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Women's Whispers: Moonrise

By VIVA HAMMER
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It is my custom to go to shul on the mornings when my people celebrate the birth of the new moon. The moon is the woman's parallel in the unequal upper spheres, and I show my partnership with her by joining the community in song on her monthly birthday.

Yet in the Orthodox shuls I attend for Rosh Hodesh, I am always the lone woman. Prayer is sweeter to God when uttered with a minyan: 10 adult males. Twice a day, after sunrise and at sunset, men meet and together offer thanks and make supplications to their maker. Women are exempt from the obligation of praying with a minyan, but if they do manage to come to shul, their prayers are joined with those of the males, on a privileged route to God. On Shabbat many women do take this opportunity, but they almost never do so during the week.

Daily services are businesslike; unlike on Shabbat, there is neither time nor audience for performances. The men move through the familiar words with unselfconscious, understated ease. The tefillin are expertly wrapped onto arms and foreheads, then quickly unwrapped and hidden away. And even though my secular side finds tefillin outlandish adornments, in my Jewish consciousness, they are as natural as women's jewelry: They are the garments of masculinity.

Sitting there, *kenegdam* – on the opposite side of the *mehitza* – I burn with self-consciousness. The comfortableness and routine dedication of these men on Rosh Hodesh mornings crosses sharply with my onliness, and the specialness of my presence. The men's coming together for prayer mocks my sex: Community is defined by their gathering, and my physical separation from their wholeness cuts me with a blunt blade. Only males count for the minyan, and when (as sometimes happens) only nine men and me appear in shul, each of us prays alone, and the Torah is not read. I am as relevant to the prayers as the clock which ticks on the back wall.

In my soul, stripped of the marks of my sex, I am one of them. It is this same little, dedicated crowd that populates all of Jewish history in those dark journeys through the desert and into the land and out of it again. So my separation from them is perplexing and the men's discomfort at my intrusion is painful. I don't yearn for their seats, I sit in them; the men's garments clothe not only them but me as well. I am part of their circle.

And yet I sit on the *sitra ahra*, the other side.

Everything is familiar; I answer the prayer calls just like those who have done so since childhood. I stand quickly at the right times, and sit languidly when those portions are over. I

know when to bow and when to bend my knees. I am a fellow traveler in the next-door carriage, looking through the double glaze of their window and my window.

This morning, the Rosh Hodesh service was at a shiva home. Mourners are not permitted to leave their place of mourning, and so the praying community comes to them. This family lived in a flat where there was scarcely room for the minyan, and so, being superfluous, I had to move whenever someone arrived. I edged from the corridor, to behind the coat-closet, into the kitchen and finally behind the front door, holding my breath so as not to be noticed and not to take up someone else's space.

The last person at davening was a man with a baby carriage. He seemed reluctant to join the main body of men, and inched into my carefully carved out, invisible space. The baby whimpered and the daddy took it out and held it on his shoulder, wrapped on tefillin, caught up the prayers, cradled the baby, sung *Hallel*, answered Kaddish, rocked the baby to sleep and kissed it gently, unwrapped tefillin and put them away; gently lowered the baby into the carriage and finished "Bless the Lord my soul," the Rosh Hodesh psalm.

He didn't acknowledge me, but he took my space, embarrassed me by not observing the rules of separation between women and men during prayer. The baby stared at me with blank black eyes.

I left before the end, quickly, to ensure I was not noticed, but the daddy who took my space apologized as I ran out and said he hoped he hadn't disturbed my concentration. I smiled and said that it was all right.

Such a daddy! And perhaps that's why I still go to these terribly awkward mornings of prayer. Because somewhere in my history a daddy held me on his shoulder and wrapped on tefillin, called the replies to Kaddish and rocked me to sleep.

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