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## Crossing the Virtual Partition: Changing Jewish Rituals in Women's Narratives

**ABSTRACT:** For many years excluded and marginalized, Jewish women have managed to alter the definitions of Jewish ritual in an attempt to find more self-conscious ways of religious expression. My paper examines how literature reflects this process by demonstrating different strategies employed by women writers to bridge the gap created by androcentric narratives. Given the example of two novels: E.M. Broner's *A Weave of Women* (1978) and Allegra Goodman's *Paradise Park* (2001), I discuss the changing role of Jewish women in Judaism. Whether by mirroring the male rituals, or reshaping the existing foundations of Jewish practice and thought, they have managed to change the performance and conceptualization of modern Judaism; the process, which is by no means completed.

**KEY WORDS:** Judaism, ritual, Jewish women, American-Jewish literature

Jewish women have traditionally been assigned less active roles in the practice of Judaism than men. According to the conviction that "the glory of the king's daughter is inward" (Psalm 45:14), women were praised for their piety, but denied a voice of their own. As women could not become rabbis and were excluded from ritual participation, their presence was restricted to a woman's section of the synagogue. Mostly confined to the realm of domesticity, they were not public figures. Judaism, however, is far from monolithic and various congregations differ in their view of *halakhah* (the Jewish law) and the woman's position in Judaism. Today, women hold positions of power in the public sphere as men do, but their position within Orthodoxy has changed little. Some Reform and Conservative synagogues allow women to have a separate prayer group, or let them open the arc, but Orthodox communities, and Orthodox Judaism is the dominant stream in Israel, still exclude women from public ritual.

Esther M. Broner's novel *A Weave of Women* (1978) is an early statement in which feminism, religion and art combine to transcend the political and cultural

limitations of the traditional world of Judaism. Set against multiethnic America, Allegra Goodman's *Paradise Park* (2001) offers a contemporary account of a young Jewish woman's quest for religious fulfillment. There are two main sources of Jewish women's spiritual creativity represented in the texts: one derives from the ideas of youth rebellion of the 1960s that reclaimed religion from church authority and broadened definitions of faith, and the other springs from the tenets of the women's movement, which encouraged women to redefine their roles in family and society. While the first favored individual experience, the latter postulated the importance of collective needs in battling the gendered order of male hegemony. Traditional Judaism generally provides for men, so women have to invent their own rituals to correct the limitations imposed by patriarchal rule. In doing so, they try to redefine the idea of traditional marriage and ensure women's social equality. Broner's literary attempt to reconcile Judaism and feminism offers a community of women as an alternative to male patriarchy. Goodman's protagonist, struggling to reconcile personal desires with societal expectations, focuses on personal fulfillment. In both novels, women search for personal practices that fall outside of traditional religious systems whose veracity they question. Rituals are cultural devices that, on the one hand, facilitate the preservation of social order, but on the other hand, provide a vehicle for the expression and containment of human emotions (MYERHOFF, 1982: 108—135). In both novels the idea of ritual exemplifies the woman's longing for a different way to experience the world. Oscillating between individual creativity and group solidarity, traditional customs and innovative rites, individual spirituality and group rituals, the protagonists explore the nature of spiritual exile within Judaism.

### Jewish women confronting Judaism

The embourgeoisement of American Jews encouraged the emergence of Reform Judaism, which altered the Orthodox service. The overall aim of Reform Judaism was to modernize traditional Judaism in such a way that it would meet the religious needs of its acculturated followers and, at the same time, come closer, in terms of service and worship, to mainstream Christian society. As Anglo-Protestant women became the reference model for the Americanization of their Jewish counterparts, the reconfiguration of Jewish women's class and gender roles reached the religious sphere. For example, women began to be admitted to the choir and trained to sing, which was a big step towards broadening their participation in rituals. They were also recognized as members of the *minyan* (the ten, traditionally male, adults who are necessary for public prayers to take

place) and enjoyed better educational opportunities. By the 1970s, this would result in the first women ordained as rabbis.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the introduction of family pews ended sex segregation in the synagogue.

Because of the division between the male-public and female-private realm, the home was the traditional center of Jewish spirituality and religious education. Viewed as “naturally pious and motivated mainly by concern for others, primarily for her family’s well-being in the home” (HYMAN, DASH MOORE, 1997: 84), Jewish women were expected to do charitable work (*tzedaka*), which expanded into the establishment of various charitable organizations and benevolent societies. Because at the end of the 19th century educated Jewish women were not accepted by Christian clubs and societies, they founded the National Council of Jewish Women (1893) in order to offer a platform for Jewish women to express themselves freely. “[T]he largest Jewish woman’s organization in the world” (MARCUS, 1981: 93) was Hadassah — the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, which was founded by Henrietta Szold in 1912. Its goal was “to further Judaism in this country [the US — B.G.] and to aid the Jews of the Holy Land (MARCUS, 1981: 92). Philanthropic organizations employed female volunteers who helped the sick, the needy, as well as assisted in the ritual preparation of the deceased women for burial.

The 20th century saw Jewish women comfortably ensconced in American society, especially because they were entering the middle class in large numbers. Education and personal careers provided alternatives to marriage and parenthood. Leaving the city centers for suburban neighborhoods was a sign of Jewish affluence, unmatched by any other ethnic group. The persistent threat of anti-Semitism, which manifested itself in the exclusion of Jews from higher education and residential neighborhoods, and the tragedy of the Holocaust delayed yet did not interrupt the assimilative process. The homogenization of the Jewish community was a fact. Inter-marriage and viewing religion as a matter of “one’s personal choice” altered the concept of religion and spiritual identity, which has been essential to the idea of Jewishness. That is why “Jewish identity for many American Jews [...] is no longer something associated exclusively with religion, long the most acceptable and hence common way American Jews had for characterizing themselves. Instead, Jewish identity seems to have moved increasingly toward ethnicity or heritage and culture, while being ‘a good Jew’ has been defined in vaguely moral terms” (HEILMAN, 1995: 135).

The rise of Jewish feminism in the 1970s called for the evaluation of the role of women within Judaism. Traditional Judaism was viewed as an example of patriarchy; therefore, one of the objectives of the feminist movement was to

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<sup>1</sup> In 1972 Sally Priesand became the first female rabbi ordained by a rabbinical seminary in the United States. She was the second formally ordained female rabbi in Jewish history after Regina Jonas who was ordained in 1935 in Germany.

evaluate the legacy of rabbinic Judaism, which had been held responsible for chauvinistic repression in the Jewish tradition. The predominantly male representations in liturgy as well as in the scriptures, and the marginal treatment of the matriarchs were subjected to criticism. Although the Hebrew Bible portrays women who are politically active (Deborah), who dare to challenge male authority (Rebecca, Tamar), and who try to find their own path to God (Ruth), nonetheless, their true merit is measured against how well they can “further divine plans and spiritual or nationalistic goals and not merely their personal ambitions” (FISHMAN, 1992: 3).

Rabbinic literature presents a predominantly negative image of femininity: “women have been made in historical Judaism to experience themselves as impure, dangerous, and devalued” (BOYARIN, 1997: 153). Rabbinical representations by male authors portray women as dependent on men — as mothers, wives, and daughters who are stripped of autonomy. A need for male control derived from the fact that Jewish women were seen as possessing a passionate and uncontrollable sexual nature, which, in order to be harnessed, required various religious and social arrangements. One example is the enforcement of sexual separation up to seven days due to woman’s menstrual periods, which make her responsible for being “unclean” in the eyes of the community. Another is the silencing of female voices during worship and delegating women to separate quarters so that they do not distract men from prayer. The exclusion of women from the study of the Torah, on the one hand, preserved purely male authority from pollution by “unclean” femaleness, and, on the other hand, denied women the knowledge, which might be used to question male dominance. The female body underwent a special scrutiny in rabbinic eyes resulting both in their contempt for and fear of it. For example, procreation was seen as a male domain, with women providing only a body — a vessel to bear a child. The role of motherhood was belittled on the basis of the fact that “the majority of the rabbis distinguished between procreation as an active male role [...] and bearing children as the female’s designated passive purpose” (BASKIN, 2002: 119). Thus, women who were childless had a very low social position.

Rabbinic interpretations tend to denigrate women’s roles in the grand scheme of Jewish history, stressing instead their domestic and child bearing duties. Fishman’s conclusion that the women of the Hebrew Bible “may not necessarily have wanted children but that the patriarch authors of the Bible needed to present women as being obsessed with motherhood” (FISHMAN, 1992: 5) offers a feminist lens to the discussion in which women were more often subjects than participants. Rabbinical commentators accentuated the importance of the survival of the Jewish diaspora as a whole, often at the expense of personal happiness and liberty. Jewish women were to be the guardians of domestic life, which provided a safe haven amidst the hostility of host cultures. That is why rabbis enforced the image of the good Jewess, which is indelibly connected with her role as

a wife and mother. They did so because they saw that the world outside might offer Jewish women emancipation and empowerment unrivaled by what they were afforded by their own community, which would pose another threat to the continuity of traditional Jewish values.

The synagogue became the main target of female emancipatory endeavors in America. In Eastern Europe Jewish men prayed both at home and in the synagogue, whereas women prayed mostly at home for “prayer was not seen as exclusively a group activity” (FISHMAN, 1993: 144). In America, few Jews could pray three times a day at home since they were constrained by the demands of their jobs. Therefore, only a visit to a synagogue allowed them place and time exclusively for prayer. Since Jewish women were barred from synagogue services, they continued to pray at home; however, lack of influence on religious content and form made “many women [feel] estranged from Jewish prayer and spirituality” (FISHMAN, 1993: 145). In recent decades Jewish feminists have begun to demand equal access to positions of religious leadership, participatory involvement in prayer, a reclamation and reinterpretation of *tekhines* (Yiddish petitionary prayers, which constituted a vital part of women’s day-to-day religious life), and the removal of hierarchical categories from Jewish prayer and thought.

Either by modifying the existing rituals so that they include female attributes, or re-reading the traditional texts to illuminate their latent feminine aspect, the Jewish feminists’ aim is to bridge the gap between the contemporary world and the world of the Talmud and, consequently, bring parity with Jewish men. In Judith Plaskow’s words: “women are seeking to transform Jewish ritual so that it acknowledges our existence and experience. In the ritual moment, women’s history is made present” (PLASKOW, 1985: 33). However, Jewish feminists tend to emphasize that “their innovations do not blur or distort Judaism but instead reclaim and reemphasize elements that were erroneously suppressed” (FISHMAN, 1993: 232). Sylvia Barack Fishman observes the rift in regard to Judaism, which in the 1970s (here and elsewhere) began to divide the American Jewish community along gender lines as follows: “when most American Jewish men seemed to be drawing away from Jewish ritual, and few men worshiped regularly with prayer shawls and phylacteries, some Jewish women began to explore these and other traditionally male modes of religious expression” (FISHMAN, 1993: 8).

Although Jewish feminism developed under the influence of American women’s movement, their paths parted when the latter failed to acknowledge its distinctively Jewish and communal concerns.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, Jewish feminism has brought both female and Jewish visibility within the realm of American Jew-

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<sup>2</sup> On the differences between American and Jewish feminism see Deborah DASH MOORE: “Jewish Feminism Faces the American Woman’s Movement.” In: EADEM, ed.: *American Jewish Identity Politics*. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2008, pp. 221–240.

ish society. Jewish women enjoy choices and opportunities, which allow them either to pursue individual freedom or explore the spiritual depths of traditional Judaism, unless they choose to enjoy both. They may refer to themselves as religious or secular Jews, and “they also call themselves ‘cultural Jews,’ ‘politically Jewish,’ or, [...] ‘culinary Jews’” (PINSKY, 2010: 44). The existence of sometimes exotic-sounding varieties of Jewish experience signals the areas of potential disputes within modern Jewish feminism. Some familiar issues shifting between universalistic and particularistic concerns are still being raised, such as the question of balance between an allegedly exclusive position of being a Jew and being a feminist, a sense of communal responsibility, and a need for security in view of anti-Semitism, followed by the problem of the survival of the Jewish people given its secularization and high intermarriage rates. What is more, modern feminist thought has introduced ideas that seem contrary to the survival of Judaism, such as the LGBT perspective, which offers an idea of procreation that is essentially incompatible with Judaism. It has also voiced controversial issues such as Israel’s ambivalent role in the conflict in the Middle East.

It has been difficult for Jewish women to take ownership of traditionally male rituals because women are not part of the power structure. Women want to practice Judaism without having to ask men for a permission to express their spiritual devotion. That is why they have found ways to infuse traditional Judaism with feminist ideas. They have invented rituals and practices that parallel those traditionally of male origin, such as *simchat bat*, a ceremony that welcomes a baby girl, and *bat mitzvah* for girls who reach legal and religious maturity. Women’s *yeshivot* (educational institutions that focus on the study of religious texts) have been established and one may buy prayer shawls (*tallitot*) made especially for women. Egalitarian weddings and naming ceremonies for daughters had no precedent in normative *halakhah* and paved the way to gender equality. Women’s *seder* (a feast marking the beginning of *Passover*) and *Rosh Hodesh* (the first day of the new month) ceremonies have enriched the Hebrew calendar with feminine motifs. There is no fixed liturgical format, as some women meet to study and discuss the Torah, while others immerse in ritual with drama, artistic creativity, dancing, and singing. The traditional religious texts have been re-read through a feminist lens, resulting in a creation of a new, more gender-neutral language that is used in feminist *midrash* (a rabbinic method of interpreting texts through the telling of stories). New prayers have been added that mark life-changing experiences in the lives of women, such as abortion, miscarriage, infertility, and menopause. By means of integration or transformation, Jewish women have revived those traditions that have been marginalized, thereby providing new interpretations of normative *halakhic* customs.

An Alternative to a Man's World:  
E.M. Broner's *A Weave of Women* (1978)

Against the backdrop of 1970s' Jerusalem, Broner portrays a group of women who question the existing norms of patriarchal society. Creating a nonhierarchical community in the heart of Jerusalem, they challenge the Zionist culture that surrounds them. The women come from different national (Israeli, British, German, and American) and cultural (a mystic, a singer, a social worker, a wayward girl, a journalist, a scientist, an actress, a convert) backgrounds, but what unites them is an attempt to form a "family of women" that would epitomize the idea of solidarity with suffering or victimized women. "In stressing the singularity of each individual [...] their individual reawakenings superficially resembles Hasidic messianism, which emphasizes a personal redemption as an alternative to Zionism's collective redemption" (OMER, 2002: 100). In the course of the novel, the women learn the powers of love and revenge, they laugh and cry, they come to terms with their lives, or rebel against the injustice of fate. By sharing their stories, they create a bond that fosters new ways of communication which are not based on power or hierarchy.

Out of the scraps of personal stories emerges a world in which women are subjected to various kinds of oppression. Inter-personal relations, which are characterized by ruthlessness and hostility, champion men as major culprits when it comes to intimidating and subjugating women. Young men "hurt you with words or by withholding love. They hurt you with the palm of the hand. They hurt you by not being ready for you. They needle you. They are dull and bore you. They hurt you by shouting and by quiet" (BRONER, 1978: 11). Religious men boo and attack skimpily clad women: "One throws an empty milk carton. Another would throw a Coke bottle at Deedee but a policeman good-naturedly takes it out of his hand" (p. 35). The choice of verbs to describe the relationship between the sexes signifies the use of force in which women are the victims of verbal as well as physical abuse: men "grab" (p. 12), "pierce" (p. 27), "impregnate" (p. 76), "hurt" (p. 15), and bruise women: "On [Dahlia's] leg, under her long skirt, is a swollen bruise. A young man with whom she went boating hit her with the paddle when she refused to succumb to his advances" (p. 17). Women fall prey to male sexual desire and suffer all kinds of physical ill-treatment; they are raped and beaten, spat upon and trampled, humiliated and discarded and that is why they "hate men" (p. 14). The novel depicts the world in which men exercise unlimited power over women and such episodes as, for example, the killing of a baby named Hava, which is in every aspect of the deed senseless and unnecessary, exemplifies male predatory nature. The very idea of woman's autonomy instigates man's anger: "An independent woman? You know what an independent woman needs? To be squeezed between somebody's legs. I could do it — anyone could do it —

your independence would be squeezed out of you” (p. 75). *A Weave of Women* portrays a community deeply polarized along strict definitions of gender roles in society, with men holding power and women subjugated to male rule. Fear and brutality are used as tools for maintaining and controlling those divisions.

The idea of woman’s oppression is depicted on an individual as well as social level. Institutionalized oppression is enforced by means of religious rule: “Mickey hates the rabbinical court which delays and delays the divorce, which humiliates her and orders her to buy her way out of the marriage” (p. 14). Women are excluded from religious rule on the grounds of being “too sensitive [...]”. That’s why women are forbidden to join a minyan or handle the Torah” (p. 72). Social problems such as “the high rate of illegitimate pregnancies among the young girls of the religious poorer communities” (p. 67), less money spent on training girls than boys, girls’ illiteracy, which means that “[t]hey are fit for only two things, marriage or whoring” (p. 146), and lack of birth control are not acknowledged by the communities and shunned by religious authorities: “case histories of beatings, child molesting, sexual abuse. No one wants to hear more. It’s a shame before the goyim” (p. 205). The problems with the funding of the Home for the Wayward Jewish Girls demonstrate the extent of sexual discrimination: “[t]here are no places to receive prodigal daughters, the way the yeshivot welcome the prodigal sons. The sons are entreated to return to the fold. The girls are unfolded” (p. 201). Hepzibah’s husband’s voice reflects state ideology with regard to women’s roles: “How do people tell if you’re a man or woman in those pants? And with boy’s hair? Did you never think of marrying? How do you fulfill yourself? [...] Do you realize you are dooming your race to extinction by not marrying and procreating? If everyone were like you, the Muslims and Christians would overrun The Land” (pp. 68–69). Unmarried women, in his view, are a threat to the preservation and continuation of the State of Israel. Broner’s novel illustrates how the connection of the rabbinate with the state fosters the problem of sex discrimination, and how national and religious interests are used to control and regulate woman’s social status. The narrative demonstrates how systemic gender oppression, which includes civic and legal institutions, helps to specify and uphold restrictive gender norms.

It is not only men and patriarchal rule that limits woman’s freedom, there are women who adopt the male stance and oppress other women. No one welcomes a baby girl: Rina’s mother “had hoped for a son, and a daughter was sent” (p. 31), which she sees as God’s punishment. After her first menses when “Rina menstruated and stained everything the unlucky color of blood red, her mother slapped both of Rina’s cheeks, and when Rina cried, “Why did you do that?” her mother said, “As it was done to me” (p. 199). In honor of an ill-understood tradition that champions the idea of family’s honor, woman’s sexuality is seen as a potential threat to its purity; a woman “can sin and her sin can swell, a growth, an abscess on the family name” (p. 201). This example of culture-based gender

violence excuses the corruption of individual behavior, which is hiding behind the reverence for years-long tradition. When Deedee's boss rapes her, her mother "slapped [her] down into the bed. 'You're of no use to anybody, including yourself,' said [her] ma" (p. 27). The street demonstration reveals the division between the women who rebel and those who accept and uphold the existing status quo: "The married ladies pushing buggies cannot bear women without buggies, cannot bear women staring straight ahead and carrying banners, cannot bear heads uncovered, hair flying, hair curling, cannot stand smiles and teeth and sturdy stride" (p. 36). Family relations illuminate the hypocrisy which sanctions the maltreatment of women: "[i]n This World the mother slaps her for going on the street, but also reminds Rina that she cannot afford to feed her, and who will put food on the table, and what can Rina do to be useful? Money is accepted — with the evil, the averted eye — by her parents" (p. 200). When both personal and communal contacts reinforce gender-based violence, there is little women can expect to improve their social status. The narrative suggests that in a culture and society that is powered by patriarchy the only measure for women is to unite and create their own support groups.

*A Weave of Women* offers an insight into the lives of women who make up such a group. In order to survive in the misogynistic world, they discover the power of ritual as a tool in a battle against a world dominated by male oppression. By forging links of new communal rites, they can face various crises in their lives: Rahel's fears that she might have been impregnated by her father as a metaphor for the male domineering role in the Orthodox family, Mickey's possession by a dybbuk, the birth of Simha's child, and the mourning after Shula's death. They celebrate Hava's hymenotomy — a devirginizing of an eight-day-old baby so that she will not be "judged by her hymen but by the energies of her life" (p. 25). Opening the hymen is an act of freedom, a symbolic claim to her sexuality, which releases her from the constraints of the male-constructed law. A cooling-off ceremony for impassioned women with cold water to drink and a splash on the burning body, and the housecleaning ceremony, which aims at ridding one's house of demons: Simha opens all the windows and the doors, "all cupboards in case demons are crouched with the onions or flattened between the dishes or hidden in a cloudy glass" (p. 56). The women add another prayer to the wedding ceremony, in which a groom swears: "I will never hurt you. I will never punish you. If I shout at you, may my tongue be struck dumb. If I strike at you, may my arms become numb. I will not smash the glass underfoot for fear slivers will enter your heart" (p. 260), and they complement the Hebrew Bible with the women's version of the Song of Songs.

A revenge rite for Deedee involves action, in addition to the right words. Deedee is almost stoned to death after having consensual sex with a young Talmudic scholar, or as the local newspaper puts it in line with the dominant propaganda: "Young whore angers the sensibilities of the guardians of the gates"

(p. 232). Even Deedee, who barely survives the attack, is susceptible to the powers of patriarchal discourse and is looking for a fault of her own: “Maybe I seduced him...Maybe I offended his religion...Maybe I said something I didn’t mean to...” (p. 235). Her sisters, however, identify the culprit and prepare their “[w]eapons: [t]he Evil Eye, the Purified Stone, Blood, Sounds Which Shatter the Air, the Weapons of Home” (p. 233), musical instruments: “pots and lids, iron pans and metal ladles, wooden spoons and kegs” (p. 234), and curses. When Hepzibah finds the assailant’s house, they disguise themselves in Purim masks, sunglasses, scarves and confront him: “[t]wo women fight with the mother and sister while others...drag out the son, a Talmudic scholar, who makes a bare living tutoring” (p. 237). They curse him, give him the Evil Eye, spit three times at him, and pour blood over him. The young man is spared their vengeance, but officially accused of malicious attack with intent to murder and taken by the police. What starts as a personal vendetta ends in a righteous and lawful manner.

The ceremony of girding for battle involves women who are ready to fight institutional forces in the public sphere, which enforce the structures of gender oppression; in this case, the members of “the Male Gynecological Conference, whose purpose is to praise traditionalism and treat infertility” (p. 151). The motto of the conference: “Women, leave your bodies in our hands” (p. 152) promotes the belief in male, heterosexual dominance and fosters systemic exclusion of women from the power structure. No wonder women are denied the right to participate and speak to such an audience. In preparation for a battle, the Independent Party women, as they call themselves, “consecrate each other...[t]hey swear that they will abstain from wine and strong drink or even fresh grapes or raisins. None of these women warriors will shave their armpits or legs...They shall avoid contact with dead bodies, nor eat, any unclean thing” (p. 152). They then disrupt the conference and clash with the police. As a symbolic act of reclaiming the rights to their bodies, they establish Holy Body Day when “they speak of the legends of their bodies...My body can walk miles. My feet never get bunions, calluses or plantar warts. My thighs do not rub...My wrists are steady. I hardly perspire...” (p. 259). Even though Broner’s women are taught to be ashamed of their bodies since “[e]ach reference to the body erases a reference to the spirit. The body is ephemeral, the spirit everlasting” (p. 72), they fight hard to claim their rights to self-determination.

Broner’s style is a mixture of fact and fiction, realism and magic realism, fantasy, horror, and humor. The choice of patchwork composition allows the author to move between genres and fictional representations in what appears to be a new generic mode of narration. Just as Broner’s narrative structure surpasses the acknowledged definitions of genres, her protagonists use rituals that are made of words: “one of the most potent instruments wielded by the women warriors is the ritual act, which draws upon the capacity of words to transform

reality” (PLADOTT, 1984: 251). The idea of subversion is used by the author to highlight the discrepancy between the characters’ actions and social expectations: Simha’s baby is not only born out of wedlock, undermining the viability of a nuclear family, but in the safety of home. The women are not exclusive and also comfort and heal men, such as Vered’s brother who attempts a suicide by hunger because he believes his sister’s love affair brings shame on their family. The women act like priestesses who volunteer their sexual pleasure to “cure” the ailing man. “With this sexual ritual, Broner turns male Jewish biblical ethics on its head; the source of his dying becomes the source of his living” (GERSTLE, 1999: 80). The women invent the Ceremony of Initiation of the boy in order to imprint respect towards women in the minds of young men: “The ingredients of such a ceremony are one lovely young boy, one loving and experienced woman. It is necessary to have a bottle of olive oil. This aids in excursing the demon of nervousness” (BRONER, 1978: 99). Even the dybbuk who invades Mickey’s body has her own story to tell: the dybbuk’s name is Magda and she was unhappily married to an older man “of habits vulgar” (p. 111), but “the court would never grant [her] a divorce” (p. 111), so she “walked into the Mediterranean where the undertow was strongest. [She] did not have to swim far off” (p. 112). Instead of fear, the women feel compassion towards a poor dybbuk and partake in her suffering. “Broner creates a unique tradition of female exorcism: instead of a highly ritualized ‘showy’ ceremony, there is attention, warmth and a desire to console and help” (LEGUTKO, 2010: 15). Expectations towards female domesticity are challenged throughout the novel as the women seek partners to love, but not necessarily to marry.

The interplay between form and content is replayed in the author’s rejection of a linear narrative form, which might be associated with a dominant, male, hierarchical voice, as well as with her attempt at embracing the complicated reality of the setting: Jerusalem, which is neither a utopian ideal, nor “the ‘Golden Jerusalem’ of Zionist yearnings and Jewish prayers” (PLADOTT, 1984: 254), but a troubled spot where historical, national, political and economic influences affect the lives of ethnically diverse communities. Broner’s novel acknowledges the emergence of secular Israeli women who must oppose not only the orthodoxy of fanatic zealots: “The religious are her enemies, for they would not limit birth, or the power of the rabbinate. The administration is her enemy for they would not be exposed for wrongdoing. Men are her enemies for they would not share power. Women are her enemies for they have adjusted to discomfort” (BRONER, 1978: 149). The setting of the novel in the heart of Jerusalem locates the feminist position right at the center of the problem — the Orthodox foundations of the State of Israel. This feminist utopian/dystopian critique of “[t]he culture’s idealization of its strong, aggressive Jew means not only that the young country has forsaken the Shekinah (in the tradition of Jewish mysticism, the spiritual mother) in exile, but also that Israeli women are essentially in exile from them-

selves” (OMER, 2002: 105). In defiance of androcentric Israeli culture, one way for women to empower themselves, the novel suggests, is through new rituals.

### A Modern Woman’s Quest for Spiritual Fulfillment: Allegra Goodman’s *Paradise Park* (2001)

Sharon Spiegelman, the heroine-narrator of Goodman’s novel, is a young woman of Jewish-American origin who is traversing the world, from the beaches of Hawaii to a Hasidic New York neighborhood, in search of divine love. She grapples with the problem of Judaism in a way that reflects the demands of post-modernity. There is no need for her to conform to American cultural and linguistic norms, as nobody questions her claim to Americanness anymore. She no longer has to be careful about which part of the Jewish-American hyphen to emphasize, as the hyphen has already been dropped. Identity struggles are not part of her experience anymore. Sharon does not have to weigh her forefather’s ethnic past against the gains of a modern American life, or resign from one aspect of her life to find approval of the other. The ethnic and cultural dilemmas of the melting pot ideology that her elders encountered on the way to a successful assimilation and acculturation have been devalued, except for one — Judaism, which maintains its multifold relevance to Jewish life. Today, when the belief in the authority of multiculturalism is dominant, minority groups are welcome to maintain their distinctive ethnicity, which for American Jews often amounts to the celebration of Judaism.

Sharon is the character who effortlessly blends her Jewish and American identities, choosing her persona at will, yet, not in a manipulative way. Coming from two different cultural backgrounds (Jewish and American) enriches rather than limits her personality and she is happy to draw from both. Her choices between American and Jewish traits are conditioned by how much they can serve her irrepressible self, and not by the sense of responsibility resulting from her ethnic and religious obligations. Her behavior is characterized by cultural relativism, which helps her access different cognitive and moral systems in an unbiased way. Sharon’s Americanness is revealed in the way she expects to find instant gratification, and when disappointed, she swiftly moves on without dwelling on past failures.

A search for God brings Sharon closer to Judaism via a myriad of representations of postmodern spirituality: 1) the discussion group hosted jointly by the Unitarian community and a Quaker fellowship, which involved “forums for learning where different people from the community would come and give talks about their beliefs or their work, or whatever turned them on” (GOODMAN, 2001:

156); 2) Kekui's Hawaiian family Makiki Gospel Church, 3) Margo and Harrison's "Mind-Body-Spirit Exploration Seminar" held at annual couples' retreat: "thinking it might be some sort of twofer: learning plus a resort vacation; contemplation together with all that extra cash. [...] The whole thing might have been an adventure, or at least a humorous scam. Alone, I couldn't help noticing that my motives were crummy, and the whole retreat so phony..." (p. 94); 4) Pastor McClaren's Greater Love Salvation Church and the sermon which fills Sharon with an orgasm-like exhilaration: "I felt all that mercy and all that love just surge through me, and I said, "Yes!" and I said, "Yes!" again. I said "Yeah!!!" And I said, "Yippee!" (p. 98), which, unfortunately, lasts a disappointingly short time: "That whole experience, that whole birthing the night before! [...] It was already wearing off! I mean, not even a day, not even twelve hours, and I was back to my breakfast and my hotel carpet, and Satan's creature comfort ways..." (p. 99); 5) drugs: "I had to admit it to myself, on drugs, joy felt better—and so did peace and love and hope—at least to me." However, she soon realizes that "a saved person would never feel [...] closer to her God on acid" (p. 108); 6) the Consciousness Meditation Center at "an enormous 1950's Buddhism ranch" (p. 112) where a four-month long stay assures her that neither "silence [is] working on [her]" (p. 117), nor a course of fasting, which only leaves her "body [...] crying out for meat and eggs, and, believe it or not, milk. It seemed like all [her] blood and flesh was crying out to eat the products of other living creatures and to forget about being holy" (p. 12); 7) a room at the co-op where "[w]e all shared the cooking and cleaning duties, and we were all dedicated to pure food and water, recycling, environmental activism, and the ideals of simplicity" (p. 127), which gives a semblance of home; and, finally, a course of world religions at the University of Hawaii, whose more theoretical than applied approach fails to answer any of her questions. A provisional and fragmented world of spiritual chaos feeds but does not quench the protagonist's thirst for God's love. Even though Sharon has multiple epiphanies, soon each of them dissolves into mundane life, prompting her to commence yet another search. Hence, the novel offers a comment on the metaphysical crisis of postmodern America.

The last part of her journey starts with her initiation into Judaism, which in tune with postmodern discourse, is also depicted in its great variety. She begins her return to her ancestral religion in Hawaii when she meets Rabbi Siegel, but is instantly discouraged by "[t]his chosen people stuff, that just made you want to slouch down in your folding chair and disappear!" (p. 148). Had it not been for her interest in Israeli folk dances, she would not have agreed to teach elderly ladies at Martin Buber Temple: "[t]hey have music, but no instructor—since the one they had was deported back to Israel along with her sister—and they are looking to pay (top dollar!!) for a knowledgeable dancer to teach and lead them" (p. 150). Then, she encounters bearded Lubavitcher "baby rabbis" who have come to bring the Torah to Hawaii. At the Torah Or school in Meah

Shearim, an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem where she attends “an intensive minicourse on Judaic law and history” (p. 178), she learns that “[t]here was Kitchen Woman and there was Rabbinic Man (being the one who’d invented the realms in the first place)” (p. 184). Later she encounters a Honolulu branch of Hasidic Judaism represented by Dovidl and Ruchel: “They were completely free and open to the public and were on Jewish thought—not just the rules of Judaism but on the mysticism of the religion, and at the classes there was more food” (pp. 198—199). The Hasidic Bialystoker community in Seattle with Bais Sarah women’s program in Bellevue: “promised me a new world as well. They were holding out to me a new earth and diet and language. They were providing an entire protective bubble—more protection than I’d ever found anywhere else” (pp. 250—251). Of Crown Heights, Brooklyn she writes: “I was there to learn, and to be forged in the crucible of Judaism” (p. 255). Finally, she encounters the Brighton Havurah “a group that came together every other week at different people’s homes to hold potluck Shabbat services. Potluck [...] didn’t just mean everyone brought a different vegetarian dish to share for lunch, but also that everyone should bring some spiritual contribution to share with the group as well” (pp. 317—318). The author stresses the notion of diversity within the contemporary Jewish American experience without making a claim to authority. Each of the religious strands is presented as valid in its own variation, as each finds an audience within postmodern American Judaism.

As a background for Sharon’s quest, the narrative reveals a tangled vision of post-modern American society where ethnicities meld to produce new hybrid identities such as, for example, pastor McClaren’s, who is “Scotch-Irish-Hawaiian-Japanese-Portuguese, [with] dark skin and longish straight black hair, and Oriental eyes, and a sharp hook nose” (p. 95); a neighbor in the co-op who is “[a] singer-actor-dancer-doctor named Will” (p. 126); and comparative religion Professor Flanagan who “came to teach each class dressed up in the style of the whatever prophet he was teaching...He was Buddha, and Moses, and Jesus, and Mohammad” (p. 141). They all cohabit the same space, respecting each other and enriching the social fabric of American society. Sharon’s employment history features odd jobs, such as catching cockroaches to be sold for electroplating, growing pot in a government owned jungle, a temp secretary, a cashier at a Hawaiian fast-food restaurant, a clerk in a jewelry store, a practice patient for medical students, an Israeli dance instructor, and a musician. The ease with which she moves from one job to another, from one experience to another, signifies transience and temporality as fundamental features of her world. Sharon takes this variety for granted and, resisting master discourses, accepts all ethnic, religious, or occupational variation as equally valid. The hippie generations’ vision of America has materialized in Sharon’s world, where recognition and equality is measured by the amount of freedom a group can enjoy. Just as Wade Clark Roof calls baby boomers of the 1950s *The Generation of Seekers* (1993),

so Sharon follows in their footsteps, marrying postmodern multiculturalism with religious marginality: “but to me God’s music was the whole-world ethnic fusion that belonged to everyone” (p. 162). In tune with the postmodern shift in patterns of thought and structures, on the one hand, the narrative portrays the success of American multiculturalism, and, on the other hand, the confusion resulting from moral relativism.

While testing different strands of Judaism, Sharon applies the criterion of personal efficacy: as long as the given principles forward her goals, she follows them, but if they defy her instincts, she rejects them. Her preferences within Judaism clearly delineate the distinction she makes between the rigid rules and regulations based on scriptures and a spontaneous and revelatory manifestation of a divine being. Sharon rejects such worship which depends on abiding by each and every one of the 613 commandments in the Torah, and champions the worship which involves “magic, and miracles. [...] God—not being some abstract concept but appearing in the world... in a feminine way, too, all the time interacting with the heavens and earth and the light and dark and all the animals and people and the plants” (p. 213). Being precise about what she is looking for, she is not afraid to relinquish a futile pursuit and start anew. Thus, she gives up Orthodoxy, believing there is more to religion than a finite set of confining and narrowing regulations, and is drawn to Hasidism because of its spirituality and mysticism. Although it takes her over seventeen years to calm her restless soul, she does not settle for a partial goal, but explores her own desires until they are satisfied. Having experienced different manifestations of Judaism, she can say what she likes and dislikes about it:

There’s a lot of things about Judaism that I love, but a lot that really turn me off. I mean, I love the poetry and the songs and stories and all of that. And a lot of traditions are really beautiful to me, like Shabbes lunch. But a lot of it I find just rigid and disturbing, like the hierarchies of the religion, with the priesthood and all that, and the separation of the people of Israel from other nations, like we’re better, and the separation of the men from the women, like *they* are better. And, I mean, I don’t want to offend you, but I feel like I shouldn’t be leading you on to think I can embrace all that in my life.

p. 218

Sharon wants to be the agent of her own destiny, not “just the object, and not the instrument, of divine revelation” (p. 271). The insistence on the individual and personal marks her as a truly autonomous and self-governing, if not narcissistic, personality, but a large dose of self-irony constructs an emotional distance, which allows the readers to look at Goodman’s protagonist with indulgence and sympathy. If we heed the claim that “Judaism rests on the principle that belief is not enough to create a compassionate, spiritually significant life. Traditional Judaism has taken the approach that people need structured guide-

lines to live well” (FISHMAN, 1993: 235), we can see that Sharon represents a modern approach to traditional Judaism, which results from “utilizing [her] free choice to select from traditional Jewish rituals only those behaviors [she] feel[s] may contribute to a meaningful Jewish experience” (FISHMAN, 2000: 12). Thus, Sharon tailors her own version of personal Judaism, which resonates both with her spiritual desires and her femaleness. The fact that it is her own independent and willful choice carries a promise that she will remain faithful and committed in its execution.

The encounter with Judaism finds resonance in Goodman’s character. It may seem that religion and ethnicity are of no relevance to Sharon’s de-hyphenated identity as she dates both Jews and (mainly) non-Jews, searching for true love, just like any other modern woman would. Yet, her final choice of an Orthodox Jewish husband undermines this claim, locating the search for love, in its spiritual and corporeal variety, at the center of her experience. Allegra Goodman re-writes the threefold category of American Jewish womanhood, placing its Jewish and female elements in the post-modern American context. What emerges from her narrative is a contemporary protagonist who is lost among the seemingly equal choices the post-modern world offers. Sharon’s religion is just one of many variables, which may shape her identity if she chooses to allow them to do so. Having been brought up in a secular and liberal family, which did not provide her with a solid ideological foothold, she has to find her own tools to conceptualize the world. What she learns in the process is the realization that Judaism is an essential factor she can neither totally neglect nor easily embrace, but which she must address in order to find out who she is. In doing so, she draws inspiration both from various strands of Judaism as well as from the values of post-modern America, mediating between constructed and essentialist approaches to reality. The more or less seemingly freedom of choice offered by the postmodern world requires Sharon to examine her priorities. As long as she picks and blends ideas according to her individual needs, she contests the idea of clarity since the availability of unlimited choices disrupts, rather than brings order to a life which is unsure about its goals. Sharon’s confusion is overcome only when she retreats to reclaim her Jewishness, questioning the belief in the constructive nature of one’s identity and endorsing the importance of one’s heredity. The protagonist’s quest for human and divine love parallels the condition of a modern man who looks for direction amidst the chaos and confusion of a decentered world. A search for spirituality becomes for Sharon equivalent of the discovery of the sense of life, however little mysticism this life might eventually offer.

The Spiegelmans are the typical middle-class assimilated American Jews who feel no need to acknowledge the existence of the ethnic hyphen. As their communal heritage lost its relevance to their lives, they supplanted Judaism with modern secular ideology: “I grew up in a totally nondenominational family. My parents were the most irreligious people you ever saw. My dad was an economist

[who] worshipped the almighty dollar. My grandpa was a card-carrying atheist” (p. 132). Yet, for Sharon the material comforts of the middle class life, however illusionary they might be, contrasted with the emotional paucity in her family. Her parents’ unobservant life results in the shedding of the vestiges of the ethnic past, while Sharon, free from assimilative anxiety and cultural inheritance, is in a position to make the free choice among available modes of worship. The fact that she chooses to fill the spiritual void of her family home with her own version of Judaism draws attention to the importance of ethnic legacy in the protagonist’s life. While listening to Rabbi Siegel, she comes to realize the essence of her ethnic and religious being. In other words, Sharon becomes aware of the connection to the Jewish soul inside her: “This man is reaching out to me, but not just because I’m a sinner, or a loser, or a returning student. This person is seeking me out because we are related. Because somehow, somewhere, we come from the same Jewish place...I am his relative! He knew me first” (p. 156). In this way, the narrative promotes the lasting importance of one’s ethnic inheritance over variable aspects of modern culture whose viability is a matter of a shifting perspective: “Once you’re born a Jew, a Jew you will be, no matter what things you do or religions you try” (p. 214). Contrary to her parents, Sharon wants to embrace her past and that is why she chooses to bring her own son up within the Jewish faith. By doing so she selects those aspects of American and Jewish tradition which are to be melded in order to create her own version of the American Jewish future. As long as she rejects what she believes to be the marginalizing aspects of traditional Judaism within contemporary American culture, she can resolve a seemingly irreconcilable conflict between fear for the loss of Jewish identity and, equally frustrating, fear of its embrace. Thus, the narrative’s overarching thread locates the potential reinvention of Judaism in one woman’s private experience.

## Conclusion

Modern day Judaism in America is highly decentralized, with each denomination, be it Orthodox, Conservative, Traditional, Reconstructionist, Reform, or “New Age” Judaism, establishing its own communal rules. Such plurality results in a gamut of Jewish American cultural discourses, which reflect the complexity of the modern Jewish experience. The contemporary idea of Jewishness escapes rigid definitions claiming its component elements, such as Judaism and gender, at times congruent and at times dissonant. There are also Jews who refer to themselves as secular, unaffiliated, or cultural. Therefore Riv-Ellen Prell argues that “Jewish feminism is best studied ‘locally’ within particular Jewish move-

ments, synagogues, and communities as well as in the settings where women meet to teach one another how to lead prayer and study Talmud, and to conduct and share what came to be called women-centered rituals, such as celebrating a new moon” (PRELL, 2007: 3). The contemporary definition of Jewishness relates to what Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen call “The Jew Within,” “in recognition of the finding that, to an ever larger degree, the discovery and construction of Jewish meaning in America [...] occur in the private sphere” (2008: 127). Despite the fragmented nature of Judaism, an overarching principle for any breed of Jewish feminism is “to distinguish those elements that are so intrinsic to mainstream Judaism that to lose them would be to lose the integrity of the religion and the culture, from those that are incidental and nonessential outgrowths of Jewish life in a variety of societies” (FISHMAN, 1993: 233). The question remains though who might have an actual authority (religious and/or secular) to decide whether the given feature is essential enough, or not. The problematic nature of such an inventory is clear when one realizes the existence of the whole range of individual groups within Judaism that struggle for power trying to attract new congregants by advertising its inclusivity, diversity and innovation.

A large number of fictional and critical texts devoted to the theme of women’s rituals in Judaism testifies to its importance in the lives of modern Jews. Works such as: *Miriam’s Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year* by Penina V. Adelman (1996), *Inventing Jewish Ritual* by Vanessa L. Ochs (2007), *The Ritual Bath* by Faye Kellerman (1986), *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant (1997), *Joy Comes in the Morning* by Jonathan Rosen (2004), *The Outside World* by Tova Mirvis (2004), *Seven Blessings* by Ruchama King (2004), and *Heavenly Hights* by Risa Miller (2004) broaden the ways to connect spiritually. The protagonists imitate and invent, adapt and adopt, create and normalize religious practices, some of which are non-compulsory and do not have the status of *halakhah*. Some of those new rituals are neither specifically Jewish nor feminist, such as “beginning kindergarten, getting a driver’s licence, retiring from work” (LEFKOVITZ, SHAPIRO, 2005: 113), but what they express is “the sanctification of life, in all its fullness, and of the diversity of experience” (p. 113). Egalitarianism and a greater acceptance of LGBTIQ Jews results in a revision of traditional ritual, such as the invention of gay marriage ceremonies that have no *halakhic* precedent. The great popularity of alternative practices such as Jewish meditation or yoga classes demonstrates that blending traditional Jewish practice with Eastern spiritual nurturance is a viable way to keep Judaism alive. Broner’s and Goodman’s novels do not attempt to impose a singular model for a Jewish identity. Instead, they offer a pluralistic vision of Jewishness and Judaism, attainable, as it seems, outside of the framework of the synagogue. A common thread in both narratives is their tendency “to oppose body and spirit by emphasizing rituals in which the body is the vehicle for spiritual transformation” (LEFKO-

VITZ, SHAPIRO, 2005: 105). They illustrate how Jewish rituals evolve reflecting the dynamics of the community, as Judaism continues to restructure itself to the contours of contemporary life. By employing multiple feminine perspectives, both authors champion the right to spiritual self-expression and demonstrate the complex nature of the religious experience of Jewish women.

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