

for—or (gasp) literally are—black, biracial, Latino, Mizrahi, Middle Eastern, African and so on. Jews can and do swing both ways. But that seems to be a well-kept secret, perhaps out of fear that Jews becoming “racialized” will spawn another Nazi-style conspiracy and lead to our demise.

Heaven help us if we admit in public that, you know, a lot of Jews do have kinky hair or full lips, prominent noses or big butts. And slap on a gag order if we dare say that these traits triggered our “Jewdar” (my Semitic equivalent of gaydar) and allowed us to identify someone as a fellow Jew. “Oh come on, Ophi,” I’ve been chastised wearily. “Not all Jews have those features.” “No kidding,” I say, pointing out my own stick-straight hair. But not all black people can be identified on sight as black, either. Isn’t it human nature to seek out reflections of yourself in others, or connections between your group and another?

Well, maybe not. But I imagine that Jews might have a lot less body neurosis and a lot more fun if we took a page from some of our darker brethren and widened the scope of body types we consider beautiful. My God, we might even let ourselves eat the vast amounts of food we prepare. I mean, how many holidays are in a Jewish year, each one requiring an elaborate meal? Likewise, we could teach the rest of the world to make really good matzo ball soup. It would be a cultural exchange of sorts, our way of saying thank you.

Seems fair enough to me. Perhaps my fellow Jews are, um, a little behind the curve. I guess I’ll just have to sit on this one until they come around.

PARENTING AS A RELIGIOUS JEWISH FEMINIST

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IT’S A GLORIOUS SUMMER MORNING IN JERUSALEM, and I am standing at the window looking out at a cloudless sapphire-blue sky. There is still a chill in the air this early in the day, and the tiles beneath my bare feet feel refreshingly cool. I think of how hot I will soon be as the sun rises higher in the sky and I walk my two children—my three-year-old daughter, Michal, and my one-year-old son, Adin—to *gan* (preschool) on my way to the yeshiva where I am studying Talmud this year, our first year living in Israel. By the afternoon, when I pick them up, I will feel the heat from the sidewalk through the soles of my sandals.

This is a city of extremes: mountains and valleys, hot days and cool nights, the *haredim* (ultra-Orthodox) and the *hilonim* (secular Jews). It is an intense city, where emotions fly and everyone believes he or she has the truth and is willing to fight to defend it; yet there is something about Jerusalem that embraces all of this and everyone. It is a real place, where everything comes to a head. It is a place that both beckons to me and pushes me away, embraces me and seems about to spit me out. It is here that I choose to make my home.

I drape my *tallit*, my prayer shawl, over my head, and suddenly it is dark. I block out all distractions—the blue sky, the bright sun glaring off the white

Jerusalem stone—for a completely private moment with God. I inhale a deep breath of clean morning air, thinking about my life and the kindness that God has bestowed on me. Under my tallit, I recite softly in Hebrew:

How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! The children of humanity take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. May they be sated from the abundance of Your wings; and may You give them to drink from the stream of Your delights. For with You is the source of all life—by Your light we shall see light. Extend Your kindness to those who know You, and Your charity to the upright of heart. (Psalms 36: 7–10)

With my white and gray tallit now draped over my shoulders, I take my leather tefillin out of their worn velvet bag, its purple material so frayed that some spots are almost translucent. Along with my first pair of tefillin, this bag once belonged to my husband's great uncle—who, it is fair to say, would not be thrilled to know that I, a woman, am the inheritor of these ritual objects. Although it is not prohibited for women to wear tefillin, traditionally only men have worn them, with a few exceptions recorded throughout Jewish history. The Talmud tells us that Michal, the daughter of the biblical King Saul and the first wife of King David, "wore tefillin and the Sages did not protest her action." (BT Eruvin 96A) It is also said that the three daughters of Rashi—the eleventh-century French scholar who wrote the most commonly studied commentary on the Bible and Talmud—wore tefillin, as did Chana Rochel Werbermacher, the Maiden of Ludomir, a Hasidic woman and mystic with a large following in the Ukraine in the nineteenth century, who after a serious illness took on time-bound mitzvot (the commandments that are traditionally obligated only of men) and eventually emigrated to Israel.

Although I know that there have been other women throughout the ages who have chosen to wear tefillin, they have been anomalies; they

probably could all fit into one room. In the past two decades, especially since women have been given the opportunity to become rabbis in the Conservative movement and must, as a requirement for ordination, assume the obligation to don tefillin every morning when they pray, more women have taken on this practice. But I cannot think of more than twenty women of any denomination who regularly wear tefillin and are not Conservative rabbis or rabbinical students.

As I wrap the leather straps around my left arm seven times—seven is the number of earthly spirituality in Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism—I think about the first time I wore tefillin five years ago. The moment felt so right, integrating my feminist and Jewish selves which until that point had been like two magnets repelling one another. I also felt as if I were breaking an ancient taboo. Growing up, I had seen only men wearing tefillin; it just wasn't an option for girls, any more than it was an option for a boy to wear a dress. I played in Little League, wore blue jeans and T-shirts and even studied Bible and Talmud with the boys, but this symmetry of experience did not extend to the realm of Jewish ritual. In the synagogue, I had to sit behind a mechitza, the partition separating men and women, once I became a bat mitzvah (at age twelve, when a girl becomes an adult woman in Jewish law). While my brothers could read publicly from the Torah scroll, lead and participate actively in services, count in a minyan (a quorum of ten required for public prayer) and serve as witnesses under Jewish law, I could not. When they reached the age of bar mitzvah, they received their own pairs of tefillin. I got my ears pierced.

It was not until ten years after my bat mitzvah that I obtained tefillin. My husband, Jacob, gave me his spare set. He showed me how to put them on, and I trembled with both excitement and fear as I followed his directions. How could something that made me feel so whole also make me feel like hiding?

It is most commonly understood that the Rabbis exempted women from performing certain time-bound mitzvot, such as putting on tefillin, because women's time belongs to others—their children and their husbands.

They should not feel pressured to take time away from nurturing others, so the logic goes, in order to fulfill God's will; God will understand. In my own experience, I do need this time set aside for God. I need to reconnect with my spiritual center before facing the day, and I need to make time for this apart from my other responsibilities, especially those related to caring for my children. If I lose myself in all of this caring, what good am I to others? What good am I to myself? What good am I to God? The words of Hillel the Sage echo in my ears: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

As I am saying the Sh'ma—a passage from the biblical book of Numbers which Jews (or, according to Orthodox halakha, Jewish men) are obligated to recite two times each day—my daughter, Michal, joins me on the porch, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Her hair is a mass of chestnut-brown waves flying in different directions, and she is wearing one of my T-shirts, which she has adopted as pajamas. The neck of the shirt hangs loosely, revealing one of her shoulders in a way that reminds me of the fact that she is female, and that some day she may actually look sensual in such a pose. At the age of three, there is nothing about Michal to indicate that she is a girl, except for the fact that she sometimes wears dresses or skirts. Even her long hair does not identify her gender in the *dati* (religious) community, since it is customary not to cut a boy's hair until he is three. Michal has been mistaken for a boy numerous times because she wears a *tallit katan* (the four-cornered garment with *tzitzit*, ritual fringes, traditionally worn under the clothes of Jewish boys and men).

The third paragraph of the Sh'ma contains God's commandment to wear *tzitzit* on the corners of our garments. Once a day during the daylight hours, when we recite this prayer and say the word "tzitzit," which appears three times in the prayer, the traditional practice is to kiss the fringes on the *tallit katan* or *tallit gadol*, the prayer shawl.

Although a woman is not halakhically required to recite the Sh'ma, traditional boys, girls, men and women are expected to recite this paragraph

as part of our daily morning prayers. Somehow, as a child, I never found it strange to recite God's commandment that we wear *tzitzit*, even though it was clear that my female peers and I were not considered obligated to wear them—that we *shouldn't* wear them, in fact.

Women, too, need to be reminded of the mitzvot. *Tzitzit* are a visual reminder of God's will and God's presence in our lives at each and every moment of the day, and I know that I need such a reminder. Even when I am spending the entire day sitting and studying Torah, it is easy, for example, to forget to pray the afternoon prayer service before sundown. When I am spending the day with my young, demanding children, it is even easier to forget to perform certain mitzvot, especially those that must be performed at a certain time. That is one of the rationales for exempting women from time-bound mitzvot—but it also is a strong argument for women wearing *tzitzit*. The mitzvah of *tzitzit* is not an act that comes and goes as the hands of the clock turn; instead, the *tzitzit* serve as a reminder to perform other mitzvot.

My *tzitzit* remind me all day of what I would like to be. They remind me that my body should be sanctified, and that I was created in the image of God. Despite the criticism and even occasional berating I receive, despite the fact that it sets me apart from almost every other religious (and nonreligious) Jewish woman, I wear *tzitzit* to remind me of my responsibilities.

It is fascinating to me that even when Michal is wearing a ribbon in her hair or a feminine outfit with flowers, people assume that she is a boy because she is wearing *tzitzit*. Once, a woman even made this mistake when Michal was wearing a dress. She looked confused when she noticed the *tzitzit* poking out from under Michal's dress, but she quickly decided that someone like me, whose head covering identifies me as an observant Jew, would sooner put a dress on my son than *tzitzit* on my daughter.

I am ambivalent about my decision to give Michal *tzitzit*. While I have adopted for myself practices that cross gender lines in the traditional

Jewish community in which I live, I am not always sure it is fair for me to put Michal in a similar position before she is old enough to understand the implications. For this same reason, I have not pushed her to wear a *kippah* (a traditionally male head covering), although she does own one and often wears it when she prays. Yet I also do not want her to feel that these practices are off-limits to her because she is a girl. I take seriously my responsibility as a Jewish mother to introduce my children to Torah and mitzvot with love, enthusiasm and careful thought, but with a daughter this job becomes more complicated. How can I best prepare Michal to make decisions about her role and practices as a Jewish woman? Traditional norms give her a bias in one direction. Is it wrong for me to balance the scales, to show her that there is an alternative?

I do not want her to grow up feeling, as a Jewish female, resentful of her religion, or marginalized and irrelevant, all of which I often felt as a child and young woman. Even if she will be different, even if she occasionally feels alienated or embarrassed, I hope that the benefit of growing up experiencing the entirety of her tradition—all of the mitzvot—as her own will outweigh the difficulties she will encounter.

As with the *kippah*, I don't force Michal to wear tzitzit: Each morning, the decision is hers. But she sees me wearing them; she sees her father, Jacob, wearing them; and we strongly encourage her to follow in our path. She usually seems happy to say the *bracha* (blessing) and put them on; the joy and pride in her eyes when she kisses the fringes is enough to reinforce my decision. There are some days when she tells me she doesn't want to wear her tzitzit, and on those days I let her get dressed without them. I wonder if her seemingly whimsical decision-making is related to her gender. Perhaps she is becoming sensitive to the comments she hears: "Why is she wearing tzitzit? Girls don't wear tzitzit!" But she never tells me on those mornings that the reason she does not want to wear tzitzit is that she is a girl; within a few days she always wants to wear them again.

I do not want to make religious issues a point of argument between us. I want Michal to have positive experiences and associations with her

Jewish practices, not negative ones. It is my plan to be as flexible with Adin when he turns three—the age at which a son is traditionally given his first set of tzitzit and his religious education begins—even with issues such as tzitzit, which for a man are obligatory. I do not plan to force him to wear tzitzit or a *kippah*, although I will certainly encourage him to. And I imagine he will be easier to convince, since he sees boys and men around him wearing them. I do wonder: Will I indeed keep to this egalitarian ideal, or will I slip into more conventional gender expectations and not allow him to choose?

I reach the point in the Sh'ma in which God commands us, the Jewish people, to wear tzitzit to remind us of the mitzvot (although here, too, the Rabbis have interpreted this to refer to men only). Suddenly, Michal snaps fully awake. "Ima," she orders, using the Hebrew word for mother. "I want to kiss my tzitzit! Wait!"

When Michal returns, I continue reciting the Sh'ma, and when I say the word "tzitzit," we both kiss our fringes. I wonder if my face is glowing with the pride I feel. As I pray, I insert a thought, an unarticulated request to God, that this enthusiasm of Michal's for prayer and mitzvot will continue. She sits beside me until I have finished reciting the Sh'ma, and then, as I recite the Amidah, during which I must stand, she hides beneath my tallit, as I remember having done with my father.

I am uncomfortable with the fact that my most vivid, intense memories of committed prayer are from watching my father, not my mother, putting on tefillin and tallit each morning. Although women are, according to most rabbinic opinions, obligated to pray at least twice a day, most of the women in my childhood community did not pray regularly. Sometimes they made it to shul (synagogue) before the communal prayers were over on Shabbat, but they did not feel obligated to do so. They did feel that it was their duty, however, to have a proper Sabbath meal waiting for everyone when they arrived home.

I am convinced that part of what makes men like my father so committed to praying each morning during the work week is the obligation to

put on their tefillin. Somehow, that physical action gives focus and discipline to the rather intangible act of prayer. I am reassured of my decision to take on these obligations from which I am exempt according to Jewish law, because I, too, am reaching for that increased intensity and focus in my prayer. Michal will have memories of both me and her father praying each morning, swaying back and forth wrapped in our tallitot and tefillin.

As I remove my tefillin and rewrap them in the way that Jacob showed me five years ago, Michal exclaims, “*Ima, I want my own tefillin too!*”

“You’ll get your own tefillin when you become a *bat mitzvah*, when you’re twelve years old, if you still want them then. Do you think you will?” I ask. I know I am being overbearing. I want to make the most of Michal’s burst of enthusiasm for prayer and its rituals, since I know that tomorrow could bring exactly the opposite reaction—but I also don’t want to overdo it.

Michal nods her head. “And I want my own tallit, too,” she says. I can hear the beginnings of an Israeli accent, after only two months of living in this country, creeping into her Hebrew. “When I get to be an even bigger girl, like you,” she adds. I take her into my arms. Maybe what I am trying to impart to my children is actually making an impression. “Of course you can, Michal,” I say as I cuddle her. “Of course you can.”

And then Michal’s had enough. She squirms out of my embrace and instantly becomes occupied, building with some blocks that she finds on the floor from the day before. How different her childhood will be from mine, I think. She will grow up seeing me and other women wearing tallitot and tefillin and reading from the Torah. And she lives in a Jewish country: Hebrew will soon be the language of the street for her, not just words in the Bible. Shabbat will be a day of tangible, visible rest and quiet, with the stores closed and noticeably fewer cars on the road. Judaism—with the intensity and heightened meaning it brings to life, its ancient traditions and slow-paced progress—will surround her. Only time will tell what the effects will be of the choices I make as I raise my children.

As an adolescent, I often saw my parents as either hypocrites or slaves to the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination. What we learned in Jewish day school and sleep-away camp did not mesh with the philosophy of Judaism that my family lived. Our practices at home were more liberal than what I learned everywhere else, and I assumed my parents’ approach was wrong. The Jewish law I learned in school and camp was simplified so that we children could understand it. I did not appreciate then the true complexity of and diversity within the halakhic system—a complexity that my parents’ religious lifestyle represented to a large degree.

The variety I encountered as a child ultimately encouraged me to develop a more accepting attitude toward pluralism in the Jewish world. I understand now that my parents’ practice was not a result of weakness, but of their own struggle to balance tradition and modernity. They often followed more lenient halakhic positions that allowed them to more easily assimilate into the modern world, but allowing oneself more freedom is not necessarily a sign of weakness.

Their choice was in some ways a risky one, as they passed on the religion to their children. A more intellectualized and nuanced religious outlook is sometimes harder to hold on to. I think a simplistic outlook is actually easier to rationalize away, but also easier to practice.

Yet I believe that had I been shown only a black-and-white model, I would not be religiously observant today. The simplistic portrayal of the Jewish legal system that I learned in school backfired—rather than making our religion easier to grasp, it frustrated me. As I discovered life’s complexities, this rigid model no longer worked. Without the alternative of my parents’ model to turn to once I passed adolescence and let go of the grudges and anger, I might well have abandoned the religious lifestyle entirely.

I don’t think we need to present children with the model of Judaism I learned at school. With our own children, my husband and I discuss varying religious observances, and they have been able to apprehend—at their own levels—the concepts of pluralism and individual choice. They

were surprised to discover that not all Jews keep Shabbat, and that even those who do don't necessarily keep it the way we do. But now that they know, they often quote this idea back to me when, for instance, they see Jews driving cars on Shabbat. I have explained to Michal that although most women do not wear a tallit in shul, some do, and that a woman may choose whether or not she wants to wear one; Michal did not have any trouble understanding what I was trying to convey. I have even told her that some people think women should not wear a tallit.

"But that isn't fair!" she said, her hands on her hips. "Right Ima? Right, girls can do everything boys can do? Right, if they want to they can play baseball and Power Rangers? And boys can play with dolls and wear jewelry?"

This was not the first time the topic of gender had arisen.

Unwittingly, Michal was pointing out to me the tension between my pluralism and my feminism. A true pluralist would be able to present all practices as morally neutral, as long as they fell within certain ethical guidelines and no one was forced to comply with the practices. However, as a feminist and a pluralist, I struggle with these sometimes conflicting ideals. On one hand, I believe that women should be given the choice to pursue all endeavors and not be hampered by their gender, biology permitting. On the other hand, I respect the beliefs of others who do not agree with me—as long as the women in that society comply and are not coerced, and, of course, as long as these beliefs are not being forced upon me. I would not advocate forcing my opinions on the women in such a society, although I would advocate dialogue with these women, so that they can see what other options exist. I explained to Michal that not everyone believes that men and women can do all of the same things, and that while this may seem unfair to us, they do not see it that way.

"Although we do not agree with them, we have to respect their beliefs," I told her. "As long as they do not try to tell us what to do, we should not tell them what to do. But we can talk to each other and explain why we do and think what we do."

Sometimes I wonder if wanting to pass on my ideals about religion to my children is a noble cause at all. What I want most for my children is for them to be happy, healthy (both physically and emotionally), moral, self-confident, self-loving human beings capable of appreciating the good in, and loving, others. Their relationship with Judaism, Torah and God should not be biased by my own. I should honor their right to choose their own paths. On the other hand, I want to see them continuing as links in the chain of Jewish tradition. If they turned away from Judaism completely, it is hard to imagine that I would not be disappointed, even devastated. Is this fair?

Trying to negotiate this tension is not a simple matter; I cannot present everything as equal. I cannot pretend—nor do I want to pretend—that I don't care if they abandon religious Judaism altogether. What I can try to do is instill in my children a love for Torah and Judaism, no matter what form it takes—even a completely nontraditional or ultra-Orthodox way of life. I don't want them to see Jewish practice as a burden. I want them to see it as a gift that enhances their lives.

I would be fooling myself if I refused to admit that I would like to see my children adopt the values that I have chosen for myself. I am a pluralist, but not without strong opinions. I would love to see a daughter of mine praying with tefillin. I would love to hear a son of mine tell me he refuses to say the bracha thanking God for not having created him a woman. If that same daughter chose to live as a Buddhist in Tibet, could I be happy for her? If that same son decided to live as an ultra-Orthodox Jew in Boro Park, New York, could I be happy for him? Some lifestyles may be fine for others, but will I be just as open-minded with my own children and the choices they make?

I hope that I will have the strength and clearheadedness to be a role model to my children, to show them a person who has carved out her own way and found her own spiritual route while trying to maintain a respect for others, a sense of communal responsibility and a tie to the past. If I succeed in transmitting to my children these values and a solid

religious education, they will have the tools to negotiate their own religious paths: Whether or not they lay tefillin, eat kosher food or keep Shabbat will be an informed, serious, personal decision.

Recently Michal, now seven years old and my oldest of four (three girls and a boy), has refused to wear a tallit katan underneath her clothing. The fears I had when she was three and I gave her her first pair of tzitzit have become reality. Because no other girls in her school wear a tallit katan, she does not want to. She does not want to be different. I understand that as a second grader Michal has a strong need to fit in. She is not me. She is her own person with her own social consciousness and comfort zone. We have compromised on her at least wearing a tallit gadol during *tefillot* (prayers) at school, but I am not sure she does so every day. It is clear to her what I prefer, but in the end the decision is hers.

I know that asking Michal to wear the tallit gadol may have negative emotional effects on her—because if she does not wear it, she knows that she has let me down, disappointed me. And that is where guilt enters the scene. While I do not want to impose the infamous “Jewish guilt” on my own daughter, I do not see a way out of it at this point. It is impossible to make my own ideology known to my daughter without somehow making her feel worried that she will disappoint me if she makes different choices than I have.

I do not know what the future will bring. Michal and my other daughters may decide to follow in my religious-feminist path, or they may not. Because their current decisions are childhood decisions, subject to change at any given moment, I have not yet truly been put to the test. I don’t know how I will react if Michal continues to choose not to wear a tallit later in her life. Or if she chooses not to read Torah for her bat mitzvah. I will have to try not to let my own ego and ideology interfere with the need to let her decide.

Perhaps the most difficult thing about parenting is being able to let go of the desire to mold our children. They are not clay in our hands; they

are human beings whose needs may be very different from our own. Parenting, it seems, is a lifelong learning experience. That is both its beauty and its challenge.