

Renovating Ritual:
The Balancing Act Bridging the Past and the Future
(Ps. 30; Leviticus 10:1-3)

Rituals play an indispensable role in how we identify ourselves as religious people. Last week's Easter pageantry and Passover Seders are fresh in our minds. Some traditions go back generations, a multitude of memories and a cornucopia of keepsakes. A great-grandmother's tablecloth. A gaily decorated Easter basket. But sometimes we must mark events that don't extend deep into the sands of time. Today is such a day. It is the 27th of Nisan in the Hebrew Calendar, when communities in the United States and Israel commemorate *Yom Hashoah v'hagevorah*, "Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism." As traumatized and tattered Jews emerged from the darkness and despair of the Holocaust, the puzzle of how to honor the dead, to acknowledge the enormity of the experience, to find a way to absorb having lost so much and so many loomed large. Some felt that the very covenant between God and the Jewish people had been broken...and yet, many were unwilling to relinquish the traditions and practices that had been handed down through centuries of continuity. In Rabbi Yitz Greenberg's book, *The Jewish Way*, we hear of competing desires and complex considerations as a new holy day evolves. Was the Holocaust a continuation of the dark periods of Jewish history or an irreparable rupture? Was the devastation analogous to the destruction of the Holy Temples in Jerusalem, so that the ninth of Av, the container for mourning their losses could hold another tragedy? No, some argued. The Holocaust was utterly unique in human history. Shouldn't it receive its own day or perhaps its own season? And if so, which one? Some survivors who had resisted the Nazis, planned the Warsaw ghetto uprising and fought in the underground knew precisely which day—the 15th of Nisan, the day the Warsaw ghetto revolt began. But the 15th of Nisan was also the first day of Passover, the celebration of liberation. This was no coincidence—the Nazis planned on April 19, 1943 to be not only a military, but also a spiritual victory— liquidating the ghetto, while mocking the holiday of freedom, with some extra icing on the cake— because the next day was Adolf Hitler's birthday. The justification for a day devoted to the Holocaust, the *Shoah*, was convincing, some conceded, but to commemorate the catastrophe of the Holocaust on the holiday of freedom would destroy Passover. The new Remembrance Day could not be on the 15th of Nisan. It could not be during the Passover holiday. But the partisans wanted it to be as close to Passover as possible. The Orthodox rabbinate wanted it to be

after the month of Nisan, so as not to mar the month filled with the happiness of freedom. But what would be the impact of going from happiness to mourning? Where would that leave us? The Psalmist says, “You turned my mourning into dancing.” There was dancing in the streets when the State of Israel was founded, with a hope so strong that it, *hatikvah*, “the Hope” became the national anthem. We could honor the dead after Passover, but only if the day of mourning would yield to the day of dancing. Consequently, the date had to be before Yom Haatzmaut, Israel Independence Day. Ultimately, this newest celebration of Israel’s future took precedence over ancient restrictions against tempering the joy of the month. The compromise date was today, the 27th of Nisan, after the festival of freedom and before the celebration of Israel Independence Day. Finally, the day was fixed, but the rituals are still in flux. Should we light six candles for six million, or a seventh candle for other victims of the *Shoah* or for victims of other genocides throughout history? Should we read the traditional mourner’s prayer or a new one composed precisely to commemorate the Holocaust, interspersed with the names of concentration camps? Should we read the names of family members aloud or, like Aaron, when he inexplicably lost his two sons at the altar of God, remain silent?

Creating ritual around our deepest wounds, renovating ritual as times and circumstances change brings us face to face with what we believe, what we know, what we want to impart for the future. In an early Jewish feminist anthology, writer Cynthia Ozick, herself an observant Jew, invokes the Holocaust to champion the voices and views of Jewish women. She laments, “Having lost so much and so many”, the tradition cannot afford to ignore half of its community. “The point is the necessity—having lost so much and so many—to share Jewish history to the hilt.”

Making room for new voices, renovating ritual, accepting innovation is not easy for religious communities, whose very power is that tradition has been received, rather than conceived.

This dilemma has accompanied me from the day I decided to become a rabbi, haunted in my dreams by scowling faces of men with white hair and long white beards. My very first sermon in the sanctuary of my rabbinical school dealt with that troubling story of the mysterious deaths of Aaron’s sons. If anything signals us to be cautious about reinventing ritual, these lines of Leviticus serve as a flashing neon sign.

“Now Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his firepan, put fire in it and laid incense on it and they offered before the Eternal strange fire, which

God had not enjoined upon them them. And fire came forth from the Eternal and consumed them, thus they died before the Eternal.” The Torah, not known for descriptions of psychology or emotions, speaks only two words. “*Vayidom Aharon.*” “And Aaron was silent.”

But the rabbis of the Midrash were not. They try valiantly to understand what sin could warrant such a swift and irreversible judgment. They too, balancing between the past and the future--variously suggest that Nadav and Avihu were upstarts—undermining the power of their uncle Moses and their father Aaron, or perhaps they did the right thing but they didn’t ask permission first, or noticing that there is a prohibition against drinking a few verses later, they conjecture that the young men came to the altar drunk. My favorite Midrashic speculation is that it was not their presence at this altar, but rather their absence at that other altar that accounts for their fate—they were of marriageable age, but thought they were too good for any of the women in the community.

What I noticed in studying this difficult story was not the timing of their sacrifice or who they did or didn’t ask or their state of mind or the their state of matrimony; it was what they placed upon the altar—*esh zara*—strange fire. As a young woman wanting to embrace, to teach and, by my very presence and that of my sister rabbis, to bridge the past and the future, how might I understand *esh zara*?

Some of the words I preached in that first sermon, guide me still: “If we try to offer our own fire without regard to the problems and needs of our society, if we try to offer our own fire while neglecting our history and our heritage, if we try to offer our own fire with only part of our being, then we too are offering *esh zara*, strange fire. For our fire to be accepted, for our spark to kindle sister sparks in others, we need to make our offerings from the whole of our being.” Even in those early years when women didn’t know what to wear on the pulpit or when or whether to use our authority, I recognized that I couldn’t teach, live and embody an Eastern European Judaism that barely survived the *Shoah*. That for me would have been strange fire. Rather than strange fire, I wanted to kindle native fire. My native fire was not only Judaism, but also feminism, not only tradition but also reform, not only personal spiritual practice but also social justice.

That meant renovating ritual, building a bridge between the past and the future. I became a mother in the same week that I became an orphan. Being the link between the generation before me and the generation after me has had

a profound impact on how I experience ritual and tradition. It has given me an urgent desire—that the stream that flows through and nourishes the next generation will be watered by the previous ones. This makes me a conservative innovator. I want the religious practices I pass on to my children to have been recognizable to my parents.

My mother was an expert knitter and before she died, I brought knitting needles and yarn to her in the hospital so that she could knit me a baby bunting for the child we had not yet conceived. She died unable to knit the bunting. After her death, I began asking all of my observant women friends, “How do Jewish women mourn their mothers?” I was answered with the silence of the tradition—whatever rituals might have been invoked by our foremothers hadn’t been passed down. My dear friend and teacher, Merle Feld, told me to be idiosyncratic. I began to think of my mother’s knitting—of her having taught me to knit—as part of her Torah, her religious teaching—and I decided to knit the baby bunting I had once urged on her. *Kaddish d’rabbanan*, “the sanctification of the teachers” is a prayer that was originally said following Torah study in someone’s honor. I decided to knit each morning, studying my mother’s teachings and then offer *kaddish d’rabbanan* in her honor. As I knit with yarn, I knit memory, and during that year I came to make peace with who my mother was and what her legacy is. I also came to know in my heart as much as in my head that life is finite and realized that it was time to become a mother myself. At our daughter’s covenant ceremony, we welcomed her as a Jew, I gave her the completed bunting, a gift of the journey from death to life.

As a ritual, this was idiosyncratic and healing. The form was determined by the tradition; the content was determined by the needs that the tradition didn’t address. Yet I experienced this ritual as a very religious, even a traditional act.

On my Seder table last week and every recent Passover Seder has sat a new ritual object, which, if you saw it, would look like an ordinary orange. My grandparents might have eaten an orange during their meal, but one didn’t have pride of place on their Seder plate. This innovative custom is now widespread—though its origins are often misremembered.

In the early 1980s, Dartmouth professor Susannah Heschel spoke at Hillel at Oberlin College. While there, she came across a Haggadah, a Passover table liturgy written by some Oberlin students to express feminist concerns. They devised a new ritual—they placed a crust of bread on the Seder plate, as a sign of solidarity with Jewish lesbians. It was as if they were proclaiming, there is as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a

crust of bread on the Seder plate.

At the next Passover, Susannah placed an orange on her own family's Seder plate. During the first part of the Seder, Susannah asked everyone to take a segment of the orange, to make the blessing over fruit, and to eat it as a gesture of solidarity with Jewish lesbians and gay men, and others who are marginalized within the Jewish community. She reasoned that bread on the Seder plate abrogates Passover – since all leavening is forbidden. To associate lesbians with bread is to view them as transgressive, violating Judaism. She sought a different message—an orange symbolized fruitfulness, the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of the community. In addition, each orange segment had a few seeds that have to be spit out – just as we should repudiate homophobia within our tradition.

When she lectured, Susannah Heschel would mention her custom as one of many new feminist rituals that have been developed in the last twenty years. Somehow, though, the typical patriarchal maneuver occurred: Her idea of an orange, her intention of affirming lesbians and gay men was transformed. Now the story circulates that a MAN said that a woman belongs on the pulpit like an orange belongs on the Seder plate. A woman's words were attributed to a man, and the affirmation of lesbians and gay men was simply erased.

Clarifying this particular genesis story seems necessary in light of the prominence in the last few weeks of the debate about marriage equality. As we create new rituals in our homes and in our places of worship, how do we shape a ritual for same gender couples to publically affirm their love? Same sex weddings should summon the power and integrity of a traditional wedding, while recognizing that changing a word or two may not fully reflect the two people standing under the marriage canopy. Before I came to Stanford, when I was preparing to officiate at my first same-gender ceremony, there was a picture in the Jewish press of a commitment ceremony of two women. The letters in response to the photograph expressed indignation that both women wore bridal gowns, as if they were parodying a “real” wedding. Symbols have power, often unexpected power. Personally, I was agnostic about dresses. I was enthusiastic about the chuppah—the marriage canopy--and the wine and the rings, and the marriage contract, but what I fretted about as I was preparing this ritual was getting the symbolic language right. It didn't feel authentic to ask the two women before me to affirm the words, “Behold you are sanctified to me as my wife according to the laws of Moses and the people Israel” when we were creating something Moses did not know, something that had no precedent. As I often do, I turned to my teacher and friend, Rabbi Edward Feld, who suggested

a different formulaic promise as the couple exchanged rings, “Behold you are united to me in holiness”. In the wedding liturgy, I find the traditional the seven blessings beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and ending with the community of Israel rejoicing in Jerusalem to be both profound and evocative, but the imagery of Eve and Eve was wrong, even bordering on comedy. As a conservative innovator, I changed the blessings that were discordant to me and replaced them with others from the tradition that this couple could be inspired by and affirm.

In those days, we Xeroxed our rituals and passed them on to colleagues for ideas. But now, not only due to the web, but also to repeated experimentation, new traditions have taken root. Some of the rituals born in the past 40 years, while not written in the Talmud, are etched firmly in the newest Rabbi’s Manual! Change is happening quickly. The bridge between the past and the future is structurally sound. The traditions we pass onto our children and grandchildren are and will continue to be different than the ones we received. As we honor the old and embrace the new, we’ve turned our mourning into dancing, our silence into speech, our exclusion into expansion. That is both exhilarating and humbling. We who are grounded in faith, who live with the power of its reach in our lives, who have the symbols, the texts, the language and the strength of tradition in our marrow have a central place in building that bridge between the past and the future. May we celebrate our place and rejoice in our time.

Sources referenced:

Rabbi Irving Greenberg, [The Jewish Way](#)

Professor Susannah Heschel, personal correspondence

Cynthia Ozick, “Notes Toward Finding the Right Question” in Judith Plaskow, “On Being a Jewish Feminist”