

**The Truth Behind Bar Mitzvah Tears**  
**By Wendy Jaffe**

I don't remember much about my own Bat Mitzvah many years ago, but I do remember this: My father cried as he turned to speak to me after the conclusion of the Torah reading.

I can't remember a single word that he said, not a one, but I do remember his wet eyes and that sound that your voice makes when the words come from your heart rather than your head. He cried when he spoke to my brother at his Bar Mitzvah a year later, when he told my sister how proud he was at her Bat Mitzvah four years after that, and he cried again at my baby sister's Bat Mitzvah thirteen years, and two months after mine. (If you were doing the math, you would have correctly guessed that my mother was VERY pregnant at my Bat Mitzvah. This was very disconcerting because it meant that all of my friends knew that my elderly, thirty-something year old parents were still having sex! Talk about gross.)

Considering that I had only witnessed my father crying one other time during my thirteen years of existence-- the sound of his sobs snuck under the crack of his bedroom door after he learned that his close college friend dropped dead before his 34<sup>th</sup> birthday-- I was stunned by his open display of emotion.

The image of my father crying at my Bat Mitzvah came back to me this month as I witnessed two of my closest friends stand on the bema facing their own children on two different Shabbats. Each of these life-long friends were ambushed by tears as they tried to express to their kids the joy that they have brought into their lives and their dreams for their futures.

My twelve-year-old daughter Rachel, after witnessing these two normally cool, collected women and their husbands become victims of their emotions, wondered why parents always seemed to cry when they spoke to their newly Bar and Bat Mitzvahed children. I didn't know the answer to that question when my father (and it goes without saying my mother) cried at my Bat Mitzvah, but I think I understand it now.

Rachel, this is why parents cry at Bar and Bat Mitzvahs:

We cry because we can't believe we are old enough to have a thirteen-year-old child. And we cry because there are many people that we loved and desperately miss-- grandparents, aunts, uncles, and sometimes parents or friends--who passed away, but should have been sitting among the other beaming friends and relatives that fill the congregation.

We cry because it is one of the few times in your life where nearly everyone who cares about you will be in the same room, at the same time.

We cry because we wasted so much time agonizing about finding the perfect caterer, invitation, DJ, photographer, videographer, choreographing seating charts (Aunt Martha can't sit within 100 feet of her ex-husband and his new trophy wife), finding the perfect mother of the Bat Mitzvah dress (conservative yet fashionable), when it suddenly becomes clear that this is the moment that really mattered all along.

We cry out of happiness that we will no longer have to listen to your endless complaints about attending Hebrew school and have to nag you to study your Torah portion; and out of sadness that yet another chapter of your life is behind you.

We cry because your innocent childhood years are now behind you, and the angst filled teenage years lie ahead.

We cry because we remember all of the moronic things that we did when we were teenagers, which could have ruined or ended our lives but didn't, and we are terrified that you won't be as lucky.

We cry because we can foresee that the opinion of the kids who sit together in the back row of the congregation, whispering during the service, and checking out each others evolving bodies, will matter more to you in a year or two than our opinion.

We cry because we wanted to leave the world to you in a better condition than we found it, and that seems unachievable.

We cry because we are terrified that you might make one seemingly small mistake-forget to wear a seat belt, get in a car with a teen driver who had too much to drink, have sex without a condom, or become addicted to a drug- and forever alter the course of the life that we envisioned for you months before your umbilical cord was cut.

We cry because we are grateful that we live in a country that allows us absolute religious freedom.

We cry because millions of Jews haven't been as lucky.

We cry because even though we spent hours thinking about what we would say to you at this moment, we really just want you to understand how much you are loved, but the words don't exist.

And we cry because we are frustrated that you can't possibly comprehend why this day, this moment, is so compelling. We know you won't get it until you are standing on the bema talking to your own child many years from now. We know this because we didn't get it when our parents stood on the bema of our childhood synagogues with tears in their eyes, with voices overtaken by emotion.

But Rachel I can promise you this: If your father and I are lucky enough to sit in the front row seats reserved for grandparents at your child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah, we will cry again too, thrilled and relieved that you had the opportunity to cry at your own child's Bar Mitzvah.