Ritual and the Elongation of Spiritual Time
Or Why I Clean for Passover

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*I am deeply indebted to Rebecca Milder and Matt Price for invaluable conversations about the ideas contained in this piece and for their comments on earlier drafts. I have also benefited from discussions with Mari Chernow, Charles Cohen, Ken Shepsle, and Matt Stephenson.
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*It is the people’s soul into which the individual soul enters…immortality acquires the meaning of the historical living-on of the individual in the historical continuity of his people.* – Hermann Cohen

What is ritual’s claim on us as liberal Jews? How do we choose our level and type of observance? To what extent are we bound to take the *halakhah* seriously?

For liberal Jews committed to a philosophy of personal autonomy the answers to these questions do not flow from a sense of moral necessity or Divine obligation. We face the considerably more daunting task of locating meaning within ritual life in the absence of an absolute commitment to *Halakhic* observance as such.

I wish to suggest one possible answer to the question, “What are the sources of ritual’s spiritual power?”: memory born of repetition. Cyclical rituals observed over and over become repositories of memory, eliciting a sense of connection to our personal and historic pasts through their enactment. Ritual observance, on this view, is of necessity a long-term commitment. The fullness of spiritual meaning can only be accessed through a lifetime of observance.

The roots of this understanding of the source of meaning in ritual life lie in the words of the Psalmist, “Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.”2 This text, when read interpretively as a practical instruction for religious life, rather than as simply a beautiful declaration of teleological hope amidst historical suffering, evokes a conception of ritual that is at once liberal – accepting ritual observance as an ongoing, autonomous search for meaning – yet which challenges the sagacity of the standard view of autonomy which

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2 Psalm 126. “Hazor’im b’dim’a b’rina yiktsoru.”
empowers individuals to reject or alter ritual practices contingent only on an educated interaction with tradition. How can one ever reject a ritual as lacking in meaning without first having devoted a lifetime to developing those memories that lend it meaning?

Before delving too far into the depths of theology and religious psychology, perhaps clarity would be best served by a personal illustration of the idea at hand. My search for a theoretical edifice with which I could support my commitment to ritual was renewed when my dissertation advisor, a Jew, asked why my wife, Rebecca, and I clean our home for Pesach. In mulling this question over I became aware of a puzzle: despite sharing a similar commitment to Jewish life in most respects, Rebecca loves to clean for Passover while I quite dislike it. The source of this discrepancy, I believe, is memory.

In Rebecca’s childhood home, Pesach meant cleaning. Scrubbing the floor, for her, evokes the spirit of the holiday. And so she cleans with the same energy and joy with which we cook Shabbat dinner or, I imagine, Christians decorate their trees in December. In my home, there was no special effort for Passover. And because there is no obvious, intrinsic relationship between cleaning and the Exodus (as there is with, say, matzah) cleaning, for me, evokes cleaning – an unpleasant necessity of life, not a path to spiritual elevation. Because of the absence of associative memory, Passover cleaning, as yet, has little spiritual content for me.

How can a ritualized action, of itself devoid of philosophical or spiritual content, nonetheless evoke a spiritual response? Because whenever in the cycle of Jewish life it is time to access particular spiritual categories, we engage in particular actions. Through repetition, the associations are etched into our souls. They become instinctual, Pavlovian. Thus we are instructed to reserve foods we especially enjoy for Shabbat, in order to build
layers of joyous connections. Repetition, rather than dulling our spiritual sensitivity, is meaning’s most effective conduit.

This understanding of ritual is clearest for rituals that lack intrinsic theological or historical content, as they evoke a spiritual state only through a constructed association reinforced by repetition. Nonetheless, it extends quite naturally, if less vitally, to rituals possessing such native meaning.

This effect of repeated ritual on our psyches may be part of the purpose of the halakhah. The Jew cleaning for Passover seems quite similar to Rabbi Soloveitchik’s halakhic man, who when he “sees the first light of dawn and the glowing rays of the rising sun…knows that this…sunrise imposes upon him anew obligations and commandments.” When we scour our kitchens for chametz we automatically begin the recollection of the Exodus. Not because our ancestors scrubbed floors when they went forth from Egypt, but because we thought of these themes last year, and in every previous year, when we cleaned.

With every repetition, the suggestive power of ritual acts becomes stronger. Over time, not only does ritual behavior transport us into the proper spiritual category, it intensifies the spiritual experience by folding memory upon memory, accordion-like, to construct a moment dense with meaning. Bedikat chametz fulfills not just a Pavlovian role – sparking us to contemplate our redemption – it also stirs us to recall and re-live the associations that surrounded this observance in years past, mingling our current thoughts and feelings with a lifetime of Passover experiences.

The scope of a memory-based understanding of ritual

There are, of course, ritual observances in Jewish tradition for which the power of repetition does not seem to provide a compelling framework for meaning. In order for rituals to build meaning through repetition they must facilitate the accumulation of affiliated memories. This suggests two preconditions: specific action and repetition.

Specific action – positive commandments – is prerequisite because associative memory cannot be built, nor its recollection triggered, by acts of omission. It is difficult to imagine nostalgic reflection on the times one did not eat *treif*, but such reverie with regard to building a *sukkah* seems quite natural.

However, not all negative commandments lack the capacity to create meaning through memory and repetition. Such evaluation is highly contingent on time and place. Rituals of omission observed in aid of some positive commandment help to establish associations with the broader, positive ritual observance. For instance, one may not form memories around not transgressing the prohibitions of *Shabbat*. However, a lifetime of *Shabbat* observance creates a profound store of memories that makes keeping the Sabbath ever more meaningful. Such memories are associated, in part, with specific positive *Shabbat* rituals such as lighting candles, eating *challah*, or singing *z’mirot*. However, just as deep are the emotional associations with *Shabbat* as such, and these are created by *Shabbat* observance more generally, including the prohibitions. Indeed, one might argue that even *kashrut*, the ritual of omission par excellence, can play a role in memory formation in the proper context. A friend who lived in China, for instance, describes with vivid recollection the feeling of affirming his Jewish identity every time he chose not to eat the ubiquitous *treif*. Even today, living in a warm community of Jews
in the United States, his memory is stirred and his sense of spiritual connection to Klal Yisrael renewed each time he chooses not to eat treif in a restaurant.4

The second essential characteristic is repetition. Without repetition no accumulation of memory is possible. It is important, however, to adopt the proper perspective in evaluating whether a ritual is repeated. It might seem, for instance, that the rituals of the life-cycle do not qualify. After all, one becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah only one time, hopes to stand at the chuppah as bride or groom only once, even attends the B’rit Milah of one’s children at most only a very few times. Were the framework of repetition and memory incapable of finding meaning in such fundamental elements of Jewish ritual life, its utility would be questionable indeed. However, such is not the case if one abandons the individualistic perspective in favor of a communal one.

It is true that a Jew ideally comes to the chuppah as bride or groom but once, seemingly precluding the possibility of creating layers of memory associated with the act of marrying. However, the communal perspective leads to a different conclusion. While an individual only participates in the wedding as bride or groom once, every Jew participates as a member of the kahal at dozens of weddings throughout his or her life. This too is a meaningful ritual experience. Singing and heckling during the tisch, dancing before the newlyweds, or hearing the sheva brachot stirs in people the recollection of their own wedding and those of their children, grandchildren, and fellow community members. This evocation makes the joy of celebration sweeter with each wedding. But the power of the reverie is dependent on tradition. Of course one remembers one’s own wedding at any wedding, but how much more deeply when the same symbols are present, the same words spoken, the same songs sung?

4 I am indebted to Matt Stephenson for sharing his thoughts on this subject.
While bride and groom cannot create layers of memory for themselves by observing traditional ritual, they can provide a ritual experience for their community that can both be folded into and evoke the community’s memories of previous weddings. So too with all of the life-cycle rituals. Each individual may only be the key player in a life-cycle event a few times, but the community is present over and over again. If each individual does not commit to follow ritual tradition when his or her time comes to take “center stage”, the members of the community will be denied the opportunity to build the layers of memory that enrich their spiritual lives.

This memory orientation towards ritual, therefore, also suggests an understanding of the importance of minhag ha-makom. When engaged in communal religious life, it behooves a person to show fidelity to the traditions of the community. Communal rituals, just as personal or familial rituals, have the power to create repositories of memory that sharpen spiritual awareness by transporting us ever more deeply into the spiritual category and emotional state associated with the particular observance. Indeed, communal rituals may do so even more powerfully by evoking memories not only within individuals but between individuals who share recollections. Through communal observance, shared memory becomes the stuff of collective consciousness.

Memory and Eternity

Whether individual or communal, ritual is endowed with the power to elongate spiritual time. A ritual moment contains not only itself, but all the moments brought forth in memory by its enactment. Spiritual time becomes dense. The moment is intensified. This ritual inspired re-connection with our past becomes integrated into, and inseparable from,
the spiritual experience itself. And as we transmit the meaning of these practices across
generations, we pass on our own elongated, intensified moments. Every generation, thus,
holds the possibility of experiencing the full sweep of Jewish history condensed within
each ritualized act. Infinity in a moment.

Ritual is a Jew’s bridge to the distant past and the distant future, a chain of
intensified moments, impossibly dense with memory. We can only imagine the power
and depth of meaning our ritual acts will contain beyond the horizon of our own finitude.
The individual, through participation in ritual, becomes part of the endless lattice of
memory and an essential element in the unfolding, collective search for meaning. Our
thoughts and feelings enter into eternity as part of the collective consciousness and
historical memory of the Jewish people. Through our experience of the fullness of
memory and spiritual meaning evoked by ritual observance, and through our own
contribution to the historical, communal, and personal memories encapsulated within our
rituals, we gain a share of immortality. And thus, the words of the Baal Shem Tov can be
heard echoing in every ritual act: “Memory is the very root of redemption.”

Why tears?

Why, we might ask, do we “sow in tears”? Must rituals be onerous to have this capacity
for intensification? The argument is certainly clearest for such observances, long-term
meaning standing in sharp relief to short-term unpleasantness. However, the underlying
workings of memory and repetition apply as directly to enjoyable mitzvot.

The image of sowing in tears and reaping in joy instead suggests a more subtle
understanding of spiritual joy. Even the most enjoyable rituals can seem thin and

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5 “Ha-z’chira hi shoresh ha-ge’ulah.”
unfulfilling when first encountered. But these initial difficulties, these “tears”, are essential. Religious life is an investment and a discipline. Spiritual insight that is fully accessible even to the child or neophyte could not be other than obvious or shallow. Ours is not a spirituality of momentary gratification. There may be highs, flashes of ecstasy, but these are not the essence of spiritual joy. Rather, the fundamental challenge is to access meaning. Over time rituals are transformed through repetition into repositories of memory and insight. Our tradition’s ritual structure allows us to access ever deeper levels of spiritual meaning through a lifetime of observance. As such, at the beginning observance is difficult even when enjoyable. We sow experiences in tears that repetition, over a lifetime, transmutes into spiritual moments – elongated with layers of memory and dense with meaning – that we reap in joy.

This view of ritual offers no easy answers. It affirms a liberal view of ritual, one grounded in an autonomous search for meaning rather than in halakhic obligation. But it raises concerns about a philosophy of autonomy that is predicated on an educated interaction with, and evaluation of, tradition.

In the standard formulation we learn, we experiment, and finally, we employ our reason to accept, alter, or reject. But ritual’s use of memory and repetition to create meaning raises into question our competence to evaluate. Ritual is difficult at first precisely because we lack memory born of repetition. I dislike cleaning for Passover. I have never been stirred by cleaning to contemplate or experience the Exodus, redemption, or my own freedom. Ought I to conclude that, at least subjectively, this ritual practice is devoid of spiritual content? Were I to exercise my autonomy in this manner, I suspect that I would regret it down the road. My shortsightedness would deprive me both
of instinctual associations between cleaning and Passover and of a lifetime of memories. Ultimately such a decision would rob me of the opportunity to experience the full spiritual richness of Passover. A richness that I cannot yet hope to imagine.

I find myself, then, in the midst of a still unresolved puzzle. The very framework that allows me to relate to ritual as an autonomous individual engaged in a search for meaning leads me to be skeptical of the wisdom of ever exercising that autonomy. However, the recognition of this paradox is itself transformative. I proceed confident in a liberal vision of ritual, yet willing to exercise my autonomy only with care and trepidation. By acknowledging that a fulfilling religious life, like all things worthwhile, requires work and self-control I compel myself to avoid the new-age trap of assuming that all religious practices must be comprehensible and rewarding – must “do it” for me – the moment I encounter them. Finally, I confront tradition well cautioned that when I reject ritual observances I run the risk that, a lifetime hence, I will wish I had sown those seeds of memory and association from which spiritual insight and meaning might eventually be reaped.