

# Graduation/Ordination/Investiture 2008

New York - April 30, 2008

Anita Diamant, Author

We are on the verge of an entirely new iteration of Jewish history and of Judaism itself, a time that is bursting with ideas and possibilities, music and art, wisdom and laughter, scholarship and movies. And holiness.

I call this new chapter *Minhag America*. The title comes from the famous prayer book published in 1856 by Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise, who dreamed of uniting all of American Jewry with a single *siddur*... I use Rabbi Wise's title not to unite or paper over the differences and variations in American Jewish practice, but as an umbrella term to describe the rich diversity of Jewish life in America, and of a uniquely American Judaism, alive and kicking.

A few words about four of the defining elements of *Minhag America*.

The inclusion of women has changed everything so profoundly and so completely, that it is as invisible and essential as oxygen... This unprecedented participation of women grows from nearly two generations of Jewish women and men who understand that feminism is an expression of Judaism's mission, part of the *Torah's* mandate for justice and the sanctification of life.

Women's participation has fostered new paradigms in virtually every aspect of Jewish life. More democracy. More congregational singing. More ritual. A redefinition of social justice and political action. And it has served as a model for the enfranchisement of all Jews, regardless of their physical abilities, their sexual orientation, their race, or their religion of origin.

The second feature of *Minhag America* I want to address is the democratization of Jewish learning... Until very recently, the idea of a commitment to life-long learning was not within the reach of most Jewish men – never mind women. And this made essential

elements of Judaism – including God – seem inaccessible to the average person. But *Minhag America* presents a vision and a growing expectation of Jewish learning for all. No Jew left behind.

Let me stress that this is not a return to old ways of doing things. This is the radical democratization of study, emerging as the learning and learned practice of *Minhag America*, which is producing hundreds of books every year; theology, history, how-to's, haggadahs. Also novels and short stories. And to get off the page for a moment, also movies and plays, operas, dances, paintings, photography, video, art.



For *Minhag America*, the arts are valued as never before. No longer suspect as a form of idolatry, the arts are understood as pathways for the soul's journey; teaching tools and ways to convene and enter community, inspiration for *tikkun olam*, opportunities to add new voices to our ongoing Jewish conversation. The arts open doorways to the larger community in which we live – doors that enrich American culture even as they challenge and strengthen American Jews and American Judaism...

The fourth and final element of *Minhag America*... For me, the most successful translation of spirituality into a Jewish idiom is

embodied in the religious gestures, the personal dramaturgy of ritual enactment... Rituals make spirituality manifest without demanding too much in the way of explanation, which is essential, since language is essentially worthless when it comes to the sacred. Deed not creed. We perform religious gestures that give us a handle on the ineffable, the nameless. We light *Shabbat* candles and stop time. We wrap ourselves in prayer shawls, altering our appearance to approach the holy. And we immerse in *mikveh* to acknowledge the mystery of change.

*Mayyim Hayyim* Living Waters Community *Mikveh* in Newton Massachusetts... is a *mikveh* imagined, designed, largely funded by and run under the leadership of Jewish women – and a lot of wonderful men... and serves the needs of everyone in the community: men, women, and children, gay and straight and transgendered, able-bodied and those who require physical assistance or an American Sign language translator: everyone.

So for me, as a practicing optimist, the *mikveh* – like the proverbial glass – is half-full. American Judaism is strengthened and nurtured by the full participation of all Jews. It is inspired by the study of ancient texts and hot-off-the-presses texts. It is challenged and informed by the lively arts and it is enriched by the unabashed exploration of authentic liberal piety.

I do know that as Jews we are asked to hold fast to the tree of life that is *Torah*, and to be like that tree ourselves. Without roots to soak up the moisture, the tree topples. But without new growth reaching for the sun, there is no photosynthesis and no fruit.

Ancient roots are no more authentic than new growth. Both are crucial, both are sacred. To paraphrase Rav Kook, "The old becomes new, and the new becomes holy." And that is us. That is you and me. And that is *Minhag America*.

© Anita Diamant [Excerpted from the full address at: [www.huc.edu/news/08/5/minhag](http://www.huc.edu/news/08/5/minhag)]