

## A Rosh Hodesh Ceremony for Bat Mitzvah Daughters

*Sherry Rosen*

**A**s members of a Rosh Hodesh group which itself is fast approaching a thirteenth anniversary, three of us recently realized we had daughters who would each become bat mitzvah within a fourteen-month period. A Rosh Hodesh Group is a gathering of women who meet monthly to celebrate the new lunar month, traditionally regarded as a women's holy day. In the early days of our Rosh Hodesh history, we surely would have avoided focusing on our roles as mothers of daughters. The group came into being at least in part as a result of the traumatic and sudden death of one woman's daughter, so focusing on our daughters was a tender issue. In addition, for many years not all members of the group had children, much less daughters.

However, since our tentative meetings as a Rosh Hodesh group 1986-87, we have become a community, changing and evolving. We have celebrated many milestones together—engagements and weddings; births and adoptions of children and grandchildren; transitions to menopause; doctoral degrees, and positions of leadership and other accomplishment. We have supported one another through divorces, deaths of parents and in-laws, and difficult job choices and moves.

By 1997, each of the nineteen women in the group was also a mother. So it seemed appropriate to develop a Rosh Hodesh ceremony that would welcome a new generation's arrival at the threshold of womanhood

and to share with our teen-age daughters the warmth of Jewish sisterhood that has enriched our own lives. Already involved in many substantive aspects of our daughters' bat mitzvah observances, we three mothers planned this ceremony in hopes that it would augment the customary emphasis on adult responsibility with an additional message: Being a woman in the mid-sixth millennium of Jewish history poses unique challenges but also offers unique rewards, a lesson we learned on our own journeys to adulthood by way of feminism and Jewish feminism.

Planning this event involved working through a number of sensitive spots. While we are all mothers, there is diversity in the role: five of us are now mothers-in-law and grandmothers as well as mothers, and two are mothers of preschoolers. Some mothers have sons and no daughters, and some have experienced pain as well as joy from their children, including not only loss and bereavement but also deep disappointment in a son or daughter's chosen path. By emphasizing a sense of collective motherhood of all our children, and by focusing on memories of our own coming-of-age experiences as well, we were able to celebrate this transitional moment collectively, as a group of mothers and daughters.

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Among the daughters, Aliza<sup>1</sup> had just observed her bat mitzvah Tamar was actively preparing for hers, and Meyrav, who had just turned twelve, was entering the bat mitzvah year. Tamar and Meyrav later acknowledged they were quite apprehensive about what their mothers had cooked up in this ceremony, and Meyrav confessed that she even imagined, among other possibilities, a mother-daughter trip to an amusement park! Aliza, however, hoped that the event would be an opportunity to relive the enjoyment of her own celebration, which had gone by much too fast, as well as a chance to connect on a new level with her mother and her mother's friends.

The first flood of memories engulfed the mothers the moment we entered the home in which the ceremony was to take place. Aliza, the daughter

of the house, came bounding down the stairs to greet us wearing the dress her mother had worn at her bat mitzvah in 1963. We sighed as we recognized the “Jackie” look of that era, and were reminded of the events to which we wore those short sheath or A-line dresses, with pillbox hats and small purses. How short was too short? Who would decide—you or your mother?

All the mothers had been asked to bring photos of themselves from this stage in their lives, and the collective display evoked another deluge of emotions. Time was suspended as we gazed at pictures of ourselves as daughters posing with siblings and parents no longer alive, as schoolgirls in cotton dresses, and as pre-teen women with noses to be “corrected” according to the custom of the era. We admired—or rolled our eyes at—the fashions of the forties, fifties, and sixties, all represented in this photo tableau, and we laughed at recollections of the stories behind the pictures. Some mothers brought junior high school yearbooks for us to leaf through, and others displayed formal portraits of themselves or of *their* mothers at age thirteen. Still another mother pushed the “play” button on a small tape recorder so that we could hear, forty years later, her own thirteen-year-old voice chanting her Haftorah.

The ceremony was preceded by a potluck dairy dinner featuring the range of Indian, Italian, and Middle Eastern flavors and spices that contemporary American Jewish women favor. The meal and the company all helped to take the sting out of a biting cold January evening, and even the daughters were relaxed and chatty as we moved from dining room to family room. While the mothers got comfortable in a semi-circle of sofas and chairs, the daughters were taken aside and surprised with corsages to be pinned to their sweaters. Once the mothers were seated and the daughters’ corsages were in place, the three girls solemnly entered the room and took their seats at the front.

The flowers, intended as a gracious but minor touch, turned out to be another unexpectedly significant “trigger” for both generations. The daughters were quite taken with the aroma and elegance of their first corsages, and found it hard to resist preening and sniffing the blossoms on their shoulders. This in turn brought a rush of memories to the mothers, of long ago parties and proms, graduations and weddings, of a time when “wrist vs. shoulder” was one of the toughest decisions we would ever have to make.

(Later, as delight gave way to discomfort and the girls began to fidget with the sharp pins to correct the inevitable slipping and drooping, we remembered the feelings of self-consciousness and insecurity that were also part of those fancy occasions.)

We began with a song, Pete Seeger’s adaptation of the classic lines from Ecclesiastes, well known to the mothers and easily picked up by the daughters: “To everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, and a time for every purpose under Heaven....” (Lyrics to this and other songs and prayers were included on a one-sheet handout, copies of which were passed around the circle.) Next came a reading entitled “Why God Gave the Torah to the Women First.” As adapted by Penina V. Adelman,<sup>2</sup> the story suggests that God instructed Moses to go down from Mount Sinai and teach the Torah first to the women, since they, as teachers of their children and as religious exemplars to their husbands, would be most responsible for its transmission. Adelman also sees a relationship between women’s life-bearing potential and what she calls their “instinctive understanding” of Torah. Adelman writes, “...the fact that she has a womb inside her is a constant reminder to her of the equal potential of her physical, spiritual, and intellectual fruitfulness.” While not all of the mothers might agree with this view, we thought it would have a major impact on the daughters at a time when general cultural messages still tend to constrict, rather than expand, girls’ expectations for full participation in society.

Still excerpting and reading aloud from Adelman’s discussion, we referred to menstrual blood as a sign of good health and a symbol of life to come. From their friends, our daughters acquire the view that menstruation is a longed-for sign of adult femininity, one by which they can measure themselves and each other on yet another competitive scale. On the other hand, once reality replaces anticipation, they frequently experience the “down” side of their body’s cycles: inconvenience and cramping pain, as well as the taboo against peers knowing when you are having it. We hoped that explicit talk about blood and sanctification, child-bearing and transmission of Torah, would imbue the girls with a more spiritual appreciation of the female body and its changes and a sense of awe at its creation. Indeed, some of the mothers saw an opportunity for themselves to reconnect to that reverence and to leave behind, at least temporarily, our own generation’s fascina-

tion with the developmental, psychological, and medical aspects of a woman's life-cycle.

Still another goal of our Adelman excerpt was to break the unfortunate folk connection between menstrual blood and ritual uncleanness that has defined generations of Jewish women. Be it ritual separation for days at a time in a separate hut, as Ethiopian Jewish women were obliged to accept, or separate beds in the context of European Orthodox observance of *niddah* [laws pertaining to menstruation], we wanted to rid our daughters of all negative connotations, up to and including the ceremony of "a Modess brochure and a slap on the cheek" that many of us experienced in our own adolescence.

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The reading incorporates filling a cup with red wine while reviewing other Jewish rituals and events in which blood plays a real or symbolic role. We stood and recited Kiddush, passing around the cup for all to take a sip. (Despite careful consideration of an alternative feminist Kiddush prayer, we opted instead to keep several key parts of the ceremony, including the Kiddush, as familiar as possible to the daughters.)

Mothers and daughters then read aloud and considered the verse from *Pirkei Avot [Ethics of the Fathers]* (5:23) that prescribes appropriate ages for specific life tasks:

*[Yehudah ben Tema] used to say, 'At five years, Bible. At ten years, Mishnah. At thirteen, mitzvot [commandments]. At fifteen, Talmud. At eighteen, to the huppah [marriage canopy]. At twenty, to seek a livelihood. At thirty, strength. At forty, understanding. At fifty, one gives advice. At sixty, old age. At seventy, a white head. At eighty, courage; at ninety, bent over. At one hundred, it is as if one is dead and out of this world.'*

In the free-wheeling discussion that ensued, mothers and daughters raised many interesting points. Is the author telling us the order in which these tasks should occur rather than the actual ages? suggested one mother. Why is learning attributed only to the early years of life? asked a daughter. Another mother pointed to the implication that one must experience a full decade of "understanding" before being empowered to "give advice." Is this always necessary? Animated though the discussion was, virtually none of the mothers or daughters analyzed the passage in terms of male-female differences. To some, this was a welcome development; to others, it was a bit worrisome.

The philosophical reflections evoked a more personal sharing of memories about the thirteenth year of the mothers' lives. In response to suggested topics about "your bat mitzvah" or about "the first time (you shaved, menstruated, wore a bra or high heels, kissed a boy)," the anecdotes flowed, with a heavy and hilarious emphasis on stories about leg hair and attempts to get rid of it, with or without parental permission. The discussion moved gradually up the body, so to speak, towards memories of panty-girdles, stockings, and garter belts, and then on to bras, undershirts, and anxious comparisons of breast size and onset of first menstruation.

Focused as the discussion was on the physical realities of life in the teen-age lane, most mothers quickly agreed that these years were best remembered for their many awkward and embarrassing moments. For Tamar, this was unwelcome news. She later reported being troubled at hearing how uncomfortable and unhappy everyone had been, and with hindsight it might have been wise to steer the discussion in a way that would have included high points as well as low points. In fact, one declared that those had been the richest and most stimulating years of her life, but her comment was less remembered. While the dominant memories for most mothers were the negative ones, perhaps we could also have taken the time to point out why we think it might be different for our daughters, who have been raised with fewer rules and restrictions, or at least made sure they understood that adolescent angst does not last forever.

Personal memories shifted easily into bat mitzvah stories shared by the small number of mothers who had actually experienced this ceremony. Mirroring post-war American Jewish culture, the observances ranged from a debutante-

like affair of the 1950s, complete with male escorts, through cautiously halakhic Friday night Haftorah recitations, to the full-scale Reconstructionist Saturday morning bat mitzvah celebrated by one mother in 1964. Still another mother recalled that, with no brother and no bat mitzvah option for herself or her sister, her family missed out on the connection to community that bar mitzvah fostered in her town.

At this point the ceremony called for the daughters to share their greatest worries about becoming grown women, as well as what they most looked forward to. All three quickly announced their desire to marry and have children, which took their feminist mothers by surprise, to say the very least. Probing gently, one mother asked if this meant that the daughters took for granted the careers and community recognition that their mothers had fought so hard to claim. The answer seemed to be that, of course, they would have careers, but what they really worried about most was finding someone to marry.

Because the bat mitzvah recognizes spiritual maturing as allied with physical maturing, we recited together a prayer from Rabbi Vicki Hollander's "Rosh Hodesh Ceremony."<sup>3</sup> We introduced it with the brief explanation that in the daily liturgy, Jewish men traditionally thank God for not making them women, which we suggested was an unfortunate back-handed way of expressing appreciation for their male bodies. Therefore, we continued, it would be appropriately affirming—and far more gracious—to recite a prayer that directly thanks God for the blessings of being born female.

*We, who are made of earth and heaven, body and spirit,*

*We, who are filled with water,*

*so as to merge with the world*

*and simultaneously,*

*with flame,*

*which lights our soul with fire.*

*We praise You*

*for breathing into us the breath*

*of life.*

Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melekh Ha-olam, she-asani ishah.

*Praised are You, Holy One, who made me a woman.*

Finally, the entire group formed a "circle of caring," the daughters in a small circle and the mothers forming a larger circle around them, arms linked around each other's shoulders. We sang, and then hummed, the song by Faith Rogow that has become our Rosh Hodesh "theme:"

*As we bless the Source of Life, so we are blessed.*

*And our blessing gives us strength and makes our visions clear*

*And our blessings give us peace and the courage to dare.*

As we shifted from singing to humming, the mothers were invited to throw out blessings for the daughters, accompanied by the tossing of candies from a basket passed around the circle. Good wishes, serious and frivolous: for good health and long life, for laughter and fun, for many good hair days and few PMS days, for interesting work and for satisfying relationships.

When the blessings were all given and the carpet of wrapped chocolates at the daughters' feet quite dense, the organizers took up tambourines and a drum and "spontaneously" switched to singing the celebratory version of the *Shehechyanu*. Everyone quickly caught on and joined in the clapping and finger-snapping as the voices swelled, culminating in a heartfelt "A-a-a-a-men."

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We ended our evening in typical bat mitzvah fashion, slicing and serving a decorated sheet cake inscribed with the names of the three daughters. Coffee, soft drinks, and milk flowed as we ate our dessert, and the informal conversational clusters now included thirteen-year-olds as well as their mothers. In a way, the ceremony had accomplished something: the recognition of the stirrings of adulthood in the bnot mitzvah.

As one mother observed, the entire community really does experience *nachas* [parent-like pride] and *simcha* [joy] in the coming-of-age of its young members, especially when their growing-up has occurred in full sight of all. From the daughters' point of view, it was comforting to be surrounded by adults whom they have seen regularly most of their lives, in

contrast to the extended family members who appear only sporadically and whom they often know less. As folklorist Chava Weissler and others have pointed out, traditional Jewish ceremonies continue to stress the primacy of the biological line, in spite of the fact that many of us identify more with the surrogate families of havurot and friendship circles.

The daughters also enjoyed a taste of what their mothers do when they get together each month. As Meyrav observed, they know their mothers address things “from a feminist point of view,” even though they have “no clue” as to what this might mean. Aliza was gratified to learn that many of the experiences of adolescence were similar across the generations, and even Tamar concluded, “It’s nice to know that you have the community behind you.”

In a climate in which the phrase “it takes an entire village to raise a child” is a cliché with genuine resonance, this ceremony attempted to reflect that village spirit. We wanted our daughters to know that we feel ourselves to be a community of caring mothers, and that we all find personal satisfaction in observing them grow to maturity. Perhaps most of all, we wanted them to know the “secret” that no school or synagogue is ever likely to teach: that in addition to the fulfillment that awaits them as they establish lives and families of their own, they will be richly rewarded if they also take time to create and nurture the ties of Jewish sisterhood.

<sup>1</sup> All pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Penina V. Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year*, 2nd edition, Biblio Press, 1990, pp. 80-82, 86-88; story adapted from Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 3, pp. 85-86.

<sup>3</sup> Vicki Hollander, “A Rosh Hodesh Ceremony,” in Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton, eds., *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook*. Beacon Press, 1992, pp. 314-21. Reprinted by permission.



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