Jewish Feminism and "New" Jewish Rituals: Imitative or Inventive?

BY ELYSE GOLDSTEIN

Come with me to the Shabbat morning service at the national biennial conference of the Reform movement. Here I am, preparing to put on my tallit. This tallit is definitely not your average black-and-white stripes variety. It is appliqued silk, all blues and greens, a full poncho-style garment that reaches to my knees. I put it over my head and adjust the neck, which has strands of sparkling color and tinkling bells. The atarah comes over my head as a hood. If there ever was a *cohenet gedolah*, a high priestess, surely this is what she wore! I stand silently for a moment, feeling the sensuous raw silk on my back, my front, my arms. I close my eyes. And from behind me I hear a loud, startled whisper, *"What the heck is she wearing???"*

Women and "Defining" Rituals

Rabbis in the liberal movements in general, but specifically women in the rabbinate, are being approached more and more with the challenge of adapting age-old traditions to a more contemporary reality affected by feminism and the feminist analysis of religion. At the same time, we are also being asked to create new rituals to fill the void where an absence is palpable—around birth, fertility and infertility, menstruation and menopause, growing old. The upsurge in interest in spirituality has deeply affected us, and often women in the rabbinate are thought of as "experts" in this growing field of the creation and adaptation of ritual for women.

This call for new ways of looking at

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Jewish ritual is a call many women in the rabbinate have taken personally. After I created a weaning ceremony for my own children, I submitted it to several resource centers, and I know it has been copied, modified, and reused by other rabbis for themselves or their congregants. *Mikveh* ceremonies for miscarriage, rape, chemotherapy, and midlife milestones are being written and shared through personal contacts or word of mouth. Covenantal rituals for baby girls, more creative than the "baby naming" or the egalitarian ceremony in my Rabbi's Manual, fill my files. Yet, to be honest, some of us experience moments of ambivalence around these creative, invented ceremonies that speak to the soul but seem unconnected to much of Jewish history and shared experience. I imagine us looking at ourselves in the same befuddled way those conference participants looked at my tallit, and asking *"what the heck are we doing?"*

A Framework of Meaning

We have learned through the writings of Lawrence Hoffman, Riv-Ellen Prell, Neil Gillman and others that rituals provide a marking, a delineation, a framework of meaning around normal events. They sacralize moments which at first glance appear to be mundane because they are in fact so universal, so predictable, and so cyclical.

For example, everyone somehow gets born. Those who live to young adolescence reach puberty. In most cultures, people marry or form permanent relationship bonds that create families. Everyone dies. Mary Douglas writes, " . . . ritual focuses attention by framing; it enlivens the memory and links the present with the relevant past. In all this it aids perception. Or rather it changes perception because it changes the selective principles. So it is not enough to say that ritual helps us to experience more vividly what we would have experienced anyway . . . It does not merely externalize experience . . . it modifies experience in so expressing it."[1] Participation in a birth ritual, a puberty ritual, a death ritual not only frames this otherwise normal experience, but it defines the experience; in essence, the ritual *creates* the experience.

In Judaism, these central concepts take shape in our rituals. A *brit milah* is a *defining* ritual. It reframes the perception of the birth of a baby boy from a physical moment in time to a reenactment of the ancient covenant between God and Abraham. Standing under a *ḥuppah* at a wedding is a *defining* ritual. It identifies the couple as standing under the roof of their newly-created Jewish home and is a reenactment of the first "wedding"—or coupling—of Adam and Eve. Thus in Judaism not only do rituals create experience by separating and marking moments, they also serve to create experience *in the participant* by moving her from the realm of "spectator" to the realm of "actor." The baby boy is Abraham. The couple is Adam and Eve. This is achieved not through theories and theologies but through actual drama. Perhaps the best example is the Passover Seder, when we reexperience the bitterness of slavery

through the rituals of eating *maror* (bitter herbs), *ḥaroset* ("mortar" of apples, nuts, and wine), and so on. We reexperience our slavery by *acting it out* in very specific ways.

So Jewish feminists ask: when do women function as actors in this historical drama? How is a woman's life framed and defined through ritual? How is a woman's experience expressed in Jewish ritual?

We have certainly passed the first stage in answering these questions. Baby namings, Bat Mitzvah, egalitarian weddings are the norm and no longer the exception. When I was ordained fourteen years ago, doing a covenantal ceremony for a girl in her home on the eighth day or shortly after birth was almost unheard of. Now, at least in my experience, it is fairly common. Bat Mitzvah is almost standard practice, and some form of it has been accepted in more traditional communities. Women wearing tallitot in synagogues is not the kind of strange sight it was years ago, leading to stares and glares and hostile remarks.

Imitative Ritual

In the progressive movements we have encouraged what I term *imitative* ritual. In imitative ritual we redesign the traditional model, but we do not reimagine it. We imitate it, with a "female" twist on the end. Thus a "girl's tallit" looks no different from a traditional tallit except in color, or material, or size, or specific design. It may have flowers or rainbows instead of black stripes. It may have lace or be made of silk instead of wool. But it is still a square shawl with fringes on the end. We take the model of tallit and "feminize" it. A Bat Mitzvah still includes the traditional rubrics—the girl reads from the Torah, writes a speech, has a party. A baby naming looks like a *brit*, but without the cutting.

A few years ago I was in Jerusalem, in a Ḥasidic neighborhood near the Western Wall, surrounded by stores carrying tallitot, *kipot*, and the like. To my utter shock, prominently displayed in one store's window was a *pink* tallit! I went inside and inquired of the owner, "Who would buy such a tallit?" "A Bat Mitzvah girl of course," this Ḥasid with pe'ot (uncut locks of hair) and knickers said, with no hesitation. "Perhaps not the girls in his community," he added, but he was not dismayed at the thought of selling this pink tallit to some Reform or Conservative family for their daughter to don on her Bat Mitzvah day. The pink tallis is imitative ritual at its best. It adds just a little bit of "femininity" to an established, accepted practice that has been in the male domain for generations. The warning that the pink tallit teaches us, in a crass way, is that "women's spirituality" is not only about the inner needs of women, it is also about a marketing opportunity and an untapped consumer group. Let's face it, in including women into the "national Jewish agenda" there is money to be made. It's one thing when a feminist artisan creates a *Rosh Ḥodesh* necklace. It's another when *Ḥasidim* manufacture pink tallitot.

Imitative rituals work best in more traditional synagogue settings. They seem to be the modus operandi of Re-

form and Conservative, and most Reconstructionist Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, where the service is sort of a Bar Mitzvah for a girl. At least in the Reform movement, baby namings feel like a *brit* without the cut. Interestingly, because of halakhic considerations, the Orthodox change the "packaging" of women's rituals the most, so as purposely *not* to imitate. Thus a "Bat Mitzvah" is often called by another name—*Bat Torah*, graduation, etc.—and looks nothing like a Bar Mitzvah.

The question is no longer about whether we need rituals that "balance the scale," that are "equal" to the traditional rituals which have been celebrated by men. In the liberal movements we have answered, and we continue to answer, that question with egalitarian adaptations of traditional ceremonies. We now look at what I term *inventive* rituals. The second-stage question we will need to address is: do we as women want to merely *imitate* traditional male rituals or ritual objects—*brit*, Bar Mitzvah, tallit, tefillin—or do we want to *invent* our own? If we choose to be inventive, what will our rituals look like? How will they be uniquely our own? Will they include men? Will they focus on our biological womanhood—menstruation, childbirth, lactation—or a more inner sense of womanhood, not defined by physicality? *And how will they become the normative, established, accepted route of the progressive movements in synagogue contexts?*

To be sure, imitative rituals are extremely meaningful and satisfying. They fulfill the need for balance. They address the exclusive maleness of so much of our traditional life-cycle events. They "normalize" the entrance of women into the public religious life of the community. They make the tradition confront the spiritual need of women and include women on every level into the dramatic and sacred moments of life.

Inventive Ritual

Can we move beyond the pink tallit? For on another level, imitative rituals do not satisfy. They say nothing of us *as women*. They do not mark the unique moments that happen only to women. They do not bond us with other women in a historical way. They wrap us in male imagery, making us "honorary men" for the moment. They express Judaism in ways that still are male ways of envisioning the universe—male ceremonies imagined and invented by men. They are still largely male answers to the question, "How shall we mark this moment?" We do not know how women would have answered long ago, when many of these rituals were in their infancy. I often joke with my students: "If Miriam would have been asked instead of Moses—how should we express being bound up with God? I'm just not sure she would have dreamed up black leather straps wound tightly around the arm and a black box on the forehead!" Inventive rituals may be the beginning of an answer to the question of how to mark the moments of *women's* lives.

Inventive rituals reimagine, start from scratch, have no historical bounds or expectations or communal sanc-

tions or communal standards. They ask, "Is there something uniquely female about this act, about this object?" By definition, they are probably not traditional. For example, I once took a woman to the *mikveh* after a rape. "What ritual will we do? What prayers will we say?" she asked. There was no ritual to imitate, and so we had to invent. The same for first menstruation, for menopause, for lactation and weaning, for pregnancy, infertility, and miscarriage, for divorce, for children leaving home, for hysterectomy, for mastectomy. The same for rejoining the work force after spending years at home. The same for rejoicing in the company of women, for forming bonded friendships, for caring for an elderly parent.

Every year in Toronto over four hundred women come to an event called "Succah-by-the-Water." Under silk banners and branches inside a tent, we form "*lulav* circles"—circles of ten where women introduce themselves by their matriarchal lineage, then shake the *lulav* (palm, myrtle, and willow bough) in honor or memory of women who never could. We make "trees of life"—silk leaves with prayers written on them like papers at the Western Wall, then sewn onto a huge fabric tree that we bring back to the celebration each year. It is reminiscent of a sukkah indeed, but not at all like one. It is an invented ceremony in almost every way. To truly mark not only the significant transitions in our lives as women, the unique moments in women's experience, the drama of womanhood, but also women's perceptions of ritual, women's specific gifts and outlooks and ways of seeing the world, there simply have to be new rituals.

The Challenges

Inventive rituals are risky. They are not linked to thousands of years of practice. They do not look like what your *bubbe* did. A menstruation ceremony, a menopause *mikveh* celebration, a silk and applique tallis-cape with hood does not look or feel familiar. It's not the *"heymish"* folksy Judaism from your childhood. One ceremony does not necessarily link to the next, as Purim links to Pesach, as Bar Mitzvah links to *ḥuppah*. And we miss the knowledge that every other Jew in history and at this time is doing this ritual or marking this event.

We will need to be scrupulous so that our new rituals don't "divide and conquer" us; that they do not assume heterosexuality or heterosexual marriage and childbearing as a centrality; that they not exclude barren women or women who choose not to have children and women who do not marry. We will need to be open to the many-faceted ways of being female, so that we do not fall into the trap of defining ourselves as the patriarchy has defined us—as child bearers, childrearers, care-givers. We are, to be sure, rooted in our physicality, but that is not our sum and total being. Writer Cynthia Ozick speaks of the danger of feminists redefining ourselves right back into the original definition we rejected back in the 1960's: as wombs, breasts, and baby-makers.[2]

We will need to be sensitive to language, and we will need to invent new

ways of blessing these moments. New rituals that are creative and innovative may feel just weird being spoken in traditional prayer language. On the other hand, new prayer language for old rituals may feel equally out of kilter. Can we say *asher kideshanu*, God "commanded us," to do a menstrual ceremony? Yet saying that very same *asher kideshanu* gives the moment some historical context and a reference point.

We will need to study and reflect on where these inventive rituals intersect with traditional Judaism and where they do not. We will need to contemplate ways to make these rituals "feel Jewish" so that, while they are not bound to a long history (your ancestors probably didn't do any of them!) they speak deeply to us as Jews, not only as feminists. In this, we find ourselves in a real "Catch-22" situation: these ceremonies do not feel Jewish because Judaism historically has not included women in the discussion of what feels Jewish. These rituals do not feel Jewish because the rituals that *do* "feel Jewish" have been created exclusively by men. To make them "feel Jewish" we will have to probe into the meaning of authenticity. Why does a tallit look the way it does? What makes any "new" ritual authentic? How do we, in a non-halakhic Judaism, define ritual and its call upon us altogether?

Beyond Gender

These questions can be asked, of course, beyond the gender issue. How do we as non-Orthodox Jews balance the tightrope between accepted traditional rituals that give us collective context and memory (for example, the Pesach Seder), and new rituals that continue our goal of inclusivity and personal meaning (midlife rituals, renewal of marriage vows, blessing our college-bound children, and others)? We add, we subtract, we change, we adapt, and at what point do we say: enough, this ritual is now exactly the way we want it? Jewish men in the progressive movements may not feel any more bound to traditional forms than do women. Shouldn't our inventive rituals invent also for such men?

One disturbing dark spot remains to cloud these sparks of creativity. Why do these ceremonies seem so eclectic, so hard to find, promulgated mostly in "women's" books, *Rosh Ḥodesh* groups, and among women rabbis? Why aren't they more mainstream and widely available, widely practiced? Of course, they must be introduced into mainstream congregations and organizations, so that they can reshape and indeed transform the Judaism we have inherited into a feminist Judaism. In those situations, we will have to be prepared to accept that sometimes inventive rituals work, and sometimes they do not. We should not have to "grade" them after only one generation, and if they "fail," discard them. They need to be collected, published, and promulgated by the lay and professional arms of our movement. Colleagues who now create and perform these rituals need to be invited into congregations and organizations not only to lecture on the subject, but to lead people in these ceremonies. Women in our congrega-

tions and girls in our schools need to be surveyed and asked, "what do you need?"

In the near future, I hope our sons and daughters see and participate in these rituals as normal, predictable, and cyclical Jewish events, defining moments of a Jewish life. They should not be marginalized experiences of women's groups or periodic, frustrating attempts at gaining meaningful spiritual entrée to our congregations, camps, schools, and institutions. In the much nearer future, I hope our male colleagues will take up the call and become "experts" with us in this new endeavor, that all in our communities may feel fully served.

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1. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1988), 62-64.

2. Cynthia Ozick, "Notes toward Finding the Right Question," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).