

An Open Letter to My Daughter On Her Bat Mitzvah

BY MARY GENDLER

Dear Tamar,

Today you have become a young woman . . . or at least taken the first steps in affirming publicly that you are prepared to do so. At times I have difficulty comprehending (as do you, I suspect) what this means. This transitional period, when you are neither child nor yet fully adult, is not an easy one either for you or for us, your parents. We'll have difficulty giving up old ways, old attitudes, old images, old reflexes. As I see you growing taller and looking more mature, as you take on more responsibilities and new interests, I come a little closer to believing that you are, indeed, approaching adulthood. More and more you begin to make important decisions for yourself, and although you still

seek our guidance, we will, appropriately, have less and less influence over you as time goes by. For the first time I begin to count the years and realize, with a start, how few remain before you move away and set up your life independent of us. Where is our little girl, our firstborn? When did you turn into a half-grown woman almost as tall as I? It is exciting, exhilarating, thrilling to see you

grow. And yet, at times, it is also confusing and a little bit scary. We're not quite used to it, we're not quite ready. . . . I think you may feel some of these feelings also.

Mixed Feelings

Perhaps it is because of these mixed feelings that your growing up raises in all of us, that we need help going through this transition. Primitive peoples recognized this need

as did the ancient Jews, and I have always been proud that Judaism preserved its ancient rite of passage in its *bar/bat mitzvah* ceremony. Intellectually I knew that it was an important custom. But although I have seen other children and families going through

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the experience, I had never had a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* myself or in my own family. Thus, I was totally unprepared for the depth of meaning the experience would have for me.

This was *your bat mitzvah*, right? Yes and no. What I had not realized was how involved I and the entire family would become in this event. Years in advance we began, occasionally, to speak of the happening. The last few months were, it seems, almost totally dominated by planning, dreaming, struggling with hard decisions, etc. Grandparents, aunts and uncles shared in this also, and every phone conversation for the past six months was focused around the event. It was as if all of the family energy was pulling in closely, centering full attention on the fact that you are slowly but surely changing your status in relation to all of us.

You had to work hard to prove to us that you deserve this. The Jewish tradition has chosen, for this task, to require you to lead the congregation in worship. You must have the knowledge to read from the *Torah* as well as to recite certain other prayers, the poise to execute this with dignity, and, through your speech, the courage to declare publicly "this is who I am." Our task was to ensure that there would be a full gathering of those who care about you to witness this event, to cheer you on, to celebrate.

Preparing Your "Passage"

During this time I began to find myself strangely obsessed with cleaning the house. All must be fresh, clean, in order. Had I fin-

ally succumbed to middle-class Jewish motherhood after all? Was I really so worried that the relatives would run their fingers over the tops of the doors and condemn me once and for all? How else explain my sudden attention to light fixtures and picture frames? I was puzzled by this passion but unable to fight it. Not until two or three days before the event did I have a revelation. It suddenly occurred to me that I had not cleaned like this since the time when I was pregnant with you and would get up in the middle of the night and scrub the walls. I came to understand this as nest building, getting my house in order to receive the new being for whom we

choleology fully understood. In many primitive tribes, following their initiation rite, the youngsters move into a new home, their own or that of an in-law or relative. Their new living quarters, as well as new status and responsibilities, help mark the transition. Clearly a new kitchen floor is not the same as a new hut, but I have talked to enough families who have made some visible change in their home around such an event to wonder if, symbolically, we aren't unconsciously following a very ancient custom.

One other aspect of the day was very poignant to me. I am aware of how new it is for women to participate in this traditional

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were to have charge. But why repeat the ritual at this point? Perhaps it was my way of preparing your passage, your birth, into a new stage of life. All must be clean and in order, for this "passage," like the first, is filled with certain dangers that even modern technology has not eliminated, nor modern psy-

chology fully understood. In many primitive tribes, following their initiation rite, the youngsters move into a new home, their own or that of an in-law or relative. Their new living quarters, as well as new status and responsibilities, help mark the transition. Clearly a new kitchen floor is not the same as a new hut, but I have talked to enough families who have made some visible change in their home around such an event to wonder if, symbolically, we aren't unconsciously following a very ancient custom.

also), nor would you have received your Bible from a female President of the Congregation (our first). It was thrilling to see you, a young woman, proclaiming your entry as a full, equal participating member of the Jewish community. And in so doing you also helped some of the older females of your family to participate in Jewish ritual in a totally new way. Thus, through *your bat mitzvah*, each of us took a new step that we might not otherwise have taken. And so it is that the young sometimes lead their elders!

Through your *bat mitzvah*, then, I have come to appreciate yet another aspect of the wisdom of the Jewish tradition which preserves this ancient ceremonial rite of passage, transforms it into an acceptable form for modern times, but even within its "civilized" expression allows for sublimated expression of atavistic feelings. And it is for helping me to learn this, for giving me the opportunity truly to experience the deep meaning of this ritual of *bat mitzvah* that I want to thank you.

Thank you for bringing us all together to share a moment of joy and celebration.

Thank you for helping us palpably to experience the flow of life as we move from generation to generation, linking the ancient past to the future through recognition of these moments of transition. For the future lies in the individual and in the community and in the fragile bonds that tie us all together. How lovely that you choose to join us!

Your loving Mother