

Turning 40: A RITUAL, TALMUDICALLY

BY RIVKAH WALTON

It was a week before my 39th Birthday and every hour the fear—no, panic—was growing. Being forty couldn't be nearly as terrifying as getting there. Getting to forty means you're undeniably middle-aged, grown-up—and I was to have only a year to get my life together!

Overcoming my fear of being the center of this kind of attention, I called together my community to help me through this vulnerable moment.

"Please come to my 'last-chance, exorcise-the-demons 39th birthday party,'" I implored.

They laughed knowing laughs. "Please, no presents; I have no intention of writing thank-you notes," I added, letting my last-minute invitees off the hook.

When the thirty-five friends who could find a week-night babysitter or release themselves from writing papers had assembled, we repaired to the low-lighted living room, sitting in the inevitable circle.

Herb Levine doubled as high priest and levitical singer for the evening, drawing the group together with the niggun for *Orech yamim asbi-eyha*. (We changed it to the feminine for the evening.)

The group having centered, I began the ceremony by speaking about liminal times and places—about how dangerous thresholds seem, being passage points in which one is suspended between two statuses, but is not fully of either one. "You are neither in nor out, neither here nor there, neither being nor non-being, neither child nor adult—and those in-between times and places in the journey seem particularly fraught with danger." (In some cultures, people put amulets on their doorposts to ward off demons.)

"Tonight, Herb and I have pieced together a ceremony to help me end the 4th decade of my life with a measure of strength and grace. Together you and I will name and banish the demons that make maturing so hard and frightening for most of us, and will try to access our collective wisdom to launch the spiritual process of the coming year.

"I want to thank each of you in advance for coming and for helping with this process."

I then invited the assembled to help me banish the demons lying in wait at the door of one's fortieth year. "I will name a demon, and I ask you to join me in calling out, 'Away, away, away, away, away. . . !' after each one. Please feel free to call out the names of your own demons around maturity issues." And so we started.

"There is a demon who says, 'No matter what you do, it won't be good enough.'"

"Away, away, away, away, away. . ."

"There is a demon who says, 'If you are a helpless child,

people will take care of you.'"

"Away, away, away. . .!"

"There is a demon who says, 'If you keep playing, bedtime will never come.'"

"Away, away, away. . .!"

When I reached the end of my short list, there was a silence, and I thought I had over-reached the intimacy limits of the community. But then someone broke the silence, "There is a demon who says, 'I will never be loved.'"

You could hear an audible collective intake of breath and then, "Away, away away. . .!"

And so it continued, one after another, until someone identified the grand demon of them all, "There is a demon who says, 'You have to get your life together by the time you're 40.'"

"Away, away, away. . .!"

We began to hum and sing the song based on the words of Reb Nachman of Bratslav, *Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tsar me-od, ve-ha-ikar lo yifachad klal*.

Herb then spoke to the tradition that one way to fool demons who have targeted you is to take a new name, and he invited the circle to give me new spiritual names for the work of the coming year. One after one they were offered. Devorah, Yonah, Shleimut, Lilith, Miriam, Tiger or for other

moments, Tigger, and more. Each spoke of a different side of me that is or needs to be.

And again, *Orech yamim asbi-eyha. . .*

Finally, Herb asked me to stand in the middle of the circle and he and Ayala Guy, a frequent Havurah Institute teacher and one of the most spiritually sensitive women I know, stood in front and back of me. Alternating, they read to me the 91st Psalm, and they were truly conduits for great goodness. I felt truly blessed through them and by them. With the final *orech yamim asbi-eyha*, Ayala and I slowly began to dance. And then we spontaneously reached out to the others seated around the room, pulling them into the center of the circle one by one until all in the room were singing, dancing, swaying, *Orech yamim asbi-eyha. . .*

After such an experience, blowing out the candles on the sacher torte seemed (dare I say it?) a bit saccharine, but lest I tempt some other demon, I complied with the demands of tradition.

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Psalm 91 translation adapted from *JPS Tanakh* (1988) to render pronouns gender-neutral.

Terror, Plague and Scourge mentioned in Psalm 91 are names of ancient Mid-Eastern demons of destruction. —HL

Almost an entire tractate of the Talmud struggles with the problems of women who are between statuses.

Song translated: *All the world is a narrow bridge and the important thing is not to be afraid at all.*

In rabbinic tradition, this Psalm was used as an anti-demonic incantation.

We have been told that Jerry Garcia has included portions of it in his recent song, *My Sisters and Brothers*. —HL