

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5780
Finding the Real Through Ritual

I spent the summers of my youth at Camp Keeyumah, in Wayne County, Pennsylvania from the age of eight until I went to college in 1978. Our family had a history at Keeyumah, as my parents had been counselors there the summer before they were married. It was an old-fashioned, co-ed Jewish sports camp, born of post-war affluence, the belief that green grass and fresh air were good for urban Jewish kids, and that an extended vacation away from one's parents was a win-win for everyone. We played basketball and softball, learned to swim in the lake, had a brief Shabbat service every Friday night, and created memories that would last a lifetime.

Looking back, I'm not sure that I loved camp nearly as much as I loved its culture of "sameness;" that each and every day felt exactly the way I thought it would feel. I memorized our weekly schedule on the very first day, and hour after hour, day after day, I knew precisely where we were going and what would happen. If there were new campers – it was up to me to show them the ropes, to let them know we did things a certain way at Keeyumah. I was proud to be the keeper of the flame; after all, these customs had been given to us at Sinai, or at least at Sugarloaf, our camp's adjacent mountain. It was...tradition.

But after eight weeks of athletic competition and evening activities, all the hills and valleys, the friendships lost and found, what I truly loved – and why I think I kept returning every summer – was the ritual of the last night. The entire camp would gather down by the lake, and each of us would receive a paper plate with a candle attached to it. The candles were lit, and then, one by one, placed in the water. Together, we stood silently and marveled as this flotilla of light grew brighter and more luminescent, as hundreds of flames beamed with hope and possibility, beckoning us to return for another summer.

As the candles, still shining, drifted further away, we linked arms and reverently sang the three songs that concluded every camp-wide gathering. It was a moment of perfection, a fitting coda to another summer of change and growth. It was one of the most peaceful, contented moments of my childhood.

Keeyumah may not have been a religious camp, but like most summer camps, it intuitively understood that at the core of the moments that give our lives meaning and purpose, we find **ritual**. It's not about swimming or archery, or even learning how to be independent (although all of those are laudable goals). No, the magic of the camp was that each day's ultimate purpose was the creation of the world of **camp** - the cheers and songs for every occasion, the folk-rock services, the evening activities that never changed from one summer to the next,

the extended periods of time for doing absolutely nothing. Camp was not a means to an end; it was an end in itself: the gradual accumulation of camp rituals and relationships, the creation of memories built for a lifetime.

The symbolic act of a shared collective narrative, our rituals give us a way to frame our religious experience; the warp and the woof of our Jewish lives. New York Times columnist David Brooks cited the philosopher, Abraham Kaplan, who calculated that over 60% of Judaism's 613 commandments involve physical ritual; such deeds – eating matzah, hearing the Shofar – represent a form, a kind of language, a way of expressing things “that are too deep for words.” Or, in the words of Pixar's brilliant film, “Inside Out,” **rituals enable us to retrieve the core memories that shape who we are.**

The Reform movement's master teacher of liturgy and ritual, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, famously said that “Torah study is the Jewish mind at work, and ritual is the Jewish heart.” Whether you're in a synagogue or at your Passover seder, lighting Shabbat candles or planting a tree in Israel, we are participants in a drama for the centuries; we have an order, a script, and a generational story that connects our present with the past, and our past to the future. As Hoffman reminds us, ritual moves us through its poetry, its music, the loved ones we share

it with, and the emotional chord that connects us to our ancestors' struggles and their triumphs.

But what does Hoffman's expression, "a Jewish heart" really mean? Is it one of those tautologies, as in, "I know it when I feel it." Or is there something more? Perhaps the way we experience our rituals can help us define exactly who we are.

Over this past summer, I was speaking with a congregant, and I asked her to describe her family's nicest Jewish moment. She told me about the warmth of her family's Passover seder, the pride she felt when her twelve year-old son chanted the four questions and then gazed into his grandparents' eyes, eager to accept their praise. Her son may not have known it consciously – but still he **knew** - that in this ritual deed, he had found a larger truth; he had become the next link in an eternal chain of Jewish tradition.

But even more remarkably, just as he was eating kugel, spilling drops of grape juice on his plate, and discovering **his** Jewish identity, his grandparents were having the exact same moment, remembering **their** grandparents' seders they went to as children; the ones with the homemade gefilte fish, the Yiddish songs, and a prayer for the family member still trapped in the old country.

Her description led me to think about our family's seders: as our children lead us in Dayenu, clapping hands, pounding the table in exaltation, the memory of my grandfather comes flooding back; regally sitting atop his red velvet pillow, his Maxwell House Haggadah at his side. He would look at me with his stern German demeanor and forcefully remind me that singing Dayenu was no excuse for frivolity.

And so, when you ask yourselves the question, "how do I know who I am?" don't begin with your date of birth, your childhood home, or where you went to high school. As Jack Webb used to say, those are "just the facts." Instead, why not answer the question by an entirely different metric: by tracing your steps through the centuries, guided by ancestors, both known and unknown. Our rituals illuminate the journey, revealing that each of us is surrounded – and loved - by benevolent ghosts who have been symbolically walking with us, holding our hands, and passing down a heritage that all of us are in the midst of passing down ourselves.

How do you know who you are? You know who you are because this morning, when you sang Avinu Malkeinu, and when you heard the shofar's haunting notes, your ears were receptive, and your heart was open; and you could hear the whispers of all those ghosts, the ancestors you never knew. And

they were saying thanks for staying – however imperfectly – on the Jewish path that they once tread.

Brooks also writes that notwithstanding elaborate Jewish rituals like weddings and B'nai Mitzvahs, our daily lives are relatively unstructured, “a passing flow of moments.” Rituals mark what he calls “doorway moments,” when we mark a transition; a passage from one stage of life to another.

But what is so critical, in this day and age, is that when we walk through a doorway, there's someone on the other side to welcome us in. When a loved one dies, Judaism commands that we open our homes for seven days, encouraging our family and friends to walk through our doors. Our rabbis understood that as we go through the trauma of loss and death, we would welcome the community's solace and comfort; that by observing the ritual of shiva, we would never grieve alone, never feel forgotten, and surrounded by real – not virtual – people – we would feel more than just “liked.” We would feel loved.

The rabbis also knew that shiva wasn't just for the mourners. When we make a shiva call, we not only go to comfort our friends, we are also fulfilling one of life's most precious desires – to be needed by others. The wonderful quality of walking through the shiva door is knowing that your voice, your spirit, your food, and most of all, **your presence**, truly matters. As Brooks reminds us, simply and

powerfully, “a community is a group of people who share a common story.” It is with others that we celebrate, and it is with others that we mourn.

It’s not by accident that the rituals I’ve mentioned - seder and shivah – are ones that teach us the value of hospitality, of opening our homes to friends and strangers alike. Our rabbis knew – and this is the genius of Jewish life – that when we have those doorway moments, when we walk through those ritual doorways, we will be welcomed by those who care for us; who will reach out their hands in friendship and affection, who will meaningfully ask us how we’re doing, and genuinely listen to our answers. Our rituals provide us with the opportunity to be kind, and through our kindness to each other, we make the world a sacred, holy place.

This morning, all of you walked through another ritual doorway, the doorway of our beloved Temple. You were warmly welcomed by our staff and by our ushers, all of whom wished you a “Good yuntif” or “Shanah Tovah.” Most of you were greeted by friends, both old and new, and hugs were generously given and received. Perhaps you shared a story or two about your summer, or maybe heard about someone’s recent family *simchah*. Many of you are sitting in the exact seats that you’ve been sitting in for years, or perhaps in the seats once

occupied by your parents and grandparents. Indeed, I imagine that many of you heard the echoes of your loved ones' voices as you prayed and sang with us this morning.

As we walk through the doors of our sanctuary, as we stand on the threshold of these gates of repentance, we know that our work of *teshuvah* is substantial. And yet, we also know that as challenging as our work may be, we are immeasurably enriched because we have experienced these sacred rituals **together**. And dare I say it: it's **joyful** to be here, it's **life-affirming**, and in this day and age, that's no small victory. When we hear our voices in collective prayer, when we remember the strength of our communal values, and when we share a vision of hope and potential for the future, we ensure that our religious rituals will continue to unite us as a community.

But let's not limit ourselves to Jewish holidays and doorway moments. Rituals can – and should – be created in every aspect of our lives. We need to spend more time in comfortable chairs, reading aloud with our loved ones. We need to spend more time walking and talking – not because we need to go somewhere - but for the sake of walking and talking. We need more family nights - playing games and doing puzzles - more days at the beach, more evenings in a

sukkah, and more days with our children and grandchildren. We need more structure in our lives and more intention with our time. We need to feel more tethered to our traditions: to remind us that we are not just careening from one moment to the next, but that our experiences have meaning, that we share a common story, and that ultimately, we are most fully ourselves when we are in relationship with others.

Perhaps this morning's rituals will – as they have for centuries - serve as both a conduit to generations past and the inspiration for generations yet to be. But I also pray that our rituals – whether they are formed here – amidst the wisdom and music of our tradition, or in your dining rooms amidst the brisket and the conversation - will enable us to see our loved ones in a new light – to celebrate their happiness, to console their grief, to enjoy a festive meal, and to nurture and sustain their love and friendship. May our rituals continue to lead us back to our most valued relationships, and may they teach us, once again, how to be in covenant with those whom we care for and love. Cain yehi ratzon. May it be God's will.

