



# “We are Already Dried Fruits”: Women Celebrating a Tu BiSh’vat Seder in an Israeli Reform Congregation

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## Abstract

Jewish holidays have always been considered a sociocultural framework that designs the Jewish communal landscape. One such ritual is Tu BiSh’vat Seder, a ritual conducted annually by various Jewish congregations and social movements on the 15th of the month of Sh’vat. These communities conduct the ritual with its traditional festival symbols and infuse it with new social and cultural interpretations. This essay presents an ethnographic analysis of a Reform Tu BiSh’vat Seder in Israel in which the holiday’s spiritual narrative and symbols were related to the female congregants’ bodies and expressed their social interaction. Observing the women’s preparations for the Seder, participating in the performance of the ritual itself, and listening to the female Rabbi’s sermon allowed me to understand the diverse gendered meanings which are infused into the ritual. The Tu BiSh’vat Seder revealed the female congregants’ attitudes toward their own bodies and ages and even their attitudes toward one another. Furthermore, by participating in the Seder, they did not only produce sisterhood and feminine solidarity but also blurred the boundaries between their private homes and the congregational space. Thus, it can be said that the Reform congregation serves as a safe space that provides a viable Jewish theological framework and is an arena for gender discourses.

**Keywords** Tu BiSh’vat · Reform congregation · Israel · Gender

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## Introduction

Holiday rituals are an integral part of Jewish culture, both reflecting and creating customs and beliefs (Domnitch 2000; Abramowitz and Silverman 1998). Sociologists and anthropologists have gone as far as to say that the Jewish calendar of holidays creates the identity of individuals and of the Jewish community (Shoham 2017a, b; Epstein 1987; Fader 2007; Levy 2018). Greenberg goes as far as to say that Jewish holidays are responsible for the continued existence of the Jewish people and their faith (Greenberg 1998: 17).

Indeed, the holidays occur every year at constant times and provide a consistent and stable cyclicity. However, holidays are also a fertile ground for change and renewal, which is demonstrated by the Jewish Reform Congregation's liturgy. Since the nineteenth century and the establishment of the Reform movement, Reform Jews have been in dialog with the *Halacha* and have been changing traditional laws (Meyer 1995: 4). This Reform theological practice has been harshly criticized by Orthodox rabbis, who consider it a desecration and profanation (Ferziger 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Reform liturgy is characterized by the replacing of Jewish traditional concepts and customs with a modern social narrative, new symbols, and innovative contemporary cultural interpretations (Sarason 2018: 159). One of the hallmarks of Reform Judaism is its promotion of gender equality, manifested in the last century by the participation of women in ritual, the ordination of women as rabbis, and later, by the recognition and inclusion of LGBTQ people (Ben-Lulu 2019b). This egalitarian mission has radically changed liturgical practices and language. The participation of women in religious activities and their ongoing integration in leadership roles makes the Reform community a religious gendered safe space (Marx 2009, 2016). In addition, the role of the *minhagim* (formalized Jewish religious customs), for example, has undergone profound changes through the 200-year history of the Reform movement. Meanwhile, in recent years, there has been a trend in the Reform congregation to prefer a reversion back to traditional forms of the *minhagim* (Meyer 2019).

Tu BiSh'vat Seder is a ritual created by Jewish mystics in the sixteenth century upon the initiative of HaAri (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria) and his followers with the aim of expressing the yearning for redemption in the nation's religious life. Emphasizing the connection between humans and nature, they elevated this day to the status of a holiday and issued instructions to eat from the fruit of the land and recite songs and praise in honor of fruit (Brumberg-Kraus 2010). This Kabbalistic custom first prevailed among Sephardic Jews and was later accepted by other congregations and ultimately became part of the official Halacha books.

In contrast to the traditional Tu BiSh'vat Seder, the Reform congregation's Seder is a gendered religious performance. Based on my participation in three separate

<sup>1</sup> For example, Rabbi Moses Sofer (1762–1839), the Hatam Sofer, was one of the most vociferous opponents of the Reform movement during its initial rise in early nineteenth-century central Europe. In an 1819 letter, which upon its posthumous publication achieved almost canonical status among Sofer's students and followers, he articulated a sharply adversarial approach to the Reform congregation (Ferziger 2014: 53).

observances of Tu BiSh'vat Seder during 3 years of fieldwork at the Daniel Reform congregation in Jaffa, Israel, I argue that the holiday narrative and the female Rabbi's sermons were adapted to various feminine life experiences, while the holiday's symbols, such as the dried fruits, were interpreted as a woman's body.

To understand a women's traditional role in the Tu BiSh'vat Seder, one should consider the quote from the Book of Psalms (45: 14) "*Kol kvoda bat melech pnima*" ("A woman's greatness lies in her modesty") that has been interpreted to mean that a woman's place is in the private sphere of home and family. This can be seen in that women were, and in some communities still are, in charge of cooking and other preparations for holidays, in other words, doing more operational tasks essential for male engagement in holy matters. It can be said that these types of women's contributions to religious rituals are considered as "doing gender" and "doing religion" as explained by Avishai (2008: 413), who says that "doing religion" is a mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity rather than only a purposeful or strategic action. She suggests using this term to refer to the performance of a semiconscious self-authoring project.

Yet, the analogy to "doing gender" exposes the enactment of religiosity in the context of social norms and regulatory discourses. A Jewish woman's traditional role, or "doing religion," in the Tu BiSh'vat Seder can therefore be said to have circumscribed her identity within the limits imposed by Orthodox norms on those of her gender so that, by fulfilling that role, she is, in essence, "doing gender." Reform Judaism, as the pioneer Jewish movement advocating for gender equality, has created a new way for women to perform their religion which provides an empowered religious and gender identity.

Today, the American Reform movement is one of the dominant political players in the Jewish world. On one hand, the Reform movement has built impressive congregations and institutions throughout the USA. On the other hand, it has faced a great deal of resistance and leaves an ambiguous legacy, even though it has become the dominant Jewish religious force in the USA (Kaplan 2003: 1).

While the American Reform Jewish movement is accepted, the Reform community in Israel struggles for public recognition and equal rights against the Orthodox monopoly (Cohen 2004; Tabory 2000). Unlike the Orthodox community, the Reform are not supported by government funds, and their rabbis have no legal authority to officiate at weddings, divorces, or burials. Tabory emphasizes that reacting to the charges of Orthodox Judaism against the Reform congregation's own legitimacy deflects from their primary goal, presenting themselves as an alternative for the non-religiously identified public (Tabory 1991: 137). This marginal sociopolitical positionality of the Israeli Reform community might explain why it is almost entirely absent from sociological and anthropological research in Israel (Ben-Lulu 2017, 2019a; Tabory 2004). Thus, this discussion illuminates the contemporary socioreligious changes in the Israeli society and concludes with the role of religious communities in promoting gender discourses.

## The Metamorphosis of a Tu BiSh'vat Seder

Over the course of Jewish history, Tu BiSh'vat received various interpretations, influenced by attitudes toward the land of Israel as well as spiritual views regarding social and individual life issues. In the Zionist culture, Tu BiSh'vat became the holiday of “the Land,” focused on the crops grown in the Land of Israel and organized around rituals to commemorate the symbolic and practical connection between the people of Israel and their land. Planting seedlings prior to the establishment of the State of Israel was considered a political mission; such rites were manifested in the decrees of the Jewish mystics in Safed. In the Diaspora, Jews took care throughout the ages to bless and eat from the fruits of the land on this holiday, thereby (re)creating a sense of symbolic emotional and spiritual connection with the homeland (Brumberg-Kraus 2010).

The first pieces of evidence regarding the custom of eating dried fruits are from the sixteenth century. According to those sources, it appears that the custom emerged in Europe and was transferred to Israel with the arrival of the mystics from Spain and Portugal. In his book *Hemdat Yamim* (1763), Rabbi Binyamin HaLevi from Safed described how the holiday should be celebrated, resulting in a special rite for the holiday (Yaari 1963). Following the new rite, the mystics of Safed gathered around a table laden with 30 different types of fruit and decorated with myrtle and flowers, drank four glasses of white and red wine (symbolizing God's judgment and mercy), and studied verses dealing with fruits from the Torah, the Talmud, and the Zohar. Rabbi Chaim Vital, a student of Rabbi Issac Luria, emphasizes in his book *Etz HaChaim* (The Tree of Life) that there is a permanent and precise order for eating the fruit which is highly symbolic according to the wisdom of the Kabbalah. In addition, the rite included verses of redemption, and a special prayer was recited for the health of the trees (Elon 2000).

In the sixteenth century, the new Tu BiSh'vat custom spread out from Safed and reached the Jewish communities in Italy, the Balkans, Turkey, Arab countries (except for Yemen), and North Africa. The intense yearning for the Land of Israel was manifested in the form of trees and the ritual eating of their fruits (Steinberg 2007: 108). These fruits were divided into four groups by the mystics: fruits that are eaten whole, fruits with a pit, fruits with a skin, and fruits that are all skin. The mystics believed that eating them was a metaphor for the ascent of man through the worlds: the first world is the world of action and is symbolized by ten fruits whose external parts are eaten and their core thrown away, and the loftiest world is the world of creation, symbolized by fruits that are eaten whole and waste nothing (Rafel 1989: 155).

In addition to the spiritual characteristics, the holiday also had sociological and cultural attributes. For example, in Iran, Tu BiSh'vat was also a holiday for newlyweds. Alongside the custom of eating fruits by all those who were duty-bound to take a vow or whose relatives had passed away, grooms would send fruit to the homes of their in-laws (ibid., 159). Contrary to other decrees (some of which were also handed down by the students of Rabbi Issac Luria), the Tu

BiSh'vat Seder was held at the fully attended family table, laden with all sorts of wheat dishes, fruits, and wine. Women and children were invited to participate.

In recent years, this Kabbalistic custom has witnessed a renaissance.<sup>2</sup> Nonprofit associations, Jewish renewal movements, and various congregations are conducting the traditional Seder with texts, wine, and dried fruit. In these Seders, various interpretations of social reality and ecological and political issues are offered for the holiday's symbols, replacing the metaphysical Kabbalistic elements. The Jewish Reform Congregation has added a unique layer to the celebration of Tu BiSh'vat which marks and empowers gender identities.

## Methodology

This paper is based on fieldwork I conducted at the Daniel congregation between 2014 and 2017. The Daniel congregation, which is located at the Ruth Daniel Residence Hotel in Jaffa, is an Israeli Reform congregation that has been operating for over 20 years. The 50 members of the congregation are residents of Tel Aviv-Jaffa and other adjacent cities; most of them are older women from a variety of ethnic and sociocultural backgrounds. The congregants define themselves as secular Jews and traditional Jews (*Masorti*), and a few congregants identify as Reform Jews. The members participate in Shabbat services, holiday rituals, and Torah study classes (Beit Midrash).<sup>3</sup> Those that participate in the Torah classes do not necessarily take part in the services and vice versa. The female congregants participate in the rituals for diverse reasons, such as social needs, achieving religious capital, and feeling connected to their Jewish heritage in a gender-equal space.

This study focuses on the communal performance and the female participants' interpretations of the performance and their participation, which contrasts with previous research exploring the process of Jewish identity construction. In the ethnological space that Israel is, Jewish identity politics are constructed differently compared with the Diaspora's processes, which are mainly shaped by affiliation or nonaffiliation. The identification as "Reform" is neither common nor popular in Israel, and de facto, Israelis who participate in Reform congregations generally do not declare themselves as "Israeli Reform Jews" (Ben-Lulu 2019a).

Since 2010, the congregation has been led by Rabbi Mira Raz. She is a highly experienced community rabbi and, throughout the years, has developed a feminist spiritual leadership's style based on the wisdom of the Kabbalah. She facilitates communal Torah classes during the week and leads the Kabbalat Shabbat services, together with a permanent musician. The rabbi's approach characterizes the community's activities: Kabbalistic knowledge is embedded not only in the classes but

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<sup>2</sup> The Neo Kabbalah revival, which includes a resurgence of Kabbalistic and Hasidic doctrines and practices and an integration of Kabbalistic themes in various cultural fields, coincides with the emergence of the New Age and other related spiritual and new religious movements in the last decades of the twentieth century (Huss 2007: 107).

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Raz conducts semiweekly lessons in the Beit Midrash about the weekly portion and various Talmudic topics.

also in the way the rituals and the discourse are constructed by the members of the congregation (Ben-Lulu 2017: 6).

The primary method of data collection was the classic anthropological method of participant observation. I viewed this method as the most efficient for analyzing the practices being examined as they were conducted in ritual space and time. In addition to observing the congregation's celebration of three Tu BiSh'vat Seders, I also conducted 40 semistructured in-depth interviews in the second and third years of the study after getting to know most of the members of the congregation. The purpose of these interviews was to fill in the gaps, the black holes that were hidden from me during the observations, and to understand the congregants' motivations. During the interviews, I attempted to extract the meaning attributed to the Reform congregation and practice. As is customary in qualitative research, the names of the interviewees are presented as pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, except for the Rabbi's name, who is known as a public figure. Cultural anthropologists contend with the issue of a researcher's positionality during fieldwork (Coffey 1999; Ellis 2004). I grew up in a Sephardic Jewish family that has always accepted the Halacha as an authority and was never exposed to the Reform movement until my adolescence. Although I do not identify as an Israeli Reform Jewish man, I have felt relatively comfortable as a participant in most communal religious practices during fieldwork throughout my life, and I felt equally comfortable participating in the Daniel Reform Congregation's practices during this study. I felt sympathy with the female congregants; they reminded me of my beloved grandmothers. Other moments exposed a gap in perceptions due to age and gender differences between the congregants and me, especially when they described their feminine bodies' references or gender experiences. Some of these are included in the following ethnography.

### **“The Worms Will Eat Us Whole”**

In recent years, the Tu BiSh'vat Seder has become an annual ritual at the Daniel Congregation in Jaffa. Every year, the members of the congregation gather for an evening of explanation regarding the meaning of the Seder and the holiday's symbols. I arrived at the 2017 Seder earlier than the hour indicated in the invitation. The week before, at the conclusion of the weekly Torah class, one of the members of the congregation asked me to arrive early so that we could talk at ease. Upon entering the hotel, I approached Ilana, age 60 and a longstanding member of the congregation and resident of Jaffa. She was born in an Orthodox Sephardi family, and the Jewish tradition had been always part of her life. Dressed in a black dress and wearing a hat, she held plastic plates while, all around her, other volunteers were putting dried fruit onto them. She smiled as she offered me a date and said: “Eat, this is the world of action: Your research will be better now.” I smiled back and took the date.

Dina, another veteran member of the congregation, stood next to us with two small children. She held a bag with dried fruit, which she said were bought in the open market. Continuing Ilana's words, she emphasized that she viewed the fruit as a metaphor for her grandchildren:

Look, I brought dried bananas from the Carmel Market, and I brought the grandchildren: This is my creation. This is the proof that what Mira [the rabbi] says is not just stories. My children grew up and brought me grandchildren. What is left? Soon we will not be here. We went through our *tikkun*.<sup>4</sup> Our *tikkun* will soon be finished.

"What do you mean?" asks Miriam, another member of the congregation. Dina replied, laughing, "We are already dried fruits: Look at the skin of my face. We have a skin, we brought forth a creation, we were in the world of action, and soon we will be no more. This is exactly what we went through. We gave birth to children. The skin is like the womb that preserves our children. In the end, the worms will eat us whole. Including the pit [she laughs]. We are an incarnation."

Another member joined in and related a family tradition of mourning: "With us, when someone passes away, then all the women arrange bowls with dried fruit at the Shiva. It's a tradition. We eat nuts and raisins. The women take care of everything. I remember one of my mother's sisters bringing large trays when my father passed away. That's how it is with the Persian Jews: The women work hard even in the Shiva."

Dina: "Large trays? I thought the Persian Jews were misers. Dried fruits are not a custom with you only. We had them too, but at the Mimouna."<sup>5</sup> She laughs.

Me: "Wait, I don't understand. So dried fruits are symbols of mourning or joy?"

Dina: "What do you think...of course, they're dry. They are dead, not alive. They have no air, nothing. Crushed and wrinkled all of them."

An initial view of the preparations for the ritual seems as if they are hosting a party in their living room or kitchen. The conversation that developed around the tables shows that they have adopted the Kabbalistic jargon and knowledge of the congregation's Torah classes to describe their experiences as women, mothers, and grandmothers. Symbolically, the dried fruit has become a metaphor representing different things for different women, such as their grandchildren or even their bodies, which have experienced physiological changes with the passing of the years. Through engaging in experiences such as arranging the dried fruits on the festive table, they create a new interpretation of their family status and body, a trajectory of their current lives and even their future deaths.

In Western societies, elderly women are invisible individuals and discriminated against as far as participation in various cultural activities goes (Levy 1996; Krekula 2007; Gilad 2019; Rubinstein 1990; Vertinsky 1995). However, participation of

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<sup>4</sup> *Tikkun* is derived from the Hebrew verb "*letaken*," meaning to repair. In Kabbalistic philosophy, it acquired a spiritual meaning of repairing oneself and/or the world; hence the well-known term "*tikkun olam*," meaning "to repair the world."

<sup>5</sup> Mimouna is a traditional North African Jewish celebration dinner at the end of Passover.

elderly women in the Reform congregation is a break with traditional societal exclusion of older women from cultural or religious practices. In addition, as one of the women described, the gendered cultural norms are expressed by various ethnic practices to commemorate death or joyful events. As mentioned, among some ethnic Jewish communities the Jewish woman's place in the performance of religious and ethnic rituals remains in their home. This is not only an outcome of the patriarchal structure but also proof of a construct internalized by the women themselves and of their acceptance and reiteration of their position within the social order (Abu-Lughod 2002).

The choice of the female members of the congregation to volunteer to arrange and organize the ritual testifies to their equal place in the Reform community and spirit of initiative. They do not come to participate and passively consume community services; rather, they actively participate in organizing the ritual and have the opportunity to reconnect to national and family traditions. Ora, a veteran member of the congregation, decided that, instead of bringing dried fruit, she would bring homemade cookies:

For Tu BiSh'vat Seder I brought cookies that I made from tahini and coconut. I learned to make them from my mother who learned it from her mother. When I was a child, I would sit next to her and learn how to cook and bake. For hours. To this day, when I make them, I am reminded of her. I said, surely everyone will bring dried fruit, so I'll make cookies. I also brought them to one of the Havdala rituals, and my friends in the congregation loved them immensely. So, I said, why not? It's not like I have too much to do. The cookies are also good for diabetics, so that there will be no unpleasantness.

A year before I brought myrtle from my garden to the Seder, to have a pleasant fragrance. I scattered the stems and leaves on the tables. I also bring them as fragrance for the Havdalah that we have in the congregation. On the Sabbath we recite a blessing. This is what I always did at our home. So, I said that it could be suitable for Tu BiSh'vat; flowering, blooming. I wish I could bring the tree here, so the congregation will always smell good.

Tu BiSh'vat Seder was more than another opportunity to present Ora's baking skills; it was, rather, a performance of personal memorialization. Recipes that had been passed down from mother to daughter weaved a complex fabric of memory, identity, and family character. Also, the cookies have a functional role in nurturing friendship between herself and her friends. After bringing the cookies on a different occasion and meeting with success, she decided to prepare them especially for the Seder. This choice expressed the feelings of friendship and caring she held towards her friends in the congregation. This was also demonstrated by the serious attention to proper nutrition for women with diabetes. Thus, the body, through attention to its nourishment, is revealed as a social agent to connect social needs, such as expressing of friendship, to health discourse (Frost 2001).

Furthermore, choosing to bring a home-made product from her own home to the congregation's table was manifested also in scattering myrtle from her garden. The holiday topic or the blessing of the Creator of Fragrances justifies and validates her decision. Memories from home, how she performed the Havdalah along with her

father or baked cookies with her mother were experiences revived at the congregational performance. Whereas in Orthodox situations, women would be more likely to follow the traditions or sometimes not be allowed to participate in religious communal rituals, Ora became part of the ceremony by infusing what was meaningful to her personally and adding her story to the Seder; she felt comfortable doing so because she expected to be validated by the Reform congregation because of all of the female-empowering aspects.

### **“The Fruits are Our Texts”: Feminist Spiritual Sermon**

Every year the Daniel Congregation’s Seder begins with a sing-along. A female singer with a guitar commands the center of the room, with the members of the congregation joining in and singing Israeli folk songs while sitting around the tables laden with all that is good. In the 2016 Seder, immediately after the musical opening, Rabbi Raz, dressed in white, delivered a sermon and a Kabbalistic explanation of the meaning of the Seder:

Rabbi Raz is a charismatic leader who consciously shapes her rabbinical performance. Her sermons include attempts to persuade the members to assimilate the social aspect, equality and tolerance, with a discourse and language rooted in the Jewish sources (Ben-Lulu 2017). Rabbi Raz offers a Kabbalistic explanation as a means to self-knowledge. Her spiritual sermon justifies the *tikkun olam* vision by the inclusion of a biological analogy. This choice to explain social notion by mentioning a genetic phrase such as DNA reflects how the body is positioned again as an integral part of the communal performance and discourse. The fruits and the wine serve as political texts aimed at repairing social injustice and coping with social issues. Rabbi Raz reformulates the abstract religious thoughts into an individual narrative. She recognizes that the relationship between individualization, communality, and nationalism must be examined not only with macrosocial discourses and forces but also through identifying the local systems, daily life experiences, and personal meanings within which the subject is constructed; the holiday’s spiritual narrative and symbols were related to the female congregants’ bodies.

Later in the evening, in another sermon, Rabbi Raz likened the woman’s body to a fig to emphasize the link between body and soul, while anchoring the argument in a broader gender context:



Look at the red wine: This is the consciousness of the union of opposites of the whole of the one. This is ripeness, this is being in consciousness. Here is the fig: it is eaten whole, it enters the bloodstream, the cells, and we are one. I did not throw away the skin and did not leave out the pit. I ate it whole. Body and soul are one. There is no separation, really. Look, it is a consciousness in which people know how to accept everything under the sun as one. It is the cycle of life. It is the Creation! As women we must understand this because our bodies recycle every month. Like this fig. Therefore, it is written ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’; one must be aware of selfless love, to create an awareness of love. To be empathic, to have compassion in one, in all things created, to care for the living, the plants, and the animals. This is love according to the Torah.

By representing and explaining the Seder’s visual objects, Rabbi Raz provided a contemporary spiritual point of view over the world. Her sermon advocated responsibility and commitment for social change by showing a fig. This specific dried fruit was chosen to symbolize the physiological menstrual cycle. The fig, infused with a Kabbalistic meaning, is scientific proof of the recurring opportunity for new creation, a process in which flawed and unnecessary elements are cleaned out, generating the potential for creating a new world, a birth. This mention of the woman’s body in the sermon challenges previous religious approaches that perceived the female body as impure in the sacred space.

During the Seder, the members of the congregation listened to Rabbi Raz’s explanations, answered questions that were raised, and proved their proficiency in the material learned in the congregation’s *Beit Midrash* (literally, house of study). The congregants went on to further discuss the sermon and its presentation.

In the Seder of 2015, Ruth, one of the most prominent members of the congregation and a resident of Jaffa, was joined by a good friend.

It’s her first time in the congregation,” Ruth said. I took the opportunity to ask her friend about her first impression and she said: “I really like the whole symbolical view of the fruits. This is giving meaning to things. Suddenly a

fruit is like the body; it's like eating with flavor—a different flavor, a flavor of understanding.

This comment exposes the impact of the holiday's material symbols in the creation of the ritual. Tu BiSh'vat Seder, as a religious performance, is not only based on textual writing but also on using material objects (Vásquez 2011). The visibility of the dried fruits inspired her comment about the taste in double meaning to emphasize her experience. This answer left Ruth with a satisfied smile on her face. It seems that her invitation indeed bore fruit, so to speak. Ruth then addressed me and emphasized that, although she grants less importance to the Kabbalistic spiritual interpretation, she draws inspiration not from the texts that are being taught but from the vast knowledge of Rabbi Raz:

See how much power she has. How much knowledge. It drives me crazy each time. This woman fills me with inspiration. It gives me hope. I didn't come here for the dried fruit and I don't really believe in it. Pits, skins, OK. It's a nice metaphor. I didn't come for these stories. I came because I am moved, over and over again, with how Mira manages to bring a large group of women here and do something with them. At our age, the sons and grandchildren are busy with making us busy. All out of love of course. I thank God for them, daily. But if I suddenly have time to get out of the house and listen to knowledge, then I go out. It also gives me strength when I see Mira's passion and energy.

It appears, from Ruth's words, that the congregation and its leader Rabbi Raz invite women to feel equal in the religious space. Rabbi Raz exposed them to religious knowledge, such as Kabbala, which was prohibited to women throughout Jewish history. Her sermon was accepted not only as religious preaching supported by traditional sacred writings, but it was also adopted as a message of gender empowerment (Shokeid 2002: 118). Thus, the Tu BiSh'vat Seder challenges Jewish patriarchal perceptions of women's exclusion, while the Daniel Reform Congregation presents both a Jewish alternative of feminine communal leadership and religious capital to Israeli women.

## A Recipe for Hreimeh<sup>6</sup> or Tikkun Olam?

While Daniel congregation's rabbi aims to go from the material to the abstract and uses fruit as a metaphor for determining the social order, others wish to note and become familiar with the nutritional significance of the fruits themselves. Hagar, a member of the congregation, matched the fruit she brought to the health of the female body. As she put it, dried fruits have Kabbalistic energy but also calories:

I brought plums, which is said to be good for women's bone density. So, I said, go ahead, bring plums. I remember a moment where I found myself discussing

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<sup>6</sup> An extremely spicy fish with hot pepper sauce and spicy tomatoes.

with the people at my table what's healthy and what isn't. Mira had a conniption, yelling with a big smile that "the whole table began to worry about their diet because of you!" But what can I do? I can't shut up when I see people shoving garbage into their bodies. And it doesn't matter how much Mira tries to convince me that it's energy and spirituality ... for me it's sugar.

For Hagar, the conducting of a Tu BiSh'vat Seder meant not only absorbing religious knowledge that connected her with the Jewish bookshelf but also expressing her knowledge of nutrition. She felt responsible for herself and for those sitting next to her at the table. She considers the Seder as an opportunity for taking care of one's wellbeing and addressing unhealthy eating habits, in particular for women. Her response might also demonstrate how health and nutrition discourses are included at religious sites and are a popular issue under discussion among women.

In addition, the fact that she is seen as a "rebel" and as one who may obstruct the disciplined performance proves how much the ritual depends upon participation. It is more than passive observation of the Rabbi; it is a decisive moment in the congregation's essence. Moreover, Rabbi Raz's response showed how, by using humor, she tried to deal with a moment of disorder during the ritual.

In another example, it can be seen how the power of performance can also be a trigger of social motivation that arouses solidarity among the members of the congregation. Batya, one of the youngest congregants, joined the congregation when she was exposed to coexistence Shabbat services—particular performances which were conducted during the summers of 2015 and 2016 for conveying messages of hospitality and friendly neighborhoods. The Daniel Congregation together with Women Wage Peace (an Israeli grassroots organization) dedicated these rituals to promote interreligious dialog between Arab citizens and Jews. Batya is a political activist and sees the Reform congregation as a space to support modern social values in the religious sphere rather than a place for worship. She argues that the Seder expresses social values of respect, caring, and giving, which she finds to be relevant for describing the relationship between herself and the other members of the congregation:

It's not something specific that I felt after the Tu BiSh'vat Seder; I usually feel this way, but I can say that I ended the Seder full of inspiration. Very strengthened. Not only because I opened my mind and understood new things due to everything that Mira explained. Look, she has incredible knowledge. But it's not the knowledge, it's more that I felt the congregation itself. It was raining cats and dogs that day, there was a real downpour, and yet everyone brought something and there was very decent attendance. And so much consideration and generosity. Shoshi, one of the congregants, knows that I love cashews, so she prepared these cashews with salt that she fries at home. It's out-of-this-world yummy. You should have seen the smile on her face when she brought me the box with the nuts. What is it they say? God is in the details. It sounds kitschy but it moved me. It was important for her to show me that she cares for me. Now, it's not like she is a close friend or that we have a relationship. She could be my mother, yes. And she actually remembered. I have close friends that don't treat me this way.

... Because it sometimes makes me laugh when Mira talks about *tikkun olam* and how to be good people. It always sounds as if the world is so bad and humanity is rotten. And then you come to the congregation and you see that the world is actually good and people are concerned for each other. They care and they help and volunteer. And it hits you in the face. Once in the *Beit Midrash* I said to Mira, in jest, that instead of giving us a recipe for *tikkun olam* she should give a recipe for *hreimeh*. Everyone laughed. But they say that in every jest there is a kernel of truth.

For Batya, the moment she experienced the surprising gesture of another member of the congregation reinforced her sense of connection, appreciation, and belonging to the specific member and to the congregation in general. This case demonstrates the extent to which food is a crucial element in establishing interactions between women (Allen and Sachs 2012; Bynum 1988). From her point of view, this experience located the congregation as a proper social space, a model of ideal social relations. In these moments, she experienced a paradox between the discourse calling for *tikkun olam* and improving society and the sense that the world is already repaired and people are concerned and care for each other. As far as she was concerned, the ritual reflected the values of the congregation while also undermining the reality outside of it.

The dynamic interaction forged time and again in the congregation through the women's participation in congregational practices is not based, necessarily, on consuming shared knowledge in the Beit Midrash or on seeking out a peer group; rather, it is based on a "recipe for *hreimeh*," which demonstrates that the culinary is a joint subject among women. For Batya, there was no contradiction: Alongside Torah studies and reading and interpreting the texts of the Jewish bookshelf, it was possible and even desirable to add spices from the private kitchen of every member. Thus, as seen in Batya's and Hagar's experiences, I argue that, through food, as a sociocultural agent, the women members of the congregation extend the elements of friendship, sisterhood, and caring to each other and expose each other to family characteristics and narratives.

## Discussion: For Woman Is a Tree of the Field

This study presents an Israeli Reform Jewish performance of Tu BiSh'vat Seder at the Daniel congregation by voicing female congregants' interpretations of the ritual. Through interaction with the holiday's symbols, absorbing religious knowledge, spontaneous conversations, and friendly gestures, the female congregants experienced and constructed the Reform congregation as a gender safe space. The ritual's setting allowed them to articulate changes in their body, to remember and apply family gender norms, to bridge past and present and bridge the congregation and their homes. Thus, contrary to prior research claims that the role of performing holiday rituals is to establish national faith and identity, Reform Tu BiSh'vat Seder is positioned as a temporal space which creates feminine social interaction (sisterhood) and generates gendered social discourses.

One of the dominant issues discussed during the Seder ceremonies was women's perceptions of their bodies, which was creatively expressed through metaphors and interpretations. For example, Rabbi Raz, in her Kabbalistic sermon, infused the dried fruit with feminine and religious meanings that drew the feminine body as a central agent in women's experiences, such as a birth. The material object not only symbolized the spiritual Jewish perception but also illustrated feminine bodily experiences. The women's world is perceived through a certain localization of our bodies in time and space (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Rabbi Raz exposed the congregants to her feminine spiritual theology. She demonstrated de facto how Reform Judaism collapses gendered patriarchal walls and the exclusion of women from full participation in the religious practices while developing feminine religious leadership. The exposure to religious knowledge creates life experiences in religious jargon and the sharing of personal thoughts, such as those about body image, publicly in a sacred sphere (Sibeko and Haddad 1997). Therefore, the female congregants appreciate her knowledge and are inspired by her sermons and impressed by her professional presence.

Moreover, Rabbi Raz's choice to base her sermon on a Kabbalistic message shows how Reform leaders engage with Jewish diverse traditions and do not frame themselves only with Reform theology. As in the case of Rabbi Raz's explanation of *tikkun olam*, Reform Rabbis have chosen to appropriate Kabbalistic terms and associate them with social justice to place social justice in a historically Jewish context (McClanahan 2010: 29). This theological tendency of renewal constructs the contemporary Reform liturgy as postmodern political worship, malleable to fit the needs of changing groups in a changing society.

In addition to Rabbi Raz's sermon, the dominance of the body issue was also introduced by engagement with foods. The friendly gestures established female friendships across ages and ethnicities and expressed concern and caring for the other congregants. The dried fruits and Ora's cookies inspired honest conversation about maintaining a healthy lifestyle and body image, in particular among elderly women. They formulated gendered and bodily experiences through references to the traditional symbols and narrative. Thus, participating in the Reform Tu BiSh'vat Seder undermines exclusionary practices toward elderly women.

The American anthropologist Susan Sered (Sered 1988a, b) demonstrates in her research how devout elderly women turn the liturgy and theology into a personal matter to maintain their own health and safety as well as the health and safety of their family members and relatives. Indeed, this study supports Sered's conclusions by showing that the same issues were discussed, but it also exposes that conducting of ritual and engagement with traditional symbols and text do not necessarily result from religious capital or spiritual motivations, as opposed to the Orthodox theological conception that characterized the elderly women in Sered's research.

In contrast to Halacha law that considers the female body as an impure object (Adler 1972), Reform Jewish rituals, as Tu BiSh'vat Seder shows, promotes feminine bodily representation and discourse, such as body image (Spurgas 2005). Through the presence of food in the Seder, in particular by paying attention to issues such as health and nutrition, the female congregants expressed their concern for their own bodies and took responsibility for each other. Thus, this study challenges former

research which has concluded that food is a functional way to sanctify the body, saying that blessing and eating foods or fasting makes the body as holy (Bynum 1988). Here, Tu BiSh'vat's traditional food lost its symbolic religious significance and was infused with social meanings. A woman's body is not only a social agent in the struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy (Dill 1983: 1); it is also a way to create a social dynamic between women themselves. This understanding challenges previous feminist claims about bodily issues among contemporary anthropological literature (Joyce 2006: 44).

In addition, the female congregants' motivations are not only derived from religious piety. They participated in a friendly feminine environment that allowed them to voice their attitudes toward their bodies, their health, and their age issues in a Jewish context. By doing so, they declare the congregation a feminine space, which temporally bridges the gaps between ethnicity, age, and other categories of distinction. In the Reform congregations, Tu BiSh'vat Seder provides traditional symbols and religious heritage that become social mediators of feminine identification, subjectivation, and association.

Furthermore, Daniel Congregation's members connect their homes and their families to the congregation's Seder through food, behavioral patterns, and sharing memories of the past. Participation in a Seder maintains their ideas, tastes, gender, and family norms, which have been imprinted upon them throughout the years. Daniel Congregation's Seder demonstrates that the categories of religion and gender are not separated and shows how "doing gender" and "doing religion" intersect in Jewish feminine performance. Unlike the Orthodox communities in the Israeli public space where women's religious involvement is traditionally prohibited, Daniel congregation's Tu BiSh'vat Seder is a religious platform which allows and promotes women's active and complete participation. Thus, Reform rituals, such as other post-modern religious configurations, are more than obligatory worship with the purpose of constructing a dialog between women and tradition; they are a dynamic performance of women's social interaction creating knowledge, inspiration, and relationships and validating women's experiences and women's bodies in an inclusive safe space.

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