

Rituals and me: some thought-provoking thoughts

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Nobody seems to know clearly what the word "ritual" means; there are whole books on the problem of its definition. I will use the word "ritual" in the following to describe any repeated, commonly known, nonverbal, symbolic acts used during Jewish prayer: the non-verbal aspects of prayer so to say.

Rituals are not learned theoretically. They are learned by doing, mainly by copying others. My Jewish formation period happened between two extremes: the German liberal Jewish tradition taught me to be sceptical towards rituals. They are not rational and don't enhance necessarily ethical behaviour. Therefore they are mostly useless and therefore highly questionable. I learned, that one only should do rituals if they would really underline ones own attitudes. On the other hand I met in my congregations people from different places doing a lot of things during prayer and in our congregation we often had discussions about what we should do and when and why. In Cologne I learned Franz Rosenzweig's position: when asked, if he would do this or that ritual, he didn't reply "no" but "not yet". So maybe, some of the things I don't practise today, I may do in some ten years, as my own attitudes will change. At the moment I do rituals for basically four different reasons:

Some rituals I deliberately practise, because they have a very powerful symbolic meaning to me personally. I even need them to add more meaning to the words I say. For example the *tallit*: Being a academic it is my profession to study liturgical texts from an objective, distanced position, observing critically and objectively what different religious groups do and say in liturgy. Praying however means that there is no distance to the prayers any more. They formulate my tasks, they educate me and I am in dialogue with this old tradition, I

question it, I cherish it, I struggle with it, I trust. Being wrapped in a *tallit* constantly reminds me that this is now prayer, not academic analysis. The *ziziyot* remind me, that it is all about *mitzvot* and ethical behaviour, not just interesting words. At other times the *tallit* comforts me, it symbolizes that God's presence surrounds me as this piece of cloth. At again other times the *tallit* symbolizes my belonging to the Jewish community. The *tallit* is the Jewish symbol I cherish the most and I'm grateful that my Jewish formation period happened in congregations, where wearing a *tallit* was absolutely common and usual for women and men without any discussions. I'm grateful to have been given this powerful symbol.

Other rituals I do or don't out of respect of others. I once lead a service during a Jewish conference and a woman came highly upset to me afterwards as I hadn't covered my head while leading prayer. (I simply wasn't used to this in my congregations so far.) Until today I don't really understand even why men cover their heads, as *halakha* commands it only for married women and our present society does not know the custom to show respect by covering ones heads. But I obviously make people happy by wearing a head covering when leading prayer. Later I also started to wear it when others lead the prayers to avoid making a difference between me leading and them leading, but only when the custom of head covering is followed in that certain group. As this ritual does not have a special meaning to me, I only do it out of respect for others.

Some rituals I deliberately do not do yet, because I haven't discovered any helpful meaning for me personally. I started wearing *tefillin* some years ago to test if this could become a meaningful ritual. I liked the theory behind it very much:

Tefillin are a daily reminder of the exodus of Egypt, they are symbols that our actions and our thoughts should be directed by our love of God, so all good and powerful reasons to practise this ritual. I discovered however, that *Tefillin* for me are a pure masculine symbol. Despite all the many reasons to wear them, I didn't feel well, but strange and stopped to use them after a year. It felt strange, it was not really mine.

Some rituals I do, but deliberately differently. During the second blessing before the *shema* many people take all the four *ziziyot* of their *tallit* and hold them together. We grasp them during the words "*vehavienu lesbalom mearba kanfot ba'aretz*" (Bring us back in peace from the four corners of the earth ...). I usually take only two sets of *ziziyot*, as I honour and value the fact that the state of Israel exists, but at the moment I cherish diversity and I would not want one big unity, but I like the fact that Jews live all over the world and have many different interpretations of Judaism. So symbolically I leave two other pairs of *ziziyot* ungathered for the sake of diversity. Their unity is, that they all belong to the same *tallit*, not that they are all together in one place. (My open question at the moment still is, what I do, when I lead the community's prayer, as I don't want to provoke in this position, but feel I have to accept the majority's position.) Rituals have to be honest, to my mind, but at the same time I feel that I have to show respect to others.

My basic questions to any ritual act are: What are the reasons to do this? Does this express my own attitudes? Are any congregational issues involved? Generally I made the experience that rituals enhance my prayer experience. They add something, I could not express in words. And most of them help to create community.