The Unwritten Layer: Women’s Wisdom and the Future of Jewish Hope

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The Jewish story we tell ourselves is not complete. Essential parts of it have been preserved outside the written canon, within the rhythms of life itself, and especially in the voices of women. For the Jewish story to continue, it must also include what has been preserved beyond texts, the wisdom carried through women’s tradition.

In his influential work *The Jewish Way*, Rabbi Professor Irving Yitzhak Greenberg offers a profound and compelling interpretation of Jewish time in the modern era. His writing, which integrates theological depth, historical sensitivity, and a deep commitment to the Jewish future, has helped shape contemporary Jewish thought in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel.

Alongside his contribution, the work and presence of Blu Greenberg have also deeply influenced me. Their home in Riverdale was, for me, a generous space of encounter, conversation, and inspiration, where I was invited to present my work on women’s prayer.

It was precisely this deep appreciation that I found myself pausing at the margins of his book, in an appendix titled “Outside the Historical Path.” There, among what were described as “minor holidays,” appeared Rosh Hodesh.

Perhaps it is within such a broad framework that we are invited to ask not only what is included in the story, but also what has remained outside it, and what can now be brought back. In a moment of fracture within Jewish life, this question is not only historical, but existential.

Rosh Hodesh: Not at the Margins, but at the Center

Rosh Hodesh is far more than a date on the calendar. It marks renewal, a new beginning, a moment of looking forward. In Jewish tradition, it has long been associated with women, with the waxing and waning moon, with cycles, with quiet wisdom, with hope, and with the ability to begin again.

For me, for the women in my family, and for many women across generations, Rosh Hodesh was never marginal. It was never an appendix. It was part of the path itself.

My grandmother, Hannah Mashiach of blessed memory, born in 1900 in Balkh, Afghanistan, who immigrated to Jerusalem in the early twentieth century, carried with her a living world of tradition. In Jerusalem's Bukharan Quarter, a vibrant communal space filled with prayer, faith, and shared life, embodied a tradition that was both simple and profound.

She knew prayers by heart, like many women of her generation. She would often say, in her simple wisdom:
"We must learn how to live together."

Each *Rosh Hodesh*, she dressed in festive clothes, lit a candle, refrained from work, and joined other women in prayer.

Across Jewish communities, similar practices emerged. Women refrained from certain forms of labor, gathered, prayed, and created spaces for reflection. In Ashkenazi communities, the eve of Rosh Hodesh was sometimes called *Yom Kippur Katan*, while in Sephardi and Middle Eastern communities it was known as *Mishmeret Rosh Hodesh*.

Despite geographical distance, a shared pattern emerges women, across cultures, preserved a distinct time for reflection, connection, and hope. And yet, despite its centrality in women's lives, this world is largely absent from the written Jewish narrative.

A Partial Story

When I encountered descriptions of Rosh Hodesh as a "rediscovery" in 1970s America within feminist circles, I welcomed the awakening. Yet I also felt a deep dissonance. For many women, *Rosh Hodesh* was never rediscovered. It had never disappeared.

When I later asked Greenberg how such a living tradition could be placed "outside the historical path," he responded candidly:
"I am an American Ashkenazi Jew. That is the world from which I write."

This is not a mistake, but a perspective. Yet perspectives shape reality.

The Jewish story, even when expansive and thoughtful, is written within the limits of experience, language, and memory. Not exclusion, but human boundaries.

And so, the question remains: What other voices have remained outside the story we tell ourselves?

The Missing Layer

Jewish tradition carefully preserves the written canon. Yet alongside it exists another world, rich and expansive, a world of women's prayers, rituals, customs, and lived practices.

We have three daughters and a son. Only with our youngest did we celebrate a *Zeved HaBat* (celebration of the birth of a daughter), after I discovered an ancient text from Italian Jewish tradition. During the ceremony, my father-in-law, David Lavie of blessed memory, stood and said, "We also have a prayer for the birth of a daughter." In an old family siddur from Tripoli, we found it.

"Why didn't you tell us?" I asked.
"You didn't ask," he replied.

This is how women's Jewish knowledge often appears: not lost, but unasked.

This knowledge has often been labeled "folklore," marginal or secondary. But in truth, it is a complete system of meaning, resilience, and hope, born out of life itself. And it does not belong to women alone. It is a resource for the Jewish people.

Not a New Creation, but a Living Return

In recent years, a quiet yet clear movement has emerged. Women are returning to these spaces, creating circles, rituals, and practices.
This is not invention; it is return. Not imitation, but awakening. Not nostalgia, but a living movement from past to future. It is not only a response to crisis, but an awakening already unfolding. This return does not seek to import meaning from outside, but to uncover what has long existed within Jewish life itself.

A Crisis Searching for Language

We are living through a profound crisis of Jewish identity. Rising antisemitism, internal divisions, and exhaustion from ongoing struggles are accompanied by a deep search for meaning and belonging. Many are no longer asking only, "What obligates me as a Jew?" but "What does being Jewish mean to me?"

The answer may not lie only in expanding existing knowledge, but in restoring layers of wisdom that have been preserved differently.

From Fracture, Hope Emerges

This was the first Passover after October 7.

A festival of freedom, while hostages were still in captivity and many were once again called to reserve duty. Many told me they could not read the Haggadah this year. How can one speak of freedom when reality feels so distant from the words?

I found myself returning to the same question: what did Jewish women do in times of rupture, and how can this wisdom be brought into the present moment? I found testimonies of women in labor camps who refused to give up the Seder. They held it in their imagination, imagining matzah and charoset, lighting candles, reciting Kiddush, and singing “Next year in Jerusalem.” Others reconstructed rituals and recipes even under the harshest conditions.

I brought texts from times of crisis, from the Inquisition and beyond. I read from a Haggadah I compiled, *Od Nachzor HaBayta* (We Will Return Home), printed copies, and distributed them.

Among the pages, I shared a tiny Haggadah, six lines long, written in Auschwitz on toilet paper, the size of a matchbox, by Toby Trackeltaub of Munkatch:

Pesach, 5705, Auschwitz
Toby Trackeltaub

We long to celebrate, but we cannot.
We yearn to believe, and that is the one thing we still possess, the one thing they cannot take from us: memory.
Only this can give us hope for a better and more beautiful future, a future we hold in our minds without lowering our heads.
And just as God redeemed our ancestors from Egypt,
so too will He save us from our bitter bondage
and restore us to the land of our ancestors.

These words opened hearts.

This is what hope looks like in Jewish tradition: not a simple promise, but an act.

Not an escape from reality, but a refusal to surrender meaning within it. Perhaps it is precisely in such moments that we understand how the knowledge preserved in lived experience, and especially by women, is not marginal at all, but a living source of resilience and continuity.

A Source of Hope

Restoring women’s Jewish knowledge to the center is not only a correction of the past, but a possibility for the future. It expands our language at a moment when it is narrowing.

This knowledge offers another path, not to erase differences, but to connect across them.

For me, this is not only a scholarly question. It is a life mission. Over the years, in encounters with women and men in Israel and across Jewish communities worldwide, I have repeatedly seen how knowledge preserved by women, in prayers, customs, and memory, carries a quiet yet persistent wisdom, one that sustains life even in times of uncertainty.

It has the capacity to repair, not as theory, but as a way of life: to heal fractures of identity, to reconnect individuals to tradition, and to bridge distances between people.

From this understanding, the Women's Prayer Project (TfilatNashim.com) emerged, a cultural-spiritual initiative that brings women's voices back into the center of Jewish life.

It is a living space of Jewish identity, where ancient prayers, customs, and stories rooted in Jewish life meet contemporary experience, offering tools for leadership, resilience, and meaning. Not nostalgia, but future.

This is not only a story to be told, but a voice to be encountered. Those who wish to listen more closely are invited to enter this living space, where these voices continue to speak, be shared, and be renewed.

The Jewish story will not be written only through what is preserved in books, but through the voices we choose to restore, and the ones we choose to hear.