

New moon and a time for change

A COUPLE of weeks ago I attended my New Moon group, a group of Jewish women who meet once a month to discuss issues of significance to them. It is rather like an old consciousness-raising group except that the issues raised tend to be about women and Judaism. This time we discussed "women and ritual" directed by an academic involved in teacher education. The evening was very striking for several ritualistic reasons.

First, the meeting took place just after the start of the new academic session and I felt we were beginning again as an annual ritual. The educator Judy Keiner who led the group was a perfect model of an excellent academic using the most up-to-date teaching methods. She had prepared a task sheet for us all, on which were listed half a dozen questions and a number of background points and queries. She divided us up into three groups and allocated each group a couple of the questions to discuss. After about 40 minutes she interrupted our, by then, animated conversations and regrouped us to discuss another set of questions. After another 40 minutes or so we were reluctantly brought together to share all of our thoughts. We all could have continued well into the night.

It was not only the topic that excited us but the method of discussion. This method of teaching, especially for adults, in seminar-like groups of 20 and



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more is probably far more effective than the traditional ones. I have just introduced this style of teaching seminars for our first year undergraduates, most of whom happen also to be women and mature students. We are also now expected to teach seminars over two rather than one-hour periods and to groups of around 20. So far it seems to be working extremely well to split the seminar into small group discussions around a piece of reading, with some specific questions. My seminar groups have been far more lively and engaging than when one or two of the students have been expected to do the reading ahead of time and then introduce the

topic. As a teacher one is then far more dependent upon the students' capabilities. Certainly, the New Moon group felt very engaged. In this respect I felt that we were creating a new kind of educational ritual most appropriate for the new times and for adult women especially.

The second reason for the evening being particularly striking for me was that it also coincided with another set of annual beginnings, this time imbued with critical Jewish significance, that of the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement. Of all Jewish rituals these are perhaps the most important in the sense that they structure the annual cycle of events and attempt to ensure that we review the previous year, try to repent for our misdeeds and begin afresh.

Of course Judaism is replete with other rituals too not only of an annual kind but on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. Many of them are expected of all Jews alike but a large number are gender specific. At the New Moon group we discussed which ones we, as women, liked and approved of and which ones we disliked and perhaps even abhorred. And of course as such a group we were in any event trying to re-create an old ritual.

Such rituals are not, contrary to popular belief, static but are relatively changeful and somewhat dependent upon the outside context. The same week as this meeting I had been to see

The Dybbuk, by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican. The play is a new version of the one written in Yiddish by Solomon Anski in the first or second decade of this century after his conversion from Russian religious Judaism to Jewish socialism. It is about a poor Chassidic Jewish community and set in the Ukraine at about the turn of the century. The theme is that of a woman possessed by a passion in the form of a spirit and the ways in which the community tries to exorcise it.

At one level the play can be seen as one revolving around traditional Jewish religious rituals of an especially patriarchal kind. This production made a great deal of the male religious rituals, presenting them in particularly stark form. At another level the play could be read as a sympathetic critique of a community constrained by abject poverty yet committed to some higher values than those merely of a material nature. At yet another level the play could be seen as a latter day Romeo and Juliet; indeed the programme notes call it "a tale of passion and possession; a bitter and extraordinary love story". In any event this current production contextualises Jewish rituals and illustrates dramatically just how much has changed in a relatively short period of time, despite the enduring spiritual themes. It also shows the importance of particular ritual for sustaining a poor community. Despite our current recession,

even depression, it is clear that our economic circumstances do not require the same expressions of faith through such sexist rituals.

I have also just finished reading a terrific book entitled *Deborah, Golda, and me; being Jewish and female in America*. It is a kind of autobiography by a woman called Letty Cottin Pogrebin who is perhaps best known for being a founding editor of *Ms* magazine, along with Gloria Steinem. The book is an attempt to reconcile what Pogrebin originally considered to be contradictions in her life – the fact of growing up in a traditional Jewish family with her adulthood as a feminist. She succeeds in marrying these contradictory tendencies by reviewing the ways in which she grew up feeling marginal to Judaism as a woman, and marginal to feminism by being Jewish. On a more positive note, she shows how she formed her desire to be an activist and a leader from her background. In other words, Pogrebin has been in the forefront of feminists, particularly Jewish feminists, in creating new rituals, often secular rather than religious rituals, which take as their fundamental basis the desire to create a more caring and more moral world. And this book is more than just an account of the process for it also contains some of the most learned and scholarly critiques of the debates that have taken place around these issues. It should indeed prove invaluable.