



## ICJW Online Study Program

### “Women's Lifecycle Events”

#### WOMEN'S LIFE CYCLES FROM A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

#### Session V - SIMCHAT CHOCHMA – THE JOY OF ELDERHOOD

by Rabbi Miriyam Glazer

#### The Spiritual Creativity of Jewish Women: The New Ritual for Entering Elderhood

As babies, we're welcomed into the covenant through the Brit Milah and – if we are female, through the Brit Banot, a still-evolving ritual introduced by Jewish parents into Judaism just about three decades ago. A little more than a decade later, we bid farewell to childhood and mark our assumption of adult religious responsibilities with the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

And, of course, from the moment we're born we're showered with the blessing that one day we too shall stand under the huppah, the wedding canopy, so that “voices of joy and voices of gladness” will be heard evermore in the “cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem.” Birth, Bar or Bat Mitzvah, Marriage.

And then? What life-cycle ritual marks the passage of our life between the day we are married and the day that we die? We know, of course, that, if we are blessed with many decades of adulthood, there are profoundly significant passages we women, in particular, undergo. Entering menopause changes us. Being menopausal changes us. And becoming post-menopausal changes us even more. Our bodies and our psyches and our souls all quietly evolve into a new stage of life.

Our bodies obviously change. But don't we also find ourselves thinking differently, as we get older? reacting differently? interpreting events and experiencing others differently? Elderhood can awaken a new sense of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and inner strength, a new understanding of life, a new wisdom, a new and different sense of creativity, a new appreciation of the days of one's life, a new sense of peace. It is a time not for resignation but for a new kind of flourishing, as psalm 92 so eloquently suggests: “*Tsadik ka'tamar yifrach; k'erez ba'livanon yisgeh...Ode y'nuvun b'sayvah, d'shaynim v'ra'ananim yihu* -- The righteous are like a flourishing palm tree, tall like a cedar of Lebanon; in old age they will still bear fruit; they shall ever be fragrant and fresh.”

A little over twenty years ago, Savina J. Teubal z"l, a feminist biblical scholar in Los Angeles who died just this past year, began to feel the need to celebrate her own passage into elderhood, particularly in the context of a culture that made women over 40 invisible altogether and was obsessively enamored of youth. Savina, who had just turned 60, had long been studying the Genesis narratives of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. In the course of her studies, she had become vividly conscious of the significance of the story's



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emphasis on the old age of both Sarah and Abraham. Both Abraham and Sarah flourish spiritually in old age – for it is then that they hear the voice of God bidding them embark on a journey to an unknown land. In her old age, Sarah is beautiful to her husband, to kings, and to God, for her physical beauty was clearly born of her innermost being. It is in old age that she experiences, in Savina's words, “the long-awaited reward of a full life... forging a destiny and establishing her legacy.” Savina called it the “Joy of Wisdom,” “a vibrant beauty from within that marks not only an elder's accomplishments in life, but the inner enlightenment we call wisdom...the process through which visions are realized....”

Abraham and Sarah both were blessed by God. Both experienced a change of name: Abram to Abraham, father of multitudes; Sarai to Sarah, Princess. Abraham was party to a covenant with God; Sarah, party to God's promise to her. Savina therefore chose to include in her Ritual of Elderhood those significant elements from the biblical narrative. Calling her new ritual a “*Simkhat Khokhmah, a Celebration of Wisdom,*” she included within it a Blessing, a Name Change, and a Pledge, in memory of the promises God made to Sarah. For Savina, that pledge was the offering of a grant to anyone who would continue the work in feminist Judaism to which Savina herself had been dedicated.

Entering and embracing elderhood also means having to reconcile with the reality of one's own eventual death. Herself Syrian in origin, Savina thus changed into a white linen galabiye, a long Middle Eastern shirt dress, during the ceremony – the galabiye that would serve as her kittel, the garment in which she would be buried. As she changed her garment, she recited the *Birkat Hama'ayan*, based on a traditional prayer:

I bless the wellspring of life and death that sanctifies me with mitzvot and commands me to enwrap myself in a comely garment and find peace and rest beneath the wings of Shekhinah.

But to reconcile with death is also to affirm life. Savina ended the ritual with the planting of a tree, in honor of the significance trees held for our ancestors. Sarah lived in a grove of sacred terebinth trees at Mamre; Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, was buried under an oak in Beth-El; Abraham planted a tamarisk in Beersheba. As Savina herself expressed it, “Trees symbolize the connection between the depths of the earth, where life is quickened, and the canopy above, where life becomes visible.”

In the years that followed, many women have followed the template created by Savina Teubal. Some, like Savina, held the ritual on a Shabbat morning; others in the afternoon, others on another day of the week. Most included a variation of the introduction, read by community elders or by friends, “The Simkhat Khochma validates the part of life already lived, and empowers the portion of our future...it marks the beginning of the Joy of Wisdom, the long-awaited reward of a full life.” Marcia Cohn Spiegel, for example, began her celebration of the Simkhat Khokhma after Havdalah service with these words:



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People always ask me what I'm going to do when I grow up. And it occurs to me that this is it. Whatever it is I'm going to be when I grow up, I am, now. So, I have put together a service that I hope will be a model for other people to include in their own lives as they come to significant times of passage.

Everything that I'm using this afternoon is symbolic to me. Those of you who are old enough to remember Gladys Avenue will recognize my mother's Spanish shawl that used to sit on the piano, and now is gracing our table for Havdalah... Also, a lot of very special women helped me in planning this ceremony.... You are all the facets of my life! My children and grandchildren, my siblings, aunts, and uncles and cousins, friends, friends of my children, neighbors, people I've worked with in the community, people I work with... people from my spiritual community, from my creativity group, poets, my publisher is here, my classmates are here, my students are here, my teachers are here, the people who have mentored me and the people whom I have mentored, people I have worked for and people I have worked with. Each of you has played a special part in my 60 years of life. And I welcome you.

As we enter this final act of our lives, elderhood and old age, assuming a new name – that of Wise Woman or Wise Man, to honor the understanding and insight that life has been gracious enough to grant us; identifying a legacy, and affirming our lives, is a beautiful gift to cherish.

**For further information:**

Three descriptions of the Simkhat Khochma (or Khokhma, or Chochmah) ceremony are available on [www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org).

See also Ellen Umansky and Dianne Ashton, *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

Rabbi Miriyam Glazer  
mglazer@uj.edu