



HOW WOMEN AND GIRLS REVITALIZED JEWISH RITUAL

by RONI HANDLER and LORI HOPE LEFKOVITZ

The image of Jewish ritual life in former times is often gender-differentiated: hair-covered women lighting candles; tallit-wrapped men waving the *lulav*; men populating the *shul* and *yeshiva*; women presiding over the kosher kitchen. There is an ancient mandate that each generation participate in the making of Torah for itself. In our times, this mandate has found its fullest response in the enfranchisement of women, as Judaism has evolved in tandem with a non-negotiable secular ethic of egalitarianism and inclusiveness. That which began as an effort to redress women's ritual inequality has had the startling effect of reinvigorating Jew-

ish ritual practice more generally.

The first American *bat mitzvah* (Judith Kaplan's, in 1922) challenged the separate spheres of Old World Judaism, but as late as the 1980s, we still wondered if baby naming ceremonies for daughters (the *simchat bat* or *zevet habat*) would ever attain the level of religious significance as the Torah-ordained *brit milah* (circumcision) for boys. Families nevertheless thoughtfully created welcoming rituals (from tallit wrapping to foot washing), wrote personally meaningful naming prayers, and unearthed appropriate song and liturgy from earlier generations. Among the first traditions revived by Jewish feminism was the ancient Festival of the New Moon, a mini-Rosh Hashanah associated with women's piety in midrashic literature and, traditionally, distinctively observed by Jewish women. Rosh Hodesh groups, the Jewish version of consciousness raising groups, met to study, eat, talk and sanctify the coming month in women's community. These initiatives fueled creativity and scholarship. Bringing color and decorative arts to the fabrics for *kippot* and tallitot, these

women forever changed the look of liberal Jewish ritual. Decades later, in response to the identified needs of adolescent girls for esteem-building systems, Kolot developed Rosh Hodesh groups for girls, a program now promulgated by Moving Traditions.

Scholars recovered women's non-canonical traditions from Jewish communities around the world. These included a North African custom of *Chag Habanot* (Festival of the Daughters), embedded in Chanukah, on Rosh Hodesh. As Rabbi Jill Hammer describes it, the heroism of Judith (whose story, like that of the Maccabees, is found in the *Apocrypha*) was celebrated; girls received presents and prayers and concluded any lingering quarrels. This unique occasion for girls balanced the otherwise all-male resonances of Chanukah's more familiar stories about warriors and the Temple priesthood.

Until Rabbi Debra Orenstein developed her *Lifecycle* volumes in the 1990s (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), few of us knew that women in the *shtetl* recycled the *etrog* from *Sukkot* for fertility rites, used the wimple that binds the Torah as a focus object during labor

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and routinely recited *techines* (Yiddish prayers). Rabbi Nina Cardin taught us that the *rebbetzin* might offer a red stone and blessing to a woman hopeful of pregnancy. Women began to ritually acknowledge other life stages and transitions. Savina Teubal's *simchat chochma* (the wisdom celebration) included wearing a *kittel* (the shroud that makes us mindful of mortality on *Yom Kippur* or *Pesach*), tree-planting, Torah study and song. Debbie Friedman's *Lechi Lach*, invoking Abraham and Sarah's setting forth, was written for the occasion and is now a staple of contemporary ritual. More recent innovations include coming out and gender-transition rituals.

Scholarly reconsiderations of Jewish sacred texts reminded us that women in the Torah flourished tambourines to honor God's miracles, that Jephthah's daughter and her companions mourned for women's losses four days a year, and that Miriam — whose name contains the Hebrew for "sea" — presided over water miracles from watching Moses at the Nile to leading song at the parting of the Red Sea. Jewish lore includes "Miriam's Well" filled with life-saving water. The decorative tambourines as well as Miriam's Cups that now grace some contemporary *seder* tables restore an ancient female presence to contemporary Jewish ritual practice.

As Miriam's Cup — filled with spring water to commemorate miracles past and present — balances Elijah's wine-filled Cup and its

message of future redemption, Miriam has become Elijah's analogue at other ritual occasions that have classically invoked the prophet, such as at the *bris*, where Miriam, like Elijah, may now find a chair awaiting her arrival. Miriam, like Elijah, is sung to at *havdalah* (with new lyrics by Rabbi Leila Gal Berner), and because this ritual marks separation (between Sabbath and workdays), *havdalah* has become a time when families, recalling that Abraham had a weaning ceremony for Isaac, might add blessings to acknowledge this important transition in the life of nursing mothers. Ritual immersion in the *mikveh*, once rejected by liberal Jews because of outmoded associations with women's "ritual impurity," has been reclaimed for the healing of physical and psychological damage, in both the anticipation and conclusion of cancer treatments and before weddings and graduations. The Fast of Esther, which precedes Purim, has been similarly invested with contemporary purpose. Mindful of details in Esther's story, the Mistabra Institute for Jewish Textual Activism called attention to the international crisis of trafficking in women; Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) attends to the plight of the *agunah* (the "chained" woman who requires a legal divorce); and Kolot is developing *Ta'anit Esther* as a Jewish Day for Social Justice to annually support the lifesaving work of a contemporary Queen Esther.

Jews' devotion to and thoughtful engage-

ment with Judaism revitalizes the tradition and enhances our lives. In recent decades, women ritual experts have been among our best teachers in adapting the tradition to new circumstances. For example, the Jewish wedding, ancient and beautiful, implicitly sanctifies an intention to be fruitful. Since modern Jews often intentionally delay bringing children into the family, Rabbi Nina Cardin has suggested including the *Sheva Brachot* in *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals) on the *Shabbat* when a couple makes this momentous decision. In keeping with the custom of some Ashkenazi families to add a candle to the *Shabbat* candelabrum with each birth, Cardin suggests that upon conception, an unlit candle be placed there, ritually anticipating life potential. In the sad event of a miscarriage, the candle is lit during the week and burned down, a *mini-yahrzeit* candle, correcting traditional Judaism's ritual neglect of this devastating experience. More happily, when a baby arrives, the candle becomes a weekly *Shabbat* addition.

These rituals as well as many more are available on www.ritualwell.org, an archive of contemporary rituals sponsored by Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies. From rituals for the environment to getting a driver's license to prayers for the Thanksgiving table, men and women have contributed strategies for revitalizing Jewish practice and honoring life. ■