

# **Bat Mitzvah D'var Torah**

**By: Alisa Bressler**

Thank you all for coming today to celebrate this special day with me. There are many things that make this day special. Today is not just another Sunday night, it is my Bat Mitzvah. Becoming a bat mitzvah means literally becoming a daughter of mitzvot. In other words, a person of responsibility in the 613 areas of mitzvot; honoring parents, tzedakah, fasting on Yom Kippur, to name a few. This new responsibility means that I am taking on the ownership to watch over my own actions and accepting the consequences that come with that.

In preparation for this great responsibility, I studied Pirkei Avot with Rabbi Rosenblatt, and Rivka-Leah Kamen. It was an amazing experience and I learned so much. For those of you who are wondering, Pirkei Avot is Ethics of the Fathers. It is a collection of wise teachings. One of the teachings of Pirke Avot is Ezechu Chacham Ha Lomed mi kol adam. Who is wise, the person who learns from everyone. This was a great opportunity to do exactly that.

The other benefit of Pirke Avot is that it emphasizes the need to constantly study Torah, not just leading up to your Bat Mitzvah. It was good reminder that this has been the start of the process, not the end.

Pirkei Avot has so many brilliant ideas to teach us. For my Bat Mitzvah, I choose to speak about friendship. Friendship is a topic that all of us discuss a lot. Whether its having class discussions or telling your friends about how nice or mean somebody was to you, this topic comes up a lot.

How would you define a friend?

I know what you're all thinking, someone who's always there for you and always by your side. Though that is true, lets look at the English definition of a friend and the Jewish definition.

Oxford's dictionary defines friendship as:

- 1) A person with whom one enjoys mutual affection and regard
- 2) A sympathizer
- 3) A person who is an ally or at least not an enemy

#### 4) A person known casually

Now that we know the English definition, let's compare that to the Jewish definition of a friend.

The Jewish definition is a little different, after studying Pirke Avot, I would say that the Jewish definition of friend is none of the above. Instead it is somebody who makes you a better person. For example the Mishna in Pirke Avot teaches that we must all “קנה לך חבֵר” acquire for yourself a friend. The Rambam explains that the term acquire a friend is related to the three levels of friendship. Rambam says that there are 3 levels to friendship: on the lowest level is a useful friend, such as the Chef at Maple grill who sends you a free desert and in return you come back to the restaurant again. You get dessert, he gets a loyal customer and you are each useful to the other. On the second level is an enjoyment friend, for example, people that make you laugh or to whom you can tell all your problems. For most of us this would seem to be the highest level, what more could I want than a friend who makes laugh and has patience to listen to me when I cry?

But Rambam places one kind of friend even higher. That is someone who makes you a better person. But friendship is a 2-way street, if your friend makes you better, you have to make your friend better. That is the meaning of acquire a friend, you have to acquire them with your effort to become and to make them better people. In other words, you need to work to deserve your friends.

This concept of two friends making each other better people is demonstrated in the story recorded in the Talmud of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish. Resh Lakish always pushed Rabbi Yochanan to be a better person, and Rabbi Yochanan responded to this. Let me tell you their story. At the beginning of the story Resh Lakish is a famous thief and outlaw. When Rabbi Yochanan found him he was drowning in the river and Rabbi Yochanan rescued Resh Lakish. After the near drowning incident, Rabbi Yochanan nursed Resh Lakish back to health and made him stronger through the teaching of Torah. Resh Lakish became a student of Rabbi Yochanan, and as he studied he grew stronger and stronger, and smarter and smarter. He was a brilliant student that he advanced to become a Rabbi and was the personal study partner of Rabbi Yochanan. Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish studied together for years and anyone who studies Talmud knows of their many debates. Resh Lakish was famous for always giving Rabbi Yochanan many reasons why his view of the law was incorrect. This forced Rabbi Yochanan to study harder and to sharpen his Torah. One day, they were having an argument over a Halachah issue related to when a blade is finished in a blacksmith shop. This question is related to the laws of purity and impurity, a knife can only become impure when its manufacture and is completely finished. If it becomes impure

then it could transfer impurity to the bread of a Cohen for example, and disqualify him from working in the Temple.

Again, The two rabbis were having a debate on the subject of what is the final step in the manufacture of a blade, Rabbi Yochanan says that it is ready when its cooled off, and Resh Lakish said that its ready when it's plunged into the water which makes it look sharp. Resh Lakish had expertise in this because he knew that highway robbers preferred sharp looking blades so as to appear more threatening to their victims. That is when Rabbi Yochanan said to Resh Lakish "a thief knows his craft". This suggested that Resh Lakish was only able to declare the more correct answer in his area of expertise which was being a thief, but not because he was also a great Torah scholar. Their friendship could not survive this fight, and the two never spoke again. From that moment on they were no longer partners. In his loneliness, Resh Lakish got sick, very sick. Unfortunately, that was the death of Resh Lakish. Rabbi Yochanan was very upset. Meanwhile, his new partner was not the same as Resh Lakish. He only told him that he was right all the time, and never pushed Rabbi Yochanan to sharpen his theories or to be the best he could be. Rabbi Yochanan cried out to Resh Lakish, "where are you, son of Lakish, where are you?" Sadly, Rabbi Yochanan died at this point. They both realized, unfortunately too late, that a friend who pushes or challenges you is the best friend you could have. This means that those people who push you to be a better person, are actually better friends. They are the people who have "bought" the right to be a good friend. Each one made the other better.

Now, think of one of your closest friends, and think of how you treat them and how they treat you. Do they push you to be the best you can be? Do you push them? As I mentioned earlier, the Jewish definition of a friend is someone who pushes you to be the best person you can possibly be. To me, that is a very important quality in a friend. So far we have talked about many different kind of friendship. It is really interesting to touch upon all of these different levels. Most of us consider all of our friends on the same level, but my goal here is to help you think about friendship in a different prospective. Hopefully this next Mishna will illustrate this a bit more.

בן זומא אומר

איזהו מכובד? המכבד את הבריות.....

*"Who is honored the person who honors others."*

Let me modernize this for you. This is Pirke Avot's version of how to be popular in one simple step. And actually it works alot better than those internet adds to change your life in one step.

This mishnah explains the quality that a popular person might have. The word honor and the word popular have a very similar meaning, Honor is respect and popularity is

also respect. Without the mishna we might have thought that being popular was about being smart, strong, beautiful, rich etc. The key to being honored by other people is in doing the exact opposite, honor them. If you want honor, you must honor other people.

If someone new came in to the class, she would of course want to be popular and liked by the other kids in the class. The most affective way to do that is to give everyone else honor and be interested in their lives. Instead of bragging about her summer in Paris, she could ask you about the summer experience of others and really be interested in it. If she gives honor, honor will come back to her. The Talmud also says that if you run after honor, honor will run away from you. In other words, if you chase after popularity by poking fun at other people, or puffing yourself up as super important, it won't help. It will only backfire towards you. On the other hand if you do everything you can to make them feel valued, you will quickly find yourself the best friend of so many in the class.

Of course in order to feel secure enough to honor others you need to figure out how to have that strength and confidence to do that. This next mishna discusses that.

### Chapter 3, of Perkei Avos

רבי עקיבא אומר:

חביב אדם שנברא בצלם. חיבה יתרה נודעת לו שנברא בצלם, שנאמר (בראשית ט), כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם.

*Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God. It indicates a greater love that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God, as it is said, "For in the image of God did He make man" (Genesis 9:6).*

I find this verse quite inspirational, simply because it talks about how all humans are created in GD's image, and we are all special. Sometimes, your friends or the people you are not friends with can make you feel weird. They make you feel like you don't belong. But we are all created in the image of GD, so we are all special, and we are all worth something. In fact Ben Azai says that the most important principle of the Torah is that a person is created in the image of Hashem. Why is that more important than Shma, or Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Let me draw a comparison.

How would you treat a Sefer Torah? With respect. Why? Because it contains the words of GD. Well, if we give the Sefer Torah respect because it contains the words of GD, shouldn't we give the same respect to everything else that is created in the image GD?

There is a story from the Talmud that teaches this very point.

Once there was a Rabbi traveling to a town, he had just finished studying a very hard lesson and was feeling very accomplished. He saw a man. He was quite ugly, in fact even for ugly people he was extra ugly. The Rabbi stops and says, are all the people in your town as ugly as you. The man takes a breath and replies, I'm ugly? Okay, maybe I am truly ugly, but please go tell the One who made me that He made a mistake and made me Ugly. The Rabbi then realizes that he has sinned, and apologizes to the man.

On the topic of how to be a friend and how to make yourself a better friend, Pirke Avot has something very important to teach us.

#### Chapter 5 Mishnah 11

*11. There are four types of temperaments. One who is easily angered and easily appeased--his virtue cancels his flaw. One whom it is difficult to anger and difficult to appease--his flaw cancels his virtue. One whom it is difficult to anger and is easily appeased, is a chassid. One who is easily angered and is difficult to appease, is wicked.*

I think this mishna gives us a few questions to think about. The kinds of questions that help us to become better friends such as, "Am I easily angered? Am I an easy going friend? Do I forgive people as quickly as I would like to be forgiven? Sometimes we tend on to hold on to our anger a little longer than we would appreciate if the tables were turned. It is important to look in the mirror about your own behaviors and this Mishana gives us the right questions to ask to look into that mirror.

I plan on looking into that mirror for days to come.

Today, I have become a woman. Today, I am realizing that it is my responsibility to be a good person and friend. After months of studying, I am confident to say that I am prepared.