transmitted. Oral history takes place in between these two categories. Collected in deliberate, one-on-one interviews, oral history allows people to participate in the making of history that reflects the individual experiences that are often forgotten or absent from the historical record. Oral history informs the history we learn in school and has the power to expand and change our understanding of past events. In addition, oral history infuses dates, timelines, photographs, and other historical information with names, faces, and first-person accounts that connect us to generations past.

WHY ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history expands our records of the past and allows us to see a more complete picture of our world. Oral history also brings two people—narrator and interviewer—together in a participatory experience. While the interviewer decides which questions will be asked, the narrator shapes the questions; “she simultaneously reinterprets as well as remembers the past.” This back and forth generates new relationships and a deeper understanding in both participants. *For more on oral history, please read the Oral History Primer in this packet or In Our Own Voices, edited by Jayne K. Guberman and available at <http://jwa.org/stories/how-to/guide>.*

Additionally, learning from the lives of older relatives improves the kind of emotional health young people will call upon more and more as they grow through their adolescence. In a recent interview, Bruce Feiler, author of *The Secrets of Happy Families*, cited a study at Emory University that connected the sharing of family stories with an increased ability for young people to problem solve and develop coping mechanisms in difficult situations. In other words, the more young people know about their families and the individual experiences of their relatives, the better they can understand and navigate the twists and turns of growing up. By bringing oral history into the Jewish coming-of-age experience, we not only transmit rituals and traditions, but also important life skills that young Jews can carry into adulthood. (You can read the article here: <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/17/171929472/control-the-chaos-with-secrets-of-happy-families>)

HOW CAN ORAL HISTORY IMPACT JEWISH COMING OF AGE?

Young people are no strangers to storytelling, nor to the sharing of memories in a family context. But how often do teens and tweens sit down with an older relative like a parent, aunt, or grandparent, and ask questions crafted from their own interests and curiosity? In an oral history interview, the interviewer gets to “set the agenda” so to speak, giving him or her the opportunity to think and ask about what he or she feels is most important to know. It also provides us “grown-ups” the chance to honor our interviewees with honest, personal answers. This creates a sense of empowerment and involvement within young people, as they become real participants in conversations about their heritage.

The stories and anecdotes gleaned in oral history interviews make up the “book” of memories that families will pass down to the next generation. In an age where families are often separated by long distances, oral history can maximize times of togetherness to facilitate lasting memories—not just of time spent visiting, but also of conversations and stories that relate to family struggles, celebrations, and traditions. These moments also help younger family members to see themselves on a continuum of history—as members of a family and of a larger community.

What happens on the *bima* during a bar or bat mitzvah is certainly important and momentous, but the close of the ceremony marks more than the end of a process toward a singular goal. It also marks the beginning of a new process, in which the conversations young Jews have with their elders serve as the basis for the exploration of what it means to be a part of the Jewish community beyond the classroom or synagogue. Oral history projects and interviews foster an exploration of history, values, and experiences that encourage young Jews to see themselves in a new way—as members of a Tribe and actors on a continuum of Jewish life. It’s up to us to share how we have struggled (and still struggle) to understand our place in the community, and to help the next generation of Jews discover for themselves what becoming a Jewish adult is all about. Using interviews as a catalyst, adults set a clear expectation: We want to tell our stories, and we want to know yours, too.

ORAL HISTORY PRIMER: A Brief Overview

Oral history is the collection of stories and historical information from people and events through planned interviews. Often, these interviews are documented with video or audio recordings, or through transcriptions. Each individual's story will relate to historical events and characters, but will include the subjective opinions and experience of the narrator (the person telling the story/being interviewed).

While oral history interviews are often conducted by historians and preserved in archives and libraries, these interviews can also be done within families in order to collect family history. They provide a unique learning opportunity and a launch pad for intergenerational conversations.

VOCABULARY:

- The **narrator** is the person who is being interviewed because they are telling their story. The narrator answers the questions in a way that is comfortable—the narrator does not have to share anything that he or she doesn't wish to tell or talk about.
- The **interviewer** is the person asking the questions. The interviewer should focus on listening actively—this is not the time to give advice or encouragement or critique. Instead, listen closely and encourage your narrator nonverbally (smile, nod, etc.), and when appropriate, ask clarifying questions.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

Here are a few things to remember while you are conducting the interview.

Do

- Start with easy questions about basic biographical information to help your narrator feel comfortable. Leave more difficult questions until later, when you have established a connection with your narrator, and he/she has become more comfortable speaking honestly with you.
- Follow up with additional questions that encourage your narrator to say more about her experience. If you are interested in hearing more about something he/she shares, just ask.
- Even though it is hard to wait, do allow long pauses or silences. Sometimes it takes a moment for the narrator to collect her thoughts.
- Do keep the focus on your narrator's story—try not to share your own experiences or feelings.

Don't

- Don't interrupt your narrator while she is in the middle of a story. Instead write other questions down so you can ask them later.
- Don't ask leading questions that make assumptions about what your narrator thinks or feels. Instead ask open questions to understand how he/she feels.
- Don't express encouragement with phrases like "uh huh" or "oh, wow," because they can interrupt the narration. Instead show your appreciation or understanding through eye contact, facial expressions, and other non-verbal signs.

Interview Location and Time

- Conduct the interview at a time and place that are convenient for your narrator. The more comfortable the narrator feels, the more likely she will relax and enjoy the experience.
- Make sure that there is as little noise as possible. The sound of ringing phones, barking dogs, fans, air conditioners, refrigerators, or other electronic equipment can create background noise that will disrupt the interview.
- If possible, arrange the interview so that as few people as possible are present. The presence of others will change how the narrator answers some questions or how comfortable she feels sharing certain stories.
- Limit interview sessions to no more than one and a half to two hours. It may be tiring for the narrator to remember so much and to talk for such a long time. You can always do several short interviews instead of one long one.

HOW TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Two Kinds of Questions

Oral historians ask two kinds of questions when they are conducting interviews—closed questions and open questions.

1. Closed questions are important for finding out short pieces of factual information. Questions about dates, names, etc. are essential but they don't make for very rich or exciting stories. Examples of closed questions include:
 - What year were you born?
 - What were your parents' names?
 - When did your family come to this country?
 - What high school did you attend?
2. Open questions, on the other hand, allow you to draw out your narrator's memories, opinions, and points of view. These questions make the narrator's story interesting and fun. Open questions often begin with:
 - Why?
 - Can you describe...?
 - Tell me about...

- What was that like?
- How did you feel when...?
- What were your expectations about...?
- What challenges did you face when...?

The One-Two Punch Method

In order to record a well-balanced oral history, try using the one-two punch method. First you ask a closed question to learn a fact or get a specific answer. Then follow with an open-ended question to allow the narrator to say more about his/her response.

Here are some examples of pairs of closed questions and open-ended questions:

Closed: What was your mother's name?

Open-ended: Describe your relationship with your mother when you were growing up.

Closed: When did you move to the new house?

Open-ended: How did you feel about moving to a new house and a new neighborhood?

Closed: When did you graduate from medical school?

Open-ended: What it was like being one of only three women in your medical school class?

Once you come up with a list of questions, put them in an order that makes sense to you. Are there some things that you need to know before you can ask about others? Decide which questions are more important or interesting to you and make sure you put them at the top of the list in case you run out of time.

FURTHER READING

For more resources on formulating questions, recording interviews, and collecting family history, see the Oral History Resource List included in this packet.

SELECTED FAMILY AND ORAL HISTORY RESOURCES

Research and Collection

- **JewishGen**—online Jewish genealogy resources affiliated with the Museum of Jewish Heritage.
<http://www.jewishgen.org/>
- **Ancestry.com Jewish Family History Collection**—the world’s largest online collection of Jewish historical records formed through a partnership between JewishGen, the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the American Jewish Historical Society, and The Miriam Weiner Routes to Roots Foundation, Inc.
<http://www.ancestry.com/jewishgen-all>
- **Preserving Family Papers**—tips for preserving historical documents collected in your family and links to additional resources for preserving documents and family papers for the future.
<http://jwa.org/stories/how-to/preservation>

Oral History How-To

- **In Our Own Voices**—a guide to conducting life history interviews with American Jewish women, edited by oral historian Jayne K. Guberman. Full PDF of book available.
<http://jwa.org/stories/how-to/guide>
- **20 Questions to Ask the Important Women in Your Life**—a list of 20 questions to use as conversation starters.
<http://jwa.org/stories/how-to/20questions>
- **Family History Tool Kit**—an adaptation of JWA’s adult oral history guide, the tool kit walks young women (and parents) step-by-step through the process of conducting an oral history interview. Designed specifically for girls as part of *MyBatMitzvahStory.org*.
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/familyhistorytoolkit>

more resources on the next page

Educational Resources

- **Taking Risks, Making Change: Bat Mitzvah and Other Evolving Traditions**—one of JWA’s Go & Learn lessons featuring three age-appropriate activity guides (for teens, family education, and adults) about the history and changing tradition of bat mitzvah. Includes an oral history activity about coming of age.
<http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/mar09/>
- **Interview Guide for B’nai Mitzvah Tutors (or Parents) and Students**—an interview protocol for opening up the conversation about bar or bat mitzvah between young Jews and the adults who support them.
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/system/files/Interview%20questions%20for%20tutors%20and%20students.pdf>
- **Museum of Family History Lesson Plan**—walks educators (or parents) through the process of doing a family history project. Includes different ideas for extending the activity or using different themes as a focus of study.
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/content/museum-family-history>
- **Our Heroes Lesson Plan**—using the Internet, oral history, and other research outlets, this lesson helps students explore what it means to be a role model and learn more about the people they look up to.
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/content/our-heroes>

Suggestions?

If you have suggestions of additional resources for doing family history projects and oral history with young people, please contact us by calling 617-383-6763 or emailing education@jwa.org.

Tell your story

The practice of bat/bar mitzvah varies widely from community to community, family to family, and even from one generation to the next. Conducting these short interviews will give you a chance to learn about one another's coming-of-age experiences and explore the "state of bat/bar mitzvah" in the United States more closely.

VOCABULARY:

- The **narrator** is the person who is being interviewed because they are telling their story. The narrator answers the questions in a way that is comfortable—the narrator does not have to share anything that he or she doesn't wish to tell or talk about.
- The **interviewer** is the person asking the questions. The interviewer should focus on listening actively—this is not the time to give advice or encouragement or critique. Instead, listen closely and encourage your narrator nonverbally (smile, nod, etc.), and when appropriate, ask clarifying questions.
- Traditionally, a **bat/bar mitzvah** recognizes a Jewish girl's or boy's entrance to adulthood. Each individual and community observes and celebrates this moment differently, and in some cases at a different time (such as adulthood). Other Jews do not recognize their coming-of-age in a Jewish context and instead may remember or recognize a different event, experience, or celebration as a significant milestone of religious, spiritual, or personal growth.

DIRECTIONS

I. Take a few minutes to interview your partner about their coming-of-age experience. Not everyone has a bat or bar mitzvah, and those that do don't always have them as teenagers. Use the question set that best fits the experience of your narrator. You are not limited to the questions here, but they may be helpful to use as a guide.

PART ONE

First ask: Did you have a bat/bar mitzvah?

*If yes go to the next question. If no, go to **Question Set C.***

Then ask: Did you have a bat/bar when you were 12/13?

*If yes, go to **Question Set A.** If no, go to **Question Set B.***

These questions were adapted from the [Jewish Women's Archive's](http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/march09) lesson "Taking Risks, Making Change: Bat Mitzvah and Other Evolving Traditions." The complete lesson is free, online at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/march09>. © 2013

Question Set A: Yes, a teenage bat/bar mitzvah

- What do you remember most about how you felt that day? About preparing for your bat/bar mitzvah?
- What bat/bar mitzvah customs or traditions were most meaningful for you?
- What customs or traditions did you not like?
- Were you involved in any new ritual practices in your community, e.g. the first girl to wear a *tallit*?
- How, if at all, was your bat/bar mitzvah different from others' b'nai mitzvah at the time? (Think about when it was [e.g. Friday night vs. Saturday morning], whether you read from the Torah, or any special traditions you added, was it different for boys and girls?) If gender did play a role, did that bother you? Why or why not?
- What advice do you have for young people who are becoming bat/bar mitzvah today?
- Why do you think Jewish tradition considers that young people become adults at the age of 12 or 13? Why is this different from other milestones (for example, learning to drive)? Do you feel like you have more responsibilities now than you did a few years ago? What are they?
- What makes you "feel Jewish"? What do you like about being Jewish? Is it ever hard for you to be Jewish? Why or why not?

Question Set B: Yes, adult bat/bar mitzvah

- How did you come to have a bat/bar mitzvah as an adult? Why did you choose to go through this ritual after the traditional age?
- What do you remember most about how you felt that day? About preparing for your bat/bar mitzvah?
- What bat/bar mitzvah customs or traditions were most meaningful for you?
- What customs or traditions did you not like?
- Were you involved in any new ritual practices in your community, e.g. the first woman to wear a *tallit*?
- How, if at all, was your bat/bar mitzvah different from other adult b'nai mitzvah celebrations you have observed? Were there gender differences or differences in ritual based on age? If gender or age did play a role, did that bother you? Why or why not?
- What advice do you have for other adults who are becoming bat/bar mitzvah today?
- Why do you think Jewish tradition considers that young people become adults at the age of 12 or 13? Why is this different from other milestones (for example, learning to drive)? Do you feel like you have more responsibilities now than you did a few years ago? What are they?
- What makes you "feel Jewish"? What do you like about being Jewish? Is it ever hard for you to be Jewish? Why or why not?

Question Set C: No, haven't had a bat/bar mitzvah

- As a young adult, were you aware of *not* having a bat/bar mitzvah?
- If you were aware, what was that experience like? Did you want to have a bat/bar mitzvah? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about it now?
- Why didn't you have a bat/bar mitzvah? (Possibilities might include: I didn't grow up Jewish; my family didn't belong to a synagogue; girls did not have bat mitzvah ceremonies in my community; I didn't want to have one; it wasn't even something we thought about.)
- Is there an important Jewish experience in your life that you would like to share? Tell me a story that can help me learn more about you.
- Why do you think Jewish tradition considers that young people become adults at the age of 12 or 13? Why is this different from other milestones (for example, learning to drive)? Do you feel like you have more responsibilities now than you did a few years ago? What are they?
- What makes you "feel Jewish"? What do you like about being Jewish? Is it ever hard for you to be Jewish? Why or why not?

PART TWO

Now, find a different partner. Use the following questions to reflect on the experience for a few minutes with your partner.

Questions for after the interview:

- What was it like to tell your story?
- What was it like to be the interviewer/listener? What did you learn that surprised you?
- How, if at all, did learning about your partner's coming-of-age experiences change the way you think about bat/bar mitzvah?
- Is there anything "universal" about coming of age in a Jewish context? If yes, what? If no, why not?