

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5767

I've been watching them for the past 20 years. Each one is different but in the end, each they each travel the same path. I'm talking about our children when they become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. After the service, non-Jewish guests say "I wish we had something like this for our kids." Why are they so moved? How does the transformation they witness occur?

This is the power of ritual. Our lives are filled with transitions. From childhood through our later years we have opportunities to mark the thresholds we enter and pass through. Most of the time we miss the opportunities. As our lives have become filled to overflow we don't often pause to recognize the changes we experience.

Jewish practices, both ancient and new, provide us with the gift of understanding, anticipating, honoring, and integrating the stages of our lives. Rituals like brit Milah, Jewish circumcision and naming are ancient. We can read about them in Torah. Since liberal Judaism is more egalitarian, when a Jewish girl is born, most of us don't think twice now about planning a communal naming ceremony. Since the ceremony of Simchat Bat, the "joy of a daughter" is fairly new, we search for the elements of ritual that bring meaning to the event.

Dr Judith Davis writes, "Life cycle rituals are the original form of therapy." She explains that they are public dramas that we draw upon to make sense of our lives. Through the use of shared symbols, and prescribed forms, life cycle rituals anchor us in past and help us move into the future.

Any good ritual must include a few things. Central to the experience is a sense of transformation. In ritual, we must feel changed in a deep way. There must be a before, middle, and after. The middle is called liminality and it should not be too long or too short. This liminal time is often uncomfortable because we are neither here nor there but between identities.

My most powerful experience of liminality came before I was ordained. For about one month before the date of my s'micha, I struggled with a feeling of anxiety and uncertainty. I had many questions. How would my life change after the title rabbi was added to my name? Would I be able to live up to the conditions of my ordination? Would I receive the inspiration others told me they received at the moment of transmission? I shared these thoughts with the other women I was

being ordained with and they confirmed similar experiences. Together, we decided to arrange for a mikvah, a ritual immersion. We asked the women who were ordained the year before us to plan this ritual. The "already rabbis" shared blessings for strength wisdom and mutual support. Each of us took our turn, with tears in our eyes, as we let go of our fears and welcomed the unknown future. I felt that my faith grew in depth with each dip into the cleansing waters. That was Friday afternoon and while ordination would be on Monday, I felt myself moving from fear of the unknown to a glimpse of what was to come. After the public ordination ritual, I was a different person. Returning to all of you in this community and celebrating my installation confirmed this change in my identity, on the inner and outer levels.

In working with our students I have seen each one of them come to their place of insecurity while preparing to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Contrary to the usual expression, one isn't bar mitzvahed. - One's identity changes. A person becomes a son or daughter of the commandments, an adult member of the tribe. Some worry about their Hebrew skills, while others don't even want to get up in front of people and pray, sing or teach. In most cases, each young adult must wrestle with themselves (and often their parents) to achieve their goal. This is the before part. And just at the time when our kids are working to understand who they are, independent of their parents, we grab them close and say, we know you are moving away from us. You are beginning your journey into the larger world. Show us, and the rest of the community, your strength, discipline and skills. Share publicly the results of your wrestling. As we witness your leadership, you are transformed from being a child into becoming an adult. Many students begin leading the service nervous about a variety of things but as moments pass we can feel their self-confidence grow. By the time their parents come to the bimah to bless them, our kids are years older than they were just an hour ago. And the time passes without notice. As any parent can tell you, time stands still. Just as Jacob received a blessing after a night of wrestling, so too can we feel the change of status that is a result of their wrestling.

Let's not forget that as parents, we too are transformed through this ritual. For many of us, this is the first event that we host as adults. I can't tell you how many remodeling projects start the year before B'nei Mitzvah. But joking aside, we see ourselves as older when we watch our children's transformation. As we watch them study, take on their hours of community service and anxiously await the arrival of our family and friends, we can see our parents in ourselves.

Towards the end of the service, we welcome the Bat or Bat Mitzvah into our congregation as a young adult. They have taken the responsibilities of Judaism upon themselves and members of our clergy; the Sisterhood and Brotherhood acknowledge this act. Often we share with them what our expectations are, that they continue to learn and think about what leadership role they would like to take upon themselves in the community. We tell them that they may now be called upon to make a minyan for shiva, or participate in a Youth Group fundraiser. Through naming this change in status, we seal the power of the B'nei Mitzvah ritual.

There are so many times I feel blessed to be a rabbi. In reflection, I realize how often it is when I am honored to help craft a ritual. I have so enjoyed helping adults decide upon their Jewish names. In many cases this opportunity has come through conversion. The path of conversion is deeply personal. One consistent theme that runs through each story is a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. In our congregation, each person choosing to convert must take a series of three classes. They include learning about the Jewish holidays, interpretation of Torah and Jewish views about God. After completing the classes, people are asked to write essays about God, Torah and the people of Israel. I have often thought, what a great project for the rest of us! The culmination of the conversion process is the mikvah, bet din and the actual ritual conversion ceremony, which is often witnessed by friends and family.

The mikvah ritual involves three immersions and each one has a particular prayers and intention. The first immersion is intended to help a person let go of the past. It is a washing away of the former connections with a different religious practice. The second immersion is a reminder of being present, in the moment of experiencing the change one is making in life. The last immersion is a welcoming of the new identity one takes on as a Jew. Some people choose to immerse in the ocean and others decide to go to an indoor, kosher mikvah, usually in San Francisco. Either way, the person converting emerges from the mikvah glowing and radiant. The words of prayer and the act of being enveloped by living water effect a powerful internal transformation.

One of the most difficult lifecycle rituals is the delivery and acceptance of a get, a Jewish divorce document. I have spoken to women who have performed this ritual in an orthodox setting and they have shared with me the humiliation and pain involved with this process. The get

ceremony involves the dissolution of ties between partners who have declared their love for each other under the chuppah. Through the ritual of marriage, these partners have made public vows of commitment to bind their lives together. The get ceremony is a process of cutting those ties. In our congregation, the ceremony is quite different from an orthodox get ritual. Both parties are treated with respect and honor. Each declares to the other, "you are no longer married to me and free to marry any one you choose." I encourage couples to participate in this ritual because I believe that it helps them separate from each other in a clear and effective way. It is especially important for people who are planning to remarry. The unfinished business of the old relationship should not be dragged into the new one.

In the last 25 years, there has been a growing awareness among Jewish women of the importance of life-cycle rituals. We have moved from creating *bat mitzvah* rituals and baby-naming ceremonies for our daughters, to celebrating special birthdays (30, 40, 50, 60), as well as weaning, menopause, and becoming an elder. As we have become more comfortable with our ability to create these special moments, some of us have gone on to conceive ceremonies for mourning, for healing of pain from illness, or separation, for recovery from rape, incest or physical abuse.

Jewish women have invented new ceremonies, created new music and songs, new ways to celebrate. It has been important for many of us to make these new observances resonate with a sense of the tradition from which they are drawn. We have adapted traditional rituals and infused them with new meaning. We have expanded the meaning of traditional blessings. We have written new prayers. We are in truth re-creating, re-newing, re-vitalizing our lives. The great rabbi Rav Kook said, "We must renew the old and sanctify the new."

Traditional Jewish ritual revolves around marriage, birth, and death, with little else in the way of lifecycle rituals for adults. But contemporary life seems to offer many occasions in want of ritual recognition: getting a new job, buying a new home, coming out, children leaving the home, adult bar or bat mitzvah.

Several generations ago, people got married in their early 20s, had children immediately, and by the time they were finished having children, they were well on their way to being grandparents. Life was shorter. Today, most of us can hope to enjoy many years when our focus shifts back to our own goals and purposes, much as it did in our

20s. Questions of meaning and purpose again present themselves. At the same time, we have acquired wisdom over the years, and some of us long to have that recognized and celebrated within our communities. Other important events characterize this time of life: our bodies change, some of us become grandparents, some of us retire from long-established careers, and at some point we may move out of our homes and downsize, or even move in with children or into a facility. All of these changes present opportunities for ritual. These changes of course happen to women and men, but women have been the ritual innovators.

Jewish women have created a new ritual called Simchat Chochma, the Joy of Wisdom. We have celebrated these rituals at TBE, usually within the context of our Rosh Chodesh group or our Women in Wisdom class. In this ritual we honor our elders for their contributions to our community, and we include models of wise women from traditional Jewish text. We have learned about Naomi, from the book of Ruth, who even after her husband and sons died, had the strength to return home with her daughter-in-law, Ruth. And we have celebrated women in our community for their ability to face hardship with courage and determination. One year we combined our Simchat Chochma with the Tu B'Shevat Seder. Like the Passover Seder, on Tu B'Shevat we also drink four cups of wine. At this Tu B'Shevat Seder when we approached each cup of wine we asked our elders to share about the four stages of their lives. We honored them for sharing their life experiences with us and asked them to be available as teachers and guides for the rest of us present.

A number of years ago, members of our community gathered around a man who was about to undergo heart surgery. It was suggested to him that his closest friends and family could come together to pray for a successful procedure and for healing his heart. He spoke of his fears about the surgery and each one of us blessed him with words from our hearts. While this healing ritual was not easy, it helped him move to a place of peace with the upcoming surgery. The love and concern in the room was a source of strength and faith at a difficult time in his life. He carried these prayers with him into surgery and they helped him know that he was not alone.

I invite you to consider these moments of transition in your own lives as opportunities for celebration, comfort, prayer and connection with old and new traditions. Our Jewish practices, texts and community are amazing gifts. Through our own creativity, we can bring deeper meaning to the important moments of our lives. I bless us all that this

year we may look to our inheritance for these gifts and continue to share our lives together with the presence of the Holy One and with each other.

Rabbi Paula Marcus
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Further Reading:
The Sacred Book of Jewish Spiritual Practices
Edited by Rabbi Irwin Kula and Vanessa L. Ochs, Ph.D
Jewish Lights Publishing

Lifecycles : Jewish Women on Life Passages & Personal Milestones
Edited by Rabbi Deborah Orenstein
Jewish Lights Publishing