

Three Suggested Activities Using *INVENTING JEWISH RITUAL*

by VANESSA OCHS

Explore the meanings of Jewish Objects, old and new:

- A. Ask each member of the group to bring in two Jewish objects that hold special meaning for them: one should express what they think of as continuity with the Jewish past, and the other should express new ways of being Jewish. (Alternatively, you might ask them to bring in the oldest and newest Jewish objects they own, specifying that they needn't be ritual objects, such as a kiddush cup or tallit, but, rather, objects that are expressive of their Jewish commitments—such as an object that represents their commitment to tikkun olam, learning, or their own spiritual path).
- B. Have group members share their objects. Invite them to tell the story of how the objects came into their lives, how they actually use them (even if it is not the conventional Jewish use), and what meanings they hope the objects might convey if they were to pass them on to the next generation. Assure members that they needn't report on the "official" story of an object's meaning or traditional use, one that a rabbi might know. It's their own story that matters.
- C. Ask members to think about how they relate to the old and new objects differently. If anyone brings in a new ritual object, such as a Miriam's cup, women's tallit, or a haggadah for a feminist seder, explore how these new objects have quickly become dear repositories of memory.
- D. Group leaders should know in advance that talking about the Jewish objects, old or new, conventional or idiosyncratic, can elicit a good deal of memory and feeling, and may want to assure the members that this is a welcome place to express themselves. Reassure them that what they share in the group is intended to be private, unless group members are given permission to share what they have heard.

INVENTING JEWISH RITUAL



Vanessa L. Ochs

NEW RITUAL PRACTICES

*For a more complete guide, see the appendix to *Inventing Jewish Ritual**

LIFE CYCLE/RITES OF PASSAGE

Simchat ha-bat: a naming ceremony for girls
Providing a "Miriam's chair" at a simchat ha-bat
Naming ceremonies for baby boys that omit circumcision
Adoption rituals
Rituals for the beginning of menstruation
"Car mitzvah:" presenting teenagers who have gotten their drivers licenses with prayers of protection and a special key chain inscribed with the "Traveler's Prayer"
Internet dating
L'chaim party for an engagement
Making a huppah at a bridal shower
Interfaith and egalitarian ketubot
Prenuptial agreements signed at Orthodox weddings protecting women in the case of divorce
Prayers said for agunot, women whose husbands refuse to grant them a get, a decree of divorce
Commitment and wedding ceremonies for gay couples
Divorce rituals
Pregnancy rituals
Infertility rituals
Miscarriage rituals
Rituals for mourning a stillbirth
Nursing and weaning rituals
Adult bat/bar mitzvah
Ceremony for taking on a Hebrew name as an adult
Hanukkat ha-bayit: moving to a new house
Leaving for college
Coming-of-age ceremonies (40th, 50th, 60th, 70th, and 80th birthdays)
Menopause rituals
Simchat hokhmah/eldering
Retiring ceremonies
New yahrzeit practices/memorial

HOLY DAYS

Sending interfaith and comic Jewish holiday greeting cards
Rosh Hodesh groups
Shabbat practices: communal ritual baths, Shabbat angel cards
Spiritual preparations for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur
Holding a Rosh Hashanah seder
Ushpizin ceremonies on Sukkot honoring great Jewish women

Spending Christmas in Jewish ways
Tu b'Shevat seder
Sending community-wide mishloach manot (Purim baskets) as a fund-raiser
A feminist Ta'anit Ester (fast before Purim)
"Unmasking Esther," a woman's Purim observance
Esther/Vashti flags
Homemade, feminist, and social-action haggadot
Holding a communal tikkun (all-night study) for Shavuot
Yom ha-Atzmaut at the JCC
Communal Holocaust memorial days

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Going on a Jewish retreat
Jewish meditation practices
Torah Yoga
Aleph-Bet Yoga
Group aliyot
The one-way mechitzah in Orthodox settings,
Women's tefillah groups for Orthodox women
Orthodox female rabbis/rabbinic interns
Virtual prayer, cyber Torah study
Healing services
Healing practices for patients and caregivers
Wearing healing amulets
Ceremonies for healing from abuse
Ritual displays of Jewish identity: wearing jewelry of Jewish charitable organizations (such as Lion of Judah jewelry)
Communal pieties: communal "mitzvah days," solidarity rallies, prayer vigils, Super Sundays, missions to Israel
Attending a Jewish film festival
Keeping or reading a Jewish blog
Collecting and preserving Yiddish books
Taking home videos of Jewish ritual events and watching them
Composing new Jewish music
Creating Jewish performance art
Creating a scrapbook of Jewish family life
Researching and documenting genealogy
Applying Jewish ethical principles to agriculture, ecology, and current pressing issues in social justice

2. Find evidence of new ways of being Jewish by “curating” a mini-exhibit of contemporary Jewish life

- A. Ask group members to explore material objects in their own homes that reveal the range and diversity of Jewish experiences in our age. Select three objects that strike members as being especially indicative of Jewish life right now, objects they might choose if they were creating an exhibit that represented Jewish life at this very moment.
- B. Ask: If they were museum curators who needed to write an interpretive statement to be hung alongside each object in a museum exhibit, how would they explain some of the multiple meanings of their objects? Questions they might consider including:
- How does the object connect to the past, evoking stories and memories?
 - What kind of feelings does the object evoke, and what kinds of acts does it inspire?
 - How does the object connect you to other Jews?
 - How does the object express new ways of being Jewish and living a Jewish life?
 - Could the object be considered sacred in any way? For example, is it a reminder of Jewish identity? If the object is not used traditionally (for instance, if it a mezuzah that is worn around the neck instead of hung on a doorway, or if it is an interfaith ketuba) does it still lead to a life of greater purpose, moral depth, joy, or commitment to others?
 - How does the object create the “Jewishness” of a Jewish home?

3. Take an ethnographic journey through your own Jewish life, in order to seek clues to vibrant new ways in which Jewish life is being expressed and transmitted.

- A. Take an ethnographic journey into your own Jewish world. Collect evidence of Jewish innovation that is inspired by the plethora of new and emerging spiritual practices, rituals, liturgies, and ritual objects that expand the possibilities for contemporary sacred Jewish experience. Look for signs of new ways that Jews live, worship, re-create, or study. Seek signs—even ones that surprise you—that Jews are expressing themselves in Jewish ways. Search your synagogue, JCC, Jewish day school, your grocery store, your kitchen, living room, jewelry box and refrigerator. Compile what you see, either in a written or photographic inventory.
- B. Consider—Do any of the objects reflect:
- 1) nostalgia for tradition or suspicion of it?
 - 2) a push and pull between yearning for ethnic cohesion and acculturation?
 - 3) a tension between institutionalized, text-based Judaism and the Judaism actually practiced by the whole range of people who constitute a folk?
 - 4) signs of vibrant new expressions of Jewish life and identity?

This modern day exploration is inspired by that of Sh. Ansky nearly a century ago: Between 1911 and 1915, Ansky (best known for his play, *The Dybbuk*) led ethnographic expeditions to the Eastern European shtetls to preserve and document the artifacts, stories, songs, clothing, and even healing practices of Jewish life. He feared they would be forgotten, the inevitable consequence of a growing abandonment of a traditional Jewish way of life, or be destroyed, as a consequence of the devastations of war. He gathered an entourage that included the writer Y. L. Peretz, a composer, an ethnomusicologist, a painter, and a photographer. Abraham Rechtsman, one of the assembled, recalled:

Everywhere we came we collected the historical treasures we found: we noted down tales, legends, sayings, spells, remedies and histories told to us by men and women; we documented stories about demons, dybbuks ... we recorded old melodies—nigunim, as well as prayers and folksongs; we photographed old synagogues, historical places, tombstones, shtiblech of tzadikim (the prayer houses of revered, holy men) ... and we collected or bought Jewish antiques, documents, pinkassim (record books), religious articles, jewelry, costumes.

Ansky and Peretz entreated Jews everywhere to follow their lead and preserve Jewish life. “Record, take it down,

and collect. See to it that nothing is lost or forgotten ... record everything, knowing thereby that you are collecting necessary material for the construction of Jewish history during this horribly important and terribly vital moment ... whatever can be recorded should be recorded, and whatever can be photographed should be photographed."

The appendix of *Inventing Jewish Ritual* offers some hints based on my own Jewish ethnographic expeditions:

"See what clues—true and false—the placement of objects gives you. Sometimes placement indicates greater or lesser importance, but it is hard to know that for sure without asking your "informants" for more information. I encourage you to do that. For instance, I display a Hanukkah menorah prominently on my living-room shelf and keep all my Shabbat implements: candleholders, candles, hallah board and cover, and Shabbat angel cards in a closed cabinet in my dining room. Unless you asked me, you might think the menorah is in some way more holy or precious to me. In fact, it is the Shabbat items that are most dear, as they are used each week: they are stored for my convenience and to protect them from dust.

Try to distinguish between objects that are explicitly and implicitly Jewish. See if you can determine how the holiness of the object might be measured by traditional means, and how it might be experienced more idiosyncratically. Especially memorable in my own ethnographic journey was the Morristown, New Jersey home of Susan Adler, where, in her kitchen alone, I found piles of magazines: Sh'ma, Moment, Tikkun, Hadassah, and a Bon Appetit, dog eared on pages featuring latkes and flourless Passover tortes. This suggested to me that Jewish ritual "text" study was no longer really limited to the canonized texts, and that the place of study had extended beyond yeshivot and synagogues and into the home. (Does the study of Jewish recipes "count" as Jewish study? Given that Leviticus contains "recipes" for the grain offerings of the priests, I could contend that recipes have an illustrious place in Jewish text.) On Adler's wall, there were prints of an old synagogue in Prague, with images of Jewish people floating, a cross between Kabbalah and Chagall. These were souvenirs from "roots" trips: "Having them reminds me where I was, gives me a good-luck charm," she said. "I like the mystical piece of it." On one wall was a framed needlepoint of the word shalom made 25 years ago, a framed photograph of Susan as chair of the UJA Women's division, bubbe and zayde dolls, over a dozen Jewish cookbooks, a refrigerator covered with bar and bat mitzvah invitations and photographs of a nephew's recent bar mitzvah, a synagogue calendar and directory, and tzedakah boxes. Such images and objects spoke to my informant as creators of Jewish identity for herself and her family—they were not just décor.

There was a tray of silver Kiddush Cups that stayed out always: some were conventional, but others were "reclaimed": "I buy Kiddush Cups at antique shops," Susan told me. "I take them away. I rescue them. I don't want anyone who doesn't know what they are to have them." These reclaimings too suggested rituals of redemption, perhaps inspired by her community's emphatic embrace of Jews coming from the former Soviet Union, a project that was not as much about rescue as it was about hoping to transform secular Russians into observant Jews.

You will discover, as I did, how to locate new Jewish practices by examining the texts and ritual objects the practices are generating. For instance, in my mail I found invitations to seminars on Jewish meditation; newsletters from the National Center for Jewish Healing that provided healing blessings for patients and doctors as well as healing practices for many of the Jewish holidays; and advertisements for personalized Rosh Hashanah cards I could order from three different organizations. In my wicker baskets at home where I keep miscellaneous objects, I found bar and bat mitzvah souvenirs, women's kippot, Passover/Easter and Hanukkah/Christmas cards, Hanukkah novelties and decorations, an advertisement for a Passover "plague" kit, and healing amulets my daughters had made. Behind these texts and objects lay new practices particular to this generation, ways of being Jewish that are ethical, creative, vibrant, and celebratory.