



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

The Power of Ritual Yom Kippur Sermon, Yizkor 5783/2022 Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman

On the tenth day of this month of Tishrei, Moses, through his wisdom, passion and charisma achieved forgiveness for the Israelites for the sin of the Golden Calf. This marked the very first Yom Kippur. And as we read in today's Torah portion, God then ritualizes this moment as an everlasting annual rite of cleansing and atonement for the Jewish people. The Torah instructs the first High Priest- Aaron in a specific ritual to effect atonement for himself, his family and then all the people. These specific rituals of purification were carried out for hundreds of years on Yom Kippur up until the destruction of the Temple in 70CE.

Prior to its destruction, it was the Temple itself that was the site for expiation. All year long, sacrifices for forgiveness, gratitude, and well-being were offered there. But on Yom Kippur, the site itself needed to be cleansed and so too the whole nation as one, in a grand ritual of atonement - Yom Kippur.

Once the Temple was destroyed, our Rabbis of blessed memory re-invented the rituals of atonement so that each human being might act as the High Priest of their own lives. Two thousand years ago, our Rabbis created very **specific rituals** for us to perform in order for us to achieve atonement for our misdeeds.

We fast. We avoid certain types of clothing. We come together as a community. We recite confessions. We beat our chests. Our Torah scrolls are dressed in white. We sing specific melodies that create the soundscape of this holiday.

Let us ask ourselves why? Wouldn't it be enough to simply go forth from one's home and apologize to everyone, to set aside one day to go about and make things right with people? Wouldn't it be enough to sit home in meditation and ask God for forgiveness? For some people this may be enough. But here we are, engaging in a full day of ritual, prayer and fasting. Why is this necessary?

I suggest that **the ritual itself** is important, that the ritual itself has power. So what is a ritual? It is an act, repeated through time whose components remain consistent.

At its most basic, we have the example of a birthday ritual with cake and candles and song. When we sit before the cake about to make a wish, we become connected to every birthday we



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

have ever experienced. And the singers too become connected to every birthday they have experienced.

Rituals create a tether to the past and to the future. They anchor us in time so that we do not become lost, as we are confronted by change. We have rituals for all the significant moments of transition in our lives: for the birth of a child, for coming of age, for marriage, and rituals for mourners in their time of loss. These are moments of transition in our lives whereby our rituals create a structure, a framework, and an anchor for us to mark these fleeting but powerful moments of change.

Rituals connect us with our past, with all those who have performed these same rituals, and it connects us as well to our future as we plant seeds for future generations. Whereas faith strengthens the heart, mind and spirit, rituals give us the tools to deepen our relationship with our ancestors, our Creator and the unknown that lies ahead.

My brass shabbat candlesticks were brought to America from Poland by my great great grandmother. They had been given to her by her grandmother as a wedding gift. Eventually they were handed down to my grandmother and I received them from her when she could no longer live independently. Over the years I would stand together with my daughter and son to light shabbat candles using these brass candlesticks. Every week we stood together, connecting past to present and future, blessed by the light of these candles and blessed by the love and commitment of our grandmothers.

Jewish rituals embody our spiritual values. They create form and structure to express our ideals. When we come together in community, whether for a synagogue service or a Shabbat dinner, we sing the prayers our ancestors sang as we celebrate this transition in time from one week to another. We ritualize this sacred pause and express our hopes for a world renewed, as we deepen our commitment to the values we hold and which our ancestors held as sacred.

Our Rabbis, in their great wisdom, created rituals for us to mark every season and every life transition. This has been an everlasting source of strength throughout the ages and the many lands we inhabited.

Today, however, one of the dangers that Judaism faces is the loss of our ritual life. By analogy, the Jewish enterprise can be likened to a physical body. Judaism, as a religion, with all of its rituals forms the skeleton upon which the flesh of culture, music, language and food traditions reside. But without the underlying structure of the skeleton, the flesh eventually loses its form.

Perhaps you have heard this story made famous by Elie Weisel:



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

When the great Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light the fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished, and the misfortune averted.

Years later when a disciple of the Ba'al Shem-Tov, the celebrated Maggid of Mezritch, had occasion to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, another rabbi, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, went into the forest and said, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

The years passed. And it fell to Rabbi Israel of Ryzhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

So says a storyteller.

But here is the problem we are facing today. Not only have we forgotten the place and the ritual, but we are also losing the stories. For our stories are kept alive through our rituals. The two are inseparable.

As a Rabbi, at this time in our history, I am sitting with the question of how we can begin to reclaim our Jewish ritual lives; that is, the lifeblood of our people. Perhaps one way might be for each of us to pick one or two Jewish rituals and commit to its regular performance. Perhaps it is lighting candles on Friday night, baking challah, saying a blessing before eating, or offering a prayer of gratitude each morning upon awakening. The key is regularity. Much like a yoga practice, the benefits are not experienced immediately but rather, it is the regularity and consistency of practice that brings the greatest reward.

In his book, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*, Jack Kornfield describes an African forgiveness ritual: "In the Babemba tribe of South Africa, when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered. All work ceases, and every man, woman, and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the accused individual. Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, each recalling the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his lifetime. Every incident, every experience



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy, is recounted. All his positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length. This tribal ceremony often lasts for several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe."

I especially love this particular ritual which echoes the teaching of R. Nachman I spoke of last night. In it, we are enjoined to seek out and recognize the good qualities in one another. This is the first step toward repairing our relationships.

Rituals create a continuity of community and support us in repair when there is a rift. In our tribe we too have our forgiveness rituals. We ask forgiveness from one another, we sing the Ashamnu together, we chant the Avinu Malkeinu, and we open our hearts together as one community.

Barbara Meyerhoff in her book, *Number our Days*, states the following: No primitive society... expects to cause rain by dancing a rain dance. A rain dance is a dance *with* the rain, the dancing of an attitude...attending, dramatizing, making palpable unseen forces, setting apart the flow of everyday life,... stopping time and change by presenting a permanent truth. If the spirits hear and it rains, so much the better, but the success of the ritual does not depend on the rain.

Meyerhoff reminds us that our rituals engage us in a conversation with the soul, a dialogue with the past, present and future, a heart-to-heart with the Eternal.

So let us rejoice in the wealth of rituals we have inherited and let us make a commitment to keep the chain growing so that the next generation may also rest in the beauty and transcendence of our wisdom traditions.

G'mar Tov!