

Rosh Hashanah 1 5787  
How Do Jewish Rituals Make Us More Ethical?  
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Shanah Tovah.

Oh no. This is a Shanda.

I was living in New York City, reading the local newspaper, when I came across a story about an apartment landlord who had been charged with negligence. He wasn't maintaining the building properly. The tenants didn't have predictable heat, air conditioning, or elevator service. A rat problem went unchecked. A worsening mold issue was left untreated. Worse still, the landlord had an obviously Jewish last name. Worst of all, he was Haredi, Ultra-Orthodox. How can a religious Jew, of all people, violate the fundamental Torah precept of loving your neighbor as yourself? Something here was badly broken.

A few years later, I was in a New York City hospital waiting room. Next to me was an Orthodox Jewish woman, and we started chatting. Eventually I asked her why she was there. She told me that she was preparing to donate a kidney: "I'm doing this because it's a Mitzvah. To save a life is the greatest Mitzvah of all, and my rabbi encourages all of us to consider it."

"Are you doing this for a relative or a friend?"

"No. Someone I don't know at all. But someone Jewish, because it's important that we look after each other."

At that moment, I thought: That's *exactly* what being a religious Jew is supposed to do. She's got it *exactly* right.

Those two encounters point to a question that I want us to consider today: Exactly how does a life of Jewish rituals and Mitzvot make us more ethical people?

We all know that people who live a life of Jewish rituals and Mitzvot *should* have a strong moral compass. But it isn't automatic. There are ritually observant Jews who behave terribly. And there are secular people who are paragons of ethics and morality. The Torah's goal is for us to create a society where people take responsibility for one another. And if it's possible to do that without a life of Jewish rituals - and it is! - why do we need the rituals? Can't we separate ritual from ethics?

Doing so may be tempting, but it misses something fundamental about Judaism. I acknowledge that ritual doesn't magically make us ethical. Keeping Kosher doesn't

automatically turn someone into a mensch. But Jewish ritual gives us practices that can form us into ethical people—when we understand what those practices are for. And when we perform the ritual not just to check a box but to cultivate habits of high character.

The example of the Jewish slumlord reveals a failure of *that individual person*, not a failure of the Mitzvot system. To paraphrase Rabbi Donniel Hartman: A person may call himself religious, look religious, may even keep Kosher, but if he lives the life of a criminal, he's not actually religious.

Today, I want to explore three ways that Jewish rituals can strengthen our ethical muscles: they cultivate our individual relationship with G-d; they develop our discipline; and they create character habits. This is particularly appropriate on Rosh Hashanah, because these holidays are not simply about what we believe. They are about who we are becoming.

The Torah's vision is one of complete *integration* between ritual and ethics. Almost every Torah portion that contains laws will intermingle ritual laws, ethical laws, and civil laws. These categories are intentionally integrated because *all* of our actions matter. Not just in shul but also at the grocery checkout line. They *all* have the potential to make this world better and more just.

Let's focus on one example. Parashat Emor in Leviticus outlines all the holidays we are to observe throughout the year. But something very odd happens on the seam between the paragraphs about Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah. We read one stray verse: "*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am the Lord your G-d*" (Lv. 23:22).

What a beautiful idea! Farmers - and back then that was most people - are commanded to leave some of their crops behind for the poor and the stranger. *Everyone* in society has a responsibility to make sure that *everyone* has enough to eat. Great, but what's it doing here, in the middle of a discussion about the holidays?

The Etz Hayim Humash commentary suggests that because Shavuot happens during the harvest season, the Torah reminds us about another harvest-time Mitzvah. That's true, but I think it goes deeper. The Torah is teaching us about ideal outcomes: To observe the holidays at the highest level, we must become people who share our bounty with those who have less. If we celebrate the holidays with our own family meals and that's it, then we have missed something crucial. The ethical responsibility we have to others is at the very center of celebrating the Jewish holidays. That's why the verse about sharing food is *literally the middle verse* of the whole long passage. It's the heart

of the matter! But exactly how does ritual prepare people to make this leap to becoming more ethical?

First, ritual cultivates our relationship with G-d. The Jewish question about G-d isn't simply, "Do you believe in G-d?" It is: "How does your relationship with G-d affect the way you live every day?" Because believing in G-d is not merely an intellectual theory. It is an active relationship. And like every relationship, it becomes stronger the more time we talk to each other and think about each other. A life of synagogue prayer, home rituals, and Jewish holidays forms the foundation of regularly encountering G-d. We do so through the blessings and prayers we say. Whenever we say a Bracha that begins, *Baruch Atah Hashem*, "Blessed are You, Hashem," the most important word is *Atah*—You. We are speaking directly to G-d. One on one. And if we take that seriously, G-d becomes more present in our lives because we are aware of this dialogue with the divine. So when the Torah gives the Mitzvah to the Israelites to share their crops with the poor, we should hear it as a reminder to us - personally! Today! - that G-d envisions a world in which nobody goes hungry.

Imagine that you find a wallet on the ground. Inside there's a driver's license and \$1000 in cash. There's nobody else around. What do you do? You *know* the ethical thing to do is to return the wallet and the money to its owner. But do you actually *do* that? Because it's sure tempting to take it when no one is watching. A life of Jewish ritual reminds us that we have obligations. G-d is watching us even when we are alone. But it goes further: living in relationship with G-d teaches us that what we do matters—even when there is no audience, no applause, and no punishment.

Second, ritual develops discipline. Being a Jew on the High Holidays is challenging, to say the least. It's so many hours in synagogue. So many hours reading and chanting Hebrew. And on Yom Kippur, no eating or drinking at all. On Passover, we spend eight days eating Matzah and avoiding Chametz. And every day of the year we keep Kosher, which means we regularly pass up really delicious foods. All that restraint is hard. But all those rituals collectively strengthen our discipline muscles. They teach us that even when we desire something, we have the ability to still say No. I want that, but I can't have that.

Let's go back to the lost wallet. You might actually need that \$1000. How do you say No to something you really want? You've practiced saying No before. Now it's actually a skill. And that matters because the hardest ethical choices are the ones where doing the right thing costs us something.

I've been there myself. I've told the following story before, but it was a few years ago, and it really proves my point. When I was in college, I was parking in a lot somewhere, and I should have backed up *one more time* instead of trying to squeeze into the spot.

But I didn't. And I made a nice dent in the next car. My first thought was...actually, I can't say that here! After being angry with myself, I had to figure out what to do. I *knew* I should leave a note. That thought came quickly. But then other ideas entered my head: *It's not that big a dent. He may not even notice. Nobody saw. I can get out of here if I leave now. They probably have car insurance.*

After a while—longer than I'm proud of—I stopped myself. I realized I was straight-up lying to myself. The dent was obvious. Even if nobody else saw, G-d did. I'm a religious Jew, and I think of myself as an honest person. In that case, I really don't have a choice here. I *have* to do the right thing because that's what it means to really believe in G-d and to really be honest. Otherwise I'm a fraud. Mitzvah means commandment, not suggestion. It was only when my being Jewish crossed my mind that those other voices went quiet. *That* was the boost of strength that pushed me when I was wavering. And my Jewish identity was top of mind because I observe the rituals every day. So I left a note. Later the woman called me, and I covered the damage. You're welcome, Geico! To this day, I feel like an idiot for hitting that car. But at least I know I did the right thing when it wasn't easy.

And third, ritual creates habits—and habits shape who we become. In the Jewish tradition, the action often comes *before* the emotion. We don't wait until we *feel* generous before giving Tzedakah. The Mitzvah is for *everybody* to give—not just people with lots of money, and not just people who happen to be feeling generous that day. *Everybody* can give something. And the more we give, the more giving becomes a habit. Over time, that habit changes us.

The famous medieval philosopher Maimonides makes this point when he discusses Tzedakah. He considers whether it is better to give, in today's terms, \$1 to 100 people or \$100 to one person. After all, it's the same amount of money. He concludes that giving \$1 to many people is superior because repeated acts of giving develop the habit of generosity. Give once, and it may be easy to stop. You might say No to the next person who asks. Give 100 times, and generosity becomes a reflex. You're going to say Yes to the next person. Because you have developed a Tzedakah six-pack! That's the deeper lesson: We become the people we repeatedly practice being. It's no surprise that multiple studies show that highly religious people - of different faiths, even - tend to donate more money and volunteer more time than non-religious people. Because religious people have cultivated a different set of habits.

Sometimes we face challenging ethical situations when we are alone, like I did. But other times, it means owning up to something in public. A few weeks ago, I read a story about San Francisco 49ers head coach Kyle Shanahan, who was involved in a car accident. Initial media reports assigned blame to the *other* driver, and naturally readers sympathized with the coach. But when Shanahan later spoke with reporters, he told

them that *he* was responsible. He explained that he had dropped his phone in the car and looked down for a few seconds to find it. In doing so, he crossed the middle line and crashed into the other car. He took responsibility at exactly the moment when he could have allowed someone else to take the blame. It cost him serious public embarrassment. I don't know what motivated Shanahan to own up to his actions. But he revealed something important about himself: when the truth cost him something significant, he chose honesty anyway. He later said, "It just crushed me hearing the girl get blamed for it." I give him much credit for taking responsibility when it really hurt.

It's easy to be ethical when being ethical is easy. The real question is what we do when honesty costs us money, reputation, convenience, or pride. In the year ahead, some of you may face a situation at work or at home where something goes wrong and people initially blame someone else. The ethical thing may require you to say in public, "Actually, it was my fault." That's hard to do. When that happens, draw on the strength of your being Jewish. Because Judaism is not simply asking us to *know* what is right. It gives us practices that help us become people who can *do* exactly that.

As we look ahead to 5787, I hope we all recommit ourselves to being honest and ethical. But I maintain that the Jewish path toward becoming those people is a renewed commitment to Jewish rituals and Mitzvot. They are not separate spheres but deeply interconnected. Of course there are additional reasons to observe the rituals, independent of the ethical piece. But today I concentrated on that dimension of the rituals as it was the core of my holiday message.

On Yom Kippur, we will gather here again and listen to the prophet Isaiah during the Haftarah. In his day, the Jewish people observed the fast but remained unethical out in the world. Isaiah reminded them—and reminds us—that religious practice is supposed to be a means to something greater. G-d says: "This is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free...It is to share your bread with the hungry...When you see the naked, to clothe them, and do not ignore your own flesh. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly (Is. 58:6-8)."

Isaiah's message is that ritual matters because of the person it makes us become. We fast so that we can become more sensitive to the hungry. We pray so that we can become more attentive to the needs of others. We do Teshuvah to commit ourselves to doing the right thing even when it costs us something. We come to synagogue to practice becoming the people we want to be when we walk back out into the world.

Shanah Tovah.