



# THE JWC NEW MOON

Tevet/Shvat 5767  
January 2007

## A Taste for Torah

by Julie Newman

Our annual Shabbaton began as it often does, in Miri Rabinowitz's kitchen. As people arrived they unveiled and unpacked dishes made to share, made with love and friendship. A beautiful table was laid with care and *chesed* or kindness. First we schmoozed and then we ate—replete with further schmoozing. We joined together for our traditional JWC Rosh Hodesh ritual, this month acknowledging the month of Cheshvan.

Instead of a service, we studied. In preparing for this Shabbaton, my overall aim was to begin a process that would result in a communal creation of a d'var Torah (word/thing of Torah) incorporating music, drama and simultaneous translation of the Torah text for our JWC Shabbat morning service coming up on Feb-

ruary 17. Sometime we oughta try something really challenging...

We set an ambitious goal – to accomplish in one afternoon what by rights should take 7-8 hours, namely the first four steps out of a twelve step model for learning and bringing Torah to life. (Yes, twelve steps—think of it as a life long addiction....)

**Step 1:** occurred as preparation for the Shabbaton. Malke and I looked at the portion, Mishpatim, ahead of time and narrowed our focus down to: Exodus 22:15-27. We felt there were some juicy issues in there between virgins being bargained off by their fathers, witches not being suffered to live and God's wrath set ablaze from hearing the cries of mistreated widows and orphans.

**Step 2:** We were meant to read and understand the text and its modern-day relevance. What we did:

We read

the text as a group, taking turns reading and commenting. We used three different English translations of the text along with the Hebrew and discussed the differences in translations and how those differences shed light on the text. We shared personal insights regarding modern-day relevance of the text and the translations.

**Step 3:** We were meant to introduce commentary and try to focus on a theme for our dramatic /musical/ radically current approach to the d'var Torah for Mishpatim. We introduced a variety of commentaries:

- Jewish Publication Society,
- Plaut chumash (Reform movement),
- Etz Chayim (Conservative),
- Five Books of Miriam (modern feminist), and
- Commentary from internet sources.

Sharing insights from the various commentaries, we had a lively and engaging afternoon of study.

**Step 4:** We were meant to use

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dramatic activities to develop translations from different characters (the dramatic part of our project—much in the vein of Bibliodrama). We looked at parts of the text through the eyes of Beruriah, Dinah daughter of Jacob and Rachel, and even Lilith. Thanks to the stories of the Five Books of Miriam we began to see the teachings through the eyes of women from different times and circumstances. And this is where time ran out.

What a wonderful Shabbat! Good food, friends, a little gossip topped off with serious Torah study. Ahhh! Doesn't get much better... But I...

[cont'd on p. 4]



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

EVENT	DATE	TIME	PLACE	TOPIC
RH Shvat	Th 1/18	7:30 PM	LZC	<b>Mikvah #1:</b> Text study with Rabbi Sharyn Henry
Women's Shabbat & RH Adar	Sat 2/17	10AM	LZC	"Torah Alive!"—Storahelling for Parashat Mishpatim
Ta'anit Esther	Th 3/1	4PM	Miryam's Shelter & Local restaurant TBD	"Food makes us stronger": social action & get-together
RH Nisan	Mon 3/19	7:30PM	Member's home	Screening & discussion of short film "The Tribe"
Women's Pesach Seder	Sun 4/8	6PM	LZC	
RH Iyar/Annual Meeting	Wed 4/18	7:30 PM	LZC	<b>Mikvah #2:</b> Creating new ritual with Rabbi Sharyn Henry
RH Sivan	Sun 5/20	TBD	Community mikvah	<b>Mikvah #3:</b> Immersion Facilitator: Rabbi Sharyn Henry
RH Tammuz	Sun 6/17	—	Your home	DIFY <sup>4</sup>
RH Av	Mon 7/16	—	Your home	DIFY
RH Elul	Sun 8/12	11AM	Member's home	Family potluck brunch

<sup>1</sup> An e-mail will be sent out prior to events in members' homes giving the exact address.

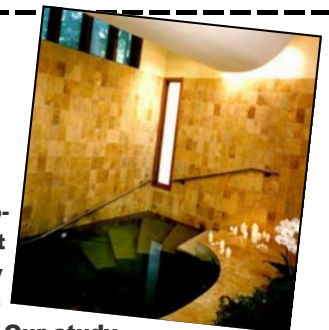
<sup>2</sup> "RH" indicates a Rosh Hodesh—celebration of the new moon or new month

<sup>3</sup> The Labor Zionist Center (LZC) is located at 6328 Forbes Avenue in Squirrel Hill.

<sup>4</sup> "DIFY" indicates Do-It-For-Yourself: a Rosh Hodesh ritual and thoughts for contemplation will be e-mailed in advance.

## Upcoming Program Note: Rosh Hodesh Shvat

On Thursday evening, January 18 at 7:30 pm we will celebrate Rosh Hodesh Shvat. The program will be the first in our 3 part series on Mikvah. Rabbi Sharyn Henry will lead a text study and discussion. The second session will take place on Rosh Hodesh Iyar, Wednesday evening, April 18. Led by Sharyn, the discussion will focus on contemporary writings on Mikvah and its varied uses for the woman of the 21st century. We will also create a new ritual. Our study of Mikvah will culminate on Rosh Hodesh Sivan, Sunday, May 20. We will visit the Mikvah, perform the ritual we created, and together do a tevilah -- an immersion in the waters of the Mikvah. See page 6 for a related article.



# A JWC Sukkot

by Laura Horowitz

Sukkot is a particularly uncertain festival. Like Pesach, it takes place during a time of year when the weather can be sweet, punishing or anything in between. Unlike Pesach, though, Sukkot is meant to be observed largely outdoors, so the weather matters. Our observance of the *chag* is dependent in large part, then, on forces outside our control and this is exactly the message of Sukkot. It reminds us that we are fragile and vulnerable creatures living in a world of forces larger than ourselves. Despite that, we are to make meaning of our lives and assert our morality in a world that can seem amoral and meaningless.

Although Sukkot is equally powerful whether we're outside in our sukkahs or inside watching the rain, it's most enjoyable when we can savor the last days of warmth and sunshine. This year's JWC Sukkot potluck met that standard. We gathered in the brand-new sukkah in the back yard of Larissa's beautiful new home. The evening was balmy and comfortable as we sang, prayed and benched lulav (courtesy of Congregation Dor Hadash, which lent us its lulav and etrog). We invited our *ushpizin* (guests) to join us, and the sukkah filled with the spirits of our prophetesses and our absent mothers, grandmothers and daughters.

Then we talked about joy. Sukkot is called *z'man simchateinu*, the season of our joy. The word joy has a particular connotation that is different than contentment or happiness, and we explored that idea by talking about the things and experiences that bring us joy. Family (especially children and grandchildren!) and music were mentioned a number of times as joyful experiences. Jewishly speaking, we are cognizant of the power of those things. Our most powerful ritual experiences include both family and music. These bypass the intellect and work directly on our emotions, to imprint the moment on our memories and make us long to recreate it. So each Sukkot echoes with joyous memories of Sukkots past, thus deepening and enriching the power of the festival.



Celebrating Sukkot

And what would a JWC event be without a lavish potluck? We outdid ourselves yet again as we shared new and favorite recipes. Sukkot is a sensory holiday, and the senses should be pleased in as many ways as possible so as to add to our joy. Happily, our meal succeeded in doing that. (Julie, would you share the polenta recipe?)

Many thanks to Larissa for opening her home to us, and to everyone who came and participated. It truly was a joyous evening!

# Rosh Hodesh Kislev by Sydelle Pearl

November 21, 2006 Event

Those who attended the Rosh Hodesh Kislev celebration on November 21st were treated to readings of Jewish Women's Writings in a variety of formats. Elizabeth Gordon, playwright, and Malke Frank, member of Kol Isha, the local Jewish women's theater group, read from Elizabeth's new play, Imagining Bubbe that will be performed sometime in late February and early March at the JCC in Squirrel Hill. Malke also read an original poem. Lisa Brush read a selection from the book Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality, a gift she received for her Bat Mitzvah a few years ago and Mimi Reznik read from Water from the Well: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. Pat Cluss shared parts of an article she authored dealing with domestic violence. Sydelle Pearl sang an original song. It was an inspiring evening for all who attended.

## JWC Tzedakah Project 5766 (2006-07): Update



This year's tzedakah project is the Israel Women's Network and, specifically, their work to address the sexual trafficking of women in Israel. The IWN is Israel's foremost advocacy group for women's rights. It is a non-partisan organization of women united in their determination to improve the status of women in Israel, despite differing political opinions, religious outlooks and ethnic origins. IWN was established as a non-profit voluntary body in 1984 by a group of women professionals.

IWN seeks to change the social context and norms that prevent women from assuming their rightful place as equal partners in a just and democratic society. In addition to their work against sexual trafficking, they are active in many other issues that affect the lives of women in Israel. This year, several bills initiated in the Knesset by the IWN passed a preliminary reading. One of these would increase the criminal penalty for employers who fire women who become pregnant.

The IWN Nemesh project is designed to change the approaches and attitudes of 10th grade students with respect to gender equality. The Eshet Chayil program teaches skills that maximize women's abilities to find fulfilling and rewarding employment via an "Employment Club" in Kiryat Gan and Beit Sha'an.

The JWC board recently received, signed, and returned a petition supporting the IWN's initiative to have childcare expenses be recognized as a legitimate deduction for tax purposes.

All tzedakah monies collected by the JWC this year will go to the IWN to support their important work.

Don't forget to support the JWC with your dues this year:

\$18 \_\_\_\_\_ \$36 Regular membership \_\_\_\_\_ \$54 Supporting membership \_\_\_\_\_

I am adding \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to my dues for this year's tzedakah project, the Israel Women's Network's Sexual Trafficking Advocacy Project.

Mail your check to: JWC, P.O. Box 81924, Pittsburgh, PA 15217

[A Taste for Torah: cont'd from page 1]

have to admit here that the original advice was correct. It really does take more time to bring the "big issues" into focus in such a way as to be able to create a concise, engaging performance piece as part of a Torah reading. Because of the time we spent this Shabbaton studying Mishpatim together, I believe that it will reach us in a new and perhaps deeper way when we

re-engage with it as part of our group prayer on February 17. My thanks to all of those who participated and lent the wisdom of your insights into this text. I hope this is something that some of us can continue and expand upon next year.



# IMAGINING BUBBE

a play by Elizabeth Boltson Gordon at the JCC February 21 - March 11

Loved, admired, feared, resented, remembered or never known, grandmothers help form the core of our identities. Two generations removed from us, they may be our emotional twins or ancestors we never met. **IMAGINING BUBBE** explores the richness of these relationships, the ways in which grandmothers and granddaughters know - and don't know - one another. Although fiction, the play draws on the memories, longings, dreams, wishes, stories, and imaginings of the women of Kol Isha. Kol Isha, Jewish women's theatre group, founded on a principle of diversity, includes women across the spectrum of Jewish belief and practice who range in age from their 20's to their 60's.

The result is a powerful multi-

layered portrait of grandmothers of a number of generations. In telling their stories, the play reflects the Jewish experience and upheavals of the last century, when these women came of age. Through **IMAGINING BUBBE**, we explore the lives of grandmothers and come to understand their contribution to our own.

**IMAGINING BUBBE** was written by Elizabeth Boltson Gordon. Bo-Elizabeth and Malke Frank, both JWC members, appear in the play. **IMAGINING BUBBE** opens Feb. 21 at the JCC's Katz Theatre. Tickets are \$15 , \$10 for students, seniors and groups of 15 or more. Check **KOL ISHA's** website, <http://kolisha.org>, for ticket purchase information.

## **PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE**

**(w) = Women-only performance**

**Wednesday, Feb 21 @ 8:00 pm (w)**

**Thursday, Feb 22 @ 8:00 pm**

**Saturday, Feb 24 @ 8:30 pm**

**Sunday, Feb 25 @ 2:00 pm & 7:30 pm (w)**

**Thursday, Mar 1 @ 8:00 pm**

**Sunday, Mar 4 @ 7:30 pm**

**Thursday, Mar 8 @ 8:00 pm (w)**

**Saturday, Mar 10 @ 8:30 pm (w)**

**Sunday, Mar 11 @ 2:00 pm**

## Rosh Hodesh Tevet with the JWC

by Jean Binstock

On December 21, 2006, the Labor Zionist Center was aglow with our 7th night Chanukah lights and Rosh Hodesh Tevet celebration. We joined in sweet and sometimes humorous singing led by Julie Newman (Julie had us sing "Latke Ditty" and "Love My Latkes"); a festive table of holiday treats; and, of course, wonderful and thoughtful fellowship. Malke Frank prepared the handouts and co-led the welcoming of the new moon and the month of Tevet. It was my special pleasure to host this eventful evening.

**Thanks to the contributors for this edition of the newsletter:**

◆Jean Binstock ◆Malke Frank ◆Elizabeth Boltson Gordon ◆Laura Horowitz ◆Julie Newman ◆Sydelle Pearl

**Have an idea for an article? E-mail Pat Cluss at [clusspa@upmc.edu](mailto:clusspa@upmc.edu)**

We often reprint articles published elsewhere about topics of interest to Jewish women, particularly those featured during our programming year. Rabbi Barbara Rosman Penzner adds to our understanding of modern meanings of *mikveh*.

## Reclaiming *Mikveh*: Bringing New Life to Sacred Waters

By Rabbi Barbara Rosman Penzner

Reprinted with permission from *Reconstructionism Today*, 14(1), Autumn 2006, published by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

The *mikveh* guide holds the oversized white sheet before her face, so the woman descending into the water is modestly screened. The gentle lapping as she takes each of the seven steps down can be hard through the transom, into the light-filled atrium where three rabbis stand. They can hear the guide softly explain how to immerse, then a splash, silence, and another splash. A blessing rises through the transom and the three rabbis respond vigorously, "Amen." We welcome a new Jew.

Since Mayyim Hayyim opened in Newton, Massachusetts in May, 2004, I have been present at many more immersions than in my previous seventeen years as a rabbi. Many more conversions of adults and affirmations for infants and children, than before; I have also

Rabbi Barbara Rosman Penzner serves Hillel B'nai Torah in Boston. She is a past president of the RRA and serves on the board of Mayyim Hayyim.

been with a woman who celebrated receiving her driver's license three years after an auto accident left her with brain damage. One woman came to celebrate taking on a Hebrew name, a symbol of her renewed interest in Jewish study and practice. Six women stood in the atrium and sang before each immersed, in preparation for her adult bat mitzvah. Brides and grooms have come as well. And I have fulfilled a personal dream of immersing every year prior to leading Yom Kippur services.

In fact, the past two years at Mayyim Hayyim: Living Waters Mikveh and

Education center has brought in over 2,000 individuals, most of whom had never seen a *mikveh* before.

Twenty years ago, the *Reconstructionist* journal published my first article about *mikveh*, and a dream was born. Along with colleague Rabbi Amy Small (then fellow-RRC student Amy Levenson), we created a ritual for brides and explained to our Reconstructionist audience what a *mikveh* is, and how one practices immersion. That ritual entered contemporary Jewish culture through Anita Diamant's first book, *The New Jewish Wedding*. Anita, who is the founding president of Mayyim Hayyim, shared an interest in *mikveh* through her experience of witnessing her husband's conversion at the Orthodox *mikveh* in Boston. For years we talked about creating a *mikveh* we could call our own.

Today, the dream we all nurtured is flourishing and *mikveh* is now "in vogue" in Boston, and catching on among liberal Jews across North America. People call and visit from across the continent, as well as from Israel and Europe, to learn what we have learned: that *mikveh* can be one of Judaism's most meaningful ritual acts and that people are thirsty for its transformative power.

Discovering *mikveh* as rabbinical students was a bit like finding a beautiful artifact at an archaeological site, dusting it off and displaying it in a private museum. Over the years, we encountered individuals, one by one, who shared our passion for this ancient ritual, and left large groups of listeners and readers a bit bewildered. "Why would a modern woman want to return to such a primitive ritual?" they asked. It took the creation of a *mikveh* that belongs to everyone who enters, no matter what his

or her background, marital status, or Jewish affiliation, to answer that question. Traditionally, men also use the *mikveh* before *Shabbat* and at other times. At Mayyim Hayyim, both women and men have taken to the water for spiritual nourishment at times of life transition that lack any formal Jewish blessing or ceremony.

Our dream burst forth into a thousand seeds this past June, when Mayyim Hayyim hosted its first international conference, "Reclaiming *Mikveh*: Pouring Ancient Waters into a Contemporary Vessel." Cosponsored by every arm of the Reconstructionist movement, along with the Conservative and Reform movements, ALEPH, and other local and national Jewish agencies, the event attracted many who have been nurturing a new vision of Jewish ritual for decades, as well as young and old who encountered *mikveh* for the first time. The conference provided workshops on multiple uses of *mikveh*: for conversion, celebration, and healing. Text study was offered at every session, and workshops were geared for educators, clergy and lay people. Dr. Norman Cohen, professor of midrash at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, opened with a moving keynote tracing the connections between water, song, and redemption, reminding us that "Miriam's well is everywhere"—that is, we need to draw on our own wells of potential.

A high point for me was a robust conversation about "new rituals" featuring feminist scholars who have dug many wells over the years: Dr. Rachel Adler, Rabbi Elyse

M. Goldstein, Dr. Lore Hope Lefkovits, Dr. Vanessa Ochs, as well as a younger Conservative rabbi, Lauren Berkun. The presentations drew upon deep experience of the art of creating new rituals and their impact on liberal Judaism as we know it today. As I looked around the packed auditorium, I was gratified to see excitement and understanding on so many faces, including a number of young Reconstructionist rabbis.

This renewed approach to *mikveh* has much in common with a Reconstructionist approach to Jewish ritual in general. We have taken one of the simplest and most basic elements of life and rediscovered the symbolic effects of cleansing our souls. Mayyim Hayyim's library contains an astounding collection of texts on *mikveh* and on women and ritual that truly reflect the revolution that has taken place in Judaism in North America over the past twenty years. The library also contains prayer for "just add water" rituals: collections of readings for a variety of life passages, much like the resources found on Kolot's [ritualwell.org](http://ritualwell.org) (which had its roots in the RRC "Creative Liturgy Library" of an earlier generation). The ritual of immersion is grounded in ancient traditions and simultaneously draws on our contemporary sensibilities.

*Mikveh* is a unique ritual in that it requires *kavvanah* to be considered effective. Merely immersing because it's the

thing to do touches the body, but not the soul. One of my favorite texts comes from Rambam's Mishne Torah (Maimonides's code) on the rituals of *mikveh* and immersion, in which he reminds us firmly that the water must be added to a substance to have an impact:

The Sages have said, if a person immerses, but without special intention, it is as though he or she has not immersed at all....we may find a hint of the inner meaning of this mitzvah: just as one who sets his heart on becoming clean becomes clean as soon as he has immersed, although nothing new has befallen his body, so, too, one who sets his heart on cleansing himself from the uncleanness of the soul—namely, wrongful thoughts and false convictions—becomes clean as soon as he consents in his heart to reject those counsels and brings his soul into the waters of true believers (*Hilkhot Mikveh* 11:12).

*Mikveh* is not magic. Just as one prepares to do *teshuvah*, to repent one's misdeeds prior to the *Yamim Nora'im* (High Holy Days), one must come to the *mikveh* with intention.

Not everyone has a beautiful, open

communal *mikveh* nearby, but maybe you'll be surprised and discover that one is being built in your community in the near future. Those who attended the Reclaiming *Mikveh* conference came away with a new vision of immersion, and possibly of Jewish life itself, and may be bringing that to your city. If not there may be an ocean or lake near you, where you can experience this same ritual.

The idea that thousands of people are eager to strip down to their naked essence, to remove piercings and nail polish and makeup and contact lenses, gives me hope. If we are so willing to shed these layers of our outer identity, then perhaps we may also be ready to cast off the dirty little secrets, the annoyed looks and tight lips, and all the other manifestations that prevent us from being our best selves. When I am at Mayyim Hayyim, I notice that this is a place where anger does not take root, in this place, people are kind and gentle, understanding and patient. Whatever is happening behind the closed doors of the *mikveh* is flowing out and watering parched souls.

## Member News



What's new?

**Sheri Sable** writes, "I am truly grateful to have opened a therapeutic massage practice in Squirrel Hill, using skills acquired at the Pittsburgh School for Massage Therapy (where I continue to study in the Advanced program), the Full Spectrum Healing Program (energy medicine), and Kundalini Yoga (using breath, prana and intention). Now that I am an empty nester, this is the right time to step into this massage practice. My "baby" (Leba) started in college in Washington DC this fall. She is growing more and more into womanhood - along with her older sisters, Shana and Becky. Becky will be graduating from U. Mass Amherst this spring as an African American studies major/education minor." Sheri is offering new customer discounts for delicious massages—swedish, chakra balancing, and geriatric massage. You can contact Sheri at 412-512-6172 for more information.

Mazel tov to **Debbey Altman-Diamant** and her family who have a new baby—Aviv Shiran Diamant, who was born on Oct 3<sup>rd</sup> at The Midwife Center of Pittsburgh with his whole family present at his birth. He is healthy and happy and his family is enjoying him very much!

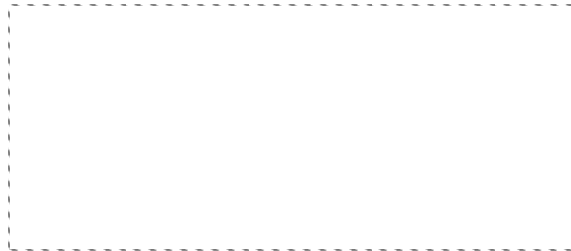
Several members of the JWC, *Malke Frank, Pat Cluss, Nancy Levine, Jean Binstock, Laura Horowitz, and Judy Grumet*, are involved in the creation of the New Community Chevra Kaddisha, a group dedicated to performing the mitzvah of *tahara*, preparation of the bodies of Jewish deceased for burial. This group is open to any member of the Jewish community who is interested in performing this act of "final kindness." Call Malke (412-422-8044) for information.

# Jewish Women's Center of Pittsburgh

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TO:



## The JWC Mission:

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

