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Metaforms of a Monotheistic Religion

The Menstrual Roots of Three Jewish and African Rites of Passage: *Khomba*, *Bat Mitzvah* and the *Mikvah*

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B'rucha at Shekhinah' eloteinu malkah ha'olam she'asani ishah: Blessed are you, Shekhinah our god, Creator of the world/Source of Life, who has made me a woman.

– adapted from a prayer recited by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein at her menses each month, when she believes women are "vessels of transformation"²

What connects women to *nyama*³, *ase*, *ruach*, our own lifeforce? What pre-patriarchal roots and contemporary customs do women from different continents and traditions share? In exploring these questions through an examination of women's ancient and modern religious rituals, I apply Judy Grahn's metaformic theory. I look at three rituals: the *mikvah* and the *bat mitzvah*, women's rituals in my own European-American Jewish tradition, and *khomba*, a puberty ritual practiced by the Lemba, a Southern African people practicing Judaic customs since ancient times. All three rituals meet enough of Grahn's criteria to allow us to consider them as possible metaforms—acts or practices containing knowledge which emerged from women's earliest menstrual rites. The *mikvah*, though rarely done as a coming-of-age ritual as are the *khomba* and *bat mitzvah*, contains enough parallels to early menstrual rites to be included here. All three are transformative transitional rituals that include a period of sitting in the unknown, in psychological if not physical darkness—and emerging with new consciousness and greater knowledge than one had before the rite.

The Jewish *mikvah* is a ritual bath traditionally taken by observant women before childbirth and marriage, and throughout married life; the modern-day rite of passage into womanhood which many young Jewish women undergo at twelve is the *bat mitzvah* (translated as daughter of the commandment or obligation).

I began studying these *mikvah* and *bat mitzvah* rites among European-American Jewish women living in the United States, as well as the *khomba* puberty rites among the Lemba of South Africa, as part of my doctoral study of rites of passage, an inquiry which would not have been possible without the help and treasured friendship of Dr. Rudo Mathivha and her father, the late Professor Matshaya Mathivha, head of the Seremane clan of the Lemba nation in South Africa's Northern Province.

I went to meet the Lemba when I learned that we might share Jewish ancestry, and that they practiced many of the same customs in ancient times as the ancient Hebrews. As Magdel le Roux of University of South Africa (UNISA) posits in her book, *The Lemba: A lost tribe of Israel in Africa?*, "Their enthusiasm for sacred hills, animal sacrifice, ritual slaughtering of animals, food taboos, their circumcision rites and endogamy suggests a Semitic influence or resemblances, embedded in an African culture."⁴

Many of the modern Lemba of South Africa have practiced Christianity for much of their lives; however, the thread connecting the rituals of the generations is African traditional religion. For an increasing number of Lemba today, Hebrew prayers and contemporary Jewish rituals are also becoming part of daily spiritual practice. Lemba living in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and elsewhere are pursuing Judaic studies and have congregations headed by rabbis. And there are African Jews throughout many countries in Africa, from Tunisia, Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan, to Malawi, Ghana, Nigeria, Congo and Kenya. Many of these groups, as well as the Abayudaya of Uganda are among those whom Professor Mathivha called the Lemba's "cousins."

The Lemba follow a biblical rather than a rabbinic tradition, praying from and living according to the precepts of the bible rather than the Talmud, sacred writings which offer multiple interpretations of the biblical text. They are, as Professor Mathivha once said to me, in a "re-education process" to learn more about their Jewish heritage; much has been lost over the centuries, through migrations and in their conversion to Christianity by missionaries. Some are studying Hebrew; hold and attend *Shabbat*⁵ services at homes and at synagogues; observe Jewish dietary laws of *kashrut*⁶; and observe menstrual separations concluded by the *mikvah* ritual bath. In addition, education—of both parents and children—is a primary value, and male circumcision is practiced.⁷ Lemba oral traditions carry the story of their Jewish heritage, and they take great pride in being Jewish, as do the American Jewish women I spoke with in the course of this study.

Given my own struggles with Jewish identity, as a feminist and later as someone with an African-American husband and son, I recognized as familiar the Lemba's struggles to define cultural and religious identity, and their desire and fight for

recognition of their 'legitimacy' to those Jews and non-Jews who regard them as outsiders to Judaism. I also believed both the Lemba and European-American Jews shared customs, including the ways in which we transmit our culture orally. And so I went to meet the Lemba in search of similarities and connection.

Initiation Rites

The principal coming of age ritual for many young Lemba women is called *khomba*⁸; for many young Jewish women in the United States it is the *bat mitzvah*⁹. While they differ in external appearance and structure, they share many of the same objectives. The overarching purpose of each is to acknowledge a young girl's passage into womanhood, to educate her, to give her humility and patience as well as specific religious, spiritual or cosmological teachings – as is also true of most menarche (first menstruation) rituals around the world. Each welcomes a new member to the tribe and celebrates her entry into the community as an adult; each provides arduous tasks for the 'initiate' and serves as a test of character, teaching the maiden to develop an ethical belief system, as well as strength, focus, integrity and self-confidence. It seems highly likely that each ritual is metaformic, meaning that these contemporary rites grew out of early menarche celebrations. I cite some of the characteristics shared by girls' early menarche rites and the modern day *bat mitzvah* in the chart below.

Bat Mitzvah and Khomba Contemporary Menarche Rites

The *bat mitzvah* ritual consists of learning passages of sacred text from the Torah, the Five Books of Moses which are the beginning of the Hebrew Bible. Girls study Hebrew and this text for up to two years, learning to read and chant the passages in preparation for the ceremony; they also write a short interpretation of the text to deliver to their assembled community. A *bat mitzvah* ceremony formally marks the assumption of one's obligation to follow the biblical commandments, along with the corresponding right to take part in leading religious services, to count in a *minyan* (the minimum number of people needed to perform certain parts of religious services), to form binding contracts, to testify before religious courts and to marry.

While the *bat mitzvah* preparation and ceremony is still focused on celebrating a girl's entry into womanhood, it is her entry into the Jewish community as an adult that seems to take precedence. As indicated earlier, this passage is marked through a deep, intensive study of sacred text and trope, traditional intonation of the sacred biblical chants. Connection to divinity, family and community are stressed and can create a very moving and powerful rite of passage.

However, in the *bat mitzvah* preparation there is no acknowledgment of the changes in a girl's body which are usually occurring during this period of study, little or

no discussion of sexuality, reproduction or womanly responsibilities. While the periods of study and later celebration are often spiritually inspiring for many girls and their families, there seems to be a disconnect from the actual physical changes they are undergoing which necessarily impact both their emotions and their spirit. I believe that the ritual would be made much richer through more acknowledgment of the body, which is starting to occur in some families, and through longer periods of separation.

For many participants, the experience may still feel integrated, and certainly fulfilling. I once asked my niece Adva Grenn Saldinger, now twenty-two, about her *bat mitzvah* experience: “It strengthened my Jewish identity. In a sense I’m more strict about keeping kosher than the rest of my family; I think being *bat mitzvah*’d in part contributed to that. I don’t know why...I guess it had something to do with learning more about my religion and knowing more that I’m a full part of the community.”¹⁰ She noticed a definite difference in being recognized as an adult in the community, and spoke of an increased awareness at times of her role as a woman.

Maggie Sarah Bond, another young woman who said her reaction to being *bat mitzvah*’d was probably different from most other girls she knew, said that she did it mostly because of parental pressure, that the ceremony was not that important to her. When I remarked on the moving speech she had written for the ceremony, she said, “Well, that was the good part...I really like writing...and looking into the meaning of things.”¹¹

When I spoke to her about coming of age, she said, “I haven’t really come of age in anything except my Temple.” “What about menstruating?” I asked. She said she had started; I asked whether she considered that coming of age? She said it was more like something else she had to deal with now, like taking a shower. I imagine that a celebration of menarche – still viewed as too embarrassing to talk about by many young girls in this culture – could have made a big difference in Bond’s view of menstruation, and her sense of power and pride in being female.

I was not able to talk to any Lemba girls of Adva’s or Maggie’s age about their initiation rites in time for completion of my work. However, I understood from my conversations with Lemba women, mostly aged sixty and older, that their *khomba* ritual surrounding and honoring a young girl’s menarche is regarded as important a rite of passage as a *bat mitzvah* is for many twelve-year-old-girls and their families in the United States. Each ritual is as much a verification of one’s membership in the tribe as it is a sacred rite marking the initiate’s entry into womanhood.

***Khomba* Metaformic Initiation Rites**

The *khomba* or *vhukomba* puberty rite—which I view as metaformic because it meets so many of the elements present in women’s earliest menstrual rites, as charted by Grahn in her dissertation¹² - is followed by many Lemba girls, though to a lesser degree

today than in the past because of migration to urban areas and modernization of daily life. The women I spoke with told me this ritual emphasizes education for the initiate, which Professor Mathivha described as being about “menstruation, sex and reproduction, as well as the duties of a married woman”¹³. Twenty years ago, it was still customary for girls to go to the *kraal*, or homestead of the local chief for this education, and initiation schools would be held throughout the year to accommodate the different phases of initiation. At the school they underwent a series of tests of endurance, to teach them discipline and to test their physical fitness. They danced and sang songs, and were taught to respect their elders.

This process, in which they are taught both by girls who have already been through the process, and their elders, is done in a much shorter time today than in the past because of migration to urban areas and the modernization of daily life.

In the past, the last leg of the initiation process, *khomba*, included a requirement that initiates sit in the waters of the river without moving, watched by several witnesses who taunted them and made sure they did not emerge until the appointed time. The girls were required to sit in the river up to their neck for most of the day, over a period of several days as part of the *khomba* process. While this was one of the tasks they had to perform in order to learn patience and humility, Judy Grahn observes that this exercise might also lead one to “surrender to nature... How well would one know the river and its currents, how would one's mind be forced out of itself to think about the river, to identify with it perhaps...as a force of life and death?”¹⁴

I have not yet been able to ask the Lemba women about this; in trying to understand the full import of what this part of *khomba* must have been like for girls undergoing the rite, I can only think of my own contemplative experiences during several brief periods of seclusion that have been part of my own spiritual practice. I believe such a submerging or surrender is necessary to put aside one's ego and ordinary consciousness, and that that is requisite to any initiatory or transformative process.

The duties of a married woman including family planning and the importance of cleanliness are emphasized at *khomba*. At the end of the initiation the girls are given new names by which henceforth they will be called. They are however allowed to use their birth names given in the ceremony when they were taken out of the hut or house where they were born.¹⁵

Although the *khomba* ritual is being performed less frequently today, I was able to speak with Rudo about her rite of passage. Many of the Lemba mothers and grandmothers I spoke with said the girls today were generally embarrassed about getting their periods; the same is certainly true of many young American girls.¹⁶ Rudo, forty-two at the time of our conversation, recalled the menarche ceremony she had when she first started menstruating at age fourteen. “I was painted, marked with red earth¹⁷ around my joints at the ankles, knees, hip, elbows, neck, and wrist,” she said, although she did not remember why this was done. Rudo told me that she had to stay in a separate hut, where she sat on a mat with a blanket on it that her Mom had given her. Her senior aunt tended

her, brought her special foods and bathed her; she also instructed her on hygiene, sex and related topics.¹⁸

Red Ochre

I was curious about the frequent use of red ochre, one of the blood signifiers Grahn frequently writes about as occurring in many women's rituals in cultures throughout the world. Although Rudo and I discussed menstrual rites a good deal with Lemba women, we were never able to get a satisfactory answer to the question of why red ochre is the substance used to mark a young girl's first period or why it is used in other women's rituals such as weddings. However, we did learn the reasons for some of the ceremonies—for example, that a young maiden's joints are covered with the ochre to insure that her period will return each month; a nursing baby's joints are painted with red ochre once his/her mother begins menstruating again, to insure that the infant will continue to breastfeed. Though no one told us why red ochre specifically is the substance used for these prophylactic—or in the case of a bride-to-be, decorative—rituals, some scholars would say that it is probably used as a blood substitute or as representative of women's divinity or power in Africa, India, Australia and other parts of the world.¹⁹ The women I spoke with simply said they did not know the reason, that 'that is just what was used.' As often seems to be the case, the original reasons may have been wiped from women's individual and collective memories as they have been in so many parts of the world--through the deliberate suppression of women's history, layers of patriarchy, the effects over many generations of organized religion, socialization by dominator cultures and colonization.

In looking at similar rituals worldwide, by women using red ochre, henna, red clay, camwood and other red plant-based substances²⁰ it seems plausible to conclude that their ritual use is often for protection, and to display or invoke spiritual purification and health, as well as for beautification and celebration. In many cultures these substances are also often thought to represent the blood of the earth and so the blood of the Mother. Judy Grahn takes the analysis further to say that the practice perhaps initially made a connection between the menstruation of the earth and the menstruation of the maiden.

Bathing in the River/The *Mikvah* Ritual Bath

Historically, the *mikvah* has played a critical role in Jewish life, so much so that the rabbis of the Talmud ruled that a community must first build a *mikvah* even before building a synagogue. Its role grew out of the intense focus on *taharat hamishpachah*, the laws of family purity considered so central to Judaism among strongly observant Jews. Because of the overuse of such words as 'impure,' 'unclean' and 'polluted' in discussions of menstruation and the pejorative light they cast on women, I want to include the perspective of Everett Fox, translator and commentator on the Hebrew Bible,

when he notes the importance of the adjective *tamei* in the priestly material in the book of Leviticus.

The word refers to a ritual state, the existence of which was understood in ancient Israel as a grave danger to the ‘purity’ of the sanctuary. It is not, however, ‘uncleanness’ in the physical sense, but a state akin perhaps to radioactivity: in this case, it drives away the divine presence...”²¹ In other cases, however, it could have been viewed as a positive power, just as radioactivity has both negative and positive properties and applications. Fox discusses the difficulties of translating the legal passages in Leviticus in clear, non-negative ways; he writes that pollutants (such as menstrual blood) did not “pose an actual danger to the person—unless he or she comes in contact with holy objects, people, or space. ...What was generally required was that the polluted person observe a period of separation from the sanctuary (or, in more extreme cases, from the camp), to be reintegrated after either time alone or with the addition of laundering their clothes and/or washing themselves...water was seen as acting as a purifying agent, not as cleanser in the detergent sense...”²²

Although Leviticus details on what occasions men are required to bathe, and there are strictures about women’s separation at menstruation, there is no Levitical commandment for women to do a *mikvah* after bleeding. It is considered a strict law, yet it did not actually appear until the rabbis wrote it into the Talmud. It is also important to note that “instead of the biblical period of five to seven days of impurity that ended with the end of the woman’s flow, the rabbis [of the Talmudic period, 200-500 CE] imposed a twelve-to-fourteen-day separation...” Thus “...extension of menstrual taboo to nearly two weeks means that resumption of sexual activity coincides with the moment of greatest fertility.”²³

For some the *mikvah* is like returning to the womb, and being reborn; the period of separation a time of renewal and 'honeymoon' for one’s marriage, in which both partners benefit from a period of abstinence. According to Yeshiva University Chancellor Norman Lamm, the rabbis who wrote detailed laws concerning the subject believed the *mikvah* waters to be life-affirming, countering the association of menstrual blood with death. He rejects the “superstitious” notion that the menstrual laws are a product of repugnance toward menstrual blood or that they have any hygienic meaning, and instead focuses on these laws as a key to erotic fulfillment within marriage.²⁴

For contemporary women reclaiming the bath as a ritual designed to serve a variety of purposes for both married women, and for single women who may be either heterosexual or lesbian, the *mikvah* has become the centerpiece of a range of healing and renewing rituals prescribed and controlled by women themselves after sexual abuse, miscarriage, illness, divorce and other traumatic or difficult events. One anonymous woman is quoted by Janice Rubin, creator of The Mikvah Project, a groundbreaking exhibit of photographs and interviews: "It's like I die – total stillness, darkness, and when I come up, I am different. In that moment of suspension I feel uncomplicated and whole." Rubin herself says that although she once “scoffed at the custom, which seemed to perpetuate the myth that menstruating women were ‘unclean’... I became interested in

exploring the mikvah at a time when I felt spiritually vulnerable. In my own tradition I found a ritual that offered an opportunity for emotional cleansing and spiritual transformation."²⁵

The word *mikvah* means collection. Only ‘living’ or natural water – rainwater, water from a river, the ocean, an underground spring, even melted snow can be used for the bath; it must be from a flowing source that has never been dormant. The *mikvah* is used by both Jewish men and women, who immerse in it before certain sacred times, including the Sabbath, Yom Kippur, Torah study, marriage, childbirth, conversion and principally after menstruation and after childbirth; some men also use the *mikvah* after sex, following the biblical prescription in Leviticus to bathe after any sexual emission. For women, the removal of such things as eye makeup, wig, hair pins, a bandage, jewelry or nail polish—anything that would come between the woman and the water—is requisite when going to the *mikvah*.

Using many of Judy Grahn’s descriptors of metaformic customs found in menarche rituals in South India²⁶ for comparison, I have charted some of the similarities between the *khomba* and *mikvah* rituals in the chart below, in an attempt to see what metaformic characteristics the two share. In future research I will continue to explore what both have in common with early and modern Semitic women’s rites. I have added the categories related to immersion in living and flowing water, and on the relationship of objects to water.

Menarche Ceremony Descriptors	Lemba <i>Khomba</i> Rite (river/bath portion)	<i>Mikvah</i> Ritual Bath
Seclusion	Yes	Yes (Brief)
Separation	Yes	Yes
Emergence	Yes	Yes
Immersion in Living Water	Yes	Yes
Immersion in Flowing Water	Yes	Yes
Female Attendant / Companion	Yes	Yes
Painting Body	Yes	At times (prior to)
Relationship of Objects to Water	Yes	Yes
Oral Traditions Continued ²⁷	Yes	Yes
Result in a change of Status	Yes	Yes
Head Covering	Yes	Yes
Sexual abstinence	Yes	Yes
Touching food taboo	Yes	Yes
Feast connected to the rite	Yes	At times

Strengthens female bonding	Yes	Yes
Sexual songs/jokes	Yes	At times

Explanation of *Khomba - Mikvah* Chart

Seclusion - At first menstruation, the Lemba maiden goes into seclusion—in this case, temporary separation from the larger community—for several days; in the past, this might have been for a number of months. During the part of the *khomba* rite in which she immerses in the river for an entire day, she can also be considered to be in a brief seclusion, although she returns home at the end of each day. When one enters a *mikvah* building in San Francisco, one could be said to be entering a mini-seclusion, when a woman steps away from the entire community and only sees the *mikvah* attendant. One could also consider the 20 to 30-minute preparatory bath or shower prescribed before one immerses in the *mikvah* as part of this brief time of seclusion. Among Ethiopian Jews, who share ancestry with the Lemba, women went into seclusion in a menstrual hut during the period of menstruation—although among those who migrated to Israel/Palestine in recent years, the custom has perforce changed to a separation, when a woman can only go into another room in an urban apartment.

Separation - The separation referred to here is from food, one's community and, in the case of the *mikvah*, most often refers to one's husband or fiancée (if it is a pre-marital *mikvah*.) While the *mikvah* is now used for a number of occasions, from celebrating menopause to mourning an abortion, I write about it in this work mostly as the ritual done by observant married Jewish women after their monthly period ends, before they resume sexual relations with their husband. The technical term for a woman in this state is *niddah* (literally, to be separated); *Niddah* is also the name of the Talmudic tractate or volume which deals almost exclusively with this subject. From the onset of menstruation and for seven days after it ends, until the woman immerses in the *mikvah*, a husband and wife may not engage in sexual relations; Orthodox Jews are prohibited from touching in any way.

Among the Lemba, women are separated from crops, cattle and pottery as well as from men. Married Lemba women either sleep in a separate room or building during their menses, or on a different surface in the same room in which their husbands sleep.

Emergence - In Grahn's study of menarche rituals around the world, frequently when a girl began her period for the first time, she separated and was not allowed to see light. Then at the end of her bleeding, she emerged into the light. Referencing the work of Sir James Frazer in 1930, Grahn writes that after a girl emerges from seclusion, the women take her around and show her the earth, bodies of water, flowers, trees...as if she is seeing them for the first time. In this way, Grahn posits, seclusion reenacts the original awakening of human consciousness.²⁸ Whether one returns to the community from a day spent in the river, as does a Lemba maiden, or to one's marital bed after leaving the *mikvah*, the ritual is followed by re-emergence into the outside world. It is not now an

emergence into the light from the darkness as Grahn discusses, however, since the *mikvah* in the United States must be used after sundown. But with the completion of the *mikvah* comes a sense of renewal and re-emergence into one's marriage, as well as resumption of one's normal daily activities.

Immersion - Immersion is variously viewed as a return to the womb, for building strength of character, obedience and patience and for spiritual purification, in both ancient and contemporary Jewish and African cultures. Since this is not an in-depth study of either the *khomba* or the *mikvah*, I am assuming that these goals are interchangeable and probably a goal or outcome of both practices. Immersion among the Lemba was formerly done in a nearby river, as noted, but is now usually done in one's bathtub at home. Among Jewish women in the United States, while it can be done in a river or ocean, an immersion, especially among observant women, is most often done at a formal indoor *mikvah*.

Flowing Waters - Regarding the movement of the water, there are no rules in the Jewish tradition that I am aware of concerning whether the water one immerses in is flowing or not; in Lemba *khomba* practices, until recently, the rite was always performed in a river and its flow played a key role in the ritual. The traditional Jewish rules for maintaining a modern indoor *mikvah* state that it should contain 'living' water, *mayim chayim*, from a fresh source, as noted earlier. A river, of course, is flowing water, and is 'permissible' as are all 'living waters.' It should be noted, however, that in urban environments in the United States some compromises are made for convenience, and rainwater can be collected and mixed with chlorinated tap water.

Female Attendants or Companions - Several women used to accompany the menstruant to and from the river as part of the *khomba* ritual. Since modernization, fewer women practice the rite and those who do more often immerse in an indoor bathtub, with female companions still present. One of these women is always the senior aunt. Their role is to instruct the initiate at this time, and to insure that she follows the rules of the immersion. At the modern indoor *mikvah*, most often a small square or rectangular pool of water²⁹, there is always an official *mikvah* attendant, who also insures strict compliance with the laws governing ritual preparation³⁰ and immersion procedures.

Painting the body - As noted above, the Lemba maiden has red ochre applied to all her joints to protect her and to insure future cycles. Among both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews makeup must be removed immediately prior to a *mikvah*. However, among Moroccan, Tunisian, Persian and other Sephardic Jews, decoration of the body is an important part of a pre-marital ritual that also involves the *mikvah*. Henna ceremonies are common, and may be done a few days prior to the bath; however, all traces of the henna—unlike the red ochre among the Lemba—would have to be removed before immersion.

Relationship of objects to water - These include, in the case of the Lemba, shards of the dish used in menarche rituals. The dish, filled with red ochre which has been applied to a menstruant's joints, is then broken, her breasts rubbed with the pieces to

guarantee that her milk will flow, and the shards later thrown into the river, to insure the return of her monthly cycles. Among traditional Orthodox Jewish women, kitchen objects such as pots and pans may be immersed in a *mikvah* when a woman is setting up a new household or kitchen.

Continuance of Oral Traditions - Oral traditions are continued through proverbs, folklore, jokes and song among the Lemba, including those exchanged with initiates. Oral traditions are also transmitted through prayers, folklore, chants and blessings said at the *mikvah*. Instruction to the girl or woman by the female *mikvah* attendant, as well as any discussion of the tradition, may also be considered as part of an oral tradition that is continually transmitted at the bath.

Change of Status - A change in status occurs in both rituals. This change includes going from being a girl to being accepted as an adult member of the community, in the Lemba menarche rite. After the *mikvah*, a woman emerges in a state considered as spiritually purified; if she is married and does it after her menses and the requisite period of seven days following its cessation, she goes from being untouchable to one who may resume sexual relations with her husband. In the case of the Lemba, a married couple may hold hands during the period of separation. Conservative or less observant American Jewish couples may allow handholding or other forms of brief physical contact since people often adopt customs to what works for their own lifestyle.

Another change of status for the woman emerging from the *mikvah* is that a woman comes out ready to marry, or in the case of a pregnant woman, ready to birth her child. If she has gone to the *mikvah* after an illness or traumatic event, as an increasing number of women are doing in the United States, she will, one hopes, emerge as one who has received comfort, healing and renewal.

Head covering - As it was demonstrated to me, Lemba maidens would return from the river with a towel or some other type of head covering; in the case of a European-American Jewish woman in the U.S., she dons a small washcloth, towel or other head covering when she immerses. When I went to the *mikvah* for the first time, the washcloth was required on the second of three immersions, as I recited the traditional blessing.

Sexual abstinence - In both rites, sexual abstinence occurs, though of different types. A young Lemba or non-Lemba Jewish girl doing this final part of the puberty rite is assumed to be a virgin, and so has not had sex yet. A woman taking a *mikvah* in the U.S. would be assumed to be abstaining because she is supposed to be a virgin if it is a pre-marital *mikvah*. The primary use of *mikvah* is among observant married women, and for them sexual abstinence is mandatory for about two weeks leading up to the *mikvah*, as stated earlier. Of course this category would not be the case for those women taking the *mikvah* right before childbirth.

Lemba women, when they menstruate as adults, add a specific amount of time, in some cases two days, to the end of their period before resuming sexual relations. Jewish

women in the United States generally add seven days after the cessation of bleeding, in compliance with Jewish *minhag*, or custom.

Taboos - For the Lemba and non-Lemba Orthodox Jewish women, cooking or touching food, being around food or serving food to one's husband is taboo during this period. In addition, a menstruating Lemba woman is not supposed to go near cattle, as it is believed that may cause them to miscarry, nor are they supposed to go near vegetables, lest they cause them to wither, nor pottery, as the power of their menstrual state may cause the pots to break. It is also believed by the Lemba women that it is dangerous for a man to be around a menstruating woman, as it may lower his IQ.³¹

Among European-American Jews, many similar beliefs have been handed down, i.e. that a menstruating woman can cause mayonnaise to turn bad or plants to die. It is still a practice among a number of men and women not to want a woman ever to touch a Torah, lest she be menstruating and “defile” it.³² There is no law or absolute prohibition that says a woman should not do this, but it is a very strong custom.

Feast connected to the rite - A feast is part of Lemba tradition surrounding a girl's menarche; Rudo remembered her aunt and other women in her family preparing special foods at the time of her ceremony. A ceremonial beer³³ is also part of the Lemba puberty rite. However, the *mikvah* experts I spoke to in the United States were not aware of any special foods being connected to the rite in contemporary times.

Strengthens Female Bonding – Both the *khomba* and the *mikvah* involve the menstruant and at least one other woman, often one who is older. It was clear in watching the Lemba women recount the *khomba* stories to me how much they enjoyed reminiscing together about their individual rites, and how it kept them close as a group. In stories women have told me about *mikvah*, I could also see—as I myself experienced—that it can serve as a means of making family members or friends more unified, and even as a means of creating cohesion between and among women of different generations, whether they are still living or not. The first time I took the *mikvah*, my first response was to burst into tears as I felt a strong sense of wishing my mother, an ancestor since 1981, could have done the rite with me; on another occasion when I immersed, I again cried, sensing the spirit of my mother near me and feeling certain, though it was never discussed, that it had been done in her own motherline.

Sexual Songs/Jokes – In both rituals, sexual songs and/or jokes are customary, before, during and/or after the rite.

Menarche Rites and the *Khomba* and *Bat Mitzvah* Rites of Passage

Intrigued by the crossover of so many customs, I went on to compare the metaformic properties of the Lemba *khomba* menarche rite and the U.S. Jewish *bat*

mitzvah, a rite of passage for young girls considered to be entering adulthood, using similar categories to the chart above:

Menarche Ceremony Descriptors	<i>Khomba</i> Menarche Rite	Bat Mitzvah
Seclusion	Yes	No
Separation	Yes	Yes (brief periods)
Emergence	Yes	Yes
Female Attendant(s)/Companion	Yes	Yes
Oral Traditions continued	Yes	Yes
Results in change of status	Yes	Yes
Head covering	Yes (after)	Yes (during)
Sexual abstinence (assumed)	Yes	Yes
Feast connected to rite	Yes	Yes

Explanation of *Khomba* - *Bat Mitzvah* Chart

Seclusion - The Lemba maiden goes into seclusion to the river with only a few companions, her elders; for those still practicing this rite, the maiden returns home at the end of each day. With modernization, however, most girls now do this at home in the bathtub.

Separation – in limited periods, the *bat mitzvah* candidate must seek solitude to study, and also has an extended period of two to three years in which she must cut down on, or even eliminate normal social activities to pursue studies with her spiritual leaders. These teachers include both the rabbi or head of the synagogue or community with which she is affiliated, and the *hazzan* or cantor from whom she learns the all-important trope, the chanting of certain sections of the Torah, considered by most to be the primary sacred Jewish text. One could argue that this is not the same separation from her community that marks menarche rites (at least several days away from all but an aunt or two, and a few other close older women.) However, I include it here because in this culture, this period of study is often so intense that there is a clear stepping in and out of sacred time and space when one must engage in “secular” activities; during the periods one is immersed in studies, there is one focus only, and relationships with mothers and other close female elders often intensifies and deepens. So in these senses there is an emergence into a new 'consciousness' vis-à-vis oneself and the world.

Emergence – the most marked change in a girl’s status occurs at the end of the process, after the ceremony. It is celebrated as she emerges from the synagogue (or other location) to mix with the community and receive their recognition and praises.

Female attendant/companion – A girl usually studies to become *bat mitzvah* with other girls, and elder women may spend more time with the maiden than usual.

Oral traditions - are continued through the trope or cantillation, intoned liturgical recitation of the sacred text. New oral traditions are created as more girls write their own speeches, and deliver their own interpretations of their *haftarah*, a portion taken from Prophets or Writings in the Hebrew Bible.

Results in change of status – Girls who become *bat mitzvah* are considered to be women at the end of the process, and are said to be welcomed as fully participatory members of the community at the conclusion of the ritual.

Head covering – Reform Jewish girls often wear a *kippah* or *yarmulke*, the traditional prayer cap; Conservative or Reconstructionist girls would almost always wear one, and those Orthodox girls allowed to do this ritual would always have a head covering of some kind.

Sexual abstinence – Has in the past been assumed among girls aged twelve, the age at which most girls have their *bat mitzvah*.

Feast connected to rite – A celebratory feast is usually held right after the ritual with additional meals and celebrations often planned for the day before and/or day after.

Next Steps

In looking at these rituals side by side, I hope to stimulate conversation about how to make modern Jewish rituals more empowering for young girls as women, not just as members of the Jewish community. In addition to the core element of Torah reading and interpretation, which presents a male-centered perception of God and the world, I would like to see positive, woman-centered sacred literature incorporated into the *bat mitzvah* ceremony. Such readings would acquaint celebrants with the ancient understanding of the power of female coming of age rites; they might include “The Thunder, Perfect Mind” from the Nag Hammadi texts³⁴ or contemporary works like Rabbi Elyse Goldstein’s *Re-Visions*³⁵, Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb’s *She Who Dwells Within*³⁶ or Marcia Falk’s *Book of Blessings*³⁷. Since most Jews celebrating the *bat mitzvah* ritual go through it at the traditional age of twelve or thirteen and this might not coincide with the onset of a girl’s period, I would propose an alternate menarche rite be constructed, giving the initiate the fullest, most empowering experience possible through a ritual combining spiritual, physical *and* intellectual elements. Such a rite, which could include a period of contemplation in solitude, would emphasize one’s bodily changes and development.

My colleagues and I find the dearth of menarchal celebrations in the United States very disturbing, and have constructed coming of age ceremonies for twelve and thirteen-year-old girls. I once asked Jenny Kien, author of *Reinstating the Divine Woman in*

Judaism whether she knew of any menarche rites within contemporary European-American Judaism; at the time, she said she did not know of any but would be happy to see such rites instituted.³⁸ In the six years following that conversation, some mothers and some spiritual leaders in the United States have begun to create these ceremonies, and we hope to see these increase, as an adjunct to the *bat mitzvah* rite or as independent rites. Among those constructing such ceremonies are DeAnna L'Am of Red Moon Rites of Passage,³⁹ Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, who writes about such ceremonies in *She Who Dwells Within* and various sources whose work can be read at www.ritualwell.org.

The importance of such rites to young girls, in having a public cultural acknowledgment of the changes they go through at puberty, cannot be overstated. A girl's response to her own onset of menstruation, and her observations of the responses to her new state from parents, family and friends all make powerful impressions which can either make her proud to be a woman at this stage of her life or create shame and negatively impact her sense of self-esteem—for years. I believe one of the greatest gifts we can give young girls is to insure that they have a sense of who they are in all their fullness at a formative age.⁴⁰

The way a girl first learns of her menstruation—and how and if she celebrates it—can shape a girl's sense of her potentiality as a woman. It is critical that, at a time when she needs to understand and integrate many changes and emotions at once, she is given ways to understand what is happening to her so that she is not afraid of or repulsed by a potent gateway which can be at once scary and exciting. As part of the Lemba girls' process, it is viewed as an expected, natural occurrence, although girls are not always warned about what to expect ahead of time and are fearful of the blood when it first appears. Time is set aside for a maiden to learn that she can get pregnant and so has new responsibilities, and that she is leaving childhood for new community status as an adult woman—which, in either culture, she may see as a blessing or an annoyance.

As to the *mikvah*, I wonder why its use as a puberty rite, at a time of sacred transformation, is not widespread. Its primary application among women continues to be prior to wedding or giving birth, and for heterosexual Orthodox and many Conservative Jewish women, a monthly occurrence to mark the end of the menstrual separation, after which they may return to the marriage bed. Lesbian women also use the *mikvah* but the more Orthodox *mikva'ot* unfortunately insist that women using their facilities be married—leaving out both lesbians and single women.

The notion of bringing a young girl to the *mikvah* to mark her first blood, which some mothers are starting to explore, is rare. It seems abhorrent and unacceptable to the Orthodox women to whom I have suggested it, for reasons of modesty, because it would bring issues of sexuality to the forefront instead of waiting until a girl is old enough to marry. Most orthodox girls do not even get to have a *bat mitzvah*—although this is not the case for those who consider themselves 'modern Orthodox.'

This intense focus on modesty to the point of ignoring a girl's natural development seems not to be an issue with those involved in *khomba* ceremonies, the last

phase in Lemba girls' traditional series of coming-of-age rites, and with non-Orthodox Jewish women, perhaps because many of the women in both of these groups have freer attitudes about sexuality--even though women in both groups may want their daughters to remain virgins until a 'socially-sanctioned' age. Both of these groups seem more open to talking about sex, and to acknowledging the physical development of a girl's body, instead of trying to hide it.

When I compared the *khomba* rituals of South Africa with the *bat mitzvah* in the United States, the *khomba* struck me as far more embodied, and perhaps more empowering, based on my own ritual experiences. Those rituals that involve me bodily in some way have been far more powerful than rote prayers I read from a book. If there isn't an accompanying ritual that allows me to embody a sense of the divine, neither the recitation of prayers or blessings which I spontaneously create, nor those which I recite from memory move or inspire me to feel divine connection. Of course, I recognize that what feels powerful for me may not necessarily be so for someone else, and so more study on this topic is needed by both Lemba and U.S. Jewish women.

Conclusion

As I look at the work of Magdel le Roux,⁴¹ the first person to do an in-depth study comparing the religious and cultural rites of the ancient Israelites with those of the Lemba, I realize that while le Roux and I both began with an interest in the Lemba's Jewish ancestry and shared rites identified as Jewish, I became and remain far more interested in those things which we share as women.

While I think there are fewer similarities in our current traditions than in the ancient ones, I hesitate to draw absolute conclusions here because we cannot know for certain what women were doing in the Lemba culture or in my own Ashkenazic ancestry four thousand years ago, and so my search for answers about shared roots and rituals continues. I am not content to let the search begin only at the formation of Judaism, or even monotheism, because my real questions start so much earlier.

There seems little doubt that Jewish (and other Semitic) menarche customs are extremely ancient, pre-dating the development of texts. For me, that is a primary red thread, a *rote faden* that keeps pulling me towards the past.

I will continue to study the rites within Judaism that appear to have emerged from women's early menstrual rituals because I think it is important for girls entering puberty today, and for future generations. Even as I begin to locate some of the customs which I identify as metaformic, I find some of these are simultaneously being lost, such as in the disappearance of the Ethiopian menstrual hut among Ethiopian Jewish communities which moved to Israel over the last twenty-five years.

Jewish and other women grounded in earth-based traditions in the United States—Rabbi Leah Novick, Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, Kohenet Deborah Apple, Rabbi Jill Hammer, Kohenet Holly Taya Shere, writer Anita Diamant, liturgist Judith Laura, Kohenet Jamie Isman, Anya Silverman, DeAnna L’Am and a number of others—have been initiating new rituals for young girls and women based on ancient ways. Grounded in but not restricted to the Sacred Feminine, these rites and the invocations and prayers they contain have tremendous meaning for many living in this time.

I envision this work continuing and expanding through my own work and spiritual practice, which combines African and European-American Jewish elements. And I know it will also grow through the work of other scholars and priestesses, activists and poets - and through the daily acts and observations of women everywhere.

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¹ A name for the divine Spirit within the Jewish tradition, first mentioned in the Talmud, defined variously as She Who dwells within, the feminine face or aspect of God, the in-dwelling presence of God and the Hebrew goddess.

² *ReVisions: Seeing Torah Through A Feminist Lens*, by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein; Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001, 107.

³ Some think of *nyama* (Dogon language) as the soul, or even as the creator of the universe. For The Dogon of Mali, West Africa, *nyama* is the word for "the life-force which permeates all things both animate and inanimate as the power behind their existence" (Ray, B.C., 1976, 90 in "Blood Symbolism in African Religion" by M.Y. Nabofa 1984, 402). A similar word in Hebrew is *ruach*, which I think of not only as breath but as manifestation. The Mande of West Africa see *nyama* as "a hot, wild energy that is the animating force of nature". "*Nyama* is also like the Yoruban *ase*," (the transformative) power considered to be present in all humans and throughout the natural world.

⁴ Magdel le Roux. 2003. *The Lemba. A lost tribe of Israel in Africa? South Africa*:Unisa Press / Uitgewers. pg. 2.

⁵ Hebrew for Sabbath, the day of rest, which Jews observe each week from Friday at sundown until Saturday at sundown. *Shabbat* is the *Sephardic* pronunciation; *Shabbos* is the common *Ashkenazic* pronunciation.

⁶ From the Hebrew root of *kosher*, meaning "fit" or "proper". The laws of *kashrut* are the biblical dietary laws laid out in the book of Leviticus (Chapters 11, 17).

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- ⁷ Here, too, there is a need to hold two contradictory positions as being equally valid; circumcision and *mikvah* are practiced differently in different parts of the world. See *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* for Judy Grahn's view of circumcision as a parallel menstrual rite.
- ⁸ This is a ritual which all Lemba girls used to go through; my impression is that those living in cities no longer practice it but I have not done an exhaustive study on this point.
- ⁹ The first public bat mitzvah ritual in the United States occurred in 1922, when twelve-year old Judith Kaplan, daughter of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, stepped to the bimah or pulpit of her father's synagogue, She recited a blessing, read a portion of the Torah in Hebrew and English and then intoned the closing blessing, "shocking a lot of people." The ceremony did not become commonplace in either the Reform or Conservative Jewish movements until the 1950's. (Source: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/firstbat.html>, accessed August 3, 2006.)
- ¹⁰ Saldinger, personal communication, 2002.
- ¹¹ Bond, personal communication, 2002.
- ¹² Judy Grahn, "*Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs? An Application of Metaformic Theory to Menarche Celebrations and Goddess Rituals of Kerala and Contiguous States in South India*" (PhD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 1999).
- ¹³ Mathivha, Prof. M.E.R. 1992. *The Basena/Vamwenye/Balemba*. South Africa: Morester Printers. 48
- ¹⁴ Grahn, personal communication, May 12, 2008.
- ¹⁵ Mathivha, 1992.
- ¹⁶ However, I must note that this sense of embarrassment seemed to overtake feelings of fear or shame which have been expressed by Lemba and U.S. Jewish women as their own reactions in their youth. I believe there is still shame surrounding it for some girls, but I would like to think it will soon be a thing of the past.
- ¹⁷ Although Rudo did not remember whether it was red ochre, it seems highly likely based on our interviews.
- ¹⁸ Mathivha, personal communication, 2001.
- ¹⁹ See the work of Dianne Jenett (Jenett 1999), Judy Grahn (Grahn, 1993, 1999), Margaret Grove (Grove 1999).
- ²⁰ Grahn 1993 and 1999, Birnbaum 1993, Moser 2005, Long 1978, Grove 1999, Cartwright-Jones 2004, Bohannan 1956.
- ²¹ Fox 1995, 497.
- ²² Fox, pg. 553, 1995.
- ²³ Biale 1992, 55.
- ²⁴ Biale 1992. Ibid.
- ²⁵ Rubin 2001, <http://www.mikvahproject.com/infoabout2.html>.
- ²⁶ Grahn 1999.
- ²⁷ Through story, instruction, jokes, proverbs, song, prayers.
- ²⁸ Grahn, 1993, 17.
- ²⁹ To meet 'legal' or halakhic requirements, a mikvah must contain a minimum of 40 se'ah (Heb.) (about 87 gallons) of undrawn water (not filled by bucket or by metal pipes.)
- ³⁰ This includes, among other things, the thorough cleansing of the body in a shower or bath of twenty to thirty minutes, as noted—which could be said to indicate that the mikvah is not about actually getting clean, but rather becoming spiritually purified, and the removal of such things as eye makeup, wig, hair pins, a bandage, jewelry or nail polish—anything that would come between the woman and the water.
- ³¹ Interviews with twenty Motati village women, South Africa, personal communications, August 2002.
- ³² Thanks to my friend Joyce Share for confirming this point.
- ³³ Often made from sorghum.
- ³⁴ [34] "The Thunder, Perfect Mind," a liturgical poem narrated by a female divine revealer, or oracular figure, is one of the ancient Nag Hammadi texts. This collection of over fifty Gnostic manuscripts, discovered in upper Egypt in 1945, is believed to have been written during the third and fourth centuries C.E..
- ³⁵ Rabbi Elyse Goldstein's *Re-Visions*, 1998.
- ³⁶ Lynn Gottlieb's *She Who Dwells Within*, 1995.
- ³⁷ Marcia Falk's *Book of Blessings*, 1996.
- ³⁸ Kien, personal communication, 2001.

³⁹ www.deannalam.com

⁴⁰ See Lyn Brown and Carol Gilligan's work on how young girls' self-esteem, confidence and consequently school grades drop around age eleven (Brown and Gilligan, 1993).

⁴¹ Magdel le Roux wrote *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?* 2003. Pretoria: University of South Africa.