



IN ONE FAMILY,
THE INTERGENERATIONAL SAGA OF

The Bat Mitzvah Dress

by NECHAMA LISS-LEVINSON

I was at home when my mother bought my bat mitzvah dress. It was from Alexanders, a discount department store, whose bargains often seduced my mother into believing that she had filled her needs or ours. I remember the dress exactly. It was long-sleeved, and fell in a perfectly straight line. There was no waist, and practically no bust, offering me little help as my body struggled to develop those features. It had vertical stripes, a white sailor collar, and a ribbon down the front.

I hated it. Even as I write those words, I'm not sure if that's exactly accurate. Rather, the dress, with its classic look and severe lines, just wasn't me. I tried not to think about it. My mother had picked it out. Obviously she thought it was appropriate. My job was to wear it and to be grateful, and not to make a big deal of it by creating a scene.

What was really a big deal was that two girl cousins my age, Robin and Jill, were coming up from Florida, flying all the way to New York on my account. One of our first agenda items was to show each other our dresses. Robin unpacked her suitcase and proudly hung up the dress she had brought for my bat mitzvah. It was a twin of my dress. Only her stripes were pink and white.

I hid my anguish in a frenzy of denial. I knew I wanted a different dress. I didn't want to wear the same one Robin was wearing. But the words stayed stuck in a very tight place deep inside.

Thirty years later, we began to prepare for my older daughter Bluma's bat mitzvah. I took the day off from work. We would spend the day together, looking for a dress

for her bat mitzvah. Clearly, the memories of my own dress propelled me.

Our initial efforts were unsatisfying. The first few stores didn't have anything that Bluma really liked. We decided to take a break, and went off to lunch together. I took her to a fancy restaurant with peach tablecloths, small vases of spring flowers, and frosted candlelight. Even though we hadn't found a dress, Bluma was in heaven. "You know," she said, "this is great. Usually, you're in such a rush, you want me to find something right away. This time, I feel like I can go to as many stores as I want to."

I reflected on her words, once again, admiring her perspicacity. For the millionth time, I regretted my ever-present rushing around, trying to get so much done in so little time—the unrelenting fallout

of being a woman of the '90's. I agreed with her observation. I actually did feel that, for this dress, we could take as much time as she liked. We would go to as many stores as needed. And I didn't feel rushed at all.

At lunch, it was Bluma's idea that we take a break from looking for her dress, and try looking for one for me. I was touched by her thoughtfulness, and together we entered a small boutique. Usually, in a specialty shop, I feel awkward. I experience an anxious urgency to please the shop owner by buying something. I become gawky and adolescent all over again.

But this time it was different. I felt as though I swept into the store with grandeur, rather than slinking in as though I didn't belong. With a sense of joyful accomplishment I announced to the owner, "I need a dress for my



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daughter's bat mitzvah." As I spoke, I proudly put my arm around Bluma, the one whose Jewish coming of age was to be celebrated. I couldn't believe I was the one saying the words "my daughter's bat mitzvah." My eyes filled with tears.

Although we had been preparing for the bat mitzvah in myriad ways, there was something tangible in making this announcement to this store owner, who didn't know me. Yes, I had arrived at this point in my life. My thoughts sped through the time zones of my mind. I remembered my own bat mitzvah. But I also moved forward, imagining myself returning in a dozen years or so, announcing, "Yes, today I need a dress for my daughter's wedding."

The dress I bought for myself for Bluma's bat mitzvah seemed perfect. It was both elegant and jazzy. I was able to express a part of me that I often kept hidden, something to do with sophistication and luxury.

Mme. Sylvia, the couturier, inquired about Bluma's dress, and sent us off to a store which specialized in "occasion" dresses for teen-aged girls. When we entered the store, it seemed as though we had entered the scene of the Sugarplum Fairy. The walls were hung with layers of white and black, festooned by rainbows of pastel colors.

Bluma tried on just about everything in the store. She chose a dress that was silver, black and white, with pizzazz and flounce. She looked radiant. I felt deep satisfaction that she was so happy with her dress, with her body, with her very self.

Three years later, for our daughter Rivka's bat mitzvah, it was time again to look for new dresses. Rivka had been anticipating the day with relish. One of the difficulties of being the second child is having to wait so long and so often. The benefit is that parents have often learned something during all that time. We immediately went to the teen dress boutique, and Rivka chose a beautiful dress in black, with strands of gold and silver thread. She looked stunning, and I think she felt it inside.

As I set out to look for my dress for Rivka's bat mitzvah, I regressed a bit, trying to replicate my mother's bargain shopping, but with the same unsatisfying results. Finally, I realized that I needed help. Again, I took the day off from work, and brought both girls with me, back to Mme. Sylvia. This time, Mme. Sylvia chose a long gown, nothing like what I had initially imagined. I tried it on, and it was breathtaking. We all three said "Yes" at once. It was exactly right.

Why did I love that dress so much, with its long full skirt, crinoline underneath, satin flowers at the hip? How could this material venture represent such a high point in the emotional life of one dedicated to the spiritual aspects of living? The answer lay in a closet filled with memories.

As a child, I remember once choosing a party dress of red chiffon when shopping with my mother and two older sisters, only to be laughed at by the three of them. "Are you crazy?" they asked. "That's so ugly." But in my mind, the

flounces of chiffon were more beautiful than anything I had ever seen.

Years later, buying a prom dress presented no problem. After all, I already had the dress I had worn as a bridesmaid to my sister's wedding. The apricot gown, although lovely, was picked out by my older sister, and matched those of the other half dozen young women chosen as bridesmaids. I wore it to the prom, but never got the pleasure of choosing my own prom dress.

I wish I had a story to tell of my mother and me happily shopping for my wedding gown. I would like to imagine us at the bridal salons, laughing and looking at one another knowingly. In retrospect, the reality seems rather predictable, perhaps even a bit boring. When my oldest sister was married, my father's dress business made a magnificent gown for her, exactly suited to her dignified simplicity. When my middle sister was married, this special gown was refitted for her. Of course, at the time, I considered it an honor for me to be able to wear this gown, when, a few years later, I too married. The gown was beautiful, but nothing like what I would have chosen. Deep inside me still lived the girl who loved the red chiffon flounce.

As I put on my dress for Rivka's bat mitzvah, I laughed at myself. This beautiful dress, crinoline and all, was my gift to myself as a grown woman coming of age. This was my coming out dress. I could be who I was. It was a result of the bat mitzvah dress that wasn't me, the red chiffon I never had, the prom dress that was used, and the wedding gown that was in my sister's image.

I felt I looked beautiful in this dress. But I think that the beauty wasn't really in the dress itself. It had to do with the glow that comes from being who you really are, from being able to finally express your inner self.

As usual, in my relationships with my children, I learn so much by being their mother. Certainly, the real importance of the girls' bat mitzvahs was far removed from choosing a dress. Each of them spent hours involved in Torah study, in addition to a year-long project of charitable activity, and a *tzedakah* program. The meaning of becoming obligated as Jewish adults, and of their development into maturity as Jewish women, far overshadowed the mundane activity of shopping for a dress.

What fascinated me, however, was that in the midst of the important priorities of the bat mitzvah celebration, the relatively small task of buying the dress took on a meaning of its own. For the girls, I think there was an increased sense of ownership of their maturing bodies, pleasure in their ability to make individuated choices, and increased pride in their growing selves. For me, there was a gift that my children often give to me, the possibility to heal and grow as they develop.

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