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NEW JEWISH RITUAL

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NEW JEWISH RITUAL

Although it is not uncommon to perceive age-old Jewish rituals as rooted in stone or in Sinai, all ritual was at one point new. Whether inspired by historical events, communal circumstance or spiritual osmosis from surrounding cultures, Jewish rituals have emerged and evolved as a means to connect with history, with community or with notions of the Divine. For this reason, new rituals are a barometer of both the vibrancy of Jewish life and the particular dynamics of the community at the time in which they emerge.

This is one reason why it is useful to take a closer look at new rituals and the retrofitting of existing rituals in recent years. As Judaism continues to reshape itself to the contours of contemporary life, ritual has become one of the most compelling facets of modern Jewish expression. What do new rituals say about the needs and values of segments of the American Jewish community? How do they reflect the ways in which groups that were marginalized in previous generations are newly energized and empowered? How do new rituals reflect the contours of a community in transition? In what ways do they reveal a new yearning for meaning and a desire to connect to community and to tradition?

The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore the many facets of new ritual, from theory to inception to widespread promulgation. They examine the ways in which contemporary rituals open up new vistas for understanding and experiencing Judaism, and they reflect on the phenomenon of Jews empowering themselves to create and contribute meaningfully to the trajectory of Jewish tradition. Taken together, the articles reveal the vibrancy of the contemporary Jewish experience as it continues to adapt to the unique freedoms and possibilities of American life.

Eli Valley
Eli Valley

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INVESTING IN TOMORROW'S RITUALS: A DIALOGUE

by FELICIA HERMAN and RACHEL BRODIE

New rituals often emerge through a combination of grass roots ingenuity, inspiration and collective will — but for rituals to attain broader acceptance, it helps to have resources and support. With this in mind, we asked the directors of Natan and Jewish Milestones to discuss the process of formulating and funding new rituals aimed at empowering individuals and enriching Jewish life.

Jewish Milestones is a nonprofit organization focusing on making lifecycle rituals accessible to a broad spectrum of Jews. Natan, a consortium of young philanthropists that favors innovative Jewish programming, is now supporting Jewish Milestones through its “Advancing Inclusiveness in the North American Jewish Community” grant committee.

FELICIA HERMAN OF NATAN:

I'm glad that we have the opportunity to talk about philanthropy and funding organizations like Jewish Milestones. It's exciting to talk about this with you as a new Natan grantee, because I think that funding access to Jewish rituals needs a new conceptual framework that I really learned about through talking to you during the application process.

What we loved about Jewish Milestones is that while your work definitely falls into Natan's grantmaking category of making the Jewish community more welcoming and accessible to traditionally marginalized groups, the conceptual framework that underpins your work has helped enrich our thinking about “inclusiveness” more generally. In particular, you start from the data that shows that at any point in time, most American Jews don't belong to synagogues. Yet, as you've shown, when it comes to marking the important moments in their lives, many wish to do so through Jewish rituals. And so you truly meet them where they are — outside of traditional institutional frameworks like synagogues — and work with them one-on-one, rather than undertaking the difficult (albeit important) job of trying to change the institutions themselves.

This is a really simple conclusion, in a way. Rather than saying “people aren't joining synagogues — let's fix synagogues!” or “people aren't joining synagogues — they need more Jewish education,” you just accept the

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I like that idea of looking at Jewish life today from 15,000 feet.

reality and work with it. How did you come to this conclusion? I imagine you must have thought about it for a good long time.

RACHEL BRODIE OF JEWISH MILESTONES:

As a Jewish educator living in the Bay Area, where fewer than 20 percent of the Jews identify as synagogue members, I was facing the reality, as you described it, on a daily basis. In fact, the catalyst for creating Jewish Milestones was my own experiences with self-described “bad Jews.” By this they mean that they don’t follow Jewish ritual laws, such as keeping kosher or attending prayer services regularly — not, as I am quick to point out, that they are especially unethical, selfish or apathetic. These Jews felt lost, unworthy or unwelcome in traditional Jewish institutions, never more so than when they expressed interest in bringing Judaism into their lives at key lifecycle moments. Jewish Milestones was born of a desire to meet the needs of *any* Jew, regardless of affiliation, who wishes to access his or her heritage at life’s most critical junctures, such as the experience of birth and death.

Helping Jewish institutions be more welcoming is a critical task, and one that, under the banner of “outreach,” has garnered significant communal resources. Yet, if the revitalization and sustainability of Judaism and the development of positive Jewish identity is your ultimate goal, then one of the significant limitations of an institution-based strategy is that it comes from a very narrow and particular view of what it means to be a “good Jew” — which, even in its broadest sense, is usually defined by affiliation with Jewish communal organizations.

The funders of Jewish Milestones don’t see inclusivity as a one-way street, a way to encourage those on the outside to come inside. Rather, they look at Jewish life today

from 15,000 feet and see Jews all across the landscape, some affiliated, some not, and then promote projects that will help *any* of these Jews access meaningful experiences of Judaism. Promoting inclusivity then means encouraging Jews to feel included in *Judaism* — not by privileging those who do so only within specific contexts, but by helping all Jews become insiders to the tradition.

FH: I like that idea of looking at Jewish life today from 15,000 feet. One of the real intellectual pleasures of working on the funding side is having access to so many ideas all at once through the applications we get each year and through the various organizations (40 this year) that Natan members decide to support. It definitely gives one a view of the landscape that is rare and very inspiring.

So from that vantage point, it strikes me that many of the organizations that Natan members are identifying as worth building for the future are organizations that empower individual Jews to make their own Jewish choices. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer of Mechon Hadar has a new book coming out on this very topic, *Empowered Judaism* (Jewish Lights, 2010). That’s helped to crystallize my thinking on this topic.

With access to resources (and the internet makes providing access and retrieving information easy and cheap in a way that is historically unprecedented), and often with a bit of guidance from people who know Judaism well, individual Jews can construct Jewish lives and Jewish communities of their own. One certainly sees this in the independent *minyan* phenomenon, which is primarily what Elie discusses in his book. But it’s a common way of thinking among many organizations that Natan supports and other organizations founded in the last decade or so. These organizations seem to be in the business of providing people with access to Jewish content and

ideas — to Jewish options — but they’re pretty hands-off about the ways that users opt to utilize that content. This is not a new dynamic, though it is a complex one for a religion so associated with law and authority.

I’m wondering how this plays out at Jewish Milestones. You are definitely empowering users to make Jewish rituals their own. But I’m wondering what the role is, then, of authority. Where do you draw the line — if you draw lines at all — on empowering people to build their own Jewish rituals? What’s the role of the rabbi in this scenario? What’s the role of the community?

RB: You’ve identified the top two issues we wrestle with, as do those who are challenged by our mission.

Most of the people we work with are surprised to learn that they are considered “unaffiliated” or thought to be lacking in Jewish community. In our experience, the individuals and families we work with will tell you that they are part of Jewish communities. As one of our clients described it, the difference is that “we’re not part of the official one: capital T, capital J, capital C [The Jewish Community].” These families find Jewish community elsewhere: through a rich network of friends and family; at the Jewish day school their child attends; in their local Jewish Community Center; through involvement with Jewish cultural and philanthropic organizations.

The boundaries of what constitutes any community — not just Jewish — have never been more dynamic. This itself challenges the very notion of behavioral conformity as an essential element of community. It also undermines the traditional perception of authority. In our work, when describing the boundaries of what can or cannot be done, and by whom, we acknowledge that authority is in the eye of the beholder. This is true not only for those who would follow authority but also for those who hold communal leadership positions. As my colleague, Maggid Jhos Singer, a congregational leader who is not an ordained rabbi, says, when people challenge him with “where do you get the authority to do X, Y, or Z?” he answers, “From the people who choose to be part of my congregation.”

Does this mean that anything goes? No. Our goal is to help our clients make informed decisions. We are clear that, for example, while Jewish law does not preclude a do-it-yourself baby naming, when it comes to conversion or formal divorce rituals the repercussions of not submitting to authority can be far-reaching. We have come to see that the question of “will that count (as a bar mitzvah, a Jewish wedding, etc.)?” is better understood as “who will see this as legitimate and who will not? And why does or doesn’t that matter to me?” ■



An invented Jewish ritual is a practice, liturgy or object that comes about at a particular time and setting because something has changed, something is missing or something needs marking or remembering.

THE COURAGE TO REINVENT JEWISH RITUAL

by VANESSA L. OCHS

THE STRUGGLING SUKKAH

My family's *sukkah* is one mopey-looking structure: a set of metal rods that must be augmented by duct tape (because they never interlock as

easily as they are supposed to), and lengths of blue plastic tarp that hook onto shower curtain rings. No matter how many strands of popcorn and cranberries we hang, no matter how thickly we overlay cornhusks and suspend autumnal fare from the farmer's market on bamboo poles, the resulting structure always feels more like a cross between a Christmas tree and a bloated beach cabana. For my tastes, both spiritual and aesthetic, this may constitute a "kosher" *sukkah*, but it

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does a shabby job celebrating the harvests of our lives and evoking divine shelter. When we host our guests alongside the invoked spirits of our ancestors, both crowds are being shabbily accommodated.

I got used to thinking that we would just have to make do. But then I spent an afternoon recently in a workshop called “On the Art of Ritual” with artist Allan Wexler at the Jewish Theological Seminary, held in conjunction with the exhibit “Reinventing Jewish Ritual” at the Jewish Museum of New York. And suddenly things started to make sense.

RITUAL AND REINVENTION

But first, some background. All rituals, as scholars of religion know, were at one time invented, although not in their fully received forms. Consider the day-long liturgy for *Yom Kippur*, which emerged and shifted bit-by-bit over the centuries. An invented Jewish ritual is a practice, liturgy or object that comes about at a particular time and setting because

them into symbols. The late rabbinic scholar Baruch Bokser wrote, in connection to the new ritual of the *seder*, that “Rituals, like religion, do change, and one form of change is by imposing significance on those things that originally lacked meaning. Precisely because not everything is transformed in the same manner and not everything becomes subject to words and actions that are geared to bring out an inner reality, we deal not with blind or arbitrary choices but with a selective process.” (“Ritualizing the Seder,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Autumn, 1988)

In our generation, ritual innovation has come about in response to the crisis of the Holocaust (*Yom HaShoah*) but it has also been the necessary response to a whole range of marvelous things: the creation of the state of Israel (*Yom Ha'atzmaut*), the ethics of feminism (*bat mitzvah*, *Rosh Hodesh* groups, Miriam's cup and the orange on the *seder* plate), and the growing interest in social justice and



Part of the efficacy of rituals is that we can easily trick ourselves into believing that our invented rituals were never new, re-embraced or remade.

something has changed, something is missing or something needs marking or remembering. Maybe human faith needs shoring up. Maybe God needs special summoning.

Throughout Jewish history, ritual invention has often come about as a response to crisis. The most familiar crisis of antiquity was the destruction of the Temple, which necessitated, for instance, a reframing of what it meant to observe Passover when it was no longer possible to bring a lamb to Jerusalem for the priests to sacrifice. A new ritual to replace the sacrifice and group meal would have to evoke God's presence in physical and spiritual exile. It would have to bring healing and the comforting knowledge that even with rupture there was continuity. The invention of the *seder*, as we know it, emerged in an accretionary way, keeping some former objects, such as the lamb sacrifice, but transforming

tikkun olam (the *matzah* of hope for Soviet Jewry, community *mitzvah* day, *mitzvah* projects for *b'nai mitzvah*).

Some of the newly invented rituals eventually become so old and so beloved — say, breaking a glass at a wedding, or tossing out one's sins in the *tashlich* ceremony on *Rosh Hashanah* — that we start believing that they have been around since the beginning of Jewish time. Part of the efficacy of rituals is that we can easily trick ourselves into believing that our invented rituals were never new, re-embraced or remade. But the fact is that all of our rituals were at one point created. They were new and then, because they were embraced, they became real.

RECREATING THE SUKKAH

Which brings us to *sukkah* creation at the Jewish Theological Seminary. I could not

have imagined that I had the creative capacity to reinvent a *sukkah* that could continue the inherited practice in a new, innovative, challenging and even edgy way. With this in mind, I was happily surprised and inspired when Allan Wexler presented images of his award-winning contribution to the museum's exhibit: a full-scale *Gardening Sukkah*, a space that could be used either as a fully outfitted gardening hut or as the setting for the ritual meals of the holiday. He encouraged us to brainstorm, to be fearless, to relinquish our anxieties about making fools of ourselves and to make mistakes.

All we had to do, with soft pencils and an expanse of paper covering our long table, was to keep our hands moving and to jot down ideas and images that came to mind. Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose contribution to the museum's exhibit consisted of a collection of scientific vessels holding spices that could be used for the *Havdallah* ritual, was sitting and doodling next to me. She came up with a *sukkah* for her house in Jerusalem, covered in a cloud of mist which allowed glimpses of the full harvest moon. While Wexler acknowledged that one would ask whether such a *sukkah* conformed to traditional requirements, this was pointedly not the first question he asked. To help Ukeles refine her design, he wanted to know more about how the water would be pumped in through jets and how it could be gathered to circulate underneath, like a Middle Eastern *hammam*. And the good ideas kept percolating.

Daniel Belasco, who curated the exhibit, has said that our experience of the reinvented rituals can bring “meaning to our lives” and give us a “heightened awareness and a heightened consciousness.”

The blessing of having artists enter the sphere of ritualizing is that they remind us that our familiar rituals — the ways we locate the holiness in our lives, sanctify the mundane, remember who we are and what we value — periodically need judicious and imaginative repair. Beyond the techniques of their crafts, these artists understand how productive it can be to work imaginatively and intuitively while confronting and respecting religious constraints and boundaries.

The *sukkah* that I reinvented was a little crazy, modeled as it was after those inflatable moonwalk structures that kids jump around in at fairs. I don't know if I can really pull that one off in reality. But my alternate idea, which seems infinitely more feasible, involves giving sheets of canvas to different artist friends who might draw ancestors and mentors. That could happen. The point is that I now feel I have not only the permission, but also the responsibility to use my creative faculties to reinvent the rituals that demand new life. ■

RITUAL

and the FORCES of the FREE MARKET

by RABBI HAYIM HERRING

Pretend that you're a parent of a young child. When your child looks up at you with innocent eyes and asks, "Where do new rituals come from?" what will you say?

First, a qualification: I am not a scholar of Jewish ritual, so I make no pretensions about providing a historical perspective on this question. But as a student of contemporary innovation within the Jewish community, I'd like to explore the question, as it suggests some fascinating observations about how external forces influence internal Jewish dynamics and about how innovation within the Jewish community can have an impact upon broader societal trends.

I am defining "new ritual" as:

- A ritual which has never been practiced before (although it may have been influenced by prevailing social phenomena)
- An existing ritual that has been adapted to suit contemporary values or styles
- A ritual that has been practiced by a small segment of the community, but has grown in popularity either inside or outside of that sub-community
- A ritual that occurs with regularity, either in the synagogue, the home or a public venue

These criteria, while not exhaustive, offer a framework for identifying patterns or trends in the origins of rituals that might otherwise escape our attention.

To leap to the answer about the origins of new rituals, it appears that they originate from multiple sources. No one set of organizations or individuals have a monopoly on their invention. In an age of pervasive and burgeoning networks, they can diffuse rapidly and cannot be controlled. Despite the fact that they are fresh, their origins may become unintentionally blurred. New rituals are often not contested like legal (*halakhic*) issues, because they are voluntary and often chic or trendy.

For example, while the "blessing of the

pets" is conducted in remembrance of St. Francis of Assisi's love of all of God's creatures, that practice has been adapted annually in some synagogues on the week in which the story of Noah is read from the Torah. Rabbis will then "bless" the pets and teach about the Jewish value of compassion for all living beings (*tza'ar ba'alei chayim*). My sense is that most rabbis who have incorporated this ritual have done so within the past decade. In a related vein, we know that Americans have a special infatuation with their pets. I have recently begun to see a few rabbis offering a "Jewish" funeral for pets. In this case, it is likely that the need for a new ritual begins with the individual but is co-created with a rabbi or other person with knowledge of burial practices.

Feminism, egalitarianism and, more recently, a greater acceptance of GLBTIQ Jews are three forces that have energized the invention of ritual. In some cases, these forces have resulted in a revision of a ritual. For example, in heterosexual egalitarian marriages, it is customary to see both bride and groom encircle one another under the *chuppah*, where previously that act was reserved for women. The existence of gay marriage and commitment ceremonies, which have no *halakhic* precedent, allows us to glimpse ritual-in-the-making. Modern Orthodoxy has also absorbed new rituals, especially those influenced by feminism, including women's prayer groups and *bat mitzvah*. Conversely, Modern Orthodoxy's commitment to the traditional use of the *mikveh* has inspired liberal Jews to expand utilization of the *mikveh* for multiple rites of passage. My point in these observations is to note that all facets of Jewish life are influenced by and contribute to the dynamic of ritual creativity.

As further proof that the "sovereign self" also reigns in people's spiritual lives, personal loss, change and growth become catalysts for ritual change. You can find rituals online for retirement, menopause, moving into assisted-living facilities, acquiring a driver's license, having sex for the first time, sanctifying the birth of a first-born daughter, celebrating a milestone wedding anniversary and taking a



trip to Israel. This is a list that gets longer as we live longer, experience more and adapt to radical changes in social and cultural norms.

While the weight of creative rituals seems to incline towards the personal, new ritual activity can also be seen in the communal sphere. The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs has pioneered the lighting of a specially-created yellow *yahrzeit* candle to commemorate *Yom HaShoah*, and communal services for *Yom HaShoah* and *Yom Ha'atzmaut* are celebrated annually in most Jewish communities. Some congregations and individuals hold an annual *Tu B'Shevat Seder*, enabling them to express their love of Israel, their concern for the environment, or both concerns simultaneously.

How far does the imagination stretch when considering the origins of Jewish ritual creation and experimentation? In almost every Jewish community today, a Chabad rabbi will light a menorah for Chanukah in a public place with a government official. That has by now become routine, as remarkable as that act is. Do we view this as a new ritual that celebrates Judaism in the public square? What about Jews who are married to Christians who place Jewish decorative symbols on their Christmas trees? Is that a new Jewish ritual for those families?

The broader social and cultural contexts in which Judaism and the Jewish community are situated are virtual Petri dishes which give rise to novel and unexpected forms of ritual life. A wide array of inputs produces voluminous ritual outputs. They are stimulated from the top down and the bottom up, from the individual and the organization, from the religious and the secular, from the risk-averse and the entrepreneurial. While often shaped by external forces, they also have the power to influence the broader culture of which we are a part. ■

Rabbi Hayim Herring, Ph.D., is President and C.E.O. of Herring Consulting Network. He thanks his daughter, Tamar, for her help with this piece.



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. ■



REINVENTING THE MINYAN, AGAIN

by RABBI JOSEPH MESZLER

As I walk into my synagogue on the first Friday of the month, I am greeted by the handshakes of men of different generations. For the past three years, we have been meeting early in the morning for Men's Study, a discussion for men only on what Judaism has to say about being a father, a grandfather, a partner in marriage, a son or just an all around *mensch*. We regularly attract 20 to 30 men, ranging in age from late 20s to much older. This has become our new version of the old custom of the male *minyan*, a quorum of ten Jews necessary for some ritual functions. The idea of a male *minyan* in an egalitarian synagogue may make some people's heads spin: in a proudly liberal community, why is an exclusively male group meeting for Jewish study? Why is it necessary?

Ever since Abraham argued with God over the fate of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, Jews have required a *minyan* of ten to pray a service in its entirety. According to this passage in the Torah, ten was the minimum number of people required for civilization to exist. For centuries, the *minyan* consisted only of men, leading to community and camaraderie but also to the exclusion of Jewish women from the public sphere.

Egalitarian synagogues — the large majority of synagogues in North America — now count women in a prayer *minyan* as well. The feminist movement has correctly insisted on equal footing in the Jewish ritual world. This means complete access to Jewish life and therefore freedom from gender-based restrictions. Female prayer leaders, including rabbis, cantors and synagogue presidents, have become commonplace, and the synagogue world has reaped tremendous benefits from this change. Needing ten Jewish *people*,

not just men, has transformed the synagogue.

And yet, parallel to this transformation of the *minyan*, another national conversation has arisen about the importance of gender in understanding how human beings work. Books and studies abound on how men and women communicate, think and view the world differently due to their sex and social experience. The egalitarian *minyan*, however, does not acknowledge these differences.

Another related phenomenon has been the decline of the participation of men in liberal religious institutions, including synagogues. In their ground-breaking study, "Matrilineal Ascent/Patrilineal Descent" (Brandeis University, 2008), Dr. Sylvia Barack Fishman and Daniel Parmer identify that women are outnumbering men in the Jewish world, sometimes at a rate of two-to-one or higher. While women are embracing their Jewish lives publicly and ritually, "boys and men are being alienated from Jewishness from their early years onward." Whether it is attending services, taking an adult education class, or volunteering for a social action project, a quick look around the room begs the question, "Where are the men?"

The problem is not matrilineal ascent but patrilineal descent. For a large variety of factors, men no longer feel comfortable in the synagogue world. One reason is that there is a diminishing amount of leisure time in our culture, and young men of the newest generation have felt the brunt of it. Despite both men and women being a part of the same workforce, men tend to identify with their work to an extraordinary degree. We live in a time when the work week (as well as commute time and the constant demands of email and cell phones) continues to expand. In addition, as a result of their own feminist sensibilities, men are using what precious free time they have to try to be equal partners at home, including parenting their children from an early age. To cope, men prefer more flexible hours, not less work. Other men, unfamiliar with Hebrew, simply feel ignorant and therefore infantilized in the syna-

gogue. Now that they are no longer required to be there for a *minyan*, these men would rather avoid feeling awkward. Given the choice between coaching a daughter's soccer team or coming to services, there is no competition.

The synagogue world is beginning to respond to this reality. While we recognize that women and men are equal before God, "equal" does not mean "interchangeable." Just as women need time to come together just to be with other women, such as at a Women's Seder or *Rosh Hodesh* group, so do men need to come together exclusively with other men. In fact, many men feel comfortable sharing their feelings on the challenges of being a father, a partner in marriage, and a son of aging parents only with other men. At our synagogue, therefore, we have a mixed gender *minyan* for all prayer services and *Shabbat* Torah study, but we also have women-only Sisterhood Study and men-only Men's Study to acknowledge our gender differences.

The concept of the *minyan* is therefore changing again. A *minyan* remains a source of ritual practice and study and must represent our multi-faceted community. If we want our children to have male role models in Jewish life, we have to attract men to the synagogue, to a new kind of *minyan* for men. We have to listen deeply to what they need. Jewish men desperately want to fulfill their responsibilities. At this *minyan*, they will be able to ask themselves: How can I be a good father beyond just being a stereotypical disciplinarian? How can I take care of my aging parents? What role does Judaism teach me about being a partner in marriage in addition to being a provider? What do I owe my community? How do I practice this through Jewish rituals and ethics?

A new version of the *minyan* must return, but not on the basis of patriarchal power and hierarchy. Instead, it must represent the need for gendered programming that speaks to men as men and women as women. In this way, as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook once said, "The old shall become new and the new shall become holy." ■

Rabbi Joseph Meszler is the spiritual leader of Temple Sinai in Sharon, Massachusetts and the author of several books, including *A Man's Responsibility: A Jewish Guide to Being a Son, a Partner in Marriage, a Father, and a Community Leader* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008).



YOU DIDN'T HAVE A BAT- MITZVAH?

by SALLY GOTTESMAN

What do the following people have in common: Judith Ginsberg (Nash Family Foundation), Phyllis Goldman (American Jewish World Service), Rabbi Joy Levitt (JCC in Manhattan), Rabbi Naamah Kelman (Hebrew Union College) and Ruth Messinger (American Jewish World Service)?

As twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls, they were all ground-breakers in their home congregations, among the first girls to have *bat mitzvah* ceremonies when this ritual was considered deviant and foreign to the Jewish community at large.

Ask almost any Jewish woman over the age of 40 about her *bat mitzvah* and she'll have a story to tell you — why she didn't have a *bat mitzvah*, or why she did, and what she was allowed or wasn't allowed to do on that Friday night, or in that group or, rarely, on that Saturday morning.

How did it come to pass that in two generations we can barely recall those times? What causes a rapid change in Jewish ritual, especially a more radical change? What precipitates change such as a *bat mitzvah*?

I was interested in the answer to these questions for two reasons — one personal, one professional.

The personal: I was another girl to have a first — the

Sally Gottesman chairs *Moving Traditions*. To share your *bat mitzvah* "first" experience or to learn more about *Moving Traditions'* traveling gallery exhibit that will explore the evolution of *b'nei mitzvah*, contact her at sally@elemosynary.net. To see letters petitioning for Sally's 1975 *bat mitzvah*, visit the online Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution exhibit on the Jewish Women's Archive website, jwa.org.

first Saturday morning *bat mitzvah* in my Conservative New Jersey synagogue in 1975. The instrumental forces in my story included our congregation's rabbi, who was looking for a test case; my parent's involvement in the synagogue; the Orthodox day school I attended (long before day schools were popular) that made me more prepared for the *bima* than the girls or boys in our synagogue Hebrew School; the women's movement; and getting my hands on a 1973 issue of *Response* magazine devoted to The Jewish Woman. Thus, I came to understand the importance not only of individual agency and personal power, but the environmental factors that would help to effect change.

The professional: I chair Moving Traditions. As a leader of an organization devoted to the intersection of gender and Judaism, I wanted to better understand how this "radical gender act" was adopted within a century by almost all Jews. I was fascinated because few changes in Judaism have had as radical an impact as rituals that have empowered women.

In addition, Moving Traditions currently has 300 *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!* groups in the United States, furthering teenage girls' practice of Judaism as well as strengthening the participants' self-esteem. We have successfully marketed *Rosh Hodesh* to institutions as an experiential education program they can offer to their constituents and to girls as a group activity. But our goal is for *Rosh Hodesh* groups for girls to be a ritual, like the *bat mitzvah*, that *shuls* initiate and are expected to offer and that girls plan to participate in, just like they plan to have *bat mitzvahs*.

Moving Traditions set about to understand how and why *bat mitzvahs* became commonplace in such a short span of time by talking with more than 50 "*bat mitzvah* firsts" — now adult women, parents, and clergy

who were instrumental in the adoption of *bat mitzvah*. Since the group is aging, we felt it would be better to do this project sooner rather than later.

What did we learn by talking with others, and how do I think it may influence me, and our, ability to change Jewish ritual?

First, we learned that many people think that the institution of the *bar mitzvah* was given at Sinai. They know the emphasis has not always been the post-synagogue party, but if you press, they insist there must have always been a *bar mitzvah* ceremony for boys at age thirteen. The truth is much more complicated. *Bar mitzvah* as we think of it today — granting a boy the right to be called to the Torah, to be counted in a *minyan* and to wear a *tallit* and *tefillin* — did not develop until the 14th-Century in Europe.

Second, the adoption of the *bat mitzvah* has been so successful that a startling number of young people today imagine that it, too, was given around the time of Sinai. The truth is that there were occasional attempts in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries to have parties for girls, without any religious ritual, to mark their coming-of-age as Jews. The first *bat mitzvah* in the United States, in 1922, is credited to Mordechai Kaplan and his daughter, Judith Kaplan-Eisenstein, although she stood "below the *bimah* at a very respectable distance from the Scroll of the Torah" (quoted in Jo David and Daniel B. Syme, *The Book of Jewish Life*, 1997) and read from a *humash* after the service was over.

We also learned that the changes that led to the adoption of the *bat mitzvah* happened in small steps. The impetus was sometimes from the girl, sometimes from her parents and sometimes from the clergy — but the three had to be acting in concert for the changes to unfold. In each congregation,

resistance had to be acknowledged and channels of communication had to be opened.

Crucially, *bat mitzvahs* were adopted because they were like something the boys did, and education for girls and boys in Hebrew schools was co-ed. Thus, gender parity was an essential value in the community's willingness to change, and context and institutional structure were key to seeing that change succeeded.

It took decades for the *bat mitzvah* ceremony to evolve — from Friday night to Saturday morning, from reading *Haftorah* to reading *Torah*, from a one-time occasion to being counted in the *minyan* any day. At my *bat mitzvah* I didn't think to ask whether I'd be counted in a *minyan* the following week. These changes evolved and are still evolving — slowly or rapidly, depending on how you look at them. I also learned that girls who had brothers (which I didn't) often thought of their events as "less-than."

Finally, the next ritual frontiers: I think one ritual that is ripe for wider practice is *Havdalah*. It is short, easy and beautiful. I hope the revival will include the singing of *Miriam HaNeviah* along with *Eliyahu HaNavi*. I also believe that God language in English and Hebrew is key to how women and men see themselves. In Jewish prayer, the familiar formulation *baruch atah* ("blessed are you," written in the male formation) calls to God in language that is personal and correct for men, but for women it is someone else's name. We are all made in the image of God, but for women, the language that conjures that image keeps us at arm's length. This has consequences for each praying person's relationship to God and for the community's relationship to power and authority. I am interested in how the Jewish community will address this issue and what can be done to hasten the posing and answering of these questions. ■

RITUAL AT ROMEMU

by RABBI DAVID INGBER

At Romemu Center in New York City, we have a very creative approach to new Jewish ritual. We believe meaningful spiritual practices must provide familiar, safe territory while simultaneously pushing us to explore unfamiliar, even dangerous territory.

Within our services, this means incorporating ancient but neglected practices like meditation and contemplation. We regularly practice saying the *Sh'ma* as a breath meditation, carefully taking our time to align each of the six words with one breath. On *Shabbat* morning our Torah service has three group *aliyot* based on spiritual themes culled from the weekly *parsha*, or Torah portion. We invite all participants to come up for any or all of the *aliyot* if the *kavanah* or theme speak to them.

Programmatically, we offer a number of innova-

tive approaches to ritual.

On one of our two monthly Friday night potluck dinners, we offer a *Z-moon*.

Z-moon, literally, "invitation," is an open-mic during the festive *Shabbat* meal that re-envision the classic *Hasidic Tisch*, or table. This allows the artists in our community a chance to share their gifts and connect meaningfully to *Shabbat* through new Jewish music and poetry.

Shabbat-asana is our *Shabbat* morning yoga class and the name for our "Torah and Yoga" program. We combine yoga postures with themes from the *parsha*.

Ravayah is a Saturday night *Havdalah* ritual that combines deep, soulful service to mark the end of *Shabbat* with a dance party. *Ravayah* seeks to fill the gap in spiritual programming on Saturday, essentially creating a *Kabbalat Shavua* service.

Often this ritual involves using imaginative visualizations that seek to focus the participant's goals for the coming week.

Our baby naming ceremonies (*brit* and *simchat bat*) always include a "babies Torah service." We've adopted a Libyan tradition and place babies (double wrapped in their parents' *tallit*, then placed on another *tallit*) in the Torah scroll, on the portion they will read at their *bar/bat mitzvah* ceremonies.

Our *Simchat Torah* service is a form of bibliomancy. After *Hakafot*, the entire community stands in a circle, according to their birthdays. We then unravel the entire Torah, which is held by people in the circle, with the Torah's letters facing the center so that no one can see which part of the scroll they are holding. Appointed readers stand in the center. The readers read selected verses and offer interpretations that lend some wisdom or theme to the year. ■

Rabbi David Ingber is Founder and Spiritual Director of Romemu (www.romemu.org).



PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM KATES

BENEATH THE SURFACE: Taking our Principles Seriously

by ALIZA KLINE

Contemporary Jews are spiritual seekers searching for meaningful, authentic experiences with the power to transform. Mayyim Hayyim, the community *mikveh* located in Newton, MA, offers a unique case study in how ritual can help build an inclusive Jewish community that welcomes people from all styles of Jewish expression. But we also have lessons that are applicable to a variety of agencies, institutions and organizations — lessons with the power to strengthen and deepen Jewish life for all.

For nearly six years, Mayyim Hayyim has been trying to ascertain how wide we can open the door to Jewish life through a single ritual — immersion in a *mikveh* — that has, for a long time, seemed closed to the majority of American Jews. We have been grappling with such questions as: How do we ensure that a space is open and accessible while also ensuring that it remains personal, private and safe? What is required of the physical space, the personnel and the less tangible feel of a setting in an organization devoted to creating access to Jewish ritual?

At its core, immersion in a *mikveh* is about marking a life transition. Perhaps the clearest example is conversion to Judaism. After months or years of Jewish learning and living, the ritual transformational moment requires stripping down, carefully examining and cleaning the body, sinking into a pool of water fed by *mayyim hayyim* (“living waters,” naturally collected from rainfall, snowfall or melted ice), and letting go to the sound of Hebrew blessings.

Conversion makes the physical, emotional and spiritual power of ritual alive and vivid. A collection of photographs taken at

Mayyim Hayyim just minutes following immersion shows faces glowing with happiness and pride. As Executive Director of the *mikveh*, I have been blessed, many times, to be present to welcome and sing to new Jews. If we could bottle the intensity and Jewish pride in those moments, we’d have a proven elixir to ensure the vitality of our people for centuries to come. Truly, I have a great job.

The converts and families (Jewish and non-Jewish) who come to Mayyim Hayyim feel welcome and safe because every aspect of our organization — our facility, staff and volunteers — is accessible to people who are unfamiliar with Judaism. There is translation for every Hebrew phrase; beautiful contemporary art on the walls; windows to let in the light; comfortable seating, tea, children’s books and snacks — everything we can think of to make our visitors feel at home. Indeed, our *mikveh* building does not immediately read like a traditional Jewish space, but everyone who enters it mentions the peace and, indeed, the sanctity of the place, which is what makes it feel Jewish.

We pay careful attention to the physical and emotional welcome communicated by our Jewish space because it enables us to live up to our goal of being fully open to the entirety of the Jewish community— including Jews of color, those becoming Jewish, non-Jewish family members, disaffected or disenfranchised Jews, GLBT Jews, physically challenged Jews — everyone.

Mayyim Hayyim’s attention to our physical plant and our commitment to openness are shared with many other Jewish institutions and organizations. But perhaps the most important lesson we can teach others is the importance of clear and compelling principles that serve as touchstones and guides.

Before Mayyim Hayyim had incorporated

or started raising funds, and before it had hired a single staff member, the founders convened an interdenominational group of rabbis to affirm a list of seven “Principles of Common Purpose.” Broad enough to garner wide support and specific enough to be meaningful, each principle was weighted equally as an essential cog in the organization’s mission.

1. HALACHA (Jewish law). We are committed to traditional legal standards for the building and maintenance of the *borot* (collection pools) and *mikvaot* (immersion pools).

2. TZ’NIYUT (Modesty/Privacy). We respect the privacy, modesty and confidentiality of those who come to immerse themselves. We recognize that at the time of immersion, an individual becomes extraordinarily vulnerable. Our thoughtful and sensitive *mikveh* guides (male and female) are trained to help visitors feel safe and comfortable.

3. AHAVAT YISRAEL (Love of the Jewish People). We honor and cherish the differences within the Jewish people. Mayyim Hayyim provides the space for Jews to practice the ritual of immersion according to each individual’s interpretation and understanding.

4. KLAL YISRAEL (All of Israel). We are one Jewish people. Mayyim Hayyim is an unhyphenated Jewish place.

5. CHINUCH (Education). Mayyim Hayyim is committed to providing educational opportunities for children and adults. We are a gateway institution where everyone can deepen his or her understanding about Jewish thought, Jewish life and Jewish values.

6. HIDDUR MITZVAH (Beautify the Commandment). The rabbinic admonition to beautify religious life is central to our vision. From towels to tiles to art exhibits, Mayyim Hayyim is a place that gladdens the eye as well as the spirit.

7. PETICHUT (Openness). By providing access and availability for all Jews and those becoming Jewish, Mayyim Hayyim strives to be inclusive of all who wish to learn and/or immerse themselves, regardless of sexual orientation, physical/developmental ability or background.

While Mayyim Hayyim articulates these principles as they relate to the operation of a *mikveh* and education center, the ideas are widely applicable.

The principles provide three essential keys for an organization committed to making ritual accessible, meaningful and safe: 1) authenticity rooted in Jewish tradition; 2) a sense of ownership; and 3) transparency so that values are front and center.

Organizations of all sizes and functions need to examine their foundational principles and then make them known as broadly as possible, sharing their beliefs and goals in their publications, classes and websites. There is no time for hide and seek anymore. We all need to be easily found. The seekers are there, once you open your doors and welcome them in. ■

Aliza Kline is Executive Director of Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Paula Brody & Family Education Center.

Our Jewish heritage
should be a lens for
experiencing the
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CREATIVE LIFECYCLE RITUALS

by RABBI MIRIAM C. BERKOWITZ

Ritual is our way of sanctifying time and space, life and death and significant points in between. It is one of the languages we use to interact with the Divine, to interrupt our routines, relinquish control, and turn ourselves over to the power of symbols, words, song and community. Ritual connects us to past, present and future.

While we assume that rituals are ancient and rooted, they vary in age and origin. "Rituals are 'created' in at least three ways: by recovering traditions that have fallen into disuse... by using an existing rite or blessing in a new context... or by drawing on traditional texts, symbols, images and ritual objects to create an entirely new composition..." (Rabbi Debra Orenstein, *Lifecycles Vol. 1: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998) The following are examples of recovering, transposing and creating traditions in order to expand the range of occasions we stop to notice, mark and honor.

1. RECOVERING TRADITIONS

End of Life Closure

In the Torah, when the patriarchs sensed their lives were drawing to a close, they gathered their children around and blessed them. While individual families may behave in a similar fashion, it is not a custom much discussed or promoted today. I created such a ceremony for a woman from Florida whose family wanted to honor her in her home before she passed away and was buried further north. It is a prime Jewish value not to worry the person who is in his or her last days or to do anything that will hasten death. Therefore, we

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clearly stressed, even though the woman was in a coma, that the purpose was to celebrate her life, not mark her impending death. In this case, she could not bless her children and husband, but they told stories about her in the prime of her life. I invited her nurse to sing a familiar spiritual, and I read some psalms connected to living a good life. The ceremony restored memories of life before illness and brought the family closer together. The fact that it hearkened back to a Biblical custom lent the event additional power and gravitas.

Weaning Ritual

When Sarah weaned Isaac, Abraham made a great feast (*Genesis 21:8*). In rabbinic times, weaning took place at around age two; in Biblical times perhaps even later. After weaning, Isaac is called child, *yeled*, and it is precisely at this point that Sarah begins to worry about Ishmael's influences on him. This milestone marked the baby's greater physical independence, new roles and expectations of parents, more freedom for the mother or perhaps a return to fertility, and often a renewal of the mother's focus from her child to her husband.

Weaning is still an emotional and physical turning point for parents and babies. With all our communal interest in babies and child development, the weaning ceremony is a glaring omission and one that could easily be reintroduced.

2. NEW CONTEXTS FOR EXISTING RITES

Mikveh or immersion in natural water (a lake, river, ocean or spring) has traditionally been used by people purifying new dishes, by scribes before writing God's name, by people preparing for festivals, by brides and grooms, and by women after childbirth and after their monthly menstruation in preparation for renewed emphasis on the sexual aspect of their relationships. Removal of clothes, makeup, jewelry and all barriers to the water symbolizes removing our masks and personae; the natural waters take us back to Eden, from where all rivers flowed when we stood before God with clear consciences. (Aryeh Kaplan, *Waters of Eden: The Mystery of the Mikvah*, Orthodox Union, 1993).

In recent decades, some women and men

have begun to use the *mikveh* to mark other life transitions, often celebration (birth, *bat mitzvah*, first menstruation, marriage, birthday, menopause, anniversary or life achievement), healing (from divorce, loss, miscarriage, rape, abuse or illness), or preparation for assuming responsibility (rabbinic or cantorial ordination, synagogue leadership or reading Torah).

Although the healing ceremonies do not provide a magical cure or instant fix — they cannot replace therapy, time and other long-term healing efforts — they can provide a turning point, a focus on other thoughts and symbols besides pain and victimization. They can help people to feel they are taking active roles in their recovery. Similarly, although celebration rituals do not transform how we react to an event if we have not prepared for it, they do create a focus and conduit for our emotions.

3. CREATING NEW COMPOSITIONS

In our society and historical period, we have new events that call for new rituals. I would like to see rituals marking important life events such as learning to drive, coming of age to vote, purchasing a first home, launching a new career, visiting Israel and making *aliyah*. The Rabbis' Manual of the Rabbinical Assembly (1999) has blessings to note some of these occasions with an *aliyah* to the Torah, but fuller home-centered ceremonies can be created.

Although these have not been defined as ritual Jewish events per se, our Jewish heritage should be a lens for experiencing the world, not a box that comes out only on certain holidays and social occasions.

For some, new rituals will be justified only if they eventually draw people to observe commandments. For others, alternative rituals are valuable on their own merits, as they breathe new life into ancient symbols and give expression to universal human needs and emotions in a specifically Jewish way.

The proliferation of rituals will not reduce their power or mystique. As long as the purpose is to inspire the individual, involve the community and accentuate our awareness of the awesome nature of life, ritual will continue to enrich and revitalize the fabric of Jewish life and hone our sense of gratitude, connection and responsibility. ■

Jewish Renewal excels in many areas: creative and engaged prayer; text study weaving *kabbalistic*, *hasidic*, *aggadic*, *midrashic* and *halachic* analysis; deeply engaged spiritual practices like Jewish meditation and Hebrew chant; and, of course, new and renewed ritual.

As the headquarters organization for this trans-denominational Jewish Renewal adventure, ALEPH and our projects regularly produce retreats, conferences, Israel pilgrimages, community training, ordination and lay-leader learning intensives. Creative ritual abounds in all of them.

At our last week-long *Kallah* conference, for example, Rabbi Hanna Tiferet Siegel and other women leaders of Jewish Renewal facilitated the *Eshet Hazon* (Woman of Vision) empowerment ceremony, which was first conducted in 1982. They transmitted a blessing to four women, linking them with dozens who had been honored in local communities and at other major gatherings. Opening with chant, the room arrayed with scarves and beautiful Judaica, the leaders told the story of the ritual itself and of each new *Eshet Hazon* as she was called up to be publicly blessed and honored.

At the same *Kallah*, Rabbi Shefa Gold led participants in a ceremony never before experienced: a modern interpretation of the ancient ritual of the red heifer. In her words, she intended to use “the power of inquiry, awareness, fire, intention, rhythm, movement, chant and *meyyim chayyim*, the living waters...to enact this ancient ritual and (G!d willing) emerge from the shadow of our deepest fears...into new life.” Many reported that it was the most powerful moment of an awe-inspiring week.

Yet ALEPH and Jewish Renewal are much more than the events we produce. We are 45 affiliated communities with hundreds of lay leaders and more than 130 rabbis, cantors and rabbinic pastors serving around the world and leading transformative *Shabbat*, life cycle and *chag* festival rituals.

Take, for example, *Sukkot*. At Congregation P'nai Or-Portland, Rabbi Aryeh Hirschfeld z”l, and Rivka Gevurtz designed a “Procession of the First Fruits,” involving their community in an eco-conscious turn on an ancient ritual. Those participating dress in white and bring fresh, organic produce from their gardens or from their favorite farmers. Children wear floral wreaths in their hair and carry the bounty of creation through the gardens to the sanctuary. The post *B'nai Mitzvah* teens perform the role of *Kohanim*, chanting, “Arise and let us go up to Zion, to the House of God our Lord!” All in attendance sing melodies written by Reb Aryeh z”l. Once in the sanctuary, they bless the gifts

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RENEWING RITUAL: REVITALIZING THE SACRED

by DEBRA KOLODNY

and the children. They donate the offerings to Oregon Food Bank's Plant a Row project to help feed the hungry. At the following potluck, community leaders teach about projects like Hazon's *Tuv Ha'Aretz*, ALEPH's Sacred Foods, and local sustainability initiatives.

In the late 1980s in Boston, Stephanie Loo, Janet Berkenfield and Matia Angelou wrote a ceremony using Miriam's Cup for the Passover *sefer*, a tradition that found its way around the globe, sometimes retaining its original intent of remembering G!d's redemptive power in providing the water, sometimes morphing into a focus on Miriam herself.

Some Renewal rituals are not meant for Shabbat, festivals, life cycles or public events. Some are for everyday mindfulness, for study or for the complexity of our modern lives, calling us to notice a moment, a transition or an opportunity for holiness.

A new meditative ritual is Rabbinic Pastor Andrew Gold's *Echad* practice used to deepen understanding and engagement with the spiritual reality of *Yichud* (Oneness) and as a tool in aiding *teshuvah* (repentance) during the High Holy Days. Participants chant *echad* in a sequence of ten repetitions, visualizing its energy entering through the *keter* (crown), leaving through the *tiferet* (heart). At the conclusion of each sequence, the leader says softly: “*Ba'shamayim mima'al, v'al ha'aretz mitachat ayn od*” (Deuteronomy 4.39) (“In the heavens above and in the earth below, there is nothing else”... but YHVH.) Participants repeat the sequence of ten repetitions seven times, for a total of 70, to include and honor all nations and all creation.

Rabbi Goldie Milgram has written several books on ritual, including *Living Jewish Life Cycle: How to Create Meaningful Jewish Rites of Passage at Every Stage of Life* (Jewish Lights, 2009). Many of her creative ceremonies can be found at www.ReclaimingJudaism.org.

For every new or masterfully rethought ritual in Jewish Renewal, there is another, which in its *keva* (form) is done precisely as it has been done for centuries or more; but in its

execution a radically new experience is called forth. As ALEPH Board Secretary David Blumenstein says, “More than new rituals, Jewish Renewal has ‘renewed’ existing rituals and breathed new life into them. The intention we bring, the story we tell, the way we get to the essential spark of a ritual, nurturing it, fanning it into a flame...that is what we do best.”

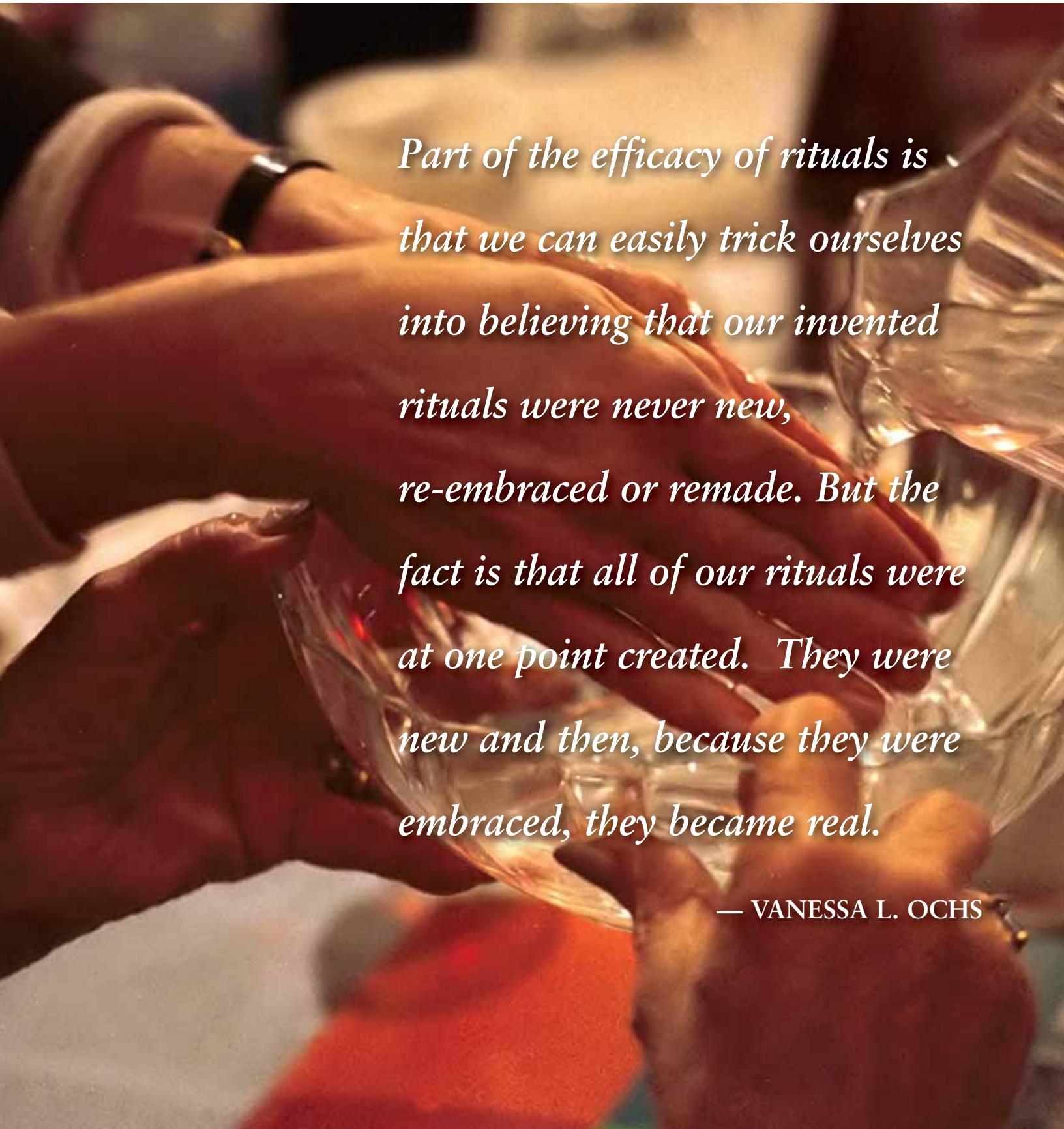
You might ask, why do we need ritual at all? Ritual amplifies the transformational poten-



tial of the moment and activates the G!d-field in its service. It also gives *kavod* (honor) where it is due, stepping into the stream of our ancestors and our tradition, rejoicing with and/or being comforted by the *Holy One*, by all those present, by all those who have come before and all those who are yet to come.

Rabbi Marcia Prager, Dean of ALEPH's Rabbinic Program, once noted, “Reb Nachman observed that deep within each soul, no matter how many layers may cover it, is a core point, a ‘*nekudah tovah*’ of self-affirmation, not marred by judgmental traumas. Here at this core spot, the soul knows herself to be wholly good. In Nachman's metaphor, this internal point can be expressed as a musical note. It is the job of the ‘*shaliach tzi-bur*,’ the representative of the community, to activate and call forth this note from each person, joining it with all the others in the creation of the music of an event.”

Ken yehi ratzon — may it be Hashem's will — that we all rise to this opportunity, allowing the best of every possible moment to unfold, to teach and to activate holiness in our midst! ■



Part of the efficacy of rituals is that we can easily trick ourselves into believing that our invented rituals were never new, re-embraced or remade. But the fact is that all of our rituals were at one point created. They were new and then, because they were embraced, they became real.

— VANESSA L. OCHS