A Need for New Rituals? American Judaism and the Holocaust

Oliver Leaman

“Der Ritus des rabbinischen Judentums wirkt nicht und verwandelt nichts.”
[The ritual of rabbinic Judaism is ineffective and changes nothing.]
—Gershom Scholem

Ever since the Holocaust, there has been a huge debate about its significance in Jewish life and ritual. Is it an unprecedented event that requires some dramatic change to how things are done, or at least some specific ceremony to commemorate it, or is it merely one disaster among many, and so the existing rituals are sufficient to deal with it? This question also brings into discussion what makes a ritual effective, something that Gershom Scholem suggests is a problem for Rabbinic Judaism. The account presented here is the result of several years of research into how different Jewish communities responded to the Holocaust, with some reflections on what the rituals they employed meant for them. I concentrate on Judaism in North America since the Holocaust is so omnipresent in Europe, being the site of the event itself, meaning that perhaps it plays a different role in the lives of European Jews. In many ways the role of ritual in religion and its relationship with grief is a constant theme. I will argue that it is by no means obvious what ought to be said about this sort of relationship or how religion ought to embody it in ritual. On the other hand, a reflection on the experience of different Jewish communities will bring out some of the relevant features of the topic and give us some indication of what we can realistically expect religions to achieve here.

RITUAL AND CHANGE

Ritual in religion sometimes is very sensitive to changing circumstances and events, and sometimes it is not. This is a particularly lively issue in Judaism, which has versions of ritual that self-consciously seek to change in line with changing events and versions that do not. Those forms of Judaism that can be roughly classified as “Orthodox” tend to believe that the ritual as it has developed over long periods in the past is sufficient for our purposes today, and thus the ritual need not be changed or indeed ought not to be altered for any reason. On the other side are those forms of worship loosely called
“Reform,” whose name is accurate in suggesting the need for reform of the existing ritual to make it more appropriate to modern circumstances. This is not the place to revisit the hoary arguments between these two groups, but the arguments between these groups are relevant to the issue of how the Holocaust can and should be embodied in modern forms of ritual.

There is a marked contrast between what might be called Orthodox and Reform approaches to the Holocaust. That contrast looks very straightforward. The Orthodox ignore the Holocaust for ritual purposes in the sense that they change nothing to acknowledge its existence. For them the Holocaust is just another disaster in a long line of earlier disasters, and perhaps there will be future disasters to come also. Here we need to distinguish between what might be called modern Orthodox Jews, who do accept some additional Holocaust rituals, but not the changing of any existing ritual to take account of it, and those Orthodox Jews who regard even this accommodation to modernity to be unacceptable. The Reform are in favor of ritually marking the Holocaust in some way, and so many of their synagogues have some pictorial display commemorating it, and the various prayer books often include some direct reference to it. This marking can be accomplished by using familiar prayers like the memorial prayer and referring directly to the Holocaust, in particular on Yom Kippur. There is also the inclusion of direct new prayers to deal with the Holocaust, including in some siddurim [prayer books] even Yiddish prayers representing songs of the Jewish partisans, German poems about the Shoah, and so on. These are often presented as alternatives to the normal service, and it is not clear how often they are actually used or whether their role is simply to give the congregation something to read and think about when the normal service is going on. I have personally never heard this additional material being employed, and when I asked I never got much of an answer as to how frequently it is used. But these compositions are there in the siddur and are available, suggesting that they are thought to be significant.

RITUAL AND MELANCHOLY

It would be wrong to think that the absence of the Shoah from the Orthodox service means that it is ignored, since this is very far from the truth. It would also be wrong to assert that the ubiquity of the Shoah in the Reform service means that it is important for religious reasons for Reform Jews. In interviews carried out with a variety of different Orthodox communities, it is clear that the Shoah is ever-present in people’s minds. Here we might enter psychological territory and refer to Sigmund Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” to suggest that the absence of direct reference to the Shoah in Orthodox ritual
has prevented the Orthodox from appropriately dealing with the event. Since they do not have a specific mourning ritual for it, they persist in melancholy with respect to it. The Reform, by contrast, have adequately represented it in their liturgy, and so for them it is not such a significant continuing issue. Yet it is a continuing issue for the Reform, and the Holocaust plays a big role in the continuing desire to preserve Jewish ways of life amidst the assimilationist possibilities of modern society, the fact that we should not give Adolph Hitler any posthumous victories, what Emil Fackenheim called the 614th commandment. This is not really a religious issue but a defiant gesture in the face of an awkward history, it might be argued, and yet in the Reform as in the Orthodox the desire to continue a Jewish form of existence despite the Nazis is significant as a motivation for religious allegiance. That suggests that the presence of ritual in Reform Judaism has not done anything much different from its absence in Orthodoxy, in that mourning has not prevented melancholy and the sort of decision-making that stems from it.

The Orthodox often suggest that it is hardly worth investigating Reform ritual because there is so little of it and so few Reform Jews go to synagogue. On the other hand, Reform Jews may retort that it is hardly worth investigating Orthodox ritual because there is so much of it and because Orthodox Jews could not possibly be thinking about why they are doing what they do, since there is so much to do and say. It is certainly true that it is far from clear how ritual works in any religion, and in particular in Judaism, especially given the very diverse groups who employ it. We need to acknowledge that “Holy days, rituals, liturgies—all are like musical notation which, in themselves, cannot convey the nuances and textures of live performance.” This is something we need to bear very much in mind, since having a ritual is fairly meaningless unless it is embedded in some wider system of practice, while not having a ritual may nonetheless mean that the event that is absent from ritual is very far from absent in reality.

RITUAL AND CONTEXT

So the ritual needs to be linked to its actual performance before we can really understand it, and that certainly makes sense. What is that context? For both the Orthodox and the Reform, it is one where the Shoah is actually a frequent topic of reference. Interestingly, although theologically the Orthodox often have the neatest resolution of the Shoah—it is generally umipnei hata’enu [on account of our sins]—they have the most unresolved difficulties with overcoming it as a community. It is constantly referred to as a rationale for doing things, having lots of children, valuing places in Eastern Europe,
maintaining steadfastly a certain religious behavior, and not deviating from
a routine; some of this procedure fits in with what Freud and his followers
would call abnormal behavior. The Orthodox react to a tragedy in a way that
does not resolve the tragedy for them, leading them to redouble their stylized
reactions. For the Reform, the Shoah represents a phenomenon difficult to
define, and yet the feeling generally was that it is adequately dealt with in the
ritual. (This is not a question one can really ask the Orthodoxy because the
adequacy of the ritual is taken to be a given.) Reform Jews want so many
different things from ritual that asking a number of them about the role of the
Shoah in it and what it should be resulted in a vast variety of opinions. Here
again we should remember Josef Yerushalmi’s comment and take account of
the general context within which the ritual takes place, since it is this context
that gives the ritual its meaning and relevance. Context will be shown to have
a considerable significance in what follows.

Marshall Sklare identifies five criteria for ritual retention:
1. the ability to remain distinct without being separate, different
   but not too different,
2. it does not demand social isolation or the adoption of a unique
   life-style,
3. it accords with the religious culture of the wider community,
4. it is centered around children,
5. it is annual or infrequent.³

Sklare’s criteria explain why in the United States, for example, more
Jews participate in Passover and Chanukah ceremonies than are affiliated with
synagogues or temples. Developing new Holocaust rituals does not really
fit into these criteria, and this fact perhaps accounts for the rather shaky
appearance of Holocaust rituals, where they do appear. The Holocaust is
much more developed as a theme in ritual in the Reform. It is also much more
a part of the iconography of the building itself in which religious activities
take place. In Reform congregations the Shoah is often linked closely to other
genocides, a link that is less the case in Orthodox congregations.

Such is the situation at the official level of what is in the siddurim, the
interior design of houses of worship, and the sorts of ceremonies that take
place in the different Jewish communities. In my research I was interested also
in what Yerushalmi calls the “context,” since like him I think this concept is as
significant as or even more significant than what is officially part of the service
or a building. Interestingly, with context, the situation is reversed. Whereas
officially the Reform movement pays more attention to the Holocaust,
 unofficially Orthodox Jews reflect more on it and its implications for them and
the Jewish world as a whole. Whereas Reform Jews spend a certain amount
of time as part of the service and linked activities discussing the Holocaust, Orthodox Jews in fact discuss it much more, albeit in less formal settings, and they seem to regard it as closer to them as a phenomenon. Finally, although Reform Jews discuss the Shoah more as part of their ritual, they have less fixed ideas about it than the Orthodox have. The reasons for this difference are worth discussing, and they perhaps have something to tell us about how rituals in religion actually operate.

IDENTIFYING CONTEXT

Let us take the issue of informal discussions about the Holocaust, including the issues of why it happened and what it means to us today. A large number of Orthodox Jews refer to the Holocaust as a major motivation for their commitment to Judaism generally and to Orthodox Judaism specifically. The suspicion of assimilation, the virtues of separation, the need to reestablish Eastern European styles of Judaism were all suggested as implications of the Shoah, albeit usually in informal discussion, not as part of any ritual. It is clear that for many young Orthodox Jews, who probably have no contact with any Holocaust survivors, the significance of this distant event has not diminished with time. Some of my informants were surprised when I suggested that the Holocaust might be regarded as something that happened a long time ago and so not be that important, since so much that they regard as important happened much longer ago, of course. Yet most of my informants were satisfied with the treatment of the Holocaust in the traditional ritual, feeling that there was no need to innovate or to enter it in new ways into the prayer book, since there are already many mournful occasions on which it can be commemorated. An additional Holocaust Day was not regarded as that helpful, since it suggests the need to add to the ritual repertoire when there is no lack of opportunities to commemorate it alongside the regular ritual.

For Reform Jews the Shoah is much harder to pin down, and there was general support for its inclusion in the service through new rituals and prayers. The existence of a Holocaust Day was regarded as important and indeed vital to show appropriate respect for the catastrophe. Given the ethical character of Reform Judaism, the Holocaust was often linked with other genocides and made part of the political program of the individual, and individuals adopted a generally redemptive attitude toward it. This attitude was not something mysterious or challenging but provided an opportunity for action and linking up with non-Jews in order to promote social justice. In informal discussion, Reform Jews offered a vast variety of reasons for the Holocaust, and they very much supported its inclusion in the ritual through specific new prayers and rites.
It is not difficult to see why the discussions went in these distinct directions, since Orthodox Jews tend to be suspicious of assimilation and so would not emphasize working with non-Jews to commemorate the Shoah, while Reform Jews are happier to work with others and would see fighting genocide as a common ethical aim that can easily be shared with other communities.

However, the discussions that I participated in actually went in rather unexpected directions. The Orthodox, who theologically should have been more limited in their responses to the Shoah, were in fact all over the place, united only in believing it to be a hugely significant event for them. The Reform were less interested, some even referring to how long ago it took place; moreover, the institutionalization of it in the ritual was sometimes referred to as putting the Shoah in its place, as it were, where it could be taken out and examined but where it would not dominate. It might even be said that Reform Jews take a rather optimistic attitude to things, and so the Shoah does not fit in that well if they regard it as a disaster where the basic distinctions between Jew and non-Jew became the rationale for murder and dispossession. Hence, Reform Jews generally do not understand the Shoah in this way; rather, it is a less dramatic and more manageable period of moral decay that has in other ways been repeated subsequently, and thus it needs to be resisted today as in the past in a general sense.

One thing that will be noted here is that these views are linked with some of the leading theological views today but are far from fully developed or well argued like those views. This is what one would expect; at the level of popular theology, views will never be fully articulated and may have many gaps in reasoning, but they are important despite these gaps for their representation of a wide range of thinking on the issue by the ordinary affiliated Jews in the United States. There are at least two issues here that need to be addressed. The more general one is how we know that a new ritual is required. What are the criteria for the existing rituals no longer doing the job, as it were, of what we want to do in religion, which Scholem refers to in the epigraph to this essay? The less general but still rather abstract issue is how a religion should commemorate a traumatic event such as the Shoah.

RITUAL AND MEANING

One of the things worth noting about the Jewish liturgy is that it is often not closely connected with what it is being used for. For example, the prayer for the dead, the Kaddish, does not actually say anything about death directly, and when one reads it, it is difficult to see why it is the prayer for the dead.
Many mourners find the *Kaddish* highly satisfying as part of the ritual, since it is firmly part of the tradition of marking a death, and the requirement for a *minyan* [quorum] to be present, however that is defined, also brings in an aspect of solidarity. The prayer itself, though, does not address the topic of death; it is the context here that does all the work. Some contemporary Jews find the existing repertoire of prayers unsatisfactory, and the Reform movement regularly changes its prayer book, very usefully for those interested in how attitudes change in different periods, since those changes are very much present in the different prayer books that come and go. An intriguing modern phenomenon is the reinvention of older rituals and the rediscovery of former rituals to fill in a perceived gap in what exists today. So, for example, there has been a revival of *tekhines* [supplications], a genre of devotional prayers recited and written principally by women who did not know much Hebrew. Many of these are designed for outside of the synagogue, which is where many women feel perhaps they have more of a role. People often say that these prayers are private and direct, reflect personal experience, and address God directly. Yet it has to be said that much of the “official” liturgy shares this quality, although much of it certainly does not. One thinks in particular of the Psalms that are traditionally recited at a time when someone close has died. Many of the Psalms have a very personal flavor to them, and it is easy to think of the author seeing himself in a close relationship with God, which is discussed in the psalm, or trying to re-establish such a relationship that he feels has been lost. But here, as with all ritual, what is important is not the nature of the ritual itself—in this case the particular prayers—but the context within which it takes place, and if it is felt that the existing rituals are too impersonal and public, then there is a need for new rituals that are regarded as more satisfactory. The question we should perhaps raise is not what is lacking in the current rituals, and what fills the gap with the new ones, but what is perceived to be missing and what is perceived to be an answer to what is missing.

When we come to consider the Holocaust, this issue of perception is crucial. The discussions within Jewish theology about the nature of the event are significant here, since it relates to how it should be embodied directly, if at all, in ritual. If the Shoah is seen as a unique and extraordinary event, then there is perhaps more reason to think that it should be part of some specific ritual. If it is seen as just one disaster in a long line of earlier disasters, then nothing new is required, although the fact that it is relatively recent might call for some direct reference to it alongside existing rituals, the position largely of what might be called the Modern Orthodox. For those who regard the Shoah as exceptional, not to have a specific ritual suggests that this very unusual status is being denied. A gap in what is required is then perceived and needs
to be filled. These sorts of debates are very prevalent when the issue is how to cope with trauma, whether one should note in a dramatic way the traumatic event and then get over it, or whether one should put it within the context of many such previous events and deal with it in that way.

This issue is much debated today in Israel, where domestic terrorism has during some periods been so damaging to life and limb. When a bomb blows up a bus, should the site be marked in some way, should the road be closed for a long period, and then periodically should there be a service of some kind at the site of the bombing? Or should the bodies be removed, as completely as possible, the parts of the bus carted away, and everything get back to normal as quickly as possible, which is the strategy that is largely carried out right now? The point of the former approach is to mark in some way the terrible events that have taken place, thereby helping us come to terms with them. The point of the latter approach is to show that we can cope with the disaster and it will not prevent us from getting on with our ordinary lives, which is certainly important in any conflict situation in which the enemy tries to sap the confidence of the civilian population.

This has nothing specifically to do with religion, or ethnicity, and certainly nothing specifically about Jews. In many different civilizations some people are not happy with the ordinary grieving rituals available to them, and they invent or follow others. For example, when someone is killed on the roads in Europe and North America, most people have the person buried or cremated and that is it. Others, however, place flowers or religious symbols, perhaps together with photographs and letters to the deceased, by the roadside where the death occurred. Some people place similar things on trees in woods that were visited by the dead person, perhaps on the birthday, maybe with birthday cards and tributes, and so on. Of course, there are also a variety of rituals that have grown up at the graveside, sometimes resulting in problems for those administering the sites, where perhaps the parents of a dead child wish to leave a teddy bear on the grave and only flowers are allowed, or where they want to leave artificial flowers and only real flowers are acceptable. We tend to think that the growth of new rituals is something new, as it obviously is since otherwise they would not be new; we also tend to think such new rituals reflect the decline in traditional authority in society and perhaps a decline in the authority of the existing religious structures. This is particularly the case when we look at new rituals for women, for gay people, and for others who have been traditionally excluded from the religious community.

But this is far from the truth: even far back in religious history there are accounts of people doing unapproved different things in particular in connection with the dead, and on the basis of these practices religious
legislation was developed to rule on what is legitimate behavior and what is not. So in Islam, for example, there are many *hadith* [Traditions of the Prophet and his Companions] that report on what may be done at the graveside, by whom it may be done, when it may be done, and so on, and these stipulations are often reflections on a variety of different practices that the Prophet observed or that those who followed him thought he might have observed. One of the chief motives of the radical theologies of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Wahhab that have formed the basis of Saudi society today was the behavior of people at gravesides, or indeed the very existence of gravesides at which people come continually to pray. Ibn Taymiyya was in fact imprisoned and tortured in Cairo for disapproving of the popular practice of praying at the graveside. Throughout Islamic history a vast number of practices grew up in connection with how to commemorate the dead, how to mark a traumatic event, and what religion has to teach us here. So although many of the new rituals that we observe today are new to us, they are probably merely versions of alternative ceremonies that were performed in the past, with varying degrees of official sanction, since the normal ways of doing things were felt to be unsatisfactory for one reason or another.

THE SUCCESS OF RITUAL

When I started conducting research on the varieties of ways of reacting to the Holocaust in Jewish ritual, I wondered whether the Reform movement had dealt with it better by introducing a variety of new ceremonies to acknowledge the event. This is a popular psychological move, to suggest that after a traumatic event a period of grieving takes place, and if it is “successful” then the mourners move on and are much more capable of coping with the aftermath of the event than those without some way of properly marking the event. The Orthodox, who talk about the Holocaust at length and in ways that suggest that it is an event that is always with them, are like people who have not managed to transcend the traumatic event, and as a result they are constantly revisiting it. This resembles a situation of having an organic illness that one group takes the appropriate medicine for and so recovers, while another group does not take the medicine and so hangs onto the disease; although it may get a bit better, some of its effects linger on and on. This analogy is a neat solution to the different approaches that diverse groups take to the Holocaust, but we should be careful about accepting it. It is far less acceptable now to insist on just one healthy way to grieve. It used to be thought that one criterion of success here is managing to carry on and carry out one’s normal functions, but this is not much of a criterion, since both the Reform and the
Orthodox seem to have no difficulty in continuing to do things despite the Holocaust. With his enthusiasm for the secular, Freud would have no time for the constant reminding of the Orthodox community of past disasters in a way intended to make them sad again and again, although it has to be said that the sadness is supposed to be mitigated by the sense that God has a plan or by some other feeling of meaning behind the events of the past and indeed the present. In the Talmud *Pesachim* 116b, we are told *matchil bigenut umesayem beshevach*, a phrase often repeated by the Orthodox when discussing the Shoah, since it refers to something “beginning in shame, ending in glory.” The fact that the Orthodox feel that they can put the Shoah into some sort of wider theoretical context, at the very least as an act that plays a role in a divinely organized world, might be contrasted with the Reform attitude that a wide variety of explanations for it exist and none, if any, of these make any direct reference to God. It might then be suggested that the Orthodox grieve more successfully than the Reform because their constant repetition of tragic events is carried out within a context where such events have a meaning. So perhaps it is the latter who have difficulties coping with the events, despite their ersatz rituals and generally optimistic view of Jewish history.

In vindication of this line of argument, interviewing Reform Jews about the Holocaust tends to result in different responses than those provided by the Orthodox. The general rationale of *tikkun olam* [repairing the world] does not make much headway when the Shoah is concerned, since there seems to have been a distinct lack of such a spirit in the past and it is not at all clear how its existence today might prevent another similar disaster or what role it might have played then in preventing it. This does bring out a phenomenon in grief-coping strategies that has often been noted by observers, and that is that some people are very effective in channeling their grief into something else. For example, when a child dies, the father will often become very active in some campaign against the disease that killed the child. In this way people often feel that their grief has found a reasonable escape valve. If, though, the reaction to the death is just that it is inexplicable, then grief may be more protracted and difficult to resolve. Here we are coming close to an unlikely suggestion, which is that the Reform Jews, who see the world as a rational space in which moral action should be carried out to improve the lot of humanity, find it difficult to account for a period of extreme savagery, while the Orthodox, who see the world far more as a site of mystery and divine activity, find it easier. The explanation is not just that the Orthodox line is simpler, the Reform subtler and thus more complex. It might be said that the Reform approach is unsatisfactory in itself since it fails to do justice to the phenomenon of human wickedness, something that the *tikkun olam* principle
tends to avoid. The approach may be to say that, if the world were a better place, then events like the Shoah would not take place, but such a position is rather weak as a call to action because very few observers could possibly blame the actions of the Jews at the time for their eventual fate.

So do the rituals of the Reform surrounding the Shoah represent a Lady-Macbeth-washing-her-hands sort of ritual, where action is taken and repeated because it is felt that it never succeeds in reconciling the individual to what has occurred in the past? Lady Macbeth kept on washing her hands because she kept on seeing blood on them, appropriately since she had murdered Duncan. The more she washes, the more it will need to be done, since it is always going to be unsuccessful. So the greater number of rituals of the Reform Jews may reflect the fact that they all fail to reconcile the community to the Shoah. Over time rituals seem to have increased, and the institutions supporting them, like Holocaust monuments and museums, Holocaust days and so on, have increased in tandem. Yet it is not at all obvious that this explosion of attention has really contributed a great deal to reconciling the Jewish community to the Holocaust, at least in terms of the Reform section of that community. It might of course be said that this is a rather ambitious aim, and not one that we normally think of when we analyze rituals and the institutions that exist around them. One of the aims of such institutions at least is to relate a message about the Holocaust to society as a whole, which is surely being done relatively effectively given the attention that is paid to the Holocaust in much of Western society.

Yet we might also wonder whether the role of a ritual is really to reconcile its practitioners to an event in the past, especially when that past is so recent, as it is in the case of the Holocaust. Perhaps it is entirely appropriate that we should feel that the sufferings that existed in the Holocaust remain issues that we still have to deal with, and the rituals we establish with respect to this fact do not have as their main purpose making us feel all right about what happened. Of course, some Jews manage to take very personally events that occurred a long time ago, but this is much more plausible for Orthodox than for Reform Jews. It is said that Napoleon was impressed by the Tisha B’Av ceremony during which Jews sit on the ground and read the book of Lamentations by the light of a candle. What impressed him was not so much the ritual but the fact that it commemorated something that happened a long time ago. If the mark of a successful ritual is helping people get over a past tragic event, then does the Tisha B’Av ritual do this? It does in the sense of putting the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem within some sort of context, but not in the sense of making those observing the ritual feel that they have gotten over the sadness of the event. This brings out the problematic
nature of regarding rituals commemorating tragedies as though they are part of coping mechanisms. They are such coping mechanisms in the sense that they put the tragedy in some sort of context, but they are not in the sense that we transcend the tragedy. That whole notion of getting over it is rather offensive, and it suggests that a disaster is rather like being sick, something to be dealt with and promptly put into the background. Neither the Reform nor the Orthodox Jews react to the ritual in this banal way, one hopes, although it might be claimed that the theology of the latter makes such a simplistic response more rather than less likely.

ASSESSING RITUAL

We need to spend some time thinking about what the ritual is actually for, and this is often dealt with in a more sophisticated way in the Bible than in the psychological literature. For instance, the Jews are told both to blot out the name of Amalek, their great enemy on their journey through the desert to Israel, and also never to forget him (Deut 25:17). This might well be taken to be a reflection on the significance of a traumatic experience: it is something that cannot really be forgotten, but it can be put in its place by its significance being grasped and installed in some form of ritual, perhaps not directly connected to it. Freud tends to ignore the possibility of a middle position between mourning, where mourners detach themselves from the lost and beloved object through some grasp of reality, and melancholia, where mourners continue to cling to the lost love in what he calls a “wishful psychosis.”

What religion tends to suggest is that there is a middle position where the missed object is remembered and reflected upon, while at the same time such remembrance and reflection does not prevent us from carrying out our normal tasks. This middle position is often ignored today in the United States in connection with the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that affects many of the troops in military conflict situations. There is a tendency for military personnel who are suffering nightmares, depression, or general anxiety to be diagnosed as having PTSD. This is not just a medical issue but very much a moral and conceptual one also. The important feature of PTSD is that memories are inescapable and prevent the individual from successfully incorporating his or her past into his or her future, and so those memories are traumatic. Yet there are clearly degrees of this phenomenon. At a lower level, such memories are not an obstacle to normal life, while at an advanced level they clearly are. One might even wonder whether someone who has gone through remarkable events involving death and violence should be able to just forget about it and not use it in his or her future life.
One of the social roles of religion that ritual embodies is a way of establishing what I have called a middle position, where grief is experienced but not in a disabling way, where it does not skew the future experiences of the individual but does shape them to a degree. This balance is always going to be unstable, in the sense that some religious observers may be so influenced by a past event that they use it as a justification for some act of violence, for example, while others may find it almost disappear from their consciousness because the ritual connected to it effectively dissolves it. From a religious, and indeed moral, point of view, neither of these alternatives is acceptable. What is ideal is that the event is noted and commemorated and that ordinary life is resumed, albeit not necessarily in just the same way as before. Perhaps Freud’s antipathy to religion explains his inability to see any sort of role for its rituals in moderating melancholia and marking grief. Perhaps his influence has meant that PTSD is regarded as so prevalent today, in that any remaining psychological sadness due to involvement in a conflict zone is often classified as an illness, a grief that has not been transcended, as opposed to a perfectly natural indication of a life event that requires some time to work through.

One of the nice, neat conclusions that we cannot adopt is that one religious approach to an event like the Shoah is “better” than another approach, although we have seen how the psychological literature does tend to operate in this value-laden manner. The rituals developed by the Reform movement have not really succeeded in resolving the issue for the Reform, but then we do not really understand what it is for a ritual to resolve an issue satisfactorily. The constant repetition of the Shoah in the social context of Orthodox Judaism perhaps expresses more their strong interest in and links with anything Jewish than with this event in particular, but I suggested that the Shoah does pervade the living experience of many Orthodox communities, even if theologically they do not acknowledge it as a central problem within their belief system. I have challenged the view that this shows that they need a new ritual, and I have shown that how rituals work and what they are supposed to do if they do work are problematic. When researching this rather specific topic, I expected to end up with some results that would shed some light on these questions, but I am not sure that I have. More worryingly, in studying rituals, we need to do more than just describe them and explain how they are supposed to operate, as we have seen here. We need to put the ritual within an appropriate context, one that is often much wider than we might expect, including informal discussions between people looking after children, decisions about what cars to buy, how to name children, and so on. Particular people may see this same ritual entirely differently, as Patricia Curran shows when she examines the culture of nuns from different generations in convents. If we are going to be able to judge
the successes of ritual use, we shall have to use a theory of the context within which that ritual operates, and as we have seen, we are still a long way from that today.

NOTES

1 Gershom Scholem, Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960), 163. The translation from the German is my own.

2 Yosef Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 43.


5 Patricia Curran, Grace before Meals: Food Ritual and Body Discipline in Convent Culture (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

FOR FURTHER READING


Oliver Leaman, Death and Loss (London: Cassell, 1995).


Jonathan Tropper, How to Talk to a Widower (London: Orion, 2007).