

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Ritual



Context

Ritual is a core part of most religious lives. Classically, participation in ritual by Jews has been understood primarily as a response to divine commandment. But what is its meaning in Reform Judaism, with our more nuanced understanding of Torah and obligation?

*Here, **Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers**, Reform Judaism's Community Educator, explores the meaning and purpose of ritual in our lives, and introduces some of the new rituals which help to enrich and give new structure to our experiences.*

Content

Rituals, which make up much of the 'doing' in our Judaism, are a diverse and rich part of Jewish tradition. Throughout Jewish time, they have been observed differently from community to community, with Moroccan rituals differing to Indian, German rituals differing to Hungarian, and so on. Even at the level of households, there were individual customs, inherited from generation to generation, transforming and evolving as individuals made them their own.

Many rituals are rooted in *Mitzvot* - Commandments, or the rabbinic understanding of *mitzvot*. They inevitably take on a different flavour when as Reform Jews our sense of them isn't that we are commanded by God and thus obligated to them. So, if we are not commanded to say blessings through the day, to light Shabbat candles, to make Havdalah, what value do these add to our lives if we do try to observe them? As we are all created differently, the answer will vary for each of us - we may hear God's voice in their practice; they might serve an inner need and enable us to live better, more fulfilling lives; they could connect us to a wider community; connect us to ourselves. And therefore, as Progressive Jews, the rituals we take on will vary for each of us. These rituals can serve crucial purposes, supporting us through the highs and lows of life. They have the potential to bring daily mindfulness to simple tasks (as intimate as using the toilet). When unpacked, they can inspire ethical behaviour in our lives. As Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner writes, ritual is a tool:

"Rituals are wonderful! Rituals are one of our most powerful tools of Jewish life. In just a few minutes they can change reality. They can transform us from one status to another. Rituals deepen and delight and ease grief. They shape, express and maintain relationships."ⁱ

Rituals are multilayered acts, and we will usually find multiple explanations for them. As an example, why do we cover our challah? Is it so the challah isn't upset that the wine is blessed first or because a layer of dew was said to cover the manna in the desert? When we light Shabbat candles, some will wave their hands over the candles and cover their eyes before reciting the blessing, perhaps believing this to give them a spiritual place to begin Shabbat quietly. The roots of the custom lie in an ambiguity around when Shabbat begins, that is not agreed upon between Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities, and hence the custom of waving and covering eyes did not exist in the Sephardi world.

Rituals such as *mikveh* may feel embedded in ancient misogynistic fears for some (and there is an element of this in Rabbinic writings on the subject) while for others they can find uplifting spiritual practice, an aid to processing life's challenges, rooted in Torah and Rabbinic Judaism but reclaimed and made beautiful by each individual user. Rituals speak to the person willing to engage in them, adding to their lives where they allow space for them to do so.

Reform Judaism is not Judaism light. It is not about being able to ‘do less’, or being able to ‘ignore’ the bits we can’t be bothered with. When someone says ‘Reform Jews don’t keep Shabbat,’ I am baffled - baffled by what they think ‘keep’ means, and baffled because Reform Judaism asks us to find the most meaningful way to honour, remember and keep Shabbat. For some this may, indeed, mean abstention from driving and electronics, for others it may mean driving to be with family, uplifting “oneg” – “delight” from songs accompanied by instruments, or finding time for specific things that bring rest and restoration once a week. It involves the hard work of engagement. Reform Judaism is about thinking deeply, about finding meaning in ritual life, and experiencing widely so that we can make informed decisions about what our observance and theology will look like. These practices may differ from individual to individual, and community to community, but they have always done so, not just since the growth of Reform Judaism.

As Reform Jews, we allow space for the individual to creatively and individually find the ritual path that is right for them, whilst being held by an overarching series of communal ideals and boundaries. When students ask me ‘how should I keep kosher’ or ‘how should I light Shabbat candles’ they may often be disappointed that I don’t have a simple, firm answer for them. Jewishly there has never been one simple answer, and as Reform Jews it is our task to hear the many answers, before finding the one that speaks most loudly to us and all that we are, so that it might bring meaning, joy and comfort.

Rituals may be ancient, medieval, or, increasingly, modern. Reform Rabbis and congregants frequently collaborate to create rituals that speak to the reality of people’s lives today, such as *mikveh* ceremonies to mark healing, or the completion of a divorce. There are new ceremonies for parts of women’s lives previously ignored, such as menarche or menopause. In 2009 Jonathan Romain edited a collection of Reform Rabbis’ liturgies entitled “Really Useful Prayers”ⁱⁱ, including prayers for modern experiences, both joyful and challenging. All of these are grounded in Jewish tradition, but seek to answer the needs of modern lives. Sometimes what we need already exists, but needs to be engaged with and studied in order to be understood. Sometimes rituals need reclaiming, or re-imagining. But if we are to benefit from rituals in our lives, it often takes work (particularly in the beginning) if we are to receive the payoff that is possible.

We may also find that ancient rituals take on new meaning when approached with modern lenses. While the authors of Torah and Rabbinic law were probably not too concerned with global warming, for me not driving or shopping on Shabbat (as one example) speaks to some of the ethical values that answer this challenge. They are reducing my carbon footprint and thus bringing new meaning to rituals that already carry so much, an ethic of ensuring we balance our work lives with rest and time for those we care about.

Ritual is not always rational. There may be emotional, familial, or habitual reasons we perform rituals, or that mean we perform them in a particular way. As Reform Jews our ideal is to be conscious of these factors, able to articulate why it is that we do what we do, and what it adds to our lives. The ‘how’ may be diverse, but articulating the why is crucial. When we are able to do the work of engaging and learning, ritual offers us the comfort of the familiar, as well as the opportunity to process trauma and celebrate life’s rarer joys.

Contemplation

For thousands of years, ritual has been a fundamental part of Jewish life. We need think only of the rituals of the Temple, which provided structure and meaning to the agricultural cycle of the Israelites in the Land of Israel. But what is the role and meaning of ritual in our lives? What cycles and life experiences can be enriched for us? In her essay, Debbie challenges us to make time and space to explore the possibilities.

As we make individual choices about our ritual lives and religious customs, how do we also do so as communities, joining together in celebrating, mourning and living with thought and meaning?

ⁱ D.I.Y. Rituals: A Guide to Creating Your Own Jewish Rituals, Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, MRJ 2009

ⁱⁱ Really Useful Prayers, Rabbi Jonathan Romain (ed), MRJ 2009