

MY ZEYDE'S GIFT

by Tammy Jacobowitz

In my memory, I am nine years old, maybe ten. I am sitting close to my Zeyde at the shiny wood dining room table in my grandparents' home, poised at the edge of my chair. He sings a *pasuk* to the *trop* and I repeat it:

אלה תולדות נח, נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדרתיו את האלקים התהלך נח

This is the lineage of Noah: Noah was a righteous and whole-hearted man in his generation; Noah walked with God (Genesis 6:9).

"A little higher, Tamele. Try again. Yes, like that."

Now my Zeyde was no feminist; in his last years, when I was studying at and then graduated from Drisha, he could never quite make sense of what "this Drisha" was all about. He always filtered his reality through the prism of a shattered, Old World. The gymnastics lessons, Mishnah study, and colorful barrettes of my youth always seemed to baffle him. Yet, it was my Zeyde, my father's father, who introduced me, his young granddaughter, to the sing-song of Torah reading.

Why did he teach me those first few *p'sukim*?

The very notion of a women's *tefillah* service or of women's *leyning* had never intersected with his world, and besides, he never taught my older sister. I wish I could tell a story about how Zeyde recognized a flicker of a spark inside of me and seized the opportunity, and how my enthusiasm for learning obscured the inconvenient fact that I was a girl. But the truth is that Zeyde's initiative remains a mystery to me.

Nevertheless, on the day of my Bat Mitzvah, Zeyde proudly listened to my strong voice, from the "men's gallery" in the kitchen of our family friend's home. He had ignited the spark, and my father had carried me through to the end; I read the entire *parashah* and *haftarah*. I was his student and my father's as well; Zeyde must have recognized the Pittsburgh and Piotrokov melodies that permeated the Teaneck home.

Celebrating my Bat Mitzvah liturgically—although it was many unfamiliar miles away from Zeyde's world—traversed the distance between his world and mine. The immediate *kahal*

around me was made up of women and girls, but in my memory, I felt stronger ties to the men in the kitchen, whose traditions I channeled.

(Memory is a tricky filter; I am sure my 12-year-old self would have said something entirely different. But looking back on it now, my Bat Mitzvah experience is contested ground—between my emerging identity as a Jewish woman and a deep rootedness to a traditional, male world that would never be as much mine as it was at the age of 12.)

In the years following my Bat Mitzvah, the gift my father and Zeyde gave me only grew with time. In many new settings, knowing how to *leyn* opened leadership doors for me, enabling me to create space for women to connect with each other and with God. It would not be a stretch for me to say that the *leyning* literacy I gained at the age of 12 did not just translate into my teaching others how to *leyn*: it fed my desire to become a teacher of Jewish texts.

Since I began teaching more than ten years ago, I have worked with many pre-Bat Mitzvah girls. Some decide to learn how to *leyn* for their Bat Mitzvah celebrations; others elect to spend the year learning a topic of their own choice in depth, one on one. Many are exceptional young women—highly intelligent, outspoken, dedicated—and I have enjoyed watching them develop into their full personalities as the years pass.

Yet, as much as the girls have made lasting impressions on me, it is increasingly the mothers who grab my attention. I notice the way they observe their daughters emerge as thinkers, doers, scholars—holding their own. I watch them marvel at their daughters' abilities, joyously observing the girls surpass them in knowledge, skills, or experiences. Some of these mothers never had the opportunities that their girls assume are rightfully theirs. Their love of learning and their desire to give their daughters all that they never had have continually inspired me to give all I can to these girls: skills, knowledge, a sense of their place in our tradition, a role model. And when the mothers would close the door and my lesson with their daughters would begin, I would often feel the mothers' pain of separation—and their yearning to be close by and to be included.

In recent years, I have had the distinct pleasure of inviting mothers into the learning relationship, teaching mother-daughter pairs during that fragile, pre-adolescent period before the Bat Mitzvah celebration when communicating through learning is still fruitful and interesting to both parties. As I see it, my role is to facilitate learning between mother and daughter and to give them the tools and experience so that Torah learning may bond them to one another, long after our lessons are over. When our triangle of learning is at its best, we all take turns as the teacher.

When our son turned three, we celebrated his birthday with an *upsherin*, cutting his hair for the first time. Speaking at the party, I reflected on the difference between the *brit* and the *upsherin*, as well as the emotional distance we had traveled from celebrating the gift of his life to the milestone of differentiation, in which our son fully knew the difference between himself and his parents. As his mother, the *upsherin* was an important marker for my letting go, something that was only asked of me briefly at the *brit*, but that was demanded more fully as he shed his baby curls and baby attachments.

Now that we are halfway to our eldest daughter's Bat Mitzvah, I wonder how we will mark her milestone— which will also be ours, of course—and I wonder what my role may be in her preparation. Will it be time for me to let go even more and allow her to take the path she chooses? How will my husband and I model our values for her, without smothering her in our own visions? Will I encourage her to learn a skill that, even today, so many years after my Bat Mitzvah, is still underappreciated and undervalued in our communities? Will I be setting her up for disappointment or creating a new source of hope for her and our future?

For the time being, I take comfort in the thought that, at the heart of things, a Bat Mitzvah celebration brings together the old and the new, generation to generation, linking them in an overlapping chain of dreams, hopes, anxieties, and prayers.

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