

Excerpt from, The Jewish Calendar,
by Michael Strassfeld



The First Bat Mitzvah

When Mira Fink was planning her bat mitzvah at Temple Sinai, Amherst, N.Y., in 1977, she wrote to Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, who had become the first bat mitzvah in 1922. Ms. Eisenstein replied:

Dear Mira,

You ask about the occasion of my becoming bat mitzvah. I don't think you realize how much more you will be doing as part of your ceremony than I did. You see, back in 1922—on the actual day of my birthday (. . . September 10!)—my father [Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan] was in the process of organizing a new synagogue, The Society for the Advancement of Judaism, where he hoped to be free to carry out the ideas he had developed about Jewishness—one of which was to introduce equality for women in Jewish life and Jewish worship. . . . But I didn't have much time to prepare. . . . The Friday night before the service my father decided what I was to do. I was to recite the blessings, read a portion of the Torah sidra (not the Haftarah!) in Hebrew and in English, and conclude with the blessing—and that was it. I went over it and father corrected my diction (I could, after all, read Hebrew!), and the next morning I was up there. And that was enough to shock a lot of people, including my own grandparents and aunts and uncles.

It must be hard for you to imagine how strange all this was, all those years ago. Now so many girls take it all for granted. But it was only the beginning. . . . I hope that by the time you are ready to go on a synagogue board, the woman rabbi and the woman hazzan will be taken as much for granted as the bat mitzvah is now.

Dr. Eisenstein died on 2/16/96 at the age of 87. She was a musicologist and a composer of Jewish music.



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