

Elder Life Challenges and the Creative Possibilities of Ritual

Richard Address

ON THE SAME *BIMA* where he had been married 25 years earlier, a man of a “certain age” stood with his rabbi. It had been over a year since his wife had died. Quietly he listened to the rabbi recite a series of readings and prayers; he then slowly removed his wedding ring from his finger. As he did so, he spoke: “With the removal of this ring, I acknowledge again that I am losing your companionship. But the memories and love

health and peace in cohabitation rather than in marriage.

Some new rituals raise controversial questions. Does a clergy person “officiate” at a cohabitation ritual? And, if so, does this misrepresent the clergy as a state official sanctifying a marriage? Do older couples not have the right to seek the blessings of their community in this “senior union”? What message does this union send to the community? Is there a difference between sanctifying the union of a couple in their eighties and a couple in their thirties? The power of ritual elevates and transforms. Can new life stages give us a more context-oriented rationale for their use?

Other issues emerge from the real world of our communities. In families struggling with diseases such as Alzheimer’s and dementia, a spouse often resides in a care facility. That spouse will never leave and is often a shell of the loving, caring, person he or she once was. Often, the healthy spouse is vital, working, and active, and is facing years of an existence that is stressful, often lonely, and frightening. What happens when that spouse seeks physical, emotional, and spiritual companionship with someone other than his or her spouse? We know this happens. Do we have a responsibility to explore how Jewish tradition addresses such situations? Should we seek to create a document or ritual that allows the couple, when healthy, to make their wishes known and that would, in certain contexts, give permission to the healthy spouse to seek new companionship? Elders are turning to their rabbis for guidance. What might our spiritual leaders suggest in these complex situations?

Longevity is presenting the Jewish community with a challenge to create rituals, blessings, and prayers that speak to new life stages and realities. How our leaders respond will shape, in part, the sense of welcome and creativity our communities offer.

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will always remain dear to my heart. May they continue as an inspiration to me and to those you touched. May they remain a blessing, and may we always praise God.”

Ritual connects a person with the transcendent. It reminds individuals, and often a community, that they are linked with history and that their lives and experiences have meaning and a place in the flow of time. Rituals serve to provide an event with an embrace of holiness. As we live longer and experience more of life in ways often unimagined, we are finding new opportunities to create or re-envision the role and power of religious ritual.

The Sacred Aging Project of the Union for Reform Judaism’s Department of Jewish Family Concerns is actively working with congregations to address the expanding longevity of our generation. How do new life stages become moments of meaning through the power of ritual? Jewish tradition already provides a rich reservoir from which to draw — prayers and blessings such as “*benching gomer*” that acknowledge transcending a difficult experience. Other experiences, like blessings for grandchildren, transitioning from daily work to retirement, or relocating from a home to an assisted living facility, are only now emerging. Some rituals sanctify new elder experiences: older adults seeking a ritual to bless a life of

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