

Ritual Does Not Go Stale – Parashat Emor 5780

Rabbi Michael Safra

A friend was walking in Jerusalem with his wife when he was approached by a young *Hasid* who asked if he had put on *tefillin* that day. My friend explained that he had put them on already, but he asked, “Just out of curiosity, why didn’t you ask my wife if she put on her *tefillin* today?” The *Hasid* got a little uncomfortable and responded, “Oh no, women do not need to wear *tefillin*; women are not allowed to wear *tefillin*.”

And my friend responded, “I know that’s one opinion in the Talmud, but why shouldn’t women be able to wear *tefillin*? Maybe we should even require women to wear *tefillin*. There’s even a historical precedent. Isn’t it true that Michal, the daughter of King Saul and wife of King David wore *tefillin*? And isn’t it said that the daughters of Rashi, one of the greatest sages of the Middle Ages, wore *tefillin*?”

The *Hasid* looked at my friend, nodded, and responded slowly: “Yes, it’s true that those women wore *tefillin*. But that was a long time ago. Times have changed!”

Times have changed. We hear that sentiment a lot. Desperate times call for desperate measures. How quickly must the Jewish community and Jewish law adapt to changing realities?

We are beginning to see signs that the first stages of a phased reopening of our state may be on the horizon, but I think back to conversations we had when we first closed our building. Is it possible to do virtual services? Do people sitting in their houses count together as part of a *minyan* just because each of their computers is connected to a single server point in “internet-land”? The standing guidance from our movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards was that people could join a *minyan* via Zoom as long as there was a real, in-person *minyan* they were connecting to. The standing position did not accept that a community of eight or nine Jews could call a friend and invite him to join for Kaddish.

But the pandemic was unprecedented, what the Talmud calls *she’at had’hak*, an extraordinarily pressured moment when perhaps things that would not normally be allowed might be permissible. Leaders in our movement quickly offered guidance to suggest that as long as we could see faces, we could join together remotely for Mourner’s Kaddish – particularly because the Mourner’s Kaddish evokes such a visceral emotional reaction. But the permission did not apply for other *devarim shebik’dushah*, rituals like Torah reading that require a *minyan*.

Those who were following at the time may remember that at first we permitted Kaddish during the week when clergy had computers in front of them and could see people’s faces, but not on Shabbat. And some were disappointed and suggested that we could have a monitor in the Sanctuary on Shabbat and recite Kaddish here as well. Which we did, and I think it’s worked for us. But I’m less interested right now in the particulars of reciting Kaddish in a virtual *minyan* than in the meta-issue of when change is warranted and how change happens. Because the call for change in an effort to attract more people or connect people in different ways is nothing new. On the whole, we live in a progressive society; I’m not talking about politics, but the hallmarks of the modern world are innovation and change.

I am a Conservative rabbi, well-trained in a concept of “Positive Historical Judaism” that posits change should be slow and incremental, and in the balancing act between tradition and change, the tie goes to tradition. And long before me, B’nai Israel has characterized itself as a “traditional” congregation.

Today’s Torah portion offers a cautionary perspective for those who think change should be swift and religious innovation should be out in front of the community. At the very end of Emor, there are five verses about the *lehem hapanim*, the showbread. Inside the Tabernacle (and later, the Temple), there was a *shulhan*, a table on which were placed 12 loaves of bread. Every Friday before Shabbat, the priests were to bake 12 new loaves, place them on the table, and give the old loaves to the priests to consume. It sounds nice; and I am told that the *Ari Zal*, Rabbi Isaac Luria, had the custom of setting his Shabbat table not with two loaves of bread as we do, but with 12 loaves to recall this ancient practice.

Now, in the very next verse, the Torah tells us about a blasphemer – a certain man from the tribe of Dan with an Israelite mother and Egyptian father who runs around pronouncing God’s name in blasphemy. The people arrest this man and wait while Moses asks God what they should do; and God comes back and commands that he and any future blasphemer should be executed. Modern scholars point out the significance of this man being from Dan, as during the time of the divided monarchy, later kings will place unauthorized shrines in Dan and Bethel. So maybe this tale has something to do with the historical battle for supremacy between the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. But that need not concern us.

Rashi asks why it is that this story about a blasphemer is placed immediately following the commandment to place the showbreads. And he answers with a Midrash on what the blasphemer actually said. Why did the people get so angry with this guy? Says the Midrash, he was poking fun at the ritual of the showbreads. Why is it, this man asked, that the *kohanim* – essentially royalty – should eat week-old bread? Wouldn’t it make better sense for them to eat the fresh bread, instead of stuff that had to sit?

And that *is* blasphemy because there is an ancient tradition that that bread never got stale. In fact, a miracle happened, and the bread that was removed from the table was every bit as fresh as the bread new bread that replaced it. In fact, the priests would actually fight amongst themselves over who got to eat how much because it was that good. Onlookers might have wondered why these otherwise-smart people were fighting over stale bread, but the *kohanim* knew something that these onlookers didn’t. The priest understood how valuable that bread was.

Now we’re going somewhere because the showbread becomes a metaphor for our ancient tradition. Insiders, scholars, rabbis debate amongst themselves about the details of the law – how much milk needs to drop into a pot of chicken soup in order to render the pot and the entirety of its contents unkosher? How hot can an oven get before it is considered “cooking”, which is not permissible on Shabbat? What is the earliest time when a person can recite the morning *Shema*? ... And meanwhile, we moderns, sometimes from the outside, look on and ask “what are you debating about? The whole thing is stale!”

Sometimes we are right. But sometimes we are like that blasphemer, criticizing a system and a tradition that we don't fully understand, jumping to conclusions without recognizing that there might be something we don't quite appreciate. How can we be less like the one who is so sure in his doubt, and more like the priests who fight to get closer to something they understand to be special? Maybe the ancient rituals aren't stale, as much as we aren't fully prepared. Sometimes, instead of changing the tradition, maybe we need to change ourselves or try a little harder to find meaning.

The Hasidic master, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, sees something else in the ritual of the showbread. Why do the priests have to lay out these loaves instead of eat them? To teach that in life, *העיקר הוא לא עצם המעשה אלא ההתכוננות וההערכות*, the main thing is not the deed itself, but rather the preparation and training that goes into it. How does ritual become meaningful? When we know how to do it, when we practice and prepare, when we try our best to lay it out and understand it on its own terms before criticizing or pushing for change. Or, as my teacher Rabbi Neil Gillman used to put it, if the reason for a particular ritual no longer applies, sometimes we might have to change the ritual; but sometimes it would be better to change the reason.

That is the challenge of holiness and the challenge of leading or joining or participating in a community: when to say that times have changed, and to say as the Torah does here, "The Israelites did as the Lord had commanded Moses."

Someday this crisis will end, and some of the permissions we granted to keep our community together and engaged during an unprecedented state of emergency will be rescinded. Other things will come up and people will ask: "why do we still do this or why can't we do that? Remember during the coronavirus crisis when you allowed us to do it?"

Sometimes change is warranted and other times it is painfully slow because there aren't easy answers. Sometimes we think a conclusion is correct; other times we think our leaders are wrong; but the discussion, the debate, the extra effort to connect to practices we call "holy" while others call "stale" is always worth it. May we continue at it for many years to come. Shabbat shalom.