



THE JWC NEW MOON

Tammuz 5767
June 2007

Miriam on the Mon: JWC Seder Blends New and Traditional Rituals

by Judith Sanders

Why was the night of Sunday, April 8, 2007, different from all other nights that are different from all other nights? Because on that night—at the far end of Passover, when most celebrants had already packed away their haggadahs and were anticipating that first post-holiday bagel—the JWC held its 15th annual women's seder.

In the Passover tradition of raising questions, let us ask, Nu, why tack on a third seder at the end, and why for just women? Isn't the classic coed double-header enough—dayenu? Isn't three a crowd, an extra wheel, ongepotchket?

How many crumbly Hillel sandwiches does a person need to eat? Especially a person of the carb-conscious gender?

Some of the dozen or so women who gathered at the Labor Zionist Building that different night already knew their answers. For them, a women's seder had become as organic to the holiday as Bubbe's matzoh farfel. But others came to see whether this new ritual might answer a question that they, like the simple child, hardly knew how to ask.

What question? In keeping with tradition, let us answer the question with a question.

A website entitled "Miriam's Cup" puts it this way: "Contemporary Jewish women face a dilemma: How can they forge a Jewish religious identity consistent with feminist values?" Passover intrigues those striving to do so because its imagery of liberation so readily allegorizes feminist struggles, and because of the influential but sketchy women in Exodus—the midwives, Yocheved, and of course, Miriam—who outwit Pharaoh (that ultimate MCP). So over the past thirty years, questioning Jewish feminists have conducted experimental women-only seders according to revisionist haggadot; they have speculated about the women figures of Exodus; they have road-tested new seder rituals to find those that accurately commemorate women's experiences. And, inspired by Miriam shaking her timbrel, they have sung new songs.

The JWC has for fifteen years been participating in this evolutionary process, this forging of new rituals and melding them with traditions, this asking answering of old and new questions. This year, seder

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leader Laura Horowitz had assembled an eclectic haggadah that invited participants to garnish its imported texts and traditional retellings with their own recollections and reflections. Julie Newman, with her guitar and flute-like voice, led both new and familiar songs as participants thumped shakers, clackers, and tambourines.

Some of the new rituals have by now become traditional for habituées of women's seders.

[cont'd on p. 3]



The Queens of Matzoh

Visit to Miryam's House: Ta'anit Esther

by Jean Clickner

Miryam's House has been in existence for almost 40 years. It is a safe haven for women, no matter what their situation or why their need. The only rule for residence at Miryam's House is that a woman be able to care for herself and that she be able to live cooperatively. On March 1st, five JWC members went to Miryam's House, located in Uptown, to help serve the supper meal: Nancy Arnold, Jean Binstock, Melissa Jones, Mimi Reznik, and me. We uniformly felt that, based on the need, what we did was minimal. We were humbled and thankful for the bounty of our own lives. But, true to JWC style, we laughed and joked about "how many JWC members does it take to sweep the floor."

The visit has made me stop to ponder, however. I would like to know why the founders chose the name "Miryam" for its safe haven and why they choose this spelling. Also, I was struck with the enthusiasm of the staff for their mission. It cannot be an easy place to work, yet I sensed a pride in their work and an uncompromising and unromantic concern for the women. I wonder if the staff knows the story of the Biblical Miryam, in whose footsteps they are following. So let me digress.

We all know that Miryam, Moses' older sister, saved his life and that she is one of a handful of Biblical women with a name. She is a well developed female personality in the Torah with many varied and diverse qualities. For example, she exhibited great Joy & Vivacity as she led the women in singing and dancing after safely crossing the Sea of Reeds. Throughout their years of wandering, she continued to lead them in prayer and active forms of celebration and thanksgiving for what God had given them.

She showed Leadership & Fealty when she helped her mother thwart pharaoh's edict to kill all the first born Hebrew children and saved her baby brother. After the exodus, she continued to participate in leadership (or tried). This, of course, was a source of conflict between her and Moses, and god seemed not to be on her side when she was struck with leprosy.

Her story reveals her Spirituality & Mysticism. After being struck with leprosy, it appears that she cured herself through penance, self examination and introspection. Some say she was cured by the waters of the mysterious well that followed the Hebrews through the desert; which we refer to as Miryam's well in our seders. Although this well had appeared periodically throughout the Torah, it seems to have disappeared after Miryam's death, as it is no longer mentioned in the Torah after that time.

So Miryam is a wonderful person to choose as a guide or muse. Likewise, Miryam's name has interesting and deep connotations. Miryam, rather than Miriam, is the most literal translation of the Hebrew word. This name associates her with both bitter and sweet water, perhaps for tears and life. The Hebrew translation of Miryam is "bitter" (mar) and "sea" (yam). The Egyptian translation for mer/mar is "beloved" and she is associated with the sweet waters of the well.

These seemingly opposing concepts are common in Jewish thought and they are common when we explore life. No doubt, the women of Miryam's house, both the residents and the staff, deal with these dichotomies daily.

Maybe this will become an annual JWC mitzvah event. This year, the food had already been prepared and all we had to do was dish it out (and it was pretty institutional, at that). Next time, perhaps we can cook something fresh and tasty for all the women of Miryam's House.



Member News

What's new?

Mazal tov to members Laura Horowitz and Sheri Sable, whose children, Eli and Becky, recently graduated from college.

We send our condolences to member Pat Cluss whose mother, Hazel Cluss, died in April.

[Miriam on the Mon: cont'd from p. 1]

The seder plate, like at most such events, included an orange. Why?

The haggadah explained that Susannah Heschel, the Jewish feminist scholar, had added this fruit to symbolize the fruitful outcome for all Jews when lesbians and gay men, as well as others who traditionally have been marginalized, such as widows, are welcome to participate fully in Jewish communal life. For the ritual hand-washing, each woman poured water not over her own hands, but her neighbor's. And in an evocative ceremony that has come to epitomize the women's seder, participants filled the communal "Miriam's cup" by each contributing water from her own glass.

As the grape juice flowed, the

women in attendance, some of whom had been, well, slaving during the preceding week to make the holiday in their own homes, visibly relaxed, if they didn't literally recline. Most seemed to relish this sanctioned opportunity to feel like a queen, a malke—not in a puffed-up, chumesh-y way, but in a hamische, unpretentious way—a Malke of Matzoh, as it were.

They feasted on a fresh, light meal fit for such a malke—that is, one who, though health-conscious, joyfully performed the mitzvah of eating chocolate and didn't want to crash-land her holiday in a sink full of pots. There were platters of raw vegetables, gefilte fish fresh from the jar, enough hard-boiled eggs to fill Groucho's stateroom order, both Ashkenazic (dayenu) and Sephardic charoses, and fruits. There was matzoh transformed into brittle, a form the hurried Israelites never shlepped—good thing, as blowing

desert sand would've stuck in the caramel—and a rich pesadicheh chocolate cake that made one speculate about whether manna could possibly have tasted this good.

After the ritual divvying of the leftovers, hugs, and good wishes, the women dispersed into the unseasonably chilly night. Perhaps the experiment in updating traditions had inspired some participants to ask new questions; perhaps some felt shored up against any enslavements that threatened to recrudescence. Some might have been humming one of those catchy new songs; some might have been thinking, Next year at the JWC.

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JWC Women's Shabbat 2007

By Aya Betensky

On a cold February day, Malke Frank and Julie Newman led our annual JWC Shabbat Service, a very warm experience. Julie introduced us to new melodies, as well as harmonizing us in old favorites—since we came from different congregations, we sang slightly different versions of the same songs. We used *Kol Haneshama*, the Reconstructionist Siddur and enjoyed some of its alternative blessings and beautiful readings. Part of the service was also devoted to the new month of Adar, and we used the JWC Rosh Hodesh rituals to welcome the new moon.

For the Torah portion of the week, Mishpatim, Lisa Brush, Erica Goldberg, and Shoshana Rosen read/chanted, and we had thematic group aliyot and engaged in chevrotah study. The theme of the portion is "community control" (Ellen Frankel's term in *The Five Books of Miriam*), including selling a daughter into slavery, seduction, and the prohibition against witches. Our groups were especially struck by the last and tried in our discussions to expand on the one verse about witches with anthropological, sociological and medical approaches.

For me and, I think, the community as a whole, this was a lovely and moving experience, and I left still singing.



JWC Visits the Mikveh

By Doris Dyen

As a culmination to our study sessions on mikveh traditions and practices with Rabbi Sharyn Henry, members of the Jewish Women's Center went together on Sunday May 20th to experience the women's mikveh firsthand. Located on Shady Avenue near Taylor Allderdice High School, the mikveh is a small brick building, once a private residence. For privacy, the windows on the lower floor have been bricked over and the entrance, on the side of the building, is partly covered by an awning. Eight JWC members participated in this program.

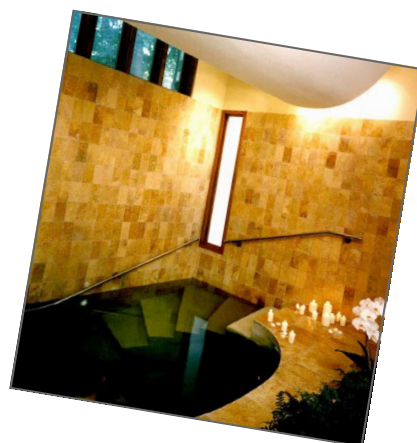
The preparation was an important part of the experience, since it required us to confront our self-image. For most of us, the preparation began earlier in the day. We each washed our hair -- without using any of the conditioners or

gels we might normally employ. Some of us had to remove nail polish and live with "naked nails" for the day. Others had to take out earrings we were used to wearing.

When we arrived at the mikveh and gathered in the small waiting room, we were joined by Mrs. Markovic, the motherly caretaker of the mikveh. Our preparation continued with a beautiful ritual written by Rabbi Sharyn and Malke, which connected mikveh with Rosh Hodesh. For the actual immersion, the original idea had been for us all to go in the water together. Some people did immerse as a group, while others, for various personal reasons, chose to immerse "solo." We appreciated Mrs. Markovic's steadying presence as she helped us recite the blessings and then hearing her quiet voice pronounce "Kosher" after each of the three ritual dips. In a variety of ways,

the experience was a powerful one for all of us.

After the visit, several of the group (some with hair still wet) went to dinner together at Aladdin's Restaurant. Between the pita and hummus, we discussed the experience and their personal thoughts.



Many thanks to the contributors for this edition of the newsletter:

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◇Jean Clickner ◇Doris Dyen ◇Judith Saunders

JWC Program Year for the rest of 5767 (2006-07)

| EVENT | DATE | TIME | PLACE | TOPIC |
|--------------------|----------|------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| RH ¹ Av | Mon 7/16 | — | Your home | DIY ² |
| RH Elul | Sun 8/12 | 11AM | Member's home ³ | Family potluck brunch |

¹"RH" indicates a Rosh Hodesh—celebration of the new moon or new month

²"DIY" indicates Do-It-Yourself: a RH ritual and thoughts for contemplation will be e-mailed in advance.

³We'll send an e-mail prior to this event giving the exact address.

Jewish Domestic Abuse Task Force

Update

By Marilyn Asimow

A Jewish Domestic Abuse Task Force Brunch and Learn was held on Sunday, October 22, at the JCC. The program included the showing of “To Save a Life: Ending Domestic Abuse in Jewish Families” followed by a panel of rabbis responding to issues mentioned in the video and questions submitted from the attendees.

Dr. Jamie Stern, an internal medicine physician at West Penn Hospital, was the program moderator. Dr. Stern has a special interest in both treating domestic abuse patients and training medical students to be aware of signs of abuse in their patients. Panel members Rabbi Joseph Weiss of B’nai Emunoh Congregation, Rabbi Amy Greenbaum of Beth Israel Center, and Rabbi James A. Gibson of Temple Sinai made it quite clear that the effects of violence or abuse in the home strongly affects the children. Audience evaluations confirmed the relevance and informative aspects of the program and suggestions for future programming stressed the importance of reaching youth about this issue.

On February 21, Jewish Family & Children’s Service child therapist Barbara Wollman addressed the attendees of the Jewish Domestic Violence Task Force’s February Lunch n’ Learn, “Domestic Violence: Its Effects on Children.” Ms. Wollman is a licensed clinical social worker with 25+ years’ experience in counseling children, including many who witness, or are themselves victims of violence within their homes.

Does domestic violence differ in the Jewish, versus the general, community? According to Ms Wollman, the incidence of domestic violence is similar. What differs, says Ms. Wollman are some of the general characteristics of the Jewish people (such as high expectations for ourselves and our families and a strong sense of community) that may play a role in the denial of the existence of a problem. “Additionally,” said Ms. Wollman, “Jews tend to internalize problems more than the general community. There is a higher incidence of anxiety, depression, phobias and eating disorders among Jews who experience this problem.”

How, in general, are children affected by domestic violence? Short- and long-term effects are substantial. “All children,” said Ms. Wollman, “need a number of things from their parents in order to prosper and grow into healthy human beings.” They need not just food and shelter, but also good role models for connection/relationship building, encouragement, intellectual/creative growth, and the development of independence and decision-making skills. “In a household where there is abuse — either witnessed or experienced directly — children have no model for healthy relationships.”

She went on to speak about how boys’ and girls’ reactions may differ. She said that boys seem to express their distress much more outwardly. They may become aggressive and disobedient. Sometimes, they may use violence to solve problems. This violence could be a response to feelings of powerlessness to protect the abused parent or because they’ve come to identify with the abuser and have incorporated his/her need to be in control.

“Girls, on the other hand,” said Ms. Wollman, “are more likely to keep their distress inside. They may learn dependency as a survival tool. They often have low self-esteem, withdraw from people and become anxious or depressed. They are more likely to have an eating disorder, or to harm themselves.”

“In the long term”, said Ms. Wollman, “children who have witnessed violence or have been victims themselves are more likely to be involved in abusive relationships as adults. What can we do?” asked Ms. Wollman, in conclusion. “We need to recognize how harmful domestic violence is to children and then help them, the best we can, to understand that it shouldn’t be happening to them and that they can ask for help.”

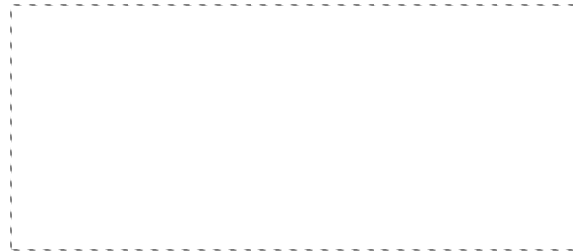
The Task Force members are most appreciative of the JWC’s support through publicizing their events and through donations that support community educational programs and purchase important media resources to enhance these programs.

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TO:



The JWC Mission:

The Jewish Women's Center is a community of women of all backgrounds that provides educational opportunities and spiritual experiences rooted in Jewish values and feminist ideals. The JWC is a supportive environment for broadening our knowledge and involvement in Jewish life. The programs and resources of the JWC create opportunities for Jewish women's learning, leadership, spiritual growth and ritual practice.

