

# Simchas



Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, Florence Prisant (left), Peggy Posnick, Gail Greenfield, Rachelle Bitterman and Karen Stiller

## South Georgia Shul Marks First Adult Bat Mitzvah

By **RABBI DANA EVAN KAPLAN**  
Special to the Jewish Times

On May 30 and 31, Temple B'nai Israel in Albany held its first adult bat mitzvah ceremony in the 133 years that the congregation has existed. The entire ceremony was incredibly emotional. Not only some of the bat mitzvot, but also many of the worshipers were moved to tears. Several congregants remarked that it was one of the most moving religious ceremonies that they had ever seen in their years of involvement with the synagogue.

In traditional Judaism, the milestone of reaching adulthood was marked in the synagogue for only the male at age 13. While females were frequently seen as reaching the age of religious responsibility at age 12, they did not have a religious ceremony in the synagogue to mark the occasion. This changed in 1922 when Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan arranged for a bat mitzvah ceremony for his daughter Judith. Even so, it wasn't really until the 1950s that the ceremony started catching on.

In classical Reform, congregations such as Temple B'nai Israel held neither bat mitzvahs nor bar mitzvahs. The justification was that both ceremonies overly emphasized Hebrew, a language that was seen as being foreign to Jews who were trying to assimilate.

Instead, classical Reform congregations held confirmation services, which was a group event held at approximately age 16. But, bar mitzvahs have made a comeback in the Reform movement nationwide, and bat mitzvahs have followed.

Today in Albany, a small majority of

the Jewish children raised in the temple have had a bar or bat mitzvah and all go on to confirmation. But if younger women are offered the opportunity to express their interest and commitment to their faith, older women (and many men as well), never had the opportunity, which is why the b'not mitzvah ceremony held in late May was such a historic event.

Five women — Florence Prisant, Peggy Posnick, Gail Greenfield, Rachelle Bitterman and Karen Stiller — were to be “bat mitzvahed.” Not only are they from very different backgrounds and have very different interests, but they also range widely in ages — from their 40s up to their early 80s. They led services in Hebrew and English, gave sermons, and read from the Torahs. To do this, they had to engage in a two-year study program that included weekly Torah study, discussions, Hebrew language instruction, community service and much more.

These five women are also helping to change how the congregation looks at various rituals. For example, the tallit was traditionally not worn in a Reform temple. All five women decided to wear a tallit, which is a double revolutionary change since when synagogue-goers did wear a tallit, it was only the men.

The bat mitzvah was historic because it marks the transformation of what was once a classical Reform temple in which no one participated into a modern Reform congregation that is involved with many cutting-edge programs and is committed to the implementation of new approaches to Jewish religious life that are consistent with and appropriate for the modern day. ■

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