



A view of old becoming new: Artists take what we see and hear daily and transform it so that we, in our empathy, see the world anew. We study Talmud with a partner. Although the "old" and "new" are locked into time, the moments of encounter with a learning partner or the silent face of an artist are rooted beyond daily time. In such special moments, we are primed to experience a trace of the Divine.

Moments of encounter through sacred text study and the arts are distinct yet similar. One is based on a "text" already possessing Divine trace: too, the act of discovery through this "text" is a mirrored trace of God's very act of creation. Art, though itself not holy, employs a powerful nonverbal symbolic language, a way of knowing on the edge of "not knowing," providing us with experiential bridges to Divine trace. Here, too, the act of discovery is a mirrored trace of God's very act of creation. In both instances, we are transformed and rejoined.

Along with meaningful commanded prayer and lived rituals, these realms provide us with clues: human experiences where old becomes new, and new, holy.

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Our responsibility is to renew our tradition in every generation so that the "old" does not become an artifact. The continuous renewal of tradition is a process that brings holiness not just to the tradition itself, but ultimately to the participant in the process.

There are contexts and settings that make the transformation from "old" to "new" much easier. Many of us grew up in summer camps and youth groups where we were encouraged to explore and experiment with our religious commitments. Our heritage became "new" to us each summer and we were thrilled by the rush of holiness that engulfed us.

We must not forget, however, that the "new" will not by itself become holy. It must be sanctified by its roots in the "old" and by its relevance in each of our lives.

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If we try very hard, we can make something old look new. Through blessings, we can attempt to make something holy.

הישן יתחדש והחדש יתקדש
May the old make itself new,
and the new make itself holy.

Igrot HaRayah (HaRav Kook) page 214, line 30

Old (adj.): Tradition, *halachah*, blessings, texts, and rituals that, in our busy lives, help us to be grateful and mindful.

New (adj.): Of the moment, fresh; typically associated with Madison Avenue, not Rav Kook.

Question: Why does the *old* need to become *new* in order to become holy?

Two months ago, my husband and I began a year of traveling. As we move from one place to another, the *shehechyanu* blessing, like our backpacks and malaria pills, has become a part of our travel gear. Each time we recite this *old* prayer, it opens our eyes to the wonders of the moment and to the blessing that is life. The old has made itself new, and the new allows us to see holiness in our actions and in the world.

In order to be a serious Jew, we each must feel ownership of the old. It doesn't do justice to just describe a challah, the Kol Nidre prayer, or the Western Wall. Without the blessing and tasting, or the hearing and singing, or the seeing and touching, it's anthropology, not religion.

In order to experience Judaism's riches fully, we must feel that they are our own; we must make them anew for ourselves. And with this newness comes holiness, as individuals and as a people.

Shira Stutman is an unemployed, globe-trotting Jewish educator. In the fall of 2001, she will begin rabbinical studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Her husband, Russell Shaw, assisted in writing this piece.

But how can the old make itself new and the new make itself holy? One clue is in the verse that we chant each Shabbat, as the Torah scroll is returned to the Ark: *Chadesh yameinu k'kedem.*

"Renew our days as of old."

As Shira Stutman notes, we must feel identification with the old. Judaism is predicated on an unbroken chain of tradition passed from one generation to the next. And yet as the "People of the Book," we must view the Torah as something far more than a static repository of ancient wisdom. We are meant to taste God's words, to digest them. When we do, we will find that they are "sweeter than honey and the honeycomb" (Psalm 19).

Through this experience we encounter God's transformative power. Then the old does make itself new, and the new holy. Call it the literary equivalent of a biochemical reaction.

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*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."