

# THE AMEN MEAL: JEWISH WOMEN EXPERIENCE LIVED RELIGION THROUGH A NEW RITUAL

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This article focuses on Jewish women's experiences of the amen meal ritual. The central intention of this meal is to achieve many recitations of the word "amen" in response to benedictions recited for different sorts of food. The women's voices and experiences, reflected in in-depth interviews with participants and participant observations, facilitate our understanding and conceptions of how some contemporary Jewish women experience lived religion. The amen meal experience is characterized by continuity, relationships and activeness, and it creates a safe place for Jewish women to develop their self- and communal-religious identities. The multiplicity of independent and united communities of women helps them connect to themselves, their community and their identity as Jewish women, and it gives them a sense of empowerment.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Amen Meal*

This article focuses on a relatively new food-related ritual celebrated by Jewish women, best known as the "amen meal." The ritual first emerged in the "Lithuanian" (non-hasidic Ashkenazi) sector of Israel's ultra-Orthodox community and spread rapidly to a broad spectrum of Jewish women in Israel, from conservative ultra-Orthodox to secular, and also to Jewish women in Europe and the United States.

The central intention of the amen meal is to recite many "amens" in response to benedictions recited for different sorts of food. In Hebrew, the numerical values of the letters in the word "amen" are equivalent to those in the word *mal'akh*, "angel," and many of the women participants in these rituals believe that a new angel is created in heaven with every "amen" they recite. One of their oft-cited slogans is "don't throw

away an angel”: It is such a simple act to recite “amen” after a benediction, at home, in the workplace or anywhere else, that not trying to get maximum amens doesn’t make sense. The participants also believe that their amens, especially following their prayers at an amen meal, may help change reality and bring about the fulfillment of their needs.

There are multiple variations of amen meals, but all of them share a basic format: Women sit in a circle, recite blessings for different types of food and pray together. After each woman in turn audibly recites the appropriate benediction for a particular food, the other women respond out loud: “amen.” Immediately after reciting her benediction, the woman tastes the food, followed by all the other women, who each take a small piece, because they want to say “amen” for the next woman. At the end, the women have some time to enjoy the food and chat.

The benedictions are uttered in a strictly prescribed order, often referred to among religious women by its Hebrew acronym, *maga' 'esh* (“a touch of fire”), for *mezonot*, *gefen*, *'etz*, *'adamah* and *shehakol*. In these blessings, God is thanked for creating, respectively, *minei mezonot* (various foods, referring to baked goods), *peri hagefen* (the fruit of the vine, i.e., wine or grape juice), *peri ha'etz* (fruits of trees), *peri ha'adamah* (fruits of the land, mainly vegetables), and all other edibles: *shehakol niheyeh bidevaro* (everything that comes into being by His word). The order of blessing and eating is established by the hierarchical nature of the categories. For example, the fruits of trees are viewed as being indirectly fruits of the land, and therefore if the latter blessing is said first, it renders the former redundant, and the number of blessings (and opportunities to say amen) is thereby reduced. As I participated in these rituals, I observed the personal contact created between religious and secular participants by the need to maintain this order, as the religious women, familiar with the order from childhood, explained it to the secular women and helped them keep to it.

Many rituals, especially those of women, involve food and have historical roots. Caroline Bynum has argued that food itself is an essential and influential symbol.<sup>1</sup> In the amen meals, however, the food seems to be an excuse for the primary objective of reciting many blessings and amens. Tovi Baron, one of the founders of the meals,<sup>2</sup> told me that the practice began when she created connections between benedictions for the various categories of food and specific types of supplications for a program for girls’ school camps. The girls enjoyed the program and told their mothers and friends, and the practice spread quickly.

Moreover, some participants went on to compose a series of prayers primarily for this ritual, each starting with the traditional phrase *yehi ratzon*—“May it be God’s will [that . . .].” The last woman to taste the food in each blessing category recites the *yehi ratzon* aloud, while the others listen silently. Each benediction is associated with a particular category of life needs: *Mezonot* (baked goods) is connected to livelihood, *gefen* (wine) to matching and marriage, *'etz* (fruit) to fertility and children, *adamah* (vegetables) to health, and *shehakol* (drinks and other foods) to salvation and any other needs. Any woman who wishes may relate the *yehi ratzon* to a specific individual by saying “especially for so-and-so,” usually invoking the person’s first name and

her/his mother's name, as is customary in Jewish prayers for the sick. The speaker may accompany the name with a sad story, while the others listen and offer words of support. Many women cry while telling or hearing these hard stories.

There are many variations of this basic ritual, with regard, among other things, to leadership, the number and composition of the participants, setting and frequency. Additional features may be integrated, creating a colorful ritual that appeals to all the senses. These may include recitation of *Tehilim* (Psalms), study of Jewish law, candle-lighting and singing.

A leader, usually a woman with prior experience of the ritual, emerges from the group to assign the participants' contributions to the meal and orchestrate the ritual. For example, my uncle was diagnosed with cancer in 2007. The family women wanted to do something for him and give emotional support to his wife and children. One of the aunts said that she had heard about the amen meal, but she didn't know how to do it. A cousin's wife related that she had already taken part in two such meals, and so she became the leader for our amen meal. She copied the *yehi ratzon* prayers, explained the rationale and designated others to prepare specific foods for the benedictions. During the ritual, we asked her many questions about her experience.

Other amen meals are public, advertised in various media and led by charismatic *rabaniyot*—as these spiritually motivated Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox women leaders, some of them newly religious, are always called, whether or not they are married to rabbis. They attract a random audience of previously unacquainted women. Lindsay Taylor-Guthartz has described a similar ritual in England, except that there the women include a man in the ritual, usually a rabbi. His is always the last blessing for each category—the most important role.<sup>3</sup>

The participants are usually heterogeneous, from different age groups, ethnic origins, geographic locations and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some groups are based on families, friends or employees at the same workplace, while others may include individuals who have never met before. The amen meals that I attended had from four to a hundred participants. I learned from my interviews of events held in huge halls with over 500 participants, while other meals take place in tiny living rooms in crowded apartments. Some groups meet annually or even just once, for a specific event, while others meet every week. Many groups celebrate the traditional Jewish women's holiday of *Rosh hodesh*, the monthly New Moon, with an amen meal.

### *Women Experience Lived Religion*

Amen meals are a vibrant and emerging example of what sociologist Robert Orsi calls "lived religion"<sup>4</sup>—the daily practices and activities that constitute a religious life. As he asserts, "religion cannot be understood apart from its place in the everyday lives, preoccupations, and common-sense orientations of men and women."<sup>5</sup> Amen meal participants live their religious experiences through their creative activities, making holy places of their homes, gardens and community centers.

Meredith McGuire<sup>6</sup> has suggested paying attention to the messy, multifaceted amalgam of practices that are not necessarily those considered most important by religious institutions. She writes:

Because religion-as-lived is based more on such religious practices than on religious ideas or beliefs, it is not necessarily logically coherent. Rather, it requires a practical coherence: It needs to make sense in one's everyday life, and it needs to be effective, to "work," in the sense of accomplishing some desired end.<sup>7</sup>

Vanessa Ochs found that Jewish women's rituals, as lived religious practices, perform important functions: "They carry us through changes and crises in life that might otherwise be unendurable; they create bonds and links between people that can transcend time and space."<sup>8</sup>

Based on these scholars' insights, the current study focuses on the voices of the ordinary women who choose to participate in the amen meal ritual. What are their lived-religion experiences and practices, and what makes these important and meaningful? Listening to the women, I identified three salient characteristics of the amen meal experience: continuity, relationships and activeness. I also found that it affords them an opportunity to create a safe space to develop their personal and communal-religious identity while giving them a sense of empowerment.

### *The Rituals and the Participants*

This study employed a qualitative-ethnographic-feminist methodology, for the purpose defined for feminist ethnography by Shulamit Reinharz: "(1) to document the lives and activities of women; (2) to understand the experience of women from their own point of view; and (3) to conceptualize women's behavior as an expression of social context."<sup>9</sup> In the spring of 2011, I carried out 23 participant observations in amen meals in Israel and conducted 53 in-depth interviews with participants. All the interviews and observations were taped and transcribed, and the data was analyzed in line with grounded theory,<sup>10</sup> dealing with the social context.

I arrived both at the amen meals and at potential interviewees through snowball sampling. Not only were the participants cooperative, putting me in contact with their friends, but they also passed on information regarding additional ceremonies being held. Although the sample cannot be considered representative, I attempted as far as possible to collect varied data by making observations in disparate geographic and social settings. The snowball sampling started from two women, one who identified as modern Orthodox and the other as ultra-Orthodox,<sup>11</sup> and it grew very quickly. To complete the picture, I then tried intentionally to reach more traditional and secular women and asked two *rabaniyot* to lead me to rituals among secular and traditional women.

The women I interviewed reflect diverse age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, locations, ethnic origins and levels of religious observance. Their ages ranged from

25 to 65. Socioeconomically, they range from a cleaning woman to lawyers and businesswomen. They live in the north, south and center of Israel. Their ethnic and religious identifications are based on their self-definitions, in response to the question: "How do you define yourself in terms of religiosity and origin?" All of the women responded to the question of ethnic origin in terms of Mizrahi (North African or Middle Eastern Jewish) or Ashkenazi (central or east European Jewish) ancestry, with 30 women describing themselves as Mizrahi and 23 as Ashkenazi. If a woman's answer regarding her degree of religious observance was vague, I asked, along the lines of the survey question posed by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics: "Do you define yourself as ultra-Orthodox, religious, traditional, non-religious or secular?" On this basis, 5 defined themselves as secular, 3 as traditional, 18 as modern Orthodox, and 27 as ultra-Orthodox. Based on these answers, I can't know whether some of the women are of mixed extraction or religious groups. In this qualitative study, the numbers in each group do not necessarily reflect their proportions in Israeli society.

In attempting to investigate the participants' experiences as reflected in their answers, I based my analysis on the work of lived-religion scholars.<sup>12</sup> Orsi suggests we listen to the stories told and retold:

I am here among these working-class people [...] because I want to hear their stories. I take their voices seriously. This is what research in religion means, I fume, to attend to the experiences and beliefs of people in the midst of their lives, to encounter religion in its place in actual men and women's lived experience, in the places where they live and work.<sup>13</sup>

Listening to the women's stories in the amen ritual calls for my reflexive voice.<sup>14</sup> When I came home from amen meals, usually after midnight, my home was quiet; no one was usually up to see my red eyes and tearstained face. Sometimes I could not fall asleep; I recalled stories I had just heard and cried the rest of the night. I cried when I remembered the moment I understood that the perfectly dressed and manicured woman who sat beside me was the mother of a very sick child. And I cried for myself, for my family: I cried about my personal and academic problems; about the conflicts between my feminism and my religious commitments, and between my career and motherhood; about the changes and challenges entailed in going to the US for a post-doc; and I cried because everyone around me had cried.

One time I came home very late, but my spouse was still awake. "You cried a lot," he said sympathetically. "You were supposed to be there as a critical scholar and a feminist; why did you cry with the women?" "This is a participant observation!" I answered, feeling the tears return to my eyes. Ruth Behar's thoughtful and influential book later gave me the words to express my feelings: "Call it sentimental, call it Victorian and nineteenth century, but I say that anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore."<sup>15</sup> As Orsi puts it: "The academic returns at the end, recognizable by his voice, although it is my hope that the process of telling stories

that precedes this will in the end have altered that voice.”<sup>16</sup> Following his fieldwork in Chicago, he framed the mission of “lived religion” studies:

Where are the theologians from the seminaries on the South Side, I want to know, with all their talk of postmodernism and narrativity? When will the study of religion in the United States take an empirical and so more realistic and humane direction?<sup>17</sup>

This study, and more importantly, my tears, love and prayers, are dedicated to the brave, sharing and creative women who shared their stories with me.

## THE WOMEN’S VOICES

### *Continuity and Miracle Stories*

As we have seen, the amen meals are based on accepted Jewish texts and grounded in Jewish practices. The benedictions are traditional ones; their order is based on the traditional order of recitation; and even the *yehi ratzon* prayers especially written by women for amen meals are based on traditional prayers. The traditional order of the ritual creates expectations and confirms the validity of the participants’ actions, creating what anthropological theory refers to as a safe social space. It is also in keeping with the emphasis in Jewish observance on doing things in their proper order (the traditional term for the Jewish prayerbook, *Sidur hatefilah*, means “The order of prayer”). However, unlike many Jewish observances, though in keeping with some other rituals observed by women, the amen meals don’t have a fixed time.

Other elements of the ritual, such as reciting *Tehilim* or other prayers and/or candle-lighting, are also traditional Jewish women’s rituals.<sup>18</sup> Many of the amen meals I observed began with the recitation of *Tehilim*: The chapters are distributed among the participants, and with each woman reciting her portion, the entire book can be completed in about 15 minutes.

Mostly I don’t even have the time to pick up the *sidur*, so an amen meal is a very good opportunity for prayer. My daily routine is very busy; I can’t pray enough or recite *Tehilim* enough, so during every amen meal we recite the *Tehilim* together. (Libi, 36, ultra-Orthodox, kindergarten teacher)

Women praying is much more powerful. Rebbe Pinchas said that women’s power is the power of prayer. (Rivka, 28, ultra-Orthodox, full-time mother)

To my eyes, an amen meal [. . .] is truly divine worship, simple, from our hearts. It comes from our feeling, from our soul. When the prayer comes from deep in our hearts, it is so much deeper, and so much more internal, and so much more beautiful. Therefore, I think that the amen meal is so feminine. It is so deep and true, it’s simply what it is. (Lea, 35, modern Orthodox, teacher)

Praying about needs and sorrows, for sick members of the family and friends, is an important part of lived religion.<sup>19</sup> Participants believe that the amen meals and their prayers have the power to change reality:<sup>20</sup>

It could help. I want to get married, and people say that women going to this ritual get what they want! Everyone has her own package of sorrows, so, anything I can do, I'll do! (Hen, 30, secular, secretary)

I got married a year ago and I want to get pregnant (*lehipaked*).<sup>21</sup> I invited my single friends to this amen meal so that they can pray to get married. Hopefully all of us will get our wishes. (Vardit, 26, secular, works for a communications company)

These experiences echo those of women in other religious groups. Marie Griffith found that Evangelical women experience “deliverance, liberation, and empowerment through prayer.”<sup>22</sup> A closer parallel to the amen meals’ association of various foods and prayers may be found among the Iranian women who gather for the *Sofreh* ritual, a ritual meal served on a special tablecloth (a *sofreh*) that is placed on the floor. In a ceremony that takes different forms according to the specific need of the woman holding the ceremony (health, marriage, etc.), the participants eat a variety of dishes together and pray to female Muslim saints.<sup>23</sup>

Another traditional practice characterizing the amen meals is storytelling. As I heard both at amen meals and in my interviews, and as corroborated by Lindsay Taylor-Guthartz in her study of amen meals among Jewish women in England, the stories told by the women of their experiences and sorrows include many miracle stories.<sup>24</sup> The women themselves linked their stories to the blessings associated in the ritual with specific spheres of life, thus strengthening the connection between the traditional blessing and the miracle that occurred in the present. Letting the women speak for themselves, I will give examples from each blessing category.

#### ***Bore' minei mezonot*—Livelihood**

Someone asked for her husband’s livelihood. He was a building contractor who had been forced out of business, so she wanted to hold an amen meal in her home. We made one there, and it was very moving. [...] Soon after, out of the blue, her husband was offered a new job. (Hadassa, 50, ultra-Orthodox, teacher)

The woman recited the *mezonot*, the blessing for *parnasah*. Two days later, her niece told me, she was supposed to be fired from her job. After the amen meal, not only did they not fire her, but she got more hours! (Ora, 45, ultra-Orthodox, group moderator)

At a meal I observed in the city of Modi'in, Lital, a secular woman, called out to her mother, who had gone out to the porch to have a cigarette: “Mom! It’s time to pray for your business!”

**Bore' peri hagefen—Marriage**

One of our single friends came to an amen meal. She was searching for a husband; she was over 30. At the next amen meal [one month later], she was engaged! A few weeks later she was married. (Rachel, 30, modern Orthodox, pre-kindergarten teacher)

I was at an amen meal, and a woman recited the blessing for wine—*gefen*—and prayed for a friend [not at the meal] to find a husband. The meal took place on a Sunday, and that Tuesday her friend called [not knowing about the meal] to say she had been offered a *shidukh* [an arranged match]. That was not just by chance! Everything is from God. (Gila, ultra-Orthodox, 45, bookkeeper)

**Bore' peri ha'etz—Children and fertility**

The woman was in her ninth month and still had two or three weeks until the [expected] delivery. The ritual took place on Thursday. On Sunday morning, she didn't feel the baby. She went to the hospital, her labor was complicated and didn't advance, so they decided to do a caesarean section. She spent ten days in the hospital. Some people said to her: "But you did your best! You had a ritual for easy delivery, and look what happened!" And she replied: "Maybe, God forbid, something terrible would have happened! In the end, the girl is fine and at home, because I immediately sensed that I couldn't feel the baby!" (Revital, 55, secular, bookkeeper)

One woman wanted to have an amen meal at her home because her daughter was pregnant, and the doctors said the fetus had no legs. I told her not to have an abortion, that we would have an amen meal for her, and all of us would pray for her. And after some time she gave birth, and the baby is totally healthy! (Sara, 63, ultra-Orthodox, teacher)

Pregnant women in their ninth month came here for the ritual. All of them had easy deliveries. They told us about the miracles. The babies just eased out, like an egg from a hen. (Reut, 65, modern Orthodox, retired kindergarten teacher)

One of my best friends was pregnant. She came to the amen meal and simply cried. I stood near her and cried, too. I didn't know why she was crying; I supposed it was connected to the pregnancy. Later she told me the doctors had told her terrible news about the baby. They thought he had malformations [...] some syndromes [...], and thank God she has a healthy baby. It works there in heaven!

We have a friend, 18 years without children. We made a very big amen meal, and she was saved. I don't know if it was just the meal. [...] But I'm sure we made a big impression in heaven! More than 100 women sitting together and saying amen. It works, it works—it shakes the very heavens! [...] One woman couldn't get pregnant for five years, another for two years; many women couldn't for many years. After



this amen meal, one or two months later, all of them were pregnant and had baby boys. All of them! (Tova, 60, modern Orthodox, teacher)

We held an amen meal in Yael's home. She is a nurse in the fertility department, and she had a long list of women who needed prayers. She knows their stories very well. After that she told us that five of them gave birth. Five!

My friend didn't have children. She asked to recite the *bore' peri ha'etz* blessing, and she started to cry [...]; no one was without tears. All of us just sat there and cried. Now she has twins! (Shira, 27, modern Orthodox, sports trainer)

One of the women couldn't have children. She recited the *yehi ratzon* while crying loudly. All of us sat there and cried. She cried there, and all of us cried with her [...]; we just passed the tissues between us. She said: "You can't understand! You who get pregnant easily just can't understand!" She opened herself, it was so exciting. [...] Now she has twins! (Menuha, 30, modern Orthodox, small business owner)

### ***Bore' peri ha'adamah*—Health**

The hostess welcomed me when I entered her home: "Not everything is kosher, sorry. My friends and I are totally secular." She smiled when I asked why she does the ritual:

Two years ago I had breast cancer. My friends organized an amen meal for me and took me here, to my home, from the hospital. I couldn't even walk, so they brought a wheelchair. I cried for the entire ritual. At the end, I promised that after I get confirmation that the cancer is gone, I'll have a huge amen meal in my house. And this is the amen meal I promised. [...] I just got the confirmation last week, and the first thing I did was to call the *rabanit* who came the last time to tell her the news and invite her! (Roni, 55, secular, teacher)

One woman asked to recite the blessing over vegetables—*adamah*—because she wanted health. She took a cucumber, looked at all the participants, and said: "I'm so excited; this is the first time in my life that I'm reciting a blessing. A blessing on a cucumber—a blessing for health." [...] On her way home she was in an accident. [...] Her car was totaled, but she was able to escape and stood there, trembling. She linked the blessing she had made earlier that evening to the miracle. When the ambulance and the police arrived [...] she stood there, saying over and over: "It was the cucumber [...], it was the cucumber." They asked her: "What cucumber?" and she told them the story. After that her entire family became religious. (Ora)

### ***Shehakol niheyeh bidevaro*—Salvation and other general needs**

I heard a story about a family that needed to finish building their house. They had a delay. The woman came to the amen meal, and she said: "Please pray for me that I will hold an amen meal in my house." In that month they finished the building. In the same month! I tell you, the amen meal creates miracles and wonders! (Pnina, 50, traditional, cleaning woman)

The stories, as we can see, are quite straightforward. The problems and needs are everyday ones, simple and connected to real life: livelihood, marriage, fertility, health. No one asked for a million dollars; no one said she wanted everything to be perfect. The women had ordinary, uncomplicated, specific needs, wishes and requests, and the miracles happened to regular people—family, friends and strangers who needed help. The women hold amen meals, strengthen their Jewish identity by using Jewish texts, praying and reciting blessings, and miracles seemingly happen as a result. But the experience is anything but simple. The women see themselves as the heroes of these stories: They make the miracles. Their feeling that it is their actions that accomplish something for other people gives them an important sense of their capabilities, creating and enhancing their agency as Jewish women.

Bronislaw Malinowski has discussed the cultural importance of miracle stories:

The ideas, emotions, and desires associated with a given story are experienced not only when the story is told, but also when in certain customs, moral rules, or ritual proceedings, the counterpart of the story is enacted. [...] It fulfills a function closely connected with the nature of tradition and the continuity of culture [...] tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. [...] Legend and myths must be lifted from their flat existence on paper, and placed in a three-dimensional reality of full life.<sup>25</sup>

Malinowski also argued that miracle-story telling creates patterns of moral values and sociological order. The participants in the amen meals bear this out by telling their stories not only during the rituals but also in subsequent conversations with family and friends, thus helping to promulgate the rituals.

In the Jewish context, storytelling as a reflection of religious continuity is not unique to the amen meals. Nissim Leon<sup>26</sup> has described the role of the *darshan*, a man who tells his male audience about the miracles he has performed. Anat Feldman<sup>27</sup> has written about communities created around popular miracle-working rabbis. Sima Zalcborg-Block<sup>28</sup> studied the veiled women who believe their ultra-modest dress prevents terrorist attacks. Leon and Aliza Lavie<sup>29</sup> compare the miracle stories related by contemporary *rabaniyot* in their speeches to traditional Hasidic miracle stories:

While traditional Hassidic stories usually describe wonders performed by the Rebbe, or *tzaddik*, the miracle stories recounted in *hizuk* discourse are for the most part about regular people and routine activities. [...] While Hasidic stories take place in the distant past, in faraway Eastern European towns and villages, the miracle stories often take place in the present.<sup>30</sup>

The amen meals, similarly, involve miracle stories about regular people, here and now, whose problems were solved because Jewish women performed a miracle for them. Many of these accounts, including those relating to fertility, are healing stories.<sup>31</sup> Long and fully detailed, they build on emotion and catharsis. They perceive illness

and health as coming from God and often cite cases where secular doctors had declared that they could not do anything, saying only: “you can pray.” The women prayed, and the secular doctors proclaimed a miracle. I found these stories powerful; they stirred the women’s emotions and enhanced their sense of their religious-social potential to influence the “seculars out there” to believe that God exists, and He—with women—performs miracles.

### *Relationships*

#### **Relationship to God**

Mary Hale found that the combination of meal and worship can create “a spirit of common acknowledgment of the human need to commune with one another and God through food.”<sup>32</sup> Participants in the amen meals associated them with sensing a close relationship to God:

Women are connected to God. [...] Amen means putting a stamp on God’s blessings. It’s very meaningful, especially for women, because we are very close to God. (Hodaya, 25, ultra-Orthodox, photo shop employee)

Women are connected to Him, to our Father in heaven. (Tova)

I think God understands us. He understands that we like this thing [the ritual], he is waiting for it, and he is waiting for us, that we will carry it out. Because we are gentler, softer, we just need this thing [the ritual]. (Merav, 34, ultra-Orthodox, medical secretary)

Women are connected. They are simply connected. (Pnina)

When I tried to figure out what it is they are connected to [...], we women are connected to the spiritual by the material. (Hadassa)

#### **Relationships among the women**

The relationships among the participants create and reinforce communities. The women described each other as giving, uniting and inclusive, sharing and supportive.

Women are searching, they search for ways to contribute. They try to help. [...] Women just want to contribute their abilities! (Tehila, 35, modern Orthodox, full-time mother)

Women have shared powers; they have strong feelings on the one hand and greater understanding (*binah yeterah*) on the other. In amen meals they are together, and that enhances the power of their prayers and their emotional strength. (Lea)

According to Mary Bednarowski,<sup>33</sup> women’s rituals are usually more horizontal than vertical in nature. Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff, describing the St. Joseph’s

Day Feast, claimed that it enables the mixing of races and classes.<sup>34</sup> Sonia Zylberberg sees the Passover Seder as an opportunity to include various types of Jewish women.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the amen rituals are circular, both structurally and essentially. They create a safe female space constructed by women for themselves on the basis of inclusiveness, as reflected in their acceptance of all Jewish women without restriction or judgment. Religious and secular women from diverse sectors, countries of origin and personal status join together in them and are seen as reflecting “the entire people of Israel, as long as they possess a Jewish soul” (Libi). Even the fixed groups of women who hold amen meals with friends or family members from a shared socio-economic background invite outside acquaintances, enriching the circle of women.

For the participants, this experience of togetherness and the integration of diverse types of women are an essential feature of the amen meals:

Ultra-Orthodox society doesn't accept “the other.” But at amen meals we get everyone! We have all kinds of women [...], and that's good. (Merav)

This is a meeting of women, but it's not a coffee klatch. There is something [...], I'm not sure how to explain it, but there is something in the environment that neutralizes you from all of the definitions of religious-secular, Mizrahi-Ashkenazi [...] something that connects you and the other. (Hadar, 45, traditional, teacher)

At amen meals, the leadership and the ritual experience are shared and based on sharing. The most important role is to be the last person to recite a blessing, because that woman recites the *yehi ratzon* prayer aloud and mentions the name of the person in need of prayers. Sometimes she shares the reason behind her request, usually with tears. Then other women share their sad and exciting stories, problems and struggles, and support each other. For the most part, the leader does not decide who will go last, and there is no need for an announcement, tension, competition or conflict. The woman in question simply says, “I wish to go last for this blessing.” The women usually sit in a circle and maintain eye contact, allowing people to notice when someone is experiencing difficulty. The open space in the middle allows free access for a supportive touch.

The following example is from my field diary:

The environment in the small apartment in Har Nof [a Jerusalem neighborhood with a strongly Orthodox character] was happy and relaxed as the assembled women prepared for the amen meal, putting out bowls and plastic boxes full of healthy salads and nice fruits. When we blessed *bore' peri hagefen*, the young woman sitting opposite me asked to be last. She was a friend of one of the participants, but no one else in the group knew her. She blessed and then told us quietly that her fiancé had left her three days before the wedding. He did not even speak to her; he only texted her two words—*be'etzem lo* (actually, no)—and left her alone to cancel the catering, the hall and the band, and especially to try to understand what had happened. Her wedding dress was still in the cupboard, two weeks after the cancellation, because she couldn't disconnect herself from the dream. She didn't

cry at that moment; she just told us the story, as if it had happened to someone else. I looked around, trying to figure out what to do. One of the women tried to say something, but she couldn't continue, and she just cried. Another woman left her place, came to the young woman and asked: "May I give you a hug?" She hugged her, and the young woman started to cry, the first good cry after these two terrible weeks. Then we stood, one by one, quietly, and gave her hugs, and we said the *yehi ratzon* for marriage, calling her name loudly. She dried her eyes, thanked us for our love and support, and said that this ritual had helped her more than all the other help she had received. She felt that she could start her life again.

The strong support offered by the group seems especially meaningful to the participants:

It starts happily, until we arrive at a *yehi ratzon* that reminds someone of her stories. [...] Then we share our stories with each other. The ritual enables us to open up. (Lea)

One woman has a terrible life, with issues of violence. [...] She asked women to come for an amen meal, and it turned into a space of support and inclusion. Some other women dared for the first time to talk about their experiences of violence, something that never happened before. (Libi)

The situation is strange. [...] I can open myself because I don't know if I'll meet these women again, [...] I can talk, and the women's circle creates empowerment and energies. (Dvora, 50, modern Orthodox, architect)

McGuire saw this kind of social support as part of the subjective reality of lived religion.<sup>36</sup> Participants in the amen meals echoed her insight in their descriptions of the emotional and spiritual connection they felt during the ritual. When I saw their faces, wet from crying, passing around the box of tissues, I understood what it meant to be in a supportive women's circle. No critical words, no suggestions or advice, just warm care and support, added to prayers from the depth of their hearts.

This supportive and sharing space enabled the women to talk about their most intimate, significant space, the female body.<sup>37</sup> Many of the prayers were linked to maternal functions: fertility, healthy pregnancy, easy childbirth, children's health, the physical and emotional strength to care for children and partners, and cooking and housework. The rituals, like those described by Ochs, "mark events linked to women's bodily experiences that previously have not evoked formal Jewish responses."<sup>38</sup> In many communities, miscarriages, fertility and menstruation are taboo subjects in public conversation. The birth of a girl is low-key, while that of a boy entails the *berit milah* (circumcision), a ritual that takes place mostly in the men's section of the synagogue. Alongside the miracle and personal stories, the amen meals give many women a safe, respectful space to discuss their bodies and the associated joys and pain, without fear of rejection.

The stories might have strayed into the realm of gossip, but, at the meals I observed, the women's conversations about their bodies, and about their husbands, children, mothers-in-law and others, remained modest, respecting the ritual and the privacy of the people whose stories were told. Only a few women shared marital problems, and I heard no stories relating to sexual problems, even among the secular groups. The safe space created by legitimation to talk and pray about the female body, fertility and pregnancy was not without boundaries.<sup>39</sup>

### *Activeness*

Amen meals provide participants with a wide scope for activity and creativity.

Women are always energetic, always organized. (Pnina)

Women are more dominant, and this is our doing, our deed. (Tehila)

We are connected to our female side. I feel that amen meals are something that we own, we believe in, we do, and we flow with. We try to do things that will empower us. More than the standard, you know, to be mothers and wives and raise the children. We do something for ourselves. (Merav)

One woman told me about her friend who had a hard time during her nursing studies. When she finished her final examination, she invited her friends to an amen meal:

She invested a lot, she prepared very good food, made very nice things. She decorated very nicely. This is such a women's thing: to create something nice and combine thanks, requests and prayers. So feminine, so warm. (Lea)

The participants spoke of their activeness in terms of their motivation to do something that goes beyond religious obligations and rules.

The Torah makes it easy for us; therefore we seek more strength, to do more. (Merav)

Women have the power, the awareness to do things that are not considered a duty. (Dena, 28, ultra-Orthodox, graphic designer)

I very much love to do things connected to religion, and to enjoy them! We introduce the fun, the joy, to things that are connected to the religion. Not everything is an obligation that is either permitted or prohibited. (Menuha)

Amen meals were only recently introduced. We have been religious since forever, and we know that the Torah says to do this and to do that; there are instructions, like manufacturer's instructions. Everything accurate, detailed. But amen meals

are not a rule. We saw that miracles happen, we started to hold the meals, and they work. Now it has spread, and everyone knows about it. (Pnina)

Ochs<sup>40</sup> described new Jewish women's rituals as allowing improvisation, personalization and choice, creativity and spontaneity; she emphasized their simplicity and the use of basic materials that most people have at home, such as candles and food. Amen rituals are convened and constructed on the participants' initiative, and while the central ritual follows a strict order, elements such as recitation of *Tehilim*, group study, candle-lighting and singing are added voluntarily. The women's sense of freedom in designing the ritual may derive partly from the non-obligatory locations in which some of the meals take place—schools, community centers, synagogue halls and private homes—what Ochs calls “less regulated spaces.”<sup>41</sup>

I do it as a choice. It's not a totally religious ritual, so I can take from it whatever fits for me. You know, most of the women at amen meals are secular, so that everything is done casually, not exactly according to the rules. (Noa, 40, secular, a teacher)

Lena Gemzoe found that women's religious experiences reveal both new contexts and new meanings of religious practices and modes of expression.<sup>42</sup> The domestication of rituals enables women to reinterpret religion, symbols and belief, and the amen meals, held mainly in homes, belong to the category of domestic ritual.<sup>43</sup> But, while the home is a traditional holy space for Jewish women, the locus of everyday *kashrut* and Shabbat (Sabbath) rituals, the amen meals are different. Cooking and Shabbat preparations are usually done in private, by one woman in her kitchen for her close family. The amen meals, however, bring public elements into the private home; not only may some 50 women crowd into a tiny living room, but they pray for many other circles of friends and relatives, often adding at the end of their prayers: “and for all of the Jewish people.” These circles sanctify the everyday private (sometimes secular) home, turning it into a new holy semi-public space.<sup>44</sup> The combination between public and private may work the other way, too, as women bring home-cooked food to ceremonies held in public places. The home as metaphor is also the focus of the women's prayers: The Hebrew word *bayit*, home, figures both in their private prayers for their close and extended families and in their prayers for the Jewish people, *lekhol beit Yisrael* (for the whole house of Israel).

### Conclusions

What lived religious experiences and practices are involved in the amen meal ritual, and what makes it important and meaningful for the participants? I have endeavored to show how the continuity, relationships and activeness associated with this ritual add meaning and importance to the women's lived-religion experience.

While working on this project, I wrestled with the question: Is this ritual feminist? When I put this to the participants, they mostly rejected the question itself:

I try to be connected to God, not to fight with men. (Menuha)

We do just what we are allowed to, not like the crazy women that try to read the Torah at shul. (Libi)

From a critical feminist point of view, it could be said that the women, even as they create a safe space for solidarity and support while empowering their Jewishness, are merely reaffirming their marginal status. Some would assign the amen meals to the category of post-feminist or fake feminist activities, calling women back home to their traditional marginal space. The element of continuity reiterates the traditional connection of women, food and prayer, with the women, remaining largely in the private sphere, uttering traditional prayers for their husbands and families while preparing and eating homemade food. The element of relationship expresses itself in mutual support, missing a potential opportunity for consciousness-raising. And why isn't the element of activeness directed toward redressing women's inferior status in traditional Jewish society? Compared to the revolutions of Torah and Talmud learning by women, or the feminist and egalitarian minyans, amen meals do not challenge the patriarchal status quo.

However, rereading feminist theories about religious women,<sup>45</sup> I have tried to shift the focus to a different question: What drives the amen meal participants to carry out religious praxes? Rather than positioning the issue in terms of agency–religious coercion and opposition–obedience binaries, I seek to understand the women's piety, in Griffith's words, as "a meaningful source of religious and social power [...] creating possibilities for loving intimacy, healing of body and soul, renewed courage in the face of sorrow, emotional maturity, and perpetual self-transformation."<sup>46</sup>

From this point of view, the amen meal is a new religious women's ritual, meaningful and important for the participants. Most of them are not comfortable with activities like intensive Torah learning or feminist and egalitarian minyans, and these need not be the only benchmark of women's empowerment. The amen meal is a ritual created by women for themselves, on the basis of their own choices and initiatives, enable them to build supportive safe spaces, creating personal and communal identity and empowering their Jewishness.

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Notes:

1. Caroline W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
2. In a personal interview on June 21, 2011, Tovi Baron identified herself as the founder of this ritual.
3. Some research has been done on this ritual. See Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, "Overlapping Worlds: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women in Contemporary London" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University College London, 2016); and Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, "'At Amen Meals It's Me and God,' Religion and Gender: A New Jewish Women's Ritual," *Contemporary Jewry*, 35 (2015), pp. 153–172. For media documentation, see Tamar Rotem, "'Amen'—Without the Men," *Haaretz*, October 19, 2011, at <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/amen-without-the-men-1.390956>, and Gael Hammer, "The Amen Phenomenon," *Jewish Action* (Summer, 2007), at [http://www.ou.org/jewish\\_action/06/2007/the\\_amen\\_phenomenon/](http://www.ou.org/jewish_action/06/2007/the_amen_phenomenon/) (both accessed October 18, 2018).
4. Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 158. See also Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 9–14; Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1997), pp. 4–17.
5. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth* (above, note 4), p. 167.
6. Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4.
7. McGuire, *Lived Religion* (above, note 6), p. 15.
8. Vanessa L. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), pp. 30–31. In this book on the power of women's rituals, Ochs shows how the women believe that their prayers may help in the healing of the sick (pp. 7–11). See also eadem, "Waiting for the Messiah, A Tambourine in Her Hand," *Nashim*, 9 (2005), pp. 149–169. For psychological aspects, see also Yoram Bilu, Eli Witztum and Onno van der Hart, "Paradise Regained: Miraculous Healing in the Psychiatric Clinic," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 14 (1990), pp. 105–127.
9. Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 51.

10. Anselm Strauss and Juliet M Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research* (California: Sage, 1990); eidem, "Grounded Theory Methodology," in Norman. K. Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (California: Sage, 1994).
11. Measurement of an individual's degree of religiosity is complex. The accepted tool in Israel is self-definition, based on the categories defined by the question included in the survey of the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics: "Do you define yourself as: ultra-Orthodox/religious/traditional/non-religious or secular?" "Modern Orthodox" is roughly equivalent to "religious" (*dati*), as the term is used in Israel. On this see Guy Ben Porat, *Between State and Synagogue: The Secularization of Contemporary Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 47–59
12. Ammerman, *Bible Believers* (above, note 4); McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (above, note 2).
13. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth* (above, note 4), p. 147; cf. p. 3.
14. Joan Acker, Kate Barry and Johanna Esseveld, "Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research, in Mary M. Fonow and Judith A. Cook (eds.), *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 13–153.
15. Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 177.
16. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth* (above, note 4), p. 115.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 147
18. Susan Starr Sered, "Conflict, Complement, and Control: Family and Religion among Middle Eastern Jewish Women in Jerusalem," *Gender & Society*, 5 (1991), pp. 10–29.
19. Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers* (above, note 4); Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (above, note 6).
20. Neriya-Ben Shahar, "At Amen Meals It's Me and God" (above, note 3).
21. The more usual modern Hebrew expression for "get pregnant" is *lehikanes leherayon*, but Vardit, self-defined as secular, used the biblical term *lehipaked* (cf. Gen. 21:1), commonly used in prayers at amen meals.
22. R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 4.
23. Laal Jamazadeh and Margaret Mills, "Iranian Sofreh: From Collective to Female Ritual," in Caroline W. Bynum, Steven Harrell and Paula Richman (eds.), *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 23–65.
24. Taylor-Guthartz, "Overlapping Worlds" (above, note 3).
25. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922; reprint: New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 122.
26. Nissim Leon, "The Simple Preacher and His Location in the Culture of Mizrahi Ultra-Orthodox Teshuvah," in Nahem Ilan, Carmi Horowitz and Kimmy Caplan (eds.), *Doresh tov le'amo: Preachers, Sermons and Homiletics in Jewish Culture* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2012), pp. 199–230.
27. Anat Feldman, "New Faith Communities: The Case of the 'Community of Miracle Seekers,'" *Politika*, 21 (2012), pp. 180–210 (Hebrew).
28. Sima Zalberg-Block, "Shouldering the Burden of Redemption: How the 'Fashion' of Wearing Capes Developed in Ultra-Orthodox Society," *Nashim*, 22 (2011), pp. 32–55.
29. Nissim Leon and Aliza Lavie, "*Hizuk*—The Gender Track: Religious Invigoration and Women Motivators in Israel," *Contemporary Jewry*, 33 (2013), pp. 193–215.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
31. Thomas J. Csordas has addressed the important part healing stories play in religious movements. See idem, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 57–73, 109–140; and idem, *Language, Charisma, and Creativity: The Ritual Life of a Religious Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 77–99.
32. Mary, I. Hale, “Not a Seder: Gender, Meal, and Memory Revisited in Christian Community,” *Nashim*, 5 (2002), p. 133.
33. Mary F. Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 105.
34. Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff, “Giving an Altar: The Ideology of Reproduction in a St. Joseph’s Day Feast,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 100 (1987), pp. 446–460.
35. Sonia Zylberberg, “Oranges and Seders: Symbols of Jewish Women’s Wrestlings,” *Nashim*, 5 (2002), pp. 148–171.
36. McGuire, *Lived Religion* (above, note 6), p. 12.
37. For more on the female body in feminist knowledge, see Susan R. Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 13–33.
38. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (above, note 8), p. 48.
39. Many guidebooks have emerged in recent decades suggesting rituals for Jewish women in connection with the female life cycle and/or the cycle of the Jewish year. For example, in *Miriam’s Well: Rituals for Jewish Women around the Year* (New York: Biblio Press, 1996), the author Penina V. Adelman, connects preparations for the festival of Shavuot with a ritual for the onset of menstruation. Aliza Lavie, in *Minhag nashim* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2011) describes Jewish women’s rituals from around the world, with specific rituals for holidays.
40. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (above, note 8), p. 49.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
42. Lena Gemzoe, *Feminine Matters: Women’s Religious Practices in a Portuguese Town* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000).
43. Numa Fustel de Coulanges coined the term “domestic religion” in describing the religions of the Greeks and Romans: “A family was a group of persons whom religion permitted to invoke the same sacred fire, and to offer the funeral repast to the same ancestor.” Idem, *The Ancient City* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1956 [1864]), p. 42.
44. Tamar El-Or, “A Temple in Your Kitchen: Hafrashat Hallah—The Rebirth of a Forgotten Ritual as a Public Ceremony,” in Ra’anan S. Boustan, Oren Kosansky and Marina Rustow (eds.), *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), Chap. 12, pp. 271–293.
45. Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women,” *American Ethnologist*, 17 (1990), pp. 41–55; and Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
46. Griffith, *God’s Daughters* (above, note 22), pp. 201–202.

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