

Reflections Upon Creating Innovative, Jewish Life-Cycle Ritual¹

Dr. Debra Reed Blank

How Ritual Innovation Happens

In discussions about innovative Jewish liturgy and ritual (liturgy being the words of religious ritual²), I have noticed two usual points of reference: either an individual's (or sub-group's) goal of more accurate self-expression, or the halakhic allowance for change. Rarely do I hear such discussions address such questions as: What is liturgy? What is a religious ritual? How has innovation happened in the past?

Religious rituals and their texts indisputably change, sometimes suddenly, more often gradually. It is also indisputable that users of traditional ritual can and do exercise control that leads to innovation, if and when overriding authority is attributed to countervailing forces, even from the outside culture. Equally indisputable is that practitioners might find themselves uncomfortable with the prospect and reality of ritual change, even when they intellectually call for it.

Ritual is not static, even within a culture that invests authority in that which is traditional and/or widely practiced. But what I call 'successful' innovation — change that is adopted by those who are most affected, namely, regular users of the ritual; change that takes root and spreads (usually) from the periphery into the larger group, being ultimately canonized by the authorities — is not the result of an isolated individual's idiosyncratic, one-time, extemporaneous, never-again-repeated improvisation. Nor is successful innovation instituted suddenly, not by the authorities (who are usually bound by definition to the standard practice), nor the lay users (who need time to adapt to the idea of change), nor by external forces (that is, non-users).³ The inclusion of the *Imahot* in the Amidah and birth rituals for girls are examples of how successful change can happen in Jewish practice: being introduced gradually and thoughtfully, taking root, becoming widely practiced, and ultimately getting canonized. These two innovations were initiated by insider ritual users who were influenced from the outside (feminism); who adamantly used or adapted traditional language (e.g., biblical texts and phraseology; b'rakhot); and ultimately such changes were officially adopted by the various movements, including the Conservative halakhic authorities⁴ and the Modern Orthodox.⁵

It is helpful to observe how certain behavior is recognized immediately as ritual; identify potential and/or competing sources of authority; acknowledge that, while some new rituals 'succeed', taking root and gaining acceptance by authoritative bodies, others do not; and consider how 'successful' ones differ from the unsuccessful. Perhaps if the shared characteristics of both established and successful-innovative ritual can be identified, then one can derive some guidance for composing new ritual.

Any ritual, including religious ones that mark life-cycle changes, is marked by distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from mundane, quotidian behavior. In the following sections, I suggest some more-or-less consistent characteristics of Jewish religious ritual, *which I mean to be descriptive rather than prescriptive*. I present them as considerations when

¹ I am grateful to Tracy Nathan for her thoughtful critique of this article.

² There is little academic agreement about the meanings of various terminology; cf. Roy Rappaport on the relationship between ritual and liturgy in "Veracity, Verity, and Verum in Liturgy," *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993), 35-50, esp. 37. There is also little agreement about the distinction between ritual and ceremony; I use the words interchangeably. Moreover, there is little agreement about the difference between a ritual and a rite; I tend to use the latter when referring to a specific *minhag* (e.g., the Ashkenazi rite) or when using the expression 'rite of passage.' See also *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, "Ceremony", "Ritual", and "Ritual Studies". Cf. Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism* (USC, 1990), 10, esp. n 2.

³ Bruce Lincoln, "On Ritual, Change, and Marked Categories," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68:3 (September 2000), distinguishes endogenous change from exogenous change intruding from the outside; 503-504. I would argue that sometimes the boundaries are not so clear; moreover, for change to be accepted in the Jewish system, it must be largely endogenous.

⁴ The Rabbinical Assembly's *Rabbi's Manual*, v. 2 (1998), A9-10, F10-11, for birth rituals for girls; *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* (1998), 3a-3b, for the *Imahot*.

⁵ This latter group has adopted the *Simhat Bat* (as opposed to other birth rituals for girls that use the word *b'rit* in the title, e.g., *B'rit Bat*). See the websites of ITIM and Kolekh; also *The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual: Options and Opportunities: Birth* (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, 2000).

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composing a same-sex-union ritual. These are new factors for the Jewish discussion in that they are not halakhic and also apply outside the Jewish realm; they suggest what the world of Ritual Studies can offer our discussions.

A Rose by Any Other Name: What To Call It?

I have observed that rituals celebrating same-sex unions tend to base themselves on the traditional Jewish wedding, appropriating its staging (the huppah), its language (the Sheva B'rakhot), its objects and actions (wine, rings, a ketubah-like document, the breaking of glass). While one might try to analyze these new rituals without referencing that heterosexual, inequitable ritual, one is willy-nilly forced into a comparative mode by virtue of such borrowings.⁶

Even if the author asserts that a wholly new ritual is being crafted, whether out of respect for halakhic limitations or extra-Jewish ideology (This is not a wedding!), Jewishly knowledgeable guests will inevitably compare — whether correctly or not — the new ritual with the traditional wedding, simply because they are being asked to witness and celebrate the joining of two adults into some kind of commitment relationship. And if those in attendance notice familiar features — rings, wine, huppah — they will be all the more compelled to deduce an intended equivalent, no matter what the ritual is called or what the introductory words or explanatory booklet assert. Thus, any ritual's author (or the couple) might want to ask him/herself what makes the traditional wedding a 'successful' ritual and how s/he can best appropriate that *je ne sais quoi*, exploiting it, even as it is transformed, reframed, or redefined.

The inevitable comparison should not force us into a comparative rut that establishes relative assessments reflecting negatively upon one ritual or the other (e.g., "Unlike the traditional wedding, the same-sex ceremony *can't* . . ."; or, "Unlike a traditional wedding, the same-sex ritual *doesn't have to* . . ."). The traditional Jewish heterosexual wedding is what it is. An innovative ritual that celebrates the union of a same-sex couple should be assessed on its own merits, even as it adopts and adapts elements of the traditional ritual.

But the inevitable comparison does force the question: Are you crafting a ritual that is *intended* to be an equivalent of the traditional wedding, or are you intending to create something completely new? Are you intending to make a political statement (the status of gays and lesbians in society) as much as a personal statement (mutual commitment), or are you intending something politically low-key that simply celebrates your relationship in the company of friends and family? Do you want a wedding, or something else? Ultimately (since we're talking Jews here): Do you want to avoid halakhic problems, do you care not at all about halakhah, or do you *davka* want to tweak the halakhic system?

These kinds of questions clearly underlie the variation that exists among the titles of the rituals: The spectrum spans from assertive declarations at one end — "Wedding", "Kiddushin", "Nisu'in" — to the less Jewishly loaded "Commitment Ceremony", which negates any allusion to a wedding. Obviously, the range evidences the absence of established nomenclature, and the question of how closely to model this new ritual on normative heterosexual practice lies just below the surface.

Choice of title should consider not only the goal for the ceremony, but the degree to which language, objects, and actions are co-opted from the traditional wedding. If you don't call it a wedding, but you adapt the Sheva B'rakhot, use wine, break glass, stand under a huppah, and read a documented agreement, then you have lent your ritual the associations of the traditional Jewish wedding, no matter your intention or printed title. The opposite is also true: If you call your ritual a wedding (or Kiddushin or Nisu'in), but forego any of the traditional elements, you risk your onlookers sensing a lack of authenticity. (See ahead: *Anamnesis, Authenticity, and Authority*.)

⁶ Steven Greenberg, "Contemplating a Jewish Ritual of Same-Sex Union," *Authorizing Marriage?* ed. Mark Jordan (Princeton, 2006), 81-101, intelligently treats the liturgy and ritual of the traditional Jewish wedding, breaking it down into its components and exploring the degree to which each can and should be adopted for same-sex rituals.

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Symbols

The inevitability of comparison to the traditional wedding leads necessarily to a discussion of symbolism. Any ritual depends upon the power of symbol, an interpretive value that people give to things as various as language, objects, and gestures.

Any viable ritual symbol enables a wide range of interpretation — from the physical and tangible to the moral and intangible.⁷ This explains why different people can interpret the same ritual object or action so differently — it's not that the people are confused, or that the object or action is problematic, or that the 'correct' interpretation was transmitted unsuccessfully. In order to be effective, symbols *must* be polysemous, allowing a wide range of interpretations, and not only synchronically, but diachronically. To be an effective symbol, an object or action (or text) must provide a blank-enough background on which people, both as a group and as individuals, can project their subjective interpretations and values.

An effective ritual aligns or coordinates the physical, external interpretations of the symbols it uses with the internal, emotional, or moral interpretations. For example, the huppah: a possible external, physical interpretation is the couple's house; possible intangible, moral interpretations are the affirmation of Jewish family life and connubial fidelity.

The range of interpretive variation needs to be contained within boundaries that are agreed upon by the group in order for a symbol to be acceptable and viable. For example, one person considers it meaningful for an orange to be on a Seder plate, but another considers it irrelevant or even inappropriate. In that case the group (the Jewish people) isn't in agreement about an orange as a viable Pesah symbol. I've attended several Seders where the orange was presented and explained, but Seder plates are not yet generally made with a spot for the orange.

Viability works in the other direction, too. Consider a symbol regarded by the group with a generally agreed-upon range of meanings. If someone projects meaning upon it that conflicts with the group's interpretation, or if it communicates something other than what the person intended, then it fails as a symbol in a given context. A woman who wears a standard-issue kippah in an egalitarian synagogue — interpreting it to symbolize humility before the Divine and/or her full involvement in worship and study — might find her ritual action interpreted very differently were she to wear it in a black-hat shteibel: She means only to identify as a Jew, while those around her sense absurdity or affront.

In searching for meaningful symbols, same-sex ceremonies appropriate already-viable symbols from Jewish life in order to establish a sense of authenticity. But just because an action or object has proven itself viable within Judaism is not a guarantee that its use in this innovative context will be successful. The potential symbolic interpretations must relate to the context in order for the object, action, or text to be efficacious within the new setting; that is, the internalized, unarticulated interpretations attributed it by the officiant, the author, the couple, the participants, and the onlookers should all fall within contiguous and relevant boundaries. If anyone's interpretation falls outside, then we have an infelicitous ritual.⁸

Huppah, breaking glass, a ketubah-like document, the exchange of rings — each carries symbolic value that relates to a Jewish wedding, and using any of these in a same-sex ritual conveys the symbolic meaning of wedding, whether or not that's intended. Moreover, speech can carry symbolic weight -- for example, the use of ritualized and formularized Hebrew (such as a b'rakhah) signals to people that they are witnessing Jewish ritual. Similarly, hearing a specific b'rakhah can evoke contextualized associations — the Sheva B'rakhot (even in adapted form) invite the symbolic values attributed to marriage. They convey the additional symbolic benefit of contextualizing a same-sex ritual within the standard liturgical and ritual framework, suggesting a communal approbation rooted in Judaism.

When appropriating ritual templates that already have a contextualized meaning or when transposing liturgical units or specific b'rakhot to a new context, the original symbolic associations come along for the ride. Therefore, if you wish to

⁷ My understanding of ritual symbol is greatly influenced by Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Cornell, 1967), 19-47.

⁸ The terminology is Ronald Grimes': in *Ritual Criticism*, 199-205, he describes various types of infelicitous ritual.

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create a ritual that does *not* parallel or evoke the traditional wedding, then you might want to reconsider using any of the Sheva B'rakhot. Likewise, hearing a b'rakhah associated with (for example) weekday Shah'rit or Havdalah in the context of a union ritual might be confusing — infelicitous — for the Jewishly educated listener. There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to invest the recontextualized b'rakhah with a new association — but you might 'lose' people mid-ritual who are distracted by a (in their opinion) misappropriation.

Similarly, the use of any non-Jewish material, such as a well-known poem or song. Although the piece might have special meaning for the couple, anyone who knows it from a mundane, non-Jewish context will immediately project their own, previously formed symbolic interpretations onto it — and likely have a jolt of disconnection.

Confusion of symbols can also result when a union ritual is superimposed onto an unrelated Jewish ritual (that is, something other than the traditional wedding), borrowing that ritual's liturgies, objects, and/or actions. Those who are Jewishly literate must — at the very least on a non-intellectual level — struggle to reconcile this discordance. Confusion of symbols may result even if only borrowing isolated texts from another ritual context. There is no question that such liturgical borrowings and transpositions have happened: The Aleynu has a long history of transposition, from a private, heikhalot setting to the Rosh Hashannah Musaf to a daily post-worship hymn; Kaddish evolved from a post-study hymn to a liturgical marker to a mourning liturgy. But when borrowing liturgical texts, especially well-known ones, the author should be sensitive to the possibility of resistance to this appropriation. It takes people time and repeated exposure to get used to hearing old liturgies or concepts — e.g., *V'-erastikh li* or Havdalah b'rakhot -- in new contexts, and the couple will have only this one ceremony.

Ritual Innovation and Marking

Sometimes an innovative ritual takes an established template and innovates around or within it; for example, using an established occasion (e.g., the convention of celebrating spring) and its format (four questions, four sons [sic], a discourse, special foods, all centered around the table), and innovating upon those. The interpretive theme of the basic template (e.g., enslavement and liberation) is transposed (along with the format and occasion) onto the new ritual (e.g., a feminist Seder), imbuing it with a sense of authenticity and precedent. In a sense, this is a less radical type of ritual change because it does not create something wholly new, whether in theme, format, or occasion, but uses an established template as a source, reference, or precedent for the new content. This type of innovation usually arises among practitioners of the more established practice.

At the other end of the spectrum is a totally new ritual that honors something heretofore unmarked and that begins with no established template or reference point. In a sense, this is a more radical kind of innovation, because any sense of authority or authenticity that might stem from a precedent is absent. An example would be a Jewish menopausal ceremony.

Some Jewish rituals for same-sex couples appear, at first glance, to fall into the first category of less-radical innovation: comparable or equivalent ceremonies that borrow the traditional wedding's understanding of occasion, format, theme, and content.

Others clearly intend a unique ritual that does not allude to the traditional wedding. Here there is no traditional parallel template or precedent from which to work. In the Jewish context, that means a wider choice of b'rakhot, symbol-rich objects and actions, and meaningful text.

Halakhah problematizes this conservative-to-radical spectrum. What is arguably least radical — transposing a ritual template to a similar context — is most radical from a halakhic perspective. What is ritually most radical — inventing a wholly new ritual — in and of itself is unlikely to violate halakhah.

In reality, most of the same-sex rituals for Jews accessible to me tend not to fall neatly into these two groups. Some aspire to a wholly new ritual, but nevertheless borrow elements from the traditional wedding. Some speak of a parallel ritual, but

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use very little if any of the wedding liturgy. An author might begin by asking him/herself whether the goal is to be ritually radical and halakhically 'safe' or halakhically radical and ritually less stretched. (See above: *A Rose by Any Other Name*.)

In those new rituals that build upon an established template, one can observe a type of ritual innovation called 'marking'.⁹ The various ideological uses to which the Pesah Seder has been subjected demonstrate how the entire Haggadah can be completely transformed through marking. The original message of the post-70 liturgy — the miraculous flight from Egypt as the model for the ultimate messianic redemption — has been adapted to themes ranging from Mideast peace to culinary preferences.¹⁰ These adaptations of the traditional liturgy cannot fully resonate with participants unless they are familiar with the format and content of the standard Seder and therefore can appreciate how each symbol, action, or text has been 'marked', that is, changed in a meaningful way. (If you don't know there should be a shank bone on the Seder plate, how can you appreciate the presence of a roasted beet?) The authors of alternative Seders assume their marked texts will resonate with participants who are familiar with the traditional Haggadah. Ritual marking is change meant to be noticed by a knowledgeable crowd that can appreciate what has been changed and why.

Lesbian and gay weddings present a perfect example of ritual marking when they adapt elements of the traditional ceremony. The participants and guests who are familiar with the heterosexual ritual fully appreciate what's been changed, how, and why — for example, the language of certain b'rakhot (*m'same'ah kalah im ha-kalah*, etc.).

While not necessary for felicity or efficacy, 'marking' is a feature that adds power to an innovative ritual because it exploits known associations. When marking is successful, it becomes widely copied and eventually standardized and homogeneous — unremarkable. One can imagine that in antiquity, someone decided to recite the liturgical formula that designates the transition from mundane to sanctified time (and vice-versa) with wine in a cup used for no other purpose. Upon seeing this, people realized that the wine in this designated vessel had some performative status that wine drunk at another time lacked.¹¹ Unfortunately the marked cup for Kiddush has become so standardized that most people now miss the impact of the marking. Marking plays against the inherent predictability of a standard liturgy or ritual; thus it can only be appreciated by those 'in the know', who can identify what's been changed and understand why.

Marking is inevitably less problematic and more acceptable among those who invest the tradition with less authority. The non-halakhically bound person is far more likely to (for example) rewrite traditional b'rakhot. The question remains to what degree the guests will be able to appreciate what's been marked. The resonance will be lost except among the cognoscenti.

I've observed ritual marking in most of the same-sex ceremonies that I've studied. All of them are penned by individuals who are Jewishly literate, in many cases clergy or educators, all of them coming out of religiously active sub-cultures, even that of modern Orthodoxy. Thus one assumes that — at least to some degree — the witnessing community would be similarly knowledgeable and able to note the marking of the ritual tradition.

Anamnesis, Authenticity, and Authority

Good ritual compresses time, collapsing past and future into the present moment. Examples are the third b'rakhah of the Sh'ma unit, where the events of the Exodus are described as a model for the ultimate redemption by the Jew worshipping in the present; and Birkat ha-Mazon, which celebrates equally the gifts to Israel in the past (land, Torah), the present (the food just eaten), and the future (the ultimate restoration of Jerusalem).¹²

The re-enactment or invocation of past event within the ritualized present in order to envision the future is termed anamnesis, and Jewish ritual is highly anamnestic, consistently grounding its present words and actions in events of the past, which are then used as the model for the idealized future. Formalized sukkah dwelling is an enactment of the desert

9 Bruce Lincoln, "On Ritual, Change, and Marked Categories," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68:3 (September 2000), 487-510.

10 *The Shalom Seders*, comp. New Jewish Agenda (Adama, 1984) and *Haggadah for the Vegetarian Family*, eds. Robert and Roberta Kalechofsky (Micah, 1993) are but two examples among a staggering selection.

11 For an explanation of 'performative', see ahead: *Effecting Transitions*.

12 See Jacob Neusner, *The Enchantments of Judaism* (Scholars Press, 1991), 31-42, on Birkat ha-Mazon; Reuven Kimelman, "The Sh'ma and its Rhetoric," *Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 (1992), 111-156, on the Sh'ma unit.

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experience; the Yom Kippur Avodah liturgy re-enacts the Temple's atonement ritual; every Amidah corresponds to a Temple sacrifice. And each of these imitations of past action anticipates an ultimate redemptive future.

Ritual authority derives in part from this successful collapse of past and future into the present. In the Jewish system, the link between anamnesis and the authoritative nature of ritual is provided by text: The present practice of the ritual relies upon the precedent recorded in Scripture or the rabbinic corpus, which is regarded by all to have an authoritative quality; the ritual is then mandated and controlled ecclesiastically.

Anamnesis figures centrally in the wedding ritual: The Sheva B'rakhot invoke the union of Adam and Havah as the precedent for the couple and envision an idealized Jerusalem filled with the joyful noises of weddings. Consciously or unconsciously, the ceremonies for same-sex couples go looking for a similar kind of memory within canonical texts, a 'usable past',¹³ from which to derive authoritative precedent.

The anamnestic devices of same-sex ritual are like those of feminist ritual in that it "deriv[es] its authority from data already available within the particular tradition . . . doctrines, symbols, narratives, and practices that have gone unexamined under the weight of naïve androcentrism or been actively suppressed in the interests of the official liturgical order."¹⁴

Shulamit Magnus' description of how Jewish women created traditions for themselves is an apt analog: ". . . women redefine and create new roles . . . The conscious, articulated sensibilities of women are being read back into Judaism and are transforming it, feminizing it . . . to assert that Jewish women have a mythic past; to fill in the blanks of women's sacred history, and then to fill out Jewish sacred history generally . . .".¹⁵

In looking for this historical or mythic memory, "forgotten or negated or suppressed aspects" of Jewish culture are "retrieved"¹⁶ (e.g., Jonathan and David's love, Ruth and Naomi's devotion, the prescription of Avot de-Rabbi Natan 8:3), which are then foregrounded and affirmed in the ritual's text. The presence of canonical sources such as these in the ritual provides a culturally based, authoritative justification.

Canonical texts, as well as symbolically relevant objects and actions, all help create a sense of authenticity. This in turn raises the question of what exactly constitutes authenticity, and that in turn leads back to the question of ritual authority and how it is gained.

Jay Michaelson correctly zeroes in on the "anxiety of inauthenticity" that plagues progressive Jews, one that invariably pops up around innovative rituals. While he counsels subjectivity and elasticity when determining what is and isn't authentic, he does acknowledge that "core values, myths and cultural traits" that are "relatively constant" can serve as a yardstick for gauging authenticity, and he mentions biblical texts as one example of such constant.¹⁷ Traditional texts are not the only constant available to the author of a same-sex ritual; so too is the value that Jewish culture places upon fidelity, family, and the home. These values and cultural inheritances are not only measures of authenticity, but they can serve as sources of authority for the innovative ritual. Same-sex-union rituals are unprecedented in traditional Jewish society, and the mandating authority for them comes from the outside culture. Nevertheless, the rituals tend to unearth fragments from Jewish culture that can be invoked as sources of authority. These pieces of the usable Jewish past add a cultural buttress to the extra-Jewish moral imperative.

The notion of a usable past compels reflection upon the use of non-Jewish material — poetry, songs, etc. — in some of these innovative rituals. Certainly such material complicates the matter of authenticity: Does a text in English or a passage (or ritual action) taken from another culture, one that contains no Jewish content or allusions, contribute anything to a

13 Inasmuch as I can figure out, this widely used phrase was coined by Paula Hyman in her essay "The Jewish Family: Looking for a Usable Past," *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (Schocken, 1983), 19-26, esp. 20: "A usable past is one which will provide us with meaningful role models for the present, one with which we can feel a link."

14 I have adopted Mary Collins' description of the characteristics of feminist liturgy: "Principles of Feminist Liturgy," in Marjorie Procter-Smith and Janet Walton eds., *Women at Worship* (Westminster, 1993), 21.

15 "Re-inventing Miriam's Well: Feminist Jewish Ceremonials," in Jack Wertheimer, *The Uses of Tradition* (JTS, 1992), 331-347, especially 334 and 338.

16 Collins' language, 11.

17 "The Myth of Authenticity," *Forward* 1 January 2010 (Forward.com). Thanks to Dini Lewittes for bringing this article to my attention.

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Jewish ritual? And if you are hoping for eventual acceptance of your ritual by the Jewish community, does the non-Jewish material advocate for this acceptance? Can the Jewish community use this material as a source for authenticity or authority if it recalls no Jewish memory?

Ritual Creates Community — and Vice Versa

Shared rituals unite individuals into local, immediate communities and further unite those small groups with a larger whole, both synchronically and diachronically. The requirement that the very foundation of Jewish liturgy, the b'rakhah, be in the first-person plural implies a subordination of individual expressions and concerns to that of the larger community. Even a Jew who recites the liturgy while alone regards him/herself, and is regarded, as participating in the larger community. (When worshipping alone, the Jew's traditional liturgical expressions are still phrased in the first-person plural, for example, "our God", and "heal us".¹⁸) Liturgies express movement toward other individuals,¹⁹ and spiritual satisfaction is to be found in the bonding that results: in this case, not so much a union with the Deity as a union with one's neighbor.

Fixed rituals with standardized texts help form, define, and preserve distinctive communities. Any proposal for ritual change — no matter how theologically or morally justified — threatens community, which in turn helps explain people's visceral dislike of ritual change. Lacking uniformity and familiarity, any innovative ritual risks failing to establish social cohesion among the guests, who get befuddled when they don't know the script. Doing a new ritual presents the possibility of leaving behind anyone who wasn't actually involved in its composition.²⁰

Community derives not only from familiar ritual, but also from the use of language, objects, and actions that have shared meaning. One can argue that the same-sex rituals that *davka* appropriate traditional Jewish liturgy (whether wedding or other) do so out of an explicit commitment to establishing community. Certainly the very fact of these rituals evinces a profound commitment to community, for they not only "ritualize relationships that emancipate and empower" gays and lesbians, but they also "locate [them] where [they] never were" before — in a public, celebrated, Jewish context.²¹

But clearly the novelty of, and the lack of standardization among, the same-sex rituals threaten community: no author, participant, officiant, or guest has the comfort of participating in or witnessing a ritual that is widely practiced or familiar. Moreover, the goal of including those who feel disenfranchised from the larger community has to be weighed against the possibility of disenfranchising some who resist non-standard practice. What if a same-sex-union ritual alienates Jews who chafe at the theological notion of holiness applied to a same-sex couple, or at the appropriation of traditional liturgy for this purpose?

On the other hand: Threat to community also comes from well-established innovations, such as a double-ring (heterosexual) wedding or a (heterosexual) bride's statement of *Harei atah* . . . , that have not been approved by some halakhic authorities. The reverse pertains as well: Non-Orthodox guests might chafe at the *absence* of the double ring/declaration at an Orthodox wedding. There's a risk of disenfranchisement at every turn: No one can imagine belonging to a community that holds values one regards as morally offensive or religiously problematic. Why not construct a community that espouses values one can share and in which one can fully participate?

Community — the tangible one (i.e., the people, the synagogue, the neighborhood) as well as the intangible one (the feeling of social cohesion that one ideally gets in a ritual gathering) — is constantly tested by ritual variation. The died-in-the-wool Reform Jew might feel little communal bonding at an Orthodox service; an observant Ashkenazi Jew's sense of

¹⁸ This example locates the first-person plural language in the Jewish world, but Christian theologians, whose liturgies are often in the first-person singular, also write of how one is linked to the community while in private recitation of the liturgy; see Daniel Benedict, *Patterned by Grace* (Upper Room Books, 2007), 27, 31, 94–95 *passim*; Brian Treanor, "Plus de Secret: The Paradox of Prayer," in *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba eds. (Fordham, 2005), 155–158. Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (St. Vladimir's, 1996), 24: ". . . Christian worship as the public act of the Church, in which there is nothing private at all . . . the division in principle between 'corporate' and 'private' worship must be discarded." Muslim liturgy mixes first-person-singular and first-person-plural language, but the appointed worship times, heralded by the public call, suggest the purpose and assumption of community.

¹⁹ Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites* (Westview, 1998), 154; see his chapter "Community", 152–165.

²⁰ Admittedly, novelty can potentially excite and engross the knowledgeable guest who finds predictable ritual to be too predictable. See above: *Ritual Innovation and Marking*.

²¹ I adapt Mary Collins' language from "Principles of Feminist Liturgy," 11, 21.

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community might be tested if dining in a Sefardi home on Passover; a contemporary Jew might feel estranged if suddenly transported to a sixth-century Palestinian synagogue where the entire Amidah is recited in piyyutic form, the usual text jettisoned save for the hatimot; Mosheh might feel alienated if eavesdropping on the classroom of Rabbi Akivah. To posit a homogenous Jewish community, whether diachronically or synchronically, is fallacious. Community, and the feeling of belonging that arises from a felicitous encounter with it, derives not only from shared ritual, but also from shared values, myths, and symbolic interpretations. (See above: *Symbols*.) And when the expression of values, the telling of myth, and the use of symbols all derive from a source that the group identifies as legitimate and authoritative, the feeling of community can arise. (See above: *Anamnesis, Authenticity, and Authority*.)

Alternatively, we can define a ritual community more narrowly, as that which is gathered and formed only for the ritual at hand. And if the ritual successfully collapses time, making those in attendance feel as if they are participants in something that is larger and inexplicably more meaningful than the sum of the parts, a something that has its roots in myth and its orientation toward a halcyon future, a something that highlights shared values that derive from authoritative canon, then social cohesion results.

If community is somehow affirmed, one can and will overlook novelty and lack of homogeneity. When the Ashkenazi Jewish tourist celebrates Passover in Israel, s/he willingly integrates the prevalent humus and rice into his/her understanding of community — not to mention only one seder. If it looks like a Jewish wedding (huppah), talks like a Jewish wedding (b'rakhot; 'ketubah' reading), and acts like a Jewish wedding (glass breaking followed by "Mazal tov!"), it probably *is* a Jewish wedding, even though there are two brides under the huppah. And this probably explains why — thus far, anyway, and whether intentionally or not — same-sex rituals privilege traditional liturgical formats, traditional b'rakhot, and traditional Jewish symbols, thereby establishing their authenticity and authority, and instilling social cohesion. Traditional language, action, and objects help the participant and guest to accept ritual novelty in the absence of the explicit approbation of tradition. Use of traditional liturgies (e.g., Sheva B'rakhot, even if adapted), objects (e.g., huppah), and actions (e.g., exchanging rings and drinking wine) express commitment to the larger Jewish community, build upon familiarity, foster ritual comfort, and enable people to respond appropriately to certain clues (e.g., yelling "Mazal tov!" when the glass is broken). Community is fostered by virtue of familiar ritual features that establish authenticity, precedent, and legitimacy.

Shared ritual is a didactic tool for transmission of values, encouraging a uniform theology around core concepts like creation (e.g., *Birkat yotser ha-adam*), revelation (e.g., the b'rakhot framing the Torah recitation), the Deity's qualities (e.g., *Birkat ha-tov v'-ha-meitiv*), eschatology (e.g., the 5th and 7th of the Sheva B'rakhot), the nature of the community (e.g., the text of any Shabbat or holiday Kiddush), and the holiness of marital union (*Birkat Kidushin*). In sum, liturgies review cosmic history and the role of the community in that history, teaching us that, for example, this couple is marrying just like Adam and Havah did, and we celebrate just as we will when we are all united in Zion.

The didactic content not only teaches ideology, but it also functions heuristically, enabling the individual to discover what s/he believes (or should) as a member of the community. A community not only relies upon the rituals to maintain itself, but it also molds rituals that express and reinforce its values.²²

Innovative ritual, when thoughtful, has potential didactic benefit, educating people to new values and perspectives. Catherine Madsen asserts that liturgy has the power "to shape the thinking of a whole culture . . ."²³ — so use the opportunity of composing a new ritual with that didactic potential in mind.²⁴

22 Grimes, *Ritual Criticism*, 56 — 57: ". . . liturgy is one of the primary means of enculturation." See also Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond the Text* (IU, 1987), 69, 76 *passim*, on how communities use liturgy for self-definition.

23 "Love Songs to the Dead," *Cross Currents* 48:4 (Summer 1998). Thanks to Dini Lewittes for sending me this article.

24 But see ahead: *Archaism and Estoricism: Let the Language Speak for Itself*.

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Ritual Tells Us What to Feel

Just as belief is instructed by ritual, so too emotion, be it joy, grief, penance, humility, thankfulness, awe, or pride.²⁵ Using ritual to guide and shape group emotion is not only socially unifying but reassuring.²⁶ Furthermore, the ritual should not only instruct people what to feel, but how best to express those feelings.

Liturgical examples of this mood-dictating function are b'rakhot like *she-heh'yanu* that cue us to feel gratitude, or occasional b'rakhot that express awe. Joy at a wedding is prompted by the Sheva B'rakhot, which explicitly describe such a happy setting.

People approach a familiar ritual anticipating the cues that will prompt the appropriate emotion(s). If the ritual is unfamiliar, people arrive with only preparatory emotion (presumably joy at a union ceremony), without knowing how it will be shaped and guided and without knowing how they should express it.

Rebecca Alpert alludes to the difficulty of establishing the proper mood in innovative rituals, a difficulty she attributes to an absence of "authenticity";²⁷ but it seems to me that this difficulty also stems from a possible absence of ritual felicity or (more simply) comfort. By grounding an innovative Jewish ritual in familiar actions, language, and objects, authenticity gets established, comfort instilled, and appropriate mind-set cued. (See above: *Anamnesis, Authenticity, and Authority*.)

In the course of any ritual, various emotions will arise. In the traditional wedding, procession to the *huppah* prompts nervousness (Will someone back out or make a scene?); *Birkat Kidushin* establishes a mood of solemnity — likewise the ketubah reading; finally, the Sheva B'rakhot instruct joy, topped off by the sound of breaking glass, which signals the time for expressions of relief and celebration. When the ritual is familiar, one does not miss cues, and therefore the ritual resonates emotionally. If known, formulaic language and action are jettisoned, known cues for appropriate responses, reactions, and interpretations are also gone.

An author must ask him/herself: How will people's emotions get prompted, shaped, and guided at this ritual that I'm crafting? Are the linguistic, aural, and visual cues readily apparent? Do the ritual forms, language, actions, and objects I've appropriated bring along emotional associations that fit? ²⁸

At the very least, the mere use of the b'rakhah formula in innovative rituals signals solemnity because the formula is so widely recognized; hearing the familiar phrases affects one's emotional response, triggering an awareness that something religious and formularized is being said, even if the actual content is unfamiliar or the context novel.

Archaism and Esotericism: Let the Language Speak for Itself

In their liturgies, people often display a preference for archaic and esoteric language, even to the extent that the text becomes incomprehensible to the average user (Kaddish is but one example). Here we discover yet another irony and paradox of the ritual phenomenon (one being its elasticity, despite its rigidity; another being its ability to simultaneously create and threaten community): Its words are intended for the instruction of cultural values and theological truths, yet these same words are likely to be opaque for the average practitioner, *even if s/he* can recite them by heart. Despite the halakhic permissibility of uttering the liturgy in the vernacular,²⁹ the Hebrew (and Aramaic) passages took root early on and have held sway, even though Hebrew has not been widely understood from the pre-rabbinic period until its adoption as a spoken language a century ago.

²⁵ Michael Signer, "Poetics of Liturgy," in Paul Bradshaw and Lawrence Hoffman, *The Changing Face of Jewish and Christian Worship in North America* (Notre Dame, 1991), 192: "... the words of our liturgical texts convey more than doctrine: they foster and mold emotions." He refers to David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (Yale, 1988), 99–101.

Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (NY, 1948), 134: "A rite regularly performed is the constant reiteration of sentiments toward 'first and last things'; it is not a free expression of emotions, but a disciplined rehearsal of 'right attitudes'."

²⁶ See Victor Turner, *Dreams, Fields, and Metaphors* (Cornell, 1974), 56.

²⁷ Rebecca Alpert, "Our Lives Are The Text: Exploring Jewish Women's Rituals," *Bridges* 2:1 (Spring 1991), 75.

²⁸ However, be sure to read the next section.

²⁹ M Sota 7:1; Rambam *Hilkhot B'rakhot* 1:6.

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Jewish same-sex rituals tend to use the ritual language of Hebrew, coining new b'rakhot in the traditional style (that is, with the traditional formula or recently established variants, and with words that are either from, or appear, biblical or rabbinic); and composing ketubah-like documents. Given the high degree of Jewish education of these ceremonies' authors, this use of sophisticated Hebrew is not surprising. Moreover, use of liturgical Hebrew (or 'official'-sounding Hebrew, in the case of the documents) imparts a sense of authenticity to those who come to the ceremony *expecting* to hear such formulaic language.

Using a large amount of English, or pedantically translating every Hebrew phrase into English, risks detracting from any mood and authenticity that the Hebrew imparts. People attend a ritual expecting to hear formalized, even incomprehensible, language.³⁰ The vernacular doesn't carry the symbolic, emotional weight.

This caveat applies to the temptation to hand out an explanatory booklet, begin the proceedings with an explanation, or interject explanations throughout, all done to ensure that the assembled will 'buy into' or understand the innovative ritual.

This is not unique to same-sex rituals — the practice has been noted in other innovative rituals.³¹ Doing so is understandable: You want your friends and relatives to know what's going on and why, you want them to appreciate the symbolism of certain actions and objects, and you want them to fully comprehend the words. In short, you want a felicitous ritual.

But booklets and explanations can rationalize or reduce the potential meaning of symbols; detract from the non-rational aspects of good ritual; and deprive individuals of their own interpretations. (See above: *Symbols*.) For some people, explanations simply subtract from the mystery of the moment. Thus an author of a union ritual might consider if the guest needs to be told what the *huppah* represents; perhaps s/he can intuit immediately that it physically defines ritual space. The author should weigh the value of telling the assembled what the Sheva B'rakhot are and how they were adapted, as opposed to letting the power of marking and ritualized language cast a spell over the Jewishly educated and uneducated guest alike. The author should ask if the assembled need to be told what the document is (and especially why it isn't an official ketubah), or if the esoteric and formal quality of the read words will sufficiently carry the power of authenticity and solemnity. Finally, one should think about the value of explaining the breaking of glass: either the guest will know or will be caught off guard by the violent action and then caught up in the ensuing joyful cries. Some people like explanations when they attend a ritual (particularly if it is unfamiliar or novel); others find them distracting and limiting, particularly when prolix. As Catherine Madsen puts it, liturgy should leave "something up to experience" and leave "cognitive work for the audience . . .".³² However, I would take issue with her use of "cognitive", and suggest that liturgy (and ritual) should leave *spiritual* work for the audience, since what is 'known' is sometimes less powerful than what is unknown.

If your ritual includes rational discourse (whether printed or spoken) about what symbolism is intended, you reduce symbolic potential and limit symbolic efficacy (not to mention being overly didactic and pedantic). Adults who hang Christmas stockings usually do not want a scholar or therapist to tell them what their doing so symbolizes: they have their own interpretations that are much more poignant (even if irrational). Explanations before or during ritual practice detract from the possibility for relishing the non-rational, numinous experience that good ritual provides.

One of the most memorable rituals I've ever attended was a traditional Chinese funeral. I understood nothing of what was happening — one example of inscrutable behavior should suffice: For the first hour or so, everyone 'in the know' was busily and silently folding slips of paper into prescribed shapes, dropping these into little paper bags, and then depositing those into a (real!) furnace. I sat transfixed by the concentrated industry, overcome by an inexplicable sense of holy gesture. Afterward I asked a couple people why they did it, and I received a wide array of contradictory explanations that only Victor Turner's elucidation of symbols as polysemous can illuminate. My own symbolic interpretation is what I've retained: Each person was lovingly and respectfully performing a final duty for the deceased. Had I been told at the outset why they were

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³⁰ Liturgical Hebrew is recognizably different and not readily comprehensible even for a contemporary native Hebrew-speaker. According to my casual, non-systematic survey, the obstacles to full comprehension are unusual conjugations, unknown words, words that have different meanings in contemporary Hebrew, and roots mistaken for different roots with different meanings.

³¹ Rela Mintz Geffen, "Life Cycle Rituals: Rites of Passage in American Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (Cambridge U, 2005), 231-234.

³² "Love Songs."

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going to do it or handed a booklet that compelled me to read about what they were doing rather than simply observing, I suspect I would have become quickly bored by the quiet and repetitious behavior, the mystery completely sucked out.

Don't be tempted to explain what you're doing. Your guests will know why they've come. Your ritual — its actions, objects, and formalized language — should be felicitous enough to explain itself.

Effecting Transitions

Ritual — its words, objects, and actions — can effect transition to new status or reaffirm a pre-existing status. This is often described as the performative aspect of ritual,³³ and is easiest understood with rites of passage, such as marriage: Two unrelated people enter the *huppah*, formulaic language is recited, and they depart, inexplicably entwined, viewing themselves differently, and viewed differently by the community. The wedding ritual has profound effect. Life-cycle rituals (anthropologists' term "life-crisis" is more apt) require a climax, and if there is no effective, symbol-loaded way to indicate that, a way that everyone in attendance can grasp, then you might be left with a non-felicitous ceremony.

Familiarity with the ritual is necessary for the group to be able to anticipate and perceive the transition — and standardization provides this. Consequently, a ritual for a same-sex couple's union seems like a no-win situation: If effective transition depends upon a known ritual, and known ritual depends upon standardization, how can a new ritual be effective? How does the author get the assembled to recognize the performative act and believe in the transition if the ritual is unfamiliar?

A performative transition occurs at a climactic point that is either formulaically announced or enacted. Thus, there is great dependence upon the invocation of viable symbols (be they objects, words, or gestures) that encourage the appropriate interpretations. Same-sex rituals that borrow the symbol-rich elements of the traditional wedding have little problem announcing the performative transition: Guests will either correctly interpret the exchange of rings, the document reading, and the *Sheva B'rakhot*, or gather their cues from those who do.

Those ceremonies that use other than the traditional wedding's language, objects, and actions have to devise a way to effectively indicate status transition. The author is compelled to go looking for 'the' action, object, or language that can carry the weight.³⁴ What will constitute that 'boom' moment, that instant in which the transformation occurs? (Refer back to the section *Symbols*.)

Once this 'something', which in and of itself carries a power that cannot be easily explained other than to say that it is 'it', is found, then it must be framed by other actions, objects, or language that establish anticipatory mood-setting and release. Any ritual needs a narrative arc with a beginning (the setting of the stage), a climax or transitional moment, and an end (which provides the relief of pent-up emotion or energy). If a *huppah* and breaking glass aren't used, alternatives must be found that can express introduction and conclusion in a symbolic fashion — something other than an officiant pedantically announcing that things are beginning and ending. (There's little more infelicitous than a precentor announcing, "We have now reached the conclusion of the ceremony.")

Closing Thoughts

Life-cycle rituals provide structure and definition to one's personal and communal lives, by defining life changes (e.g., marriage) and transforming banal acts into meaningful ones (e.g., living together). This function of providing structure and communally approved meaning explains, in part, ritual's characteristic formularization and standardization.³⁵

33 Performative language theory has been well explored since J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962). For summaries, see Lawrence Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer* (Pastoral Press, 1988), 231–235; Rebecca Lesses, "The Adjuration of the Prince of the Presence," *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer et al (Brill, 2001), 189–193; Grimes, *Ritual Criticism*, 191–198. The use of 'performance' or 'performative' in this context does not refer to dramatic productions for entertainment or to the mere use of action. See Grimes' clarification, *Ritual Criticism*, 235, n 14.

34 Neil Schwartz pointed out to me (in conversation) that music is also capable of providing a ritual center.

35 Some would attribute the human tendency toward repetitive, formularized behavior to the biological realm, a claim that I cannot assess, despite my willingness to accept the hypothesis. For a summary discussion, see Nathan Mitchell, et al., "What Biogeneticists are Saying about Ritual," *Liturgy Digest* 1:1 (Spring 1993), 38–68.

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Because ritual is communal glue, it is resistant to change, whether that resistance comes from above (those with halakhic authority) or from below (lay users of ritual). Resistance stems as much from the wish to preserve theological uniformity and social cohesion as from the gravitation toward habitual, expected behavior. However, change happens because ritual systems exist not in vacuums but in live communities. Thus, while ritual resists change, it is also paradoxically and characteristically elastic.³⁶

Resistance to same-sex-union rituals need not be reviewed here. But the mere venture of this website and the denominational range of the contributors to it suggests the extent to which there exists within the Jewish community a willingness to acknowledge these unions: there is willingness to change. Moreover, the content of sample rituals generally displays a commitment to roots within the Jewish tradition, not a break with the tradition.

Just as fixed ritual instructs the community what is theologically normative, so too it instructs what is socially normative. Just as the traditional wedding announces that it is normative to be in a heterosexual marriage, so too same-sex rituals announce that it is normative to be in a homosexual union (underscoring the educational potential of ritual). Just as a community's established rituals dictate what *is* normative, so too its new rituals instruct what *should* be normative.

³⁶ Bruce Lincoln, "On Ritual, Change, and Marked Categories," 507: "Rituals are often more resilient than brittle. . . they can resist, withdraw, negotiate, retool, reorganize, and maneuver, often with stunning success."



Dr. Debra Reed Blank teaches and writes in the fields of Jewish liturgy, rabbinics, and ritual theory, and is a Visiting Scholar at Brandeis University's Women's Studies Research Center, where she is writing a book about Jewish female-infant initiation. From 1998-2009, she was the Rabbi Philip Alstat Assistant Professor of Liturgy at the Jewish Theological Seminary. She has also taught at Hebrew College, the Academy for Jewish Religion (New York), and the Russian State University for the Humanities (Moscow). Her edited volume, *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Essays in Honor of Menahem Schmelzer*, was published in 2011.

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