

A Special Message to Our Daughters
by Mary Gendler

Sitting in our lovely sukkah, the leaves rustling in the gentle breeze, the pine boughs, grapes, Indian corn and flowers decorating the airy space, two giant sunflowers standing guard at the door' the jack—o lantern with the star—of—David nose on the table, and the crystalline blue of a perfect New England autumn sky peeking through the corn stalked roof - at a moment like this, how can I doubt that I want to identify myself as Jewish? As I bask in the warmth and wisdom of our tradition that includes such a wonderful custom, encouraging familial and communal togetherness along with connection to the earth, food, and the cycles of the seasons, I wonder how I could ever have been so angry at the Jewish tradition. It is with difficulty that I crawl back to my feelings of only a few days ago when, sitting in our schul (A small reform congregation) I felt continually jolted back and forth by the language of the service. No sooner would I begin feeling mellow with the music and some of the familiar prayers, then we would come to a passage with language so exclusive of me that I felt offended.

Praised be Thou, O Lord, God of our Fathers, God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, great, mighty, and exalted. Thou bestowest loving kindness upon all thy children. Thou rememberest the devotion of the fathers...

What is man, O God, that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou thinkest of him?

Our Father, our King...

Our God, and God of our fathers, may Thy kingdom come speedily, that the worship of Thy name and obedience to Thy law may unite all men in brotherhood and peace...

I have heard it argued that these masculine terms are simply generic, human, so we should not take offense. But how can this be, really? How can "Father" be both father as in "God of our fathers" and also a sexless representation of the Divine without carrying connotations from one to the other? How would it feel to men to be united in "sisterhood"? To say "God of Abraham and Sarah", and "Thou rememberest the devotion of the fathers and mothers" includes me, a woman and mother, in a way the traditional prayers do not. Finally, if "man" means "human", then what is "woman"?

Here, then, is the dialectic. In moments like the above, I feel excluded, angry, rejected and rejecting. I wonder how I can possibly continue to identify myself with such a religion. At other moments, like the present in the sukkah, or at my daughter's bat mitzvah, or united in traditional mourning ritual following the death of my mother-in-law, I feel profoundly connected. How resolve this conflict? How come to terms with such an impossible, irritating, masculine, chauvinist, beautiful, warm, wise, contradictory tradition?

Ours may be the first generation of Jewish women to struggle in quite this way. I and others who feel as I do could simply leave, of course, and join a feminist spiritual group, or be nothing at all. But this will not work for me. Born and raised Jewish living now in my own Jewish family, it would, quite simply, hurt too much to cut myself off. The cost would be too great. My roots, my family, all mean a lot to me. The only alternative, then, is to struggle, to grapple with the tradition which I feel willing to do.

I went through an intensely religious period as a teenager, and my wonderful naive grandmother once remarked, "Maybe she'll become a Rabbi". Her passing words lodged somewhere in my mind at the same time that I dismissed them and soon went on to disconnect myself almost totally from Judaism. So what was a good Jewish girl to do? A few years later I married a Rabbi! For the first few years I related to Judaism totally through him. Somehow I had decided that religion, Jewishness, was his business, not mine. I felt no personal connection, no unique tie.

Looking back now I can imagine that some of what I may have been feeling unconsciously was that the tradition was not mine, as, indeed, is true in one sense. Jewish history is distinctly male; Jewish theology is male; the Torah is male; God is male. How should I not feel alienated? Only I didn't know what was the matter and, in typical female fashion, saw it as a lack in myself: I thought I wasn't religious. The irony is that it was only when I woke up and began to become conscious of being excluded from so much in the tradition that I began to feel connected to it. In my case, consciousness led to exploration, study and confrontation, and I cannot fight with something and not feel engaged. Indeed, the wrestling, the challenge, the anger, all have led me to a deep encounter with myself, my spirituality, my creativity and my femininity. In short, the struggle feels worth it because it helps me grow. But what of our daughters? What do we say to them? Do we want to pass this same frustration on to them? Will it be worth it to them? Will they be interested and willing to struggle? Will they need to?

Perhaps their remaining within the tradition as conscious, equal co-partners and worshipers depends significantly upon what we of our generation forge out of our own personal encounters with the tradition. Jewish women all over the world are beginning to experiment with new prayer forms, create new ceremonies, rituals and theology. Increasing numbers are becoming active in leadership roles within the community, both secular and religious. We are raising questions, making men and other women uncomfortable but more aware, and forging a new Judaism which may reflect and fulfill the needs of women as well as men. It is my belief that there are seeds of rich fruit lying dormant both within the soil of the tradition and deep inside each of us. It is the task of those of us who have decided to remain and struggle to find these seeds, nourish and cultivate them, and out of these new, tender shoots intermingled with the old, create a beautiful, life sustaining garden. And if our garden is appealing enough, perhaps our daughters will not need to wander in the wilderness, but will choose to remain with us.

It is in this spirit that I would like now to focus on one particular aspect of Jewish tradition - its life-cycle ceremonies. One of the strengths of Judaism is the way in which it celebrates ritually certain important moments in our lives. Birth, puberty, marriage, divorce and death all have prescribed ritual celebrations. I believe very strongly that the religious and communal support provided by these rituals can be psychologically valuable. For rituals help us to acknowledge and validate, publically as well as privately,

that there is a change in ourselves or in someone we love. Unfortunately, many traditional developmental rituals within Judaism are quite uneven in relation to males and females. Circumcision, the sign of the covenant, excludes women de facto. Until quite recent times, puberty seemed to belong exclusively to males, at least in terms of public acknowledgement and celebration. It was not until marriage that the presence of the girl was celebrated in the community, the chuppah being the first and last we see of her in public ritual until she dies! This is important, for the way in which we welcome our children into our lives and into the community can have a profound influence upon how they perceive themselves in relation to us.

There are several different responses we can make in relation to traditional Jewish life-cycle rituals. Some of them, such as the ancient death and mourning rites require little or no change except to make certain that women are counted in the minyan. Death, it would seem, does indeed level distinctions. The ceremonies for marriage, divorce, bat mitzvah, and naming a baby girl have basic structures which may be useable, but which need some revision of language, emphasis, content and even form in some cases. Imaginative and co-equal ketubot have been written and used to unite young men and women; a large variety of naming ceremonies have been birthed and used to welcome girl-babies with much joy; the divorce ceremony, though worthy and increasingly needed, has received less attention. Sometimes, as in my proposal of a ritual hymenotomy as an equivalent covenantal ceremony for girls, the suggested change may involve an adaptation of a previously all-male ceremony made appropriate for girls. Bat mitzvah is a less radical example of such an adaptation, one which has been accepted without much difficulty into the Jewish community. Finally, there are certain life-cycle events which have been traditionally ignored and which require the creation of new rituals. Two such important events for women include the onset of menstruation and menopause.

It is my experience and belief that there is validity and profound meaning in all of the above forms of ritual. We must be eclectic, gladly taking from the tradition the wisdom and beauty which does exist, but challenging, changing, adapting and inventing when it does not meet our needs. In my own family, there is no doubt that my daughters, now 12 and 15, were cheated in terms of birth ceremonies. One of them had nothing at all, the other was named in the synagogue along with two other baby girls. The ceremony was sweet but basically tepid. No family flew in from out of town for the occasion as they surely would have for a circumcision. Now, as they enter puberty, I am anxious for them not to be cheated again. Additionally, I find myself fascinated with this developmental stage, reminded by their rapid changing of my own tumultuous but exciting adolescence. Puberty, as we all know, is an especially alive, ever changing, vulnerable and impressionable time. All the more important, then, that we help our daughters to feel good about themselves and their potential as young women, for this is the period of consolidation of identity. Thus, puberty presents an especially ripe time to validate our daughters' entrance into the community as full, participating equal members as well as to celebrate their uniqueness, their femininity. Our eldest has already been bat mitzvah, and the event for our youngest, Naomi, is fast approaching. Not having been bat mitzvah myself, Tamar's bat mitzvah turned out to be a surprisingly significant experience for me, personally. At the end of this article I am including an "Open Letter", a summary of the words I spoke to her on the bimah which reflect my thoughts and feelings of

that time. For me, that experience represents an example of the profound meaning and often unexpected power, which a pre-existent ceremony can have.

But even though her bat mitzvah was wonderful, it addressed only one aspect of her growth, the public acknowledgement of her change of status in relation to the adult community. What is missing is a ritual which marks the important physical changes which occur in young girls' bodies at this time in their lives. The most dramatic of these changes is the onset of menstruation. I have given much thought to this over the last few years, and would like to share some of my ideas here.

Changes in our bodies, the onset of menstruation — these are very personal events which call for quiet recognition. Orthodox Jewish women go to the mikvah, but I do not know of any special ceremony celebrating the girl's first visit. Most young modern Jewish girls do not follow this custom, however, leaving the problem of creating a ceremony which is valid on a spiritual and psychological level as well as tolerable for modern young

The only Jewish tradition which I know of relating to the onset of menstruation is that of the mother slapping the girl's face. I have yet to understand why she does this or what it is supposed to mean, but it is hard to imagine that such an action will cause the girl to feel good about this aspect of herself. In our culture menstruation is referred to as "the curse". If such a basic female biological process is a curse, then how are we to feel about ourselves as women? And if our Jewish mothers slap us at such a time, how must they feel about themselves as women? The more I thought about this, the more it began to seem absolutely crucial that this moment, the moment in which we show ourselves most tangibly to be women, the moment in which we are most different from men, most separate and unique — this moment must be sacralized and celebrated. But how? Anyone who has been around young girls ages 12 to 14 knows that it is an age of acute embarrassment. Our culture, although permissive in many ways, does not easily talk of normal bodily changes, especially outside of one's peer group. Public acknowledgement is out of the question. The moment must be private but special. Some of my friends have had a celebrative dinner or taken their daughter out to lunch. I was searching for something slightly more formal more ritualized, more connected, if not to Jewish tradition (for there is none that I know of), at least tied into ancient imagery and presented in some ritual fashion. The image that came to mind was that of the moon. The connection of women and the moon is as ancient as time, and anyone who is interested in exploring this can read M. Esther Harding's fascinating book, *Women's Mysteries*. As more and more Jewish women are reclaiming and elaborating on the ancient celebration of new moon, Rosh Hodesh, it would appear that the moon, and our special connection to it, may be returning to our consciousness. And no-where is this connection to her more evident than in our monthly period, our twenty-eight day cycle which mirrors hers. Waxing and waning, filling followed by emptying followed by filling, we ebb and flow in echo of her rhythm.

The moon, then, was the obvious symbol. It seemed to me that in this instance something tangible might not be out of order since a lot of fuss and ceremony would only embarrass the girls. Most girls I know love jewelry. Why not make a silver moon necklace which would be symbolic of the occasion, but also a beautiful object in itself. (Ideally it would be made by the mother - it's not hard, I've done it myself with no previous silversmithing experience.) The necklace which I have designed looks like this: It is patterned after the ancient moon-tree, illustrations of which appear in Esther Harding's book. The

silver six pointed star is added as a symbolic link to the Jewish community. The bead at the end of the moon is made of coral and symbolizes a drop of blood.

The necklace should be accompanied by a prayer or note and the occasion could include a special meal. The occasion might be only between mother and daughter, the parents and daughter, or the whole family. Another intriguing idea is to gather together all the female members of the family for a kind of initiation rite into the female clan. There might be some sharing about personal experiences relating to menstruation or about being women. These two happenings could be separate, the necklace being given very close to the event, the gathering taking place on the first anniversary or a month later. The exact form of the ritual will need to evolve over time.

Hopefully the necklace will be attractive enough that the girl will want to wear it, not necessarily when she gets her period, but as she would any other piece of jewelry, because it is pretty, and because she feels herself connected to being a woman. As she grows older, or even as an adolescent, she may want to join in celebrating Rosh Hodesh. This would be a perfect time to wear the necklace.

To celebrate our daughters' femaleness with them. to welcome them as women within a Jewish context. is to make the statement that we rejoice in who they are. The combination of the public recognition during bat mitzvah and the private ceremony of menstruation acknowledges the inner and outer selves which we all have, recognizing our uniqueness as women. and at the same time affirming us as equal, fully participating members of the Jewish community. Such a statement, truly meant, could have profound consequences for all of us, communally and at a deep, psychic level.

What follows are several addenda which might be useful. The first is a "note" which accompanied the necklace I gave to our eldest daughter. I have also included a poem which I wrote for the occasion. Finally, there is the "Open Letter" to which I referred earlier.

Dear Tamar,

At your bat mitzvah you declared your intention of joining the Jewish community as a full, participating adult. This was a touching and beautiful occasion which we, your family, viewed with much pride and pleasure. Today a different kind of event has happened. Your body has made known to you, clearly and definitively, that you are no longer a little girl. Although still young and not fully formed, your body is now capable of nourishing and bearing children. This is an awesome responsibility, one which you may or may not choose to exercise in the future. But this ability, this link to the deepest mysteries of creation, is a special gift which we women have been given. Your menstrual blood is its visible monthly reminder. Although some of menstruation as the "curse", although some consider it a bother and inconvenience, which it sometimes is, I hope that you will come to think of it as a gift a blessing.

In order to celebrate the occasion, I have made you this necklace which can serve as a reminder of your deepest feminine nature. The new moon symbolizes our connection to this heavenly body which also cycles every twenty-eight days and which fills and empties as do we. The coral bead symbolizes a drop of blood, and the star links you to your Jewish heritage. I hope that you will find the necklace beautiful in itself and want to wear it for that reason.

I am proud and happy to welcome as an adult woman, and I sincerely hope that you will always have the opportunity to develop the full range of your many talents.

Please join with me in reciting this prayer.

Blessed art Thou, Eternal our God, Source of all Creation, who **hast** made me a woman.

—

MIRIAM

I am Miriam, prophetess of God
Midwife of my people

Youthful guardian of my brother, Moses,
lying cradled in the rivered womb in Egypt
Reuniting the infant prophet with his mother's milk
which gives him strength to hear God and lead our people
toward a new becoming.

I am Miriam, prophetess of God
Priestess of my people

Joyously leading the women in song and dance
in celebration of our perilous passage
through the tunneled opening of the blood red sea,
of our rebirth from the dark night of slavery
to the brilliant light of the Divine.

I am Miriam, prophetess of God
Mother of my people

Transmitter of the well of life to the barren desert.
Suckling my newborn brothers and sisters
in their infancy as children of God,
Soothing them in cool woman waters
when the journey becomes too arduous,
Refreshing them in my moon depths
when they weary of the unrelenting desert sun.

I am Miriam, prophetess of God
Leper of my people

Containing the sickness of their soul
in the ghostly flesh of my body.
Sacrificial offering for my people's shame
whose trust in the Word too often wavers.
Decayed in flesh and cast down in spirit...
When, O God, wilt Thou redeem me?

I am Miriam

Mother
Midwife
Leper
Priestess

Prophetess of God

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