

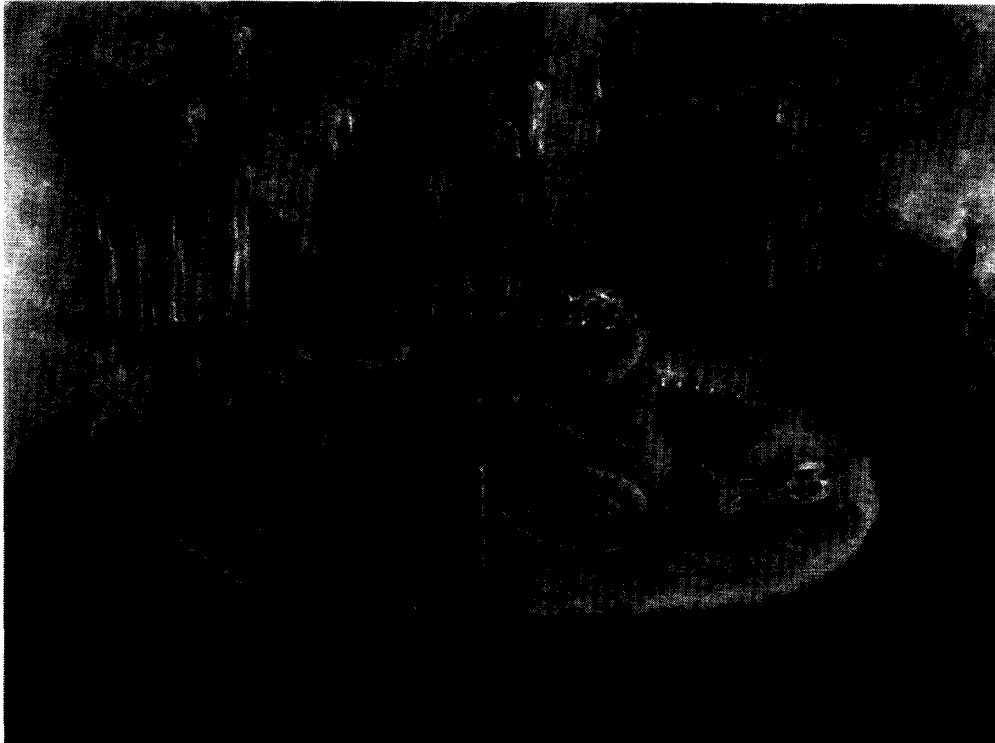
Jewish Feminism and "New" Jewish

by Rabbi Elyse M. Goldstein

L'auteure réfléchit sur l'incorporation des femmes et des filles dans les rituels juifs traditionnels.

way our society has attached authority onto rabbis or the Bible or the synagogue. Thus it behooves us to pay attention to all realms of feminist activity, for each has a ripple effect on

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. (62-64)



Norma Dvorsky, "The Comeback Table," acrylic on canvas, 112cm x 89cm, 1993.
Photo: François Turchon

In Jewish feminist circles, a great deal of attention is now being paid to spirituality and to ways in which we can incorporate a feminist world-view into the "religious" realm. I put religious in quotes, incidentally, because I disdain the current bifurcation of Jewish feminism into religious/cultural or religious/secular or religious/political as if women who care about *Torah* study might not be politically activist or women who identify as secular might have no interest in studying the *Torah*. As Jewish women however, we define our personal Jewish identity, we cannot help but be influenced by our upbringing, our contact with the Jewish religious establishment, the moments we find ourselves at weddings or funerals, the

the other. We used to say "the personal is political"—for Jewish women, the religious is also political! This growing interest in a feminist spirituality finds its most concrete expression in the call for new ways of looking at Jewish ritual.

In nearly every religion, rituals provide a marking, a delineation, a framework of meaning around normal events. They make sacred moments of our lives which at first glance might appear to be mundane. For example, we are all born; we reach puberty; in most cultures we marry or form permanent relationship bonds which create families; and we all die. Mary Douglas writes,

... ritual focuses attention by

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.

For Judaism, these are central concepts. A *brit milah* (eighth day circumcision ceremony for a boy) is a defining ritual. It changes the perception of the birth of a baby boy from a physical moment in time into a re-enactment of the ancient covenant between God and Abraham. Standing under a *chuppah* (marriage canopy) at a wedding is a defining ritual but it also identifies the couple as standing under the roof of their newly-created Jewish home. It is not only a re-enactment of the first "wedding" or coupling of Adam and Eve. In Judaism rituals 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 are Adam and Eve. This is achieved not through didactic learning or through theories and theologies but through actual drama. Perhaps the best example is the Passover¹ *seder* (meal), when Jews re-experience the bitterness of slavery through the rituals of eating *maror* (bitter herbs), *charoset* (mixture of nuts, apples, raisins), and so on. We re-experience our slavery by *acting it out* in very specific ways.

Rituals

Jewish feminists ask where are women touched as actors in this historical drama? How is a woman's life framed and defined through ritual? How is a woman's experience ex-

been accepted in more traditional communities. Women wearing *tallitot* (prayer shawls) in synagogue is not the strange sight it was years ago, when it led to glares and hostile re-

marks. I am ready for the second stage. The question for me 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. We have, I sincerely hope, passed that point. For me, the question we need to address is this: do we want to be *imitative* of traditional male rituals—*brit*, *bar mitzvah*, *tallit*, *t'fillin*²—or do we want to be *inventive* of our own? And 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 on an inner sense of womanhood, not defined by our biology?

On the one hand, imitative rituals force a certain "normalcy" on equality. A few years ago I was in Jerusalem, in a very religious neighborhood, full of stores carrying *tallitot*, *kippot* (skull caps), and other traditional ritual items usually used only by men.

To my utter shock, displayed prominently in one store's window was a *pink tallit*! I inquired of the owner, "Who would buy such a colour of *tallit*?" "A *bat mitzvah* girl of course" this *Hasid* 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 *tallit* is imitative ritual at its best.

In imitative ritual we redesign the traditional model, but we do not reimagine it. Thus a "girl's *tallit*" looks no different from a traditional *tallit* except in colour, 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.

So on one level, these rituals are extremely meaningful and satisfying. Imitative rituals 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.

But on another level they 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



Norma Dvorsky, "L'Heritage," acrylic on canvas, 76cm x 90cm, 1993.
Photo: François Turchon

pressed in Jewish ritual?

I suggest we are already passed the first stage in answering these questions. Baby namings, *bat mitzvahs*, egalitarian weddings are becoming the norm and no longer the exception. When I was ordained 13 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 it is fairly common. *Bat mitzvah* is almost standard practice, and some form of it has even

express Judaism in ways which still may be 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 yet 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 do not redesign; they reimagine. They ask, "Is there something uniquely female about this act, about this object?" They start from scratch. By definition, they are probably not traditional. For example, I once took a woman to the *mikveh*³ 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. We need to do the same for first menstruation, for menopause, for lactation and weaning, for pregnancy, infertility, 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. Our "Succah-by-the-Water"⁴ here in Toronto is inventive ritual. It is reminiscent of a *succah* indeed, but not at all like one. Under silk banners and branches inside a tent, we form "*lulav*⁵ circles" and make "trees of life." If Judaism were to truly mark not only the significant transitions of women's 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 would have to be new and invented rituals.

Inventive rituals are risky. They are not linked to thousands of years of practice. They do not look like what your *bubbie* (grandmother) did. A menstruation ceremony, a menopause *mikveh* celebration, a silk and applique *tallit*-cape with hood does not look or feel familiar, homey, warm, and fuzzy Jewish from your childhood. We will need to be scrupulous that our new rituals do not exclude barren women or women who choose not to have children, women who do not marry, lesbians. 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, child-rearers, care-givers. We will need to integrate the many kinds of "being" Jewish women so there are no "religious/secular" divisions in the creation of these significant and definitive moments. We will need to be sensitive to language, and we may need to invent new ways of blessing these moments. 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 have elements of an authentic Jewish link in them. They will be feminist, to be sure, but to enoble and enrich our Judaism, they must be Jewish as well. And they must be introduced into "mainstream" congregations and organizations along with feminist events and groups, so that they can reshape and indeed transform the Judaism we have inherited into a feminist Judaism. In two hundred years, I hope our great-grandsons and daughters see and participate in these rituals as normal, predictable, and cyclical Jewish events.

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her ordination. She has created "inventive" rituals for the Succah-by-the-Water celebrations each year and has been instrumental in reappropriating the mikvah as a tool for feminist spirituality. Currently at work on her first book—a feminist analysis of major themes in the Torah—her articles have appeared in Jewish and interfaith periodicals and she is one of seven women featured in the NFB documentary Half the Kingdom.

¹The spring holiday commemorating the exodus from Egypt.

²Phylacteries—small, square leather boxes containing slips of vellum, on which are written portions of the Mosaic Law, worn one on the head, another on the left arm, by orthodox and conservative Jews at prayer.

³A ritual bath of purification.

⁴A Toronto feminist celebration of the holiday of *Succot*.

⁵A set of branches of three specific plants waved during the *Succot*. Each branch is symbolic of different personality traits.

References

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1988.

Norma Dvorsky is currently living and working as an artist in Montreal. "I define myself somewhat as a secret Jew. The responsibility of outing this aspect of myself has been my own decision, or should I say, my own need. My mother is an Auschwitz survivor. My father was in the Czechoslovakian army during the war. When they came here they were involved in an intense reconstruction of self. Judaism was left behind, broken English was the new language and, Unitarianism was the new religion. The past, good and bad, was abolished. No explanation given, certainly for years, none asked. But then with the passing of time the undeniable past came back.... With that began my personal quest, always ongoing, to recreate, to move beyond the denial stage of paralyzing memories. In my work I examine aspects of loss and women's place as a keeper of ritual, the idea of passing on rituals from mother to daughter that have endured hundreds of years as well as the idea of giving it all up and forever changing the future."