

Jewish Women and Ritual Experience: Relational Focus and Meaning

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Introduction: Goal and Methodology

The goal of this paper is to explore the experience and meaning of ritual in the lives of practicing Jewish women. How do contemporary Jewish women describe their experiences of ritual? Which aspects of ritual performance are important to them, what elements of ritual do they find irrelevant, and why? This essay will attempt to answer these questions by providing a detailed description of the religious ritual actions of several Jewish women who define

themselves as “modern Orthodox.”

This research was conducted from the point of view of religious studies, and with the intention of contributing to the academic body of knowledge of that field of study. This paper uses the methodology of anthropological ethnography, in which the major source of research data is people, based primarily on oral texts, interviews conducted in person. Rather than take the stance of feminist and gender studies, which view Jewish women’s experience of ritual as the construct of a historically male institution, the contributions of gender studies and feminism to the topic of women’s ritual performance will be *outlined and put into the larger perspective of the study of religion.*

For Previous Research on Women and Religion see extended bibliography.

The Influence of Feminism on Jewish Women’s Ritual

Any study of contemporary women would be incomplete without addressing the topic of feminism. As a result of the feminist movement, women’s issues in Judaism, like women’s studies in general, have become valid subjects for academic study. Since the mid-1970’s, when feminism emerged as a recognized ideology in the Western hemisphere, many popular works on the topic of women and Judaism have focused on raising the feminist political consciousness of Jewish women. These works usually take a negative attitude toward women’s traditional roles in Judaism, criticizing them as demeaning, degrading, second-class, and part of a patriarchal system that denies women full participation.

As a result of the feminist movement, Jewish women, mostly in the US and to some extent in Europe, have made great efforts to change their part in ritual observance. These efforts at change have focused on three areas: reviving traditional women’s rituals that had fallen into disuse, adapting men’s rituals to women, and offering women the same ritual status as men for the purposes of public prayer.

Several examples of rituals that are being revived are *mikveh*, birth ceremonies for girls (*zeved habat*), and *Rosh Hodesh* gatherings. Rituals

traditionally performed by men which are now also performed by women include bat mitzvah ceremonies and the recitation of *birkat hagomel* in synagogue after childbirth. In modern Orthodox circles, changes in public prayer rituals within the boundaries of *halacha* mean separate prayer groups for women, and halakhically meticulous Torah and *megillah* readings. These rituals do not involve any change of women's ritual status, but they definitely mean a change in women's mode of participation. Modern Orthodox women have taken upon themselves a new area of ritual performance, one not entered in the past, and one which is criticized by members of their community as well as by the ultra-Orthodox community.

The decision of the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and egalitarian movements to permit women to participate publicly in prayer has had a profound effect on the physical cosmos of women's ritual performance. Whereas the locus of most Jewish women's rituals in the past has been the home, non-Orthodox Jewish women are now full participants in the public rituals of the synagogue, even to the level of the rabbinate and the cantorate.

This section has noted the direction of changes in Jewish women's ritual performance under the influence of feminism. Logically, the next step is analysis of these changes, but researchers are only just beginning to explore this field. Before research can be done on changing patterns, more study must be made of women's rituals as they are performed at present. Lack of empirical studies of this topic in the past means the researcher has little or no material which could be used for comparative study or analysis of change over time. Given the past is unavailable for study, documentation of the present status is vitally important. Ideally, the interviews below will enrich the store of knowledge of the present situation among Jewish women with regard to ritual.

Methodology of Empirical Research

Three in-depth interviews were conducted with young married women in a middle-class neighborhood of Netanya, Israel. The questions about ritual performance were composed with the intention of being as open-ended as

possible, in order to offer the informants the freedom to choose their area of response, and to avoid bias on the part of the researcher. Also, in transcribing the interviews effort has been made to include all information offered, in order to allow a balanced analysis of the data.

During the interviews, the informants were asked to describe not only performance but also perceptions. The focus was on their attitudes toward ritual and what they define as important about ritual, not just the steps performed. As will be shown, the informants spoke of ritual as creating cosmos, mostly in relational terms.

In the choice of informants, one criterion was a relatively high level of religious observance (*shomeret Shabbat, kashrut*). This was in order to ensure the depth and relevance of the interviews to the topic at hand. As a result, the conclusions must be limited to this group and should not be assumed to represent the entire range of Jewish women.

It was natural to choose women who seemed willing to answer openly. This could be criticized as giving a one-sided view of women's ritual, since a more private personality might mention rituals that are more solitary and less relational. In addition, as the study focuses on young, married women with children instead of a wide range of ages and family situations, conclusions should be limited to this group. Yet the parallel studies mentioned above lead to the theory that the picture at other points in the life-cycle looks much the same.

Questions:

The respondents were asked to respond freely to the following:

1. General information: age, marital status, occupation, religious background, present religious affiliation.
2. What Jewish ritual do you find most meaningful, and why?
Describe this ritual (when, where, people involved, purpose, emotion).
3. What Jewish ritual that you perform do you find least meaningful, and why?
4. Why do you choose to perform this ritual despite your negative feelings?
Describe this ritual (when, where, people involved, purpose, emotion).

Analysis of Interviews

1. Strengthening Family Ties

In the framework of a behaviorist interpretation of religion, ritual is defined as causing a transformation. In their descriptions of ritual performance, did the women interviewed focus on transformations? Transformation can be identified here, but instead of personal or communal, it is familial. This finding accords with the paradigm outlined above, that women's religious acts focus on the relational, and also offers an expansion of that paradigm, that women's rituals show a particular focus on relations among the immediate family.

This course also defined rituals as creating "cosmos" or "attitudinal space," on the multiple levels, of the individual, environmental, social and universal. The women interviewed here, as well as women in other studies, place overwhelming stress on a sub-level of the social, that is, the immediate family. The women focus primarily on ritual as strengthening interrelations between members of their families.

Each woman spoke of the role of ritual in strengthening or cementing family relationships, without focusing directly on herself. The example of Nava serves to highlight this phenomenon: To her, the most important part of Shabbat is how it strengthens *her husband's* ties with their children. Her personal involvement in the ritual, lighting the candles, is significant but secondary.

Each woman spoke of Shabbat as a designated space in time to unite with family. Gila feels the presence of Shabbat most when her children sing, and Janet finds greatest meaning in her prayers for her loved ones during candle-lighting. Shabbat is marked as a different way of being together with the family; the transformation, however, is not from a state of profane to sacred, since family ties are part of the women's everyday life. The change is more adequately described as "unstrengthened" to "strengthened", and it is not personal. The time of candle-lighting marks the transition from ordinary family time to special family time, but the designation "family time" applies continuously, throughout the entire week. Instead of a transformation from "without a certain status" to "having a certain status," the women describe their

experience as a change in degree of a constant status.

Additionally, the Turnerian scheme of separation, liminality, and reincorporation is secondary in the women's descriptions. Instead, the liminal stage blends into the others, as the mother remains a mother before, during and after candle-lighting and *havdala*. The focus is not on change of status from "nothing" to "something", but a subtle rise in the level of family bonds.

2. Personal Relationship with God

Ritual can be defined partially as creating a certain status. For example, one meaning of the red heifer ritual as described in the Mishna is to preserve the Temple as pure. The Temple is given a ritual definition based on its status and environment as pure, and that status is what makes it holy. This definition is not related to God or an experience of the numinous. Similarly, the women interviewed here speak of the ritual status of Shabbat as family time. God, when mentioned, is secondary; indeed, for all Gila's enthusiasm for religious observance of Shabbat, she does not mention God at all. Janet, who values prayer, does not concentrate *her kavannah* on developing her relationship with the divine. Rather, she petitions God about family issues. Significantly absent from the women's accounts are the traditional definitions of Shabbat as a time for obeying God's commandment, duplicating God's day of rest, and experiencing the *Shechina*.

When they do mention God in the context of ritual, with the women speaking of ritual as a method of strengthening their relationship with God. When Janet prays, she communicates with God and bonds with the community. Like the experience of Shabbat, the transformation she experiences is one of degrees rather than extremes on a continuum. She acknowledges the importance of prayer as part of her daily routine, and it is the maintenance of communication with God that is crucial to her, rather than a specific personal satisfaction obtained from prayer.

To Nava, Sukkot and Yom Kippur are opportunities for feeling close to God. Again, she does not talk of change, renewal, or forgiveness; the idea of

fortifying a relationship that is always present in the background seems a more appropriate analysis of her experience.

Gila does not speak directly of her relationship with the divine. This omission has significance in light of her enthusiastic observance of details such as head-covering and blessings, rules which Nava neglects, despite the “fire” of her professed belief. Her statements offer additional support for the conclusion that in women’s ritual practices, God takes a back seat to relationships. Gila draws inspiration for religious observance from her bonding experience with other women at a weekly lecture. Instead of direct communication with God, she prefers to strengthen her relationship with the divine through an interpersonal act. Her socializing and dancing with the other women provides her with the strength to continue worshipping God as she sees fit, despite the frustration she feels at her husband and elder children’s refusal to participate.

3. Women’s Ritual Practice as Ethos

Pre-Sinaitic Biblical religion has been described as an ethos, or a way of life lacking the clearly defined rules of the later, priestly Judaism. In the former, several passages were identified in the Biblical text which point toward the possible existence of a female divinity at that time. From the research on women’s ritual performance outlined above, and from the interviews, it seems clear that to women, religion is more of an ethos, or lifestyle, than a set of rules. One possibility is that the ethos of early Biblical religion and the hint of female divinity described in the early books of Genesis resulted from a greater involvement of women than the later development of a patriarchal, priestly culture.

In the ethos model of religion, ritual is not a well-defined body of actions set in theological terms, but rather something that encompasses a way of life. This accords with the observation above that the women focus on rituals as maintaining their relationships with family and God. They speak of Shabbat, prayer, and *mikveh* as part of their religious way of life, rather than on the transformative aspects of these rituals. Following the rules is important, but

their emphasis is not on the rules themselves, but on the way of life that the rules create. In Nava’s words, “family is central to Judaism.” She does not say, halacha is central to Judaism. She feels devastated when she realizes that she has not been following the rules of *mikveh* correctly, not because she has transgressed God’s rules, but because she believes her mistake in this ritual could have been disastrous for her children. She shows no misgivings about not wearing a head-covering, apparently because she does not connect this omission to any negative effect on her relationships.

Toward a Broader Understanding of Ritual

Throughout Gilligan’s book, she maintains that her research should be used toward a fuller understanding of the entire range of human behavior, both male and female. Although she recognizes that the relational theme is largely an expression of the female voice, she emphasizes that male and female live together in this world. Similarly, by focusing on the female experience of ritual, this essay aims at a greater comprehension of ritual in general, by filling in what has previously been absent from the picture. As a direction for further research, more documentation is needed of women’s ritual performance in order to compose a more adequate general theory of ritual practice. This study has focused on women who consider themselves modern Orthodox. To complement and refine the conclusions here, women from other movements in Judaism should be targeted, especially those who have the opportunity to participate in public ritual. Among them, two types can be identified: those who take leadership roles upon themselves, and those who choose not to participate publicly. The ritual experiences of both groups could be analyzed along the relational paradigm. Do these women demonstrate the same focus on family, and do they also relegate God to a secondary role in their performances of ritual?

Adding ultra-Orthodox women to the study might offer different dimensions to the conclusions of this study, particularly regarding their relationship with God. It might be argued that modern Orthodox women’s lack of relation

God in their ritual experiences is a response to modernity's criticisms of their religious belief, and not a result of their gender-determined focus on family relationships. This argument would be disproved if it could be demonstrated that ultra-Orthodox women show a similar pattern of focus on family and absence of connection with the divine.

But research on women should not end at research on women. The next step in completing the general picture of ritual is to use the above findings to illuminate the ritual practices of men, and then to combine both areas of knowledge to arrive at a better understanding of ritual as a universal human behavior. To begin with, this study would be complemented with research on modern Orthodox Jewish men, interviewed in the same manner and using the same questions. By so doing, the interviewer could learn what ritual experiences these men value, whether they fit the paradigms that gender studies have delineated, and under what, if any, circumstances they emphasize the relational in ritual. Comparing the conclusions of such a project with the ones presented here would help to advance the understanding of ritual practice across the variety of human experience.

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