
Rethinking Jewish Ritual: Toward an Eclectic Approach

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Scholars often divide religious traditions into those emphasizing true belief (orthodoxy) and those stressing correct ritual behaviour (orthopraxy). While admitting that this distinction is too broad “since no religious tradition can promote belief or ritual at the total expense of the other,” Catherine Bell in her recent assessment of ritual practice claims that “these can be useful terms for understanding aspects of the density, style, and domains of ritual in the life of a religious community” (Bell 1997, 191). While ritualistic performances are interpenetrated with meaning, and while beliefs inevitably find reinforcement in practice, some religious traditions turn to one or the other of these as the most reliable marker of religiosity. Membership within a community of faith may depend most on creeds of belief or on execution of definitive external actions. Judaism, like Islam, has often been contrasted with Christianity as an example of orthopraxy. This paper examines the way a single Jewish ritual practice has received a variety of interpretations. Approaching Jewish ritual from an eclectic perspective will reveal that the same external act, putatively the “same” ritual, may in fact have a variety of meanings.

This diversity is particularly well represented in the case of the ritualizing of narrative, of telling tales as part of ritual performance. In *Rethinking Modern Judaism* (1998, 242), Arnold Eisen notes a story attributed to the Hebrew novelist Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970) and related by Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. The story tells of successive generations of Jewish mystical leaders (*Zaddikim*) who seek to perform a miraculous act. Each generation seems to lack one element in the magical process, but ultimately attains the same goal. According to Scholem, the final stage is one in which only the story of the miracle remains, but *telling the*

story effectually accomplishes the same purpose as the acts performed in previous generations.

While noting the changes that have transformed contemporary Jewish practice in all its forms, Eisen refuses to accept the lingering pessimism which adheres to Agnon's tale (Eisen 1998, 263). As we shall see, however, this tale occurs in several versions and several modern variants (see Idel 1988, 270–71; cf. Scholem 1961, 349–50). In each case the event described, the *actions* involved, the ritual process itself, seems the same, but the *meaning* of that event differs dramatically.

Ritual as Opportunity: Gershom Scholem's Tale

Gershom Scholem, who may be credited with making this tale a famous one, uses it as a means of illustrating the current condition of Judaism, or at least Jewish mysticism. He claims that although the story is ambivalent—some interpreters would say “it symbolizes the decay of a great movement”—it can also be said that “it reflects the transformation of all its values.” In either case, Scholem interprets the story optimistically: “the story is not ended, it has not yet become history, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me” (Scholem 1961, 350). Scholem does not claim that ritual has been replaced by the telling of stories. Instead, he intimates that telling stories is itself a powerful ritual, a ritual that can transform both the storyteller and the audience. Story is not mere theory but deed: “Nothing at all has remained theory, everything has become a story.” Far from claiming that by becoming story ritual has atrophied, Scholem argues that story is itself a ritual act that goes beyond theory and plays an active role in shaping Jewish life (349).

To make this point, Scholem restructures and remolds the original tale. According to Scholem's version, the Baal Shem Tov¹ originally carried out a specific routine whenever he had “a difficult task before him.” He would go to a special place, light a fire, and meditate in prayer. When all these actions were completed, the task was accomplished and reality had been altered to fit the needs of the Baal Shem Tov. Thus place, action, and prayer are the central elements in achieving a certain goal. The decline occurs as, over time, one after another of these elements become inaccessible. First, the specific actions associated with the routine are forgotten, but the place and the prayers are remembered. Then the prayers are lost, but the sacred place is recalled. In each case, however, that which needs to be achieved is finally accomplished. Eventually not even the place is re-

membered but the story serves to have “the same effect as the actions of the other three.” The sequence has an important significance in understanding the story. By making place the final part of the ritual to be lost, the tale renders it the most important. The key idea is that ritual involves a change of place and that telling stories may effect a type of metaphysical dislocation that corresponds to the geographical change of place indicated in the tale itself. Ritual, according to the story, transforms reality by a transformation of place.

Thus what appears to be the most important element in this ritual is a physical change of place. Yet even this element appears to be dispensable as storytelling provides its own metaphysical location, its own space, different from the original one. The displacements involved have a significance beyond that of merely indicating a change or difference. To use an analogy: forest fires—those, at least, started by human negligence—present both an enigmatic and dangerous intrusion of the human into the natural. Although humanity has tamed much of the destructive power of fire, reintroducing that element into the woods suggests recklessness (as indicated by the cliché “playing with fire”). In Scholem’s telling of this particular tale, the precarious use of a domesticated power within a wild setting represents the most extreme example of ritual power.

The next aspect of ritual to be lost is the special meditation used by the Baal Shem Tov. Here again the social and conventional has been displaced into the natural and untamed. Prayer is most often associated with public worship, with devotion in the midst of community. Even when practiced in private, prayer usually seeks to impose discipline and order on the mind. Here, however, prayer takes flight in the midst of a primeval forest. It is taken out of its communal and structured setting and, like fire, returned to its pristine dangerous form, to the wilds. The place itself, then, becomes the sign and signal of the transformation that occurs. To go to the place means to return *ab origine* to the fount of one’s beginnings, to the primitive roots of humanity’s development.

How then does telling a story perform the same function and achieve the same end as ritual practice? Perhaps because it eschews intellectualization and theory, storytelling recalls the primitive impulse of thought itself, an impulse best expressed in narrative and only later tamed and subdued into theoretical shape. As retold by Scholem, then, the Hasidic narrative about the successive decline in generations demonstrates the necessity of going back to origins. Ritual represents a regression to original immediacy—to fire without

civilization, to prayer without a community, to a place without human interference, to words without intellectual structure.

Ironically, Scholem's view of ritual here comes close to that of Martin Buber (1878–1965), a theorist whose works he routinely criticized. The ontology described by Buber in *I and Thou* serves as the underlying reality on which Jewish ritual depends (Wood 1969). Human beings can interact with the world in a manipulative, self-centered way. They can use the others in their lives as instruments to attain their own ends. This is a mode of being characterized by Buber as "I-It." People, however, can also encounter one another and the world around them through direct meeting. Such relationship in the "between" of existence is more immediate and responsive. In this mode, people *meet* others as genuine others from whom they learn and in whom they can trust. This is the mode of "I-Thou." Jewish ritual depends on this ontology to justify its existence and significance.

Buber discovered in ritual both the foundation of society and an escape from an overly stratified social structure. Community, he averred, depends upon an anchoring around a common centre—an "invisible altar"—and ritual is a way of symbolizing this spiritual anchor of society (Buber 1970, 163). At the same time, Buber argued that ritual practices must open up to an experience of primal relationship, to the "holy" which occurs not on the level of structure but rather on the level of encounter in the *between*. Thus, he contends that "All the prescriptions of this body of rules, both the ritual and the ethical, are intended to lead beyond themselves into the sphere of the holy" (Buber 1952, 104).

Buber's theory of Jewish ritual, then, agrees with Scholem's retelling of the story in terms of the decline in ritual specificity. The point of ritualism lies less in its detailed performance than in its efficacy to evoke an immediacy of experience, a collapse of structure, and an infusion of primal dislocation into a person's consciousness. Ritual conveys the truth that human beings live on the brink of the holy; that their ordinary existence can open into the wonder and mystery of true relationship. Even if some rituals may no longer be able to generate such a response, others, even new ones, arise to do so. Yet, more pessimistically than Scholem, Buber suggests that there are some historical moments when no ritual seems available. When God's reality has hidden itself from humanity, then *all* ritual falls into idolatry. If God does not stand behind the curtain, the ritual, even when it opens itself wide, can reveal only emptiness. Buber laments that such a condition will continue, "until the new conscience of men has arisen that will...enable them to see through illusion and recognize

this confusion for what it is" (Buber 1970, 120). In short, though ritual can precipitate the I-Thou encounter, in a time of the "eclipse of God" ritual can only *substitute* for that encounter—can only be an idolatrous imitation of it. Buber ultimately rejects modern ritual because it does not serve as true ritual, as the storytelling of Scholem, for example, once functioned.

Scholem and Buber do agree, however, that ritual in its true sense communicates the double reality confronting every person. It awakens a sense of possibility and opportunity for entering a new mode of being. The performative ritual of Jewish storytelling, the transformation of all Jewish action into a type of narrative communication, functions as a window opening out to a reality often overlooked. The new vista provided by the ritual is itself a stimulus for change, and an invitation to embrace all aspects of human existence. Seen in this light, ritual represents a positive and optimistic way to view the world in which people live and points toward the liberation of which they are capable.

Ritual as Insensitivity: Elie Wiesel and the Post-Holocaust World

Not every interpretation of the Hasidic story adapted by Scholem expresses this optimism. Elie Wiesel, for example, relates the same story far more pessimistically (Wiesel 1972, 167–68). Whereas Scholem affirms the ability of ritual storytelling to fulfill the purposes served by earlier, now abandoned rites, Wiesel makes the story a tale of ritual effectiveness. When a disaster threatens the Jewish people, Wiesel recounts, a religious leader, a *Zaddik*, performs rites in order to ward it off. Wiesel follows Scholem insofar as the original ritual loses first its magical fire, then its special prayer, and finally its special place. He too relates that at that junction all that remains is the story itself.

However, according to Wiesel, this series of successful attempts to counteract danger has ended dramatically in the modern period. Looking at modernity through the prism of the Nazi Holocaust, he concludes that if ritual had been effective, then that event should not have occurred. That it did happen undermines the presuppositions of ritual action. Wiesel's conclusion to Agnon's story suggests that the tale cannot continue. At this final point, Wiesel comments, "it was sufficient. It no longer is. The proof is that the threat has not been averted... Perhaps we are no longer able to tell the story. Could all of us be guilty? Even the survivors? Especially the survivors?" (Wiesel 1972, 168).

What lies behind Wiesel's pessimism? Wiesel denies the power and effectiveness of traditional Jewish practices, yet he refuses to create new rituals, to affirm the power of symbolism in some altered way. Rather, he gives them new meaning—a *personal* meaning that illuminates the problems of modern existence. For Wiesel, this means confronting the overwhelming new responsibility humanity faces. The insufficiency of past ritual forces each human being today to shoulder the duties of saving the world, of averting disaster. Wiesel's theme has become "reliance upon man in a world devoid of God," in a world in which traditions become "significant in allowing a person to face his fate" (Berenbaum 1979, 10, 59). Ritual confronts each person with the duty to act precisely because ritual *fails*, because it cannot accomplish now what it once purportedly achieved. From this perspective, ritual, and especially the ritual of storytelling, works by conveying the limitations within which a modern person must live. Ritual failure forces a recognition of reality, the reality of a post-Holocaust world.

Wiesel's perspective receives some empirical confirmation in the following example, in which the abandonment of a ritual process seems to proclaim not less but *greater* piety. Deshen (1974) points out how pious immigrants to Israel sometimes choose to relinquish rituals such as the wearing of a beard, expressive liturgical gestures, and some ritual garments as a sign that they have moved into a new, secularized environment. They seek to maintain the sanctity of those actions and so refuse to follow them in a less than completely religious context. They have indeed been "effacing dissonant symbols," not because they themselves have become less pious or religious, but rather as a sign that they now live in a less religious community. By abandoning rituals they are, in effect, affirming a "continued attachment to the religious values related to ritual actions" (Deshen 1974, 179–82). Ironically, the absence of the ritual sign points here to the failure of the *environment*—the problematic reality noted by Wiesel in his version of Agnon's tale. More than Scholem, and even more than Buber, Wiesel advances the negative view of Jewish survival that Eisen criticizes. From Wiesel's perspective it is precisely the *observance* of the ritual that points to an insensitivity to Jewish values. Continuing to practice rituals when we are no longer worthy of them, when they no longer serve a useful purpose, does not contribute to Jewish survival but rather marks its extinction.

Ritual as Reliance on Others: Shmuel Yosef Agnon

Scholem emphasizes the continuity of ritual; Wiesel stresses the discontinuity of failure. Beyond these aspects of traditional Jewish observance stands the assumption of such observance as a valued or value-impairing act. Ritual, however, sometimes affirms more prosaic realities. The ritual process may convey, for example, the legitimacy and authority of communal leaders and institutions. As previously noted, the tale which both Scholem and Wiesel tell goes back to an original story attributed to the Hebrew novelist, S. Y. Agnon. Agnon's own retelling of the tale reflects the social and cultural reality of European Hasidism, a religious movement in which the role of the leader, the *Zaddik*, is paramount. In his telling of this narrative the element of social or political power advances to the forefront (Agnon 1978, 439). As Agnon tells the story, an occasion for *pikuah nefes*, the saving of a life, has presented itself to a man's only son. The man and his son come to the *Zaddik* Israel of Rizhin and ask him for help. The *Zaddik* replies that just such an event occurred in the days of the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov's procedure consisted of ordering the making of a candle, taking the candle into the forest and lighting it by a certain tree, constructing a fire, and doing other sorts of mysterious things there. With God's help deliverance was effected. In the next generation a similar event occurred, and the Great Maggid of Meseritz was approached to appeal for mercy. The Maggid was able to perform all the actions except kindle the mystical fire or recite the special meditations, but by relying on the merit of what his teacher the Baal Shem Tov had done, the deliverance was nonetheless accomplished. Later on, in the days of Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, a similar event took place. Upon being approached by the supplicants, Rabbi Leib went to the special tree and confessed that he did not have the power to do what his predecessors had done. Nevertheless, he would recite all their deeds before God. He told the entire tale, and by God's help the deliverance was effected. After recounting this history, the Rabbi of Rizhin concludes that we in the present no longer have even the power to do as much as Rabbi Leib. However, we *can* tell the tales of the *Zaddikim*, and God will perform the deed. And such, says Agnon, was the way it occurred.

We may note several points of interest in this rendition. First, the significance of place is reduced. What is important is knowing the special tree and performing the special actions there. Holiness of place has given way to a holiness of secret knowledge. The designated actions are also made more complicated and detailed. Fire and candle

are distinguished here as two ritual actions, which are less symbolic of some general idea (such as taming the wild) than of performing miraculous actions. Thus lighting a candle may be possible even when kindling a special fire and reciting magical incantations might not be.

Finally, all that remains is the act of conveying the wonder at what earlier leaders could accomplish. We might note here that the intended audience of the narration is the divine; when God hears what the heroes of the past achieved, then God acts on behalf of their descendants. While Agnon seems to be emphasizing the power inherent in stories, note that the stories themselves associate that power with individual leaders. Ritual, here, portrays relationships of power. The central theme is the necessity to seek out those who possess superior abilities—even if, in a fallen generation, those abilities may only consist in recounting the great deeds of those who have come before. Finally the theme of “saving a life” requires notice. Jewish tradition requires extraordinary measures when a human life is at stake. In the story this seems to operate on two levels. On one level it suggests that in connection with such a case a leader will use the entire arsenal of magical ritual possible. On another level it suggests that God may well allow a lesser instrument to succeed, even though under ordinary circumstances it might fail, just because of the crucial nature of the situation. That the various rituals at each stage all succeed does not, therefore, validate the ritual power of those performing them. Rather the success points to God’s mercy and leniency.

Thus it becomes clear that ritual displays the status of the person performing it. By mastering all the detailed and intricate forms of behaviour, a ritualist testifies to special talent. The more such behaviours, and the more esoteric and abstruse they are, the higher the level of the leader. A leader who knows secret incantations and has the ability to make a magical fire stands above one who can only recall stories. The story as Agnon tells it cannot escape conveying a sense of sadness regarding the decline of generations. Ritual is measured not only by its pragmatic effect but also by being an occasion on which its performance reveals the virtuosity of the performer. Agnon shows how that virtuosity declines and, while allowing that even reflected glory may succeed in achieving a particular goal, he seems to lament the need to lower the standards of practices to this level. The theme in this tale echoes many found throughout Agnon’s corpus (Band 1968, 105–8). He shapes one story (“The Good Years”) around his narrator’s growing amazement as he meets one generation after another of pious, long-lived men. The secret to the oldest of these men is his Zionism—he counts his immigration to the Land of

Israel as the beginning of his life. What strikes the reader of this tale is that the generational decline is not in “piety” as such but in devotion to living in Israel. Other tales focus more on conventional religious practice and its abandonment by succeeding generations. These stories reinforce the idea that Agnon’s telling of the story of Rabbi Israel of Rizhin is but another example of how later followers have diluted the power and authority of earlier leaders. Ritual, in this case, becomes the showcase which displays the evidence for it. The general practice of ritual is less important for Agnon than the rituals of the ritual expert. His ultimate lament arises from the failure of the authorized elite rather than from any decline in popular piety.

The link between leadership and ritual expertise is clear in Jewish history. Lawrence Hoffman (1987) traces the changing rituals that developed in rabbinic and medieval Jewish practice to sociological causes. He claims that rituals enshrine and reinforce the categories of experience an institution considers essential. While students of Jewish ritual routinely describe variants in terms of geographical location, Hoffman notes that the differences refer to “social space” and not to topological sites. He looks at the way modernization has influenced practice of such rituals as the Passover celebration and the recounting of Jewish history and finds a social rationale for the innovations introduced. In short, he concludes that “the holistic study of liturgy may begin with the text but must eventually go beyond it to the people, to their meanings, to their assumed constructs” (Hoffman 1987, 182). Jewish ritual, on this reading, undergoes change and development in order to create new social structures, to influence political life. Rather than just *reflect* changes, Jewish ritual has, in the past, *shaped* and *arranged* power relationships. It has created divisions between Jewish communities and in the process has established new constellations of authority.

Ritual and Personal Mysticism: Moshe Idel’s Interpretation

Agnon’s version of the story of the declining generations inspired both Scholem and Wiesel. Moshe Idel takes a closer, more scholarly, look at Agnon’s use of his sources (Idel 1988, 397 nn. 92–97). As with Scholem, and unlike Wiesel or Agnon, Idel considers this tale not one of decline and loss but of continued efficacy. More than that, he seems to consider it a proof of spiritual advancement. “If there is a decline,” he says, “it is in the knowledge of theurgy, which is, however, complemented by a direct address to God... The loss of theurgy...is compensated by the discovery of forms of personal mysti-

cism" (271). The tale, as Idel reads it, relates how magical practices were displaced in favour of a pietistic reliance on the divine. The abandonment of external rituals brought with it a higher type of religiosity, that of private devotion.

The text that Idel reproduces differs from the other retellings of the story. Here the candle, found by Agnon but dropped by Scholem and Wiesel, is attached to the special tree and stands alone without any mention of the building of the fire. Idel interprets both of these symbols as referring to the soul of the son whose life is in danger. The attachment of the son's soul to the "tree of souls" is, for Idel, an example of "sympathetic magic." In later developments that magic is replaced by the more psychological tie between the individuals involved and the divine; direct action replaces symbolic rite. Of striking significance in Idel's version is the absence of an emphasis on place. While the figure of the special tree remains in Idel's telling of the first two cases of effective intervention, its neglect is not considered significant. Though the Baal Shem Tov is said to have attached the special candle to the special tree and done various meditations, the specific actions play no real role in what follows. The author relates that the ritual leader of the first generation after the Baal Shem Tov did "as mentioned above" but declared that "since the special prayers of the Baal Shem Tov are not known to me, I shall do this on the basis of the *kavanah* which the Besht [Baal Shem Tov] intended." He too was favourably received by God and the deliverance was accomplished. The leader of the final generation claimed, "We do not even have the power to do that, but I shall only tell the story to God so that he will help." And, indeed, the story concludes, God did help. The intense devotion of the *Zaddik* replaced the expertise of former leaders.

According to this version, the specific elements that brought about the deliverance are irrelevant. The Besht uses extraordinary actions (the mention of the candle here is unique, despite Idel's desire to connect it with a memorial candle lit for a close relative) and recites extraordinary prayers. The next generation enacts the same mystical deeds but forgoes the prayers. Finally, in the last instance neither extraordinary prayer nor extraordinary deed is required. All that is really necessary is an appeal to the divine, and even without all the external rituals, it is believed, God will answer such a cry. God's compassion becomes the central theme of the story. The common element at every stage is God taking action for the sake of human beings. The various stages in the story require different ways in which God may be importuned, not different levels of leadership.

Idel's presentation of the Hasidic story emphasizes meaning over outward form—ritual merely provides an external expression of an inner conviction and trust. Rituals draw attention to the divine nearness, but that nearness remains accessible even when the rituals are not. Rituals have meaning only when they point to the reality of the divine; they are useful as tokens of a reality, but they have no significance in and of themselves. Heschel offers a similar interpretation of rituals and even condemns them, noting that in Hebrew the letters making up the word “customs” (*minhagim*) are identical to those in the word for Hell (*gehinom*). He declares frankly, “Too often a ceremony is the homage which disbelief pays to faith” (Heschel 1954, 113–14). Heschel contends that Jewish religion consists, above all else, of the creation of a view of reality, a sense of the order of existence. Those who see Jewish practice as a ritualistic regimen have misunderstood it—“the order of Jewish living is meant to be, not a set of rituals, but an order of all of man's existence” (106). The point of rituals is to suggest that order of existence, and to remind those who perform them of the significance of the whole of life, of the meaning of reality. Rituals have no meaning in themselves; they are tools for spirituality. This means that ritual acts, if they have significance, point to what a believer already knows; they *reinforce* faith rather than *create* it.

The Value of an Eclectic Approach to Jewish Ritual

How does Jewish ritual interact with Jewish religious life more generally? The sketch given here suggests that differences in definitions of ritual practice may lead diverse thinkers to analyze the same data in strikingly different ways. In some cases, the abandonment of ritual offers a more profound gauge of religious commitment than its retention. In other cases, ritual action may appear as a poor substitute for genuine religious experience. Each theory of ritual and each Jewish theorist of ritual offers substantive evidence. No single hermeneutic for decoding symbolic actions encompasses all the possible meanings and uses of Jewish ritual. By refusing to universalize a single theory of ritual, the student of Jewish practice may attain a clearer vision of Jewish religious belief and action than can be achieved through an essentialist approach. The exercise carried out here—analyzing the story of a single ritual practice and its transformation in the works of several of the most significant modern Jewish theorists and authors—is only one such experiment. Yet it is one that, I believe, has relevance not only for the interpretation of Jewish ritual but for scholarship in religious ritual generally.

Endnotes

1. Israel ben Eliezer (1700–60), the founder of Hasidism.

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