
An Adult Coming of Age

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My friend Amy Alper celebrated her Bat Mitzvah on December 11, 1999. Amy turned thirty on January 4, 2000. An adult Bat Mitzvah is different from one celebrated at the age of 12 or 13. At Amy's age, it affirms a personal connection with God, maturation as a deepening into relationship with God, and the universality of blessing that transcends all differences.

As I prepared for her Bat Mitzvah, I vicariously participated in her wonder at the wisdom of Torah and her frustration over the bonds of adulthood. Though both of us have long since abandoned the unfettered life of adolescents (I am thirty-six years old), I felt we shared the timeless struggle of accepting the responsibilities of womanhood. Amy and I are both single women who desire to have children in the context of a warm and stable Jewish family. Our choices as single women today differ from those faced by our mothers when they were preparing for marriage and starting families. Women in their thirties today are no longer constrained by traditional expectations of marriage. We are supposed to make our choices based on a new set of criteria that we figure out for ourselves.

We travel in a formless dimension of free-fall through the liberation fought for by our mothers. It is a bittersweet inheritance. Our mothers knew what they didn't want—restrictive, loveless marriages and rigid societal expectations. They weren't searching for money. They wanted to reclaim Eve and her choice to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. They fought for their daughters to have conscious choices to control their own destinies. And indeed, career choices flow and change and are much more varied for women today than they were when my mother was my age. Most women in their thirties that I know are very independent and self-sufficient. It's the love connection that still confounds and baffles.

How do we remain independent and be in loving partnership? That part wasn't shown to me. I saw the divorces, even experienced my own divorce, and I still feel lost without a road map. I see couples my age struggling to forge a new path. These loving couples are made of two equal individuals who need connection in a different way than our parents did. These couples are brave pioneers who are creating roles as they go along. No answers, only questions—the generation after the revolution must be the forgers of permanent resolution and diplomacy. It is up to the daughters of the revolution to figure out for ourselves what coming of age means all over again and how to create meaning for ourselves.

Coming of age is not about the first bleeding, the first sexual encounter, being financially self-sustaining, or any of the other benchmarks of our mothers' time. Coming of age now is about spiritual fulfillment and personal connection to God through scripture, study and prayer. It is about religion, and leadership, about having a voice in the dialogue of truth that joins us in equal partnership. The other stuff—money, status, 'freedom from'—gave temporary answers that freed us from our mothers' bonds. I am certainly thankful for that. But now it is incumbent upon women to go another step, toward 'freedom to'—freedom to be joyous, soft, soulful and powerful, independent in thought and action, connected in family, community, and love.

I thank my dear friend Amy for showing me a way to that place of love and connection as an independent partner in community. Our mothers sang the song of change and severing ties of past constraints. Now it is upon us to form new bonds that we lovingly wear as tefillin that tie our souls to each other. I want to look at bonds not as chains that constrain, but as ties that give my life substance and connection—a connection that cradles the flow of life itself.

