Connected to Community:
Jewish Ritual, Meaning, and Gender at Brandeis University

Master’s Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Hornstein Program for Jewish Professional Leadership
Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts
in
Jewish Professional Leadership and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

by
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May 2016
Acknowledgements

One of the first classes I took as a graduate student was called “Half-Jews, Queer-Jews, and Bu-Jews: Mapping Jewish Identities in America,” taught by then-PhD-candidate Emily Sigalow. I went into the class intrigued by intersectional identities and I came out intrigued by qualitative research. Although I had no idea what I wanted to study for my (then still so far off) master’s thesis, I knew how I wanted to study it.

This thesis has truly been a labor of love, emphasis on labor. Beyond Emily’s class, I had very little idea of what goes into sociological research, and, in my typical fashion, I dove straight in, and asked questions later. I am grateful to Emily not only for introducing me to this field of research but also for introducing me to her dissertation advisor, Sylvia Barack Fishman. Professors Fishman and Amy L. Sales, my advisors in this thesis, have offered me guidance and support throughout, encouraging me all along.

I am also indebted to Harry Abrahams, Jewish Student Life Associate at Brandeis Hillel, Rabbi Peretz Chein of Chabad House Brandeis, Rabbi David Pardo of the Jewish Learning Initiative at Brandeis, and Rabbi Elyse Winick, the Jewish Chaplain at Brandeis, along with multiple student leaders at Brandeis Hillel, for their assistance in recruiting research participants. And, of course, a huge debt of gratitude is owed to those students who participated in my research, especially those who agreed to sit down for an interview.

I could not have completed this massive project without the support of my friends and family, who had to deal with my complaints and anxieties for a very long stretch. I am particularly appreciative of my cohort-mates in the 2016 class of the Hornstein program—we always say we are the best cohort and the encouragement I have received from you during this past year has been incredible. I am also especially grateful to my mother, who is
my rock, an incredible sounding board, and whose excellent editing chops helped make many of my drafts that much better.

Finally, there are not enough thanks in the world for my partner, Nate. Not only did he support me, encourage me, offer suggestions, order me ice cream delivery, help re-code my survey results, edit my writing, locate useful sources, and offer a shoulder for when the times got tough (and they got tough a lot), but he did it all while almost completely house-bound with a broken leg. I don’t know what I would have done without you. Thank you.
Abstract

Connected to Community:
Jewish Ritual, Meaning, and Gender at Brandeis University

A thesis presented to the Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership and
Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

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What rituals do actively-involved Jewish undergraduate students practice? What is
meaningful to them and why? What role does gender play? This thesis seeks to answer
those questions. The thesis is based primarily on qualitative research, consisting of long-
form interviews with undergraduate students at Brandeis University. This exploratory
study addresses the intersection of the study of American Judaism, ritual studies, and
gender and Judaism. The non-generalizable findings suggest that participants frequently
tinker with practices and affiliations to mix-and-match different aspects of Jewish life, and
that community is highly important. These findings support existing research theories
about ritual and community and religious life among emerging adults. In addition, findings
suggest that community may be so important to participants that they are willing to engage
with discomfort and tension around issues of gender in order to practice their Judaism in
spaces of meaningful community.
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Introduction

A ritual, writes Barry Stephenson in his 2015 book, *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction*, is “both action and idea.” True, rituals are “first and foremost a doing.” But—they are also “a way of thinking and knowing.” ¹ Stephenson’s framework of ritual theory captured my attention when I first began my research for this project. As a Jewish communal professional, I have been hearing about the decline of Jewish ritual observance constantly since the release of the 2013 Pew Research Center’s “A Portrait of Jewish Americans.” According to the report, fully three-quarters of Jews attend religious services only a few times per year or less. Fewer than a quarter always or usually light Shabbat candles, and in 2012, barely half fasted for part or all of the day on Yom Kippur. ² Declining ritual practice is not unique to Jews. In 2015, a Pew Center report on religious decline in the United States as a whole found that “as a result of...growth and secularization among the religiously unaffiliated—the share of Americans who exhibit high religious commitment is declining.” ³

Prior to my graduate studies, I worked for three years with young Jews on a college campus. I met with many of those so-called unengaged Jews and helped and watched quite a few of them become engaged Jews. In 2015, as a candidate for Master’s degrees in Jewish Professional Leadership and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, I wanted to learn what

actually attracts young Jewish adults to religious participation. Why do college students choose to spend their Friday nights engaged in prayer? What draws them to ritual and what does it mean to them? This thesis is based on research that seeks to understand what college students’ ritual practice looks like, what it means to them, and what role gender plays in their understanding of Judaism and Jewish ritual practice.

Rituals are repeated, symbolic actions. Whether they are repeated daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly, rituals recur and are performed multiple times. This repetition serves to reinforce over time the values and norms of a group; these values and norms are enacted in the performance of such ritual. Lesley Northup has argued that “ritual praxis is the key to understanding religiosity.” In other words, the ways in which people practice ritual can reveal much about what religious life means to them.

Unlike ritual behaviors, which are most often developed by and for a group and are usually recognizable even across variations and denominations, meaning fluctuates from person to person. Meaning, Riv-Ellen Prell writes, is not a “given. In the act of performing rituals that convey cultural ideas and assumptions, people come to hold and value them.” Ritual prompts and develops meaning through repetition. A ritual could be meaningful because it carries emotional significance. A ritual could be meaningful because it evokes a special memory. A ritual could be meaningful because it helps a person articulate their beliefs. Whereas ritual is primarily a behavior, meaning is primarily a feeling. Only the person who experiences meaning, therefore, can define what meaning is. Yet, when it

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comes to religious ritual, understanding the connection between the two is important because it is precisely this connection that attracts people to religious practice.

This thesis is an attempt to understand the connection between ritual and meaning—between behavior and feeling—amongst Jewish college students. In addition, this thesis asks how ritual and meaning intertwine with gender, an ever-present factor in Judaism. Community, choice, exploration, grappling with tough issues—these are all themes that emerged when I interviewed sixteen undergraduate students and asked them to tell me about their ritual practice, what they find meaningful, and how they understand the role of gender in Jewish life.

I decided to interview students about their ritual practice because I wanted to know more about the Jewish lives and identities of those who are active in a Jewish community. The results of the Pew report on Jewish practice may be unsettling, but they also reveal little about what Jewish practice looks like for those who do engage with ritual. As a communal professional, I am not only concerned with those who are disengaged and how to re-engage them, but also with those who are active members of the community. In order to support them, I want to know why and how they are involved in Jewish life and what structures enable their involvement. In the words of Prell, "what theorists have overlooked is what religion means to those who do participate." This thesis grew out of my desire to learn more about these actively involved Jews, and out of my growing interest in sociological research, pluralistic and young Jewish communities, and a deep attention to gender dynamics and gender politics. There is an expanse of research in the sociology of

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6 Ibid., 163.
religion, the study of rituals and societies, religion and Millennials, and gender issues. Yet very little work has addressed the specific intersection of topics in this thesis.

This thesis is based on the results of an online survey and a series of interviews with survey respondents—all undergraduate Jewish students at Brandeis University—about ritual, meaning, and gender. The study was exploratory in nature, addressing the identified gap in existing research using mixed methods and a sample of convenience. Due to the nature of this study’s sample, the results are not generalizable. In addition, this study captures a snapshot during one period of these students’ emerging adulthood phase. These students’ behaviors, beliefs, and affiliations may continue to change in the coming years as they leave the boundaries of the college campus and begin to explore what their Jewish adult life will look like. This thesis is not meant as a research report. Rather, it seeks to present the findings of exploratory research in order to get a better understanding of the relationships between ritual, meaning, and gender for a specific sample of students. The results of this specific study do appear to support existing theories about Jewish life for college students.

In the Literature Review, I will discuss how religion and Judaism in America, ritual practice, religion in college, and gender have all previously been studied. In Chapter One, I discuss the survey results and analyze some interviewees’ ritual practice in order to paint a portrait of the sample and contextualize the interviews. The survey results suggest that the sample consists of students who appreciate the fluidity of the college campus and for whom group affiliation and gender dynamics are intertwined. Chapter Two explores the depth of meaning in ritual practice for interview participants. I suggest that community, as the foundational sociologists argued, is highly important. In Chapter Three, I examine
interviewees’ thoughts on gender and ritual and argue that these students see gender as a complex issue: They are constantly negotiating personal and communal norms and seeking to figure out their own beliefs.

Ultimately, the findings from this study suggest that community and the group are important parts of Jewish life for the interviewees. Even when the most meaningful ritual is a personal one, even if meaning is private, the community always looms large. Group affiliation is imperative to understanding ritual practice and ritual meaning. Group affiliation is equally critical to understanding the role of gender in the interviewees’ Jewish lives, as well. I believe this finding is important because it supports many of the existing theories about the centrality of community religious life and ritual practice.
Literature Review

This study on ritual and gender focuses on the intersection of two broader fields of research. The first is the sociological study of religion and, more specifically, the study of Judaism in America. The second is the study of the role of gender in Judaism. In this literature review, I examine the existing research in these fields in order to frame my research.

To study Judaism in America today requires attention to three different subjects. The first is the history and sociology of religion more broadly in America. Second, because Judaism is often studied and Jewish life often measured through the lens of ritual practice, there must also be a consideration of ritual theory and the sociological study of ritual. Finally, understandings of generational change and religious life in the context of college campuses are necessary.

Religion in America

Religion is central to American life. In 2014, less than a quarter of Americans were unaffiliated with any religious tradition; in 2007, only 16% of Americans were unaffiliated. Three major, interrelated aspects of contemporary American religion are the influence of family, ongoing generational transformation, and a growing interest in spiritual seeking.

First, American religion is closely tied with the family unit. In qualitative interviews with adults who as children were raised religiously, Robert Wuthnow found that many of

his informants closely associated religion with home and family life. Many of them engaged in religious practices because their parents did, understood God in ways influenced by family “dynamics,” and learned religious principles at home. One informant in Wuthnow’s study even reported that church “reinforced” what he learned at home, “not the other way around.” In addition, holidays were observed with the immediate and extended families; grandparents especially were a crucial component of religious life. Wuthnow found grandparents were often a vital link to traditional religiosity and created emotional attachments to “dutiful, religious practice” that might otherwise carry a “negative connotation.”

Similarly, Wade Clark Roof, who studied Baby Boomers’ religious influences, beliefs, and practices, also emphasizes the role of families. For the generation that Roof studied, however, it is important that families, once the core social unit of American life, were becoming “unraveled.” Roof notes that in the post-Baby Boom world, “families must compete with peer groups and the media.” Still, even with other competing socializing agents, Roof emphasizes the prominence of family as an early influence and believes that in studying religion, the “journey” is important (as does Wuthnow). Family is thus critical in the early stage of a person’s journey.

Wuthnow and Roof focus on people of all faiths, but the majority of their research looks at Christians as the dominant religious group in America. However, the sociological milieu of American Judaism in many ways reflects the broader American religious landscape. Family is also a key component for American Jewish life. In their survey of

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“moderately-affiliated Jews” (the apparent middle ground of the community), Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen learned that families “loomed large in respondents' accounts of their Jewish journeys, activities, and households.” Cohen and Eisen also found, like Wuthnow, that grandparents held great emotional importance to their informants' sense of Jewishness. This emotional aspect of grandparents is important because of theories on the relationship between assimilation, declining practice, and “nostalgia.”

A second aspect of American religion is dynamism, the idea that American religion is transformed with each new generation. This is a key theme for Roof, who posits that “new maps [of religion] are called for.” He notes that with increasing pluralism, modernization, and individualism, “religious identities are malleable and multifaceted” in ways they were not before the Baby Boom generation. These changes in religious expression, particularly the growing trend of individualism, are examples of critical ways in which the Baby Boomers helped transform what American religion looks like and how it is practiced. While data from certain studies suggest declining religiosity, Roof argues that, for the Boomers and post-Boomers, “religious identities in contemporary society are fluid, multilayered, and to a considerable extent personally achieved.” Both Roof and Wuthnow would be skeptical of whether the questions—such as frequency of service attendance—asked by research firms like Pew accurately measure the true extent of American religiosity.

As with family, so too do generational shifts affect American Judaism. For example, the women’s rights movement has had a significant impact on Jewish life. In her important

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1993 book on Jewish feminism, Sylvia Barack Fishman characterizes Jewish feminism as “the new American Jewish immigration.” As she explains, feminism has had an impact on the same scale as the waves of immigration, which “renewed and revitalized American Jewish life.” Fishman argues that feminism more broadly helped Jewish women understand that their roles within Jewish life could be expanded just as in American political and economic life. Once these women, especially within the liberal denominations of Judaism, realized this, they began “agitating for more participatory roles.” And, in turn, Jewish feminism affected all denominations of Judaism. Paula Hyman believes feminism will continue to affect American Judaism in the years to come. More recently, historian Jonathan Sarna has supported the argument that feminism as a movement “transformed” American Judaism. Sarna demonstrates the significant impact the women’s rights movement had in changing the leadership and structure of the Jewish community. His research shows that by increasing the sphere of participation to women, non-Orthodox Jewish movements galvanized interest in Jewish life for a whole new portion of the population. In Sarna’s words, “the discontinuities that [feminists] introduced into Jewish life worked to promote religious continuity.”

Additionally, both Roof and Wuthnow argue that generational shifts in the broader American religious landscape reacted to and integrated an increased sense of individualism. This has been equally true of American Jews, who are now less inclined

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toward institutions, and more inclined, as Cohen and Eisen phrase it, toward the “sovereign self.”

The third major aspect of American religion is the focus on spirituality. For Wuthnow, spiritual seeking is a part of the maturation process, whereby those who “grew up religious move from the taken-for-granted world in which they had been raised to a more deliberate, intentional approach to faith.” For Roof, the spiritual “quest” is both a product of the Baby Boomer generational transformation and a reaction to the modernization and globalization of the world. In response to increasingly uncertain times that were filled with unrest, Roof argues, “young Americans...were looking for a more direct experience of the sacred.” This trend away from institutional religiosity is even more pronounced among young adults: a 2005 study on Generation Y found that a full 35% of respondents described themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

These three components are connected. Wuthnow emphasizes the critical role of family and especially grandparents because family has an increased influence in the early years. Yet, as people age and mature, they develop their own beliefs and ways of practice. Thus Roof, who focuses on generational shifts, sees transformation in American religious life. Even so, these generational shifts are in response to familiar, familial religious practices. Therefore, the role of family is still visible and viable even in the generational

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16 Cohen and Eisen, The Jew Within, 13, 15-16.
17 Wuthnow, Growing up Religious, 162.
18 Roof, Spiritual Marketplace, 41-44 75, 86. It should noted, however, that sociologists and historians sometimes overlook the spirituality of past generations; it should not be taken for granted that the Baby Boomers were the first to discover or express spirituality as it were, even if that spirituality was new-found for the Boomers and took on new forms. For an example of how spirituality can be overlooked by scholars of religious life, see Pamela S. Nadell, “Opening the Blue of Heaven to Us’: Reading Anew the Pioneers of Women’s Ordination,” Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues 9, no. 1 (2005).
transformation of religious life. Further, the growing popularity of “spiritual seeking” is directly tied to value shifts that generational transformation has brought on. It is not a coincidence that the idea that one could be “spiritual but not religious,” where one seeks direct access to the sacred rather than through an institution, gained momentum alongside growing individualism.

**Ritual Practice/Performance**

Within the study of religion is the specific study of ritual practice. It is important, however, to take note of the fact that classical sociologists and ritualists have a different understanding of ritual than do practitioners, especially practitioners of Jewish ritual. Early sociologists of religion emphasized the importance of the group and the role ritual played in maintaining the group structures and norms. Emile Durkheim, considered one of the founders of sociology and in particular, sociology of religion, believed that religious rites were constructed to maintain the social group; in turn, these rituals came to have meaning because of the group. In the introduction to his important, early twentieth-century work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim wrote that,

> religion is inherently a social thing. Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups.\(^{20}\)

Durkheim was not alone in his belief that the group was vital to religious life; nor was this concept limited to early sociologists. Victor Turner, an important scholar in the field of ritual studies, wrote almost six decades after Durkheim that, “in *rites de passage*, men are released from structure into communitas, only to return to structure revitalized by

their experience of communitas.”

Contemporary scholars continue to support this framework of ritual. As recently as 2015, Barry Stephenson has argued that ritual “binds groups together, ensuring their harmonious functioning by generating and maintaining orders of meaning, purpose, and value.” Many scholars of women’s religious practices have focused on the importance of the group, as well. For instance, Norma Baumel Joseph, in a chapter on women and ritualized memory, claims that “religious ritual creates the arena in which the individual expresses solidarity with the group and the group manages to incorporate the individual.”

The group and the community are also important to Jewish ritual. Joseph’s chapter is on memory and one of the means of ritually enacting memory in Judaism is the recitation of the Mourner’s Kaddish, a prayer that can only be said in a quorum of ten. At the same time, these classical and modern scholarly understandings of ritual do not capture an essential concept in Judaism, that of obligation. Understanding the concept of obligation is important, particularly for traditionally observant Jews. The Rabbinic texts of Jewish law frequently use the Hebrew term, בה债权 (chayav), meaning obligated. This term indicates a necessity, something that must be done. Jewish rituals, which ultimately derive from the Hebrew Bible’s long list of mitzvot, commandments, are not merely suggestions or a framework. For observant Jews, these rituals are seen as obligatory. There is an entire legal system built around these rituals and commandments because they are the laws of behavior that govern Jewish society, which is inseparable from daily life.

The lack of a concept of obligation in most theorists’ view of ritual is notable and important to parse out when studying Jewish ritual. Still, it is equally crucial to appreciate how ritual has been both understood and defined by these theorists, as well as how it has been measured in the American, and more specifically, Jewish contexts. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, a purely American denomination of Judaism, claimed that Jewish identity is founded on the three pillars of believing, belonging, and behaving. It would be easy to equate ritual with “behaving;” however, ritual is much more complicated than that. Ritual does include and is dependent upon behavior, but it is not ordinary behavior, nor is it solely performed through behavior. Ritual, as a specific, recognizable type of behavior, is dynamic and linked to both believing and belonging.

First, ritual, according to Ronald Grimes, is a behavior that is “repeated...sacred...formalized...traditional...[and] intentional.” These characteristics of ritual behavior reflect Victor Turner’s 1978 definition of religious ritual as “formal behavior prescribed for occasions not given over to technological routine that have references to beliefs in mystical beings or powers.” David Parkin and Gerd Baumann both categorize ritual as “performance,” implying that there is an elevated consciousness or even value ascribed to ritual.

Second, rituals are dynamic. Just as generational shifts signal change in religious trends, so too are rituals transformed over time. Rituals are “not at all static, but, on the contrary, more often subject to dynamic changes, even if their participants continue to

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26 As quoted in ibid., 59.
claim that they have been the same since time immemorial.”\textsuperscript{28} Simon Bronner has shown that Jewish ritual undergoes transformative processes through “variation” due to “interpretation” and that this variation is religiously allowed—perhaps even mandated—by Jewish sacred texts.\textsuperscript{29}

Third, religious ritual is never divorced from believing, or at least never divorced from thought or intention. Catherine Bell, for example, claims that, “the study of ritual has always assumed the close association of rite with belief.”\textsuperscript{30} Vanessa Ochs posits that “understandings about the presence of God” are a part of the “ritual toolbox.”\textsuperscript{31} Even when emphasizing the behavioral aspect of ritual, scholars acknowledge the emotional and cognitive components as linked to the behavioral. Barry Stephenson claims that, “if ritual is action, it is also an idea, something we think with...ritual is a way of thinking and knowing.”\textsuperscript{32} Bronner even goes so far as to claim that “ritual draws much of its power...not only from its patterned repetition, but also from its dramatic, affective quality.”\textsuperscript{33}

Finally, ritual is also linked to group belonging, although not necessarily in the Durkheimian sense that religion acts a form of social control.\textsuperscript{34} Daniel de Coppet speaks of the “social whole of rituals,”\textsuperscript{35} and Simon Bronner claims “ritual acts...hold social


\textsuperscript{30} Catherine M. Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 182.

\textsuperscript{31} Ochs, Inventing Jewish Ritual, 5-6.


\textsuperscript{33} Bronner, “Introduction,” 30.

\textsuperscript{34} See for example Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 208-216.

attention,” indicating ritual is communal. Bronner further contends that Jewish ritual “can also be seen as a strategy for perpetuating peoplehood.” Barry Stephenson, too, argues that ritual “binds groups together.” And, although Gerd Baumann contests that rituals “unite members of a category of people in shared pursuit,” his contention that rituals belong to “various ‘constituencies’” still implies that ritual transcends the individualism that Wuthnow and Roof observe.

The communal aspect of ritual is especially noted by those scholars, many of whom are women, who study religious gender dynamics. Even when expressing an individual, personal belief or experience, “ritual is ideally performed in community,” according to Rivell Ellen Prell. Sylvia Barack Fishman argues rituals “confirm the communal significance of personal experiences,” and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso also claims that rituals “tug at the private heart and the communal soul.” Thus, as Jody Myers writes, “people who perform rituals...do so...to express their membership in community.” Within these communities, Amitiyah Elayne Hyman argues, ritual is an “anchor” in the “collective search for meaning.” Rituals not only express community but also develop and augment interpersonal relationships. According to Carole A. Rayburn, “positive rituals...reinforce

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37 Ibid., 3.
40 Prell, Prayer & Community, 23.
41 Fishman, A Breath of Life, 121.
relationships among people,“⁴⁵ and Lisa D. Grant also notes the “role ritual plays in defining relationships.”⁴⁶

With these four major aspects of ritual in mind, it is not difficult to appreciate why ritual is hard to research and understand. Social scientists might contend that as behavior can be readily observed and measured, ritual should be studied quantitatively. Considering the connection between behaving and belonging, an argument could be made that it is possible to quantitatively measure behaving (e.g., how often a person lights Shabbat candles) and belonging (e.g., if a person is a dues-paying member of congregation or other Jewish communal institution).

Thus, many studies of ritual focus on quantitative measures. In order to measure religious practice, the 2015 Pew report on declining religiosity asked about the frequency of attending religious services, frequency of prayer, and whether or not respondents followed religious dietary laws.⁴⁷ The 2013 Pew study of the Jewish community measured similar behaviors, as well.⁴⁸

When Jews study themselves, they also often utilize quantitative measures of ritual. For example, consider both a four-decades old study and a five-year-old study. In 1974, when Sidney Goldstein and Calvin Goldscheider studied the Rhode Island Jewish community, they created a “composite ritual index” based upon the frequency of household observances of the following rituals: lighting Shabbat candles, attending a seder, buying

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kosher meat, using separate meat and dairy dishes, and lighting Hanukkah candles. More recently, a 2009 Taglit-Birthright Israel evaluation report cited the statistic that, “participants were 28 percent more likely than nonparticipants to attend organized Jewish religious services once a month or more” as a measure of the program’s success; in addition, the study examined whether or not certain ritual practices (observing Hanukkah, attending a Passover seder, regularly lighting Shabbat candles, and keeping Kosher) were correlated with certain measures of Jewish identity.

However, while quantitative measures of ritual and belonging are important and necessary for a behavioral analysis, studying ritual through only quantitative measures ignores the other important aspects of ritual, such as belief, symbolism, dynamism, and the tensions between individualism and belonging. The researcher would be unaware of, and thus unable to measure, rituals about which they did not ask. Robert Wuthnow derides surveys about belief in God and service attendance as “overly narrow.” Qualitative research is called for in order to counter-balance the limitations of quantitative measurements. Both Wuthnow’s and Roof’s studies stand out for the utilization of long-form interviews that allow for deep, nuanced explorations of ritual life.

Millennials: Generation and Social Context Matters

As discussed earlier, generational shifts can define the dynamics of American religion. Generation matters: The current generation(s) of young people are in many ways vastly different from the generations that came before them. The trends that preceded

them (e.g., rising individualism, changes in conceptions of gender roles, delayed marriage and childbearing) led to an approach to religion that Robert Wuthnow described as “tinkering”—his updated term for Claude Levi-Strauss’s bricolage.\(^{52}\) In other words, those of Generation X (the generation that followed the Baby Boomers) and Generation Y (also known as Millennials, born approximately between 1980 and 2000\(^ {53}\)) have had previously unseen opportunities to experience pluralism, to pick which aspects of religion to practice, and to privilege personal over institutional authority. According to a 2005 study on “How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith In The iPod Era,” the organization Reboot found that Millennials are “the most diverse generation in history,” “denominationalism [is] on the decline,” and “faith [is] expressed in highly personal, informal ways.” The same study found that while “family clearly shapes a young person’s entry into adulthood”—emphasizing the need to understand childhood and family history—young Millennial adults are increasingly carving out identities for themselves, rather than simply following in their parents’ footsteps.\(^ {54}\)

In addition to these generational characteristics, the socializing forces of college campuses have vastly changed the way religion is learned about, engaged with, and practiced. According to Wuthnow, “being in college creates social networks and shapes how people think about themselves,”\(^ {55}\) which can have a profound impact on the way college students practice religion, and usually leads to either a decline in, complete change

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 13-14.

\(^{53}\) Potts, Bennett, and Levin, "Omg!," 8.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 6, 13, 23.

\(^{55}\) Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers, 36.
of, or strengthening of childhood religious identity. The environment is fluid and, for the first time, college students have authority over their own religious choices.\(^{56}\)

What happens in college is of great significance for larger religious trends, as students come out of college with new ideas about religious life and, in turn, help to change the religious landscape. This is especially true for Judaism, as the vast majority of young Jewish adults do attend college and have formative experiences there.\(^{57}\) Where once the family reigned as the primary socializing agent, now “peer networks” come into play. College students’ religious practices often become more meaningful because they are making their own choices about what to practice and believe. As Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe have shown, this is a time when young Jews often change their belonging (denominational switching) and/or their behavior (whether increasing or decreasing their “observance level”).\(^{58}\) Critically, when all these forces (individualism, pluralism, choice, and peer networks) come together, college students often find themselves—for the first time—in the position to craft their own Jewish practices and rituals. As Shaul Kelner has described, the Taglit-Birthright Israel trip (itself a microcosm of the college Jewish experience) provided participants the opportunity to take something as ancient as a shofar and imbue it with new meaning.\(^{59}\) For these students, instead of disengaging, religious life becomes an avenue for expression of their changing values and beliefs. They live and practice with a social network of peers who share their desire to make Jewish life


\(^{58}\) Sales and Saxe, “Particularism in the University,” 6-7, 13, 17-18.

meaningful and relevant; and when they graduate from college, they seek out like-minded young adult communities. Whereas in 2007, Robert Wuthnow could deride the lack of communal and institutional support for young people coming out of college, there are now highly developed, institutionally-supported networks and programs to support young adult Jewish life in most of the major centers where young Jews flock after graduating. For example, in the Boston area, the closest metropolitan center near Brandeis University, the local Jewish federation runs The Network, “an initiative dedicated to connecting young adults (22-40) to the Greater Boston Jewish community.” Those who get involved in young adult programming, whether from a religious, ethnic, cultural, or other angle, then go on to shape their future Jewish community as lay and professional leaders. Riv-Ellen Prell has shown how the havurah style of prayer service and community and the Jewish counter-cultural movement of the 1960s were built up by former students who had found community in college Hillels. Just as these counter-cultural innovations—such as Havurat Shalom and The Jewish Catalog—“became part of the mainstream,” so will the ethos of college Jewish life then transform young adult Jewish life and in turn, affect Jewish life as a whole.

**Gender and Judaism**

Judaism, as all of the major, Western monotheistic religions, is not gender-blind. Gender, in fact, plays a very significant role in the practice of Judaism. Gender is reified as a category in Judaism’s sacred texts, and has had an impact on Jewish religious and social life.

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60 Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 12.
from its inception until today. Traditionally, women’s roles within religious life have been limited. Women are “exempt” from certain mitzvot, commandments, and this exemption has affected their status in halakha, the Jewish legal code, in various and often limiting ways. Elizabeth Shanks Alexander has argued that it is precisely this exemption that “supported the construction of gender during the rabbinic period...[when this exemption] was conceived, formulated, and transmitted.” It was also during the rabbinic period when the legal system of Judaism, particularly as it related to post-sacrificial Judaism, was codified. Thus, until very recently, much of women’s status in Judaism has in some way revolved around this exemption and, historically, women have not been allowed to perform public rituals or take on communal leadership.

Over the past two centuries, however, with increased secularization following emancipation in European countries, and the development of denominational Judaism, gender roles have shifted across the spectrum of Jewish practice. This shift has been especially true of America in the twentieth century, where assimilation and feminism have changed the roles of Jewish women in Jewish life.

The encounter of Judaism with civil society has always seen changes in Judaism. In the middle ages, Jewish women’s secular and economic power rose as a result of their frequent role as breadwinner. Jewish women also saw increased legal protections. For example, it was at this time that it became halakhically illegal to divorce a woman against her will. Paula Hyman describes assimilation into American society as a “sociological

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64 Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 11.
process." Yet, prior to emigrating, most Jewish communities in Europe were far more concerned about politics and economics than they were with gender issues, even as matters such as women’s education slowly came to the forefront. With the “privatization” of religious behavior in middle-class societies, it was left to the women, within the home, to pass on Judaism to the children. In the end, it was women rather than men who often “continued to take cognizance of the Jewish calendar and its many rituals.67

Even with the fast pace of religious change in the 19th and 20th centuries, change was often slow and modest when it came to the role of women.68 The sister movements of feminism and Jewish feminism dramatically changed the way gender was discussed and handled in the Jewish community across the denominational spectrum. According to Riv-Ellen Prell, “Jewish feminism challenges the assumptions on which Judaism is based, including that gender is a key principle in determining Jewish rights and obligations.”69 Sylvia Barack Fishman has written extensively about the impact of feminism on Jewish life. She and other scholars have pointed to the development or reclamation of women-specific rituals and the astounding increase in women’s access to traditional text study as some of the major transformations in Jewish religious and social life that were brought about or prompted by the Jewish feminist movement.70

67 Hyman, Gender and Assimilation, 13, 21-23, 40, 91, 121; Fishman, A Breath of Life, 8.
Reverberations were felt in the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative movements, leading to egalitarian prayer spaces, the de-gendering of certain rituals, and the acceptance of women in lay and rabbinical leadership.\textsuperscript{71} The Orthodox world was not exempt from the changes catalyzed by Jewish feminism, even if these changes were much more subtle and often more hard-won.\textsuperscript{72} Two major works, Tamar Ross's \textit{Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism}, and Tova Hartman's \textit{Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation} demonstrate the impact the feminist and Jewish feminist movements had on traditional modes of Jewish life. Hartman writes that, "much of Modern Orthodoxy has constructed its self-conception upon notions of who it is not." That is, Orthodoxy formed as a reaction to other denominations and therefore maintains very strict boundaries. Feminism, however, encourages the breaking of boundaries.\textsuperscript{73} In addition, Ross argues that, "one clear effect of feminism’s influence is its imbuing Orthodox women—even those who do not consciously identify with feminist ideology—with the confidence to find their own voice."\textsuperscript{74} Feminism also helped bring greater attention to the gender divisions within traditional Jewish communities, through the Orthodox authorities’ negative response to the movement: “ultimately, what makes the examination of backlash interesting is not merely what it reveals about authority figures’ stances vis-à-vis women’s roles but what it reveals about the gender dynamics within a


\textsuperscript{72} See for example Norma Baumel Joseph, "Women in Orthodoxy: Conventional and Contentious," ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} Tova Hartman, \textit{Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation} (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 14-16.

\textsuperscript{74} Tamar Ross, \textit{Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism} (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2004), 228.
given community.”75 Ongoing and sometimes vitriolic debates even in 2016 surrounding women’s religious leadership in the Orthodox world and access for women from liberal denominations to pray as they wish in Orthodox-controlled spaces76 demonstrate that gender continues to be a factor in Jewish life today.

Considering the dynamic nature of religion in America, especially on college campuses, the multifaceted nature of ritual, and the continuing relevancy of gender issues, I designed my study to be exploratory in order to best capture of a snapshot of what Jewish ritual life looks like and means to Jewishly-engaged students and what role gender plays. The next chapter outlines the methodology of my research.

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75 Hartman, Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism, 118.
Methodology

This thesis is based on an exploratory study on the ritual practices of undergraduate students at Brandeis University that combined quantitative and qualitative research. The research was designed to answer the following questions: what rituals do Brandeis Jewish students practice? What do these rituals and Judaism mean to them? And, finally, what role does gender play in their ritual practice? Is there a difference between male, female, and genderqueer students? Is there a difference between students who affiliate with different prayer groups, where issues of gender are often most pronounced?

Brandeis University is a nonsectarian university with a reputation for strong Jewish life that attracts many Jewish students. The high number of Jewish students supports diversity in Jewish practice and community on campus, incomparable with other major American universities. Because of this diversity, there are a variety of religious prayer options available on Brandeis’s campus that are not available elsewhere. The Fall 2015 magazine published by Hillel International names the top schools Jews choose. These schools, based on size of the Jewish student population, include: University of Florida, Rutgers, University of Central Florida (public schools), New York University, Boston University, and George Washington University (private schools). The top schools Jews choose that are not also seminaries, based on the percentage of Jews at the school, include: Barnard College, Muhlenberg College, and Goucher College. According to the Hillel

websites for each of these colleges, none of these Hillels offer more than three different prayer groups. By contrast, there are seven prayer groups under the Hillel umbrella at Brandeis and a Chabad on campus that does not offer Shabbat prayer services but does offer other opportunities to engage with this stream of Judaism. While some of these prayer groups, like the Reform or Orthodox services, align with denominations in the larger Jewish world, several prayer groups, like Kehilat Sha’ar or Shira Chadasha, are not denominationally-affiliated. The diversity and presence of non-denominational service options may prompt some students who are curious to explore these other options. Finally, only three of the groups (notably all denominationally-affiliated) meet weekly. The rest meet monthly. For students who prefer the prayer style or the community found in one of the monthly groups, the only option for participating in weekly prayer is attending different services in off-weeks. The unique nature of this environment for emerging Jewish adults makes Brandeis University an ideal setting for a subject of this nature.

The study is based on a convenience sample. The sample was composed of upper-class students—juniors and seniors—and second-semester sophomores. College is a time for exploration, and the sample intentionally excluded students in the first three semesters of their college career. The intention was to better focus on the middle and end of college

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students’ exploratory years. The assumption is that students’ self-awareness related to community and ritual crystalizes as their college career progresses.79

There are seven different prayer services offered on Brandeis’s campus (which does not include the Chabad). Some of these groups meet every week and others at varying frequencies. For the purposes of this study, the respondents have been separated into three categories. The first category contains those who exclusively attend egalitarian prayer services, where there is no separation between men and women. The second category contains those who exclusively attend prayer services with a mehitza, a physical separation between men and women. The final category contains those who attend both egalitarian and mehitza prayer services.80 The affiliation groups are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Prayer Group Affiliation by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mehitza Affiliation</th>
<th>Egalitarian Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chabad (no minyan)</td>
<td>Kehilat Sha’ar (monthly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox (daily)</td>
<td>Reconstructionist (monthly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sephardi (monthly)</td>
<td>Reform (weekly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shira Chadasha (monthly)</td>
<td>Traditional Egalitarian (weekly)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: parentheticals detail frequency of prayer services.*

The egalitarian services are: Kehilat Sha’ar, a non-denominational “monthly traditional egalitarian” service; the monthly Reconstructionist service; the weekly Reform service, and the weekly Traditional Egalitarian service affiliated with the Conservative group. The mehitza services are: the Orthodox minyan which offers daily prayer and

80 For a list and description of prayer services at Brandeis, please see [http://brandeishillel.org/student-leadership/student-groups-2/](http://brandeishillel.org/student-leadership/student-groups-2/).
weekly Shabbat services, the monthly Sephardi service, and the monthly partnership minyan\textsuperscript{81} known as Shira Chadasha. Chabad was also included in this category since it is the movement’s practice to have separate seating, although the Brandeis Chabad does not offer Shabbat prayer services.

**Survey**

An online, closed-answer survey was conducted using a convenience sample. The primary purpose of the survey was to identify respondents for subsequent qualitative interviews. Survey respondents were recruited through campus religious life organizations: Hillel, Chabad, the Jewish Chaplain, and the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC). Hillel is an umbrella organization for Jewish life on campus, which sponsors many student groups, ranging from social to cultural to political to religious. Chabad is a religious organization on campus that does not offer prayer services at Brandeis but does offer weekly Shabbat dinners, opportunities for Jewish learning, and opportunities to engage in other religious and ritual practices. The Jewish Chaplain serves Jewish students under the auspices of the Multifaith Chaplaincy. The Jewish Chaplain is not directly connected with Hillel although the current Chaplain was involved with one of the Hillel groups prior to appointment as Chaplain. JLIC is a program of the Orthodox Union that

\textsuperscript{81} A “Partnership” service is one in which there is a separation of men and women and women are more involved in prayer leading. Typically the gender separation at these services is considered more equal, where the men’s and women’s sections may be side-by-side, rather than the women’s sections being behind or above the men’s. The level of women’s leadership varies between each Partnership service, but in general women are afforded more opportunities at these services to lead than in traditional Orthodox services; however, the leadership roles are still defined by gender.
places rabbi and wife teams on secular college campuses, in collaboration with Hillels, to provide resources and support for Orthodox students.82

The professional staff and volunteer student leaders of these organizations distributed a description of the research project and a survey URL through their email listserves and Facebook groups and/or profiles. The survey included a final question asking if respondents were willing to take part in an interview. Sixty-five (65) students accepted the screening question confirming their eligibility and willingness to participate and 46 students completed all or part of the online survey.

The survey tool asked questions about gender,83 the denomination of Judaism in which the respondents were raised, and the Brandeis prayer group(s) with which they affiliate or attend. Respondents were asked how regularly they performed a set of 11 rituals, and were asked to rank the same 11 rituals in order of personal meaning. There are some drawbacks to measuring specific, pre-determined rituals, including imposing a bias by choosing rituals a researcher believes are worth measuring. To borrow language from Talal Asad, in deciding to measure certain rituals, the researcher is essentially appointing those rituals as “candidates for interpretation” before they can become “constructed as ‘symbolic’” by the practitioners. According to Asad, symbolic construction must take place before interpretation in cases of individualized authority.84 Considering the rise of the

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83 The question of gender was the only open-ended question in the survey.

“sovereign self,” a researcher must consider the impact of their imposing value on the rituals they choose to measure.\textsuperscript{85}

With these concerns in mind, the rituals for this survey were chosen to encompass a wide variety of Jewish customs and practices. Certain rituals (such as fasting on Yom Kippur) were chosen because they are standard practices that are often measured in studies of Jewish behavior. Rituals common to Jews of all denominations (such as lighting candles on Hanukkah) and rituals associated with more observant Jews (such as avoiding handling money on Shabbat) were both included. Also, rituals that have traditionally been performed by women (such as lighting Shabbat candles) and rituals that have traditionally been performed by men (such as wearing a tallit) were both included as well.

The survey sample is predominantly female and observant. Of 46 respondents, 35 identified their gender. Twenty-three (23) are female-identified, 10 are male-identified, and 2 are genderqueer. Many of the respondents attend or affiliate with more than one religious/prayer group on campus, as can be discerned in Table 2. Twenty-three (23) of 46 attend more than one prayer group. Sixteen (16) exclusively attend egalitarian services, 15 exclusively attend services with a mehitza, and 15 will attend both egalitarian and mehitza services.

\textsuperscript{85} This issue has also been raised in particular by feminist scholars, some of whom contend that “predefined categories of responses” represent “the male normative model that defines ‘tradition’ and ‘substantive’ Judaism.” See for example Debra Kaufman, "Measuring Jewishness in America: Some Feminist Concerns," Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues, no. 10 (2005): 92, 95.
Table 2: Respondents' Religious/Prayer Group Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious/Prayer Group</th>
<th>Total Affiliated Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kehilat Sha’ar</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Egalitarian</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructionist</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shira Chadashah</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chabad</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sephardi</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews

Survey respondents were asked if they would volunteer for a long-form interview to discuss the topics of gender and ritual in further depth. Twenty-one (21) respondents provided contact information for a follow-up interview; 16 interviews were conducted after five of those students either later declined to participate in an interview or did not respond to multiple requests to schedule the interview. Volunteers participated in one-on-one interviews, typically lasting 30 to 45 minutes. The majority were conducted in person; two were conducted over video conference.

Although the survey measured a pre-determined set of rituals, the interviews asked more open-ended questions. In her book, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, Vanessa Ochs, an anthropologist, ultimately did not ask whether rituals were Jewish or not, but rather about the rituals that Jews perform. The distinction in these questions is important. It follows the paradigm laid out by Bethamie Horowitz, a scholar of the American Jewish community, who proposed initially in 2000 that the sociological study of American Jews should not

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focus on the question, “How Jewish are American Jews?” but rather on the question, “How are American Jews Jewish?” This framework allows for consideration of ritual practices without pre-determined value judgments, and allows the respondents to define for themselves what ritual is and means (although there is a possibility that the survey may have biased participants to think of certain rituals).

During interviews, participants were asked about their Jewish background, their current Jewish and non-Jewish ritual practice, what was the most meaningful Jewish ritual to them and why, their perspective on the role gender plays in Jewish ritual practice, and what being Jewish means to them. Interviews were not recorded; extensive typed notes were taken to record participants’ responses and any relevant direct quotations.

Sixteen (16) students participated in an interview. Eleven (11) of 16 interviewees were women. There were four men and one genderqueer student who participated. Four exclusively attend egalitarian services, six exclusively attend prayer services with a mehitza, and six attend both mehitza and egalitarian services.

Chapter 1: Practice

When some interview participants were asked to define a ritual, they noted such intangible elements as emotions, associations, spirituality, and symbols. But they also spoke of the physical: objects, habits, and actions. As Barry Stephenson writes, “ritual is first and foremost a doing.” 88 Understanding that ritual is intertwined with meaning requires first understanding that rituals are practices that need to be performed. On the one hand, rituals are inextricably connected to their meanings and contexts. On the other hand, they are also behaviors that reveal those very emotions and associations. In this study, ritual practice reveals a great deal about the participants.

This chapter presents a portrait of participants’ ritual behaviors based on the online survey and related interview responses. As discussed, this research relies on a non-scientific convenience sample and the findings are not generalizable. Certain characteristics of this sample, however, affirm existing, well-researched theories and the results of the survey help to paint a portrait of the interviewees. Behavioral patterns in survey responses suggest students are exploring different types of Jewish practice, breaking traditional boundaries of Jewish denominationalism. Students sampled for this research explore Jewish life by engaging with more traditional practices and affiliations. That there is not always a link between frequency of performance and personal importance of specific rituals strengthens the supposition that this behavior is exploratory. The patterns appear

consistent with expected behavior based on sociologist Robert Wuthnow’s theory that young adults spiritually “tinker” to create new customs by combining multiple practices and affiliations.

**Tinkering and (S)hopping**

As Robert Wuthnow has written, young adults approach religion through a process of “tinkering,” where “they do not rely on only one way of doing things.” Rather, they create their own experiences through the combination of multiple available options. Many young adults go through a process of exploration and discovery, a developmental stage referred to as emerging adulthood. This period often begins in late high school and lasts through college and beyond. Young adults begin making their own decisions, often for the first time. In the process, according to Wuthnow, they discover that they prefer to mix-and-match religious affiliation rather than participate in only one community; they “tinker” with their religious affiliation. The affiliation characteristics of the sample support Wuthnow’s theory of tinkering. The participants in this study are, for the most part, not rooted solely in one religious or prayer community. Twenty-three (23) of 46 survey respondents and 10 of 16 interview participants affiliate with or attend more than one prayer service or group. Of course, college is an especially fluid time in young adults’ lives. This was as true for the Baby Boomers as it is for college students today, where an open environment allows students to make their own choices for the first time in their lives.

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This tinkering process can involve “minyan-hopping,” as several interview participants called it, in order to find a religious service that is meaningful or comfortable or part of the right community. In some cases, these various reasons for attending a certain service are not mutually exclusive. For instance, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, meaning and community are often intertwined. As Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield have shown, the college campus is a place where interdenominational mingling and pluralism are at the forefront.\textsuperscript{93} In addition, a 2005 study on Generation Y also found that, generationally speaking, “denominationalism is on the decline and pluralism is on rise.”\textsuperscript{94} This trend is evident in the prevalence of students who attend multiple prayer services across denominations, as well as in the two prayer groups, Kehilat Sha’ar and Shira Chadasha, that are not denominationally-affiliated.

For some of the interviewees, attendance at different prayer services is more incidental or community-dependent. For example, Amy did a lot of “minyan-hopping” through her junior year. However, she had fewer friends at the Reform service, so she went there less often, and also stopped going to the Conservative service when it became, in her words, “less fun.” Dave, who says he would not label himself an Orthodox Jew, still occasionally attends Orthodox services because he enjoys the community and has friends there. Other students’ tinkering is more deliberate. Laura has deep ties to the Reform community and plans to be ordained as clergy through the Reform movement. Therefore she makes it part of her practice to attend Reform services as well as the non-denominational service that she prefers stylistically and helps to run. Similarly, Ilana spoke about how she personally identifies more with the style and politics of both the mehitza,  

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 289, 293.  
\textsuperscript{94} Potts, Bennett, and Levin, "Omg!," 6.
partnership service or the non-denominational egalitarian services, but finds the Orthodox service to be the most “serious prayer space.” Thus, she attends all three.

Among the services offered on campus, some are egalitarian, where men and women sit together and participate in and lead all aspects of the services. Other services make use of a mehitza (partition), where men and women sit separately and ritual roles within the service are gender-dependent. In addition to the fact that many students attend more than one prayer service, it is interesting to note that some students go to different types of services, as well. Thirty-one (31) of 46 survey respondents exclusively attend either one type of service or the other—but 15 of 46 survey respondents attend both egalitarian and mehitza services, as do 6 of 16 of interview participants. These students’ affiliation with more than one type of religious group further supports Wuthnow’s theory of tinkering.

Minyan-hopping and group affiliation are important considerations when studying ritual. First, because prayer absolutely should be understood as a ritual practice. In a traditional Jewish context prayer is an obligation, just as other, more “typical” rituals like lighting Shabbat candles or fasting on Yom Kippur. The concept of obligation, as previously discussed, is a critical element to understanding Jewish ritual. Therefore, if prayer is understood as an obligation—at least traditionally—then it should also be considered a ritual. In addition, prayer is ritualistic in its repetition and its symbolic meaning.95 Riv-Ellen Prell’s study of independent prayer groups excellently demonstrates how prayer, like other

95 Bronner, "Introduction," 1.
rituals, is communal, performative, and emotionally meaningful. As Wuthnow has written, “prayer is a discipline, a deliberate practice.”

Prayer group affiliation is also important because modern American Judaism is denominational. Rituals (prayer included) often look and feel different depending on the denominational context. The blessing over the wine, for instance, might be said using a shorter version in one denominational group than in another. Or, one ritual that is taken for granted in one group might not even be performed in another. Therefore, understanding an individual’s connection to ritual depends on the group in which they perform it.

**Traditionally Oriented**

The participants in this study lean towards the traditional in their current observance. Over half the survey respondents avoid handling money on Shabbat “as often as prescribed by Jewish law.” Seventeen (17) of 46 respondents light Shabbat candles every week, and 25 respondents in total light Shabbat candles at least several times each month. Nineteen (19) of 46 respondents ritually wash their hands before a festive meal as often as prescribed by Jewish law. This number increases when including those who responded that they do so every day or every week. Of 10 male-identified respondents, 8 reported wearing a kippah or head covering every day or as often as prescribed by Jewish law.

Interestingly, many of these students’ inclination toward traditional practices does not reflect the primary Jewish environment in which they were raised, suggesting a possible shift in observance since their childhood. Two-thirds of survey respondents affiliate with the Orthodox and/or Shira Chadasha prayer group, the two main mehitza services. However, fewer than a third of respondents said they were raised in an Orthodox

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96 See for example Prell, *Prayer & Community*, 14, 23, 160, 166-70, 184, 211, 258.
denomination. This suggests that some of the respondents now affiliate, at least sometimes, with more traditionally-oriented groups than when they were children and adolescents. Affiliation is a proxy variable and cannot actually demonstrate whether there has been any change in behavior. It is still important, however, that respondents have chosen to either change or broaden their affiliation to include more traditionally-observant communities.

Eight interviewees, when asked about their Jewish background and how their ritual practice has changed over time, also fit a pattern of increased affiliation with more traditional groups, as shown in Table 3. Anna, who grew up with no formal Jewish education, now attends Orthodox prayer services. Naomi, Ilana, Dave, and Emily were raised in egalitarian (mostly Conservative) environments and they all now attend mehitza prayer services in addition to egalitarian services. Joe, Samantha, and Jason were raised Conservative and now exclusively attend services with a mehitza.
### Table 3: Interview Participants' Affiliation by Denomination Raised

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Denomination Raised</th>
<th>Prayer Service Affiliation at Brandeis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>Conservative (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Both egalitarian and mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilana</td>
<td>Conservative (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Both egalitarian and mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Conservative (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Both egalitarian and mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Conservative (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Exclusively egalitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Conservative (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Exclusively mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Conservative (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Exclusively mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>Conservative (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Exclusively mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>Conservative and Reform (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Both egalitarian and mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Conservative/independent (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Both egalitarian and mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Conservative/independent (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Exclusively egalitarian on Shabbat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
<td>Exclusively mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamar</td>
<td>Orthodox (mehitza)</td>
<td>Both egalitarian and mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Orthodox (mehitza)</td>
<td>Exclusively mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batya</td>
<td>Orthodox (mehitza)</td>
<td>Exclusively mehitza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Reform (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Exclusively egalitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Reform (egalitarian)</td>
<td>Exclusively egalitarian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The large proportion of interview participants who were raised in an egalitarian movement and now at least sometimes attend mehitza services suggests that this is a sample of students who have become more traditionally-oriented either before coming to college or during their college career. One the one hand, this seems to belie well-researched trends about the decline of religious observance in college. On the other hand, Bethamie Horowitz identifies “‘blooming’ or increasing’ involvement” as one type of journey that some Jews took in her 2000 study of the New York Jewish community. Importantly,

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98 See for example, Sales and Saxe, "Particularism in the University," 17-18.
Horowitz observed that those in her study who were on an “increasing” journey were “much more likely to have partaken in the various “voluntary” experiences available to them, especially college-based activities...like Hillel.” This category of Horowitz’s included participants who had been raised in various denominations. Additionally, it is not surprising that recruiting students to participate in research about ritual attracted students who are on the more observant end of the religious spectrum, because they are more likely to be engaged in the topic. While this study was always intended to focus on those students who do engage in regular ritual practice, the trend of increased observance was not anticipated.

**Ritual Behavior**

In addition to asking about gender, denomination raised, and which prayer groups the respondents attend, the survey also asked about the frequency and importance of a set of 11 rituals. As mentioned in the Methodology, rituals were chosen to represent a range of types of practices that includes rituals that are typically gendered and not gendered, rituals that are more often performed by observant Jews, and rituals that are typically performed by all Jews regardless of denomination. Importance serves as a proxy for meaning as it is logical that if a ritual is more important, it carries more meaning. Forty-six (46) students responded to the survey and 35 provided their gender. In this section, I will discuss the results of the survey in relationship to gender and prayer-group affiliation.

For the purposes of the analysis, the rituals have been divided into two categories. The first category includes those rituals that are traditionally performed on a daily or weekly basis. These include: avoid handling money on Shabbat, light Shabbat candles,

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prepare special foods for Shabbat and holidays, wash hands before a festive meal, wear a tallit, and wear a kippah or other headcovering. Survey responses about the frequency of these rituals were grouped into three categories: do not perform, perform infrequently, and perform frequently. The second category includes those rituals that can only be performed as they occur in the annual cycle of the Jewish calendar. These include: fast on the Fast of Esther or on Yom Kippur, light Hanukkah candles, and participate in a Passover seder. Survey responses were grouped into two categories: do not perform and do perform. Since the traditional frequency of the ritual can depend on gender, immersion in a mikveh was also included in this binary category.\textsuperscript{100}

In addition, the ranking of the ritual's importance was grouped into three levels of importance. When a respondent ranked a ritual's importance among the top three or bottom three important rituals, the ritual is considered to be Most Important or Least Important, respectively. Rituals ranked from 4-8 are considered to be of Medium Importance. Table 4 shows the respondents' frequency of daily/weekly rituals and Table 5 shows the respondents' frequency of yearly rituals. Table 6 shows the importance categories of all 11 rituals.

\textsuperscript{100} While immersion in a mikveh is a highly-gendered ritual in traditional thought, it is less likely that any of the respondents are practicing niddah, the laws of family sexual relations, at this stage in their lives. One interview participant did describe practicing niddah, although they are not married.
### Table 4: Frequency of Daily/Weekly Rituals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>Frequent</th>
<th>Infrequent</th>
<th>Do not Perform</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wash hands before a festive meal</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid Handling money on Shabbat</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light Shabbat Candles</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear a Kippah/headcovering</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare special foods for Shabbat/holidays</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear a Tallit</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of respondents

### Table 5: Frequency of Yearly Rituals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>Do perform</th>
<th>Do not perform</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light Hanukkah Candles</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in a Passover Seder</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast on Yom Kippur</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast on Fast of Esther</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immerse in a Mikveh</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of respondents
Table 6: Ritual Importance by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>Importance Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fast on Yom Kippur</td>
<td>Most Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in a Passover Seder</td>
<td>Most Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light Shabbat Candles</td>
<td>Medium Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare Special Foods</td>
<td>Medium Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wash Hands before a Festive Meal</td>
<td>Medium Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid Handling Money on Shabbat and holidays</td>
<td>Medium Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light Hanukkah Candles</td>
<td>Medium Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear a Tallit</td>
<td>Medium Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear a Headcovering</td>
<td>Medium Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immerse in a Mikveh</td>
<td>Medium Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast of Esther</td>
<td>Least Important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Categories assigned by respondents’ average ranking:
Most important=ranked top 3 on average, Least important=ranked bottom 3 on average

From these data, rituals that tend to be practiced by Jews of all denominations appear to be more important to respondents than some of the more traditional rituals like fasting on the Fast of Esther. In addition, it appears that high frequency of performance does not necessarily correlate with higher importance. For example, over half of respondents avoid handling money on Shabbat, but on average this is a ritual of only medium importance in comparison to other rituals. Even more telling, every single respondent lights Hanukkah candles, but this is also a ritual of medium performance. This
is not to suggest that high frequency of performance *never* correlates with high importance. For example, almost all respondents participate in a Passover seder or fast on Yom Kippur, two rituals that *do* rank highly in importance for respondents. What these data suggest, then, is that there is not necessarily a relationship between frequency and importance.

**Gender**

Of the 33 surveys respondents who identified their gender, 23 are female-identified, 10 are male-identified, and 2 are genderqueer. For these respondents, only a few behaviors emerged where there are gender differences in the ritual practice. It is important to consider the fact that any gender differences that emerge by the data may be confounded by prayer group affiliation. Yet, the compounding nature of prayer group affiliation should not outright dismiss the value of gender as a category of analysis. As discussed in the Literature review, gender politics have had a great deal of impact, if in varying degrees, on all denominations of Judaism. In Chapter Three, there will be a further discussion of the relationship between affiliation and gender. These variables are, and for the foreseeable future of Judaism, will be, intertwined.

Since the sample skews observant, it should be expected that there will be gender differences in certain rituals which are either incumbent upon or traditionally performed by different genders. Not unsurprisingly, therefore, wearing a tallit and wearing a kippah were more likely to be performed more frequently by males, as shown in Table 7 and Table 8. Wearing these ritual garments is traditionally incumbent upon men, and women are traditionally exempt from these rituals. Thus, these patterns of behavior are to be expected.
Table 7: Wear a Tallit by Gender (in descending order of frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequent</th>
<th>Infrequent</th>
<th>Do not perform</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequent = more than once a month or as often as prescribed by Jewish law
Infrequent = once a month or less

Table 8: Wear a Headcovering by Gender (in descending order of frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequent</th>
<th>Infrequent</th>
<th>Do not perform</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequent = more than once a month or as often as prescribed by Jewish law
Infrequent = once a month or less

There did not appear to be differences between the genders in the frequency of other ritual behaviors. There are two rituals, however, where there appears to be a difference between the genders and the importance of the ritual. Wearing a tallit is more likely to be of low importance to women and more likely to be of medium importance to men, as shown in Table 9.
Table 9: Wear a Tallit by Gender (in descending order of most important)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Most Important</th>
<th>Medium Importance</th>
<th>Least Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most important=ranked top 3, Least important=ranked bottom 3

The higher proportion of male respondents who ranked wearing a tallit in the middle of the importance scale suggests that, since men are more likely to perform this ritual and since traditionally it has been men who have performed this ritual, this ritual may involve less deep thought or choice for men. It is neither an unimportant nor the most important ritual. Riv-Ellen Prell noted a similar finding in her study of practice in Conservative synagogues: “No man in [Prell’s] study mentioned wearing tallit as a choice or a decision.”¹⁰¹ In other words, wearing a tallit was a ritual that men simply accepted as one that should be a part of their practice.

Lighting Shabbat candles is the other ritual where there seems to be a relationship between gender and the importance of the ritual, as seen in Table 10. Unlike wearing a tallit, however, there did not appear to be a connection between gender and the frequency of lighting Shabbat candles. However, almost half of the female-identified respondents ranked this ritual among the most important, whereas only one (1) man did.

Table 10: Light Shabbat Candles by Gender (in descending order of most important)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Most Important</th>
<th>Medium Importance</th>
<th>Least Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Most important=ranked top 3, Least important=ranked bottom 3

Although both men and women are required to have Shabbat candles lit in their household, it has been traditionally associated as a women’s ritual for several reasons.\(^{102}\)

Thus, considering the traditional leanings of the sample, the greater importance of lighting Shabbat candles for women is not surprising. In addition, at least one interview respondent spoke of the importance as a woman of connecting to traditionally women’s rituals, even if she wants to practice traditionally men’s rituals as well. This phenomenon, where women do not want to take on rituals from which they were exempt to the exclusion of rituals that they were already performing, was first discussed by Ann Lapidus Lerner in her important Jewish feminist work, *Who Has Not Made Me a Man: The Movement For Equal Right for Women in American Jewry*.\(^{103}\)

The fact that there is a not a large difference in behavior but there is a difference in importance of lighting Shabbat candles is critical to understand, because it further demonstrates that frequency does not necessarily correlate with importance. This lack of connection shows that behavior is not indicative of importance. Thus, presumably there is a lack of connection between frequency of behavior and what is meaningful, as well.

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\(^{102}\) See for example Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah*, 40.

\(^{103}\) Lerner, *Who Hast Not Made Me a Man*, 15.
Prayer Group Affiliation

When looking at the behaviors of respondents by whether they affiliate with egalitarian, mehitza, or both types of prayer groups, some predictable patterns emerge. For example, those who at least sometimes attend mehitza prayer services are more likely to frequently avoid handling money on Shabbat (Table 11), to frequently light Shabbat candles (Table 12), and to frequently ritually wash their hands before a festive meal (Table 13). These relationships are to be expected—those who exclusively attend mehitza services fit the typical profile of traditional Jews, who would perform these rituals more frequently. This profile is supported by the 2013 Pew report, which found that 77% of Orthodox Jews avoid handling money on Shabbat, compared to 13% of all Jews; the report also found that 90% of Orthodox Jews always or usually light Shabbat candles, compared to 23% of all Jews. The respondents who exclusively attend mehitza services exemplify this profile of a typical traditional Jew. It is thus not surprising that ritual handwashing, a similar ritual about which the Pew survey didn't ask, follows the same pattern.

Table 11: Avoid Handling Money on Shabbat by Affiliation (in descending order of frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequent</th>
<th>Infrequent</th>
<th>Do not perform</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mehitza</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequent=more than once a month or as often as prescribed by Jewish law
Infrequent=once a month or less

What is interesting, however, is that respondents who attend both egalitarian and mehitza services in these cases appear to behave more like the mehitza-only respondents than the egalitarian-only respondents. The Pew Center research also reported on Reform and Conservative as well as Orthodox respondents’ ritual practice. Thirteen percent of Conservative Jews and 4% of Reform Jews avoid handling money on Shabbat, and 34% of Conservative Jews and 10% of Reform Jews always or usually light Shabbat candles. The portrait painted by Pew is similar to the characteristics of those who exclusively attend egalitarian services in this sample. The Pew research, however, did not report on whether

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105 Ibid.
their sample contained respondents who affiliate with more than one denomination. There could be, therefore, no expected pattern of ritual practice for this category of respondents based on prior research like the Pew Center study. The similarity of respondents who attend both types of services to the mehitza-only respondents is notable, not only because this is a new category, but because it continues to support Wuthnow’s tinkering theory. Tinkering is more than just exploration. According Wuthnow, “the spiritual tinkerer is able to sift through a veritable scrap heap of ideas and practices from”\textsuperscript{106} a variety of sources. The students in this sample appear to tinker with “practices” as well as affiliation. As discussed earlier, many of the respondents affiliate with prayer groups of a different denomination in which they were raised; many of these respondents are now affiliating with more traditionally-oriented groups. It appears that they may be adopting, at least for now, some more traditionally-oriented ritual behaviors as well.

At the same time that respondents who attend both types of services appear \textit{behaviorally} more like mehitza-only respondents, those who attend both types of services are not always like mehitza-only respondents when it comes to ritual importance. For example, when it comes to avoiding handling money on Shabbat, mehitza-only respondents tend to view this ritual as more important than respondents who attend both types of services, as shown in Table 14.

\textsuperscript{106} Wuthnow, \textit{After the Baby Boomers}, 15.
Table 14: Avoid Handling Money on Shabbat by Affiliation (in descending order of most important)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Most important</th>
<th>Medium importance</th>
<th>Least important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mehitza</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most important=ranked top 3, Least important=ranked bottom 3

In some cases, those who attend both types of services view the importance of ritual in like ways to those who exclusively attend egalitarian services. The majority of respondents who exclusively attend mehitza services rank lighting Shabbat candles as of medium importance, and very few rank it most important. The majority of respondents who exclusively attend egalitarian services, however, rank this ritual to be most important, with a notable amount also ranking the ritual of medium importance. Likewise, all but one of the respondents who attend both egalitarian and mehitza services rank lighting Shabbat candles as most important or of medium importance. This importance ranking is show in Table 15.

Table 15: Light Shabbat Candles by Affiliation (in descending order of most important)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Most important</th>
<th>Medium importance</th>
<th>Least important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mehitza</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most important=ranked top 3, Least important=ranked bottom 3
As discussed earlier with regard to gender, behavioral patterns do not necessarily correlate with importance. This appears to be true when it comes to group affiliation as well. This lack of connection also suggests there is something to be learned by studying the importance and meaning of ritual in addition to behavioral patterns. This is one of the main questions I explored in my quantitative interviews, which I will examine in the next chapter.
Chapter 2: Meaning

Group, society, and community are important concepts in the sociology of religion. At the same time, the modern world is often one of private religion that privileges individualism. Thus, almost a full century after Durkheim originally published *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen could write a book with the title, *The Jew Within*, and could theorize about the concept of the “sovereign self,” in which personal choice becomes the “ultimate arbiter of Jewish expression.”\(^{107}\) In her extensive, late twentieth-century study of the *havurah* movement,\(^{108}\) Riv-Ellen Prell wrote that “ritual is ideally performed in community. At the same time, ritual creates a private, unarticulated experience.”\(^{109}\) In other words, even as the group remains the basis for religious practice, there has been a rise in the privileging of individual meaning within the group context. A “*havurah*” (pl. *havurot*) is a non-denominational, non-institutional prayer group. These groups began to appear during the Jewish counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Prell, these groups rejected denominations, impressive buildings, and other imitations of American society and Protestantism. The members of these havurot did not, however, reject Judaism, only their parents’ version of it. Instead the members created small, homogenous groups that prayed, usually weekly rather than daily, studied, and provided a community to share personal events and the holidays of the Jewish year.

Prell’s study is important for understanding college Jewish life, not only because the movement often grew out of Hillels, but because many college prayer groups function in

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 23.
the same way or seek to emulate these groups. Prell’s observation that ritual bridges communal practice with individualized meaning is critical. Sherry B. Ortner’s theory of “summarizing symbols,” in which one particular symbol may contain a multitude of meanings,\(^\text{110}\) is relevant to a modern understanding of religious rituals. The same ritual may evoke different meanings for different practitioners. Meaning and what is meaningful is individually-defined.

This chapter will explore the relationships between community and the individual and the concept of personal meaning. These themes were pervasive in the interviews I conducted. Analysis in this chapter is based on responses to the questions, “What is the most meaningful Jewish ritual to you and why?” and “What does Judaism or Jewishness mean to you?” Results show that community plays a significant role in these college students’ ritual practice and meaning—even when they focus on the personal, individualized meaning of ritual.

**Communal Rituals**

Communal rituals, and in particular, Shabbat rituals, emerge as highly meaningful in respondents’ lives. A majority (11 of 16) named rituals related to the weekly celebration of Shabbat as the most meaningful ritual they have performed or currently perform. These rituals include observing Shabbat and refraining from some form of activity during the twenty-five hour period, attending or participating in prayer services, or marking the conclusion of Shabbat with a havdalah ceremony. These responses came from students across the denominational spectrum. While no student who exclusively attends egalitarian prayer services named the practice of “keeping” Shabbat—that is, the refraining from

certain activities—as the *most meaningful* ritual, many of those students did mention some level of observance as part of their practice, and those students also named attending or leading prayer services as the most meaningful. The implication is that the observance of Shabbat in some capacity is meaningful for the students in this study who pray in both egalitarian and mehitza services.

It is notable that the Shabbat rituals interviewees found meaningful all take place communally. Likewise, participating in a Passover seder, the other communal ritual named as most meaningful, also takes place with a group. Jewish prayer by definition is done with a group.\textsuperscript{111} Although the havdalah ceremony does not require a group, it is specifically the ceremony being done in a group setting that was named as meaningful. It is important that these rituals are done communally and many of the students pointed specifically to that community as the meaning. The emphasis on community suggests that religious practice is, in the twenty-first century, still something that is performed in public and with others. This is reflective of the trajectory of Jewish practice over the past century. In the early- to mid-twentieth century, “given the privatization of much Jewish behavior in the wake of emancipation,” Jewish practice had become much more home-based.\textsuperscript{112} However, over time, this shifted as Jews suburbanized and Jewish practice became more institutionalized. The college campus is an excellent and likely setting for these more communally-driven rituals to take center stage. As Robert Wuthnow has argued, college is an inherently social

\textsuperscript{111} Certain Jewish prayers, such as a the Mourner’s Kaddish, a prayer said by those who have recently lost family members or those marking the anniversary of family member’s deaths, require the presence of ten Jews (traditionally men). The group of ten is referred to as a *minyan*. This is because these prayers require the group to respond to the person reciting the prayer. This requirement is part of Rabbinic law, as discussed in Babylonian Talmud Megillah 23b.

\textsuperscript{112} Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation*, 23-43.
time during which community-building takes place.\textsuperscript{113} Thus, it is significant how central a role the concept of community plays for many of these students.

\textbf{Community}

For the students who named observing Shabbat and attending prayer services as the most meaningful ritual, all named “community” as the reason the rituals are meaningful. Unsurprisingly, most of these students also pointed to community as at least part of what Judaism means to them. As the authors of a study on religion among Millennials argue, religion can be a key component in “connecting a highly mobile group to community and family.”\textsuperscript{114} This indeed seems to be a significant part of the role Jewish life, and in particular Shabbat, plays on Brandeis’s campus. Several students pointed out that Shabbat is a time to see people and friends with whom they might not normally interact otherwise. Thus, Shabbat is a time and a ritual that actively creates community, and is reflective of Mary Ellen Ross’s and Cheryl Lynn Ross’s understanding of ritual: it is “aimed at overcoming separation through community by reconciling differences and bringing absent elements into current interaction.”\textsuperscript{115}

Naomi, who defined community as a group of people who are “kept up at night by the same issues,” pointed to observance of Shabbat as a ritual that creates community. This is likely a natural conclusion for someone like Naomi, whose observance of Shabbat includes refraining from such activities as handling money, using electronics, or doing schoolwork. Without the community, she would be isolated in her practice. Ilana, who named attending prayer services as her most meaningful ritual, defines community as “a

\textsuperscript{113} Wuthnow, \textit{After the Baby Boomers}, 36.
\textsuperscript{114} Potts, Bennett, and Levin, "Omg!," 13.
\textsuperscript{115} As described in Rayburn, "Ritual as Acceptance/Empowerment and Rejection/Disenfranchisement," 90.
group of people who I'm familiar with, and who are also similarly engaged in the prayer and make the prayer beautiful and meaningful for themselves and other people.” In her conception, prayer and community are inseparable. This is reflected in her belief that ritual upholds community and community upholds ritual. It is notable that Naomi and Ilana participate in both egalitarian and mehitza prayer services. Because they have multiple affiliations, they may also have multiple communities, complicating the idea that prayer as a ritual is meaningful because of the community in which it is practiced. It is possible that prayer is meaningful for them in both contexts, because as Gerd Baumann argues, rituals are linked not just to community but often to communities—plural.116

Both Tamar and Emily pointed to community as a key reason they find praying at Shabbat services meaningful, along with the spirituality and melodic aspects of the services. Because of the community with which she prays, Tamar feels emotionally connected to the people and the prayers. In this sense, her attachment to Shabbat as it relates to community is not dissimilar from Liz’s understanding of community as a place of comfort. Although Liz identifies as Reform Jew, does not refrain from work on Shabbat, and does not attend services every week, she still named attending Shabbat services as the most meaningful ritual to her because of the chance it gives her to interact with her community. It is interesting that Tamar, who so strongly identifies with halakhic, Orthodox Judaism (despite any cognitive dissonance regarding gender roles, as will be discussed in the next chapter), and Liz, a clearly non-observant Jew, both connect Shabbat with emotional community. This suggests that the association between Shabbat and community

is not limited to one type of prayer group or one category of Jews at Brandeis; rather, the concept of community is linked to Shabbat rituals in a more general sense.

It is also important to note that it is not just observance, but specifically prayer, that is meaningful to these students. It is especially important that these students are women. Historically, as Sylvia Barack Fishman has argued, there had been an “estrangement of Jewish woman from prayer.”

However, research since the second half of the twentieth century has shown that women are equally likely as men, if not more so, to participate in prayer. The increased presence of women in religious life is true in college settings and generally among young adults, as well. In addition, the connection between prayer and community is important for women because women are obligated in prayer according to Jewish law (a concept previously discussed), just not at specific times. The fact that these female students are speaking specifically about time-specific prayer that takes place in community suggests that these women’s understanding of ritual is not of something performed by oneself or at any time. They are suggesting that ritual needs structure and that women as well as men need community for ritual to have meaning.

Samantha and Joe, who name the observance of Shabbat as their most meaningful ritual, and who both exclusively attend mehitza—specifically Orthodox—prayer services, believe that the meaning of ritual derives from the community. Joe was ambivalent about finding particular meanings in each action or ritual, so it is understandable that his sense of

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117 Fishman, A Breath of Life, 144.
119 Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield, Religion on Campus, 43; Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers, 61-65; Potts, Bennett, and Levin, "Omg!," 20.
120 For more on the link between women, ritual meaning, and community, see Northup, "Expanding the X-Axis: Women, Religious Ritual, and Culture," 144.
meaning is rooted in the community as a whole, rather than the ritual itself. Samantha’s prior experiences as an observant Jew in a sparsely-Jewish setting also explains why she sees the relationship between community and ritual as unidirectional. At the school she attended to prior to Brandeis, Samantha had to leave campus to get a Shabbat experience that was meaningful to her. She could not experience a meaningful Shabbat on her own, even if she could observe all the laws. Therefore, she would see Shabbat as interwoven with community and its meaningfulness and powerfulness as a direct result of the community. In addition, the fact that both Joe and Samantha identify as Orthodox Jews is relevant. Their belief that ritual derives meaning from the group harkens back to the Durkheimian understanding of religion as rooted in the social group. Durkheim based his theory on the study of “elementary” religions. While Judaism now is a complex religious system that on the surface does not appear like animalism or totemism of Durkheim’s studies, it should be noted that Orthodox Judaism is rooted in tradition. While some concessions are made to modernity (the degree of those concessions depends on the spectrum of Orthodoxy, which itself is not a monolith), Orthodoxy at its essence strives to maintain, as much as possible, the historic, social, and religious realities of its ancestors. Thus, echoes of the “elementary forms” of Judaism persist. Therefore, Durkheim’s theory linking religion, especially in its early stages, to the centrality of the group is highly relevant.

Existing somewhat in contrast to those interviewees discussed above is Ryan, a male student who loosely affiliates with the Conservative group on campus. Although Ryan rarely attends prayer services or Shabbat meals on campus, he did name Shabbat dinner and the Passover seder as the most meaningful rituals to him. Growing up, until his bar mitzvah, his family had weekly Friday night Shabbat dinner and he misses this practice.
Ryan spoke at length about how much the social and communal aspects drive his conception of meaningful Judaism. However, because of Brandeis’s fairly large Jewish student population, Ryan finds that the community aspect is lacking. In comparison to growing up in a geographic area with few Jews, Ryan has many Jewish friends at Brandeis and, therefore, does not feel the need to seek out Jewish life, thus diminishing the feeling of a close-knit communal he found so meaningful in high school. Along with this, his observance of the meaningful rituals in his life (Shabbat meals) has waned. In fact, in response to being asked what he does that is meaningful each day or week, he responded, “I don’t think I do a ton of meaningful things. My life just kind of flies by.” For Ryan, the college campus is not a place where community is created, rather, it disappears, and along with it disappears connection to ritual. Although Ryan’s behavior is opposite to many of the students’ behaviors analyzed above, his disconnect from ritual practice further emphasizes the link between ritual and community.

Amy is another student whose current lack of participation in Shabbat observance reinforces the link between community and Shabbat rituals. Amy is a senior who, up until this year, had been observing Shabbat somewhat strictly and was actively involved in many prayer spaces. However, many of the friends with whom she celebrated Shabbat graduated. Due to the dissolution of her friend-group, combined with a rigorous work schedule, her observance has waned and she has not participated in Shabbat prayer as much this year. While she misses the feeling and meaning she derived from celebrating Shabbat, the importance of her connections with friends and acquaintances is apparent. It seems clear that Shabbat could really only have a high level of meaning for her when she had that community.
The college setting heightens the connection between such rituals as Shabbat and community. This is clear for all those students discussed above, both for those who find the ritual prayers of Shabbat to be the most meaningful and for those who feel disconnected from community and Shabbat. As Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe have written, “peer social networks are the fabric of campus life.”121 If community is so integral to campus life, and community and Shabbat are so closely linked, it seems quite natural that many interview participants not only linked the two but also found meaning in this ritual for this particular reason.

**Holiness**

It is notable that there were several students who named Shabbat rituals other than participating in prayer as most meaningful—two students named the *havdalah ceremony* and one student named *leading prayer*. However, all these rituals are still done in the communal context. None of these students pointed to community the specific reason for the rituals’ meaningfulness, but the meanings they did find all shared a theme of holiness and transcendence. This suggests that while community is highly linked to the observance of Shabbat for many, there are still those who seek out and find individualized meaning in communal rituals.

For both Dave and Batya, the most meaningful ritual is the havdalah ceremony that separates Shabbat from the beginning of the workweek. Batya, who exclusively attends a mehitza prayer service, named ritual practice and the choices she makes as a college student regarding Jewish observance as the driving forces in her Judaism. For those who observe the Sabbath, the separation of Shabbat and the workweek happens at a specific

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121 Sales and Saxe, "Particularism in the University," 6.
time, regardless of whether a ritual is performed to mark the moment or not. Therefore, attending the ceremony, which is likely less popular than the Friday night or Saturday morning service and accompanying meals, is a choice that affirms her personal commitment to Judaism. Thus, it makes sense that the meaning she derives from the havdalah ceremony comes back to her relationship with God, which exists on a personal, rather than communal, level.

Laura stood out as someone who named *leading services*, rather than participating in them, as being most meaningful. The meaning for her derives in part from her feeling “connected to nusach,”122 to the chain of tradition;” she feels leading prayer elevates her to what she calls the “God zone,” a place she also finds while teaching. Although Laura believes that Judaism is based on community and tradition, she also finds it to be “so individualized.” Traditionally, the prayer leader is considered a part of the community of prayers. The Hebrew term for the prayer leader, שליח צבורי (shaliach tzibur), means messenger or emissary of the congregation, and indicates that the person is no different from the rest of the prayers, simply that they have been chosen to be a representative of and from the group. However, in more modern, liberal prayer spaces, the prayer leader does not often fit this exact mold. Sometimes in these spaces, the prayer leader faces the congregation rather than standing or sitting amongst them. They might lead call-and-response prayers or even recite an entire prayer on behalf of a congregation that cannot read the prayer, rather than beginning or guiding a prayer that the entire congregation recites or silently reads along with them. As discussed in Chapter One, Laura was raised in and feels deeply connected to the Reform community, where this liberal model of prayer

122 The style of services or the particular melodies used.
leading is more prevalent. However, she participates in both the Reform prayer group and the non-denominational, “traditional egalitarian” service where the more traditional prayer leader model might be seen. Thus, it is not surprising that she negotiates community and individualized meaning in her Judaism. Naming leading prayer services as her most meaningful ritual, inherently rooted in community but pointing to a personal, elevated holiness as the reason she finds the ritual meaningful, underlies this duality.

**Tradition**

Finally, several students who found communal rituals to be the most meaningful found meaning in tradition and common history. For instance, Tamar, who finds praying the Kabbalat Shabbat service to be most meaningful, said that what makes Judaism meaningful to her is being “conscientiously engaged” with the traditions that get passed down over generations. For Laura, mentioned above, who finds transcendental meaning in leading Shabbat services, tradition is also an important part of her Judaism. In fact, it is the connection to what she calls the “chain of tradition” that is a large part of what makes the ritual holy for her. Similarly, for Dave, Judaism is about “existing as part of something that has been around for so long.” This connection with tradition, that is, the continuity of the rituals themselves, is important for understanding why havdalah is so meaningful for him. Dave pointed out that wherever he goes, havdalah is the same—often in a circle, and outside if possible. The only difference he has noticed, attending both egalitarian and mehitza prayer services, is where men and women might stand.\(^\text{123}\) This synchronic

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\(^\text{123}\) Some Orthodox Jews practice "shomer negiah," or “observance of touch,” where members of the opposite sex do not come into physical contact with each other outside of family or marriage.
continuity across communities is not so far removed from the diachronic continuity over time that speaks so powerfully to Dave.

For Alex, a genderqueer student\textsuperscript{124} who attends egalitarian prayer services for Shabbat and has explored Orthodox services during the holidays, the Passover seder is the most meaningful ritual because of both the communal aspect and the important role it plays in passing down traditions. Alex also found meaning in community but provided a few caveats. First, Alex is of mixed-ethnic heritage and their mother was not Jewish when they were born, although she later converted. Alex mentioned that they experienced racism at Jewish institutions growing up. Alex’s family was also involved in both havurah-style prayer groups and established synagogues, leading them to witness a good deal of discord between people who were technically part of the same community. Alex was careful to caution that the concept of Jewish “community” is often misconstrued as Ashkenazi-centric, and this can be alienating to those whose background is different. Because of these experiences, tradition spoke more powerfully to Alex than community.

\textbf{Personal Rituals}

Although communal rituals were much more common in terms of meaningfulness, there were four students who named personal rituals as being most meaningful. One student, Anna, named immersion in a mikveh as her most meaningful ritual even though she has only performed this ritual once. Anna grew up without any formal Jewish education and is a first-generation American of Sephardic heritage. Like Amy, she began to explore

\textsuperscript{124} Alex does not have a specific, preferred pronoun that they use. When asked, they responded that they answer to all pronouns, saying that pronouns “are a social construct that bears only a tangential relation to a person’s complete and complicated identity.” They gave me license to use any pronouns I thought appropriate. I have chosen in this thesis, therefore, to use the “singular they”—a pronoun commonly used by genderqueer people—because it does not erase Alex’s identity as genderqueer and, while being grammatically acceptable, still in some ways upsets constructed norms, which I think Alex would appreciate.
traditional Judaism only when she came to college. She is still in the process of this exploration and thus it makes sense that a ritual that marks transitions is meaningful to her. Anna attends Orthodox services and finds meaning in pushing herself beyond her comfort zone and finds challenges productive. She also acknowledges that she is somewhat uncomfortable still with the traditional community. She tries to pray every day but dislikes organized prayer structures. Therefore, it seems almost obvious that she should find more meaning in a personal, intimate ritual, which focuses on the self, rather than on communal ritual. In addition, she spoke of the emotional meaning that immersion had for her, echoing trends indicating that millennial young adults, including Jewish young adults, connect with faith through spirituality and personal avenues.125

Two students specifically named Torah study—that is, the study of Jewish sacred texts broadly—as the most meaningful ritual to them, and another also named Torah study as an integral part of his ritual practice. For Sara and Amy, Torah study is the most meaningful ritual. Although they have very different backgrounds, the reason they find meaning in this ritual is very similar. Sara was raised in a Modern Orthodox home and attended day school her entire life. While describing her day school as “the most central institution” in her Jewish background, she expressed frustration at the barriers to women’s education. She first encountered these barriers after participating in a summer program for women’s learning and realizing how little her school had offered women in the way of learning sacred texts.

Amy, in contrast, was raised in a non-observant, “Conservative-identified” home in a rural, largely non-Jewish area. Although she was highly involved in her synagogue growing

125 Potts, Bennett, and Levin, "Omg!," 6.
up and, as a religious school teacher, tried to infuse ritual into her lessons, she feels she lacks a lot of Jewish knowledge. When Amy came to Brandeis, she encountered traditional Judaism in a modern setting for the first time and began to take on more ritual practices and observances. Among these, she began to study the weekly Torah portion around each Shabbat. She would connect the Torah to her personal life and to science, which she studies.

For both Amy and Sara, Torah study makes up for an earlier lack of learning. For Sara, it was the gender restrictions her high school placed on learning and for Amy it was a general lack of access to studying sacred texts and Hebrew. Thus, the ritual—which they both perform or used to perform on a regular basis—has an elevated meaning. Their perspectives on Judaism also indicate why they find these personal rituals more meaningful than communal ones. Judaism for Sara means being connected to tradition, and ritual observance is an essential element of her Judaism. Community is important but is just simply not intertwined with ritual practice. The rituals are the same whether she does them with other people or on her own. This is the way of traditional Judaism. While some rituals can look slightly different when performed alone, they are still always performed, even if alone. When asked, Sara defined a ritual as “an action [that] is infused with spirituality and with a sense of commandment or obligation.” It is clear that the meaning—the spirituality—she derives comes from the ritual itself, not the context in which it is performed. What is important to her is that she makes the conscious choice to engage in these rituals. When it comes to Torah study, she actively seeks out opportunity, and, if she is unable to learn with a partner or group, she studies on her own. To Amy, Judaism is all about the personal. It is about an individualized connection to God and about a personal
interpretation of Jewish text and tradition that serves as a guide to life. Clearly, Sara’s and Amy’s own sense of their Jewish identity and Judaism influences the ways in which they derive meaning from ritual.

Jason, a now-Orthodox student who grew up, in his words, “Jew-ish,” also pointed to Torah study as an important part of his ritual life, saying that in order to practice Judaism in the best way possible, he needs to learn all that he can. He, too, incorporates learning into his daily routine, sometimes alone and sometimes with a partner. However, he named giving tzedekah, charity, as the ritual that was the most meaningful him because of its importance and because the obligation to do so comes from Jewish texts. Notably, Jason spoke about how the daily practices of his Jewish rituals did not necessarily come with specific, identifiable meaning. This feeling was one that Joe also expressed, as discussed above. Where for Jason this view of meaning leads to a less emotionally-driven, and more obligation-based understanding of Judaism, for Joe, not seeing meaning in individual acts leads to meaning being rooted in community and less in actual ritual behavior.

While these students did not find community to be a reason that rituals are meaningful, it is important that all of these participants at least sometimes attend or used to attend mehitza services. Clearly, even when the students are not actively engaged in thinking about community, there are group dynamics at play. The next chapter will discuss the critical role of group affiliation when it comes to thinking about gender.
Chapter 3: Gender

The stories, behaviors, and feelings of interview participants in this study, particularly those who are not male-identified, demonstrate that these students think about gender in a variety of ways. Many of their views on gender are connected to the communities with which they regularly interact. The data from these interviews do not reveal whether views on gender cause someone to affiliate with a certain group or whether affiliating with a certain group influences someone’s views on gender. There does, however, seem to be a connection between whether a participant attends an egalitarian, mehitza, or both kinds of services, and the participant’s belief that ritual belongs to men or women. When asked whether gender has an impact on their ritual performance, all but one of the female and genderqueer participants affirmed that gender does affect their practice.

The effect of gender on these students’ ritual practice varies. In most cases, it is related to their prayer group affiliation because it is in prayer where gender concerns are most pronounced due to the difference in structure between egalitarian and mehitza services. For some students, the group with which they choose to pray espouses similar views on gender as they do. For these students, the gender has an impact in that the students appreciate their prayer environment. Other students, however, may experience discomfort about or tension between their prayer group’s view of gender and their own.

For example, when I asked Tamar whether she thinks Jewish ritual belongs to men or women, she replied that she is “still figuring it out.” She then went on to say that there
are times when she wants to “allow myself intellectual dishonesty, but...to synthesize that [with] being very critical of my own cognitive dissonance that I maintain in Orthodox spaces—with other people that feel the same way.” In other words, Tamar, who was raised Orthodox, does not always agree with the gender divides present in Orthodox Jewish practice. Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, prayer and community are very meaningful to Tamar. Sometimes, she wants to take part in a meaningful, traditional prayer community without focusing on the discomfort brought on by gender separation. At the same time, she recognizes and is willing to engage in self-criticism of the fact that these are moments of cognitive dissonance.

Tamar was not alone in feeling this way. Several of the female and genderqueer students expressed or implied feelings of tension or discomfort with the way gender affects either their ritual performance or their communities’ conception of ritual performance. Given the prevalence of community in meaning-making, as discussed in the previous chapter, this tension is not insignificant. According to Tova Hartman, “tension...between the words of liturgy and subjective experience of reality” is not necessarily “an exclusive feminist tension...or even a particularly modern one.”

Not all students, however, and not all female students, expressed feelings of tension. Some students, especially observant students, described experiencing gendered ritual as a positive affirmation of their identity. As the interviews conducted for this study demonstrate, there is no monolithic female experience. Still, it is important that all but one female interviewee did feel that gender affects their ritual performance. This chapter presents findings on interviewees’ responses to questions on gender and shows that prayer

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126 Hartman, Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism, 64.
group affiliation is important when considering conceptions of gendered ritual roles. This chapter also explores how non-male participants’ ritual practice is affected by their and their communities’ conceptions of gender.

**Gendering Ritual**

As discussed, in *halakha*, Jewish law, males are obligated in all of the *mitzvot*, or commandments, that are laid out in the traditional Jewish sources. Some of these commandments include moral or ethical laws, such as the prohibition against murder or adultery. Some of these laws are ritualistic, such as the commandment to refrain from work on the Sabbath or to eat only certain foods. The rabbinic commentators on the biblical text exempted women from positive, time-bound *mitzvot*. Positive *mitzvot* are those that command an action rather than the refraining from an action. Time-bound *mitzvot* are those that are commanded to be performed at a certain time of day or year. There are various debates as to whether “exempt” means “forbidden,” whether these exemptions were sociological or are actually rooted in the biblical law, and what exactly the parameters of “time-bound” are. While there is no longer consensus in the diverse Jewish world on these issues, there are certain *mitzvot*, such as wearing certain ritual garments like tallit and tefillin, from which women have traditionally been exempt. As a result, women as a class historically have been, and in many Orthodox communities still are, excluded from performing ritual functions on behalf of the community, such as leading prayer services, because of their exempt status. Thus, some Jews view ritual as being gendered. When

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asked whether they viewed ritual as belonging to men or women, interview participants’ answers tended to be reflective of their prayer group affiliation.

Those who at least sometimes attend egalitarian services tend to believe that Jewish ritual belongs equally to men and women. Dave, who attends both egalitarian and mehitza services, does believe Jewish ritual belongs to both men and women, and in fact feels it is important for women to have ritual opportunities that in the past they have been denied. Alex, who also attends egalitarian services, feels the same way. Laura and Liz, who both exclusively attend egalitarian services, pushed back against the idea that ritual might belong differently to men or women. Ryan, who affiliates with the Conservative movement and grew up on the more traditional end of the Conservative spectrum, does not believe that ritual belongs differently to men or women. While he associates certain rituals with men more than women, he believes that if a woman wants to perform these rituals, it is “her prerogative.” Naomi, Ilana, Amy, and Emily, who all attend both egalitarian and mehitza prayer services believe that ritual belongs to both men and women. At the same time, they acknowledge that anyone who was raised with a gendered Judaism would associate certain rituals more easily with one gender or another. They are also cognizant of the fact that, because they sometimes attend mehitza services, not everyone in these communities feels the same way they do. Finally, while describing herself as halakhically committed to Orthodox Judaism and claiming she understands there is a difference in ritual roles for men and women, Tamar also calls herself a feminist and thinks Judaism should move towards non-gendered ritual. Those students who find community and meaning in attending egalitarian services at least some of the time have an egalitarian outlook on gender and ritual.
Those who exclusively attend mehitza prayer services, however, were far more reluctant to allow that ritual could belong equally to men and women. Importantly, all these students acknowledge that this can be incongruous with their or others’ twenty-first century sensibilities. At the same time, they felt strongly about upholding these traditional boundaries. Joe, who grew up Conservative but now attends Orthodox prayer services, believes that certain rituals do belong differently to men and women. But, like Ryan, Joe also thinks that if women want to perform rituals from which they are exempt, it neither detracts from nor adds to his own performance of those rituals. Joe also pointed out that certain rituals, such as the observance of Shabbat, are incumbent upon both men and women. This fact was something Jason mentioned as well—he gave the example that both men and women are obligated in prayer, with the only distinction that men are obligated at certain times whereas women are not. At the same time, Jason understands and identifies with the reasons that certain rituals belong differently to men and women. While he intimated that he did not want to offend or embarrass anyone else, he also made it clear that he was comfortable with the gender separation of Orthodox Judaism. Of course, both Joe and Jason grew up in egalitarian families and only when they came to college did they become more involved in an Orthodox community. Given their backgrounds, and perhaps the fact that they were being interviewed by a woman, it does not seem surprising that they felt compelled to offer these concessions to egalitarianism.

Batyba, who described herself as a “neo-feminist,” someone who can choose whatever she wants, “appreciate[s] that there is flexibility in halakha but also feel[s] comfortable in what [she] has chosen to do for [her]self.” In addition, she emphasized that men and women, regardless of their different ritual roles, are equal in their relationships to
God. For Sara, tradition takes precedence over what she called “jarring” gender differentiations. She also believes that gender distinctions are not a reason for her to abandon praying in an Orthodox setting. Samantha, who is probably the most traditional of all the women interviewed, believes that Judaism has always had a concept of male and female. She regards prayer as personal and is influenced by the belief that men and women are spiritually different; thus, she actively prefers separated prayer to egalitarian services. Even Anna, who did not grow up Orthodox and is torn as to whether ritual belongs to men or women differently, did not want to dismiss the fact that certain rituals have been prescribed separately for men and women. Like Sara, she holds tradition and history in high regard and said that if these distinctions have survived the test of time, there must be “something there.” Sara’s and Anna’s emphasis that tradition should not be ignored, even if it creates some level of discomfort, is important because it suggests that some women value tradition over comfort. At the same time, Sara and Anna have both found ways to ritualize as women in a way that does not contradict some of their more egalitarian values.128

Most of the women’s and Alex’s answers indicate that they have more frequent experiences than the men with gender dynamics in ritual settings. The important differences in this case, however, fell across the affiliation divide. Those students who continue to have contact with egalitarian prayer spaces believe that ritual already does, or

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128 Although neither Sara nor Anna identified with the feminist label, they are in this sense quite similar to the feminists Sylvia Barack Fishman describes, who “have no desire the diminish the significance of ceremonies with ancient authority and deep historical and spiritual significance. However, they are insistent that the lives of Jewish girls and women should be accorded deep spiritual significance as well.” Fishman, A Breath of Life, 124.
should, belong equally to men and women; those students who only pray with a mehitza believe that gender distinctions in ritual practice should be maintained.

Importantly, however, the majority of the participants do have experience with different types of Judaism. Students’ exposure to multiple streams of Judaism is evident in the nuances of their responses. This is especially true for students who attend both egalitarian and mehitza services, but even those who only attend one kind of services are still cognizant of the fact that gender dynamics are at play. Sara and Batya, for example, who grew up and continue to identify as Orthodox, spoke about their awareness of being female and the gender distinctions or restrictions their communities uphold. Joe and Jason, who both grew up in an egalitarian environment but now identify as Orthodox, were both willing to allow that others will not feel the same way as they do about gender distinctions. Ryan, who is strictly egalitarian, acknowledged a large a spectrum of Jewish practice exists beyond his own. Laura exclusively attends egalitarian services but as a student leader at Hillel has to navigate the diversity of views and halakhic beliefs on gender on a regular basis. None of the students’ answers to the question of whether ritual belongs to men or women suggested a flippant, ignorant, or uninformed view of the issue. Yet, despite their ability to see the issue from other perspectives, there are fairly clear differences of opinions between those students who are willing to be in egalitarian spaces and those students who prefer mehitza prayer services exclusively.

Navigating Gender

Some differences across group affiliation do emerge in response to whether or not gender affects their performance of ritual. Although not enough men participated in the study to allow for an appropriate analysis of gender differences, it should be noted that of
the four men I did interview, Dave was the only man who said that he thought about gender during his ritual performance, specifically during prayer. Notably, Dave is also the only man who attends both egalitarian and mehitza services. Despite their disparate views on who ritual belongs to, Alex and almost all the women interviewed think about gender or believe gender affects their ritual performance in some way. They exemplify Tamar Ross’s conception of “gender as a processor of knowledge.”129 That is, they sometimes view their lived experiences through the lens of gender—they see things differently because they are not male, the dominant gender group in American and Jewish societies. When students’ beliefs about gender align with their community’s, there can still be an awareness of gender. However for some students, their worldview can cause tension when it does not align with the community’s.

**Personal and Communal Views Aligned**

For those who attend exclusively egalitarian services, female and genderqueer students in the study reported that they are aware of gender as an issue; however, they said it neither directly affects their performance of ritual nor does it cause them to feel discomfort or tension. For Liz, who grew up Reform and has only attended Reform services at Brandeis, gender is not an issue. Although she had some more observant family members whom she witnessed observing ritual in a gendered way, she has always considered ritual as belonging, without differentiation, to men and women, and never thinks about it when celebrating Shabbat or the holidays. Both Alex and Laura, who also only attend egalitarian services, do think about gender but see it as an external factor. Alex doesn’t believe ritual should be gendered; and as someone who does not identify along the

129 Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah*, 8.
traditional gender binary, Alex personally places much less emphasis on gender than the community expects them to. Alex thinks gendered ritual is the reality, even if they personally believe ritual does not belong to men and women differently. For Alex, having been born female and now identifying as genderqueer, gender is a lens that other people impose onto ritual practice—sometimes they even impose it on Alex’s practice where Alex does not. Similarly, Laura does not think about gender during the actual moment of her personal ritual performance but does often think about it in the context of coordinating services. Laura helps to coordinate the non-denominational egalitarian prayer services, where attendees come from a range of backgrounds. Therefore, the issue of gender differentiation in Jewish ritual is something she thinks about when asking students of different genders to lead various parts of the service. All of these students only attend a type of prayer service where roles are not gender specific. Still, because the prayer groups are still a part of a pluralistic umbrella organization (Hillel), the students are clearly aware of gender issues. In addition, some of them were raised with a Jewish narrative that consciously promoted such egalitarianism, so they would have been aware that non-egalitarian denominations of Judaism exist. Yet, because they have chosen to remain involved in exclusively egalitarian prayer groups, they all claim to be aware of, but usually not directly affected by, gender issues in ritual.

Two of the women who only attend mehitza services said gender affects their performance of ritual but does not cause any tension. Notably, both Batya and Samantha, the two women who feel this way, were also very firm in their belief that ritual belongs differently to men and women and that women’s experiences are inherently different from men’s. Because they have different spiritual experiences as women, the separation of
genders obviously does not cause any anxiety. Samantha, for example, agrees that men and women should have different roles. Batya’s relationship with God is primary and she sees no gender barriers there. Thus, she feels comfortable with her choice to partake in traditionally-gendered roles. Both of these women feel that they and the communities in which they pray share the same outlook on gender in ritual.

Amy, Emily, and Ilana, three women who attend both egalitarian and mehitza services, expressed a tendency to be cognizant of gender issues in the moment. Like Laura, Emily is a student leader at Hillel and has to navigate many constituents’ beliefs about gender when coordinating events. For Amy, it is only in non-egalitarian spaces when she is aware of her presence as a woman and what it means to perform or not perform a ritual in that context. It should be noted that Amy and Emily do not attend Shabbat prayer services as frequently as some of the other women who also attend both egalitarian and mehitza services. In addition, their minyan-hopping is less about finding a meaningful prayer space and more about having different experiences and being with their friends. Thus, they have to contend less with the issue of gender separation at mehitza services because these are not necessarily their primary communities.

Ilana finds comfort and meaning in connecting to historical women’s roles. While she believes ritual belongs equally to men and women, she also feels it is important that as a woman, she appreciates the rituals, such as lighting Shabbat candles, that have traditionally been more frequently performed by women. Wanting to be more conscious in performing traditionally women’s rituals is not an uncommon view among women who also want access to traditionally men’s rituals, as well.\(^{130}\) Ilana is particularly interested in

\(^{130}\) Lerner, *Who Hast Not Made Me a Man*, 15.
creating women’s-only spaces specifically for the purpose of ritual performance. Again, this is not uncommon even among women—Jewish and otherwise—who do have access to egalitarian spaces or to the ability to practice traditionally men’s rituals.¹³¹ It could be that, for Ilana, engaging in these spaces allows her to dispel any discomfort she has with gender restrictions in co-ed spaces.

**Contrasting Views Lead to Tension**

Several of the women interviewed also have experiences like Tamar, where they feel a sort of cognitive dissonance between their personal views of gender roles and the way they interact with their communities’ gender norms. Although Tamar was one of only two interview participants to name this phenomenon outright, it was clear from several other students’ responses to the question that they experience tension or even uncertainty around the issue, as well.

In contrast to Batya and Samantha, Sara and Anna, who also exclusively attend mehitza services and do not disavow the gender differentiation in traditional Jewish ritual, were much more willing to acknowledge their discomfort with the differentiation. The two attend mehitza services and both think about gender and feel it affects their ritual performance. As mentioned earlier, Sara finds some of these distinctions “jarring,” and Anna feels torn about the differentiation between genders. Yet for both Sara and Anna, these are not reasons to disengage. As Jody Myers has written, “people who perform rituals do not always do so in order to actualize a collection of theological truth claims or to concretize abstract intellectual principles, but to express their membership in

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¹³¹ Myers, "Phasing In: Rosh Hodesh Ceremonies in American Jewish Life," 239; Fishman, A Breath of Life, 176; Prell, Prayer & Community, 300; Roof, Spiritual Marketplace, 22.
community.”¹³² In other words, people like Sara and Anna might participate in “jarring”
gendered rituals for the sake of being part of community, even if these rituals do not
articulate their beliefs about gender and Judaism. However, it is important that prayer was
not the most meaningful ritual for either Sara or Anna. For both of these women, personal
rituals—Torah study and mikveh immersion—are more important. In addition, while
participating in the community was important to them, it was tradition more than
community that made these rituals meaningful. It is possible that these factors—being
conscious of gender tensions, a preference for personal rituals, and finding meaning in
tradition—are all interrelated. Gender is more of a factor for Sara and Anna in the rituals
that express community rather than personal meaning. It may be that because these
communal rituals are less meaningful for them, they are willing to be more flexible when it
comes to their discomfort. Sara’s and Anna’s secular egalitarianism is in conflict with the
gender distinctions in the religious life of their chosen communities.

The other two students who spoke about gender being a source of tension were
Naomi and Tamar, who attend both egalitarian and mehitza prayer services. These two
women, who both consider themselves observant and egalitarian as regards ritual
performance, were the only interview participants who directly addressed the fact that
they are engaged in a community that does not necessarily align with their values when it
comes to gender. As mentioned, Tamar talked about her “cognitive dissonance” and
“intellectual dishonesty” in engaging with gender issues in Jewish ritual. Tamar described
herself as a feminist and “loves” the non-denominational egalitarian service. Yet, she
continues to attend Orthodox services, as well, because she connects emotionally to the

community and to the singing. In the egalitarian community, she sometimes feels pressure
to take on ritual roles and she feels it is important to be a woman representative in these
roles, but she doesn’t always feel entirely comfortable in these roles, either. Tamar, in some
sense, is at the point of her life where she is, as Judith Plaskow once wrote, “overwhelmed
by the contradictions between [her] two identities,” that is, her halakhic, Orthodox identity,
and her feminist, woman identity. Naomi admitted that she often does not live out her
egalitarian values, claiming this was something she was still learning how to do better. She
spoke, for example, of saying the prayer of thanks in the morning with feminine grammar—
“modah ani” as opposed to “modeh ani” in the masculine or universal—but also has not
participated as a woman in traditionally male rituals, such as wearing ritual garments like
tallit or tefillin, since before she came to college.

It is clear that group affiliation plays an important role in these students’
conceptions of gender and in how gender affects their ritual practice. More so than
personal gender, there are similarities within affiliation groups as to how interviewees
view gender in ritual. As might be expected, every student who at least sometimes attends
egalitarian services believes ritual should or already does belong equally to men and
women. Also expectedly, those who exclusively attend mehitza services believe that men
and women have different obligations in ritual. Further, non-male participants see gender
affecting their ritual practice when their personal views on gender do or do not align with
their communities’. This attention to whether their individual beliefs align with their
communities’ serves to underscore the importance of community and the group.

133 Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row
Publishers, 1990), viii.
Conclusion

In Pirkei Avot, a tractate of the Mishna (early rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Bible), Hillel is quoted as saying, “Do not separate yourself from the congregation.” Hillel, the rabbi after whom the umbrella organization of college Jewish groups is named, is one of the more well-known sages of the rabbinic texts. He is oft-quoted in Jewish organizations and by Jewish professionals. Some of his better-known sayings remark upon the responsibility of people to one another. “Do not separate yourself from the congregation” makes it explicit: community is a Jewish value.

Although ritual theorists fail to capture Judaism’s concept of obligation, the scholars who write about the deep connection between ritual and community encapsulate an equally important component of Jewish religious life. The findings from this research profoundly support these theories. The importance of community was pervasive in my interviews. For many participants, community was the reason that they found meaning in ritual. Even in cases where participants found personal rituals more meaningful, or found communal rituals meaningful for personal reasons, these students’ ritual practices enact their individualized roles within the context of a community. These students experience ritual in the way that Norma Baumel Joseph understands ritual when she writes, “religious ritual creates the arena in which the individual expresses solidarity with the group and the

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134 Mishna Avot 4:2
group manages to incorporate the individual.” In this way, these students connect the individual with the communal all at once.

Something similar is true of participants whose practice would continue in the absence of community, but for whom community elevates the meaning of the ritual. For observant Jewish students, the concept of community may be important, but rituals need to be performed regardless, even in the absence of a community. What is noteworthy is the example of someone like Samantha, who found ritual meaningful because of community, because she experienced ritual without one. It is important that while Samantha differentiated between the positive emotional meaning of observing Shabbat with community and the loneliness of doing so without community, she still practiced this ritual even when she had no community. If community is meaningful, it becomes so in the way Joe and Sara view it in that it drives the meaning of ritual, but not the practice of it. The ritual will always be performed, because it is an obligation, but the emotional meaning may change depending on the community in which it is performed.

For some participants, community was so valued that they were willing to engage with their discomfort about gender for the sake of community. This was my most surprising and interesting finding, because it implies that the positive emotional feelings of being in a community outweigh personal feelings of discomfort of tension. Although this was an exploratory study and I had no particular hypotheses, I admit I expected a person’s gender to be more of a factor in how they approached and thought about issues of gender in Jewish ritual. Instead, I met Alex, who is genderqueer and exclusively attends egalitarian services—except on High Holidays, when they are willing to stand in the back of the

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Orthodox service in deference to gender separation in order to experience that prayer space. I met Tamar, who readily admits she experiences cognitive dissonance when it comes to gender and Orthodox Judaism. I met Sara, who finds Orthodoxy’s gender differentiation “jarring” but still prays in that community anyway. I met Ilana, who is completely egalitarian in her outlook on Jewish ritual but still attends a mehitza prayer service sometimes because it is a more “serious prayer space.”

Perhaps even more interesting is the ways in which these students seek out, create, and belong to multiple communities. Robert Wuthnow’s theory of tinkering is clearly at play here, as would be expected of a college campus environment. I would have assumed that a society of tinkerers would probably lack the community aspect. If tinkerers are building their religious experience from multiple groups and multiple practices, it seems it would be hard to find community since no one tinkerer’s practice would look like another. But tinkering is enormously prevalent within my sample, and plenty of tinkerers found rituals meaningful because of community.

The construction of community through tinkering is fascinating and something worth studying. This thesis was limited by the nature and size of the sample. Further research that makes use of a larger and more representative sample should explore whether there are other tinkerers on Brandeis’s campus and college campuses more broadly, and if those tinkerers seek and find meaning in community the way these participants do. In addition, appropriate further research could theorize about new models of community built by or made up of members who tinker and who belong to multiple communities. This research might also explore whether or not there are similar characteristics among young adult Jews after college.
Riv-Ellen Prell writes that, “covenant...was the religious articulation of community and responsibility for other Jews,” and that covenant has “flourished as the most significant referent of any Jewish symbol for the majority of American Jews.” However, Prell writes that covenant became the most significant referent by replacing observance. The participants in this sample suggest otherwise: that observance and ritual are intertwined with covenant and community. Whether they realize it or not, community and group affiliation are probably the most important factors in what makes ritual meaningful and how gender affects ritual practice for the participants in this study.

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136 Prell, Prayer & Community, 206.
References


Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Thank you for participating in this survey. My name is Rachel Eisen and I am a graduate student in the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies department. For my master's thesis I am examining the relationship between gender, ritual practice, and Jewish identity among upperclass students at Brandeis University. This survey will ask you about your current and past Jewish affiliations and your current ritual practice. All questions are optional and all responses are confidential.

I would also like to conduct interviews to explore these topics in more depth. If you would like to volunteer to be interviewed, you may provide any form of contact information on the last page.

If you have any questions or concerns at any time, please contact me at raeisen@brandeis.edu / 301-706-2458.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in the research, please contact the Brandeis Institutional Review Board at irb@brandeis.edu or 781-736-8133.

By checking yes, I am confirming that I am an upperclass student at Brandeis University and that I am 18 years or older. I understand that participation in this survey is optional and that all responses are confidential.

☐ Yes
What is your gender?

With which Brandeis minyan/prayer group do you associate or attend services (check all that apply)?
- Chabad
- Kehilat Sha'ar
- Orthodox
- Reconstructionist
- Reform
- Sephardi
- Shir HaDasha
- Traditional Egalitarian
- Other (please specify)

In which denomination(s) were you raised (check all that apply)?
- Chabad
- Conservative
- Humanist
- Just Jewish
- Non-denominational
- Reconstructionist
- Reform
- Renewal
- Secular
- Sephardic
- Orthodox
- Multifaith/Interfaith (please specify)
- Other (please specify)
How often do you perform the following rituals?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>Once or twice a year</th>
<th>A few times a year</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>A few times a month</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Every or once a day</th>
<th>As often as prescribed by Jewish law</th>
<th>I don’t perform this ritual but plan to in the future</th>
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<tr>
<td>avoid handling money on Shabbat/Jewish holidays</td>
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<td>fast on the Fast of Esther</td>
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<td>fast on Yom Kippur</td>
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<td>light candles on Hanukkah</td>
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<td>light candles on Shabbat</td>
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<td>participate in a Passover seder</td>
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<td>prepare special foods for Shabbat/Jewish holidays</td>
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<td>wash your hands before a festive meal</td>
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<td>wear a tallit</td>
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<tr>
<td>wear a yarmulke/kippah or other head covering</td>
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Please rank the following rituals in order of importance to you (1=most important, 11=least important):

- avoid handling money on Shabbat/Jewish holidays
- fast on the Fast of Esther
- fast on Yom Kippur
- immerse in a mikveh
- light candles on Hanukkah
- light candles on Shabbat
- participate in a Passover seder
- prepare special foods for Shabbat/Jewish holidays
- wash your hands before a festive meal
- wear a tallit
- wear a yarmulke/kippah or other head covering

0% [ ] 100% [ ]
Please indicate if you are willing to participate in an interview to discuss these topics in more depth:

- Yes, I am willing participate in an interview
- No, I do not wish to participate in an interview

Interview contact information

If you are willing to participate in an interview to discuss gender, ritual, and Jewish identity in more depth, please provide any form of contact information:

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.
Appendix B: Interview Guide

I. Introduction

• Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between gender, ritual, and Jewish identity.

• The purpose of this particular interview is to get a sense beyond measurable ritual behavior, what a person’s Jewish journey looks like, and what meaning ritual practice has for them.

• Confidentiality: Nothing will be reported that identifies an individual. I will not use names of individuals in my thesis. I will be taking notes throughout to assure that I accurately capture your views. The notes are for the purposes of the thesis only and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team.

• I’m going to ask you about your current and past Jewish identification, your current and past ritual practice, your views on gender and Jewish identity.

II. Interview guide

1. What is your gender and age? Which Brandeis minyan/prayer group(s) do you attend or identify with?

2. Can you tell me about your Jewish background or upbringing? For example, what are the important moments, people, and/or institutions in your Jewish story?

3. Can you tell me about any things you every day or week that are meaningful to you?
4. Can you tell me about the Jewish rituals you currently perform? Has this changed at all over time?

5. Where did you learn about these rituals?

6. Can you tell me which is the most meaningful general or Jewish ritual to you and why?

7. Do you view Jewish ritual practices as belonging to men or women? Does this influence your performance of rituals?

8. How would you describe what Judaism or Jewishness means to you?