

# Adult Rites of Passage



## WRJ Understandings to Guide our Learning

1. Reform Judaism is an authentic expression of Jewish living that reflects the evolving tradition of adaptation and change that is the hallmark of Jewish history throughout the centuries.
2. WRJ Mission Statement: Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ) strengthens the voice of women worldwide and empowers them to create caring communities, nurture congregations, cultivate personal and spiritual growth, and advocate for and promote progressive Jewish values.

[www.chaimitzvah.org](http://www.chaimitzvah.org)

[www.wrj.org](http://www.wrj.org)



# I - Adult Rites of Passage



## connection to original sourcebook

Chai Mitzvah offers participants the opportunity to explore their own Jewish learning and practice in a personally meaningful way by encouraging participants to engage deeply with their community, study new texts, and experiment with new commitments. This approach, in many ways, mirrors the development and evolution of Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism began as a response to Emancipation, when Jews were first granted full citizenship, and access to secular learning, politics and culture. Reform Judaism has always put an emphasis on history and the evolving nature of society, acknowledging that to live as both a modern individual and a Jew requires a sense of balance and adaptation. As a result, Reform Judaism has often been at the forefront of ritual adaptation and creation. Lesson One, with its focus on rites of passage, encourages learners to explore their own experiences with lifecycle events and how they have enabled us, personally, to change and grow. This supplement, with its emphasis on the adaptive nature of Reform Judaism and on Women of Reform Judaism, encourages participants to place their own experiences within the context of the evolving tradition of Reform Judaism. We will focus on the following texts from the original sourcebook:

- Page 2, “The Jewish Life Cycle; Rites of Passage from Biblical to Modern Times”
- Pages 5-7, “Celebrating Aging”



## facilitator’s notes

Consider using the questions below as an opening exercise to provide an opportunity for participants to build and strengthen community, adding one or more of these questions to conversation questions below.

- What brought participants to this learning experience?
- What do they hope to gain (personally, spiritually, intellectually...)?
- Invite participants to share a meaningful lifecycle experience from their own lives.
  - What changes in their lives did they experience after participating in lifecycle events?
  - How does their experience inform their understanding of the potential for lifecycle events to bring order to chaotic times of change and transition in our lives?
  - How did their experiences help divide their lifetimes into meaningful occasions and stages?

Consider inserting the text on the next page of the supplement after the text on page 2 of the sourcebook, “*The Jewish Life Cycle; Rites of Passage from Biblical to Modern Times*,” after the final conversation question and discuss: How does this text support the claim that, “...change is the key to evolution and survival?”

## SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS



### introduction

This brief explanation of Reform Judaism comes from the Movement's website and serves as the introductory paragraph to the question: What is Reform Judaism? Beginning with this text can help ground the discussion of tradition within a Reform context, reminding participants that innovation has always been a part of our history.



### text: What is Reform Judaism?

Throughout history, Jews have remained firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, even as we learned much from our encounters with other cultures. Nevertheless, since its earliest days, Reform Judaism has asserted that a Judaism frozen in time cannot coexist effectively with those who live in modern times. The great contribution of Reform Judaism is that it has enabled the Jewish people to introduce innovation while preserving tradition, to embrace diversity while asserting commonality, to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt, and to bring faith to sacred texts without sacrificing critical scholarship.

*"What Is Reform Judaism."* ReformJudaism.org. *Union for Reform Judaism, 2015. Web. Sept.-Oct. 2015.*  
[www.reformjudaism.org](http://www.reformjudaism.org).



### conversation

- What new insights or information does this text provide concerning your own understanding of Reform Judaism?
- According to this text, what contributions has Reform Judaism made to the Jewish world? How have these contributions enabled Reform Judaism to remain relevant to modern Jews over the last 200 years?
- Given the current political and social environment, what challenges does Reform Judaism face regarding preserving and adapting tradition?

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## facilitator's notes

A focus on Rosh Chodesh can be added to the Modern Understanding section of the Chai Mitzvah Sourcebook on pages 5-8. Consider how the WRJ's reclamation of Rosh Chodesh is similar to, and different from, Teubal's creation of the new ritual, "Celebrating Aging."

- If focusing on this text, consider also exploring one of these Or Ami "Light of Our People" Award-winning Rosh Chodesh programs by:

*Congregation Kol Tikvah Sisterhood, Parkland, FL: **ARZA Rosh Chodesh***

This joint program between the ARZA committee and sisterhood celebrated Rosh Chodesh, Israel, and important women in Israeli history. The women prayed together and taught one another about significant women in Israeli history. The event featured Israeli songs, dance, and food and drinks to celebrate the theme.

*Congregation Beth Israel, Austin, TX: **Birthing Kit Project***

The sisterhood's social action chair organized an event that incorporated the traditional women's celebration of Rosh Chodesh with a program about the dangers of giving birth in developing countries and the assembly of birthing kits. Each birthing kit contained vital supplies for women giving birth in areas without hospitals, clinics, or medically-trained personnel. The kits have been shown to help reduce the rates of infant and maternal mortality in these countries. At the inaugural birthing kit assembly event, more than 150 kits were created.

*Sisterhood of Temple Sholom, Vancouver, BC, Canada: **Dedication of "The Torah: A Women's Commentary" and Establishment of a New Sisterhood Program, "Rosh Chodesh Renewal"***

Temple Sholom sisterhood carried out an extensive promotion for purchase of the "The Torah: A Women's commentary" for donations to the temple or for personal use. Following receipt of the commentary, the sisterhood developed a new Rosh Chodesh Renewal group, inviting women to study Torah together using the new commentary.

- Options for exploring the Or Ami programs: Break into small groups. Have each group explore one of the rituals and consider the following questions:
  - What is new and "non-traditional" in this ritual?
  - What is inspiring about this ritual?
  - What is challenging about this ritual?
  - What elements of the program might they want to experiment with in your own Sisterhood?
- Invite participants to read one of the rituals before the next session and come prepared to share what they found meaningful and challenging in the materials. What excited them about the program they read and what pieces might they want to experiment with in your own Sisterhood? Invite participants to share their own Rosh Chodesh experiences and why they choose or have chosen to participate in Rosh Chodesh rituals.





## introduction

While not a lifecycle ritual, the modern reclamation of Rosh Chodesh, the holiday that marks the start of each month, represents an important revived tradition that was given modern meaning. With the advent of the Jewish Feminist Movement of the 1970's and 1980's, modern women embraced Rosh Chodesh as an opportunity for women to gather, study, and mark the rhythm of Jewish time. A generation later it is for many Reform Women, especially members of the WRJ, a regularly celebrated ritual of womanhood and sisterhood. Rosh Chodesh represents a regular moment in time that has been reclaimed and given modern meaning.



## text: Rosh Chodesh; Monthly at the New Moon

Rosh Chodesh marks the beginning of each month as determined by the appearance of the new moon. Though all Jews traditionally observed this day, it is celebrated as a holiday for women whose origins go back to the Talmud.

Because of these strong and unique links between women and the moon, Rosh Chodesh provides a wonderful and rare opportunity for women to connect Jewishly in an historical yet contemporary manner... Rosh Chodesh lifts women out of the observer realm and elevates us to initiators, full participants, leaders, and creators. We value these opportunities to define our religious identity and to embellish in our own words, amongst ourselves, both the mundane and sacred aspects of our lives.

*"Rosh Chodesh; Monthly at the New Moon." Women of Reform Judaism. Women of Reform Judaism, 2015. Web. Sept.-Oct. 2015. www.wrj.org.*



## conversation

- Why do you think the experience described by this text might be uniquely important to Jewish women?
- If you have attended or experienced a Rosh Chodesh celebration, in what ways did it empower or inspire you to celebrate both the mundane and sacred aspects of your life?
- When have you acted as an initiator or creator of change? What has that experience been like personally? Spiritually?
- Considering the task of Chai Mitzvah participants to create a Chai Mitzvah ritual for your cohort (See Notes for Marcus Text on page 9 of the sourcebook and the end of the Introduction to the text on page 5), what in this text inspires you as a creator (or initiator)? What excites you about the possibility of creating a ritual that reflects your evolving religious identity?

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## facilitator's notes

If you have time, you may wish to discuss this additional text and the important role Women of the Wall plays in helping to promote religious pluralism in Israel through their reclamation of Rosh Chodesh.



## introduction

Since 1988, Women of the Wall, a group of Jewish women from around the world, have sought to achieve equality in religious practice, including public celebration and Torah reading on Rosh Chodesh. Below is their story.



## text: Women of the Wall

On the morning of December 1, 1988, a multi-denominational group of approximately seventy women approached Jerusalem's Kotel (Western Wall) with a Torah scroll to conduct a *halakhic* (legal according to Jewish law) women's prayer service. As no provisions for Torah reading existed in the women's section of the Kotel, we brought a sefer Torah (Torah scroll), stood together, and prayed out loud; a number of us wore prayer shawls.

Suddenly many women, and men on the other side of the *mechitzah* (partition separating men and women), began to scream, curse and even threaten us. Despite these events, we managed to complete our Torah reading. The then Kotel Administrator, Rabbi Yehuda Gertz, allowed us to continue our service stating that we were “not violating *Halakhah* (Jewish Law).”

Since that day, we struggle to relive our service, to once again pray together while wearing our tallits and read from a Torah Scroll at the Kotel. For over twenty five years, we have endured violence and spent many years in court fighting for this basic right as Jewish women...

*“History of Women of the Wall.”* Women of the Wall. [Http://womenofthewall.org.il/about/history/](http://womenofthewall.org.il/about/history/), 2014.

Web: <http://womenofthewall.org.il/about/history/>.

To Join monthly Rosh Hodesh Services at the Kotel, go to

<http://womenofthewall.org.il/international-events/join-us-for-rosh-hodesh>



## conversation

- As Reform Jewish Women, how do you feel about the challenges the Women of the Wall have faced for the last 27 years?
- In what ways is their story like your own story of Jewish life, practice and learning? In what ways is it different?
- What about the story of the Women of the Wall inspires you?



## links to additional information:

- For more information on life cycle events  
<http://www.reformjudaism.org/practice/lifecycle-and-rituals>
- For more information on creating new traditions:  
<http://www.rrc.edu/kolot/ritual/resources-new-traditions>  
and <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/new-jewish-lifecycle-rituals/>
- For resources on newly created rituals: [www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org)
- For more information on Rosh Chodesh:  
<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/women-and-rosh-chodesh/>  
<http://www.reformjudaism.org/rosh-chodesh>  
<http://www.wrj.org/jewish-life/holidays/rosh-chodesh>
- For more information on WRJ Or Ami awards:  
<http://www.wrj.org/sites/default/files/WRJ%20Or%20Ami%20Programming%20Awards%202013.pdf>  
<http://www.wrj.org/sites/default/files/WRJ%20Or%20Ami%20Programming%20Awards%202011.pdf>  
<http://www.wrj.org/sites/default/files/WRJ%20Or%20Ami%20Programming%20Awards%202009.pdf>



**Chai Mitzvah** was created as a way to engage adults in a Jewish journey throughout their lives. **Chai Mitzvah** encourages adults to take some time to reflect on where they are Jewishly and what they would like to achieve.

There are five steps to becoming a **Chai Mitzvah**:

1. Attend nine study sessions, with a specially designed curriculum.
2. Identify something Jewish you want to learn.
3. Take on or deepen an existing Jewish ritual.
4. Engage in a social action project.
5. Celebrate your achievement!

It is our hope that **Chai Mitzvah** will serve as a catalyst and ignite deeper Jewish engagement and continued growth into the 21st century.

***Chai Mitzvah** is an unaffiliated, non-profit independent 501(c)3 corporation, funded through donations and grants. Please consider sponsoring a **Chai Mitzvah** program in your community or making a gift today.*