

Transcendence, Belonging and Expressing the Inexpressible: On the Power of Ritual
Nitzavim 5782
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On Tuesday night, Cantor Adam and I met with our 7th graders for the first session of our weekly Netivot program.

After getting to know each other and eating some pizza, we all came into this room, the Rudin chapel, for a discussion led by the cantor.

It was about 6:45 or so and the sun had mostly set. It was around that time our Sages call “*bein ha-sh’mashot*,” that liminal moment between day and night when, you might remember, the Talmud tells us is the precise moment to say the evening Sh’ma.

And, as the Sages promise, it was indeed a magic moment.

Cantor Adam had purposely left the overhead lights off, so the chapel was mostly dark. Except for three things.

One: the day’s last bits of sunlight were enough to sort of backlight these beautiful stained-glass windows so we could still see the artistic designs in them and, because of the sharp contrast with the darkness around them, the windows looked almost as though they were floating along the sides of the room.

Two: the eternal light behind me draped the ark in a soft white light, causing the intricate designs in the silver panels to shimmer in an ethereal way.

And three: penetrating the darkness with a striking reddish orange were the bulbs on the yartzheit plaques.

Like the faces of the kids sitting in the pews, the names on the plaques were not visible in the dark, but the pair of bulbs bracketing each name indicated to the kids that what lay in between the lights was holy.

Cantor asked them: “Do you know what those lights mean?”

“They’re next to the names of people who died,” one or two of the kids responded.

“Right. And can you guess how long some of these names have been here?”

“A thousand years!” one kid said. “469 years!” said another.

And not flippantly or disrespectfully.

They said it with a palpable air of reverence that’s a little hard to describe, but you knew it was there.

I’ve been around a lot of 7th graders, and I’ve seen how they tend to conduct themselves during religious school classes. And this was definitely different.

I want to say yasher koach to my friend Cantor Adam because the way he set the room and engaged the kids in conversation about what they saw around them was truly inspiring and created a sense of the holy.

The kids could feel it. It was unmistakable. They were listening. They were *experiencing*. Something *transcendent* was happening.

In that moment, these 7th graders grasped that they are part of something that is much, much bigger than they are.

And they were awed by it.

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The opening lines of our parashah this week try to create a similar sense of reverence and humility.

“You stand this day, *all* of you, before Adonai your God—your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials; every householder in Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp; from woodchopper to water drawer—to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God...

“I make this covenant...not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day...and with those who are not with us here this day.” (Deut. 29:9-11, 13-14)

In midrash, the Sages add texture to this vivid description of standing at Sinai.

They say that *all* Jewish souls—those who were there in human form that day, *and* all other souls that ever had existed and ever *would* exist...

from the time of Abraham to the coming of Elijah and the messianic age—were there that day when the covenant was made.

Meaning: the community that formed that day—and the special bond created between that community and God—transcends all time, and place, and history.

And it’s all-inclusive of *everyone*—from our ancestors who lived thousands of years ago to the baby born today, and into the future.

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When I officiate b’nai mitzvah services and we line the generations of the family up to pass the Torah, I ask them to imagine that the line of family they see there with them—going from them to their parents to their grandparents and sometimes to their great-grandparents...

I ask them to imagine that line extending all the way out through the sanctuary and across space and time, all the way back to Sinai.

And I say to them: “you are the newest link in the chain. All those generations and the ones to follow—“those who are standing here with us today...and those who are not with us here today”—are giving this to you as a gift, and they are entrusting you to protect it, and respect it, and pass it on down the line when the time comes.”

And like our experience with the 7th graders the other night, the b'nai mitzvah kids and their families really seem to get it, at least in that moment.

It's not so much something you grasp with your mind. It's something you grasp with your *heart* and *feel* in your soul.

It's not rational or logical so much as it is emotional and spiritual.

And that's why it's something that can really only be experienced through a mode of human practice that some of us may be a little uncomfortable with our uncertain about—and that is: *ritual*.

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Whether we realize it or not, we Reform Jews are part of a community that has long struggled with ritual—or what our founders called “ceremony.”

In their view, a great many of Judaism's ritual practices “originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state,” they said in the 1885 “Pittsburgh Platform.”

Therefore, they announced, “[T]oday, we accept as binding only [the Torah's] moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies [that] elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.”¹

All well and good, so far as it goes.

Emphasizing the “moral law”—or ethical teachings—of Judaism over traditional ritual practices surely spoke to a community seeking to live by a code of Jewish values while also blending into the society around them.

And this emphasis on the moral dimension of Judaism certainly speaks to us now, as we confront an increasingly cruel and divided world.

We believe in doing *tikkun olam*—repairing the world and working for justice.

And not only do we believe in it; we also *live* it.

Our Jewish forbears marched with MLK and advocated for fair labor laws. The Civil Rights Act was crafted in the conference room of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center in Washington, DC.

Today, Reform clergy and leaders are at the forefront of fighting for racial and justice and gender equity.

This legacy is surely in keeping with the highest moral values of the Jewish tradition, and we are proud of it.

But here, in my view, is where our Reform forbears, despite their brilliance, may have missed the mark.

The ethical and moral teachings of our tradition are about the tangible world—our interactions with others, our workplaces and schools, our policies, and politics.

But ethics and morality are not the sum-total of Judaism or the religious experience.

They are complemented by our ritual practices, which point *beyond* the ordinary stuff of this world to the world of *meaning*—to a dimension of our existence that transcends our temporality and finitude and connects us to that which is far greater than our ability to capture with words or comprehend with our minds.

In this way, ritual is *poetry*—poetry in action.

Through movement, aesthetics, and routine, and its connection to times of the day and seasons of the year, ritual gives us a way to express the inexpressible.

Lifecycle rituals like...

—The joy of welcoming a child into the world and giving him or her a name once borne by an ancestor who is no longer living—binding the child’s life to theirs and, on some level, giving the deceased person new life and an ambassador in the world for their legacy.

—A young person’s transition in that invisible dimension of time from the child-version of them self to a blossoming young-adult version—a shift in their being that reflects a combination of all their parents have given them and the absolutely unique spirit God has implanted in them.

—The mysterious change in the nature of two people’s entire existence when, through the act of marriage, they enter into two new dimensions of holiness:

the intimate circle they occupy alone, apart from any other relationship in their life;

and, somewhat paradoxically, learning to maintain that circle while also opening their life together on all sides and sharing it with the community of family and friends who love them.

And there are experiences in time, too, like...

—Noticing the majesty of those liminal, blink-of-an-eye moments like the transition from morning to night and night to morning, and affirming the reality of God by saying the Sh’ma.

—Marking the tangible change in the world when the sun sets on Friday and the gentle rolling of time from ordinary to sacred, by lighting Shabbat candles.

—Experiencing the start of a new year not just as a change in the numbers on the calendar, but as a cosmic promise of a fresh start, the opportunity to repair broken relationships, and to renew yourself.

These moments in life are fleeting, and we can easily let them pass by unnoticed.

But beneath the surface, they are packed with spiritual and cosmic meaning.

And ritual, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it, “is the enactment of meaning.”²

Ritual is the way we elevate the ordinary to the dimension of the holy.

It's through ritual that we experience our fellowship with the unbroken and all-inclusive community from "the woodchopper to the water drawer."

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Interestingly to me, this is something our 7th graders seemed to understand, almost intuitively.

When they asked about how the yartzheit lights were turned on and Cantor Adam explained that one of our members comes in and does it each week not for pay, but out of love for this community, they got it.

In that moment, as they sat in almost complete darkness—with the only lights coming from atop the ark, through the windows, and beside the names of those who have died—I could clearly see those few rows of six dedicated TBE 7th graders extending out beyond the chapel and across the dimensions of time and space—connecting them with generations of people they never met and a future they cannot even imagine.

As we head into perhaps the most ritual-heavy time of the Jewish year, I invite you to try to take in the beauty of the pomp and circumstance and let yourself be moved by the movement and aesthetics of it all—

The white robes, the melodies and the cadence of Hebrew words you don't understand and don't really need to, the parade of congregants coming up for honors, the ushers shepherding people to their seats, grandparents sitting next to their grandchildren, the kids making noise.

This is how we Jews enact meaning, and elevate the ordinary to the sacred, and express the inexpressible, and experience the magic of eternity.