My Mother’s Hats

Michelle Lerner

My mother’s hats sit in boxes on the shelf
above the dresses and the coats
in her closet.
Every year on Rosh Hashanah
she would climb the stepping stool and take them down,
the blue hat in the round box
the black one in the square box
the gray hat with the buckle
on its band.
We would try them on, her and me,
and match them to our dresses,
the dresses that we picked so carefully
to look our best for shul.
This is what I thought
of Rosh Hashanah as a child:
the day of hats.
When we would get to synagogue,
we’d gawk
as the women walked the aisles
trailing fur coats and Gucci bags,
on every head a hat.

I don’t think that I have worn a hat
in twenty years,
though I have peeked at the boxes
on the shelf
when visiting my mother.
She never goes to shul anymore
or has a reason to get them down.
My mother visited me this year
on Rosh Hashanah
and we went to shul together,
to my shul
my new synagogue
the first that I have joined as an adult.
I wore plain black pants and a button-down shirt,
and my mother wore slacks and a sweater.
There was not a hat, or a fur coat, in the room.
“How nice,” my mother said,
“that your synagogue feels
so much like a home,
that the people are
so down to earth
that they welcome you
so completely.”
I agreed, of course, and think it’s true,
but I think as well
of the hats on the shelf
the stepping stool
in the corner
underneath them
and wonder if there will ever be a reason
to take them down again
while my mother is still here to wear them.

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