

Daydreaming About My Daughters*

Lori Lefkowitz, PhD

A baby girl is born. She is welcomed into her Jewish community in a naming ceremony that includes liturgy and rituals that situate her among the great heroines of history and that celebrate her presence and her promise.

When she is weaned, at the *havdalah* ceremony that separates the Sabbath from the work week, she is given her first *kiddush* cup, with the wish that her life overflow with sweetness, and that she find her own sources of sustenance.

She reaches maturity; she stands before a full house in a synagogue and demonstrates her skills; she offers a clever and funny interpretive talk, and she speaks her mind forcefully before the congregation. Her bat mitzvah makes her feel proud of her achievements.

Defining New Traditions

It is true that until recently only boys were welcomed into the covenant with a *brit* ceremony, and even the *bat mitzvah* did not take hold until the middle of the twentieth century. Jewish tradition, like Western tradition, has objectified women. Women in our texts are honored for their beauty or their fertility. Historically, sons have been valued and girls demeaned.

* This article first appeared in *Making Connection Home Study Kit, "Building a Jewish Home."* *Making Connections* is a project of the Jewish Outreach Partnership of Greater Philadelphia. For the entire *Making Connections Kit*, see www.jopp.org.

To this day, women and girls too often feel particularly alienated from Jewish texts and practices. They also feel the impossible pressures of competing demands that they become both brilliant career women and homemakers and mothers, available to their families and Nobel laureates, a baby in each arm, and president of the PTO. Little wonder that Jewish girls are at high risk for eating disorders and other disturbances of the middle and upper middle-classes.

At the same time, Judaism is a deep, rich resource from which to address the problems of our moment, and women are finding ways to mine this resource. The *bat mitzvah* can serve as an antidote to the crisis of self-esteem common in teenage girls. Girls are empowered by and valued for sharing their learning.

As this growing daughter lights the Sabbath candles and recites time-honored formulas, she may develop the habit of using this weekly time to articulate quietly — to herself, to God— her fondest, most secret wishes. It is a therapeutic practice, and it links her to her great grandmother, who may have had a similar habit.

Fighting the Barbie Ideal

At Hebrew school, by encountering the world of Jewish books and languages – Bible, Talmud, mysticism, short stories, and poetry – she expands her horizons and identity. Her friends learn that *Rosh Hodesh*, the ancient festival of the new moon, was classically a woman's holiday and that in recent decades women have formed Rosh Hodesh groups. With the help of their college-aged teacher, they form an adolescent Rosh Hodesh group, and once a month they meet, study a Jewish text that is relevant to their most urgent concerns, talk about peer pressure, body image, grades, parents, sexuality. They munch carrots and raisins and they laugh, lounge around, and play music. They come to rely on each other, and in community they

find the strength to resist the culture that glorifies an empty Barbie ideal. They appreciate themselves and each other as they are.

At Rosh Hashanah, she will think about how God birthed the world, and at Passover she will remember that the prophet Miriam led the people in dance after the parting of the Red Sea. She will marvel that when her people had no time to bake bread they nevertheless did not forget to bring their timbrels. She will look at the bread of affliction and be mindful that she is part of a people with a strong history of commitment to social justice.

Sometimes when she puts food to her lips, she will remember a blessing that invites her to be grateful for all that she has. She will not be afraid to be different because being Jewish has taught her to take pride in her special heritage. And where she finds this heritage to be intolerant—sexist, racist, militaristic—or otherwise offensive to her sensibilities, she will work from within the tradition to revise it, asserting herself as a creative force in the ongoing creation of Judaism.

Reclaiming Judaism

I used to worry that helping our daughters find places of importance in Judaism would feel artificial and that the gestures would seem inauthentic. When I first attended a baby naming for a girl, I remember thinking that no one would ever really take this “girl” ritual as seriously as the *brit*. By the time we named our first daughter in a small community in rural Ohio, it seemed to all present that this ritual had been ordained at Sinai. Years later, when this pre-schooler was asked by her teacher to draw a picture about the Passover story, she drew two women in a river lifting a baby from a basket, with a little girl hiding and watching in the tall grasses at the bank.

This image of women's community and heroism would never have come to *my* mind when I was five years old.

Judaism offers sources of self-esteem and pride, opportunities for developing human relationships in the family and with friends, values education to teach our children to care for the environment, human life everywhere, and themselves. Raising daughters in Judaism can teach them to be at once critical and loving, to take the best of their heritage and reclaim it for themselves by meaningfully incorporating Jewish practices into their lives.

May your daughters and mine grow from strength to strength; may they find each other, learn together, laugh together, and work together. May they know how to love and be loved, and may their smiling, active participation in life bring redemption.