

AS FAR AS JEWISH LIFE is concerned, the San Francisco Bay Area still contains vestiges of the Wild West. A strong individualist — even anti-establishment — streak runs through much of the community. One of the growing trends in the Bay Area is toward “independent” lifecycle rituals where Jews, affiliated and not, hold rituals to acknowledge lifecycle events that are facilitated by laypeople or clergy outside a synagogue framework.

Independent ritual events exist outside the boundaries of normative Jewish settings.

Over the past year, with a grant from the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and the organizational support of the Berkeley-Richmond JCC, we have begun to research this phenomenon and have documented hundreds of these independent rituals including:

- the bar mitzvah of a learning-disabled boy, who attends a Jewish day school, conducted by a Jewishly-knowledgeable family friend and held in a JCC
- a wedding ceremony, complete with *huppah* and *kiddushin*, conducted by a Jewish educator for an interfaith couple and held in a Japanese tea garden
- a healing ritual for a terminally ill woman, active in a Conservative synagogue (headed by a male rabbi), who asked a non-congregationally based female rabbi to lead the women-only service held in her home

While the independent ritual trend may be strongest in the Bay Area, it is also a national phenomenon. Evidence of independent Jewish ritual abounds: on the Internet (e.g. www.ritualwell.org), in publications (e.g. CLAL's *Book of Jewish Sacred Practices* and Debra Orenstein's *Lifecycles, vol. 1*), and in living rooms, community centers, and gardens of Jews throughout the country.

What often draws people to an independent ritual facilitator (IRF) — *halakhah*, Jewish law, permits an educated Jew to perform most ritual functions — is the facilitator's openness to innovation. Some of the innovation consists of creating new rituals such as those focused on birth, healing from sexual abuse, or honoring an elder. Other innovations include inspiring traditional rituals — everything

from now-standard-but-once-quite-innovative baby naming ceremonies for girls to a bat mitzvah where a dyslexic teen musician composed and performed a piano concerto based on her Torah portion rather than chanting it. Some IRFs also make use of meditation and visualization, movement and storytelling, as well as sensory and tactile experiences, to enhance traditional rituals.

Independent ritual events exist outside the boundaries of normative Jewish settings, sometimes drawing in disenfranchised Jews who then become inspired to take additional steps on their Jewish path. The independent ritual facilitator, then, functions as more than a “rent-a-rabbi” by providing referrals and connections to these seekers. (A recent Bay Area survey found that while only 22 percent of households belong to a synagogue, “Jews in [the] community have many personal connections with the Jewish world. During the past year over 75 percent regularly followed news about Jewish topics; 65 percent celebrated Shabbat or Jewish holidays with friends...” www.sjfcf.org)

While a customized event may suggest catering to a consumer mentality or contributing to the further atomization of the community, the reluctance of an institution to consider ritual innovation leads some even-committed congregants to bypass synagogues.

Of the more than 100 Bay Area facilitators that we've spoken with, most receive referrals from synagogue rabbis who cannot meet the needs of non-members. However, without communal standards to evaluate the skills, knowledge, and abilities of these facilitators, a Wild West exists with few “sheriffs,” many “cowboys,” and a lot of bewildered locals.

We envision a time when the Jewish community offers professional development and articulates best practices for independent ritual facilitators; when there is an easy-to-access centralized database and website that allows clients and ritual facilitators to find each other, access sample rituals and lifecycle-related educational materials, and to document and share ritual innovation. These kinds of resources would also benefit synagogues, augmenting their capacity to design and facilitate innovative, meaningful, and personal rituals within the context of their communities.

Rachel Brodie and Julie Batz are founders and co-directors of *The Ritualist*, a Bay Area-based not-for-profit dedicated to researching and supporting the phenomenon of independent Jewish lifecycle rituals (www.theritualist.org).