

Are Rituals Important?

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Those who deal with the complex mechanism of the human mind, the psychiatrist and the psychologist, are becoming more and more convinced that human beings must have the help of ritual in facing certain of life's problems. The intelligent human being will knowingly use ritual to help himself face the heavy burdens of life. He will employ ritual to help release emotions which otherwise might be unhealthily contained. He will employ ritual to reinforce certain intellectual concepts and ideas which he might have. More and more, we are learning that man is not merely a rational being. He must deal with himself in his irrational aspects, and ritual is a great aid here.

Does this mean that we must accept the entire mass of Orthodox ritual? Does this mean that we must assume, as the traditionalists do, that God is the author of ritual? No. To understand that SOME ritual might be important is not to assert that ALL ritual is important or that one should pre-occupy himself constantly with meeting the obligations that fixed ritual can impose. Nor are we abandoning the Reform view that ritual originates with man and not with God. We are suggesting that we choose a few rituals to perform because they will be helpful to us, and we suggest that we perform them not out of a sense of compulsion, but because we understand their significance.

For example, we in Beth Am strongly urge upon you the kindling of the candles on Friday evening, on the advent of the Sabbath. We urge this as a weekly ritual of identification with your people. We suggest that you perform this little act with the thought strongly in mind, "I am doing this to remind myself that I am a Jew, that I am a child of a people that long has struggled to build a world of meaning. I am doing this to remind myself that I belong, that I am not alone, that if I falter, many will come to my side. I am doing this to remind myself that I must contribute to that stream of ethical action like my fellow Jews before me. I do this as my weekly reminder, not out of fear, but out of joy. This is my symbolic act of identification. But I must not stop here. There are deeds to be done."

Another ritual of great significance is the ritual of "shivah" which follows the death of a loved one. Judaism suggests that following the funeral you be "at home" to your friends for a fixed period of time (seven days in Orthodoxy, three in Reform). Knowing that you will be "at home" or "sitting shivah," your friends come and commiserate with you. The resulting release of your emotion, the strength you gain from the friendly expressions, all of this is adequate practical demonstration of the virtue of this ritual.

There is not space in this column for further demonstration of this point today, but the conclusion seems clear. We human beings need certain forms and opportunities for emotional expression. Many of our Jewish rituals are brilliantly designed to be of great help in this regard. The wise Jew will avail himself of certain rituals with the intent to exploit them consciously. He will find that they tap well-springs of feeling that he did not dream he had.