

Kol Nidre 5783

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An Unprocessed Jewish Life

One of the ways I feel most Jewish is when I'm cooking. I'm no chef. I can't do much improvisation, but I research and follow recipes *really* well. No shame in that. For me, cooking for my family, preparing food for others is one of the ways I express my Jewish identity. I believe that the way I treat my body is a reflection on my connection with God. When I'm cooking up a storm, I'm in my happy place. When I'm relying on the middle aisles of the grocery store for most of my nutrition, something isn't balanced.

The other day I was reading a column in the Washington Post about ultra-processed foods. Articles about food tend to catch my eye, especially when I'm most conscious about my cooking. The columnist relayed a study from the National Institutes of Health that almost **sixty percent** of the calories American adults consume come from ultra-processed foods. The writer goes on, "They are what scientists call hyper-palatable: Irresistible, easy to overeat, and capable of *hijacking* the brains reward system [to] provoke powerful cravings."¹ The column goes on, these kinds of foods are linked to higher rates of heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and colon cancer. In other words, these foods are scientifically made to taste soooooo good and are literally shortening our lives.

The study from the NIH showed a significant relationship between eating a homemade diet and better overall health:

1. Lower cholesterol,
2. Lower weight,
3. Lower levels of the hunger hormone,
4. An increase in the appetite-suppressing hormone.

The net-net is, it's healthier. It's better for you. We know this but it's *so hard* to stop the cycle.

This idea of being caught in a mindless cycle really caught my attention. The ease of ultra-processing our food creeps into other areas of our life as well. We can have ultra-processed days where we look up and say, "*where did the time go?*" *Hours pass by and we say, "what did I even do the last few hours?"* And we've all been in the position of scrolling through social media, only to look up and realize we've been sitting, staring at our screen for forty-five minutes.

If an ultra-processed life means mindless consumption and thoughtless action, naturally, we ought to aspire for the opposite: an *unprocessed* life that keeps us present

¹ Anahad O'Connor, "What are ultra-processed foods? What should I eat instead?," Well + Being, Eating Lab, *The Washington Post*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2022/09/27/ultraprocessed-foods/>

and aware of our decisions. Usually, we need a little help to kick things off. This might take a little planning, an extra step, but it's your life at stake, who wouldn't do that? In Judaism, the action that can **snap** us out of this endless loop is clear—ritual.

Here's what I mean when I say ritual. We all know ritual, those moves baseball players make in the batters box; the way a golfer approaches the ball; or how a basketball player lines up for a free throw. When I played basketball at Weber, my least favorite drill was to run sprints along the length of the court and then stop and shoot and free throw. My heart was racing. My breath was heavy. Now focus, concentrate, and take the shot. Ritual is anything that focuses our mind to the task at hand, plants us firmly in the present moment, and tunes out all other distractions. In the Jewish context, ritual is how we access something deeper within ourselves, something sacred.

The three most accessible rituals I can think of are the ones we teach to our pre-schoolers. Rituals like touching the mezuzah upon entering a room, saying "motzi" for our food, or Shabbat blessings on a Friday night. It has varying degrees of effort, but it yields a feeling otherwise unattainable: the feeling of being present. The problem is, ritual can easily creep into repetition: lather, rinse repeat. Like that feeling we have when a word is repeated over, and over again: it loses its meaning. We must rescue and reclaim ritual in Judaism from lather, rinse, repeat, from losing its meaning.

That's the system that led to generations of Jewish parents and kids reminiscing about the forced repetition of Hebrew school like one might talk about a hazing ritual in a fraternity, "don't think about it, just do it." Or, "you'll thank me later." Or "well I was forced to go, so I guess I should force them to go." This ultra-processed Judaism doesn't help us to become better Jews, be more familiar with Judaism, or hold positive memories about our Jewish education.

What we need is a focus on slowing down. When we pause for ritual. We can create a powerful memory for us and others. What memories do we want for our kids or grandkids to have about being Jewish? The soft gazes shared between blessings in the glow of Shabbat candles. The experience of putting up a mezuzah on their door. Or, the feeling of wrapping yourself in a tallit that was worn at a bat mitzvah, at a wedding, passed down by a beloved patriarch or matriarch.

These rituals are powerful because they engage multiple senses. These rituals cannot be highly processed. They require us to stop, if even briefly, and pay attention to the world around us. They are unprocessed and bring us to the present.

However, reality is a bit more hectic than the picturesque scene I describe. Maybe you've seen the meme on social media: Instagram vs Reality. Instagram represents the curated view of someone's life, like a Norman Rockwell painting. Reality is much, much messier, more like a Jackson Pollock. Here's the reality: In my house growing up, we had the custom of reciting Shabbat blessings every Friday. Shabbat blessings—not necessarily having Shabbat dinner, but at a minimum: candles, blessing children, wine, and

challah—and maybe sometimes we used a slice of bread from my lunch sandwiches. I remember, on more than one occasion, we would recite the blessings, drink the wine, and eat the challah, and then we were out the door to whatever movie, ballgame, or activity we were doing on Friday night.

These kinds of ritual add up—they create memories. Five minutes of our evening means another five minutes to pause and recognize the space and time we're in with Judaism as our guide. Even if I wasn't observing Shabbat the "right way," whatever that means. I paused, if even for a moment, to recognize that this night or this day is different from all other days. I didn't need wine from the most kosher of wineries. I didn't need candles blessed by Rabbi Spike first. And I didn't need a challah made from scratch where I harvested the wheat and raised the chickens and collected their eggs myself—go to Rabbi Spike's house for that.

I want you to remember the phrase, "Lo BaShamayim He." Lo BaShamayim He is the phrase Moses uses in his third and final speech in the Book of Deuteronomy. These are some of the final words Moses says to the people before he ascends Mt. Nebo and dies. Moses tells them,

יא) כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם

This Instruction which I am binding you to today

לֹא־נִפְלְאוֹת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הוּא:

It is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.

יב) לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר

It is not up in the heavens that you should say:

מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָה:

Who will go up to the heavens and get it for us so they will instruct us so we may observe it.

What's the "it" in this case? It is Torah! It's the actions we take to preserve our Jewish identity. Moses tells us, "It is not up in heaven," And we don't need a second Moses to get anything for us. Being Jewish is supposed to be doable, understandable, not for some esoteric few who cloister on a mountainside. Candles, wine, and challah on a Friday night is not just for those who *also* don't drive *and* don't touch the opposite sex *and* always wear a head covering of some sort. Lo BaShamayim He! Judaism is not up in heaven. Doing something Jewish or Jewishly does not mean doing everything or nothing.

I believe in the power of ritual, even small ones, to make a big change over time. I want to give you three rituals you could do this week. First, Shabbat—unless you live in a dorm room, you probably have candles and matches somewhere; most folks have wine—and it doesn't need to be kosher, and for those who prefer welches grape juice—go right ahead; maybe getting a challah requires a little forethought, like putting it on your grocery list during the week or picking one up from the grocery store on your way home from work. Once you have everything together. Put a napkin or a cloth over the challah, pour the wine, and light the candles. Bring the warmth of the flame close to your face like this, and say the blessing—English or Hebrew, God understands it all. Next, lift your cup up high and recite the blessing. Last but definitely not least, remove the cover from the challah, lift that up as well, and say the blessing. Some people tear, some people cut, it's all kosher. And hey, if you didn't get it all done this week, the beauty of Shabbat is you have another chance in six days.

The second Jewish ritual is Mezuzah. The mezuzah is simple, just the words of Shema on a scroll in a box affixed to the doorpost of any entryway. Typically, people put mezuzot on the front doors and bedrooms of their home as a symbol to others that *this* is a Jewish home. The mezuzah symbolizes something even more powerful than one's Jewish identity. The words of Shema within the mezuzah are the basic building blocks for living a good, Jewish life.

The mezuzah is also a symbol that the place you are entering is a holy place. We believe that every Jewish home is a mikdash m'at—a mini sanctuary, a place just like this one, a place filled with God's presence. The custom today is to touch the mezuzah as you enter or exit a home and to kiss the fingers that touched the mezuzah—the custom for touching any holy object. Touching the mezuzah is a brief moment of recognition that the place you are entering is unique, sacred even. If I said this ritual takes five seconds, I think I would be grossly overestimating; however, the effects of this split-second ritual linger much longer. I said these rituals could be done this week. You could begin observing the ritual of touching the mezuzah tonight as you enter and leave the sanctuary or enter your home! In the hopes of leading an unprocessed life. Touching the mezuzah is a small act that makes us pause briefly to consider the place we are entering and the kind of person we want to be within it.

The third ritual is Motzi. The “motzi” is the blessing said for the bread eaten before a meal. The Motzi is ubiquitous in almost any Jewish group setting where there is or will be food.

After Shabbat services? Motzi.

Before the wedding or b'nei mitzvah party? Motzi.

At Jewish camp? Motzi.

At every preschool Shabbat sing? “HaMotzi lechem min haAretz...”

Why focus on motzi? Centuries ago, our rabbinic sages wanted to quantify how many blessings a Jew should say each day. They came to the round number of one hundred. Most of us aren't going to get there. But one thing we all *gotta* do is eat, and most of us are going to have bread or a bread like product at some point each day.

Bless the moment.

A blessing is a short form meditation, an act that makes us keenly aware of the supply chain this bread traveled along and the miracle that is the act of growing food from the earth.

When we talk about living an unprocessed life, this is how we slow down. Even if you're eating Wonder Bread and wondering where it came from, pause for a moment to consider the long and peculiar journey that loaf of bread took to get to your plate.

Now, I know I've mentioned food just a bit more than I should on Yom Kippur, but you'll survive. This time tomorrow, or maybe slightly earlier, we're going to break our fast. Before you dive into a long-awaited meal, say motzi. Give a moment of gratitude that you can *choose* to fast with the knowledge that you'll enjoy a bounty of food in a short time.

I've given you a lot of homework, and it's Yom Kippur, you should not be working. But even if you commit to just one of these, you've taken a step forward to living a deeper Jewish life. Whether it's health, exercise, nutrition, environmentalism, or Judaism, *something* is always better than nothing. Just because you can't exercise every day doesn't mean you should *never* exercise. Just because you can't help the earth and live entirely on clean, renewable energy doesn't mean you shouldn't try to make a difference.

The same can be said for being Jewish. Just because you can't be like Moses, or Miriam, or whoever you think of when you think of a Super Jew, it doesn't mean that Judaism isn't for you. The truth is, there are no Super Jews, there is no person who does *everything* or never errs, that's why we atone on Yom Kippur, but that doesn't mean you should throw your hands up and turn back to an ultra-processed Judaism: lather, rinse, repeat.

You have just about twenty-two hours until break-fast, or at least when Temple Emanuel will break the fast at exactly 6:00pm tomorrow. That means you have those twenty-two hours to reflect, account for the kind of person you want to be and decide how you're going to try and get there, to take a step forward. My fervent belief is that our Jewish rituals have the power to get us there, to live an unprocessed, healthier life, a life filled with meaning and purpose. This kind of living doesn't take much to get started; in fact, when get back home tonight or when you come back here tomorrow, reach out and touch the mezuzah.

May these rituals give you pause to think about the kind of Jew you want to be in the year ahead.

May you be sealed in the Book of Life, and you your year ahead be a life well lived. Tzom Kal u'mashmautee, may your fast be easy and meaningful.