

Follow your heart . . . and choose what happens next!

Yael is dreading her bat mitzvah. Her loving but clueless mother insists on throwing an epic birthday extravaganza, even though Yael hates the spotlight.

Will Yael go along with a fancy hotel party—or choose something more her style? Will her Torah reading be a success . . . or a bust? Who will be her partner for the first dance: Eli, her longtime best friend; Cam, her new crush; or Gabriel, the emcee's son?

Yes? No? Maybe so!

There are many ways this story can go.
YOU decide what happens next.
And if you don't like how it ends?
Just start again!

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Yael AND THE Party
OF THE Year

Artistic Differences



“Shoe hurts! MAMA! SHOE HURTS!”

Well, I had to give Rivka—my two-and-a-half-year-old sister—credit: Her reasons for having full-on, wailing, red-faced, and inconsolable tantrums were always random, creative, *and* varied.

But it didn’t matter what she was going on about this time; that it was embarrassing and annoying *never* changed.

Slowly and inconspicuously I sidestepped away from the scene: her lying on her back, flailing her arms and legs in the middle of the Temple Shalom parking lot. I aimed for the colorful bush

that hadn't yet lost all its leaves. The plan was to hide behind it until Ranting Rivka got herself under control. It was so humiliating that she was related to me; I hated drama more than anything.

My parents looked flustered as they stood there, desperately trying to calm her down (I don't know why they bothered—it *never* worked) while people heading toward the synagogue shook their heads. I could imagine the scene as a painting—a slice-of-life tableau entitled *Mortification*.

I almost felt bad for Mom and Dad. *Almost*. I mean, they were the reason she existed, right? I felt it hard to be too sympathetic when you created your own problem.

"Hey, Yael," came a voice from just behind me.

I eagerly pivoted away from my embarrassing family to greet the friendly voice and was happy to see Eli Roth. Eli was not only my next-door neighbor but was also in my bar and bat mitzvah class. We'd practiced our Torah portions together until his bar mitzvah at the beginning of the summer.

He'd been away for the last month, and though we'd been back at school for a week already, we had somehow missed each other in the chaos. I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen him in a long time.

He was very tanned, and his sandy-brown hair had blond highlights from the summer sun. Both changes made his blue eyes seem even bluer.

"Hey, Eli," I said, pushing my glasses up my nose. "It's been forever since I've seen you! How was your summer?"

He shrugged. "It was okay. The camper van was pretty cramped with the five of us."

"Right," I said, remembering that his parents, who weren't great at planning, had decided at the last minute to take the family in a rented RV and tour around the country, visiting national parks and probably not bathing very often. Not my idea of a fun summer. Nor Eli's, it would seem.

"Oh, that sounds . . . interesting," I said, trying to be nice.

He laughed. "Parts of it were okay, like being able to see way more stars when driving through the countryside," he said before his face twisted into a frown. "After my bar mitzvah I was glad to get out of town for a while. Although I would have preferred camp or somewhere that my parents weren't, if you know what I mean."

I nodded sympathetically. I *did* know what he meant. His bar mitzvah had been a complete and total disaster.

Eli had wanted to have a huge pool party to kick off the summer, one that all the kids would remember. But it was scheduled for the first long weekend of the summer, *and* his flaky parents forgot to send out invites until the last minute. It was—well, I hate to say it—a bust. A *major* bust.

He'd done an okay job with his Torah reading at the service, performing to the small crowd in the synagogue. But after that it went downhill. What was supposed to be a huge party for more than a hundred people was barely a cringe-worthy two dozen—and that included mostly his family and grandparents.

After the service we'd gathered at the Knot's Valley Community Center, but soon after we arrived, it began to thunder. Lightning flashed. And then there was hail. The giant balls of ice didn't just splash into the pool, either. They came down over the whole deck, popping the balloons. We watched helplessly from inside the center as hail crashed down on the buffet table.

To say the food—including the beautiful tiered cake—was ruined was a giant understatement. It had been obliterated.

When Eli's dad laughed and said that with so few guests a pizza bill wouldn't be too big, well, I

thought Eli was going to have a Ranting Rivka-type of meltdown.

I hardly would have blamed him. It was definitely a party we'd all remember. But not in a good way.

Which was why *I* was having a small family-and-friends-only dinner to celebrate my bat mitzvah. The last thing I needed was that kind of drama. Or rather, *trauma*.

"How about your bat mitzvah?" Eli asked, as though he were reading my mind. Just then my sister let out a long and loud howl behind me. Eli's wide eyes darted over my shoulder at what sounded like a crime in progress. "Is that Rivka?" he asked, his alarmed gaze returning to mine.

I adjusted my glasses and sighed, not needing to turn around to confirm it. "Yes. This is sort of her thing now," I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. It was amazing how I'd ever thought Rivka was cute. "Anyway, about my bat mitzvah . . ." I was cut off by an eardrum-bursting screech that I did my best to ignore, but it was getting harder.

Finally, when there was a moment of silence, I opened my mouth, but Eli asked, "Do you have your Torah portion nailed yet?"

I thought about my bat mitzvah. The Jewish

ceremony signifies a person becoming an adult and being responsible for their own actions, but first that person has to sing part of the Torah.

On a stage.

In front of the entire synagogue congregation.

In Hebrew.

Singing. On a stage. To a zillion people. In Hebrew.

This wouldn't have been an issue for my best friend, Tara Singh, who was a natural performer and loved the spotlight on her at all times. But for me, who preferred to paint and was not a very good singer, it was a tiny bit terrifying. And by a tiny bit, I mean colossally.

"Uh, not exactly," I said, nerves rattling my chest, because while I knew all the words and could sing along with the recording that the rabbi had e-mailed, it was one thing to practice in the mirror and another to recite it in front of a million people.

"Oh," Eli said. "Well, if you want to come over, I can help you practice. It is kind of a big deal, so . . ."

I opened my mouth to answer, when I heard, "What's a big deal?"

I looked behind me, and there was my mom

with a smiling but red-eyed Rivka in her arms, perched on her hip. So weird how my sister could be freaking out one minute and the happiest kid in the world the next.

"Yael's bat mitzvah is a big deal," Eli said.

"Of course it is!" Mom exclaimed, leaning into me. "We couldn't be more excited, right, Yael?"

"So excited!" Rivka shouted, mimicking Mom's enthusiasm. I wouldn't admit it out loud, but okay, sometimes the kid was kind of cute. Her brown hair was like mine, but hers was in ringlets, and that, paired with her pale, chubby cheeks, made her look like an adorable little angel. Not that she acted like one most of the time.

"Sure," I said. "I mean, I love Dumplings."

Mom looked from me to Eli and then back again. "Dumplings?"

"Uh, yeah, Dumplings," I said. "My favorite restaurant. The one where we're going to have my bat mitzvah dinner? With you guys and the grandparents and a few of my friends."

Mom frowned. "Noooooo," she said, stretching out the word. "That's not what we're doing."

I blinked at her several times before I said, "But . . . I thought . . ."

Mom shook her head as she interrupted me.

“Yael, we are not having your bat mitzvah at a *restaurant*.” She said the word “restaurant” as though she were saying “the dump.” I frowned as she continued. “This is a very big deal, a once-in-a-lifetime event. We are having a party. A *big* party. Everyone will be invited to share your special day.”

“No,” I said, my heart pounding in my chest. “I don’t want a big party. I don’t want the . . .” I was about to say “trauma,” but I saw Eli fidgeting out of the corner of my eye. “I’m nervous enough about performing my Torah portion. I don’t need a party where I have to make a speech and be on display. I don’t want the attention,” I added. It was the truth, if not the whole truth.

“Don’t be silly,” Mom said, shifting Rivka to her other hip. “Of course you want the attention. That’s what being a bat mitzvah is all about. We’re celebrating *your* entry into adulthood. This is all about *you*.”

“All about you!” Rivka announced.

Seriously, kid? I was starting to sweat, and not from the heat.

“But I don’t want that,” I said. “Save the money. We’ll just have a small dinner. Just us. And a few of my friends.”

Mom shook her head. “It’s not about the money. We want to do this for you. We want everyone to see how wonderful you are. How proud we are of you.”

“But I don’t want that,” I repeated, starting to sound whiny, but when I glanced over at Eli, he’d disappeared. Just as well, I guess; this conversation was embarrassing. And I feared it was only going to get worse.

“Yael,” my mother said in a very stern tone. “You are having a bat mitzvah party, and you are going to enjoy yourself! You’ll see; it will be the best bat mitzvah ever!”

Really? I squinted at her. Did she realize how ridiculous she sounded? She just smiled at me cluelessly, so I guess not.

“Best bat mitzvah evah!” Rivka exclaimed.

I looked at my suddenly sweet sister and tried not to scream in frustration. Thirteen years old was definitely too old to throw a tantrum. Luckily, I wasn’t thirteen yet. I stormed into the synagogue.