MOMENTS OF RENEWAL

Or How To Have Fun And Be Inspired While Being Jewish

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Something happens to Jews on Rosh Hashanah. They will endure things with patience and good humor on this day that would frustrate or irritate them on any other day. They will endure severe parking problems; they will willingly eat dinner too early or too late; they will sit cramped together in a large hall; and yet,they will not only be content, they will be expectant, even radiant. Why? Because there is something mysterious about the Rosh Hashanah moment. Jews know this in their heart, even if they can't explain it.

On Rosh Hashanah, our tradition says, the world was created. Maybe that is what makes this moment so vital. It is the anniversary of the moment on which the world came into being. At this moment, the primeval light first pierced the darkness and drove it back. At this moment, the first signs of life stirred in the sea. Surely,then,this is a magic moment for those who are able to recognize it, to sieze it and make it their own. Jews know this intuitively. This moment contains in it the seed for renewal, for rebirth, for constructive change.

Actually, Judaism provides us with many such moments of renewal. Rosh Hashanah is not the only magic moment in our calendar. There is also the moment when we say the Kol Nidre prayer on Yom Kippur, the moment when we bite into the matzah on Passover, the moment when we light the Sabbath candles. All of these are potentially moments of profound meaning, but,alas,all of us are not able to take advantage of them. All of us are not able to see these moments for what they really are. Perhaps our vision will be sharpened by the mood of Rosh Hashanah, and we will be able to understand tonight what we cannot so easily understand on another occasion.

Consider this well known story. A Jew came up to the Rabbi after a Sabbath service and said to him, "Rabbi, I came to synagogue tonight but I felt nothing. I didn't find God here." The Rabbi thought for a moment, and then he replied, "Perhaps you did not find God here,because you didn't bring him with you." Participating in the worship experience is something like listening to great music. The more you know about music, the more you are familiar with the subtleties of a profound composition, the more you are able to appreciate a particular performance of that music. Your appreciation of the music depends on what you bring to the music. The depth of your experience at a concert depends on your own knowledge and on your sensitivity, and so it is with prayer and with rituals and with the holiday celebrations.

Take, for example, the Passover Seder. You recall the moment when the leader of the Seder holds up the matzah and says, "Hah Lachmah Anyah, This is the bread of affliction. Let all who are hungry come and eat." Now, what does this matzah, held so dramatically aloft, mean to the Seder participants? Suppose you don't know the story of Jewish enslavement in Egypt; how can you understand the historical significance of the matzah? And suppose you don't know that every one of the dozens of laws in our Torah, which are there to

protect the weak and the poor, concludes with the teaching, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt." Suppose that when you see this matzah you are not familiar enough with pogroms and holocaust to see it as the symbol of thousands of years of Jewish suffering, and suppose that you are so affluent and comfortable that you can't translate the meaning of that matzah to the millions of starving and abused people in the world today? Suppose that when the matzah is held aloft all that you can see is a piece of dry, thin bread! How, then, can this ritual be profound and meaningful to you? An appreciation of the ritual of the matzah is clearly dependent on your knowledge of Jewish history and on your ability to identify Jewish experience with the human experience. A Seder is more than an opportunity for us to realize one of the highlights of Jewish history. It is a whetstone on which to sharpen the knife of our human conscience.

A ritual, a Festival means no more than you are able to make it mean.

I have been to Seders where the leader is more determined to read every traditional word in Hebrew than he is to challenge those who are present to relive the experience of the Exodus. Such a leader is a block to sharing the true meaning of a Seder. I have been bored at a Seder where the leader drones on for hours trying to prove that he, at least, has great stamina which he confuses with piety. I think you will agree with me, this is hardly a legitimate celebration of the Passover. It is better for you to grope through your own Seder than to be a prisoner of such a leader. (At Beth Am, we understand this problem very well, so we have produced a highly pointed and abbreviated Seder and Haggadah, which you can get at our office.) At our Temple Seder and in my home Seder, many participate in the reading of the service,and all join in the singing of joyous and stirring songs. What potential there is in the Seder ceremony, and what a tragic loss it is when we don't use it creatively!

A ritual means no more or less than you make it mean.

When is a Hamantash More Than a Hamantasch?

Now I want to give you a great chochmah, a very wise saying. Try to memorize it. A piece of matzah is not just a piece of matzah,and a hamantasch is much more than a hamantasch. But perhaps some of you don't even know what a hamantasch is?

I have had the good fortune as a boy to bite into more than one delicious hamantasch. My mother made her hamantasch of a soft egg dough, and inside the three cornered delicacy was the richest mun, or poppy seeds, you could ever hope to taste. My personal feeling is that a hamantasch without poppy seeds is not a hamantasch, but others tell me that prunes or cherries can be just as good. The sad thing, however, is that some modern Jewish mothers are unable to teach the story of Purim by making delicious hamantaschen, and to that extent their children are deprived. The Jewish people has a genius for transforming a tragic experience into a happy festival. The Biblical Book of Esther tells us that Haman was the bad guy par excellence. He wanted to destroy the Jews of Persia some 2,500 years ago. Not only didn't Haman succeed, but he himself was hung on the very gallows which he prepared for the good guy, Mordecai, the Jew. How rewarding it is to eat Haman, through the hamantasch, and how joyous it is to stamp out Haman in the synagogue when his name is read as part of the Book of Esther. The holiday of Purim teaches us, at a stated interval each year, that no matter how bad times may be, there is hope that the good guys will win in the end. How sad it is that some Jews have never eaten a hamantasch worthy of the name,and some Jews have never turned a grogger or stamped out Haman in the synagogue. A ritual is an opportunity for learning and for emotional release. It may be also an opportunity for fun and pleasure.

Do You Like a Parade?

Consider the holiday of Sukkot, the Biblical thanksgiving holiday after which the founders of America patterned the American holiday of Thanksgiving. Some of the high points of this holiday are the Sukkah, the frail hut in which fruit is hung, and the Torah processional on the last day of the holiday. ~~On Simchat Torah~~, some American Jews yearn to have a Christmas tree so that they can put tinsel and brightly colored bells on it, but these same Jews see no pleasure in building a Sukkah either in their yard or in miniature in the home and hanging all sorts of exotic fruit on it. Some Jews have never marched behind a Torah in the Simchat Torah parade in the synagogue. Some Jews are too sophisticated to be in any kind of parade or to sing a spirited song while they hold the Torah to their breast. Sukkot gives us the opportunity to link ourselves to the creative spirit that propels nature, and it is also a time to reestablish our link to the Torah. Sad it is that many Jews have never really participated in the joys of Sukkot.

Most Jews have an identification with Yom Kippur and especially with the Kol Nidre prayer. That prayer has outgrown its original meaning. It grew out of the Spanish period of our history when hundreds of thousands of Jews in the late 15th century had to choose between forced conversion, exile, or death. Kol Nidre has since become the repository of deep Jewish sorrow and also a vehicle for expressing our hope for a better future. Somehow, most modern Jews are able to relate to this prayer. We are open to its magic. We are able to put into it some of our personal fears and hopes. WE are able to make it <u>our</u> prayer. On the other hand, not all modern Jews experience the profound meaning of Yom Kippur as a day of fasting. Many of us who live the easy life find it too difficult to deny ourselves the pleeasure of eating for even one day, and by not fasting we deny ourselves one of the emotional aspects of this profound holiday. Fasting is for many of us a way of stressing the solemnity of the process of seeking forgiveness. It is harder to ponder the serious problems of life on a full stomach. On the other hand, even half a day of fasting makes it easier to identify with the millions of human beings in the world whose daily diet is a few crumbs or a few grains of rice.

Not least important about the ritual of fasting is that you can't know the joy of the break-fast unless you have fasted. Those who constantly live in the lap of luxury find it difficult to experience the feeling of gratitude; to be grateful for the gifts of nature, for our daily food, is to feel warm and loved. How sad it is to have a full stomach and to feel as if one has been given nothing. All of these things are tied together on Yom Kippur - fasting, identifying with the poor, the joy of the break-fast, and feeling grateful for life's small gifts.

Judaism has many beautiful customs that teach us to face life's problems with courage. One of our most meaningful customs is the Kaddish prayer. When my Zayde died, you might call him a grandfather, my father, who was not a particularly religious man, went to the synagogue three times a day, seven days a week for a year. He went, of course, to say the Kaddish prayer for his father. My father had actually discouraged me from following certain Orthodox customs, so he found it necessary to explain to me why he was fulfilling this rather demanding custom. "I don't really know why I'm doing this," my father said, "I do know that it makes me feel good to do it." "I think I go," my father said, "because I feel that by being in the synagogue,I am linked to my father and to the Jewish people." "Further, he said, "before services we study a little Bible and Talmud, and I learn something about Judaism and about life itself." Each Jew says Kaddish for his own reasons, but all who say it profit from it. It is a custom which answers different kinds of needs.

Unfortunately, not every Jew is able to take advantage of this custom. I have probably told you the story of the nineteen year old Jewish soldier in the American Army who was stationed in Europe just after World War II. The young soldier, along with many of his comrades, was flown from Europe to America for the New Year holiday. The plane crashed in the ocean and all aboard were killed. After I performed the difficult funeral, the father of the soldier said to me, "Rabbi, I am going to the synagogue to say Kaddish for my son." The father knew that he would find solace there. He was conditioned to be consoled by performing that ancient custom; but the surviving brother of the dead soldier was not so conditioned. He was a product of the American environment which seems to discourage participation in rituals of any kind. When his father left the house, the brother looked at me, tears welling in his eyes, and asked, "Rabbi, what can I do?" I understood his question exactly. He was telling me that he could not bring enough to the Kaddish prayer to make it meaningful, and, on the other hand, he had not developed another way of expressing his great sorrow at the loss of his younger brother.

How sad it is that we who are raised in the American environment have progressively shut ourselves off from the helpful aspects of Jewish ritual. What can we do about this estrangement? Why, we can start to wend our way back, taking one step, one ritual at a time. We don't have to use the Kaddish as our grandfathers did, for often they associated superstitious meanings to it, but we can use it for our own purposes. The Kaddish prayer is precisely that kind of ritual which can be meaningfully employed by modern Jews who have been taught the importance of releasing feeling.

He who says the Kaddish prayer among friends in the synagogue learns that he is not alone in his suffering. The worshipper who recites the Kaddish says, "The God of Life is my God. Through Him, I am linked to my beloved dead. Through the God of Life I am linked to all the past generations and to all the souls yet unborn." He who says the Kaddish says, "I am God's son or daughter. He cares about me, and I have many parents, and many children, for all who are Jews are one family, and all who are humans are one family." There is much to be gained from the Kaddish prayer for those who are able to open themselves to its balm.

The most meaningful of Jewish ceremonies are not those connected with the Holy Days or those connected with the Festivals. The most important Jewish ceremonies are those connected with the Sabbath. They are the most important ceremonies because they occur regularly. True religious feeling is not something which can be left dormant and reawakened once a year. True religious sensitivity is something that must be exercised regularly, if it is to develop in scope. That is why the Sabbath is the most meaningful of all Jewish holidays, and that it why the Sabbath rituals ought to have the greatest hold on us.

I firmly believe that every Jewish home, without exception, should employ the Sabbath symbols at the Friday night dinner. Every Jewish parent has the responsibility to try to understand these symbols and to make them meaningful in an imaginative way. In the oldest Jewish tradition, the lighting of the Sabbath candles was the moment of love renewal. In my Orthodox home, my father was not present when the candles were lit, and the children were merely spectators. I could sense that the ritual was important to my mother. She made certain mystical signs, and then, with her eyes shielded, said her prayers. The moment was important to me only by proxy. It was my mother's moment, but it was not a family moment. I did not learn until much later that my mother and my father didn't understand the deeper meaning of the Sabbath rituals.

In the oldest Jewish tradition, candle lighting time was a moment to be experienced by the entire family. The husband stood there at the wife's side as she lit the candles, and then he was required by the tradition to sing her a love song. "Ashet Hayil Mi Yimzah," the husband sang from the Book of Proverbs, "A noble wife who can find, for she is more precious than rubies." In other words, candle lighting time was the moment for the expression of love between husband and wife. It was the time for making up, it was the time for letting go of small complaints and petty bickering. How wonderful it would be if the modern Jewish husband and wife could use this moment as it was originally intended. I am not suggesting that the husband must sing the wife this particular love song, or any love song for that matter, but I am suggesting that the candles should be lit when husband and wife stand together, and when each is able to express his love for the other in his or her distinctive way.

In the older tradition, after the husband sang the love song to his wife, he was required to embrace his children and to bless them. If you saw "Fiddler on the Roof" you saw this spectacle. Tevyah sang to his children, "May the Lord protect and defend you..." Now, I am not saying that you fathers must sing your children this song every Friday night, and I am not saying that you must say this traditional blessing. I am saying that candle lighting time on Friday night ought to be the time when the parents embrace the children and let them know that they are loved. I promise you that if you can use the opportunity this ceremony presents, that your marriage will deepen and your children will never forget it. (For this ceremony, I have prepared a little pamphlet called, "Taking On a New Soul". Just call the Temple and we will mail it to you, or pick it up at the Rabbi's office.)

We have discussed just a few of our Jewish symbols and rituals tonight, yet think of the wide range of need these few meet:

The matzoh of Passover - helps us to identify with the poor and oppressed.

The hamentaschen on Purim - for the sweet taste of victory over the persecutor.

Fasting on Yom Kippur - to teach us to be grafeful for what we have.

The Kaddish - to link the generations together in the "God of Life".

The Sabbath candles - to celebrate the love of family members.

Ours is a great heritage, indeed! It is fitting that on Rosh Hashanah we ask ourselves - are we sufficiently educated about our heritage and sufficiently steeped in it to use it creatively?

Let us be certain of one thing - if the tradition does not live through us, it will die through us. If it is not articulated by us in terms of its greatest beauty and profundity, then it will lose its aura and power and disappear.

In this respect, ours is an awesome responsibility, for the hopes and prayers of 4,000 years are invested in us.

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