

THE RIBBON

So, here we are again! The turn of the head, a glint of the eye... another year has passed. Somehow, it seems that Rosh Hashanah always comes as a surprise. Just as we are never quite ready for a new infant's appearance into this world, the birth of the New Year also has a sort of suddenness about it.

And so we welcome this sudden New Year with a slice of apple dipped in honey, with words of blessings – the "Shecheyanu" – with a round challah, with a sense of anticipation for hearing shofar sounds, and perhaps with a Tashlich – tossing our pocket-lint sins into water. Without the rituals it isn't Rosh Hashanah. And conversely if it was not Rosh Hashanah those rituals would have little emotive impact.

I've been thinking about the effect of ritual quite a bit lately. I'd like to share those thoughts with you tonight.

My thoughts were prompted by a recent study published by the Center for Family Research of George Washington University, in which Steven Wolin and Linda Bennett made some interesting findings. They noted that families which use rituals of whatever kind, as a means of passing on rules of behavior, expectations, and family history, create children who are likely to be more resilient as adults.

They studied 240 students entering college and 70 of their parents and found that "the more meaningful that family rituals were thought to be, the more positive that student's sense of self, and the better able the freshman is at adapting to the stresses of college."

Incredibly, in families of alcoholics where there was some ongoing daily ritual as a family, the offspring were found to be less likely, by a dramatic margin to become alcoholics. And in individuals, rituals, viewed as being important, are shown to lower levels of anxiety dramatically and to lessen chronic stress. Therefore, the researchers are quick to point out how sad it is to see such core family rituals as supper together, bedtime reading and family outings disappearing because of the time demand of jobs and the increase in single parents' families. One parent hasn't the energy at day's end to fully engage the children. And, of course, there is the shrinking paycheck.

So, what is ritual; what do we mean by the term? That's not an easy question, because ritual is a fairly elusive concept. There is, of course, a great difference between actual ritual and merely ritualized actions.



Ritualized actions are behaviors, mannerisms, tension relievers or Superstitious quirks, which we all have – avoiding black cats and leaning ladders or knocking on wood. Ritualized actions are the sort of thing a baseball player does when coming to bat – a touch on the cap, knocking dirt out of cleats, or grabbing the bat at both ends and rolling it back over the head. Such mannerisms are transitory, or they are habits, much as lighting up after dinner and checking hair and lipstick in the mirror for the umpteenth time. They neither elevate nor transcend; they neither mark a particularly memorable moment, nor do they connect with one another.

Actual rituals, however, have a certain...what can I call it...a certain power all their own. Authentic rituals communicate values. So, before a ball game or a session of Congress or in a schoolroom or at a public meeting, when we stand for the “Pledge of Allegiance” or the “National Anthem” we are saying that principles of our country are important to us.

Rituals also foster identity. So, when we look forward to special things – fireworks or a picnic on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, sharing a Thanksgiving Day turkey with family and friends, or planning a last few day of vacation on Labor Day weekend – we say a lot about who we are in relation to where we live.

Some rituals can promote health and healing. Physical exercise, a few moments of meditation, prayers before sleep and during difficult times in one’s life are certainly beneficial to body and mind. Ritual can relieve tensions between people. Socially agreed upon behaviors – rituals – can take the guesswork out of what is expected and acceptable and what is not.

Proof, if such is needed, was the simple matter of the handshake between old enemies standing side-by-side on the White House Lawn. That ritual gesture was as important to the moment as the signing of the papers. Such ritualized proprieties can relieve social anxieties and serve as “safety valves” for potential flashpoints in inter-personal relationships. That’s why people from different cultures can have such a difficult time relating to one another at first, because they don’t know each other’s ritualized mores.

Some rituals can promote family and group bonds or even establish household traffic patterns. So, when family traditions develop around the celebration of birthdays and anniversaries that bonds us. And perhaps less dramatic, but just as significant, is the morning “do-si-do” of family members rushing from bed to bath to breakfast to bye-bye out the door. Then there is the controlled pandemonium of getting children ready for bedtime, or of getting everyone ready for an outing, a party, or for company, a holiday, or a life cycle

celebration. Household members then act and maneuver in a sort of expected and anticipated symphony within defined patterns and behavior parameters... which, in time, are set and over time are ritualized and rehearsed again and again.

Some rituals are merely symbolic – public expressions of life passages. We don't really benefit from graduation exercises. The diploma could more easily be sent by mail. But still the ritual persists. International diplomacy is suffused with ritual and so are initiations into clubs, fraternities, or sororities. Being introduced to one another, testifying in court, and being inducted into military service or into public office are all well-known and well-rehearsed rituals. Even becoming engaged is apparently ritualized, as is evident from the TV commercial, in which the groom-in-training [dressed only in the advertiser's jockey shorts] practices all the "proper moves" before a bedroom mirror - kneeling, asking, and presenting the ring.

The research shows that families and members of those families with a law commitment to meaningful and appropriate rituals have certain traits in common. They tend to be oriented solely in the present and they tend to have less precise generational boundaries so that the parent-child hierarchy is out of kilter. They tend to have less attachment to ethnic, religious or community groups, and they tend to see their small nuclear family group as the sum total of what family is all about. 'They also tend to feel that there is no power behind the few rituals they do share as a family, so that in time all their rituals fade away. And, perhaps, even more revealing, individuals raised in such families tend to have a minimal sense of identity with their family group, especially if there are crises. They tend to disconnect and simply go their separate ways.

Typical comments by such family members come from a mother of five who said: "I don't think we've done anything together as a family except sleep under the same roof. And I don't really even know these people." Therefore, families without ritual in their home tend to be if not dysfunctional then at least disconnected, isolated and dispassionate about one another.

The research done by Wolin and Bennett is truly groundbreaking. Households without a sense of ritual or without shared activities that give structure to the values - the celebrations, and the routines of daily life tend in time to disintegrate! Families [and by families they include even two-people households in which there are no children] without definite structure, defined ritual tend to fall apart. Think about that in the context of what we see in society today. Which families do survive intact, vend which do not? Which families have a sense of inter-generational structure and which do not? Astoundingly,

the implication is that even for a couple a lack of meaningful ritual in their relationship tends to put their relationship at risk.

For thousands of years, the Jewish family has been the prototype, the model, the paradigm of what family is all about. Even in this day and age of fragmentation and family dissipation, non-Jews still express amazement at how close-knit Jewish families seem to be, and how close-knit we are as a people. This positive stereotype, while a bit tarnished, is still true today in comparison to society in general. We Jews, of course, take it all for granted. We rationalize or we assume that our family stability is a result of centuries of persecution or of ghettoization and/or of isolation or of a guilt producing gene found especially in Jewish mothers.

The more I reflect on what in the past has enabled Jews to create strong family bonds the more I am convinced that it has little to do with isolation and guilt and much to do with our commitment to Jewish ritual. I know of no other people, no other heritage, no other religion that puts such emphasis on rituals performed in the home. Not just ritual for the purpose of random activity, but ritual that elevates and ennobles and teaches values along the way. And that, dear people, is another incredible, awesome, wondrous feature of this most sublime heritage of ours. And something else that we Jews simply take for granted.

But just because our tradition encourages, allows, and proffers rituals in abundance without our accepting them and without our using them in our homes and in our lives, it is as if they never existed at all. For a lost treasure or an unappreciated treasure is in reality no treasure at all.

Do not think that I'm about to declare that we should all undertake every ritual practiced by Jews in any time or age. Not at all. My purpose is simply to remind us that it is high time we understand that just as being a member of a family is totally irrelevant if we don't communicate with each other, so being Jewish can be totally irrelevant if we don't act as Jews. Being a member of a unique people is just a matter of curiosity if we do not connect and reconnect in many different ways with our people.

Jewish ritual has power. It feeds the subconscious mind and prepares us to meet the world with optimism. It connects us to this world and protects us against a sense of existential loneliness and uncertainty so prevalent in society today. It opens us to possibilities beyond the mundane, enabling us to see that there is more to life than buying and selling and working and playing. There is also being and sharing and learning and reaching.

Jewish ritual transmits the shared beliefs of family members across generational lines. It enables us to celebrate time and space – something that cannot be done without ritual and something that without doing makes being a Jew somewhat irrelevant.

Scientists today speak about the GIA effect. This means that the earth, indeed, the universe, has a rhythm of its own – an internal clock, undulations an array of patterns that allow for renewal. Likewise, I believe there is a certain GIA like effect to ritual. It has a rhythm all its own – a set of behaviors and patterns that open us to the energies of the world and that enable us to get in sync with ourselves. And guess what else? Ritual makes one just plainly feel better.

### **RIBBONS**

And the proof? We are all going to feel better tonight just because we celebrated something important together as Jews. We welcomed the New Year with hope and courage and with joy and sincerity. May the year ahead retain its sweetness. May hope and renewal of the human spirit be our blessing in the days and months ahead.

Amen.