A few years ago, I got into a memorable discussion with a hostess at an elegant dinner party. Since she had a captive rabbi, she decided to express one of her pet peeves about organized religion. Specifically, she targeted ritual, which she dismissed as hocus pocus, irrational, meaningless. As I recall she also used the words repetitive and primitive.

I listened politely and, when she paused for my response, I complimented my hostess on the beauty of the table. I then noted that her dinner party seemed quite ritualized to me. The table was set in a particular way with the wine glasses, the water glasses, the forks, and other utensils placed in a prescribed order. There also seemed to be some order in the way we were seated [I didn't randomly end up next to her]. The lights were dimmed, and candles graced the table. The courses were served in a structured way, including the sorbet between the appetizer and the entrée.

I then suggested that some outside observer might characterize her way of feeding guests as ritual; it was patterned behavior in accordance with certain rules designed to enhance the significance of the occasion. Moreover, anyone who made a study of her dinner parties might find much that was repetitive, yet interestingly enough no one would call it "primitive."

As I recall, my hostess was not offended by my response. She smiled and acknowledged that I had a point. My point, of course, was that ritual is an integral part of human life. Ritual gives form to our experience. Human life is inconceivable without ritual.

Religion is certainly impossible without ritual and yet, since ancient times the proper place of ritual in religion has been a subject of discussion. Consider the scene described in the Book of Amos. It was New Year's Day [our equivalent of Rosh Hashanah], in the 8th Century B.C.E. A group of Israelite worshipers were gathered to offer animal sacrifices in an elaborate ritual by which they hoped to express loyalty to God and pray for a year of abundance and prosperity. The presiding priest was suddenly interrupted by a shepherd/prophet named Amos who crashed the scene and scandalized all assembled for this solemn assembly by declaring: "Thus say the Lord, I hate, I despise your feasts and I cannot abide your solemn assemblies but let justice well up as water and righteousness as a mighty stream."

As Reform rabbis, many of us have implied that traditional observance was excessively driven by a regimen of prescribed rituals, and we justified why we ignored this or that observance by quoting Amos. After all, justice not ritual is at the heart of true religion!

Of course, classical Reform never abandoned **all** ritual. Our Reform elders agree that no religion is possible without it and that ritual can serve some worthy purpose. Ritual enables a group to express its noblest ideas and hopes and helps create a sense of community. When we sit down at the Seder, eat the matzo and the other symbolic foods and recount how we were once slaves in Egypt, we affirm the importance of our knowing the heart of the stranger.

According to this perspective a ritual is to be judged by the degree it symbolizes or preserves the basic ethical and spiritual truth. For years that was the operative credo of Reform Judaism.

In recent years, our culture has come to a new and deeper appreciation of ritual in life and in religion. We understand humans are both left-brained and right-brained creatures. We discover truth not only by reason; we apprehend truth and access the spiritual depths of reality by tapping the emotional, non-rational energies associated with the right hemisphere of the brain. Ritual is a primary way of nourishing the human spirit. It mediates our sense of the sacred: ritual helps foster a sense of the Divine Presence.

The Hebrew word for the sacrificial offerings which the Israelites brought to the altar in biblical days is Kurban. It is taken from the Hebrew root meaning "to bring near." Difficult as it may appear to our modern sensibility, the ritual of animal sacrifice connected and brought the worshiper closer to God. Those moments in this room when our worship is at its best may also evoke a sense of the sacred.

The prophets of Israel were not generally opposed to ritual as such; they were opposed to ritual performed with a smug assurance that you could act unjustly and then appease God with a gift from the flock or a prayer. The ethical deed remains the ultimate touchstone of our religious seriousness, but ritual remains more than just a way of affirming our core values; it is an important way of placing us in touch with the deepest mystery of life.

The recovery of a greater appreciation of ritual in Reform Judaism is evident for me by two interesting examples over the course of my rabbinate. I want to refer first to the recovery of that ceremony called Havdalah and then to the increased observance of the traditional bris. The Havdalah ceremony separates Shabbat from the new week. It features the kindling of a braided candle, a cup of sweet wine and a container filled with fragrant spices. In the course of the ceremony and the prayers that are sung or recited, the light is observed, the wine is tasted, and the spices are sniffed. The Havdalah celebrates God as Creator of the world and all of its fragrance. God is the giver of Shabbat with its opportunity for rest and renewal. God is the giver of the blessing of work through which we become partners with the Holy One.

Yet, the explanation I have just given does not begin to exhaust the power of a ritual that engages all of our senses and not just our minds. For those who seriously observe the Shabbat, Havdalah marks the transition from rest and release to resuming the burdens and responsibilities of everyday life.

As far as I can determine, the Havdalah ceremony first came back into Reform Judaism in the '50's in our youth camps. Even those among our classical Reform elders who might have sneered and dismissed it as a mystical, irrational deviation from high-minded religion could not help but be pleased that their children were deeply moved emotionally by this Jewish observance. Moreover, when we first observed Havdalah at an adult gathering, many initially prepared to sneer found themselves gripped by the spiritual resonance of this ritual.

As for the bris, there was a time when male infants in Reform congregations were circumcised in the hospital by the physician with no ceremony. In an earlier era, Reform leaders deprecated the bris as primitive, even barbaric and totally devoid of any redeeming features. Naming in the synagogue, **yes**; ritual circumcision, **no**. But now, interestingly enough, an ever-increasing number of young couples who grew up in our congregation requests the ceremony at home on the eighth day as prescribed by tradition. A physician or mohel performs the bris and the rabbi performs the ceremony and blesses the baby.

Admittedly, there are elements in this ritual that are not esthetic or comfortable; it is even a bit disturbing. But there is power in its very earthiness and in the multi-generational physical bonding of the male child to the Covenant. So the bris has outlasted our tendency to rationalize it out of existence. Some of the bris' meaning we may not even be able to articulate fully. Of course, in Reform an effort is made to provide an appropriate ceremony that affirms the birth of a girl with no less enthusiasm.

A new perspective on the power of ritual has also affected our attitude toward IVRIT. Judaism always appreciated the importance of understanding the words we speak in prayer; in fact, the Talmud says that even the Sh'ma can be recited in any language you understand, not necessarily in Hebrew. We in Reform continue to emphasize the contribution our understanding of the words brings to our worship.

But we are coming to a new appreciation of the ritual recitation of certain words in Hebrew or English even when we are not focused on their literal meaning; on some occasions when you and I sing the National Anthem we are deeply stirred emotionally. Yet, I would challenge most of us to describe the meaning of the words we have just sung!

On many Shabbat, as one of the B'nai Mitzvah chants the blessings over the Torah, a grandparent sitting on the first row quickly takes out a handkerchief and wipes some tears. Hearing a grandchild chant those words that had been chanted by his son, the parent of this child, and by this grandparent himself – and by countless generations of Jews before them, may have been part of what moved him to tears. And there was probably more that stirred him, more than even he could express. Those Hebrew words tap the spiritual vain within us without our knowing literally what the words mean.

The blessing chanted on that occasion speaks of God having chosen us for special witness by giving us the Torah. Understanding those words can further enrich the meaning of the moment.

Before entering surgery some weeks ago, a member of our congregation recited the Hebrew of the Sh'ma over and over again. She reported being comforted and felt accompanied into that operating room by a Presence greater than herself or her medical team. I suspect she was not conscious at that moment what the words of the Sh'ma literally meant but repeating that Hebrew refrain was spiritually nourishing.

No doubt about it, Reform Judaism today has a more expansive view of ritual's importance in the life of the spirit. How then do we differ from our Orthodox kin? First, we endorse a much greater element of personal choice in our individual observance. We don't all have to observe the identical pattern of ritual life in order to be good Jews; nor do we believe one can measure a person's degree of seriousness as a Jew by the extent to which he or she conforms to the traditional 613 commandments. Within some important guidelines and boundaries, we can choose the rituals that speak to us and advance our spiritual journey.

The other difference between us and our Orthodox brothers and sisters is that we feel freer to create new rituals to express the needs of a Jew living in this time and place. Let me give you but one example. According to Jewish law you are not supposed to formally mourn the loss of an infant unless that baby lives at least 30 days. That rule probably arose at a time when infant mortality was rampant, and rabbis were concerned lest the community be constantly mired in grief.

We live in a time when there is less infant mortality but the need to do some formal grieving for a baby lost through a miscarriage late in the pregnancy, or to grieve for an infant who has not lived 30 days, may be very great. As a Reform rabbi I have felt free to stand with couples at the grave under such circumstances and recite prayers, including the Kaddish. That flexibility in ritual is for me one of the strengths of our liberal Judaism.

Hardly a day passes when I am not reminded anew of the compelling significance of ritual. The other night I stood in the home of a family who had just lost a loved one. The funeral had taken place earlier in the day. We were now gathered for a minyan. The living room of the home was dense with family and friends. As we prayed the evening service and filled the house with our words, our singing, and our silences, we were joined together as a community of comforters seeking to envelope that family with our love. And yes, we were seeking to come to terms with our own mortality and to reaffirm our closeness to the Source of our being and to trust in the meaning of life even in the presence of death. That is immensely powerful. We would rob ourselves of a great deal if we left the cemetery and had no such solemn ritual.

In just a few days we shall build a sukkah and recite the words - praised are You, O God,
"Who has made our lives sacred, significant by giving us mitzvot." Our lives are sanctified and deeply enriched by the ethical and ritual deeds through which we become more connected to each other and to God.