

“FINDING SPIRITUALITY”
Rabbi Victor Urecki
Congregation B’nai Jacob
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I could have been a rich man today. But no, I took Rabbi Morris Besdin’s ‘killer’ idea and used it to enrich my spiritual life! If only in 1978 I had gone to a little sport shoe company in Beaverton, Oregon (ten years earlier than advertising man Dan Weiden) with Rabbi Besdin’s slogan, I would right now be on the beach celebrating Yom Kippur as G-d had intended it.

And I lived right next door to the **Nike Inc.**, for crying out loud!

Sorry. I am frustrated and getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning.

This summer, I learned what I believe to be one of the single most persuasive ideas I have ever heard for our Jewish traditions, a most interesting way to approach the Jewish heritage and maybe even one of the best arguments for the return to greater observance of Jewish rituals and practices into our lives.

What is it that most people understand about Judaism? Generally, that Judaism is a ritualistic faith. We are a faith tradition which emphasizes laws, customs, and traditions; we have practices that we have observed for

centuries. And that has been both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because rituals bind us together, with each other and with our past. There is something wonderful knowing that we are doing the exact same thing that our parents, grandparents, and ancestors have faithfully maintained for centuries. These prayers we recite today are the same words, uttered in the same language, and chanted in virtually the same way as Jews have done for hundreds of years. The Kol Nidrei that still stirs our core has been recited for over 1000 years; the chant our cantor used for it last night has been heard for over 500 years. Some of the words and prayers last night and today are well over two thousand years old, almost word for word. A ritual like the sounding of the shofar is pretty much the exact same ritual Jews have used to welcome Rosh Hashanah since living in the Levant. That is an incredible blessing! That is an anchor, a great source of comfort in a turbulent world.

It is also a blessing knowing that what we are doing, what we are singing, what we are declaring is being done and said in synagogues around the world. There is a lot to be said for understanding what it is we are praying in the Hebrew but, let me tell you, the fact that we as Jews could go anywhere on this planet where there are Jews, walk in, not know the native tongue and local customs and instantly feel at home at this service is because of the binding nature of the Hebrew language and the emphasis on the same rituals. For these few hours at synagogue, we may not be able to communicate with a Pole, a Russian, or a Swede in their language nor understand

their culture, but in their shuls, there would be no language barrier, no sense of discomfort, and no uneasiness. We would be at home. We would be with our people.

However, rituals are also a curse. The curse is that whenever you do something long enough, it becomes rote. You do something over and over again, day after day, year after year and it can become drained of meaning.

It has been quite heartening to hear the positive reaction to the new five minute videos we have been creating for our web site. In case your oblivious to the internet (and sometimes, my wife wishes I was!), we have been creating short videos for bnaijacob.com entitled **B'nai Jacob 101: your cram session and guide to being a part of our congregation.** All we are doing is showing people how we practice our traditions in general, and at B'nai Jacob Synagogue in particular- how to do Hagba and G'lila (lift and dress the Torah), how to be called to the Torah, what to expect at High Holiday services. Future videos will explain why we have 'Second Days' of holidays, what is Kaddish, how to put on Tallit and Tefillin, how to put up a Mezuzah, the proper way to light the Chanukiah (The Chanukah candelabra) and more. What is interesting is not just the reaction from people who have never done these rituals, but the comments of those who have and who didn't know why they were doing them or what they meant.

That is the curse of ritual. Rituals become rote, devoid of all meaning. The fact that so many are learning

about the “why” of our rituals means a lot of us just go through the motions. And that may explain why some over time eventually drop them. They don’t know why they do them so they discard them as meaningless.

But without rituals, people also discover that something is missing in their lives.

So let me tell you about Karen Armstrong.

Armstrong is a British author and former nun. She has written 12 books on comparative religion. She has taught courses at the Leo Baeck College, a rabbinical school in London and though not of the Jewish faith, has been particularly inspired by our tradition’s emphasis on practices and rituals. She views our rituals as our greatest strength but for a completely different reason than the one I mentioned earlier.

In her book, “A History of G-d”, she writes something that is almost counter-intuitive but gives us a great insight into why Judaism is so rich in value and has created so much religious thinking down through the centuries. She writes:

***Rituals are not the product of religious ideas;
religious ideas are the products of rituals.***

Think about that for a moment and you’ll understand what she means and what that implies for us as Jews. We like to think of rituals as products of an idea. Give you an

example. Why do we eat Matzah (the ritual of the unleavened bread)? Matzah reminds us of how we left Egypt in haste, before we had time to let our bread rise. We remind ourselves of the Exodus through the ritual of Matzah.

A religious idea produces a ritual.

Why do we circumcise our male children? It is to remind us of how our ancestor Abraham performed the ‘Brit Milah’, creating a covenantal relationship with G-d. And just as Abraham performed the act on the eighth day for his son Isaac, we do the same thing.

Again, a religious idea produces a ritual.

Karen Armstrong offers another way of thinking and that is that rituals are not always performed as a result of an idea but rather to plant and *create* ideas in mind of followers. Many rituals start as a result of ideas, but more often than not, rituals develop a life of their own and have value on their own. Human beings need rituals regardless of whether there is a reason. We actually need rituals because they help us unlock the rigid mind that can only think concretely. Rituals give us the ability to create spirituality and spiritual ideas.

This may be tough to follow but let me see if I can simplify what she is saying with a personal story, a story that helps make Armstrong’s point and but also explains

how I *could* have been a rich man (how I began my sermon!).

Rabbi Morris Besdin, of blessed memory, was my very first teacher at Yeshiva University. A short and stocky man, he was a former army chaplain but more importantly, the head of the James Striar School of General Jewish Studies. He was the rabbi you went to if you came to Yeshiva University with anything less than a yeshiva day school background.

At that time, there were lots of students like myself who had not come from Orthodox backgrounds, and many of us were not fully observant. It was his goal, and he relished that opportunity as a former military man, to “whip us into shape”. He was there to make us good “yeshiva bochrin” (young men of the academy). He acted tough, but we adored the guy. He respected us; we idolized him. We learned so much under his watchful eye and methodology.

And I could have earned a fortune with his system if I would have thought about it more!

I’ll never forget the first day of classes. There he was in the front of the room, hands behind his back walking back and forth. He said to us (with a booming voice): I will teach you **how** to perform the mitzvot, the commandments. You want to talk about why we do them, the background and the history? That is not why we are

here in this class. ***Here, we teach it, not about it.*** We learn how to do it. Just do it.

Just do it.

You must think: “wow, I am glad I wasn’t there!” My friends, I have never had a better instructor than Rabbi Besdin. He taught us not only ***how*** to practice Judaism, but how to develop a pathway to spiritual ideas. Just do it. Learn it. Practice it. And by doing so, you will soon develop the ideas and attain the ‘keys’ that unlock spiritual thoughts.

That is Karen Armstrong’s point about Judaism and religious practices. Our rituals create spiritual ideas.

People always come up to rabbis and tell us they really want to become more spiritual and more in touch with their Jewish heritage. Everyone wants a book or a sermon or a class that does that for them. But there are no books nor sermons nor classes that do that. You don’t become spiritual by *reading* about spirituality any more than you become a better tennis player by reading about tennis. You learn, you develop, and you grow as a Jew by *doing* Judaism.

It. Not about it.

And guess what? You do it enough times, you work at it and trust me, you will develop and grow ideas about G-d and spirituality that you never thought possible. Leave

your intellect for a moment. Push aside the rational for a while. Forget about the need to always know the why. Just do it. That is Armstrong's point. Rituals create spiritual ideas. They help open the mind to the G-dly.

One group of Jews that understands that is Chabad. Chabad is a branch of Chasidic Judaism that is willing to do outreach. Chabad are the ones on the street corners of New York, inviting Jew males to put on tefillin and Jewish women to light Shabbat candles (*Editors note: they recently erected a sukkah on Wall Street for the "Occupy Wall Street" protesters. They never miss an opportunity for outreach!*) They don't go into the philosophy or the ideas behind the rituals. They as a emphasize a "just do it" approach; the idea that one should try to simply incorporate Jewish rituals into one's daily lives. By doing so, you will learn to understand the beauty and the magic of Judaism. Kol hakavod. More power to them. They realize that rituals open the heart to ideas, creating pathways to spirituality.

To their credit, Reform Judaism is also embracing the importance of and the spiritually nourishing value of rituals. Shunned as relics of the past for decades, Reform Judaism is now encouraging their followers to discover the power of spirituality through the rituals of our people. Kol hakavod. More power to them, as well.

If you are struggling to find your spiritual voice, you may want to try to embrace the power of rituals, rituals that you may have dismissed as passé. As Karen Armstrong

suggests, they may actually be the pathway to religious and spiritual living.

You want to grow as a Jew this year? Embrace the rituals of our heritage! You want to understand Shabbat? Keep it! You want to find spiritual peace? Come down and daven (pray) with us! And don't come in thinking if you do it once, things will come to you. Just do it. Again. And again. Trust me. You will find your spiritual center of gravity.

My fellow Jews, as we begin a new year, we always ask G-d to turn our hearts to Him. We ask for strength to feel His presence and guidance. This year, we should try something different. Let us ask G-d instead to help us act at becoming practicing Jews. Rituals create the spiritual ideas in our hearts and bring us closer to G-d. This year, instead of reaching for a book, as Rabbi Besdin (alav hashalom) told us, just do it.

Nike has made a lot of money on Dan Weiden's slogan in 1988. Just Do It. I missed my financial ticket when I heard it first from Rabbi Besdin in 1978. But there is a lot of spiritual wealth to be found in those words.

Just do it!

Amen