Perspectives on Evaluating New Jewish Rituals

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In my research on emerging Jewish rituals and their adaptation in America, I have observed that when people initially encounter a new ritual practice, after the first shock of novelty has passed, they typically ask three questions: Is it authentic? Is it permissible, either according to halakhah [Jewish law] or according to the standards or customs of my rabbi, community, or family? And finally, the question that is especially unanswerable: Will it endure?

I should say that that shock of novelty hits some more strongly than others. Speaking from personal experience, I admit that when I witness a new Jewish ritual, when I am without my ethnographer’s hat to wear or hide behind and I am there just as myself, I do not inquire immediately about authenticity, permissibility, and endurance. The first question I ask, particularly when caught unaware, is usually “Where is the door?” If I am told to stand in a circle and hold hands, or take a partner, or close my eyes, I disappear. When it comes to new ritual practices, many share my gut reactions of fear, disgust, anger, and suspicion. If this offers any consolation, these responses are not so different from the initial reactions people had to medical practices, such as organ transplants or fertility treatment using new technologies, when they emerged on the horizon as possibilities. First there was horror, followed by some interest once the new methods have been proven, and then full embrace, if the technologies, shown to be effective and lifesaving, become commonplace.

People react strongly and then inquire cautiously because the rituals that already work for them, the ones that feel “right” or “natural,” matter so much. They are enactments that hold them together and express and affirm sacred (or holy, or powerful) commitments. People hesitate to alter old rituals that are just a little creaky, out of date, or even altogether dissonant, fearing (imagining a cosmic balancing scale, perhaps) that adding a new one might jeopardize the integrity or sturdiness of the familiar and precious rituals. While people may, in theory, be proud of Judaism’s radical guise, its capacity to imagine a world more perfect than the one we inhabit, they tend, in practice, to be fiercely protective of Jewish rituals as a conservative force, preserving memory, transmitting identity and values, and specifying acts of piety, sensitivity, and obedience—whether or not they themselves ever practice them. To maintain a protective stance in the face of a tradition that feels vulnerable despite its
venerability, to remain a responsible (even if disengaged) guardian, it seems logical to set up a gate-keeping mechanism that preserves the borders between what should and should not be added or changed.

While I, like many, do eventually come round after the passage of time, given my own proclivities, had I been a rabbi in the Middle Ages, I might have joined my colleagues who tried to suppress, say, the popular folk practice of breaking a glass at a wedding—thought, by Jews and non-Jews alike, to ward off evil spirits and to be too reminiscent of the popular practices of the host culture in which Jewish were living. I might have opposed the Bar Mitzvah ritual and wedding chuppah [canopy] because I could glean their origins in church practice. Would I have been readily persuaded to accept casting sins into the water, tashlich, which many rabbis initially opposed because it risked introducing levity and frivolity into an otherwise theologically heavy day? Perhaps, but only because I could not refuse such a fine excuse to take some fresh air. In modern times, I would surely empathize with those rabbis who panicked when machine-made, square matzos were first introduced and sold in—heaven forefend—boxes, and who proclaimed that these were a “dangerous instrument of modernity leading inevitably to assimilation and apostasy, and would uproot the Torah.” Mostly, though, I would miss the old, round matzos. Passover without them would not be Passover, and my heart would break. I overstate my point here, but it is clear where I am going: some people are especially slow to come around.

In retrospect, those turnarounds seem rapid. We experience a new ritual, we decide that we hate it or never will get used to it, or it offends all that we hold to be holy and genuinely Jewish, however we define that. And then, all of a sudden we cannot imagine our lives without it; a Seder table without Miriam’s cup feels as incomplete as a Seder table without Elijah’s cup (yes, his cup was once new too and seems to have been introduced because it settled certain arguments about having a fifth cup at the Passover Seder).

The very concept of a new ritual can appear paradoxical. Rituals are supposed to be so old that their origins are obscure. We are not supposed to wonder what to do or what it means or worry about how long it will last. We are just supposed to know, but not just as a cognitive memory. Ritual is a cultural muscle memory that is supposed to well up, touching some primordial core. Rituals should not feel tentative or made up—they are supposed to feel natural, timeless, graceful, inevitable, venerable, full of power and resonance; they should be self-evidently worth preserving. We do not want religious rituals rote and meaningless, but we do want them rote and comforting. Otherwise, how can a new ritual hold us together; how can it have cosmic significance if we are practicing it with self-consciousness? Or, as a nonpracticing secular
Jewish colleague tells me, if he is going to go to a Jewish ritual, such as a wedding, a Passover Seder, or a bris, it better be done the right way. And what is the right way, I asked? With only the slight twinkle of self-consciousness visible in his eyes, he said, “How it was done in the fifties, in Long Island,” done the way it feels graceful and natural to him. I do understand where he is coming from, almost literally, having been a Long Island baby boomer myself, although I cannot say I share my colleague’s fondness for the suburban Judaism that the countercultural peers of my generation collectively rebelled against and replaced, over time, with practices that were less formal, less hierarchical, and more insistently spiritual in style. Not that I liked these new practices initially, but I got used to them and embraced many.

Acknowledging how averse I am to ritual innovation when it is not an object of study as well as the sluggish pace of my adjustment, I can better understand those who so resisted the new Jewish women’s rituals when they emerged in the seventies. In vehement prose, Rabbi Meiselman, an Orthodox rabbi, called the practices futile and meaningless, claiming that celebrating the birth of a daughter “completely mocks the entire structure of Judaism.” For this Orthodox rabbi, a “ridiculous ceremony” such as this celebration “destroys the meaning” of the male rituals and “is not necessary to make women feel significant.” He dubbed women’s ritual creativity “spiritual autoeroticism.” Their dancing with Torah scrolls on Simchat Torah was but “a sexual provocation that distracts male worshippers from their concentration.” And as for those who wish to wear a tallit [prayer shawl], it is a “tool for an ego trip or for the advancement of a . . . political movement.” As most are aware, all these dreaded and despicable practices Meiselman feared and saw perniciously bubbling up through liberal branches of Judaism have entered mainstream modern Orthodoxy. Those young enough may assume that such practices have gone on among the Orthodox for generations and that they are, in fact, “natural.” Such rituals have found their way into some ultra-Orthodox and Chasidic communities: there are baby-naming ceremonies for girls, ceremonies for three-year-old girls to receive and light their first Sabbath candles, and Bat Mitzvah.

All Jewish rituals were once new. But it helps to forget that, and there are traditional strategies for doing so. In their imaginative writings, our sages and ancestors had their reasons for claiming that Eve went to the mikvah [ritual bath], Abraham prayed wearing tefillin [phylacteries], and Sarah lit Sabbath candles in her tent. This is midrash, magical and imaginative thinking. One does not have to be a sage to know that nowhere in the Torah does God command Moses to tell the children of Israel to cover their heads with yarmulkes and the women to wear wigs. Nowhere are there Sabbath angels
who make house calls after synagogue service—there is no synagogue, and biblical weeks ended happily without *havdalah* [ceremony to conclude the Sabbath]. Nowhere is there a commandment to have separate dishes for milk and meat—Sarah, our Sabbath candle lighter, prepared a lovely meat and dairy dish for Abraham’s visitors that would promptly render a modern kosher kitchen *traife* [unkosher].

I want to begin by comparing the questions laypeople ask to a different set of questions: those that I as an ethnographer of contemporary Jewish life ask about the very same practices. As will be readily evident, the ethnographic questions are not asked to protect Judaism as a fragile entity. Rather, they are concerned with documenting and investigating Jewish religious creativity, however it is given shape in particular eras and locales. Research questions are no doubt shaped by a scholarly conviction that when religious practices change, religions still endure; more precisely, if practice could not change, the continued survival of any religious system, over time, would be threatened.

What then, goes on in the field? I will begin by approaching a new ritual first from a scenographic perspective, carefully noting what actions I see, what objects are introduced, and what script (or text, or program) is being provided and comparing these observations to any already-existing forms. How does it rehearse major Jewish themes of the past in new or altered forms? How does the ritual, in its language and actions, build upon, subvert, or reject Jewish rituals of the past? I will examine how it complies with a range of halakhic interpretations as well as contemporary ethical expectations, such as feminism. I will note who seems to be in charge, who is allocated more or less agency, and who has been designated as a main actor and who comes as a witness. I pay attention to the mood that is being created through manipulations of place, smell, light, music, dance, and food.

I notice how deftly or clumsily the new ritual is being introduced and carried out, and I notice how participants react through their comments and body language: are they anxious or comfortable, engaged or bored, reluctant or eager, resistant or accepting? I try to account for such reactions beyond personal proclivities. I gauge, in terms of audience, if the ritual appeals to those already committed or reaches out to those on the fringes, creating new points of entry. When possible, I ask the creators to narrate their stories of the ritual’s genesis, including all the process and deliberation along the way, and afterward, I ask leaders and participants of differing levels of enthusiasm, Jewish engagement, and erudition to reflect upon their experience and evaluate it.

Outside any particular site-specific enactment of a new ritual, I read or listen to different people telling their own true, complex, and usually
contradictory stories about how the ritual first came into being, from the
genesis of an idea, through experimentation in early forms, to more stable
iterations. How, for instance, were the early Rosh Hodesh [New Month] groups
born? How did the orange get onto the Seder plate, and how does the story
most frequently told deviate from the one the founders claim as authoritative?
From a spiritual perspective, and this would be through discussion and
direct observation, I try to note how a presence of God is referenced and
made available to participants in this new practice, and how that presence is
differently interpreted as the ritual occurs in a variety of settings, in different
denominations and communities, over time.

When a new object is involved, such as Miriam’s cup, Miriam’s tambourine,
or a Holocaust Torah, I consider how it corresponds to the existing inherited
inventory of Jewish ritual objects, just as I would compare a liturgical
innovation to established conventions. How does it reframe Jewish memory
or reinterpret sacred Jewish narratives? How does it make the new ritual
repeatable and transmittable from one generation to another? Does it
intentionally disguise the radical nature of a new ritual within an innocuous,
mundane, and traditional-seeming vessel? How democratic is it: is it simple
to make or acquire, or is it complicated, requiring special skills and access to
knowledge or money? Is it intended as a sacred object in and of itself or as
an object that is facilitated for sacred experience?

Over time, I observe the ritual, live, photographed, or filmed as it keeps
getting performed, and I note the variations as it is disseminated. I try to
discover the multiple forces—say, in our age, the democratization of Judaism
or feminist Judaism—that have led Jews to simultaneously originate similar new
rituals that over time coalesce so thoroughly that they appear with instructions
in rabbinic manuals. How are people beginning to write about the new ritual,
in memoirs, in the Jewish (and sometimes secular) press, and in rabbinic
deliberations? Along this vein, I study papers given on new ritual at academic
conferences by scholars (who may also happen to be themselves generators
or proponents of new ritual), noticing how their presentations describe and
analyze the new rituals but also can reify them, particularly when the scholars
have been actively engaged in creating, performing, and introducing them.

If my research questions can plausibly be answered as I go about
chronicling the birth, transformation, and acceptance or rejection of new Jewish
ritual, why are the questions laypeople ask about authenticity, permissibility,
and endurance so much more difficult?

As for authenticity, I would like to suggest that any new Jewish ritual
cultivates its authenticity only over time, through repeated, loving practice,
through its capacity to hold multiple variations, resonance, and meanings.
In religion, authenticity, as I have been claiming for a long time, is a feeling about legitimacy and divine sanction, a cultural feeling and not a fact that gets substantiated with evidence (although it is commonplace for religious groups or movements to employ the term “authenticity” to support claims that their interpretation of text or tradition is the one that is most true and legitimate). Lapsed time changes the valence of a ritual that initially does not inspire a feeling of authenticity, giving it weight and steadfastness that clothes and supports it. With time, rituals become plausible, real, and ordinary. With time, too, comes the forgetfulness that facilitates cultural change and acceptance.3

As for permissibility, nearly every new Jewish ritual practice can feel transgressive, forbidden by God (who shows dismay by “causing lightning to strike”), by some authority (a rabbi or often one’s Hebrew school principal), or by its inconsistency with local or familial practice [minhag]. For my mother, born in 1932 to a traditional Jewish family, nearly all the new practices she has encountered in her lifetime have initially felt transgressive. That extensive list includes synagogue prayers recited in English; Bat Mitzvah; Rosh Hodesh groups; baby-naming ceremonies for daughters; women counting in a minyan; women being called to have aliyot [opportunities to “go up” to read the Torah]; women wearing kippot [head coverings], tallit, and tefillin; and women serving as rabbis and cantors. It also includes saying the names of the matriarchs in the Amidah [major prayer, recited in standing position] and, at the Passover Seder, including Miriam’s cup and a pillow for her (and not just my father) to lean on. My mother did not need an authority to tell her that such acts were forbidden; she knew it to be the case, and had she inquired and received permission, I believe she would have overlooked it. With different passages of time, with the growth of familiarity and the formation of new habits, all of these practices now seem permissible to my mother.

I think this reflects an awareness that while it may seem that a ritual’s permissibility is decided by authorities, it is in fact ultimately decided upon by the folk—again, in their own time, which can be speedy or slow. Rabbis know this. In the Talmud, when the rabbis were contemplating ritual behaviors of which they were unsure, they gave each other this advice: Puk hazei mai amma davar [Look around, and see what people are actually doing].4 Then legislate it. For example, when married women wanted to wear wigs to cover their heads as a sign of modesty, rabbis of the late nineteenth century were against it, preferring the more modest hat, kerchief, or shawl. But the wig-wearing women (especially as more could afford wigs) prevailed. Now, wearing wigs is the sign of the highest modesty and piety in certain communities, and it would be rabbis who would be the first to say the practice is de rigueur. Another example: rabbis did not initially appreciate, as I said, tashlich. But people did;
I suppose they liked it a lot. Now, when we open up a high holiday *machzor* [prayer book], the sages tell us exactly how to observe *tashlich*, when to observe it, and what they want it to mean. We can almost forget that it was not their idea in the first place. We can also imagine that Abraham and Sarah and little Isaac all went out to do *tashlich*, until we recall they did not yet have Rosh Hashanah.

And now endurance: it is almost curious that we move quickly ahead to ask about a ritual's longevity when we first encounter it. Can we realistically ask why some new rituals stick and others do not? There is no way to have anticipated that *etrogim* [citrons] would be shipped special delivery around the world each year for Sukkot. Who would have supposed that turning the *afikoman* [hidden piece of matzah] into a game of hide-and-go-seek at the end of a Seder would still be around or, for that matter, Hillel's bitter herb and Passover sandwich, to which so many add, as a condiment, haroset? In fact, it is only in hindsight that one could have predicted that lighting a Chanukah menorah would attract American Jews after it had nearly fallen away.

It is not possible to predict endurance; demanding proof of it, long before the fact, is yet another indication of the hurdles that protectors of Jewish tradition feel obligated to erect. That said, and I conclude here by offering observations that should reflect the concerns of both laypeople and scholars, I do think it is possible to evaluate new rituals, with an interest in refining them and enhancing the possibility that they might be around after the first, second, and even third appearances. Even if a new practice meets any or all of these criteria, we cannot know if it will endure, but we can assume that it just might.

Thus, these are some of the hallmarks that characterize the stronger new rituals, and I conclude with this checklist:

1. Does it make overt links to major Jewish themes, using familiar Jewish ritual objects, and creating links to Jewish times and values? Does it allow people to remember, mark time, synchronize their psyches with natural cycles—in a word, does it feel continuous with the Jewish past and still rooted in the present?
2. Does it use Hebrew and make scriptural reference in ways that feel familiar and artful?
3. Does it establish new communities and sustain existing ones? Does it create opportunities for bonding across lines that might otherwise be divisive: for instance, age, economic class, marital status, sexual orientation, and denominational and ideological identification? Does it strive to be inclusive, so that even those without Judaic knowledge will feel comfortable and
 included? Does it allow for improvisation, personalization, and spontaneity? Is it user-friendly and self-explanatory?

4. On the level of meaning making, does it help to give sense and order to life? Does it carry people through painful changes and crises in life that might otherwise be unendurable? Does it articulate joy or grief?

5. Does it mark life events that have gone unmarked by a formal Jewish response? (Examples would include the onset of menstruation, pregnancy, giving birth, menopause, miscarriage, infertility, hysterectomy, healing after rape and abuse, and completing a course of cancer treatments.)

6. Does it confirm and evoke a capacious definition of the divine presence in the world? Does it offer realistic steps toward living one’s life according to ever-higher moral standards?

The short-term endurance of potent new rituals, ones that already seem to be catching on, is often dependent upon people who put energy and intelligence into incubating them further, strengthening them, and broadening their access. New rituals need community ritual organizers, so to speak, to plead for their cause. They need to persuade first-time participants in the new ritual that shocking innovations ought to become tomorrow’s hallowed traditions.

Which new rituals stick? Perhaps the ones people care most about, and the ones that are nurtured.

NOTES

3 I have explored this topic and many of the others addressed here more extensively in my book, Inventing Jewish Ritual (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007).
4 Babylonian Talmud Brakhot 45a, Eruvin 14b.