

"Yearning for Tarnished Silver: The Feminist Creation of Ritual"
(Exodus 19:9-17; Exodus 20: 18)

In her book, The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America, Ruth Rosen reminds us of what America looked like 50 years ago. "Harvard's Lamont Library was off-limits to women for fear they would distract male students. Newspaper ads separated jobs by sex; bars often refused to serve women; some states even excluded women from jury duty; no women ran big corporations or universities, worked as firefighters or police officers. By the end of the 1970s there are not only legal abortions, Title IX and more women than men in American universities, but letters like the following were submitted to Ms. Magazine. "One day last week I pulled up to a four way stop in my taxi," writes Jill Wood. "At one of the stop signs sat a police officer in a cruiser; and at the third, a telephone installer in a van. What made the occasion memorable was the fact that all three of us were women. We celebrated with much laughter."

In the religious realm, the world has split open as well. Looking at Judaism from the perspective of the 50s—the ordination of female rabbis would be over twenty years away. No women were counted in the minyan, the quorum required for prayer. The first bat mitzvah, which had taken place in 1922, for Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan's daughter, had not been repeated. It would be a decade before a few courageous congregations offered the option of bat mitzvah for girls. Most daughters were born without any official welcome into the community while their brothers were welcomed into the covenant. Women's leadership in the synagogue meant running the Sisterhood and nothing else. Women were the worker bees, present in the pews but never on the pulpit. It would be twenty years before the creation of *Ezrat Nashim*, the first religious women's organization, formed to address the role of women in Judaism. The very name *Ezrat Nashim*, meaning the women's section, reclaimed the women's section of the synagogue, a place traditionally identified with disengagement and distance.

For some, that disengagement meant that any manifestation of religious or spiritual life could occur only outside normative structures. The late anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff describes a moment in the fifties, when she and her close friend, writer Deena Metzger, were arguing over how to mark Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. They were trying to deal with the inevitable sense of exclusion, which they felt upon seeing the open ark and feeling they had no access to what was contained in it—to the Torah. They agreed only that they could not go to synagogue. But they disagreed about what they could do. Finally, tentatively, they put together all the fragments that they had of Jewish life into a ritual—a dash of Holocaust poetry, wrapping themselves together in the prayer shawl which belonged to Barbara's father, lighting a candle. Together, they opened themselves to the tradition from which they had

previously felt barred. “We were stunned and we were shaking at our own outrage and daring and ingenuity.” Myerhoff said. “Remember, This was the fifties.”

Rarely were innovations in ritual-- daring or not-- initiated by men. Their place at the center of religious institutions was assured. Rather it was the women, faces pressed against the windowpane, who initiated and shaped new expressions of religiosity. At first questions revolved around equal access to leadership—moving gingerly from the women’s section to the center of the service. Religious life had a different look, as women became preachers and pastors, teachers, leaders and rabbis. As religious communities found ways to make the circle wider, to include women in positions of religious leadership, larger questions begged to be asked: How do women lead? How does a history of exclusion and invisibility inform those leaders? How do female religious leaders acquire the tools to make change? Desire to be inside the circle yielded to further challenges once they were inside.

In 1984, Rabbi Laura Geller and I created a two-day conference in Los Angeles that asked the question, “What would Judaism look like if women’s experience were taken seriously?” We titled the conference, “Illuminating the Unwritten Scroll: Women’s Spirituality and Jewish Tradition”. Our first hint that we were on to something important occurred when we wrote a grant and we received more money than we’d applied for. As we began to get advance registration, we realized that we had tapped into a deep vein of passion. Women were clamoring to enter a conversation about spiritual search and religious identity-- a conversation they had felt previously excluded from-- when the starting point was familiar--their own experience. We hosted women from wiccan covens to orthodox hasids. The concept of the unwritten scroll offered a place to chronicle and acknowledge a religious experience previously unrecorded in traditional sacred texts. The conference ended with a ritual filling in of that scroll.

The chutzpah, the audacity that anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff describes in tentatively creating religious ritual has given way, in this world split open, to women proudly claiming and making ritual. Ancient authority is making room for democratic innovation. Moments, which had never before been sacralized, are now acknowledged as worthy of being marked. We have come to believe that women’s experience, as diverse and as shaped by our particular stories as it has been, needs to be highlighted and included in our communal stories. On the one hand, this is easy--we know our own experience, and creating ritual values and honors it. On the other hand, as Barbara Myerhoff suggests, creating ritual is an act of daring--to add to the repertoire of religious ritual from our own small store of experiences. While Myerhoff and Metzger took whatever varied artifacts of their Judaism they had in hand, the process of creating feminist religious ritual has become more deliberate, with an understanding that some ritual experiments will be momentary, and others will be enduring.

Christian artist Gertrud Mueller Nelson writes in her book To Dance with God (Paulist Press 1986) about a family in which a two-year old boy had outgrown his baby bed. He wept and protested at the idea of giving up his bed, which had been a dear and comforting home since his birth. Seeing this, his mother devised a ritual for the

transition. She made a special dinner; the whole family talked about his old bed, how sad it would be to see it go, how exciting it would be to move to this new stage of sleeping in a “big boy” bed; they all lovingly took apart the old bed and brought it ceremoniously to the garage, assembled his new bed, they made it up with a new bedspread the young boy had selected himself, said his bedtime prayers and tucked him in for the night.

Rabbi Margaret Holub comments that, while this story has a lot of problems--not the least of which is that now Mom is supposed to be the family shaman on top of everything else--when she read this story, she found herself crying. “How different my childhood, indeed my adulthood, would be if people around me valued and marked the things I think are important!” Rituals are one of the ways we connect to those close to us, to our own lives, to community, to the story that makes up our life. When it is not only our own story, but also the story of our community, of our faith, of our people, rituals strengthen our sense of place in the stream of tradition.

Sheryl Robbin is an observant Orthodox Jewish woman who in addition to her work as a writer and social worker, makes extensive home preparations in anticipation of the Sabbath. In her essay, “Hands”, she describes the considerable and solitary preparations she makes for the Sabbath late on Thursday night in her kitchen. While she makes dishes her foremothers wouldn’t recognize and uses her Cuisinart to create them, she feels, she writes, “an eternity beyond time as strong as the ageless communion we invoke when engrossed in prayer.” She invites the women who came before her into her kitchen through the care she takes in her preparations. She describes her kitchen work as *avodah*, the Hebrew word used for ritual sacrifice and transformed into the word for prayer. She calls her *avodah* “the sacrifice that women have offered through the centuries”. These kitchen rituals are also part of our repertoire, the rituals of placing ourselves in religious time, of living by religious rhythms, of using religious words to sanctify the experience of the moment, familiar though it may be.

Rituals, of the kitchen and bedroom variety, and rituals of the religious variety are an integral part of human experience. For those of us who live in religious community, the desire to mark those occasions of importance and transition with rituals affirm both our individual and communal life, and has prompted us to invention.

How do we know when an occasion demands a ritual? I was once on a clergy panel on ritual, when the moderator asked the participants to share moments when they had invented rituals. The rituals revealed what people regarded as the blank spaces in their lives--aging, marriage, separation, divorce pregnancy, choices about childbirth, nursing, weaning, infertility, giving a baby up for adoption, menstruation, death, holidays. Esther Broner, who creates and writes about ritual, says that her best customers for ritual are people with broken hearts. But rituals for women need not only be related to biology or life-cycle moments. Women of all traditions have created rituals for completing a creative project, for forgiving oneself for a sin, for celebrating a time of family closeness, for publishing a book, for cooking a special family dish with a favorite grandmother’s recipe.

In most synagogue communities in America, even among the Orthodox, there are now rituals for welcoming daughters into the covenant and for bat mitzvah. Additionally, some communities are adopting New Moon or Rosh Chodesh celebrations, which have served as opportunities for study of women in the tradition and the creation of new rituals. When Rabbi Dara Frimmer was a Stanford student, she wrote her senior thesis in Feminist Studies on local Rosh Chodesh groups and how these groups enhanced the religious rootedness of the participants. And then she put her learning into action. She began a Rosh Chodesh ritual at Stanford over a decade ago which endures to this day: Graduating women immerse themselves in the ocean at the crack of dawn during their last week at Stanford to mark the completion of their undergraduate years; I received an elated email from one of last month's proud graduates describing the power of this ritual, the power of entering the water, sharing stories, memories and prayers.

Reinterpreting existing religious ritual from a feminist perspective has provided a foundation for creative ritual deeply rooted in yet challenging the past. A tradition of feminist Seders now exists in many Jewish communities. If Passover is a holiday celebrating freedom, then invoking it to mark the progress of the liberation of women is a natural extension of the holiday. In The Telling: A Group of Extraordinary Jewish Women Journey to Spirituality Through Community and Ceremony, Esther Broner describes the evolution of a feminist Seder, starting in 1975 in Haifa when Naomi Nimrod and Esther Broner were trying to figure out how to refer to God in Hebrew, a gendered language. "Phone Jerusalem" Naomi said. "They feel closer to God there. They'll know." The "they" were the pioneering women rabbinical students at the Hebrew Union College. Once they got the crackly call through to Jerusalem, they asked, "What do you call You-Know-Who?" "Shechinah", the rabbinic students answered, "She Who Dwells In Our Midst." Inviting the feminine image of God into their liturgy and their lives, the women appropriated a traditional ritual and used it in revolutionary ways. The Seder Mothers were Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Grace Paley, women known for their feminist activism, but not known for their religiosity, yet they found a way to claim their Jewish identity in a setting which valued and incorporated their feminism. The high point for the group was the year that the Seder was led by the daughters of the innovators. Then the women who created the Seder, the Seder Mothers, saw that the next generation would embody the values they worked so hard to achieve and inculcate. Feminist innovators and appropriators of traditional ritual hope for continuity, for, as Barbara Myerhoff knew, the process of being present at the creation is daring and outrageous.

In her poem, "Third Hymn to the Shekhina", theologian Rachel Adler imagines herself in the present, but returning to Mount Sinai for the revelation of the Torah,

All the prayers I make you are
Flashy
Like new silver.
It's too much
Being alone with you. I want a
Rebbe, a Minyan, a
Thousand generations to put

A patina on these words--
I want a crowd around this mountain.

Contemporary feminists and the religious traditions they confront have come a long way since Rachel Adler first challenged the ritual meaning of the Sinai revelation as it is described in Exodus. She understood that this is the central text of Jewish communal experience—the text of the revelation of the Holy Torah, a text read every year at Shavuot, the holiday marking the giving of the Torah by God to the people Israel.

As we just heard, Exodus teaches, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.” In 1973, Adler wrote, “When a woman hears the Torah read at a Shavuot morning service, when she hears the text in which Moses says to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman” (Exodus 19:15), she thinks, “‘The people’ does not mean me!” And as the commandments are proclaimed, one after the other, in the masculine singular, women are left standing apart, . . . eavesdropping on the conversation between God and man, wondering if there is anything God wants you to do and, if so, why doesn’t He tell you so Himself? . . . And because the text has excluded her, she is excluded again in this reenactment and will be excluded over and over, year by year, every time she rises to hear this covenant read.

But thirty years later, the participants in the rituals and indeed, even the meaning of revelation itself has changed, and not just for women. When we stood for the reading of the Ten Commandments at Congregation Kol Emeth, beautifully, expertly and clearly chanted by a woman at our local conservative congregation, Rabbi Sheldon Lewis incorporated feminism into his teaching. Rabbi Lewis, himself a traditionally observant conservative rabbi, taught a Chasidic text suggesting that even the revelation at Sinai was limited by the human capacity to hear it. In commenting on the Chasidic text, he said, “Our understanding of God and God’s intentions are limited by time and place. For example, we didn’t know when we first experienced revelation, that women must be equal to men in all of our rituals, relationships and in the presence of God. In the future, there will be other things we will learn that we do not now know.” Women’s place in the tradition is the example Rabbi Lewis used to express the introduction of time and place--of modernity--into religious theology. For Rabbi Lewis, as for many observant religious leaders, gender equality is not just a social movement or a passing fad. It has the force of being revealed by God at Sinai. Our core image of covenant has widened.

Flashy, daring, outrageous and now becoming familiar, those of us who yearn for tarnished silver continue to write prayers and to create ritual. Our rituals, our understanding, our appreciation of the relationship between religion and experience have been enhanced and broadened by feminism. Gradually, the silver is aging, reflecting less flash, revealing more tarnish. A crowd—of men and women building together-- is slowly but surely, gathering around the mountain. *Ken yehi ratzon*. So may this be God’s intention.