Higher hopes for peripheral girls

THIS WEEKEND it is my daughter Charlotte's bar mitzvah, or coming of age. In traditional Jewish law this occurs at the age of 12 for girls, 13 for boys. Although there have been some major changes in the ways in which girls are treated in Judaism over the past couple of decades I am left pondering how far they have gone and how much further they might be allowed to go. I have been thinking about this both in the context of the current debates about Judaism, given the recent inauguration of the new Chief Rabbi, and of my perennial interest in women and their education.

From a personal point of view, there clearly have been dramatic changes.

When I was 12, no consideration was given to any kind of religious "rite of passage" or any kind of major secular celebration for girls. But nowadays there is a major debate in traditional orthodox Judaism, as well as in reform or liberal strands, as to what kind of education girls should be given in order to make a contribution to both the spiritual and ceremonial aspects of Jewish life.

However, much of that debate is narrowly conceived and begs many questions about the similarities and differences between girls and boys with respect to their public as well as their private roles in Judaism. Some argue for girls to have a religious ceremony at the age of 13, like boys do; others argue that girls should get a similar ceremony, but still at 12. Yet others have become more circumspect about the involvement of women or girls in any communal religious rituals and seem to be trying to confine women to relatively traditional home-based activities.

MIRIAM DAVID

For example, about 18 months ago the then head of Jews' College – the higher education college for the training of Rabbis and others in Judaism – set up an organisation called Traditional Alternatives. By doing so, it appeared that he was keen to initiate some debate. But he has been much more muted since his inauguration. He has most recently argued that Jewish education is the key to understanding, and therefore acceptance, of a separate and different position for girls and women.

It was brought home to me recently that this is an international issue. I was invited to be one of the international guest speakers at the second Spanish and Portuguese annual meeting of sociologists of education in Barcelona. The general theme of the conference was on multi-culturalism and education, but I was asked to address this group of about 100 professional sociologists on the theme of gender and education.

I was most impressed that they would give such serious consideration to a topic that often remains on the margins in British contexts, including in education itself. They had gone to the trouble to invite me and provide for me, despite the fact that I do not speak any Spanish at all. Few of them were academically conversant in English. My lecture had to be simultaneously translated, an experience that I certainly had not had before. And I must say that it is most strange and quite difficult to carry out a sustained dialogue, let alone debate, in this manner.

In any event, the situation made a marked contrast to my Northern and Eastern European experiences. There were other major contrasts, too. The audience in Spain was largely male, with a smattering of women, some of whom had initiated my invitation. I was also invited to meet in a more informal seminar setting, where we discussed issues of strategy as well as analysis.

Here I was seen as someone from a more "advanced" society, one with masses of experience to impart. This came as something of a surprise to me since it does not feel as if our efforts have been particularly influential. But, as they noted, Spain and Portugal are "on the periphery" and have only just begun to get from under the yoke of Franco and become a developed economy with all that that implies.

In the context of a mixed audience, it is usually the case that one will meet with more cautious and critical comment than one might in a women-only setting. And so it proved to be. However, interestingly, the criticisms were not directed at my analysis but at my overarching pessimism about future prospects. I have been relying on British evidence for the most part, or to the United States, rather than to other parts of Europe. I was concerned to raise questions of gender, not only with reference to girls' curricular opportunities, but also in terms of girls' access to equal opportunities in adult life, given family responsibilities. I also raised the topic of the parallel changes in family life and their implications for the future of and in education.

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I was reassured to learn that in Europe the future looks rather more rosy than it does from here. Debates about educational and occupational opportunities for women, including consideration of the need for social support for childcare and other family responsibilities, are wider. I was provided with a wealth of evidence about how parents, for example, are able to participate equally in their children's education and in forms of paid employment. In Europe, it seems, both boys and girls are learning to share the responsibilities of family and public activities, including paid employment.

It may be that my pessimism is misplaced and derives from a peculiar conjuncture of experiences. However, on my way to Barcelona a little incident confirmed me in my view of traditional British conservatism. When I presented my ticket to the British Airways official, he demanded also to see my passport. This latter is in my married name, whereas my ticket was made out in my professional (maiden) name. He nearly refused me my flight until I managed to produce confirmatory evidence of both. His parting shot was that in future I should travel with my marriage certificate as "proper" proof. Neither Spanish nor British passport controls insisted on seeing both passport and ticket; nor did either do more than glance cursorily at the passport. So is it British privatisation that is in the vanguard of tradition?

Tailormade

DON'S DIARY