

The Baby's Bat Mitzvah

Ruchi Koval / Parshat Naso / June 10, 2022

This weekend marks the final bat mitzvah of our family, as our daughter Nomi turned 12 years old on the holiday of Shavuot.

Bnei mitzvah admittedly feel a bit different now that we've married off two kids, but still, the fact that this is the last feels very significant. There are so many things I want my daughter to know, so many ideas and memories I want to imprint into her impressionable mind. Since she's the youngest of seven, thank God, we have all our aggregated mistakes and successes of all previous children weighing on us, almost begging to be rectified with this one last human.

Which is ridiculous, of course. Just as an only child can never be everything his or her mother wants and needs as well as everything his or her father wants and needs, so too the youngest can't pick up all the pieces from all the siblings, learning from their failures and riding on their victories, off into the sunset forever.

But what the youngest of a large family does have is a squad. A team of cheerleaders rooting for her, cheering her on. This is priceless. My own baby sister (now a mother of four) is 16 years younger than me, and she was by far the best thing that happened to me as a teenager, and I had a relatively enjoyable adolescence. I loved picking out her clothing, dressing her up like my personal doll, taking her grocery shopping with me, loving when other shoppers thought she was my daughter. (Now I love it when they think my daughters are my sisters. The irony is priceless.) I photographed her incessantly and showed her off to all my friends.

And to some degree that's how I feel about my baby. My youngest, my little doll, my last bat mitzvah. But of course the stakes are higher. She's my child, not my sibling, and that's not the same. I'm responsible for her growth and development, and I know too much, it's not my first rodeo, or my second or third. I am well aware that issues don't disappear when they leave home at 18, that parenting never stops, just morphs and mutates to an unrecognizable form. I know that motherhood is forever, that I will never stop wondering if I did okay. I live in the present, but also, through my older kids, in the future, and am also fully mindful of the fact that this is not always healthy. My baby has the benefit of an older, wiser mom, and also all the drawbacks of a mom who knows too much, who's been around the block.

All the weddings in the world don't detract from the milestone of my baby becoming responsible for her Jewish choices. The bigness of raising adult kids doesn't eclipse the significance of 6th grade stuff. It's all big, it's all real. It's all mine.

I'm grateful, I'm joyous, I'm calm, I'm scared. And that's the reality of a simcha.