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DOI 10.1007/s12397-015-9132-7

"At 'Amen Meals' It's Me and God" Religion and Gender: A New Jewish Women's Ritual

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Received: 13 August 2014 / Accepted: 6 January 2015

Abstract New ritual practices performed by Jewish women can serve as test cases for an examination of the phenomenon of the creation of religious rituals by women. These food-related rituals, which have been termed "amen meals" were developed in Israel beginning in the year 2000 and subsequently spread to Jewish women in Europe and the United States. This study employs a qualitative-ethnographic methodology grounded in participant-observation and in-depth interviews to describe these nonobligatory, extra-halakhic rituals. What makes these rituals stand out is the women's sense that through these rituals they experience a direct connection to God and, thus, can change reality, i.e., bring about jobs, marriages, children, health, and salvation for friends and loved ones. The "amen" rituals also create an open, inclusive woman's space imbued with strong spiritual–emotional energies that counter the women's religious marginality. Finally, the purposes and functions of these rituals, including identity building and displays of cultural capital, are considered within a theoretical framework that views "doing gender" and "doing religion" as an integrated experience.

Keywords Rituals · Jewish women · Amen meals · Gender · Religion

Introduction

The luxury apartment in Jerusalem could have come straight out of a glossy magazine. The table is laden with gourmet salads and delicious cakes, all homemade. The smell of freshly baked food welcomes the women as they enter: a lawyer, a jeweler, several teachers, some homemakers, and university students.

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Published online: 31 January 2015

They are dressed fashionably and some wear modern head coverings. An iPhone rings, sounding the "Sex and the City" theme and all the women, except for the ultra-Orthodox ones, burst into laughter.

The simple, modest home in the Beit Yisrael quarter in Jerusalem has known better times. Parts of the walls are crumbling and the deep windowsills reveal the age of the building. The owner of the house is cutting cucumbers. There are cheap snacks on the table, candy, and wedges of apple that have already turned brown. Older women, heavy and tired, come in one after the other. Most are dressed in black, their heads covered in coarse kerchiefs. They wear dark stockings and heavy shoes. They all congratulate Hava, whose son became engaged the day before. She responds that she has not even finished paying for the weddings of her other children; how will she manage to pay for this one?

A new house in a new community. The hostess wears a thin top and trousers. Her friends are trickling in, bringing presents for the new house. They are professional women dressed fashionably in revealing clothes that suit the hot Israeli climate. Cakes, focaccias, salads, dips, and desserts are brought into the living room. "Sorry but the food is not kosher," says the owner of the house as she opens the door to a *rabbanit* (wife of a rabbi) who has also been invited.

These divergent situations, which seem to occur in different worlds, are part of the phenomenon of a new ritual that Jewish women have been creating for themselves. Secular, religious, and ultra-Orthodox, from a broad spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, these women get together in different places and at different times to participate in a ritual that has been named the "amen meal."

The goal of this paper is to describe this new and flourishing, but as yet unstudied, ritual. Beyond its descriptive aspect, the paper seeks to identify what motivates these women to invest significant resources of time, energy, and money to participate in a ritual outside the realm of normative religious duties and to attempt to ascertain what functions this ritual fulfills for these women. It asks why religious women, who are already obligated to perform many commandments and duties, are willing to take on yet another one. Conversely, it also asks why secular women, who do not observe the commandments, choose to participate in a non-obligatory religious ritual.

What emerged from the women's statements and my own observations is that these women view participation in the voluntary "amen ritual" as something that falls outside the range of their ordinary religious experience, something that possesses an overriding sense of a direct spiritual connection to God. I will argue that the strong spiritual and emotional energies inherent in these rituals, together with pleasant social interactions, ultimately create an open religious-cultural space, which is uniquely available to women and differs significantly from Jewish males' religious experience. I will also suggest that the creation of religious rituals reflects the frustration felt by women with their exclusion and marginality in Jewish patriarchal societies. This, in turn, leads them to create rituals that go beyond the actual commandments they are required to observe. Thus, they are making sophisticated use of the paradox of marginality and turning it into an advantage.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to different perspectives of popular religion and spiritualism in Israel (Aran 2013; Azulay and Tabory 2008; Bilu 2003;

Leon 2010) and to the intellectual-theological experience of Torah study among Jewish women, especially from the feminist perspective (El-Or 2002; Ross 2004). The present article focuses on women who create a special emotional–spiritual space for themselves, similar to other Jewish women who renew and apply blessings, celebrate the new moon as a women's festival, and observe other rituals linked to the female life cycle (Adler 1998; Breger and Schlaff 2000; Lavie 2011; Lefkovitz and Shapiro 2005; Rothschild and Sheridan 2000; Umansky and Ashton 2009). But while those rituals could be related to feminist experience, the women taking part in amen meals are not necessarily motivated by feminist leanings. On the contrary, they told me they do not seek to take part in the "men's section" or traditional learning and worship, but rather to build a separate and original "women's section." This is similar to El-Or's (2006) description of the ceremony for separating challah and explanation for how ordinary domestic *halakhah* (Jewish law) has become a public ceremony.

The food ritual discussed in this article takes place among women of the Jewish faith, a religion in which men have the central role (Plaskow 1991, 1997). The study was carried out in Israel where the religious establishment controls various aspects of women's personal and public lives (Sered 2000), making the effort required to develop a self-empowering women's religious framework challenging. Sered (1991) lists a series of factors that prompt women to participate in new religious frameworks, including their exclusion from traditional Jewish rituals. However, she focuses on marginal, elderly, impoverished, uneducated women, whose religious exclusion is only one aspect of their social exclusion. Zalcberg-Block (2011), Ganzel and Zimmerman (2011), and Targin-Zeller (2014) examined alternative frameworks for religious expression for Orthodox women in Israel from a different perspective.

I seek to examine the development of an extra-*halakhic* ritual among diverse Jewish women who are generally well educated and often personally and financially independent. Their religious marginality is not part of a more general social exclusion but, rather, the only area from which they are excluded. Nonetheless, their marginality and inferiority in the religious public sphere cannot be ignored and is part of their reality.

Data and Methods

The methodology employed for this study is qualitative-ethnographic-feminist (Reinharz 1992). The findings are based on 23 participant observations and 53 interviews with women who have participated in amen rituals.[1] The data were collected in the spring of 2011 using snowball sampling. The participants also assisted in the creation of links to their friends and updates regarding additional ceremonies being held elsewhere. Although the sample is not representative, I attempted, insofar as possible, to collect representative data. For that purpose I made my observations in different geographic and social settings, and the women

[1] Their names were changed to ensure their privacy.

interviewed reflect a variety of age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, locations, levels of religious observance, and origins. Of the women interviewed, 27 were from the ultra-Orthodox sector, 18 were modern Orthodox, 3 were traditional, and 5 were secular. Ethnically, the division was 30 women of Sephardic extraction and 22 of Ashkenazi background. All the observations and interviews were taped and carefully transcribed, and the resulting data were analyzed in line with grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1994).

The 53 women who were interviewed can be divided into two groups: organizers and participants. The organizers can be further subdivided into two groups: organizers of private groups, who create ceremonies for family and friends; and organizers of public groups, who are paid for orchestrating mass ceremonies. Leah is a representative of the private organizers. She is 30-years-old with four children, modern Orthodox, lives in Jerusalem, employed in childcare, and a volunteer in her community. Her motivation for holding monthly amen meals with friends was the death of a young niece two years previously. *Rabbanit* Temima exemplifies the organizers of the public ceremonies. A 40-year-old mother of six who lives in the center of Israel, she is newly religious and of Sephardic origin. She holds a job as an accountant, but devotes her evenings to organizing amen meals. These ceremonies include talks on ethical matters and religious empowerment peppered with jokes; she also engages the audience by audio–visual means.

The participants, who come from a broad spectrum of Israeli society, can be categorized into four broad groups, ranging from ultra-Orthodox, modern Orthodox, traditional, to secular. The ultra-Orthodox women are represented by Hava, a 26-year-old graphic artist with three children who lives in Jerusalem. She participated in one of the original amen meals and in recent years has been attending them in order to pray for family members. Molly, a 55-year-old who lives in northern Israel, represents the modern Orthodox sector. A senior official in the Ministry of Education, she has a master's degree in education and is married with four children and seven grandchildren. She describes herself as a modern woman with critical faculties, who "never imagined participating in these things, let alone with the unsophisticated women who attend." She decided to attend an amen meal just "for a few minutes," and now attends regularly on *Rosh Hodesh* (the night of the new moon). Dana represents traditional women: a 55-year-old with six children, a cleaning woman from Raanana, she regularly takes part in amen meals. Tali represents the secular women. A 35-year-old divorcee from a town in southern Israel, she is an organizational consultant and holds a master's degree. Her participation in these ceremonies was part of a series of rituals and actions she was advised to undertake in order to remarry.

The Amen Ritual

The amen ritual described in this study is taking place in the early 21st century in Israel and is rapidly spreading to a broad spectrum of Jewish women, from ultra-Orthodox to secular. Within the space of a few years, it has also spread to the United

States and Europe.[2] Until this study, amen meals have been addressed only in *halakhic* or popular writings (Ansh 2006; Stern 2004) and have not received scholarly attention.[3] Their main goal is religious-ritualistic: to recite the maximum number of "amens."

According to Jewish law, different kinds of food require different blessings. One needs to be strict about the right order of the blessings, *Mezonot, Gefen, Etz, Adama, Shehacol*, which create the acronym MAGA ESH (in Hebrew, touch of fire). The main reason for this order is that some blessings contain others, so one can miss a blessing.[4]

The ritual has no *halakhic* basis,[5] yet the participants recount the *midrash* concerning King David, who stopped a plague by asking everyone to recite one hundred blessings daily (*Numbers Rabbah* 18:21) and also refer to the Talmudic dictum: "One is required to recite one hundred blessings daily" (BT *Menahot* 43b).

In effect, a number of women gather, supply themselves with various types of food, sit in a circle, and recite the blessings in the order of precedence set by Jewish law. Each woman takes a turn reciting a blessing, the others respond "amen," and the woman tastes the food she has blessed. At the end of each circuit, the woman who goes last recites the *Yehi Ratson* prayer (May it be God's will to grant a special benefit or benediction to a particular person). This is an original prayer developed especially for amen meals. Each *Yehi Ratson* prayer has an associative link to the relevant benediction. The blessing for baked goods is considered to be related to earning a livelihood; that for wine to marriage; that for fruits to children and fertility; that for vegetables to health; and that for food and drinks not covered by the other categories to salvation.

Names can be inserted in the prayer, "especially for…." and the woman reciting the *Yehi Ratson* usually inserts the name of the person to whom she is dedicating her prayer. At the end, all the women respond "amen" and, after a moment of silence, various women begin to recite, in no particular order, the names of people who require assistance in the same sphere, and the other women respond "amen." In some groups, the calling out of names leads to a revelation of a personal story (a family member who needs work or a sick child). The woman telling her story often bursts into tears and is comforted by the group. In most cases, the leader does not decide who will recite the *Yehi Ratson* prayer; a woman simply has to say "I wish to go last in this circuit." In all but the very large groups, the women sit in a circle and maintain eye contact, making it possible to notice when someone is experiencing difficulty. The open space in the middle also allows free access for the purpose of a supportive touch.

[2] While amen meals take place in countries outside Israel, cultural and political differences make it difficult to generalize to Jewish women in other countries.

[3] For media documentation, see http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/amen-without-the-men-1.390956
http://www.ou.org/jewish_action/06/2007/the_amen_phenomenon/.

[4] According to Jewish folklore, reciting the blessings in the right order is a good test of the piousness of the groom.

[5] According to the Jewish law, if one hears someone's blessing, he or she must answer "amen" (*Shulchan Aruch–Orach Haim*, 215:2) and "who responds amen to a benediction is **greater** than the one who recites the benediction" (b. Ber. 53b), but there is no need to create a situation for saying more amens.

Beyond this basic model, the amen rituals incorporate a variety of features. Some incorporate the study of *halakhah*, such as the laws of Shabbat, *kashrut,* prohibitions against gossip, and modesty. In some of the ongoing groups, the women study specific Judaic books and have a fixed program. Many ceremonies open with the recitation of psalms. It is interesting to note that both the recitation of psalms and the study of *halakhah* are legitimate, traditional elements in the religious practice of Orthodox women (El-Or 1994; Sosis and Handwerker 2011).

At some ceremonies, the women sing religious songs, taking advantage of the absence of men, in whose presence they are forbidden to sing. Sometimes they sing and use a prepared disc of *Hasidic* songs. In many of the rituals that I observed, both public and private, the women lit candles in memory of righteous people, another traditional Jewish custom.

The amen rituals are held in two main frameworks—domestic and public. The domestic groups, composed of extended family members or friends, carry out the ritual on their own and their leaders, usually the founders, come from within the group. In the public type of framework, the audience is not fixed and consists of previously unacquainted women who attend the ritual in response to advertisements. The ritual is orchestrated by a charismatic leader, often a *rabbanit* who has been invited in advance (Leon and Lavie 2013). At times, the two frameworks are integrated: groups of family members or friends invite a *rabbanit* to run the ceremony.

Some of the private groups meet every Rosh Hodesh, which is traditionally a woman's holiday (Lavie 2011). Others meet on happy occasions (*bat mitzvah, simhat bat,* house warmings) or sad ones (discovery of a severe illness, anniversary of a death). Other groups meet only occasionally and for no particular reason.

For the most part, the public ceremonies draw a more varied population of women, whereas the private ones are usually more homogeneous, i.e., family members and friends, with a number of outside guests. The number of participants in the ritual ranges from 10 to 500. Quite naturally, the private rituals held in homes are smaller than the large, organized ones held in public settings. Yet, I attended rituals where the organizer invited scores of friends to her home and a *rabbanit* to run the ritual.

Although I tried to assess the proportions of the phenomenon, I could not find proper quantitative data. This is because the private events are entirely unpublicized. Some indication, however, is found in the fact that I tracked down, within the space of two weeks, three groups that meet once a month and four groups that meet once a week; to this we must add the large-scale public rituals. Some *rabbaniot* reported that, on average, they conduct three rituals per week.

The Origin of the Ritual

My efforts to pinpoint the source of amen meals led me to one individual: Tovi (Tzeitlin) Baron, an event coordinator from Bnei Brak.[6] During her interview, she

[6] Many interviewees mentioned Baron's name when I asked about the ritual's origin. Some mentioned Ansh and Stern's book (see references), but they explained that the latter wrote books and spoke about the importance of amen, but Baron started the ritual.

confirmed that she had initiated the ceremony; also, that she had created the link between the blessings and women's needs. She reported, however, that other women had composed the *Yehi Ratson* prayer.

Ms. Baron explained the genesis of the ritual.[7] She was approached by a Rabbi Kesler of Bnei Brak to organize a ceremony for children. Rabbi Kesler (2007), who had authored *halakhic* and other source books on the importance of reciting the blessings and the amen response, wished to renew an old custom called "Notrey Amenim" (The Amen's guards) of having groups of young children, to whom candy is distributed, recite blessings and respond "amen." Finding the notion appealing, Ms. Baron began to incorporate such ceremonies into the events she organized for girls and young women in *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) schools. As word of these ceremonies spread, many mothers began to attend events organized by Ms. Baron and subsequently to hold similar ceremonies in their homes (but as I mentioned regarding amen meals) in settings according to the group's choices. Ms. Baron continues to lead amen ceremonies in which she recounts stories of the miracles that occurred in their wake, and also shares her personal story as a member of the ultra-Orthodox Lithuanian elite who experienced marginality because she married late.

Today, the amen-meals "industry" includes at least five *rabbaniot* who work countrywide and many others who conduct local ceremonies. Most of them are from the Sephardic communities and some are from non-observant backgrounds who have become religious. Indeed, most belong to both categories, representing a group that suffers double exclusion from the *Ashkenazi* religious sector.

The Women's Voices

I now turn to the reasons these busy women give to explain their participation in a non-obligatory religious ritual. My inquiries evoked varied answers to the question of "why." However, I was able to identify several factors that explain the women's participation in these rituals, particularly the desire to acquire spiritual and emotional-social energies, and to experience esthetic-sensory ones. The spiritual energies include more than a spiritual connection to God and the Jewish people; they also have a practical thrust: the women believe that their prayers have the ability to change reality and help the people for whom they pray. Clearly, the ritual provides emotional-social energies similar to those of group therapy, such as support, inclusion, companionship, and sharing. The esthetic-sensory energies include a sense of enjoyment and fun, a meal shared with other women, and the dramatic elements of the ritual. I describe these elements more fully in the following section.

Spiritual Energies

Across the spectrum, the interviewees reported that they experience a strong spiritual connection to God and to the other women from the group during these

[7] For an article about amen meals and Ms. Baron's story, see http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3360702,00.html.

rituals. One of the most striking statements was that made by Leah, a private organizer: "There is a straight line between God and us and no one can get in the middle of it. It's me, my friends, and the connection to God." Others commented: "This connects me to my faith" (Natalie, private organizer). "This strengthens me…like after good prayer, good deeds, or overcoming temptation" (Hodaya, ultra-Orthodox). Another aspect of the connection to God is the spiritual link to the Jewish people: "We are all one big, giant soul" (Hila, private organizer). "The first time I returned from an amen meal I truly felt 'Who is like your people Israel'…I am glad to belong to this People. Everyone eats, but we Jews sanctify food" (Gitti, ultra-Orthodox).

The reality-changing power of prayer is an important part of its spiritual energy. The participants believe that they can change reality and save themselves and the people they pray for and alleviate their distress and misery. In the participants' own words: "I was drawn to it because of personal despair. You seek many remedies. You try to move heaven" (Molly, modern Orthodox). "People seek a way to be saved" (Hadassah, public organizer).

The women often describe a sense of being able to take action by means of the ritual: "I so want my friend to become engaged, so I go to amen meals to advance this aim. If I can't find a match for her, then at least I'm working in that direction…If I persist, it will happen sometime" (Edna, modern Orthodox). "You can make a difference. You recite names of people. You can't help them give birth or find a mate, but you can pray for them" (Malka, ultra-Orthodox).

Many women reported that their attendance at these rituals is one of a series of apotropaic actions they engage in in order to change their bad luck or that of people close to them. Secular women also engage in such activities. As Tali observed, "They said that it would help, and it certainly can't hurt…I want to get married and they say that whoever performs these actions, their wishes are fulfilled. I know lots of women who visit rabbis or holy grave sites…No one's life is perfect. In the final analysis, each has her burden…I think that if presented with an alternative, any alternative, you will try anything they tell you to do!"

When I inquired how this "works" (Bilu et al. 1990), I received a number of answers: For example, it's not clear how it works, but it does: "I do not know, nor do I presume to know heavenly thought. But we feel that we prayed for someone and then she became engaged. We prayed for someone, and something good happened to him" (Yaffa, modern Orthodox). Another reason given is the power of group prayer: "When many women ask for the same thing and recite together 'Amen! Amen!' it has greater significance and greater weight and power" (Malka, ultra-Orthodox). Finally, many of the participants believe that each recitation of amen creates a heavenly angel (in Hebrew, amen and angel have the same numerical value): "The matter of amen is very deep…each response of 'amen' creates an angel" (Hannah, ultra-Orthodox). "When the entire group answers 'amen,' the heavenly angels make great noise" (Dana, traditional). Many of the women believe that the greater the number of amens recited, the greater the number of angels created, which will assist them in attaining their requests. Similar to any religious ritual that includes behaviors oriented to transcendental entities (Rubin 2004),

women's answers reflect their feeling that via the ritual they can connect directly to God.

Moreover, as we can hear from the miracle stories, an important part of every amen meal, the women feel not just that they can speak with God, but that God listens and answers their requests. In contemporary Israel, we can see diverse Jewish sectors, including the secular, performing various popular traditional religious practices, rituals, and experiences, such as visiting the tombs of famous rabbis and other *segulot* (spiritual remedies) (Bilu 2003). Maybe the importance for them is the feeling that they did their best to change their bad situation.

Emotional Energies

In their descriptions, the women underscore the emotional aspect of women's prayers: "Nothing is more desirable than a woman's prayer…When I say to my husband, pray [for someone] he says, 'Who am I to pray? You pray! You women, your prayers are stronger and more powerful than men's" *(Rabbanit* Temima, public organizer). Hila (private organizer) links the power of women's prayer to motherhood: "A mother's tears open the gates of heaven." The women view prayer as having emotional power: "Women's prayers are much more powerful…women have the feelings, the power to petition. The strength of men lies in Torah study" (Leah, private organizer). "An amen meal is so feminine, it is truly divine worship that comes from the heart, from our souls, from our feelings" (Elisheva, private organizer).

The women stressed that the strong emotional dimension of these rituals is a direct outcome of the fact that they are women's rituals, thereby linking emotion with femininity and intellect with masculinity: "Women are more emotional and more spiritual…men are a different species; they are more intellectual" (Dana, traditional; the private organizer, Elisheva, made a similar statement). The rituals in question are saturated with emotional energy. In the small, intimate groups, the women share the personal stories underlying the names of the people they pray for. They describe personal and familial difficulties, and nearly every meeting includes tears and emotional support from the participants. In the moderated evenings, the *rabbaniot* generate high emotional energy as part of the "show." They turn off lights, burn candles, play fervent religious music, appeal for divine help, and invite participants to pray for what they deeply desire. Very quickly someone bursts into tears, followed by others. All the rituals permit a unique temporal–spatial place that connects the women to their personal and familial needs.

The women also spoke about the importance of having a space in which to experience release: "When I've had a hard week…I wait for us to perform [the ritual of] separating challah. It provides me with release" (Tzofia, modern Orthodox). "If I am undergoing something, I make a separating challah ceremony. I pray. On the one hand, I am taking action, 'doing.' On the other, this connects me to 'being'" (Natalie, private organizer). "People have to do something. A combination of action and prayer. Touching the dough has a fun, releasing element. The encounter and the shared prayer possess energies…this provides fuel for the entire week" (Natalie, private organizer).

The power of sharing and support was also discussed: "If someone asks [to say the blessing on taking challah], this is because something pains her…You see tears streaming from all eyes" (Tzofia, modern Orthodox). "There is something unifying in the group that creates a [shared] feeling…a sense of empowerment" (Tali, secular). Elisheva (private organizer) told of one of her acquaintances, a woman who had suffered abuse: "She decided to give thanks to God by making an amen meal in her home…It was very moving…something very accepting and embracing. Women dared to share and to speak. It was very tender and charged, very friendly, encompassing, and loving. Something so feminine, beautiful, heartwarming…a combination of thanksgiving, petition, and prayer." This connection is charged with especially strong personal and group emotional energies. The atmosphere of partnership and sharing, and the ability to weep and pray together that characterize these rituals cannot be quantified.

According to Scheff (1977), ritual generates a singular emotional dynamic that enables participants to reach emotional and psychological catharsis. Griffith (1997) understood the emotional energy experienced by evangelical women during the rituals as an important part of their empowerment. Groups have special power, and a group experience endows faith in action and its rightness. A group ritual facilitates a feeling of power, in which the person is an individual who obeys rules (Durkheim 1965). In addition, the individual reaps significant profit from participation in ritual, advancing personal, social, and religious aims (Bell 1992; Bourdieu 1986) as well as improving his/her emotional–psychological state.

Esthetic-Sensory Energies

A strong multisensory experience imparts esthetic-sensory energies to the participants. The shared meal is an enjoyable, fun-filled experience and the ceremonies appeal to multiple senses: smell, sight, taste, touch, and hearing.

A central feature of the women's enjoyment lies in the dramatic elements of the ritual: "They arranged a sick friend to come toward the end of the evening. She recited the last *Yehi Ratson*. The last 'amen' was hers. This had a dramatic effect. It was very moving…there was not a dry eye in the house" (Shani, modern Orthodox). "I was attending a seminar…They brought Tovi Baron. The entire group was seated in a huge auditorium, and they gave out bags to each young woman with all the things to eat…There were many young women present, maybe five hundred…Each one said a blessing…the amen seemed to move…like a wave. One by one, and each time she said, let us ask for this…there was electricity in the air. It was simply amazing. All wept. It was out of the ordinary" (Hava, ultra-Orthodox).

Goffman (1990) maintains that every social situation is a stage and that we function in a theatrical type of paradigm. In his opinion, people create a stage, wear masks, play roles, clash, and create routines. He explains that we utilize each detail, like dress, food, or other useful objects like props that endow the roles and scenes with drama. And, if every social situation is drama, then ritual is even more so. In his colorful language, Turner (1986) describes the ritual process as an antique hall of mirrors whose reflecting elements build the dramatic ritual. The varying

combinations of groups and appearances elicit different meanings, and the unification of the leader with the actors and audience leads to the ritual's full meaning. One of the significant theatrical aspects of ritual is that the participants not only act, but "try to show others what they are doing or have done" (Schechner 1977; Turner 1986, p. 76).

In terms of dramatic food rituals (Bynum 1987; Curran 1989), we can see similar rituals among non-Jewish women, such as the Iranian *sofreh* (Shirazi 2005). In this ceremony, women gather for a ritual meal, which is served on a special cloth that is placed on the floor (the *sofreh).* The women pray to various female Muslim saints and eat a variety of dishes together. The ceremony takes different forms, with different types of food and varied prayers; the form is chosen in line with the specific need of the woman holding the ceremony (health, marriage, etc.). The days around the ritual, like the ritual itself, include different dramatic acts, like wearing ceremonial clothes, which enhance the women's excitement and partnership. The ceremony is also held among Iranian emigrants (Kassamali 2004) and Jewish women of Iranian extraction (Soroudi 2002).

Viewed in this light, the rituals described in this study are consummately dramatic. Beyond the panoply of colors, flavors, smells, and sounds, and all of the features and functions presented above, the sequential performance of prayers plays a significant role. The women continuously tell each other what they are doing: "Now I'm reciting the blessing; say 'amen'…now I'm mentioning a name, say 'amen'…now I'm crying, respond to me…now we're turning out the lights, lighting candles, and playing sad music, weep." Another dramatic aspect relates to the miraculous stories recounted. The charismatic *rabbaniot* are talented, spellbinding storytellers who mesmerize their audiences. But the women who hold private rituals also tell of the miracles that occurred in the wake of amen meals, mostly about those they themselves participated in.

Scholars believe that this dramatic aspect is essential to social life:

> Social rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them. It is not too much to say that ritual is more to society than words are to thought. For it is very possible to know something and then find words for it. But it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts. (Douglas 1966, p. 63)

Theoretical Discussion

I now attempt to analyze the features and functions of amen rituals within a more general perspective. The presence of food in religious rituals is not unique to women and has been the subject of study in various disciplines (Harriss-White and Hoffenberg 1994). Some have examined the role of food from a sociological and anthropological perspective (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Douglas 1966; Mennell et al. 1992; Wood 1995). Food also plays a central role in understanding the construction of group identity (Brown and Mussell 1984; Caplan 1997; Tapper and

Tapper 1986) and gender identity (Counihan 1999; Jansen 1997; McIntosh and Zey 1989).

Like the rituals described in this article, many women's rituals involve food (Kanafani 1983; Sacks 1989; Sered 1988a) and have profound historical roots (Bynum 1987; Weinstein and Bell 1982). The main reason seems to be that in many societies women are the ones responsible for feeding the family (Bynum 1987; Sered 1988b). Ostensibly perpetuating their marginal position, this responsibility also allows them considerable power (Joyce 2000). Mobley-Tanaka (1997) explains that women's marginality led them to evolve their own rituals in the course of their everyday chores.

Turner (1969) views marginality and structured inferiority as conditions that allow the invention and development of myths, symbols, ceremonies, philosophical systems, and artistic works. Women who experience marginality, who are excluded from the male-public-religious space, tend to create a separate, different, and open space of rituals with unique characteristics.

Any discussion of the lives of women in traditional societies raises the question of agency. As Goluboff (2008) has shown in his study of women lamenters in Azerbaijan, women's connection to hardships and social and personal needs provides them with significant agency. The women who pray and weep during the amen rituals not only fulfill a personal psychological need and acquire a feeling of personal power, but also a sense of agency in a patriarchal society that marginalizes and excludes them. By taking part in these rituals, some of the women feel they are doing everything in their power to change and improve the existing situation.

Maybe one of the most important senses of agency for these women is feeling a direct connection to God without the mediation of any man: "At amen meals it's me and God. A direct, unmediated line links us" (Leah, private organizer). "We speak with God, we open our souls, sometimes we cry, sometimes we sing and rejoice, sometimes we do something here that creates a connection between us and God" (Elisheva, private organizer).

As opposed to previous claims that the lives of religious women are characterized by obedience and coercion (Daly 1973), other claims suggest that religious women observe religious demands and customs as part of building their personal, religious, and gender identity. Taking this argument further, I contend that the women who devise these new rituals, which are not part of their prescribed religious duties, create a new, empowering religious space for themselves.

The recent critical examination of the notion of agency in the study of the place of women in non-liberal religious societies is particularly relevant. Several seminal thinkers, e.g., Mahmood (2005) and Abu-Lughod (1990), have questioned the opposition-obedience and agency-religious coercion binaries, calling for actual study of the social reality and, more particularly, what drives women to carry out traditional praxes. Avishai (2008) has elaborated on this new notion of agency and has also expressed reservations regarding the accepted definition of "doing gender" as put forth by West and Zimmerman (1987) and subsequently by Butler (1990), i.e., the creation of a *coerced* subject who acts through the repetition of disciplinary actions that perpetuate gender inequality. Avishai (2008) suggests an alternative

framework: "doing religion." Her concern is with an authentic religious subject who *chooses* its religious conduct, experiences, and complex identity.

Following Mahmood and Avishai, I study what motivates Jewish women in Israel to engage in the new practice of amen meals and suggest that both concepts, i.e., doing religion *and* doing gender, are fused in this ritual and, therefore, should be studied as an integrated phenomenon. Instead of engaging in a gender approach that views religion as an oppressive gender mechanism or a religion perspective that focuses on choice, I suggest that the gender-religious behaviors of women in patriarchal societies require a new look based on an integrated, combined perspective. As exemplified by the amen rituals, when women formulate their religious and gender identities through a novel appropriation of existing religious practices, they not only become independent subjects capable of choice, but also create a new religious culture.

From the religious perspective, the women who participate in amen rituals have evolved a practice that is not judged in terms of religious affiliation, which generally characterizes all religious activity in Israel. Instead, it is judged by the women's willingness to participate in a relatively short and non-denominational ritual. For the religious women, it is another ritual in which they can participate; for the secular women, it offers a religious experience that is non-judgmental and does not demand long-term commitment. Also, contrary to customary practice in Israel, where the different streams of Judaism tend to have little contact with each other, the women appear to experience the integration of the various types of women in the amen meals as an essential feature of the ritual: "Usually, ultra-Orthodox society does not accept the 'other' **but** at amen meals we accept everyone! We have all kinds of women…and that's good" (Miriam, ultra-Orthodox).

The women's extra-*halakhic* religion, very possibly because of its marginality, enables fresh, original, intuitive, and integrated inventions. These women have created the amen ritual not because of tradition (although it contains traditional elements); not because they are obligated, because there is no specific commandment for it and no sanctions for failing to observe it; and not because it is accepted behavior in the group or family. As Sered (1993, p. 111) has observed, religious and secular modern Israeli Jewish women who take part in various rituals connected to childbirth "feel fairly free to select rituals or constellations of rituals that meet their needs and strike their fancy"—a fascinating and unique use of the paradoxical strength that comes from marginality.

From the perspective of gender, the ritual offers a space that enables the women to experience a sense of empowerment and self-realization. The ritual has a subversive aspect, manifested in the fact that, whereas the Jewish religious establishment in Israel remains squarely in the old order, requiring stringent adherence to existing religious commandments, the creators of the amen rituals have invented ceremonies and customs that did not exist in the past. As Miriam (ultra-Orthodox) explained her frustration in this manner: "Sometimes I feel disgruntled…I feel that the men monopolize everything religious except for family purity…but the amen meals are ours…Men like black and white ideas but women like shades of gray. We want to do something to empower ourselves, not just to be wives and mothers and raise children…In ultra-Orthodox society, men rule the home. But…the amen meal is…ours. Like…stop here! You can't enter our space!" Lea expressed this sentiment

directly: "We are women. What do we have? Lighting the candles? Separating the challah? Family purity? They have many commandments to fulfill…wearing *tzitzit* (ritual fringes), *tfilin* (binding phylacteries), everything from the Torah."

Social Functions

I further propose that the women who choose to participate in amen meals do so not just for religious reasons, nor solely for the spiritual, emotional, esthetic, and dramatic energies they derive from the ritual. Their participation also fulfills profound social functions, i.e., definition of personal and group identity and demonstration of cultural, economic, and religious capital.

The women's statements indicate that they come for the social experience. Some explained: "We invest a lot in making attractive evenings. I come to be pampered in a feminine, experiential place, with women only" (Elisheva, private organizer). "This is not just something sacred…it's something social. Social with content. Not just women getting together and gossiping and chatting and eating. It has significance" (Yaffa, modern Orthodox). "It's an experience. It's pleasant. It's a gimmick, like a bachelorette party" (Tali, secular). One woman honed in on this point: "More than the amen meal itself, the blessings and the food, are its social aspects: the conversation and the encounter with new people. This provides perspective, namely, what am I with respect to others" (Tzipi, modern Orthodox).

A focal aspect of individual and group identity is the decision to make a public display of cultural, economic, and religious capital (Bourdieu 1986). The ritual considered here is an appropriate venue for such demonstrations. The women who participate express and enhance their cultural capital through the topics they discuss, their dress, and the food they serve. Unstructured conversations generally take place before and after the ritual, when the women arrive and during leave-taking. The women speak of varied topics that are of concern to them that reflect their cultural capital: students complain of the burden of their studies, lawyers discuss legal issues, mothers of large families speak of their children, and so on.

One aspect of the demonstration of cultural capital and declaration of group identity lies in the type of dress chosen for the event, as reflected in my participant observations. Most of the ultra-Orthodox women wear the same clothes they had on during the day; modern Orthodox women check their appearance before arriving for the event, and secular women shower and dress up for the occasion. Beyond the economic variable (there is a negative correlation between religiosity and income), the women are making a social statement. The ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox declare their simplicity in a society in which the value of religion outweighs that of economic success, whereas in secular society, with its modern values, people use a religious event in order to display their economic wellbeing.

Displays of cultural capital are also manifested in the food served at these events. Here too, there is a negative correlation between religiosity and food. Except for one wealthy host, the ultra-Orthodox women eat inexpensive snacks, the modern Orthodox women serve healthy cooked meals, and the traditional and secular women provide gourmet food. Apart from the economic variable, this choice serves

as a statement of group values. By serving snacks, the religious women declare that they invest more in spiritual goals than in material food; less religious women use the event as an opportunity to make a public display of their culinary skills.

There are additional aspects to the food served and the shared meal. According to Douglas (1982), the organization of food reflects the social relationships of the people who eat together. Apparently, the food served at these rituals attests both to the hostess's economic capital and that of the group's members. In some groups, the hostess prepares most of the food and the other women bring token contributions. In others, each woman brings food from home. Even though they all eat together, the ritual takes on aspects of an exchange of gifts. As Mauss (1990) has shown, gift exchanges are not really governed by free choice, but are an interest-based social action with coercive elements. Presents facilitate the creation of a group hierarchy and displays of social superiority. The participants in the rituals display hierarchical superiority through the level of food that they bring, both in economic terms, i.e., its cost, and in social terms, through the effort invested in its preparation. A number of women purchased exotic fruit or expensive cakes and apologized for not having time to prepare something themselves (compensating through the expense of the purchased food); others were happy to demonstrate the effort they expended by referring to the prestigious cookbook they used; still others tried to set a current agenda such as healthy food, "I brought quinoa salad with lettuce" or by showing environmental concern, "I don't use disposable pans." Sacks (1989) sees the social exchange of food as a process that creates a surplus of significance, which sparks negotiations in social relationship systems. Women apparently make use of these rituals to examine their social standing and demonstrate their achievements.

The rituals also serve as a space for the demonstration and enhancement of religious capital from the perspective of investment in religious belief (Stark 2005, 2011). The women demonstrate their religious fervor in a number of ways: Modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox women make sure to eat all the different types of food in the prescribed order and discuss the level of kashrut and other *halakhic* questions related to the ceremonies, while traditional and secular women try to demonstrate their religious knowledge through stories of their grandmothers' customs, by their questions to the *rabbanit*, and use of head coverings during the ritual. Nonetheless, at some rituals held in the homes of non-religious women, non-kosher food is served. This, however, does not prevent these women from asking and seriously discussing *halakhic* questions.

At times the rituals also serve religious-economic functions, creating a direct link between ritual and money. Some of the *rabbaniot* are paid for running the ceremony. Others receive salaries from charitable organizations and collect donations from the participants (sometimes the woman who asks to go last makes a large donation to the charity).

Conclusion

Time and again the women I interviewed commented: "What? You're doing research on that? That's really not important!" Indeed, from a critical perspective, it

can be argued that the phenomenon of amen meals is nothing more than another instance of marginal women creating a marginal ceremony, held mainly in private space and focused on domestic aspects of religion. I suggest, however, that these rituals represent women's unique power, i.e., women utilizing their marginality in order to sanctify the mundane (Bednarowski 1999; Sered 1994) and constructing a framework that can be termed "materially spiritual" (Morgan 1998). By using quiet power, by creating a ritual that focuses on domestic topics, women raise the legitimacy level of the ceremony and direct their marginality to the challenge of elevating physical, mundane elements of food and home to the level of a religious ceremony. In fact, the responsibility of feeding their families, which devolves upon women in many societies, (Bynum 1987; Sered 1988a) ostensibly preserves their marginal status but also endows great power (Joyce 2000).

In the context of women's rituals having existed from the dawn of history in a wide range of religions (Adelman 1994; Bynum 1987; Sered 1992, 1993; Shirazi 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987), those described in this study should be considered more than a local phenomenon of women who eat, pray, and cry together. As Douglas (1966) observes,

> No experience is too lowly to be taken up in ritual and given a lofty meaning. The more personal and intimate the source of ritual symbolism, the more telling its message. The more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wide and certain its reception. (p. 114)

Examination of amen rituals also elucidates the unique features of an extra-*halakhic* women's religion. It is the very exclusion of Jewish women from the public religious space in Israel, their marginalization, that has induced them to create rituals and customs that are not an essential part of mainstream religion but which form a central component of women's religious life. This phenomenon can be attributed to the gap between their place and identity in the modern world and their marginal place in the religious one. The inclusion of women in secular public space and their concurrent exclusion from religious public space has created a new, religious-gender identity that required the invention of a new, original women's religious culture.

I conclude that the Jewish women who create the ritual of amen meals are building an empowering feminine–spiritual world for themselves. Their descriptions point to spiritual, emotional, esthetic, and sensory energies they derive from the ritual. These energies are as necessary as breathing air for all types of women: religious and secular, wealthy and indigent. Collins (2004) maintains that people are guided by the search for emotional energy, which leads them to interactive rituals with a complex sequence of symbolic acts that create emotional energy, enhance agency and collective identity, and also serve as social functions.

This article aims not just to describe the ceremonies, but also to suggest a different theoretical perspective. I argue that the women who participate in these rituals integrate both doing gender and doing religion. The findings demonstrate that, even though the rituals are not obligatory, women invest time, effort, and money in them. They receive spiritual, emotional, and esthetic energies from these rituals that empower their personal and group identities as women, as "doers of

religion," and as individuals in pursuit of what they perceive important. They exercise independent choices, thus building and enhancing their religious identities. In addition, the women's concern with the domestic and personal spheres also builds and enhances their gender identity. This is not submissiveness, nor is it acceptance of their painful exclusion, but rather female empowerment. All these elements, taken together with the demonstration of social, cultural, and religious capital, lead not just to the creation of a new ritual, but also to the creation and renewal of a gender-religious identity. For all these reasons, I maintain that the development of gender identity cannot be studied separately from the development of religious identity. These women create and renew not just the ceremonies but their complex identities as well.

Acknowledgments This article was written with the generous support of a Fulbright Foundation post-doctoral grant, Hadassah-Brandeis Institute's scholar-in-residence research grant, and a Memorial Foundation research grant. The wonderful year I spent in the United States provided me with the rich resources necessary to write this article. I would like to thank the Sapir Academic College, my second home, for its help and support in financing the long English editing process of this article. I also thank Dena Ordan, Renee Rabinowitz, and Helene Landau for their hard work on this article. Prof. Tamar El-Or and Prof. Yoram Bilu read older versions of this article and provided incisive comments and corrections. Thanks to Dr. Nissim Leon for his support and for his helpful insights. The women who took part in the "amen meals" opened their hearts and homes to me for this research; I would like to thank every one of you. My spouse, Meir, did everything possible to support my research and is my best critical reader. My children—Ora, Shira, and Yonatan—did everything possible to remind me that academic life is not the whole of life. And a very special and grateful thanks to Prof. Marc Brettler. I will always remember your help, trust, support, and the extensive time and effort you invested in helping me realize my dream to receive a Fulbright grant and spend a year in the United States. This article is devoted to you.

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