

Jewish Routines: Springboards for Growth and Change
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I have a friend from Camp Ramah in Wisconsin whose father is a rabbi. On Friday nights, his family always ate chicken. If the sun rose Friday morning, this family was eating chicken Friday night. Until one week, the wife just couldn't take it any longer. So she took action...by fixing fish for Shabbat dinner. The rabbi noticed and gave her a loving look requesting that this not occur again. His wife agreed. *Ten years later*, she began to tire again of chicken and quietly prepared fish instead for Shabbos dinner. The rabbi noticed, looked at his wife, and asked, "Fish again?"

Ten years later! That's what I call a long memory.

Our people the Jews, in some ways, seem to have a very short memory. We do the same things again and again...and again. At today's Shabbat services we'll daven the same words we did last week, last month, last year, etc. The Torah reading is unchanged from last year and next year. The prayers, the Torah readings, the Mitzvot, the holidays - all that never changes. But why?

Judaism sweeps us into a routine, and while the routine itself doesn't change, the routine changes *us*.

First, routine is the foundation of genius.

There's a book by Mason Currey called Daily Rituals: How Great Minds Make Time, Find Inspiration, and Get to Work. He chronicles that most creative people have daily rituals.

For example, Beethoven. "The famous composer rose each morning at dawn and made himself coffee. He was fastidious about this: each cup had to be made with exactly sixty beans, which he counted out each time. He would then sit at his desk and compose until 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. Each night after supper he would have a beer, smoke a pipe, and go to bed early, 10:00 pm at the latest."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks applies this to Judaism. He writes that, "Judaism's greatness is that it takes high ideals and exalted visions – image of God, faith in God, love of neighbour – and turns them into patterns of behaviour. Halakhah, (Jewish law), involves a set of routines that – like those of the great creative minds – reconfigures the brain, giving discipline to our lives and changing the way we feel, think and act. Much of Judaism must seem to outsiders, and sometimes to insiders also, boring, prosaic, mundane, repetitive, routine, obsessed with details and bereft for the most part of drama or inspiration. Yet that is precisely what writing the novel, composing the symphony, directing the film, perfecting the killer app, or building a billion-dollar business is,

most of the time. It is a matter of hard work, focused attention and daily rituals. That is where all sustainable greatness comes from.”

In other words, routine sparks creativity.

The second virtue of routines is that practice makes perfect. Only by reading, rereading, and then re-rereading can one come to any deep understanding of any text. Certainly our holy Torah deserves nothing less. If we don't want to forget something, we read it a few times. But our goal of studying Torah should not be merely not to forget but to make it top of mind. That level of mastery calls for more review.

A New Jersey friend of mine was describing his relationship with golf when he said, “practice doesn't always make perfect, but practice always makes permanent.” Sadly this pearl of golf wisdom did not by itself improve my golf game! But his insight contains Torah. Who we are is the sum of what our habits are. And repetition creates habits.

Let's take Tzedakah as an example. Which of these is a better way to give? To give \$100 to one person, or \$1 to 100 people? I'm curious what you think. Who here says A, to give \$100 to one person? Who here says B, to give \$1 to 100 people? Both are virtuous, and both total the same generosity.

But Maimonides says B, it's better to give a little to more people. Why? Because each act of giving strengthens the Tzedakah muscle. Each time you give, it's easier to give again because you are more generous than you were before. Imagine persons A and B were approached for Tzedakah the next day. Person A would likely say, “Sorry, I just gave out \$100 to somebody.” But person B would probably say, “Sure, here's one dollar.” Person B has done this so many times that giving is now a reflex. By the way, if this approach appeals to you, there's a Jewish nonprofit called Good Today that operates on this reasoning. I participate, and every day I get an email and choose a group to which to donate \$1. The more we give Tzedakah, the more we strengthen our generosity habit, the more we become generous.

When we want to develop a character virtue, we must practice that enough to make it a habit. Routines are gym reps for the soul.

The Torah does not contain a word that directly translates to “routine,” but it does describe the process. It utilizes an unusual word: Tamid.

We tend to think the Hebrew word Tamid means ‘always.’ Because in Modern Hebrew, that's the word for ‘always.’ Non-Hebrew speakers also know this word because we are familiar with the Ner Tamid, the eternal lamp. This light found in every shul never goes out, as it stands for the

eternality of G-d and Israel. There's a greeting card that reads, "Things could be worse. At least you don't have to pay G-d's electric bill!"

Tamid always means 'always,' unless we're reading the Torah, when Tamid almost never means 'always.' Consider two verses from our Parsha, Tetzaveh. The opening verse tells Moses to instruct the Israelites to bring clear olive oil ready for illumination *LhaAlot Ner Tamid*, to kindle a light in the Mishkan, the portable Sanctuary, Tamid. Here Tamid cannot mean 'always' because this lamp in the Menorah went out every morning. This was no Olympic-flame-like wick that burned endlessly. It needed to be rekindled every night. So the Priests were to kindle the light *regularly*. It became a nightly routine.

The Parsha continues to describe the functioning of the Mishkan. We are told that the Priests were to sacrifice two sheep daily, Tamid. Here Tamid must also mean 'regularly,' because these specific sacrifices - called the Tamid offering - were not offered all day long, just twice a day. But every single day. The regularity - the daily routine - makes it Tamid.

The word Tamid occurs 16 times in the Torah, and 14 of those times it translates to 'regularly.' As another example, last week's Parsha, Terumah, speaks of the *Lehem Hapanim* Showbread, the 12 loaves of bread that were on display on the *Shulchan* Table in the Mishkan. Though the Torah instructs the Priests to place the loaves before G-d Tamid, the loaves were changed out weekly on Fridays. Here Tamid speaks of a *weekly* ritual.

I interpret this as speaking to us today. Judaism pushes us to commit to certain practices daily, nightly, even weekly to strengthen the soul. It is a tall order, a never ending challenge, even for rabbis. But when we fall short, a new opportunity always beckons.

There are only two examples in the Torah of Tamid meaning always, and they have much to teach. First, The Mizbeach, or Mishkan Altar, was to have a permanent fire, 24/7. The verse in Leviticus reads, "*Aish Tamid Tukad Al HaMizbeach Lo Tichbeh*. A permanent fire shall remain aflame on the Altar. It shall not be extinguished." The fact that this flame never went out proves that Tamid here must mean 'always.' This flame was the means by which Israel reached up to G-d. The Israelites brought animal sacrifices to demonstrate their loyalty and belief in G-d. Metaphorically, these sacrifices carried their prayers upward to heaven. Tangibly too, as the smoke from this flame rose skyward, visible for all to see. Thus, this particular flame symbolizes every Jew's loyalty and faith in G-d. *These* must be Tamid, always, a continual part of our existence. Even when our actions and commitments lag - for nobody is perfect - our belief in G-d must be ever present.

The other one appears in Deuteronomy and it speaks of the Land of Israel. The verse reads, "[The Land of Israel] is a land that Hashem your G-d seeks out. The eyes of Hashem your G-d

are Tamid - always - upon it from the year's beginning to its end." G-d protects the Land of Israel not just on a regular basis but a permanent one. Every moment of every day. We, the People of Israel, likewise owe our homeland of Israel our support, love, and protection. Every moment of every day.

In sum, the Torah uses the word Tamid as 'always' to move us to love G-d and Israel on a constant basis. And it utilizes the word Tamid as 'regular' to define daily, nightly, and weekly commitments. These routines shape our souls just like gym workouts get our bodies in shape. But just like we are not the same body when we are in week one of a workout as we are in week eight, so too we are not quite the same people last year at Purim as we will be this year.

I began with a story about long memories and I close with a fitting story about a short memory. Rabbi David Wolpe tells the story of a rabbi who prepared his senior sermon with Professor Mordechai Kaplan, a brilliant and powerful teacher. Sparks flew when they met to discuss the sermon, as both were strong personalities. With a week or two before the big day, the sermon finally got his teacher's approval. On Shabbat the student delivered the sermon, and as soon as he sat down, Kaplan tore it apart.

The baffled student protested, "I don't understand. Two weeks ago you approved it!"

The professor replied, "Young man, since then I've grown!"

May we have the persistence to stick with the routine of Mitzvot. And we also be so fortunate to echo that line again and again with conviction: "Since then I've grown."

Shabbat Shalom.