

Neshama

נשמה

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קיץ תש"נ

Encouraging the exploration of women's spirituality in Judaism

Kos Miryam: Development of a Women's Ritual

Matia Angelou

There are a number of elements included in ritual being created by women today. Water imagery is used time and again, as are circles and spirals. Miriam's Well and the cycles of the moon are symbols to express renewal and inspiration. Female role models from the Torah, such as Sarah the Matriarch, Miriam the Prophetess, and Deborah the Judge, give women strong feminine characteristics to emulate. Women are rediscovering and redefining the feminine aspects of God, with Shekhinah and Rahameima becoming more widely used as names of God. Mikor ha-Chayim (Source of Life), Chei ha-Olamim (Life Ever-Lasting), and other phrases from traditional liturgy are used in new ways to describe a God who speaks personally to women.

Women are creating rituals which add to the traditional liturgy with a feminine consciousness. A women's group from Delaware, the Judaism and Feminism Study Group of Jewish Family Service, has written a new service for Birkat ha-Levanah (Blessing of the Moon). The women's service is based on the traditional Kiddush Levanah service, which is often said in the synagogue, as it should be conducted with a *minyan* (a quorum of ten people). This service, recited between two days and two weeks after the appearance of the *molad* (new moon), should not be confused with Birkat ha-Chodesh (Blessing of the New Month), announcing the upcoming Hebrew month on the Sabbath preceding Rosh Chodesh.

The women have kept some of the traditional elements, such as reciting the service out of doors. The Hebrew is in the same form and they have kept the traditional psalms, but they have added some original stories and translations. They have also added some songs and readings to expand what is a rather short service (just a few paragraphs) in the synagogue. By standing in a circle outside holding candles, singing together, and reciting personal intentions, they have given a feminine feel to this service while keeping the basic service in its traditional form.

There is a co-operative nature to women's rituals, both in their creation and in their expression. More often than not, a few women will work together

to create a ritual. The rituals themselves usually include a time for sharing feelings and thoughts. Acknowledging and blessing their own inner qualities, as well as blessing one another, is often part of women's ritual. Singing and dancing with each other are favorite activities, and healing circles are often included.

A number of these elements came together in a ritual called Kos Miryam. The first time I was introduced to the idea of drinking water in honor of Miriam was in Penina Adelman's book *Miriam's Well, Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year* (Biblio Press, 1986). On page 11 Penina describes a women's ritual using the image of Miriam's Well (a water well that, because of the merit of the prophetess Miriam, followed the Jewish people through their long wandering in the desert) as a centerpoint. Indeed, the entire book affirms the well as a symbol of renewal and inspiration. Miriam's Well is an excellent source for information about the well and about Miriam as a heroine for Jewish women.

The development of the particular ritual called Kos Miryam began with a guided meditation led by

Women are creating rituals which add to the traditional liturgy with a feminine consciousness.

Joyce Rosen. During the meditation, members of a Boston-based Rosh Chodesh group visited Miriam's Well to gain inspiration and renewal from the *mayim chayim* (living waters) found there. We splashed in these waters, bathed in them as in a *mikveh* (ritual bath), or simply sat by them quietly. Joyce suggested that we each, still in meditation, take a cool drink from Miriam's Well, filling ourselves with strength from these living waters.

One woman, Stephanie Loo Ritari, met Miriam herself at the well. Stephanie, a new mother, was feeling a need for some loving support in tending her

baby. In her meditation, Stephanie felt Miriam physically support her as she dipped into the well, using it as a *mikveh*. Miriam took off her red leather sandals and handed them to Stephanie. Miriam encouraged her to keep walking in the direction she was going because she was doing just fine.

This image was so powerful for Stephanie that she wanted a way to keep in touch with it weekly, to feel on a regular basis the strength and support Miriam gave to her at the well. She and her family began drinking from what she called Kos Miryam before the Sabbath Kiddush every Friday night. She holds up a clear glass goblet filled with spring water or seltzer water and says in Hebrew, "This is the Cup of Miriam. Strength, strength, and may we be strengthened." Then everyone drinks, drawing strength from the living waters.

There is a cooperative nature to women's rituals, both in their creation and in their expression.

When Stephanie shared this new custom with me, I felt it was a wonderful way to bring a new dimension into Shabbat. I have built a more elaborate ritual around Kos Miryam, using sparkling water in a cut crystal goblet. Before Kiddush, I ask everyone at the Sabbath table to share an inspirational thought, something that helps them to renew themselves. I liken the Sabbath to a well in which we can refresh and purify ourselves after a long week. I say, "This is the Cup of Miriam, the Cup of Living Waters," in Hebrew, and then I add two blessings: "Blessed are You, Shekhinah, Source of Life, who gives us living waters. Blessed are You, Adonai, Ruler of the Universe, by whose word everything is created." (This second blessing is *she-hakol*, the traditional blessing said before drinking water.) My family enjoys beginning the Sabbath by remembering Miriam, while ending it at Havdalah by remembering Elijah.

I enlisted the help of Janet Berkenfield, who had written some beautiful meditations and psalms for *Siddur Birkat Shalom*, the new egalitarian prayerbook produced by the Havurat Shalom Siddur Project. Together we expanded the ritual to include Hebrew and English readings, as well as some songs. My family uses this expanded version of Kos Miryam to begin the Passover Seder, ending it with the traditional Kos Eliyahu (Cup of Elijah). I think this is an appropriate addition to the Seder because Miriam played such a prominent role in the Exodus story.

Some Rosh Chodesh groups have also adopted Kos Miryam, using it in their closing rituals. As women pass the clear goblet around the circle, they share an intention for the coming month, something they want to bring home with them from the ritual for that evening. They sip from Kos Miryam, drinking in strength, inspiration, and renewal from the living waters of Miriam's Well.

The development of Kos Miryam exemplifies the cooperative nature of Jewish women's ritual. Without Penina's story in *Miriam's Well*, Joyce's original meditation, and Stephanie's Sabbath custom, there would have been no expanded rituals using Kos Miryam. This is a cooperative effort which all of the women had a share in creating.

Matia Angelou, Associate Editor of Neshama, says that she puts the Kos Miryam ritual before Kiddush so as not to interrupt the flow from Kiddush to the Ha-Motzi blessing. For women who observe traditional Jewish law, Kos Miryam would be performed between Kiddush and Ha-Motzi because according to Halacha the Kiddush wine is the first food or drink to pass the lips after the Sabbath begins.



Women's Minyan

Kimberley A. Shaw

mayim khayim
the water of Miriam,
we draw it up by cupfuls
and buckets
in a sunny circle
and portable shul
the drumbeat leads us
kids run
the men stare
before they walk on
borkhu
loud, so they hear our voices
forbidden
weight of Torah on my arms
on my shoulders
in my head
on all of us

Kimberley A. Shaw is a Maine native now living near Boston.

The National Council of Jewish Women, N.Y. Section, is compiling an international directory of Rosh Chodesh groups. For info contact Alicia Driks, 9 E. 69th St., New York, NY 10021 (212/535-5900).

Women of the Wall

Cindy Olsher

In December of 1988, a group of women from the First International Conference of Jewish Feminists went to the Kotel (the Western Wall, remnant of the Temple in Jerusalem) to pray. Some of these women continued to *daven* as a group at the Wall on Rosh Chodesh and on Friday mornings. This group eventually received the "attention" of the Chief Rabbi and the State of Israel. One of the most intriguing aspects of the group is its religious diversity; the women involved range from Orthodox to secular Jews, and from politically conservative to radical.

It was just an opening of floodgates of religious emotion and connection that were blocked before and allowed to open. It was truly a transcendent experience.

For the Orthodox women to participate in the service it had to follow the guidelines of a *tefillah* group, which means they don't do those parts of the service which require a *minyan*. This in itself required a compromise on the part of the women who resent the implication that a *minyan* can only be made up of 10 men. For the Orthodox women involved in the group the compromise has often come in the form of community difficulties and/or rebuffs. The three women interviewed for this article were asked to describe themselves as Jews and to speak about their involvement in and experience of the group.

Shulamit Magnus: "At the conference Rivka Haut from Brooklyn had this idea that we would go to the Wall and have a women's service. There were not enough Orthodox women for her to organize and pull it off on their own so she was forced to reach out to non-Orthodox women. She also wanted it to be more than just Orthodox women and a broader kind of experience, so she started asking who would be willing to go and to participate.

"Right away we started to hit the denominational walls. There were many women who wouldn't go there because there's a *mechitzah* there, and there were other women, myself included, who said they could not participate in a group where women are not counted. I was raised Orthodox, and I helped found the Orthodox Women's Tefillah Group, but I had passed out of that and felt I could not go back. That's what I said when they asked me to lead davening; but I did say I would read Torah because I love to read Torah and that to me did not involve any violation of my self.

"Ultimately what it meant for me was a way to reclaim that place that I love dearly; I had felt I could not go there alone and be whole as both a Jew and a woman, but I hoped that with a group of women going to *daven* as a group I would not have to park my self-esteem in order to pray there. In fact, that is what that experience was for me; it was just an opening of floodgates of religious emotion and connection that were blocked before and allowed to open. It was truly a transcendent experience.

"It was absolutely marvelous, even with all the lunacy that started to happen on the men's side, which was quite frightening. But I consciously shut that out so I could have a few moments there of something wonderful.

"Then a group of Jerusalem women continued to go to the Kotel. Initially I didn't go because I thought it would be another Orthodox Women's Tefillah Group and I didn't feel I could do that on a regular basis. So I didn't go the first time, in January, but when I heard that they were very badly attacked I felt I could not stay home. I was always afraid every time I went, but what I got was, first of all, an intense bonding to the other women doing this, who were an extraordinary bunch of women whom I came to respect immensely and for whom I have boundless loyalty and affection. And that compensated for a lot of my discomfort with praying as a *tefillah* group. And we did have some lovely *tefillot*. Despite everything going on around us, we did *daven*."

It was absolutely marvelous, even with all the lunacy that started to happen on the men's side, which was quite frightening.

Geela Rayzel Robinson: "I was at the conference so I was part of the decision to go to the Wall the first time. I was really caught up in the excitement. I led Pesukei Dezimrah (introductory psalms) and it was such a high. It was a very exciting thing to be a part of.

"Then I was in the Rosh Chodesh group that met a week later and decided to go to the Wall. I see myself as a feminist who is bringing Judaism into the New Age, and I sing and try to keep people entertained along the way so they won't notice the pain. When I started out in the group I was going to *daven* but it became clear to me that it was not a place I could *daven*, with all the screaming and noise. I kept going as a statement of solidarity and political action.

"Also I see the group helping to shape the policies of the State of Israel. Israel is young still and has lessons to learn. I think this is going to raise the consciousness of the State and help bring religion up as an issue among feminists, and feminism as an issue among the religious. I think it took a lot of brave souls. I was really honored and excited and challenged to be a part of that."

I was so impressed with their sincerity and their sensitivity not to make the whole thing political.

Barbara Wachs: "I grew up in Boro Park (New York) which was really modern Orthodoxy. I am currently Shomeret Shabbat (Sabbath-observant) and a havurah member in an egalitarian traditional *minyan*. Ideologically I am committed to egalitarianism, but I have never actively participated in the *minyan*, possibly because I don't have a good voice and my feeling was always that if I was going to participate I wanted to be perfect, so I never felt comfortable participating in the leadership.

"I got involved in the Women of the Wall initially out of outrage. I was at the conference and I didn't go to the first *tefillah* in December because I thought it was a gimmick of the women.

"But after the women were attacked I decided to go. I'm very straight and I knew some of the women by sight who were involved and I was very



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skeptical. But I went to a meeting, to see who these women were, and I was very touched. I was so impressed with their sincerity and their sensitivity not to make the whole thing political.

"So I began going on a regular basis on Friday mornings, and while I started going to show solidarity for the women, it became for me a spiritual experience. I found the courage in this group to stand up and lead the davening! I would never have dreamed of it. And before I left to return to the States I read from Torah.

This group caused the Kotel to be a holy place. It returned the *kedushah*.

"That was very special, both reading and the fact that I even wanted to do it. The Kotel used to be a place I hated with a passion because I always felt there was no place for me. I need a group for *kavanah*. So the fact that I had no group to *daven* there with was awful.

"This group caused the Kotel to be a holy place. It returned the *kedushah*."

Cindy Olsher is an Assistant Editor of Neshama.

Yotser Or

Marthajoy Aft

shabbat shalom. going home.
though Chicago's no longer home,
for me.
living in Boston long time now.
seventeen years.
and yet, somehow,
in exile.
seems only place to feel shalaym
is in Your city.
my real home is
the Wall.
well. that's
where my soul resides,
flies at night while body sleeps,
returning
each dawn.

yawn.
time for bed.
sun's rising
in Jerusalem.

Marthajoy Aft is a consultant with the Bureau of Jewish Education in Boston.

Midrash of Our Mothers

Rebekah's Cry No. 1

While Rebekah is pregnant with Jacob and Esau who struggle in her womb, she cries out, *Im ken lama zeh anokhi?* ("If this be so, why do I exist?")—an existential question, to say the least.

Something extraordinary was happening within her. Whenever she passed by the doors of the schools of Shem and Eber (the pre-Torah Torah scholars mentioned in Genesis Rabbah), Jacob "moved convulsively in his efforts to come to birth," but whenever she passed by the gate of a pagan temple, Esau "moved convulsively in his efforts to come to birth" (Gen. Rab. 63:6).

When Rebekah, like her great-aunt Sarah, was barren, she, unlike Sarah, had a husband who prayed for *them* to have children. Sarah, according to Rashi, rebuked Abraham for praying for *himself* to have children. Isaac, however, "stood in one corner and prayed while she stood in the other corner and prayed." Isaac's entreating God "reversed her destiny" (Gen. Rab. 63:5), as they prayed "opposite each other."

Why was Isaac's prayer so important? Rashi says, "There is no comparison between the prayer of a righteous person who is the child of a righteous person and the prayer of a righteous person who is the child of a wicked person...She was the daughter of a wicked man, sister of a wicked man, and her native place was of wicked people, and yet she did not learn from their doings."

"Her father was a rogue, and her brother was a rogue, and the people of her town were likewise

rogues," says Gen. Rab. 63:4, "and this righteous woman who came forth among them might well be compared to 'a lily among the thorns' ...the whole population were included in the category of rogues."

Rashi and Ibn Ezra deal with Rebekah's question on the level of asking about such a difficult pregnancy. "She asked whether this was the normal course of childbearing, feeling that something extraordinary was happening." If the pain of pregnancy is so great, she asked, why is it that I longed and prayed to become pregnant?

The Midrash (Gen. Rab. 63:6) says she went around to women's houses, asking them if they suffered so much in pregnancy. "If the pain of pregnancy be so great, would that I had not become pregnant!"

Rabbi Nehemia believed that "Rebekah merited that the 12 tribes should spring directly from her," and lists 12 phrases that God says to her. Rabbi Huna claimed that she said, "If I am to produce the 12 tribes only with such suffering, would that I had not conceived!"

Nachmanides sees her plight as more existential. "Life was unbearable for her, and she wanted to die," he says. She asked, "Why am I in the world? Would that I did not exist, that I should die or never have come into existence."

Rebekah's Cry No. 2 will be the topic of the next "Midrash of Our Mothers."

Kinship Systems in the Torah

Judith S. Antonelli

Much of the sexism that is blamed on the Torah is actually the sexism of the patriarchal pagan societies in which Judaism arose. The sociological status of women in these societies has not only misled some into thinking that the Torah itself is sexist, it has also led others to believe that a particular sociology of women's status has divine approval.

Patrilineal descent (kinship through the father) and patrilocal marriage (couple lives with husband's kin) were the norm in both Egypt and Canaan, where the children of Israel resided. Yet remnants of matrilineal descent (kinship through the mother) and matrilocal marriage (couple lives with wife's kin) are evident in the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs.

Before the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai, matrilineal descent was the norm. That is, relations were determined solely through the mother. Being brother and sister meant having the same mother, not necessarily the same father. Children of the same father but different mothers, lacking that uterine tie, were permitted to marry each other.

In a matrilineal system a man belongs to his mother's and his sister's clan, and his sister's sons, rather than his own sons, are his heirs. For his children are not of his sister's clan and thus even his daughters are sexually permitted to him.

That "a Noachide was permitted to take his daughter" (Nachmanides) is made reference to several times in the Jewish tradition. "Gentiles do not recognize paternity," says the Midrash in Genesis Rabbah 18:5.

When Abraham explains to Abimelech why he tried to pass Sarah off as his sister, he says (Genesis 20:12), "And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife."

Sarah is actually the granddaughter of Abraham's father, according to Rashi, for she is the daughter of Abraham's (paternal) brother Haran (Gen. 11:29). But "one's children's children are considered as one's own children," Rashi adds, and also notes that "the daughter of the same father is permitted to a descendant of Noah." Haran and Abraham had the same father, Terach, but we do not know if they were born of the same mother.

Rabbi Meir, in Genesis Rabbah 52:11, says that, in his reply to Abimelech, Abraham "answered in accordance with their own views, for they permit the daughter of one's father, but interdict the daughter of one's mother; therefore he answered them in accordance with their practice."

This is why, at Sinai, the sexual prohibitions in Leviticus 18 often emphasize the relations of the father, such as the father's wife (who is not the mother of the son), or the sister, whether she be "your father's daughter or your mother's."

That God worked within the confines of a society where women were under the authority of their fathers and their husbands does not mean that such authority over women is God-given. Nor does it mean that the Torah is sexist and should be abandoned or rewritten.

Matrilocal marriage is first mentioned in the Torah in Gen. 2:24, after the *adam* (first human) has been split into female and male: "For this reason a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." There is no corresponding suggestion that "a woman leaves her father and her mother and cleaves to her husband" to make them one flesh.

Matrilocal marriage is practiced by Jacob when he is sent by his mother to her brother (the primary male-female tie in a matrilineal system) to find a wife. Here Jacob practices animal husbandry (to become a husband), working for 20 years for his wives' household to earn his keep, and to earn his right to marry Rachel and Leah.

It is not clear whether matrilocal marriage was the norm in Babylonia, or just in the part that Abraham and Sarah came from, or not the norm at all. Yet there is an indication that Rebekah is being asked to do something out of the ordinary. Eliezer says to Abraham, "What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" No, says Abraham, "if the woman does not consent to follow you, you shall then be clear of this oath to me; but do not take my son back there." (Gen. 24:5,8)

Similarly, when Rebekah's family asks her, "Will you go with this man?" (Gen. 24:58), and she says, "I will go," it may refer to her willingness to live with her husband *in his land* rather than her willingness to marry him. For the betrothal has already been made (Gen. 24:51) by her father and brother. She is only being asked if she will leave immediately and not wait the customary year. Judith Kates has pointed out that Rebekah's answer, "*Elekh*," calls to mind God's command to Abraham, "*Lekh lekha*." Like Abraham, Rebekah is being asked to get up and leave her land.

Patrilocal marriage involves the betrothal of a girl at a very young age. The laws of annulling vows (Numbers 30) shed some light on this. As a minor, *ketannah*, (until she is 12) her vows can be annulled by her father. After she is married, her vows can be annulled by her husband. But in her betrothal stage—as a *naarah*, a young maiden age 12 to 12-1/2—her father and her future husband must both annul her vows.

The transfer of a daughter from her father's authority to her future husband's authority occurred at puberty. She would go to live in his house even before the actual marriage (this is why the Jewish wedding ceremony used to occur in two phases, *kiddushin* and *nissuin*). That a daughter was lost to her family very early because of patrilocal marriage—becoming more a part of her father-in-law's family than her own—is noted in the Midrash in Gen. Rab. 26:4 in the following story.

Rabbi Simeon's wife had a baby girl. Rabbi Hiyyah the Elder stated that a daughter is a sign of a blessing, daughters are a sign of increase. But R. Simeon's father says that "wine is more needed than vinegar, wheat more needed than barley. When a man gives his daughter in marriage and incurs expense, he says to her, 'May you never return hither.'" This means, the Midrash concludes, that she should be happy with her husband. A daughter is eventually lost to her family and this, rather than a lower opinion of women, is the reason for son preference.

But surely a "lower opinion of women" is at the root of a system which can barter off its daughters in such a way while retaining its sons. This extreme form of patrilocal marriage is still practiced today in

India and in China. In India, women, who go to live at the households of their future fathers-in-law at a young age, are often the victims of what is called "dowry burnings." Disguised as a cooking accident, a young woman may be set on fire in her new home by a family greedy for another dowry. In China, women have protested the permanent severance of relations with their own family for the sake of the husband's family by forming a group known as "the marriage resisters." These are women who refuse to get married.

The Torah did not dictate patrilocal marriage. This was the form of society found in the lands in which the Torah was given. The Torah was given in a certain sociological milieu, which God worked within the confines of so as to not surpass its own boundaries of allowability and believability. (Enough miracles were happening already!) Maimonides talks about the need for God to wean the people away from idolatry by *transforming* animal sacrifice rather than *eliminating* it. This is a similar phenomenon.

Judaism has retained a unique way of combining kinship systems by attributing the soul's identity (who is a Jew) to the matrilineal line, while tribal identity (which determines division of the land) comes from the patrilineal line.

That God worked within the confines of a society where women were under the authority of their fathers and then their husbands (college, career and a room of one's own not even being an option!) does not mean that such male authority over women is God-given. Nor does it mean that the Torah is sexist and should be abandoned or rewritten.

Genesis 37:35 states, "And all Jacob's sons and daughters rose up to comfort him." Rabbi Judah said that each of the 12 sons had a twin sister, and each son married a half-sister (i.e., the daughter of a different mother). This would be called, anthropologically, endogamous marriage (marrying within one's group) rather than exogamous marriage (marrying outside one's group), which would have meant intermarrying with the Canaanites. Thus Jacob's "daughters" and his daughters-in-law are one and the same. He retained his daughters rather than sending them away.

In modern America we have what is called a bilateral system of kinship—i.e., descent comes through both the mother and the father. Sexual taboos apply whether the person is a relative of the mother or the father, and both mothers and fathers may leave an inheritance to a son or a daughter. Judaism has retained a unique way of combining kinship systems by attributing the soul's identity (who is a Jew) to the matrilineal line, while tribal identity (which determines division of the land) comes from the patrilineal line.

Judith S. Antonelli is an Associate Editor for Neshama.



untitled



Morissa Williams

For the sake of every blossom,
animal,

child,

I entreat you, Lord,

Stay the tremors of your sorrow.

Do not abandon this nearly orphaned earth
to the cynical, despairing ax of men's words.

Teach us, again,
from the beginning,

to wander with you among the
elements --

to love the world of Aleph, Bet --

please. I entreat you. Begin again.

Amen.

Morissa Williams lives quite happily in Boston's North End.

Poet of the Moment: Guiding Meditation

Julie Leavitt

My introduction to Julie Leavitt occurred about two years ago when she led a powerful, deeply moving meditation at a Rosh Chodesh group meeting. I learned to look forward to her meditations because they contain an indefinable something that makes them extraordinary. In this article, Julie describes her process of guiding group meditations. --ed.

I start with a prayer to attune and open myself. I breathe deeply, becoming aware of my body and releasing tensions and thoughts from the day. Sighs, groans, and sounds of letting go can be heard around the room as I encourage others to allow their breath to aid them in beginning the clearing for meditation.

The sighs and groans of a Jew are very precious...How precious when you sigh out of longing for something holy. The sigh you let out because you are far from something holy breaks the bond of impurity which was trapping you...Then the soul can draw nearer to the body and communicate to it something of her own perception of God.--Rabbi Nachman

Lev Friedman has taught me the Pinhole Theory: any time we open ourselves to the Holy One, all we need is to find an inner opening or willingness the size of a pinhole through which we can come closer to God.

I feel my shoulders drop their ache, my stomach ease, arms and hands loosen their grip, and my spine warmly supporting me. Aloud, I name body part by body part beginning at the top of our heads. We let go together. I keep this simple, offering silence between words to respect solitude and encourage the engagement of each imagination.

Solitude of inner focus nourishes and forms the meditation. A guide must respect the silence and solitude of each group member. Often the excitement of imagery and anxiety to communicate pushes the guide to say too much. Trust the group--and yourself, for that matter. As in poetry, the guide must learn to trust the image, process, and partakers in order to simply communicate the image that forms in her own senses. There can be beauty here. After scanning body parts, encourage each person to feel the breath unifying their whole body and take a few breaths with this awareness.

The meditation may be led with or without the aid of soothing background music.

Begin following a preliminary guide through the body to release tension and promote inner focus.

See in the center of yourself, the place where your breath begins, a single seed. Hold this seed very gently inside of you. Witness it. See its shape, color, listen to its needs for care so it may grow as it must. If it feels right, see yourself caring for this seed as it has asked.

Silence as meditators follow their image.

See this seed sprout and begin to grow. Watch this. What shape, direction, color, texture, size comes from the inner plan of the seed?

Silence.

Let this growth come to fruition. See this with all your senses. What is this fruit that has come from the seed? What is within its own seed?

Silence.

As time passes, the fruit and all growth from this seed returns to earth. See its vibrance leaving as it begins to die. Say goodbye, remembering its essence and the gifts that came from the original seed. Where does it leave its seed as it dies?

Silence.

Gradually become aware of your breathing inside your body, hear sounds of the room, my voice and others around you. Appreciate yourself for taking this time for stillness. As you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Editor's Corner

Let your image come from a theme for the month or holiday, as in Rosh Chodesh celebrations where each new moon-th brings its own *kavanah*, or intention. As I wait for an image to come into me from a group sense or pre-chosen theme, I feel for my own "pinhole opening" to swim through into the meditation's depth. It can be frightening: "What if I don't find an image people like and can use? Am I in touch enough to do this? Who am I to do this anyway?" Ah, familiar thoughts, so I go with the image and a small leap of faith.

Let the image unfold, develop, and recede, leaving plenty of long silent pauses. Let yourself relax with the process. It always amazes me how in one room with a single image, each person discovers something uniquely their own. So many worlds spinning in one room!

Some people need longer to come back from their meditation than others. I gently bring them back, offering within, and following, their guided imagery time for silence. Providing a bridge between the meditation back to waking consciousness is important--the difference between an alarm clock and a light tap. The "tap" eases the transition that could otherwise be so abrupt as to sever the imaginative cord by alarming the body's senses and safety.

Once emerged from meditation, I usually have people gather to move, draw, write, or express their experience in another way. Putting the experience into words can be suggested when the meditators wish. The words spoken may be as tenderly picked as those found to guide the evoked images.

We all have it in us to be poets of our experience--present for the grace and surprises of the moment and listening for words that come from it. The guide, too, becomes "poet of the moment," giving ourselves to follow a simple image whose effect may be profound.

*Let silence still us so you may show us
your shining and we can out of that
stillness rise and praise. --Marge Piercy*

Julie Leavitt is a dancer and expressive therapist in Greater Boston.

Nishmat Ha-Nashim, a one-day retreat for women interested in exploring spirituality with other Jewish women, will be held on July 1 in the Boston area. The day will include workshops, discussions and networking. Emphasis will be on skills that can be brought back to local Rosh Chodesh or other women's spiritual groups. Everyone is invited. For information contact Matia Angelou, 31 Surry Rd., Arlington, MA 02172, (617) 648-4878.

Women's participation and leadership in Jewish organizations and institutions is growing in leaps and bounds. Almost no segment of the community is untouched: in one of Boston's large Orthodox synagogues two women were elected to the board; ten years ago this would have been unthinkable.

Numerous women's services were held around the country on Sunday, February 25 in solidarity with the Women of the Wall. In Boston, about 30 women showed up in spite of a blizzard. The crowd included women of all ages from all parts of the religious spectrum. On one thing we all agreed: we were pleased that we were able to pray together in spite of our religious differences.

Exciting conferences have been and are being held across the country. One was the December 1989 National Council of Jewish Women's "Bat Mitzvah," marking the 12th anniversary of its Jewish Women's Resource Center. This program focused on envisioning the future of Jewish feminist agendas.

In Boston, a very different conference is planned for early July. Women from numerous Rosh Chodesh and other Jewish women's groups will be meeting together for the first time. The program will focus on spirituality and will teach skills that can be brought back to the individual groups.

Is there a conference in your area? We'd love to include announcements (if you send them to us early enough, at least 4 months before the scheduled date) or brief reports on the highlights. Remember, reading about your successes can give others the courage to plan their own programs. (Anyone want to write us an article about how to plan a successful Jewish women's conference?)

Please write for us. The only way we can publish diverse opinions is for many people to send us articles. If you've never written an article before, try; there's a first time for all of us. We can always work with you to sharpen up a piece, as long as you send it to us in the first place. Our Writer's Guidelines are available for free if you'll send us a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Deadline for our Fall/Rosh Hashana issue is July 1; for our Winter/Chanukah issue send material before October 1.

We want to thank everyone who has sent a tax-deductible contribution to *Neshama*. Our special thanks go to the Albert E. Marks Charitable Trust for its generosity.

More on Mechitzah

Roberta Einhorn

The divider between men and women in a traditional synagogue, the *mechitzah*, has often been the focus of discussion among modern Jewish women. The time-worn reason for *mechitzah*--that of sexual distraction--sounds as offensive as it does strange, and yet there is another distraction which is far more inhibiting to the flow of prayer and to the feelings of joy which the Sabbath should inspire. For those of us (men or women) who are alone or for any reason feel alone, sitting with members of the same sex helps immeasurably to defuse those emotions.

For those of us (men or women) who are alone or for any reason feel alone, sitting with members of the same sex helps immeasurably to defuse these emotions.

Same-sex seating allows a rest from those emotions on the day when we deserve the luxury of separating ourselves not only from what is profane but from what is painful. What I am suggesting here is a *mechitzah* which is more symbolic than actual, allowing both men and women visual access but at the same time creating distance, not from men or women, but from couples.

I have been making the happy discovery that our tradition survives because our laws and customs have more to do with justice and compassion than any other reason. The *mechitzah* makes sense to me because it keeps faith with this abiding level of reality. For me, this standard has become the litmus test by which I

assess the justification for holding onto those conventions and customs which are meant to serve us in the direction of our becoming more truly human.

Early on in our lives we depart from that close, comforting, magical world of friendship and engage in other rites of passage which encourage rivalry and competition in situations where some of us gain and some lose. I am grateful for at least one day each week when I am reminded by the women around me of our common experiences, concerns, and our own unique perspective.

My favorite seating arrangement in one synagogue I frequent allows for men and women to sit separately on either side of a section where they can sit together. Given this choice, I have noticed that most of the congregants choose to sit with others of the same sex.

Shabbat can be the day when we renew our sense of self as complete. The women beside me affirm who I am rather than what I have not.

If any of us doubts that we are whole and intact just as we are, whether we are "alone" or not, Shabbat can be the day when we renew our sense of self as complete. The women beside me affirm who I am rather than what I have not. At the conclusion of the service it is to each other we turn in that perfect space with welcome and good wishes.

Roberta Einhorn writes poetry and runs a Bed and Breakfast in Bar Harbor, Maine.

Book Reviews

Hanna Bandes

Flying on the Wings of Aleph, a tikkun by Monique Pasternak. 74 pages, Ocean Star Publications, Ft. Bragg, CA, 1988.

This is a volume that speaks of the indomitable human spirit. Many of the poems are richly textured with Jewish language and metaphor. The poet, born in 1942 in Nazi Europe, is a transpersonal therapist and educator who uses the destruction that surrounded her early years as one side of a scale, challenging us to reach for the spiritual heights that provide some small balance against the evil. These poems are glowing, uplifting tributes to the good that lies within.

Flying on the Wings of Aleph is available from Ocean Star Publications, 30200 North Highway 1, Ft. Bragg, CA 95437. Include \$7 per copy plus \$1 handling charges.

Bad Names for Women, by Hilary Tham. 71 pages. Word Works Capital Collection, Washington, DC, 1989.

Hilary Tham, now Jewish and married to a Jewish man, was born and raised in a Chinese family in Malaysia. Her poems are brief, vivid sketches of moments and people from the Chinese/Malaysian, Jewish, and just-plain-American parts of her life. Tham takes the same clumsy words I know and transforms them into brief, sharply drawn images, showing me familiar scenes in new ways and unfamiliar scenes in ways I'll never forget.

Bad Names for Women can be ordered from The Word Works, P.O. Box 42164, Washington, DC 20015.

Hanna Bandes is Neshama's editor and publisher.

Shema and her Blessings

Debbie Rittner

God washes over me,
wave upon wave,
with people who have touched me;
the flow of light must never stop.
The cover of love continues
and no one need descend
when ever lifted higher
in a Oneness rush.

Debbie Rittner is a poet and storyteller in the Boston area.

Neshama needs volunteers to help with organizational and editorial work. Let us know what skills you have. Contact us at P.O. Box 545, Brookline, MA 02146, 617/232-4742.

The Measuring Cup

Ada Jill Schneider

Balanced on my heart is a cup that measures joy.
When it fills to overflowing--like the night
Ron turned fifty-four, enveloped
in a Marriage Encounter circle
of good friends who savored my
poems like white chocolate mousse,
My eyes close to keep the dream moving,
My ears laugh their nine-year-old giggle,
My secret body leaps into a pirouette.
The very walls applaud my happiness.

Balanced on my heart is a cup that measures joy.
When you and Daddy laugh on the phone,
Mama, my gratitude knows no bounds.
I wait for you to say, "I pray to God
we should be talking like this
next year at the same time.
Mein kindt, if you only knew
how much I love you."
I know, Mama, I know because my measuring
cup
Is overflowing again and I dance my way
Across the kitchen to drop two quarters
In the *tzedaka* box.

Ada Jill Schneider is a mother and grandmother who writes and performs poetry in Somerset, Massachusetts.

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The Confusion of Hebrew

Hilary Tham

*For Hal Goldklang who has forgotten more Chinese
and 6 other languages than I could ever know*

*Li is me,
me is who,
who is he and
he is she, we chant obediently
the nonsense rhyme you teach us
to hold Hebrew pronouns that slip like rain
from the packed clay banks of our aging
minds.*

*Chinese pictograms make more sense, however
sexist. The ideogram for a man, nam is a rice
field
over strength, a curved back and strong arm.
The character for woman, nui is a body without
a head,
arms hanging down, crossed submissively over
the body.
Two nui side by side makes the word gossip.
Two nui under a roof means trouble.
Three nui in a triangle means adultery.*

*And the pictogram for goodness, wellbeing
is, you guessed it, nui and tze;
woman with male child.*

*Physical needs come first in Chinese greetings:
"Have you eaten?" And if you answer "no,"
food will be pressed upon you.
The Hebrew greeting, Shalom is a promise
and a hope for the intangible: peace.*

*We trace the Hebrew Amen to its root
Amenah, meaning trust, security, truth;
v'imru to omer, to speak out loud, to say.
A language where past and future exist
simultaneously in the verb, and the passages
always end in v'imru amen: Let us say, it is true
or May it be true, or We trust. It was true.
The flexibility of faith open as the verbs.*

*Hilary Tham, born and raised as a Confucian-Buddhist in a
Chinese family in Malaysia, attended a convent school, became a
Catholic at age 17 and was an existentialist in the university,
from which she has a degree in literature. She studied for her
conversion to Judaism in Israel. Her husband is Jewish from
birth; they are the parents of three daughters. Ms. Tham is a
poet and writer and teaches creative writing in public schools.*

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