

The Power of Ritual

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For 18 summers of my life, I was engaged in the incredibly transformative experience of sleepaway Jewish summer camp. Over the course of that time, I was a camper, a counselor-in-training, a counselor, and eventually various roles on senior staff. Camp is where I met my best friends, it's where my wife and I fell in love, and it's the reason I wanted to become a rabbi.

Anyone who has been to camp before knows that there's something special about sharing space with your peers—and even though it's only for a few weeks each summer, the experience of living and breathing the daily rhythms of a communal schedule has a lasting effect on how we develop as individuals beyond that camp framework.

Each camp has its own unique traditions, and my camps are no different. We begin our days together offering gratitude by singing and dancing through modeh ani, we pray birkat hamazon after each meal to better understand that the food we enjoy is truly a blessing, we have nightly t'filah and weekly Shabbat services. And in addition to the daily and weekly Jewish programming, my camps have a schtick for practically every moment of the schedule which helps to get the camp community excited for what's to come.

When we hear the name of our camp we respond accordingly: Camp Hess Kramer – CHK *clap* or Gindling Hilltop Camp *clap clap*. When there's someone on the microphone instructing us about our upcoming schedule and they say the words “announcements”...I mean to this day it takes everything I have to stop myself from breaking into the whole announcements bit—ANNOUNCEMENTS?! A-DOUBLE N-O-U-N-C-E-M-E-N-T-S...Announcements announcements announcements...it goes on...trust me...it goes on. We have cheers for when someone says that word t'filah (do do do do TFILAH!). We have camp characters and specific cheers for celebrating birthdays, for when a camper loses their tooth, for the start of our beach day so we can “bring out the sun bring the sun,” and we need special characters and cheers to help light our campfire before our weekly talent show. And, obviously, the cheers don't ever work the first two times we try to call for the camp characters. We're never loud

enough and we always have to stand up as a community and really give it our all on that third time. And we all know it's coming but there really is a sense of magic when it finally works.

From my 18 years at camp, two experiences stand out as being the epitome of this magic. The first is siyyum, which is how we end each of our busy and active days at camp. No matter how we each spent our day at camp, we end all together, putting our arms around one another, and sing the Shema and Hashkiveinu—prayers of unity that ask for God's protection throughout the night. It wasn't until I was older and in rabbinical school that I learned that siyyum wasn't just something my camp came up with; it's connected to the commandment of reciting the Shema when we rise up and when we lie down. Our sages drew inspiration from this commandment and over many years created the evening ritual of Kriat Shema al haMita, the bedtime Shema. The rabbis recognized that—for themselves and the people in their communities—the darkness the night brought raised questions of the nature of the soul and caused people to fear the unseeable unknown. Wanting protection against negative thoughts and evil spirits, the rabbis created a nighttime ritual one could recite—a bedtime lullaby compiled of psalms and prayers utilizing themes of serenity and protective shelter.

For our camp community, siyyum is grounding. As we hold each other, swaying and harmonizing under the stars, we are reminded that we're a part of something bigger. And we're given this gift to recognize that every night we spend at camp. And now I sing siyyum to my daughter every night before I put her to bed. Of course, this brings me back to camp and floods my senses with feelings and memories of being in that space, and now it also connects me to her and reminds me that she is now a part of something bigger.

Speaking of putting kids to bed, the other magical camp experience I had a chance to participate in was when I was on staff. Every night, after the campers go to bed, the staff attends after hours. Here we would debrief the day, go over the next day's schedule and programming, and before we would break for the evening and enjoy staff snack, we would engage in the "passing of the koosh." (hold up koosh) This is a koosh. On the surface, this is just little toy ball made of rubber that's fun to play with. But for any staff member at Gindling Hilltop Camp *clap clap*, this is an honor. At the end of our staff meeting, we save time to pass the koosh. The person who has the koosh stands up and offers some anonymous words of

gratitude and praise for another individual on staff. For example, “I have been so impressed watching this person with their kids this week. They have a pretty tough cabin and the ways in which they are making each camper begin to feel more comfortable here at camp has been so amazing to watch. Tonight, I’m giving the koosh to ____.” The koosh gets passed, the staff usually hug each other, and the passing continues each night of camp until everyone on staff has received the koosh at least once. The last person who receives the koosh that summer actually holds onto it throughout the year and brings the koosh back the following summer to begin the cycle of gratitude anew.

If you’ve ever worked in a professional Jewish setting, you have definitely heard someone say “let’s make it more like camp!” Most of the time they mean let’s just make it fun, but I believe what makes camp so magical is the way that camp elevates each and every moment. Camp doesn’t do this on its own—it’s just a bunch of buildings and open space, often in a natural setting. The magic of camp is the repetition of the schedule and the intentionality infused in each activity. Camp invites the individual to participate in—even help to create—the moment and then become invested in the outcome. These moments of cheering, singing, camp character goofiness, praying, gratitude—what makes these work is that they are more than just moments; these are rituals.

Rituals exist in some form in every human society and culture. The word ritual is often defined as “a correct performance” or “doing something in a specific order” and because of this formalized structure rituals are most often associated with religion.

As humans, we want to celebrate and honor various lifecycle moments—birth, coming of age, marriage, death. As Jews, we frame these and many other moments by linking them to our traditional and ever-evolving narratives and we imbue the experience with uniquely Jewish metaphors and symbols. Our calendar turns, seasons change, holidays come back around to be celebrated. Our sages teach us to “הַדְּכֵלְאֵי בְּיָמֵינוּ, הַדְּכֵלְאֵי בְּיָמֵינוּ” – turn it [over] and turn it [over] again, for everything you need is right there.¹ The power of ritual comes not just in the one-time celebration, though, rather it’s the patterned and repeated nature of that performance that allows a one-time marking of a moment to become ritualized.

Torah teaches us to share the words and rituals of our tradition with the next generation—bind mezuzot to our doorposts, recite Shema when you rise up and when you lie down, retell the story of the time God brought us out of Egypt, remember and keep Shabbat. In his succinct and profoundly spiritual offering, The Sabbath, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel encourages us to “not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; but it is the moment that lends significance to things.”²

And while these specific moments of enacted ritual are powerful, the ritual itself does not exist in isolation. Leigh Schmidt, professor of religion at Princeton University, says that Jews make Judaism and uniquely express their Jewish identities when they send New Year greeting cards, when they shop and cook for Passover, when they search for the right outfit for a b’nai mitzvah...Schmidt suggests that the “real” Jewish ritual was in all the preparations leading up to the experience: “inviting guests, shopping, trying on, kneading and chopping. Likewise, the rituals include the events that come after: cleaning up, writing down memories, and assembling photographs in an album.”³

For so long we have all been taught that there is a separation between the sacred and the profane—a difference between the religious and the secular—that somehow a synagogue is holier than our homes. And yet, amidst a global pandemic, so many of us were able to experience profoundly sacred moments in our homes, with our families—moments we would have never been able to replicate here in this building.

Casper ter Kuile, author of *The Power of Ritual* and co-creator of the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, speaks of ritual as offering four different connections: connecting with self, connecting with others, connecting with the natural world, and connecting with the transcendent.⁴

These connections can happen anywhere—at the beach, watching a movie, learning in a classroom, enjoying a delicious meal, sitting with a loved one, belonging to a Jewish community—and yet too often we place a stumbling block in our own way; we never really give ourselves a chance to connect.

Our lives are filled with so many activities that are ripe for ritual. Think about something you do regularly. Walking the dog. Reading a book. Spending time in your garden. Now imagine how meaningful it could be to create a ritualized practice for this experience. Creating an intention and

asking yourself “what am I inviting into this moment?” Bringing the moment to your attention to be fully present—no distractions. Making time and space for repetition—recognizing the importance of returning to this practice again and again.⁵

Intention. Attention. Repetition.

When we tune out moments of sacred opportunity, we miss out on our chance to connect to anything spiritual. And it might feel strange at first to ritualize something seemingly unremarkable, but if you believe what Vietnamese monk and teacher, Thích Nhất Hạnh taught, then the simple act of eating an orange can become miraculous.

If you don’t know how to begin with ritualizing moments in your daily routine, this is where we can borrow from our tradition for inspiration. We know how to perform Jewish rituals because of our time in Jewish communities: we offer blessings of gratitude, light candles, wear specific clothes, speak words to mark a moment.

These acts became traditional because they spoke to individuals and communities over generations and continue to speak to us today. When a ritual works, we know it—we feel it. Ronald Grimes, ritual theorist and author, speaks about rituals not “dwelling in a literal somewhere...they exist in that moment they are enacted and then disappear. When effective, their traces remain—in the heart, in the memory, in the mind, in text, in photographs, in descriptions, in social values, and in the marrow, the source of our lifeblood.”⁶

We know there is power in ritual. We are all here today because we believe in the power of this ritual—beginning a new year with a clean slate, reflecting on the year that was and looking ahead to who we might become, dressing in white, hearing the sound of the shofar. The calendar cycle brings the work of this season back into focus, but if we don’t have the intention to change then the opportunities this holiday season offer will slip right through our grasp.

We already have everything we need to elevate moments in our daily lives—to transform the rhythms of our schedules into sacred practices. Everyday moments can be the sacred ground upon which we build and rebuild our spiritual practice.

Writer Annie Dillard teaches that how we spend our days is how we spend our lives.⁷ Let us fill our lives with intentionality, let us grow our awareness for how we connect to ourselves and everything beyond us, and let us find meaning each and every day.

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1 Pirkei Avot 5:25

2 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951), 6.

3 Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 32.

4 Casper ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual* (Harper One, 2020), 23.

5 ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual*, 25-26.

6 Ronald Grimes *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (University of California Press, 2002), 7.

7 ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual*, 31. _