

Beyond Reform and Conservative: Exploring a Technology of the Spirit
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2016
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This room is full of thoughtful, sincere, and caring people and I would venture to say that few would call themselves religious. There is no doubt in my mind that being Jewish and embracing one's Jewish identity and culture is an extremely high priority for most of the people in this room. And yet, even here in our Conservative services, I will make a guess that few people here have prioritized regular Jewish ritual and prayer practice into one's life – the aspects of Jewish life that most people label “religious.”

I have no doubt that all of us want to be the best people we can be. We are quick to live and incorporate all of the ethical mitzvot in our lives – we want to be honest, treat people fairly, be a caring presence for others emotionally and physically, and yet when it comes to ritual mitzvot – prayer, observances of sacred time, dietary choices, we don't make it a priority.

While intellectually, many of us may value the prayer and ritual aspects of Judaism, we might not prioritize it in our lives because when we actually imagine ourselves doing it in everyday life, it seems distant, forced, and not relevant to our reality. For some of us, we don't seriously consider it because “being religious” is just not congruent with who we think we are. It doesn't fit our self-conception. Maybe we label ourselves as “Reform” and basing our life around the cycles of Jewish time is something that the Conservative or Orthodox do. Maybe we label ourselves Conservative, but that just means that we are most comfortable with Judaism being practiced a certain way in the synagogue – according to tradition as we grew up

with, but when it comes to what we do outside of the synagogue, setting aside sacred time for Jewish ritual or prayers has not become a priority.

Maybe, it's just about living in South Orange County – where are we inundated by a culture focused on the material with so few other Jews. To set the necessary boundaries that would insure Jewish ritual practice just takes more energy than we have, and might threaten to isolate us from others.

And yet, our tradition is not only asking for us to be good, it's asking for us to be Holy. The Torah is a guide to how we can be present to the reality of God in every moment of our lives. Not some idea of God that is written in your prayerbook, but the infinitely beautiful, meaningful, intelligent and awesome presence that underlies a collaborative project at work, getting our kids ready for school, a difficult conversation with a parent, buying our groceries. Being present to the reality of God means not sweating the small stuff, it means prioritizing our relationships, it means letting in comfort when our hearts are broken, it means trusting our own integrity, it means knowing that we are ultimately safe, and it means never being bored.

Our Jewish mystical tradition has a powerful insight about the reality of God in all moments. God is not something separate from the physical world in which we do our day to day business. But God is the underlying force, the reality of everything. It's only human consciousness that responsible for the limited way we perceive the physical and static nature of the world. Everything that hits our sense perceptions – the physical, is only the shell, or the *klippah* for the Divine presence of God. And that's the way that most of us relate on the day to day – we relate to the outer covering of life – in people, in our environment, in the world that we attempt to control and manipulate to fit a model in our minds of what needs to happen. And yet, we are asked to be present to the inner

dimension of reality – to the light and Presence that fills creation, to be present to holiness.

In the Torah, Rosh Hashanah is called Yom Teruah – the day of the shofar call. This primal sound that we will hear over the next two days is designed as a wake up call to the reality of God in this moment and in every moment. Much of our Rosh Hashanah prayers speaks about crowning God as king of the world. That crowning is asking us to shift our perception – to stop focusing on the shell of things, but instead to see the Divine Reality that permeates everything.

And how do we do this? Mitzvot. Mitzvot are not just “good deeds” – they are pathways to holiness. The aramaic root of the word Mitzvah is *tzavta* – which means “to join or to connect.” So we can understand Mitzvah as a pathway to connect with something greater than ourselves. Rabbi David Zeller of blessed memory was fond of saying that the mitzvot are not meant to cut you off from the world outside, but to keep you from getting cut off from the world inside. It is truly a technology of the spirit.

Here are some sketches, some examples from my own “religious” life. The alarm goes off at 5:45 pm and I go and wake up my older boys. 15 minutes later, my 8 year old has joined me on the meditation cushion, him dressed and ready for school, me with my tallit and tefillin. Yes, it is a stretch to wake up at 5:45 instead of 6:15 am and to stumble out of bed, and there is a pull to deal with only the physical requirements for getting us off to school and work. But for both of us, the opportunity to sit together with attention to breath, to practice having an open heart, and to chant the Shema together frames the entire day.

On Tuesday evenings at 6:30 here in this chapel, our community gathers around a Torah scroll and offers prayers for healing for those we love. Do many in this room deal with heartbreak and with despair? I don’t doubt it.

Does everyone who comes believe that the Torah scroll has some kind of magic power to make people well? Probably not. And yet, people come because the practice of prayer and coming together in community reminds us of the Divine Presence that fills reality. And we need that reminder. We need to be able to actively reach for God's presence in the brokenness.

Do I sometimes regret that my kids can't do boy scouts or play sports on Saturday afternoon because we don't drive on Shabbat? Occasionally. And yet, by not having errands and activities that pull us in every direction allows us to be together in a very fulfilling way. When we sit together around the table for an early Saturday night dinner – the third meal of Shabbat and I feel the strength of our family and our love, God's presence shines out in the most glorious way.

Practicing mitzvot – the ritual as well as the ethical is not something that is Reform or Conservative or Orthodox – they are pathways of holiness for the entire Jewish people. As both Progressive Jewish movements, Reform and Conservative stress not only the engagement of ritual mitzvot as part of who we are as Jews, but the awareness that we need to engage in them congruently with our lives, in our time and place. In the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform – statement of principles for Reform Judaism, it states:

We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of mitzvot and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community. Some of these mitzvot, sacred obligations, have been long observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times. (Statement of Principles, "Torah" paragraphs 5-6)

And in the most recent articulation of Conservative Judaism by Jewish Theological Seminary chancellor, Professor Arnold Eisen, he writes:

Halakhah – the norms and details of Jewish observance have changed over the centuries, and must change further to retain their force in transformed conditions.

Observance is required – but so is flexibility in observance. We treasure the fact that Jews bring diverse meanings to the performance of mitzvot and we respect the diverse patterns of their observance. (Eisen, Conservative Judaism: Today and Tomorrow, p.17)

Temple Beth El, our synagogue community, can be a place where we can develop this “technology of the spirit” in meaningful way. I want to propose five *derachim* – five pathways that our Jewish tradition gives us to engage mitzvot and live lives of greater goodness and holiness.

1. *Limmud* – learning from the timeless wisdom of our tradition about who we are, where we’ve come from, where we are going, and how to get there. We have a thoughtful year of adult education planned beginning with a series about how to be a caring presence for people in illness, dying, or loss.
2. *Avodah* - gathering together around ritual and worship to connect to something greater than ourselves. Since the merger with Congregation Eilat six years ago, our community has struggled with understanding the difference between Reform and Conservative practices and many have planted themselves firmly in one identity in a way that separates and divides from the other. Let’s get clear about what this means and who Temple Beth El is. Both Reform and Conservative movements are “progressive” Jewish movements – meaning that our understanding of Jewish tradition is that it has always adapted to meet the social reality and needs of the current generation. This can be seen in both movements’ articulation of full participation and leadership of diversity of the Jewish community – women, people of color, LGBTQ, people with disabilities, all are encouraged not only to participate, but to take leadership roles. Both movements are committed to supporting a democratic and

religiously pluralistic state of Israel. Historically, the difference between the two movements have been how we approach and actualize prayer and ritual – with Reform prayer commonly having less Hebrew and liturgy and Conservative ritual and prayer, less creativity. In the past 15 years, both movements have changed their approaches in this regard. In the 1999 Pittsburgh platform, the Reform movement officially declared their commitment to learning Hebrew to not only connect us with Israel, but to for it to be a greater part of our study and ritual. Over 60% of Conservative congregations in the United States use musical instruments and creative approaches to services and these new approaches have been shared at national conventions.

At Temple Beth El, we are committed to having our ritual practices reflect the diverse needs of our community. Our Jewish Life and Ritual Committee have articulated 5 values that guide all our choices around prayer and ritual. These five values are both fully Reform and fully Conservative. They are “audacious Hospitality, spirituality, tradition, accessibility, and participation.”

Some of our prayer spaces and rituals will emphasize some of these values more than others and by experimenting with the different things we offer, each one of us will be able to find the environment here at Temple Beth El that helps us connect to the mystery and wonder of life.

3. *Mussar* - Mussar is an aspect of Jewish tradition that is focused on moral self-improvement and spiritual development. While we will continue to offer a Mussar group for people who want to be engaged in a structured process, I am defining Mussar as the intention to

purposefully engage with Jewish practice and community as a pathway to becoming a better person. As your clergy we are committed to having our study and ritual to not just be intellectual or simply communal, but to always be asking the question – “How does this help me grow as a person.” If you want an introduction to Mussar in a more formalized way, I highly recommend that you attend the session with Steve Birch on Yom Kippur afternoon at 2:30 pm.

4. *Tikkun Olam* – According to Torah, part of what it means to be a Jew is to “be a light unto the nations.” This is not about elevating ourselves above others, but to take seriously that our purpose here is to make the world a better place. This year Temple Beth El is one of the 12 synagogue communities to partner with the URJ and Religious Action Center on a social justice initiative entitled “Moving Justice To The Center Of Our Congregation.” I will share more about that on Yom Kippur.
5. *Chevruta* – Through an intentional process this last spring, our congregation determined that one of the main focuses of our synagogue is to build and deepen relationships with each other. While there are numerous opportunities through classes, worship, social events, and being at services, we are launching a synagogue-wide small group initiative to create opportunities to build and deepen relationships around the topic of “How Our Relationships Can Help Us Live More Fully.” We are encouraging everyone in the synagogue become a part of a small group and I will speak about this more tomorrow.

Individually, each one of us can use these five *derachim* – these five pathways as a guide to help us each navigate our ways to becoming more of a

mensch and live lives of holiness. All of these are listed on a blue one page flyer outside titled "Five Pathways to Holiness." As we begin the new year together, each one of us can figure out what is the right balance of each of these pathways in our lives, so that we don't settle for anything less than being awake to God's presence in all things and all moments