

The Secret Diary of a Bat Mitzva Girl

By Galina Vromen

The trouble began when my big brother married a *shiksa*. Not only was she Catholic. She was also pregnant – and religious, too. He was just 20 and brilliant. Well, at least he was considered “brilliant” until he married her. After that everyone in our family thought he was dumb. Except me. I still think he’s brilliant. He always has been. It’s just that he’s also horny. He always has been. At least as far back as I can remember. Is that such a crime? I guess even my parents would admit that it’s not a crime. But they think getting a Catholic girl pregnant is a misdemeanor. Marrying her on account of her not believing in abortion is a felony. At least it is in our religion.

But like I said, I think Mort’s brilliant. First of all, Cindy, the girl he married, is sweet in a naive sort of way. They eloped, which pissed off just about everybody. Me included. I mean I could have at least gotten an awesome new dress out of a real wedding. The baby (a girl) is called Ashley and she’s really cute. And Cindy adores Mort. And Mort adores Cindy and is nuts about Ashley. They’re kind of corny together. But if you ask me, adoring someone who adores you - the way Cindy and Mort do - that’s got to be brilliant.

Not that I can speak from experience. I always seem to adore guys who don’t even know I’m alive. And the guys who adore me are su-u-uch geeks. And ugly too. Except maybe for Charlie Ho. He’s really smart but he’s not a geek even

though he's Chinese. Or at least his parents are. He's this amazing athlete at our school, really great at basketball and tennis. Tall and funny. He knows I'm alive but he doesn't exactly adore me. We just kid around together sometimes. We both like Lenny Bruce and hiku poetry. Maybe that's not enough to base a relationship on, but at least it's SOMETHING. I mean I don't adore him. But I could, if he adored me.

My Mom and Dad don't exactly adore each other. Half the time, they don't even talk to each other, especially since Mort married Cindy. They communicate through me. Like, "Ask your father when he wants to have dinner." Or like, "Ask your mother when she wants to leave for Aunt Amy's." Each one thinks it's the other one's fault that Mort married Cindy.

My mother thinks it's my father's fault for not sufficiently educating Mort about screwing around without using birth control. My father thinks that's a load of crap. He's right. I bet Mort knows a lot more about sex than Dad. (I walked in on Mort and Janet Schneider doing it in his bed one afternoon when Mort was 14. I didn't know what all that moaning and groaning was about at the time. I've grown up a lot since then. I should be so lucky – to lose my virginity at 14, I mean. At the rate I'm going, if I get kissed by the time I'm 14, it will be a miracle.)

My father thinks it's all my mother's fault that Mort married Cindy because Mom wouldn't let Mort go on a trip to Israel with Synagogue Network Youth in his junior year of high school. "You were so afraid of terrorist attacks. Now we have a *shiksa* in the family instead. If he'd gone to Israel, maybe he would have

understood what it means to be a Jew.” My mother thinks that’s a lot of crap.

She’s right. No one understands what it means to be a Jew.

This is something that I have been finding out recently because I’m preparing for my bat mitzva. I have been going to bat mitzva class since the beginning of the year. It is soooooo boring. We spend a lot of time talking about what being

Jewish means. Rabbi Susan Fleishman says that being Jewish means knowing about Jewish tradition. Ha. The Orthodox rabbi in town won’t talk to her because she’s both a woman and a rabbi and that’s not part of Jewish tradition. I

happened to point this out in class. Which she admitted was an interesting point.

So then she dropped the tradition bit and talked about Judaism as being flexible and changing with the times. But when I wanted to take pictures in synagogue

after the bat mitzva of my best friend Beth, Rabbi Fleishman stopped me

because she said our synagogue is against taking pictures on the Sabbath. So

much for flexible. I pointed that out, too. She said I’d made an interesting point.

She said my observations helped to show just how complex defining Judaism could be. That was her point, she insisted. Like, right.

There were some kids in class who said being Jewish means being good to other people (Like Maimonides said, the essence of the Torah is do unto others as you would have others do unto you, the rest is commentary). But it seems at the soup

kitchen where I go once a week, there are loads of Christians doing good, too.

What I mean is, Jews don’t have a monopoly on the Golden Rule.

The soup kitchen is the one thing about this whole bat mitzva thing I really like

(other than the presents and the money I’m going to get in the end). We have to

do something of service to the community. It's supposed to make us good adults. Except the adults never do it. Just us kids. Down there in the soup kitchen, you get to see all these down-and-out types. You get to see what REAL life is like. It's so awesome. And it does make me feel lucky for our house, and the pool, for air-conditioning and heating. Most of the time, I wash dishes at the soup kitchen, and it makes me glad that we have a dishwasher at home.

Which may be the whole point of the exercise, really. To make us grateful for our comfortable Jewish homes. When I wash dishes at the soup kitchen with my friend Beth, we make up stories about anyone new who comes in for a meal. Then later, we try to get them to talk about themselves and see how far off our made-up stories are from reality. But some of the types that show up there are a little frightening to talk to, they seem totally flipped out. And a lot of people there don't like to talk about themselves. They yell at us, or dismiss us with a wave of the hand. Which only makes us more curious. We have our own "punishment" for those who won't talk to us. We make up nicknames for them. Like Morty the Molester, Alan the Adulterer, Jimmy the One-Eyed Jailbird, Mark the Mother Killer.

Anyway, as I was saying, no one in our class, including the rabbi, knows how to explain what being Jewish means. One day, when we were talking about it (again) in our bar-mitzva preparation class, someone said that being Jewish means sticking together with other Jews. I was considering mentioning my brother Mort. But I didn't want to get into it. As a matter of fact, it was one of the things a lot of the kids agreed about. Sticking with other Jews. What does that

mean? Like when Jeff Finkelstein cheats on his algebra test, I'm not supposed to tell on him because he's Jewish? Well I did. He got a 99 and I got a 98 and I wasn't going to let him get away with getting the best grade in class just because he cheated. So I squealed on him. He got into a shit load of trouble. So does that mean I'm not Jewish? Like right. I pointed this out to Rabbi Fleishman. She wiggled out of it. Said it's sticking together on other things, as a family. By which she means not marrying *shiksas*, like my brother has.

Tell me about sticking together as a family. One of the things my parents have been talking about behind my back – like I don't know – is whether to invite Mort and Cindy to my bat mitzva. They don't know how they would explain Mort's absence to their friends. But they are afraid Cindy will not know how to behave, not stand up and sit down in the right places during the service. They're afraid she might do or say something that would show just how much of a *shiksa* she is. As my grandmother (she's dead) would have said: "Cindy doesn't know from Jews." I figure, if Cindy had, she probably wouldn't have gotten involved with Mort in the first place.

The problem with inviting Mort and Cindy is that my parents don't talk to Mort anymore. They are super pissed off at him, not only for marrying Cindy, but also for everything he has done since then – quit college, let the baby be baptized. I think he baptized her out of spite. Then Mom and Dad threatened to cut him out of their will. He told them he wishes them a long life and to go fuck themselves. I'm telling you, he's brilliant.

Well, my parents can discuss it behind my back all they want, but Mort is absolutely, definitely, coming to my bat mitzva. First of all, I had to be at his boring bar mitzva eight years ago. I even had to say something nice about him during the ceremony, which was hard since he wasn't nice to me (or anyone else) during that particular period of his life.

Second, I want to get the present he'll have to buy me if I invite him. It will have to be a pretty big one. After all, I'm his only sister. Not that he's got a lot of money for presents these days. Since he quit college, he's been working as a floor manager at K-Mart. Not exactly big bucks. But he's brilliant, right? He'll get me something awesome. I'm sure of it.

Third, his being there will embarrass my parents, They've sort of down-played his marriage. To put it mildly. I think they'd rather die than tell their friends what he's done.

Fourth, he'll look so bad for marrying a *shiksa*, it's sure to make me look good by contrast. I mean, until now I've never been considered the brilliant one. Bratty, yes. Energetic, definitely. Brilliant, no. So now maybe, finally, I'll seem really smart. (I am going to learn my damn Torah portion until I know it backwards and forward and I'll think of something brilliant to say about it. Really). So, anyway, my parents don't know it, but he's going to be there. Invited, personally, by yours truly.

About that Torah portion. I've been learning all that Hebrew stuff by heart for a couple of months. I even have the singsong down quite well. This week I got a

great idea. Really. Since I don't understand what I'm reading, I thought to look it up in English in a Bible so that I would actually know what it is I am going to be saying.

I couldn't quite figure it out, but it was something about Moses marrying a Cushite woman while he was leading the Jewish people through the desert for 40 years and all about how Miriam, his sister, gets upset about it, and how God gets angry at Miriam for badmouthing Moses, and God wants to punish her with some horrible disease but Moses and Aaron beg God not to be so hard on her. In the end she is punished by being banished from the Jewish encampment for a week until she gets a grip. She got the opposite of grounded for badmouthing her brother. Now, that's something I can relate to. I had no idea what a Cushite woman was. I thought maybe it meant "low-class" or something. There's one kid at school, Arie, who comes from Israel and he actually knows Hebrew. So I asked him what "cushite" means and he said black, as in black-skinned. Like Moses married an African American. Or I mean the same thing as an African American because, of course, there weren't any Americans then. The equivalent then. At least I think that's what that portion means. Wow. I mean Moses was the f-cking leader of the Jews and he goes and marries out of the faith! No wonder Rabbi Fleishman has us learn all this stuff only in Hebrew!

But I don't see why she should get out of sussing up to what the Bible really says. So I decided to ask her about my Torah portion. I asked her if Moses marries an African American in my portion. She looked at me funny. Then she sort of mumbled that although "cushite" in modern Hebrew means black-skinned,

in Moses' time it's not exactly clear what a "Cushite" was or who the "Cushites" were.

"But they weren't one of the twelve tribes of Israel, were they?" I asked.

"No, we know they were not one of the twelve tribes," she answered.

"So, like this portion, is saying that Moses married someone who wasn't Jewish, right?" I pressed on.

"Yes, that's probably true," she answered.

"And Moses's sister criticized him for doing it, right?" I asked.

"Yes, she was very critical," Rabbi Fleishman answered.

"And God punishes her for badmouthing him for marrying a *shiksa*, right?"

"Well, that's not the way that passage is usually interpreted," the rabbi answered.

"Traditionally, that passage has been viewed as dealing with leadership issues, establishing that Moses was God's favored. If you read the passage carefully, in context, it shows that God is letting Miriam and Aaron know that they must be subordinate to Moses. But we really don't have time to discuss this further right now. It's not fair to the rest of the class," she added quickly. "We can't just talk about your particular portion."

But I'm not willing to let it go. I go to the rabbi office later to talk to her.

"If Moses can marry a maybe African American, why can't my brother marry a Catholic? Especially if God has nothing against it."

"That was then, this is now. I don't think you can just literally take everything from the Torah, it has to be viewed in context," she says and then cuts our

conversation short because she has a meeting with Nora Cohen, who is organizing the synagogue's annual tag sale.

So now I am wondering about all this. Then was then, now is now, she said.

Can't take it all literally? Ha, tell that to the ultra-Orthodox. And who's to say what part to take and what not? *Payot*, yes. But *shiksas*, no? Doesn't make sense to me. Know what I mean?

Anyway, I'm thinking of showing the passage to my parents. Like, get a grip folks. But they'll probably only get angry at me for bothering them. They're really busy these days. They've been trying to hire a photographer and decide on a caterer. And then there's the fighting over the guest list.

I told them I want to invite Mort and Cindy and Ashley. My parents keep saying, "We'll see," which is usually their way of saying "no." But I'll show them. I called Mort this week and made him promise to come if he got an invitation. He said he would if it was an official one. I get to invite some of my own friends to the bat mitzva and I address those envelopes myself. I'm inviting Beth and Charlie Ho and a bunch of others. (I think it's okay to invite Charlie Ho. He was at Beth's bat mitzva and I've seen him at a couple of other ones, so I don't think being at a Jewish service freaks him out or anything.) I gave my mother the name of three friends I'm not inviting and sent the invitation to Mort, Cindy and Ashley instead. I addressed the envelope in my mother's handwriting, which I'm very good at since I'm always practicing forging her signature so I can use her credit cards (Don't

worry, I only forge it with her permission – except when it comes to the sick notes I write to the school nurse after I've skipped out on a day of school).

So, anyway, happy bat mitzva to me. The day finally arrived. I missed Mort and Cindy's entrance. I don't know whether they came in when Aunt Amy took me aside to the vestibule of the synagogue to hand me an envelope, explaining to me in conspiratorial tones that she was giving me a bigger check than she gave my cousin Sarah a couple of years ago because I've been such a wonderful niece and Sarah never calls on her birthday. Or maybe it was when I was in the bathroom trying (again) to safety pin down my bra straps so they wouldn't show when I was up on the *bima*. (Though I wouldn't mind if Charlie Ho happened to notice that I'm wearing a bra these days, but still, it's embarrassing to have it show on the *bima*). Anyway, by the time I came out of the bathroom, Mom had on the sort of wobbly, distracted smile she puts on when something both unexpected and unpleasant happens. Next to her I saw Mrs. Cohen who seemed about to head for me when I noticed my brother in a corner, talking to the cantor and looking bored. I dove off in his direction, almost toppling him over with a big hug.

"Hi brat," he smiled.

"Hi big brat," I retorted.

"Excuse us, cantor," he said, "I need to have a word with the birthday girl." He grabbed my elbow and took me aside.

The moment we were out of the cantor's earshot, the smile disappeared. "I can't believe you didn't tell Mom or Dad that we were coming," he said.

"But you promised me you would come."

"Yeah, but I assumed you'd tell them you were inviting us and they had agreed."

I shrugged. "What does it matter. I wanted you here. You're here. That's what matters."

He shook his head and rolled his eyes upwards. "I have half a mind to leave."

"Don't," I said, grabbing his arm. "Please don't. I want you and Cindy and Ashley to be here. And this is MY party after all."

"Okay, okay. But you sure know how to create one hell of an uncomfortable situation," he hissed.

"That's rich. I'm the last one you should blame. You're the one who eloped and Mom and Dad are the ones who have decided not have anything to do with you or Cindy. I'm the one who's trying to make everything all right. Really."

"Sure, right." He smiled ruefully at me. "Brat," he said, tousling my hair.

"Stop it, you're ruining my hair."

"Like I said: brat," he tousled my hair again.

I stuck out my tongue and turned away.

"Hey, good luck up there," he called after me.

I beamed him back a smile. "Thanks, big brat."

People were beginning to take their seats in the hall and the rabbi came to herd me and my parents up to the *bima*. Sitting up there during the service, I had plenty of time to get good and nervous. I once read that the way to deal with

stage fright is to imagine everyone in the audience is naked. But with my grandfather and Aunt Amy sitting right up there in the front row, I decided that I would rather suffer from stage fright than throw up imagining how ugly they must look naked. Aunt Amy's thighs probably ripple like a wind-swept lake. Grandpa's dick probably looks like a dead chicken neck. (Sorry, but that's how my mind work. Barf, barf.) I was in the middle of trying to redirect these impure thoughts of mine, trying to think about Moses instead, and imagining how much he must have looked like my grandfather – dressed and naked – when I heard Rabbi Fleishman call my name and invite me to read from the Torah.

If I say so myself, I read my portion flawlessly. My “amen” at the end was in gratitude for getting it all out of the way. Finally. Months of work. Gone, finished, done with. Then the rabbi asked me if I wanted to say a few words to the congregation. I nodded and went up to the podium again. I glanced at my parents, sitting behind me on the *bima* with self-satisfied smiles on their faces. The moment had arrived for the long suffering folks to get their official gratitude from the bratty, ungrateful twerp– your truly, of course. “Thanks to all of you for coming to my bat-mitzva,” I said. “And thanks to my parents for paying for all of the great food you’re going to eat later... and for putting up with me for the past 13 years,” I added, getting a laugh from the audience.

“I want to talk to you a bit about the portion I just read,” I continued. “Frankly, most of the time, the Bible seems to me to be full of stories I can’t really relate to. But I must have lucked out, because the portion I got really speaks to me. I don’t know how many of you understood the Hebrew text – I bet not too many of you. I

didn't understand it either until I decided to look it up one day. And I found out that it is about the reaction of Miriam and Aaron, Moses's sister and brother, when they find out that he has married a Cushite woman, in other words, a non-Jew. Miriam criticizes this marriage, so God strikes her with leprosy. Then, after Moses appeals to God, He lessens the punishment and orders that she be ostracized from the Israelite's camp for seven days. There are various interpretations of this story, as Rabbi Fleishman has pointed out to me," I paused and smiled at the rabbi. She smiled and nodded back.

"But I have my own interpretation. And it has to do with my brother, who, I want you all to welcome here today. Mort, stand up."

Mort looked mortified, and keeping his head down, lifted himself half way up off his chair before immediately sitting down again.

"That's my brother, for those of you who don't know him. If you are wondering why he is not sitting in the front row, where close family usually sits, it is because he's my surprise guest here. You see, my parents never invited him to come." My father suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"That's because, like Moses, Mort married someone who's not Jewish," I continued. Her name is Cindy. She's the woman sitting next to him, with their baby, Ashley.

"Now the thing about my portion is, I don't see why Moses could marry a Cushite and have God punish Miriam because she didn't approve but when my brother marries Cindy, my parents - and I guess a lot of you sitting here - think it's some big scandal.

“Everyone thinks kids of my generation are ignorant. That we don’t know anything, that we are forgetting Jewish tradition. But if we bother to actually read the Torah, and to ask uncomfortable questions about certain parts, we are going to find parts of tradition that you don’t really want us to talk about. Or we might end up changing the interpretation from the one you would like us to adopt. Who is to tell us what part to emphasize, what part is for our times, what part is not? The truth is - and I’ve been reading quite a bit of the Torah recently to get ready for this little lecture I’m giving you now - as far as I can figure out, marrying *shiksas* is part of Jewish tradition. Lots of Jews in the Torah did it. Sure those were different times. But still. Who’s to say that marrying a *shiksa* is less part of Jewish tradition than keeping kosher? How do you judge? By how many rabbis tell you to keep kosher? Or by how many Jews over the course of Jewish history have married *shiksas*? I bet more Jews have married *shiksas* than have kept kosher. Do you see what I mean?” I glanced at Rabbi Fleishman, who had a don’t-go-there look on her face. My parents looked dazed and seemed to be searchingly distractedly for familiar faces in the audience. I wondered if they were listening to me. It was time to get their attention.

“Mom, Dad, Could you please come here and join hands with me.”

I could tell my parents were startled, but they obediently rose and stood by my side.

“I want you to repeat the following words after me: Marrying a *shiksa* is okay. Moses did it. Mort did it. God punished Miriam for badmouthing Moses for it.”

My mother bowed her head. Her bland smile vanished and horror, then mortification, took its place. She looked as if she was about to cry. My father just glared at me. Then he decided to make it into a comic moment. He turned to the audience, "Didn't I always tell you, I've got kids with guts." And shaking his head, like he was just playing a good sport, he turned to me and said, "Whatever you want, dear."

"Good," I answered, ignoring his condescending tone and remaining dead earnest. "So, say the words."

"What were they again?"

"Marrying a *shiksa* is okay. Moses did it. Mort did it. It's okay. God punished Miriam for badmouthing Moses for it."

In a tone that left no one in the audience in doubt that he was merely indulging me, he repeated the words.

"Your turn, Mom." I said. She was crying softly, her head still down.

"Mort, come up here," I said. I couldn't believe I was doing what I was doing. But now I was on a roll. Hell, if I'd been born Christian, I might have considered becoming a television evangelist.

Mort remained glued to his chair. "Hey, Mort," I said. "Come up here. Come on, let's go. Get yourself up here."

He shook his head at me. Big brat was going to ruin this all, damn it.

But just then, Cindy touched his shoulder lightly, pushing him to go.

“Come on Mort, do this for you, for Cindy, for Ashley,” I said. Cindy nodded at him. Hesitantly, he rose and then in a half-trot came up to the *bima*, almost tripping over the top step.

“Mort, hold Mom’s hand.” Mom was holding a handkerchief in one hand and crying into it quietly. He moved his hand over her other hand, which hung limply at her side, and she let him grasp it. “Okay, now say it, Mom.”

She looked up at Mort, her face was suddenly washed with love. I could tell she wasn’t thinking of all the people in the audience any more. She could barely force her eyes from his face to glance back at me. “What was it I’m supposed to say?”

“Marrying a *shiksa* is okay. Moses did it. Mort did it. It’s okay. God punished Miriam for badmouthing Moses for it.”

In a daze, she turned back to look at Mort. “It’s okay, Mort,” she whispered. “It’s okay, Mort.” Mort put an arms around her in a hug. I could see he was trying not to cry. With his other arm, he motioned me to come over to him. He clasped my neck in a hug that was clumsily like a neck hold. We just stood there in a huddle. Dad hovered over us uncomfortably, trying to usher us off the *bima*. The embarrassed silence of the audience oozed around us.

Suddenly, someone in the audience began to clap. I looked out from under Mort’s armpit. It was Charlie Ho and he was beaming at me. “Mazal tov,” Charlie yelled out. “Mazal tov to the bat mitzva girl.” He clapped wildly, put his fingers to his mouth and whistled with all his might.

Didn’t he know you’re not supposed to clap and whistle at services? People around him tittered uncomfortably, then, slowly, as he kept clapping with

abandon, an elated smile on his face, they began to join him, first hesitantly, but then with added conviction. Suddenly the hall was filled with their clapping and to their din of mazel tovs, we descended the *bima*.

Over the canapes afterward, no one said a word about my little ceremony. But believe me, Charlie Ho was one guy I definitely danced with at my disco party that night.