

New Jewish Rituals

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Secular Jews and Jewish Ritual

IRA GLASS, the National Public Radio host of *This American Life*, was recently asked in the *Forward* if he goes to synagogue. “I don’t believe in God,” Glass responded, “and so I feel like a fraud when I’m in a synagogue. I feel like somebody who is in a theme park of my own childhood. I know all the songs, and it makes me feel really warm and nostalgic, and it’s incredibly comforting. But then I think that I don’t believe anything that’s being said here. And so, I have no business here.”

Glass is far from alone, though most other disengaged Jews may not have thought out their detachment as carefully. Secular Jews are typically non-joiners or drop-outs when it comes to synagogue membership. Prayer is alien to most of us, and even in the most liberal denominations we feel disconnected from the language of the liturgy. We have also traditionally rejected a hierarchical, rabbi-led institution that feels theocratic.

Yet non-membership doesn’t eliminate a real existential human need for ceremonies that mark the passages in our lives, for celebrations that affirm our family, communal, and even national identities, and even for

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other rituals, as simple as shaking hands or exchanging hugs, that humanize our interpersonal relations.

When it comes to marking the passages of life there is probably a universal human desire for ritual. We celebrate the birth of babies with showers and naming ceremonies; we mark the coming-of-age, graduations, and loving partnerships of our children with various rituals; we mark the deaths of loved ones with funerals and memorials. While some secular Jews may not incorporate Jewish elements, others may feel tugged to connect to Jewish culture at such events.

Still, we are often uncomfortable with traditional ways of observance. The language, the rituals, not to mention the eligibility requirements that some rabbis impose, can be alienating. Increasingly, however, many Jews recognize that they have a choice in the matter and are seeking out the rabbis and leaders of secular congregations and groups to help organize these occasions.

For a variety of reasons, for example, there are an increasing number of Jewish parents who choose not to circumcise their sons. Yet they want to introduce these infants into membership in the Jewish people with a ritual that formalizes this connection. Fortunately, there are rabbis like myself who do not regard circumcision as the *sine qua non* of Jewish male identity. We will gladly officiate at ceremonies that equally welcome boys and girls into the community.

A similar challenge and opportunity arises when youngsters and their parents want to mark the passage into adolescence — a coming-of-age desire for ritual that is clearly not unique to Jews. Yet many secular Jews have not wanted to perpetuate a traditional bar or bat mitzvah. They especially reject the rote memorization and lack of comprehension that may have marked their own experience. While some may enjoy preserving a connection to Torah, others do not want to give the Torah privileged status over the rest of our literature. Happily, secular Jews have figured out that there isn’t only a single way to carry out the bar or bat mitzvah, and have enthusiastically discovered creative and innovative approaches, including research on family history, Jewish values, role models and heroes, along with purposeful community service.

Later in life, if they decide to marry or celebrate a partnership, secular Jews have yet another chance to design a ceremony that suits not only their personal tastes but also their philosophy and convictions. Some are tentative or even apologetic when they first call me — “I’m Jewish, but not religious” — while others are

more confident in their quest, which is a powerful testimony to the general acceptance of ritual innovation. As one person wrote, coming right to the point, “My fiancé and I are getting married in October 2007 in NYC and we’d like a very secular Jewish ceremony.”

Intercultural couples are particularly grateful to find welcome acceptance in secular Jewish communities, where conversion is not a prerequisite to full participation. While sometimes they want to blend rituals from both their cultures, often it is their shared humanistic values that are most important. It is very gratifying to be able to provide celebrations that use language consistent with our principles and beliefs and yet preserve the traditional structure of familiar ceremonies. Such adaptation of old practices becomes even more significant at a funeral, when secular Jews do not need the additional challenge of coping with unacceptable language and ritual to compound the grief they are already experiencing.

When it comes to the cycle of the seasons, however, most secular Jews are not attuned to the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. Most of us do not have any connection, for example, to the weekly *Shabbat*, which marks the legendary creation of the world. Yet more and more secular Jews *are* looking for a way to pause at the end of their week, find some time for renewal, and affirm their Jewish identity and connection to community. One reason secular, cultural, and humanistic communities are being formed is to offer just this opportunity. While some provide full services, with secular versions of the traditional blessings, others focus on discussion programs, book clubs, or community dinners.

Likewise, many secular Jews do not relate to the High Holiday themes of penitence and atonement. This leaves many feeling stranded. Secular Jewish communities once again offer a way to mark these occasions on our terms — with human judgment replacing divine judgment, and human power becoming the alternative to divine power. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur then become perfect vehicles for celebrating a secular humanistic philosophy of life, for reflecting on the moral quality of our behavior.

The one holiday ritual that is practically universally observed and preserved by all Jews, across denominational lines and including the unaffiliated, continues to be Passover. According to a poll in the 1990s, nearly 84 percent of Jews attend some form of a seder, including, undoubtedly, a hefty number of secular Jews who have given up practically all other Jewish ritual connections.



Why the enduring attachment to Passover? Surely the setting of the home — in contrast to the pews of a sanctuary — is one compelling reason. The ceremony is literally on our own turf. Infusing it with familiar family recipes doesn’t hurt, either. But perhaps the most significant reason that this particular holiday is preserved is that its rituals encourage interpretation and personalization.

The holiday empowers us to be leaders ourselves.

Even in the most attenuated seders, the symbolic foods carry the message of the day. We add new ritual items to the table: the potato peel that recalls Jewish deprivation during the Holocaust, or the orange that symbolizes the welcome presence of women and of lesbians and gays. We develop new lists of plagues that identify contemporary social ills, and add songs from other contexts, like “We Shall Overcome,” which universalize the story of freedom from slavery. Secular Jews, in particular, who feel less loyalty to fixed tradition, will often grab the opportunity to reinvigorate the observance in this way.

I believe this same interpretive spirit can be applied to many other days of the Jewish calendar, in a way that can bring intimacy to our families and communities and open doors to a progressive interpretation of Jewish ritual and Jewish thought. As secular Jews, we have come a long way from having to mock Jewish religious observance by organizing Yom Kippur balls. Most of us are not interested in oppositional Judaism, but in developing our own Jewish practices — practices that are positive and meaningful, not to mention inspiring. ■

This is the first of a series of “New Ritual” columns that will appear in every other issue of our magazine. Reader comment is welcome!