

Sacred Encounter: Women's Rituals and Retreats

Rabbi Jessica Kessler Marshall

Inward Yearning

Years ago, I found myself in a yurt in rural Washington State. Mason jars filled with smiling daisies sat proudly on each nightstand. A box of mini chocolates with ribbons rivaling Macy's store windows flanked each vase. Throw pillows in vibrant magentas, peacock blues, and merlots nestled on twin beds sitting alongside canvas yurt walls. Lovingly placed on my bed was a journal with a quote by Evelyn Beilenson on the cover reading, "In the midst of our lives, we must find the magic that makes our souls soar."

My heart swelled with both uncertainty and promise. Soul soaring magic sounded infinitely better than how I was feeling.

I had just signed up for a weekend women's retreat—a needed reset button. Burnt out professionally, everything felt like too much. Tired and disconnected from my Spirit, uninspired, and unsure about relationship choices, I signed up for a glamping (glamorous camping) retreat. This immersive weekend in a yurt with eight other like-minded soul-sisters was filled with the guidance and spaciousness for my inner wisdom to emerge.

Over the weekend we tended to our souls. Co-creating a sacred circle, we filled our days with:

- Listening to each other's vulnerabilities and realizing we all struggle with different shades of universal human experiences—feeling like we're too much, feeling like we're not enough,

RABBI JESSICA KESSLER MARSHALL (NY08) offers spiritually inclusive rituals for women's gatherings and retreats, facilitates premarital and newlywed spiritual development programs, and presents at speaking engagements on authentic sacred living. She guides participants into abundance and JOY by connecting to their own rich soul-wisdom. Her rituals and teachings sanctify our human journey with humor, Divine Presence, and overflowing compassion.

concern that putting ourselves first means we're selfish, or seeping in guilt from events long past.

- Releasing the heaviness of what no longer serves us and welcoming in an uplifting, aligned, and enlivening future!
- Giving ourselves radical permission to detach from screens, devices, and the ever-present demands of technology.
- Hearing brave stories of honoring soul-wisdom and feeling personal courage to elevate our dreams.
- Vital encouragement that listening to our dreams honors our souls, and our worthy visions are within reach!
- Leaving the weekend renewed, uplifted, and affirmed; and carrying this momentum forward in the weeks and months to come.

Why Women's Retreats Light Up My Soul

This adult glamping retreat reminded me of overnight summer camp as a kid. It was so different from the academic school year. Here, the focus was on our hearts, connecting with others, aligning with nature's rhythms, and intention around becoming the best version of ourselves. Authenticity, encouragement, and listening to inner wisdom were woven into each moment. While I did well academically, I did not relish school. What lit up my being was deep connection with others, imaginative artistic creations, and nature's calming perspective. Again and again, my inner being repeated, "*This is what life is really about. This is marrow-deep alignment with my Truth.*"

We each know too well the fragility of life and how much is beyond our control. For me, reminders of this lack of control frees my Spirit. We get one spin on this planet as the *n'shamah* that is uniquely us; this is our shofar blast to live lives that reflect our deepest essence! The power of uplifting community enables both connection to our own Truth and the reminder that so many of us confront similar struggles. Retreats offer an opportunity to reconnect with living our most passionate, lit up, fulfilled, abundant, and JOYOUS lives!

The Baal Shem Tov's words reverberate through my being, "*Let me fall if I must fall. The one I will become will catch me.*" Retreats and rituals are an invitation to catch ourselves. Turning inward, reflecting on where we are and where we want to go enables us to be our own safety net in the process of becoming.

The Craving for Solely Women Gatherings

Every woman I know has felt threatened solely because of her gender simply for being in a female body. Each instance of unwanted attention or comments wears upon us. And each of us regularly works against patriarchy conditioned to make us vulnerable or stay small. Patriarchal stereotypes about women's sexuality and societal constraints such as not being too big or loud or ambitious place daily challenges upon women. However, being in a dedicated community of women invites us to both question these norms and shed them. It is a profound gift to be in a sacred circle of other women who get it—a blessed combination of freedom and expansiveness.

This sense of feeling known and understood is the foundation retreat facilitators can create. Women's retreats and rituals offer participants distinct space that is different from the world of productivity and achieving that many of us operate within. Retreat settings espouse a sacred encounter focused on intuition, nurturing, allowing what is without needing to "fix," creating for the pure joy of expressing ideas artistically, and affirming each person exactly where they are without needing them to be different. Encouraging women to embrace these modalities can be empowering for many women who have been taught that these approaches are weak. When participants are able to honor the wisdom of their bodies, not simply their intellect, and when they understand that allowing can be even more powerful than doing, their spiritual connection becomes infinitely more dynamic.

The Importance of Language and Inclusivity

I am ever conscious of using language that both honors the spectrum of gender identifications and offers protective space for those who move through the world with a particular set of expectations, assumptions, limitations, and gifts. I like the term "cultured female" as it captures what those raised as girls carry with them as they mature. The use of "womxn" also captures the inclusivity of intersectional feminism. It is an alternative spelling to avoid the sexism perceived in the sequences m-a-n and m-e-n, and to be inclusive of trans and nonbinary women. As our language is evolving, not everyone is familiar with newer terms. Programs like

these provide opportunities to experiment and explore the power of language.

What Makes Women's Retreats and Rituals So Dynamic?

Feminine Modalities

We have each had the feeling of being in community with people who just “get it.” The depth of shared experience transcends the particulars of each participant. Those of us who are sports fans understand this energy—the swell of the crowd rooting with a shared heart stirs something within us beyond words. So too, retreats and sharing rituals can create that sense of community. Coming together with a shared intention opens a door for each participant to feel seen and affirmed in their own empowerment. When a *n'shamah* feels seen, lives expand in extraordinary ways.

Here are a few ways retreats and rituals use particular modalities to create dynamic inspiration, connection, and growth:

- Harnessing sensual creative energy without receiving unwanted sexual attention.
- Challenging restrictive gender norms in safe space.
- Honoring the wisdom of our bodies to tap into the energy of our dreams.
- Embodying the juicy excitement of potential, JOY, and playfulness allowing life to flow with greater ease.
- Uplifting the cycles of the moon and qualities of intention-setting and releasing alongside our cycles as women.
- Elevating intuition over logic.
- Encouraging fluidity alongside or even beyond structure.

Designing a woman's retreat with flow, content, and modalities that are often shunned by patriarchy encourages participants to explore new ideas, such as “soul wisdom.” This is knowing beyond intellect—intuition. It is accessed through journaling and guided meditation. We explore the difference between a fear-based reaction and an aligned intuitive sense of truth.

The activities and rituals engaged in during these retreats are deeply cooperative and encouraging. Instead of asking, “How can I do more?” we ask, “How can we lift each other up?” I'm continually inspired by Sister Joan Chittister's teaching, “Instead of chasing ideas for getting ahead, why not chase ideas for touching

the Divine?"¹ We focus on inner alignment instead of productivity. Tapping into desire, we explore what we want to experience; what lights up our being? What feels good in our body? What feels expansive and joyous?

As social justice warrior Glennon Doyle reminds us, "Perhaps imagination is not where we go to escape reality but where we go to remember it."² The feminine modality that elevates heart and imagination over logic invites participants to expand in ways beyond narrow societal paradigms. Here is an invitation to co-create with the Eternal our own *Sefer Chayim*. We ask ourselves, "What is the truest, most beautiful story about our life that we can imagine?"³

Immersive Experience

Retreats explore these techniques within an *immersive experience*. I cannot overemphasize the power of sharing community for an extended period of time. The level of vulnerability, the sacred space for introspection, sharing intimate time in early morning hours and late into the evening with the moon high under starry skies, stepping away from technology—all of it creates a magical environment for transformation and connection.

Blending Judaism and Personal Growth

A retreat or extended ritual setting invites time to explore a variety of spiritual entry points, a range of ways to connect to Source. Here are some ways to dance with both Jewish teachings and personal growth.

Theology—Co-Creators with the Infinite: Genesis 1

When the Eternal was about to create heaven and earth, the earth was a chaos, unformed, and on the chaotic waters' face there was darkness. Then God's spirit glided over the face of the waters, and God said, "Let there be light!"—and there was light. And when God saw how good the light was, God divided the light from the darkness. (Gen. 1:1–4)

Torah teaches that the Divine is "Creator" in verse 1, "Spirit" in verse 2, "Manifestor" in verse 3, and "Goodness" in verse 4. As one of my mentors Rob Bell teaches, the Infinite creates from an overflowing abundance of love, joy, and creativity!⁴

I will often affirm the beauty and deep Jewish history of wrestling with the Divine. Sharing my own grappling with the Infinite offers permission for participants to welcome their own struggles. I invite participants to explore the idea of Process Theology—we are continuing the sacred act of Creation in partnership with the Divine.

These verses from Genesis coupled with process theology offer a perspective that can lead to powerful conversations. If we are created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the Divine image), and we are partners with the Divine in continually co-creating a world of goodness and possibility infused with sparks of the Eternal, then we can explore how this might manifest in our lives. Rich conversations might delve into whether participants connect to the Divine/Mystery/Source as a force within them or beyond them, or both! If we co-create with the Infinite, then we are in continual dialogue and Divine partnership. When do we as humans act with intention? When do we step back to let a force beyond us carry us forward? If we are co-partners with the Divine in manifesting our dreams and visions of a righteous and light-filled world, how can we foster deep connection with this Divine force in our lives? If the Eternal wants to offer all humans a life of joy and goodness, how do we cultivate and honor that in everyday experiences? Retreat settings invite participants to deepen their own connection to Spirit, explore these questions, and listen to what feels aligned for them. We rarely have the spaciousness of time and quiet to sit with these questions for ourselves. Retreats and rituals offer us sacred encounters to honor these invitations.

Connection to the Infinite via JOY!

A person will have to answer for everything that his [their] eye beheld and he [they] did not consume. (JT *Kiddushin* 4:12).⁵

For me, this Talmudic quote captures a Divine summons to soak up every delectable drop of whimsy we can. When I was able to understand my connection to the Infinite as manifest in experiences of JOY, I shifted to deliberately savoring life's sweetness as a practice of Divine connection.

Abraham Joshua Heschel captures an element of this theology. "People of our time are losing the power of celebration. Instead of celebrating we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation. To be entertained is a passive state—it is to receive pleasure afforded by

an amusing act or a spectacle . . . Celebration is a confrontation, giving attention to the transcendent meaning of one's actions."⁶

For me, celebration is precisely that "attention." Many retreats focus on helping participants intentionally connect to JOY—the feeling of giddiness when we feel a spark of potential, a mischievous glance, the delight of fresh coffee as we dream up our day; all of these moments are sacred exchange with the Eternal. These instances are often overlooked in the rush of everyday life. When a retreat setting and facilitator guides us to slow down and intentionally elevate these moments, they become a divine dialogue, a dance, an embrace.

When we affirm the good, when we make the choice to elevate JOY, we become a living emblem of "*bacharta bachayim*" (Deut. 13:18), what it truly means to choose life!

Other Spiritual Access Points

Another connection to Source can be via the understanding that our thoughts create our reality. The way we hold each thought or belief has its own energetic vibration. Victor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, captures this aptly: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."⁷ The *kavana* I bring to my life, the way I choose to hold various events, the ways I can suffer or thrive based on my expectations have profoundly changed the way I experience life.

Practices of radical trust, surrender, patience, and non-grasping reconstruct how I move through the world. If our thoughts create our reality, if we believe that in order to experience light, we need to emanate it, this framework offers immense succor. An energetic framework provides additional spiritual access points for retreat participants to embrace an expansive and joyful experience of life!

Melding Nature and Ritual

Ritual is our invitation to meld our everyday physical world with the spiritual. One of my favorite understandings of ritual comes from Chip and Dan Heath:

If we see our lives as an unfolding story, rituals recognize where the prose of life needs punctuation. When we attune to life's

peaks, pits, and transitions, we “break the script and create more moments of elevation” in our lives.⁸

Nature is one of our most powerful access points to the Divine. Natural settings offer us a unique grounding perspective. There is nothing like looking up at an inky sky laden with stars to remind us that we are one small piece of a much greater unfolding universe. Likewise, sitting on the earth leaning against a tree feels infinitely different than sitting on a chair indoors. Nestling ourselves outside is a portal to metaphors of the interconnectedness of creation and a reminder of our own place within it.

In a retreat setting we can use creative nature-inspired ritual to mark life’s moments—challenges, transitions, and momentous occasions. Most of my rituals center around releasing heaviness or welcoming in potential. I often incorporate where the moon is in her cycle—using the new moon to set intentions and the full moon to release burdens that no longer serve us. The lunar cycle is so paramount to Jewish time, it is a perfect way to infuse personal relevance into Jewish tradition. Imagine the visceral power of a Rosh Chodesh celebration under the sliver of a new moon. This ritual could lift up the stirring metaphor that the new Hebrew month is always celebrated when the moon is simply a hint of what it will become. We do not celebrate the new month when the moon is full, we celebrate it as a hint of potential. Affirming collectively that each participant is likewise celebrated exactly where they are on their path of becoming for all they are in this moment, and all that will evolve into, is exceedingly more compelling when incorporating nature-based ritual.

Dynamic Facilitation: Creating Engaging Retreats

I’ve learned a lot as a facilitator over many years of leading retreats and women’s circles. Here are a few guiding principles I hold close.

Personal Touch Goes a Long Way

The moments that stay with me most profoundly and those that touch my participants deepest are conversations at the end of the night perched on someone’s bed or gathered in the hot tub under a full moon. Away from the microphone and programmatic plans, people turn to us for assistance with perennial struggles. This is

when facades are lifted. These moments are precious and just as important as what we say in front of the microphone.

Validating That It Is OK to Feel Uncomfortable

I affirm at the beginning of every retreat and ritual, that growth doesn't always feel like ponies and rainbows. We may run into discomfort. We may come up against challenging beliefs or ways of being. All of this is a really important part of each person's process. I invite participants to hold what arises with compassion and openness. And I affirm for myself as a facilitator that I have not automatically done something wrong if someone is struggling a bit. I model holding them in loving space while they sit with discomfort.

The Art of Shared Participation

In the covenant that participants and I create together at the beginning of each gathering, we affirm the importance of "stepping up and stepping back," sharing the floor. I am always conscious of hearing from all voices and will occasionally gently redirect the conversation so that it can be mutually beneficial.

Modeling Authenticity Alongside Wisdom

All of the mentors I admire simultaneously hold deep wisdom, vulnerability, playfulness, and authenticity. We can make sacred space for all of our sides and model this for our participants.

Stories, Not Theories

We each connect through stories, through metaphor, through examples. The more we are able to teach via human experience, the deeper we touch our participants, the deeper they relate, and the more "aha's" they have. Tell more stories; it breaks down barriers especially when we are in a more frontal setting.

Silence, Not Needing To "Fix"

The poet Rumi teaches, "Silence is an ocean. Speech is a river. Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation."⁹ We don't have to always suggest answers for our participants. Profound moments of insight can come from within when we offer spaciousness for them to emerge. I remember on one particular retreat, a

woman shared some mighty struggles in her life—a son who suffered with addiction and was in jail, the loss of a parent, a romantic relationship that wasn't giving her what she needed. She was sobbing while telling her story and needed to release all that she had been carrying. The silence reverberated loudly after she finished, each of us holding space for all she shared. Then someone in the group started singing. Slowly, each participant joined in, and then she joined in too. No words, no suggestions were needed, simply the healing power of silence punctuated by music that said everything we could never capture with words.

Spaciousness/Down Time

Even as a serious extrovert, I am someone who needs a lot of downtime. I do not like feeling rushed, and enjoying physical activity every day is a precious part of my personal spiritual practice. On my last few retreats, I have made sure that breaks were a sacred part of each day. I'll often offer a break from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. or 3 p.m. each day. When I first started leading, I was worried participants would feel like they were not getting their money's worth if I infused a long break midday. I asked for feedback throughout, and everyone vehemently argued in favor of this down time. Some participants took time to be alone, others enjoyed conversations in small groups or pairs, and others took blessed time for a nap. Our culture is oriented towards packing more in, and people instead crave spaciousness to replenish. Our words and teachings land infinitely deeper when surrounded by spaciousness to absorb them.

Choose What Lights You Up

Worry less about your content and spend more time thinking about where your passions lie and what lights you up. Where do you feel enthusiasm and excitement? Teach from that place, invite participants to simultaneously feel animated about your passions. I've used podcasts, poetry, gardening, and everything in between. The content is less important than the passion you bring to it.

Sample Programmatic Activities

Permission Slips

This activity is inspired by a retreat I participated in with writer Elizabeth Gilbert. Participants write *themselves* permission slips

from the kindly principal's office to do or not do things they have always wanted. For instance, "I grant Susan permission to buy a mountain bike even though she is really in debt because she has always, always wanted a yellow mountain bike!" Or, "I grant Jessica permission to not pick up the phone when _____ calls because every single time this person calls, she ends up feeling awful." Then all the other retreat participants yell, "Permission granted!" It's an incredibly affirming, uplifting, and joyous activity.

T'shuvah Practice

This is a wonderful activity for a Women's Circle during *S'lichot*. I guide participants in a journaling activity directing forgiveness inwardly or to others. This *t'shuvah* practice loosens our vice grip of anger and guilt. I then lead an energetic cord-cutting meditation where participants sever any energetic cords that have kept them entangled in suffering—either strangling thoughts or actions. They conclude by plugging both themselves and the other person/situation back into their own unique connection to Source. We end with a burning ritual that further enables cathartic release. In this example, a ritual can powerfully transform our mindset.

Soul-Wisdom

Participants bring to mind a situation in which they are struggling. In one color marker, they write a question that they have about how best to proceed with the situation. Then, I lead them in a guided meditation as they ground themselves in their own connection to the Infinite through breathing and visualization of divine light. Following this, they take another color marker and respond to their question via their Soul. They let their *n'shamah* answer back as any responses flow through *Shechinah* onto the page. It is amazing how powerful this simple activity can be. It enables participants to tap into inner knowing, inviting an aligned and spacious response.

Jewish Communal Benefits

Feeling seen, heard, and supported creates space for more invested Jewish communal members. Jewish communities benefit from retreats via exponentially greater volunteerism, member engagement, donations, new member recruitment, and more stable financial well-being. Many communities create beautiful retreats

for their sisterhoods, Rosh Chodesh groups, empty nesters, young families, and interfaith couples' groups. *S'lichot*, Chanukah, and Elul are also times we can tie personal introspection and community building into our Jewish calendar.

Participant Experience Reflections

Participant feedback is one of the most telling ways to understand the dynamism of single-gender gatherings:

"This weekend was the most impactful, amazing, self-loving weekend I have ever had."

This woman's use of "self-loving" speaks to a culture that promotes self-judgment and comparison. When we offer a sacred encounter of affirmation of inner truth and desires, our soul soars.

"[This] Women's Retreat provided a truly unique and rewarding weekend full of productive introspection and respite in a nurturing environment . . . I greatly benefited from learning about my fellow retreaters' inner strengths and vulnerabilities as we shared our personal stories . . . New friendships blossomed and spiritual insight flourished."

This person's use of "nurturance," "vulnerabilities," and "sharing" highlights the power of using a gentle and soft energy to invite transformation.

"I so needed this. I registered amongst a lot of transitioning in my life. I looked forward to a long weekend of getting away where it was easy, not work/effort. The women all came together, supported, and loved one another. We built deep bonds, saw each other fully, and held each other in a tender heart-space. Alongside compassionate facilitation, this provided a beautiful opening for my own soul wisdom to come through. I feel capable and supported in moving forward on my next chapter with ease."

Again, we see the emphasis of love, compassion, and tenderness to invite inner wisdom to emerge. These qualities are often not sanctified in the same way during mixed-gender retreats.

Women's retreats and rituals create a sacred space where participants are asked to listen to the soul-whispers. This is an invitation

for each of us to dance with Spirit as we feel into these answers for ourselves. As the cover of the journal in my yurt read: "In the midst of our lives, we must find the magic that makes our souls soar." To the journey!

Notes

1. Oprah SuperSoul Conversations, "Sister Joan Chittister: The Time is Now," July 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKHDXIZJqGs>.
2. Glennon Doyle, *Untamed* (New York: The Dial Press, 2020).
3. Doyle, *Untamed*.
4. Fr. Richard Rohr, "The Story that Defines Us," February 11, 2018, <https://cac.org/story-that-defines-us-2018-02-11/#gsc.tab=0>.
5. Author's Note: I have chosen to retain the Talmud's original gendered pronouns with my own gender-neutral suggestions in brackets.
6. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Wisdom of Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 152.
7. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press 2006).
8. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2017) 19, 87.
9. Paulo Coelho, "Rumi's Wisdom," October 2, 2015, <https://paulocoelhoblog.com/2015/10/02/character-of-the-week-rumi/>.