

| Rites and Rituals |

Rationale:

Rites of Passage have existed at all times and in all cultures throughout human history. They are defined as rituals, or ceremonies, that surround milestone events in a person's life such as birth, maturity, reproduction and death. Other rites of passage can celebrate transitions that are wholly cultural, marking changes in social position, occupation or affiliation. Whether they take place in a secular or religious context, such rites perform the same function. They symbolically mark - often actually enable - an individual's passage from one phase of life, or social status, to another.

Rites of passage can be considered universal in human experience, in that all societies find ways to mark transition between one phase of life to another. The Jewish rites and customs explored in this activity may be different from a person's own experience but nonetheless participants may be able to identify points of commonality between their own social, culture or religious identity and the rites explored in this activity.

This activity is designed to help participants identify and explore the range of rituals and practices that may be part of a Jewish person's, or families', experience of life cycle events and rituals that are part of the religious and cultural life for Jews.

Learning Outcomes

- To gain knowledge of some of the Rites and Rituals that are part of a Jewish person's life cycle
- To gain an understanding of Ritual as a way to mark the passage from one stage of a person's life to another
- To appreciate the universality of Rites and Rituals across times and cultures
- To learn the value that individuals can bring to a group – strengthening the knowledge of the group overall. And to learn from each others knowledge and experience

Requirements:

Materials: Sets of two envelopes, containing 13 photos of rituals and rites of passage from Judaism and 13 slips of paper with descriptive texts that explain the photos (number of sets of envelopes depends upon the numbers of participants and small groups)

Copies of worksheet

Copies of handout "On Rites of Passage"

Time: 90 minutes



CULTURAL AWARENESS

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Directions:

1. After introducing the concept of rites of passage and explaining the rationale for the activity, divide participants into small groups of 3 – 5 people.
2. Give each small group an envelope containing the photos, explaining that they will have approximately 15 minutes to look at the photos and discuss what's going on in the picture, using their own knowledge, experiences and perceptions of the rites and rituals displayed.
3. After the participants have examined the photos, distribute the second envelopes with the descriptions of the rites and rituals. Give an additional 15 minutes for the task of matching the photos to the descriptions provided. Invite the small groups to discuss their own familiarity with the ceremonies described in more detail.
4. After asking the small groups to return to the large group, pose the following questions
 - a. **Are there some rituals which are more or less familiar? Why?** This question may raise a couple of points:
 - i. Traditions that are close to their own personal experiences
 - ii. Traditions lived in the local environment, or of whom they have had more personal contact
 - b. **Are there some traditions which seem strange or bizarre? Why?**
5. Re-iterate the universality of rites and rituals throughout the world and the fact that it may or may not have religious meaning. Invite participants to think about their own experiences of rites and rituals using the questions for personal reflection provided on the worksheet. Give approximately 10 minutes for individual reflection.
6. Ask the participants to find a partner with whom they can share their own experiences based on the individual reflection. They may need another 15-20 minutes for paired sharing.
7. When the pairs have finished their sharing, lead a discussion in the large group using the discussion questions below.

Discussion Questions:

- How was it to think about, and then share, your rite of passage?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Are rites and rituals somehow comparable across traditions?

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- What are some of the common elements that define ceremonies of rites of passage? (Note: Record the common elements of flip chart paper for the whole group to see. Distribute participants' handouts on the activity to summarise.)
- What can we learn from this exploration of rites and rituals for living in a multicultural society?

Note to facilitators:

- As this workshop focuses on Jews and Judaism, you may decide to forego the questions for personal reflection, however it would still be relevant to close the large group discussion with a recognition of the universality of rites and rituals across all cultures.



HANDOUT

| Rites of Passage | Questions for Personal Reflection

Rites of passage may mark religious, cultural or social milestones, and may be celebrated with religious or secular ceremonies. Instead of a specific rite of passage, you may decide to focus your reflection here on a ritual of particular importance to you.

Think about a significant milestone in your life that was celebrated with a ceremony or ritual.

- A. Who participated in this rite of passage with you?
 - B. What were your feelings when experiencing this rite of passage?
 - C. How may have this rite of passage contributed to shaping who you are today?
 - D. What were the elements of this celebration that made it ceremonial?
 - E. What meanings are given to this rite of passage?
 - > Your family?
 - > Your community?
 - > Those outside of your community?
 - F. Was your rite of passage defined closely to the mainstream tradition, or was it in some way unorthodox, unusual or unique?
 - G. Are there differences in the ways of celebrating this particular rite of passage within your community?
 - H. How does this rite of passage position you within an identity group?
 - I. One that is celebrated within the wider dominant society, or is it part of a minority tradition? How might this position you within a multicultural society?
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| On Rites of Passage |

Rites of Passage have existed at all times and in all cultures throughout human history. Whether they take place in a secular or religious context, such rites perform the same function. They symbolically mark - often actually enable - an individual's passage from one phase of life, or social status, to another. Many of the most important rites are connected with biological functions - birth, maturity, reproduction, and death. Other rites celebrate transitions that are wholly cultural, marking changes in social position, occupation or affiliation.

A Rite of Passage is transformative in nature, i.e., the individual's perception of self - along with the community's perception of that individual - is permanently altered by the experience. Thus, the ceremonial activities and teachings connected with a Rite of Passage are intended not simply to mark a change in status, but to actually affect it.

In his ground-breaking work, *Rites of Passage*, the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) identified three stages in the experience. We can call these stages separation, transition, and reincorporation. During the separation phase, the subject begins the process of detaching from his/her former status and prepares for the change that is to come. This is followed by the transition phase where ceremonies, which are usually presided over by a legitimised authority figure, inscribe the subject with a new sense of self, a new identity, along with the powers and responsibilities that accompany it. Thus altered, celebrations of reincorporation occur, whereby the community that has initiated the subject and witnessed his/her passage, celebrates the return, enabling him or her to reenter society on a new basis.

Applying this schema to contemporary Western customs attached to marriage, we see a variety of ways in which these three phases might be manifested:

Separation:

- The period of engagement
- Parties celebrating the end of being single
- Religious pre-marriage instruction
- Customs related to the bridal dress, the bridal party, the dressing of the bride and her sequestering from the groom until the ceremony

Transition:

- The actual ceremony enacted in a formalised space with ritualized movements, gestures and expressions which can include: a procession, traditional music, proscribed words, the speaking of vows, the exchange of rings that will permanently symbolize the couple's union, the signing and witnessing of the marriage contract, the "first" kiss
 - The presence of family, community and delegated Witnesses, all of whom in some way signify their affirmation of the union during the ceremony
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- Authorized ceremonial Leader who formally legalizes the marriage

Reincorporation:

- The “greeting line” where the couple and members of the community first meet to acknowledge the couple as husband and wife
- The community’s affirmation of the couple by throwing rice, flowers or confetti as they leave the ceremonial space
- Photographing of the couple, the wedding party, and newly merged families
- The wedding reception with celebratory customs attached to it
- The “honeymoon” which allows the couple a period of time to adjust to their new status

A Rite of Passage, then, is both a personal and a communal event, providing meaning and purpose for what might otherwise be random biological happenings, or an haphazard sequence of occurrences. Rites of Passage exist for the same reason that all rituals exist - because they must. From the mating dance of hummingbirds to the warrior dances of the Yanamamo, from a procession of worker ants to a parade of Olympic athletes, all living creatures engage in certain repetitive, symbolic behaviours that link individual members of the species with the collective enterprise of well-being and survival.

Ultimately, no community exists without its rituals, those repeatable rites wherein by song, dance, story, symbol, and symbolic action they express their most fundamental beliefs about who they are, how they came to be, and why they stay together. In the same way that community is intrinsic to the human condition, ritual is intrinsic to the life of a community. Throughout history these rituals have taken many forms: sometimes religious, sometimes not. Although we have come to regard ritual as essentially a religious event, this is not the case. Rituals are as evident in our personal and public lives as they are in our religious experiences. Ritual expresses and affirms our personal and communal identity. It maintains and strengthens the bonds of affiliation among community members. It supports individuals, or the community as a whole, through times of celebration, crisis or transition. It marks the passing of the seasons, gives meaning to the years. The performance of rites - be they secular or religious - that connect humans with one another and link the past with the present and future, ultimately affirms the rightness of the human condition, and the relationship of what is human with all of Nature.

Van Gennep has written with regard to rites of passage, the celebration of human transitions “has, among some peoples, been linked to the celestial passages, the revolutions of the planets, and the phases of the moon. It is indeed a cosmic conception that relates the stages of human existence to those of plant and animal life, and, by a sort of pre-scientific divination, joins them to the great rhythms of the universe.”

| Elements of a Ritual |

- > **Purpose**
rooted in the needs of the individual participants and the vision, mission, and culture of the community
- > **Plan**
for before, during, and after the ritual
- > **Time of Preparation**
for ritual as action
for ritual as presence (i.e. interior readiness to participate)
- > **Structure**
a beginning, middle, end
- > **Defined Space & Time**
appropriate to purpose of the ritual
- > **Symbolic Focus**
physical object that expresses the ritual's intention
- > **Unifying Symbolic Actions & Expressions**
- > **Forms of Expression**
words, music, songs, dance, movement, gesture, "sacred text," visuals, smells, tastes, physical elements appealing to all the senses and the person as a whole
- > **Opportunities for Spontaneous Expression**
- > **People**
Witnesses – invited to moments of formalised and/or spontaneous participation
Participants – have actively prepared for their part in the ritual
Leader(s) – authorized by the community and/or participants to preside over the ritual
- > **Ritual Presence**
altered state of being appropriate to the ritual action
- > **Repetition and Tradition**



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| Elements & Structure of a Ritual |

1. A place, an environment that sets the atmosphere and the mood. It can be as simple as a lighted candle before a picture in one's room, or as elaborate as a special building, a temple or a church.
2. An opening, gathering and focusing of attention and energies. For a group this can often be achieved by a song.
3. A theme, set forth in a story, a poem or other text expressing a central thought.
4. A response to the theme by the assembled community. The litany is a useful form for a communal response. For a ritual to remain alive, there needs to be room for spontaneity, for the community members to share their concerns.
5. A symbol and a symbolic action — the group must do something, i.e. plant a seed, break bread, pass the cup
6. A closing — having aroused the psychic/spiritual energies of the group, we must ground them and bring closure, perhaps with an exit song or a final word and gesture.

| On Ritual in Community |

“A ritual is an act that is performed primarily for its symbolic and imagistic import and for its effect on the soul. I grab a quick sandwich one day, but another day I go to a special restaurant to celebrate an anniversary. The meal at the restaurant probably will have more of a ritual quality than the sandwich, although even that could be a simple ritual.”

-- Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*

“Ritual ushers us into a welcome and comforting rhythm of thoughts and activities. It unclutters our minds by providing structure and boundaries during times of change. The order imposed by meaningful ritual allows us to reflect our values and convey messages to self and the community about who we are and what we are experiencing.”

-- Achterberg, Dossey, Kolkmeier, *Rituals of Healing*

“Ritual enacted by the community is experienced as participation of humans in cosmic energies...the sacred is experienced not as something coming down from above but rather as energy welling up from within the community whose daily life is already holy. The community lifts up a certain moment--the sharing of a meal, the healing of a conflict, the birth, maturing or death of a member--and highlights its significance in a making and sharing of the meaning of life.”

-- Diane Neu, *from Notes On Ritual*

“Purpose is the driving force that contributes to the effectiveness of ritual.”

--Malidoma Patrice Some, *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community*

“Although...rituals of the past may seem magical and full of life and colour, they may not work if they are not consonant with today’s belief system. Rituals that work best for you will be those that you believe in.

--Achterberg, Dossey, Kolkmeier, *Rituals of Healing*

“When rites are at their best, people’s emotions and sense of beauty are both fully expressed.”

--Hsun Tzu, *Confucian*



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| On Ritual in Community |

“Whatever happens in a ritual space, some kind of power is released if given a freedom in which to live. This is the only way those who participate in the ritual can continue to benefit from the power.”

--Malidoma Patrice Some, *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community*

“Because rituals both come from and create dreams, they encourage the deeper wisdom coming from these visionary levels.”

--Achterberg, Dossey, Kolkmeier, *Rituals of Healing*

“The harmony and well-being of the community, its coordination with the harmony and ultimate nature of the cosmos of which it is a part, and the integration of the individual, in his (sic) thought, feeling, and personal desires, with the sense and essential force of this universal circumstance, can be said...to be the fundamental aim and nature of the ceremonial...It is possible that the failure of mythology and ritual to function effectively in our civilisation may account for the high incidence among us of the malaise that has led to the characterization of our times as the “Age of Anxiety.”

--Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

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Photo: Wikimedia Commons

1. Circumcision

Eight days after a male baby is born the ritual of Brit (or Bris) Milah takes place. This is the ceremony of circumcision which brings the child into the covenant of Abraham, who is traditionally considered the first Jew. The baby is passed from the mother, through any relatives or friends present to the *sandek*, often a family member who holds the boy while the *mohel*, a professionally trained ritual circumciser, performs the minor operation. After that, the *sandek* passes the boy to the father, and both the father and the mohel say a blessing. Then the baby's first name is announced to those present. Often, Jews (both men and women) have a first name for use in Jewish rituals that is different from their regular first name.



Photo: www.chocostudio.com

2. Naming of a girl, (Brit Bat, Simchat Bat or Zevud Bat or Britah)

After the birth of a Jewish baby girl, the girl's name is announced, often at the synagogue, in a ceremony that somewhat parallels the naming that is a part of a boy's circumcision. For this reason, the ceremony is sometimes called a Brit Bat (bringing a daughter into the covenant) or Britah (the feminine version of the word Brit, or covenant). It is also called a Simchat Bat (the Joy of the Daughter) or a Zevud Bat (the Gift of a Daughter).

The ritual during this ceremony is less fixed than that of a circumcision, and besides the naming, it can also include a festive meal, a reading from the Torah and other readings and songs. The timing of the ceremony also varies, ranging from a couple of days to a few months after the birth.



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Photo: Wikimedia Commons

3. Pidyon haBen (Redeeming of the Son)

Jews hold a Pidyon HaBen ceremony for first-born sons that originates in the Torah (Exodus 13:12-15, among other places). It is held when the baby is at least one month old. The child is redeemed via a symbolic payment to a Kohen, a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron, who can perform special mitzvot or duties. In biblical times the payment equalled five silver shekels. Today, the payment consists of five silver coins or a small silver article. During a Pidyon HaBen ceremony, the father recites two blessings. The first praises God for commanding the redemption and the second thanks God for bringing them to this moment in time. The father then hands the money to the Kohen. The Kohen holds the money over the baby's head and recites a number of prayers. A festive meal (seudat mitzvah) is often held following the ceremony.



Photo: www.amit-events.co.il

4. Bar-Mitzvah/ Bat-Mitzvah

The Bar Mitzvah for men and Bat Mitzvah for women is the public celebration of the coming of age. The term means "A son/daughter of age to fulfil the commandments", and refers both to the ceremony and to the person celebrating it. Celebrated at 13 for men and 12 or 13 for women, the ceremony symbolizes the beginning of adulthood, which traditionally was the moment from when the Bar or Bat Mitzvah was considered obligated to keep the commandments. B'nai Mitzvah (plural form) usually consist of the celebrant reading from the Torah during a service. In Orthodox Jewish circles this is only done by boys – there, the ceremony for girls is much less elaborate. Afterwards, the father or parents of the new adult will recite a blessing. Following the service, the family will usually hold a reception or party, and gifts are given to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

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Photo: Wikimedia Commons

5. Mikvah

A *mikvah* is a pool of water that is supplied by a natural source such as a river or a lake. It is used for ritual purification ceremonies. The *mikvah* is used during the conversion ritual, before weddings, and by Orthodox and Conservative Jews to cleanse away the ritual impurity caused by menstruation. Some Chassidic men immerse in the mikvah every week, or even every day. *Mikvahs* are also used to purify utensils when they are first bought. When a person uses a *mikvah*, he or she must be completely immersed. All hair is to be worn loose and no jewellery or clothing or even bandages should be worn. Every part of the body should be touched by the water.



Photo: www.customchuppah.com

6. Wedding

The Jewish wedding can take place anywhere, though in some communities it is usually held at a synagogue. It is presided over by a rabbi or other officiate, with the couple standing under a canopy known as the chuppah. The canopy symbolizes the home that will be created by the new couple. The officiate will recite a blessing and the couple will share a cup of wine, followed by the reading of the marriage contract. The husband then gives a ring to the wife, and in many communities the wife also gives a ring to the husband, followed by the reciting of seven blessings for the couple. Finally, the groom will smash a glass with his foot to remind those assembled of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem – a reminder that amidst all the joy of the wedding, there is still sorrow in the world. The wedding is often followed by a reception or meal.

In some communities, during the week after the wedding the couple will be hosted for meals by friends and family, during which blessings are also recited.



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Photo: www.jpost.com

7. Funeral / Burial

When a Jew is dying, he or she recites prayers ending with the Shema—a reaffirmation of the Jewish faith. It is customary not to leave a person who is dying alone, where possible. Once dead, the person is ritually washed and then buried. Jewish custom is to bury a person as soon as feasible after the death. The primary mourners (i.e. parents, spouse, siblings and children) will have their clothes torn before the ceremony to symbolize their grief. Jews are buried in simple coffins or shrouds, to symbolize equality in death as well as the worthlessness of material wealth, and the mourners will all contribute to the burial by putting earth into the grave until the coffin is covered. The ceremony is brief and simple. After the funeral, the immediate family sits shiva for seven days (shiva means seven in Hebrew)—they sit in low chairs, may not look into mirrors, shave or cut their hair. Friends and extended family will often bring food. Prayers are said every evening and a candle will burn for the entirety of the period. For thirty days after the funeral, the family will not attend celebrations or parties.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

8. Mezuzah

A Mezuzah is a parchment inscribed by hand with verses from the Torah in Hebrew. It is affixed to the door frames of Jewish homes. In Deuteronomy 6:9, God tells the Jewish people to attach the commandments to the doorposts of their houses. The Mezuzah is the fulfilment of this.

The parchment, written in black ink with a special quill pen, is rolled up and placed in a protective and decorated holder that can be made of any material, and then affixed to the doorways of the house.

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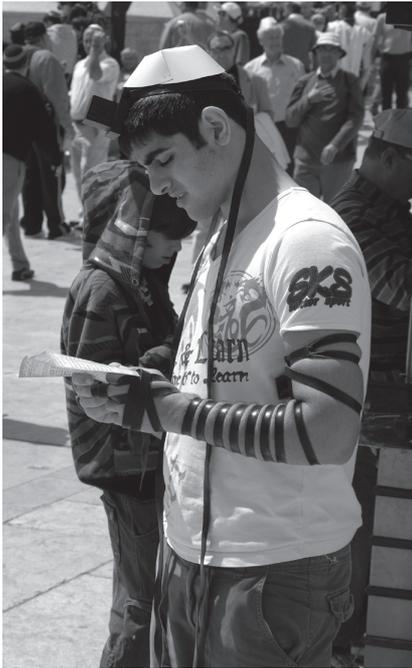


Photo: Wikimedia Commons

9. Tefillin

The *Tefillin* are two small square black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, held by leather bands. Each weekday morning (Sunday to Friday) Jewish men are required to wear during prayers: one *Tefillin* box is placed above the forehead and the other box is tied on the left arm so that it rests against the heart.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

10. Pesach Seder

The Pesach Seder is held on the first and second nights of the Jewish holiday of Pesach (Passover) (which falls in March or in April). Families and friends gather around the table to read the Haggadah (literally: "telling of a story"), the story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt.

While many Jewish holidays revolve around the synagogue, the Seder is conducted in the family home and it is customary to invite guests, including strangers and needy persons. During the Seder, participants drink four symbolic cups of wine, eat *matzah* (unleavened bread) and partake of numerous other symbolic foods placed on the "Seder Plate". The ceremony goes on until late at night, with the participants discussing passages of the Haggadah and singing special Passover songs.



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Photo: Wikimedia Commons

11. Shabbat

The weekly day of rest in Judaism, *Shabbat* starts at sundown on Friday and lasts until sundown on Saturday. The *Shabbat* (or *Sabbath*) symbolizes the seventh day after the beginning of the world, when God rested after the six days of creation. Traditionally, Jews are prohibited from working on *Shabbat*, including business transactions, writing, and using electric appliances.

Shabbat is not specifically a day of prayer, although prayers are included, and for many Jews it is the one day on which they attend synagogue services. On *Shabbat*, Jews often spend time and meals with their families and friends. Traditionally, three festive meals are held: a Friday night dinner, a Saturday lunch and a Saturday-evening meal.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

12. Chanukah

Chanukah, also known as the Festival of Lights, is observed for eight days and occurs in late November or December. The most important *Chanukah* ritual is the candle lighting: the festival is observed by the kindling of lights in a special candelabrum, the *Menorah* or *Chanukiah*, starting with one light on the first night of the holiday and progressing to eight on the final night. It is traditional to eat foods fried in oil such as potato latkes (pancakes) and sufganiot (donuts). *Chanukah's* status as a holiday is on a lesser level than the biblically ordained holy days, as the festival originates not from the Bible but from a later period of Jewish history (2nd Century BCE). In the modern world gifts are frequently given to children as part of the festival celebration and this is the Jewish festival that falls closest to the secular New Year and Christmas.

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Photo: Wikimedia Commons

13. Purim

This festival is the Jewish version of carnival, and this early spring holiday, recalls how Esther saved the Jews of Persia from annihilation as described in the biblical Book of Esther. The festive celebration, as with all Jewish holidays, begins at sundown, when the Book of Esther is read in the synagogue. The story is read from a *Megillah* or scroll and Jews are instructed at this festival that they should get so drunk that they cannot tell the difference between good and evil and pandemonium reigns in the synagogue. Esther's role and her true identity as a Jew are hidden during the story and therefore Jews especially children, celebrate the festival in fancy dress. *Purim* is further celebrated by exchanging gifts of food with friends (*Mishloach Manot*), by giving alms to the poor and by a festive meal.