

## Italy's Five Books of Miriam

*Rabbi Barbara Aiello, the first woman rabbi in Italy, celebrates five young women whose Bat Mitzvah ceremonies reclaim Torah as their own*



*Dina bat Miriam v'Julio, Camila Sobral reads from the Torah scroll, the first Bat Mitzvah in Italy to do so - July 19, 2005. Camila's D'Var Torah was unique in that, in typical "Miriam" style, she played a cello composition which featured Miriam as our first prophet.*



*Tzipa bat Chana v'Zalman - Charis Freiman-Mendel is the first Bat Mitzvah in Calabria, June 12, 2010. "When I was little I always looked up at the clouds and picked ones that represented my grandparents. The clouds in the sky right now make me feel like my grandparents are here with us, and I would like to dedicate this service to them."*

Given the scope of Jewish history with all of its ancient traditions, it wasn't all that long ago, that Judaism celebrated the first girl in modern times to become a Bat Mitzvah. It happened in America in 1922 when Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, arranged for his daughter, Judith to become a Bat Mitzvah in a public synagogue ceremony.

Today we make the assumption that the Bat Mitzvah moment actually happens when the young girl reads from the Torah scroll – an entirely logical belief especially since these days the girls assist the rabbi on the bima, lead prayers and blessings and read Torah, just as the boys have always done. But for Judith Kaplan, our first American Bat Mitzvah, that wasn't the case. Instead history records that young Judith did not receive a full "aliyah" which means that she did not make the blessings over the Torah reading or read directly from the scroll itself. And although her experience represented a monumental change in what had been described as patriarchal Judaism, Judith's Bat Mitzvah ceremony is described as "a much diminished version of what the boys did."

In fact we now understand that the first American Bat Mitzvah resembled what Jewish girls in Italy had done for centuries. Back in the 1600's girls stood before the open ark, recited a special prayer, received the rabbi's blessing and then adjourned for the "Sedukat Mitzvah," the celebratory meal held in the girl's home. Some suggest that Rabbi Kaplan actually may have studied this ancient Italian ceremony and adapted it for his daughter's rite.

So, who knew? The Bat Mitzvah ceremony has its roots in early 17th century Italy, which makes it entirely appropriate that as Jewish rituals evolve and change, five young women should become the very first in Italy to advance the ancient Bat Mitzvah tradition and read directly from the Sefer Torah.

Because Miriam is the very first individual in the Torah to be called a prophet, Rabbi Barbara Aiello celebrates this feminist achievement by referring to her first five B'not Mitzvah as Italy's symbolic "*Five Books of Miriam.*"

When I read Dr. Ellen Frankel's wonderful book (The Five Books of Miriam, Putnam, 1966) which represents the first Torah commentary from a woman's point of view, I was encouraged. "Frankel's book has done much to advance the conversation between Jewish women and their Jewish traditions and these five young girls are Italy's contribution to this important process," Rabbi Barbara says.

# rabbi barbara

Rabbi Barbara Aiello



*Leah bat Miriam v'Julio – Leila Sobral, Camilla's sister, becomes Bat Mitzvah in Rome on May 22, 2010. "The verses I read from the Torah are the words of this very important blessing. It is the blessing for the family. I chose these verses because family is so important to me."*



*Savanah bat Chaya v'Dan – Samantha Goldstein becomes the fourth girl in Italian Jewish history to read from the Torah scroll as she is called to the Torah in Calabria on June 11, 2011. "Part of becoming a Bat Mitzvah is learning how to think about the world and my place in it as a Jewish woman."*

It all began with Dina bat Miriam v' Julio, Camila Sobral. Camila lives in Rome with her parents and two sisters and recalls the happy celebration when her older sister became Bat Mitzvah in Los Angeles, California. Camila remembered how her sister read from the Torah scroll and how much she looked forward to having the same experience. When her parents took her to Tempio Maggiore, The Great Synagogue, in Rome, an orthodox Synagogue, as are all the synagogues throughout Italy, Camila witnessed something entirely different from what she was expecting. "The girl came up to the bima," says Camila, "but she didn't read from the scroll. Instead an older brother read from the Torah in her honor." Camila's mom recalls her daughter's exact words that morning. "I'm not doing that!" - a statement that initiated the Sobral's journey to create the egalitarian ceremony that, to mother and daughter, only seemed right.

On July 19, 2005, at a ceremony attended by friends and family from New York, Los Angeles, Brazil, Poland and Israel, Camila Sobral became the first girl in Italian history to be called to the Torah, to touch the Torah and to read directly from the Torah scroll.

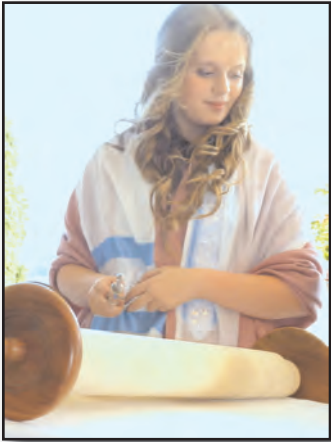
In June of 2010 Charis Frieman-Mendel travelled with her family to Calabria, in the "toe" of the Italian "boot", to Synagogue Ner Tamid del Sud, the first active synagogue in Calabria in 500 years since Inquisition times. There she became Italy's second Bat Mitzvah in the modern tradition and the first girl in Calabria's history to follow in Camila's footsteps and read directly from the Torah scroll.

Leila Sobral, Camila's younger sister, became Bat Mitzvah number three. Again in Rome and following her older sister's lead, Leila studied with Rabbi Barbara long distance via the SKYPE internet video telephone. On May 22, 2010 Leila carried the Torah in procession (hakafah) through a crowd of more than one hundred friends and family and then opened the sacred scroll to read verses from Parasha Naso.

Samantha Goldstein's ceremony in the Calabria synagogue opened book number four of the "Five Books of Miriam". Samantha, her parents, brothers and grandparents traveled from Florida to the deep south of Italy to experience Shabbat Italian style. Making kiddush under the ancient grape arbor, complete with local wine and hand made challah, offered Samantha and her family an opportunity to experience Judaism in an isolated mountain community founded centuries ago by "anousim" Jews escaping persecution.

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*Aliza bat Ariel v'Yehuda –  
Louisa Auerbach's Bat Mitzvah  
ceremony on June 18, 2011  
marked the first time in  
Tuscany that a girl read  
directly from the Torah.  
"The Torah helps us  
understand that our actions  
have consequences, not only  
for us, but for all the  
generations that follow."*

Then, June 18 2011 marked a first for Tuscany when Louisa Auerbach became the fifth girl in all of Italy and the first girl in Tuscany to become a Torah-reading Bat Mitzvah. Known in Hebrew as Aliza bat Ariel v' Yehuda, Louisa shares her Hebrew name with author Aliza Lavie whose landmark siddur, "A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book," has been translated into Italian and is used today in Italy. The book details the trials, challenges and joys of Jewish women throughout the centuries and the texts reflect an alternative model, based in the feminine experience. With Louisa's ceremony The Five Books of Miriam are complete.

In "*The Women's Torah Commentary*," Rabbi Sue Levi Ewell writes, 'Contemporary Jews have begun to reclaim Miriam as a model for biblical leadership. As (we) break Miriam's silence and restore her memory as prophet and teacher, all of our songs are enriched and our people's story becomes more whole.'

As a woman rabbi in the modern tradition, I like to think that in memory and in honor of Prophet Miriam, Camila, Charis, Leila, Samantha and Louisa have accelerated the acceptance and the equality of women throughout Italy and beyond.

*Rabbi Barbara Aiello is Italy's first woman and first non-orthodox rabbi. She is the descendant of "anousim," - Calabrian and Sicilian Jews who were forced into conversion in Inquisition times. As founder of the Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria (IjCCC) and synagoga Ner Tamid del Sud, her work is the first of its kind to help Calabrians and Sicilians discover and embrace their Jewish roots.*