

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5782
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Meeting Uncertainty with Ritual

Well, here we are. Again. Another Rosh Hashanah with masks, social distancing, remote services, you name it. Even with so much progress – vaccines and testing and so much learned – we are still living a reality shaped by this pandemic...a kind of radical uncertainty previously unfamiliar to us. What uncertainties weigh most heavily on you as this new year begins? The health of those you love? The school year that's beginning? How you'll celebrate life cycle observances that are around the corner? Unemployment or underemployment? Insurmountable inequality in our society?

Listen to that list – the worries about health, success at school or work, our concerns about who will make it to our seder tables and baby namings. These aren't actually new questions, new uncertainties. But this pandemic has forced us to deal with that which has always been “at the heart of the human experience.” The pandemic has forced us to see, in the words of my colleague Rabbi Jonathan Blake, that the “false assurances we had, and that what we thought we had before (well-ordered, regulated, predictable lives), were actually the aberration, and that we were living under false pretenses.” Many of the uncertainties we are navigating today were tenuous already, and the pandemic has revealed the cracks forming just beneath the surface, threatening to break through.

We are not the first Jewish generation to live through a time of radical uncertainty. In fact, our Israelite ancestors built years of uncertainty into their calendar on a regular basis. *Shemita*, which literally means “*release*,” is the seventh year in a repeating seven-year cycle, set out in the Torah, that the Israelites are told they must observe when they arrive in the promised land. There are four major Biblical rules for *Shemita*.¹ First, cease planting crops. Second, invite the poor to gather food from the land. Third, free the slaves. And fourth, forgive debts. Every seven years the Israelites gave up ownership and could take only what they needed to survive and sustain their families. Life became radically uncertain. *Shemita* demanded a release of reliability, a forced reprieve from what people were used to, what they counted on: work, schedules, and everything else that felt “normal,” routine, stable. *Shemita* necessitated a year of figuring out how to manage through uncertainty while providing a fresh start. It so happens that 5782 is a *Shemita* year. A year of release, and its accompanying uncertainty, begins right now, with Rosh Ha-Shanah.

How can we use this year of *shemita*, of release, both to get through a time of unprecedented challenge and also to face the reality that our futures will, to a certain extent, require us to live with uncertainty? What might we learn from our ancestral

¹ Summary taken from the “Biblical Roots of Shmita” box in the Fall 2014 URJ Magazine, page 11.

Israelite family and how **they** lived during these mandated periods of *shemita*, of release and renewal, of letting go, of untethering themselves from the assurances of agriculture, commerce, and ownership?

I believe that ritual kept them anchored in time and relationship: prescribed sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, weekly Shabbat and holiday gatherings with feasts fashioned from the food now equally available to everyone, a living, real-time test of the sustaining power of their connection with God and each other. Each of these, different benefits of ritual.

Rituals stabilize life² in three primary ways. First, rituals help us find our place in time, offering structure to hours and days, weeks and years. Second, rituals help us feel connected to one another, inviting us to create or deepen relationships. And finally, rituals bring us into something bigger than any one of us alone. Taken together, rituals give us structure to navigate uncertainty and Judaism gives us the tools with which to build and rebuild.

Now, before you tune out because the rabbi has just started talking about ritual, I want you to consider the rituals we developed over the last year and a half. I'll start and share two that have sustained me. The first ritual I came to treasure was during our Shabbat service on Zoom. As we had done long before the pandemic, we shared our blessings. We imagined filling our kiddush cups with the good stuff we lifted up, even when the world was dark. The Zoom chat was quiet at first each week, but then your offerings started to flow. One person inspired another who inspired another and, all of a sudden, our locked-down Shabbat celebrations felt connected and personal, and had the added benefit of helping us get to know one another differently, more deeply. This was not a new ritual for us, but it took on a new life.

The second is a ritual Ezra and Asher and I started, by accident I'll add, of Thursday afternoon lunches with really good sandwiches. Why? Because Thursday is my day off, and it was the one day I could sit down with them for lunch. So we made it fun. And yummy. And suddenly the lunch was really about our time together. We all looked forward to Thursdays; it became an anchor in our week. And even when camp and now school have resumed, we make sure to have a yummy Thursday dinner, which usually means take out. Different meal, same feeling. And here's an important point I want to underscore – the rituals we choose to keep don't have to be flashy. Regular meals aren't particularly exciting or unique moments to ritualize. It's how we choose to create and protect these moments that gives them power. For as long as we choose to do them, they can keep us tethered – in time, in relationship, in purpose.

Remember, in the spring of 2020, a ritual emerged as the clock struck 7:00pm and what seemed like the whole of NYC opened their windows or stepped outside and cheered and banged pots and pans to thank the health care workers caring for us and our loved

² Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals* (Inspired by this readin!)

ones. This ritual helped people mark time each day and brought strangers together around a shared purpose. And other opportunities grew out of it – musicians played short concerts and neighbors struck up conversations. Ritual. It didn't make the pandemic go away but it became a tool to manage the uncertainty. That is, creating and participating in rituals is not a magic potion to eliminate the real challenges that come along with living. But they are, I offer, a beautiful tool that can change the way we **do** that living.

Jewish tradition is filled with rituals--beautiful, meaningful markers in time, practices that I hope you will consider trying on for size and adopting into your personal or family practice. Rituals anchor us in time. Consider Shabbat. We need the rituals for Shabbat, because otherwise it's just another day on the calendar. Forget, if you can, whatever you think Shabbat is "supposed to be" - a perfectly set table with roasted chicken, well behaved and well-rested people, and no stress. Don't get me wrong, that sounds wonderful. But it's not what I'm going for, because for many of us, including for me and my family, it's not realistic. Instead, how about lighting candles to mark the beginning of Shabbat, whether it happens exactly at sundown or exactly when your family can be together. Or sharing the blessings of your week? These can be done with our Barnert community in person or online, or with family at home. I think you'll find this ritual to be deeply stabilizing, comforting, a sturdy anchor in the endless flow of days.

Secondly, rituals bring us together...and being together helps us manage through the unknown. They are guides – telling us what to do for each other, what we can rely on when we are at a loss. When we don't have them, we lose our connection and our way.

Earlier this summer I spoke by phone with a long-time member of Barnert Temple who was thinking about ending many decades of relationship here. The pandemic has taken its toll on each of us differently and this family, like so many, had suffered the death of an older parent. At the time of my conversation, many months had passed since the death. This congregant was hurt that the Temple hadn't sent a note, gathered – even virtually – for shiva, or reached out to offer a meal of consolation. These are the rituals that bring us together around death and mourning. In high points and low points, we need these rituals to keep us afloat, a spiritual raft in this sea of uncertainty. Without the familiarity of Jewish ritual to help them through their bereavement, this family felt completely unmoored.

So where had we been? We didn't know about the death. So let me say here, right now – please call me or write to me when you are living with sadness and also when you welcome celebrations. In illness and death, babies and weddings. Also, just as importantly, please opt-in to these communal ritual gatherings. Go to shiva – in person when possible and with the necessary precautions, or online. Send a note of condolence or congratulations when it's appropriate. These rituals matter. And it matters that we live them together. Rituals give us community connection.

Finally, in the face of uncertainty, rituals unite us around something bigger than ourselves. They remind us that we are not alone. Connection comes with responsibility – to opt in, to participate in community ritual in spite of all the good reasons why we can't make the time, why we feel reluctant to open ourselves to others. Consider all the ways in which the rituals of our shared Jewish tradition enhance life's meaning by increasing connection: Giving tzedakah regularly, even in small amounts, like a ritualized weekly collection before Shabbat, reminds us that our obligations extend beyond the self. Volunteering at Barnert--cooking and serving each month in the Men's Shelter, for instance--may radically alter our perspective on all the "certainties" that we take for granted. The connective aspect of ritual, the way Jewish traditions tie us to the larger "we," is a reminder that, pandemic or no, life is often a matter of relationship.

What if, in this new year of *Shemita*, we divert some of the energies we are currently spending trying to solve what cannot be solved, and, instead, allow the transformative potential of ritual to help us find our footing. What might we feel? Perhaps this will be where we feel our *shemita*, our release - our hearts beating less erratically, our breathing steadier, our faces lifted to one another.

Rituals stabilize our lives – in time, in relationship, and in purpose. Of course, they only work if we try them. It may take us a while to find the right ones, and then also to find comfort in where we land. That's why we do them over and over: it is our actions that transform them into rituals. And it's not just for this year. This year of *Shemita* is also our opportunity to try out and find the rituals we might keep as we continue out of the uncertainty of the pandemic into the inevitable uncertainty of what comes next.

"Here's the thing," wrote my colleague Rabbi Rachel Barenblat in a perfect poem for this second uncertain New Year together,

"the year begins anew

even in the worst of times. The leaves

will turn and fall and then they'll grow again.

And sometimes we're afraid, and we can't know

what choice to make to keep anyone safe.

Uncertainty's a bear. All we can do

is seek out sweetness everywhere we may

and work to fix what brokenness we find.

The good news is we're not in this alone.

We'll help each other hope when light seems dim
and lift the sparks that darker days reveal.

We'll love each other fiercely: in the end
there is no greater work that we can do.

We who survive will help each other heal.”

May we begin our new year, 5782, this year of *shemita*, with a commitment to finding even one ritual that holds us steady through our uncertain days of life. And may we embrace this loving presence - of God and one another – that surrounds us as we journey forward.