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## Walking with Our Ancestors

Ten days ago, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, Apple launched the brand new iPhone 4S, replete with its dual-core A5 microchip, an 8-megapixel camera that shoots stunning videos with unbelievable visual clarity, and featuring Siri, a personal assistant who makes phone calls, sends messages, schedules meetings, sets reminders and more.<sup>1</sup> Apple markets their new telephone as “Picking up where amazing left off.”

Admittedly, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, I found myself otherwise engaged. It was the 16<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, and the Jewish community was celebrating the second day of the Jewish festival of Sukkot. Sukkot, known as the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles, is an ancient biblical celebration that lasts for seven days. According to the Torah, the Israelites were to mark the conclusion of the autumn harvest by making pilgrimage to Jerusalem and offering sacrifice to God at the Temple. Still today, we follow the commandment in the Torah to dwell in *sukkot* – fragile, temporary booths, eating festive meals, learning, and even sleeping under the stars. Additionally, we take a citron-like fruit called an *etrog*, together with the *lulav* – consisting of palm, myrtle and willow branches – and we wave them in six directions, indicating the presence of God in our midst.<sup>2</sup>

But even as Sukkot has now concluded, an image from that Friday morning remains clear in my mind. My walk to the synagogue takes me through Bondi Junction, and as I passed the Apple Store, I noticed more than two hundred fifty people were flocking, making pilgrimage if you will, to the Apple Store, to proudly emerge and wave their new iPhone in the air for everyone to see. Meanwhile, I was about to celebrate an ancient pilgrimage festival, and participate in an ancient ritual involving the waving of branches and a lemon-like fruit. Some people may ask, *What was I thinking?*

In reality, trying to compare the waving of *lulav* and *etrog* to the iPhone is, if you will, a fruitless escapade. The latest part of our ubiquitous technological frenzy offers us greater convenience than ever before, and further enhances our ability to remain connected to nearly everyone and everything. Mind you, I have no interest in poo-pooing the so-called “i-Generation.” I am a proud participant with my own iPhone, an iPod and a Mac computer at home. But the question remains, *with technology that leaves everything accessible at our fingertips, why do we still need ancient rituals? And why can ancient rituals still be meaningful?*

Before attempting to answer these questions, we must, reluctantly admit, that for many people, ancient rituals have lost their meaning. Twentieth century philosopher and activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote:

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.apple.com/iphone/features/>

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 23:33-43.

defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, [and] insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendour of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

With new scientific and technological developments, people have moved on to find “meaning” elsewhere, establishing connections and finding community beyond the walls of the church or synagogue. So many of us encounter tragedy. We watch loved ones suffer. Such moments leave us riddled with questions, or we conclude that religion does not answer our questions satisfactorily, and we are left feeling uncertain, sceptical about the existence of a loving God, so much so that in this day and age, we find ourselves asking *why* we should actually *choose* to express ourselves through ancient rituals, and why we should concern ourselves with ancient values.

But the message of religion can still be meaningful. While that which is *timely* is attractive and desired, the sense of connecting with that which is *timeless* can truly enhance our lives. Together, we respond by examining how we approach our traditions, understanding our teachings more deeply, and discovering new ways to make the messages of our faiths relevant for the time in which we live.

A few years ago I remember attending a gathering of Jewish young adult leaders. We were asked to comment upon our dreams for the future of the Jewish community. The overwhelming response suggested that Judaism needed to be “sexy, cool, and vibrant.” In truth, Judaism already is.

Contemporary society does a great job of defining “sexy,” bombarding us with glossy magazines and glitzy commercials, highlighting the latest trends, and revealing the most up-to-date celebrity gossip. But Judaism defines “sexy” by teaching that each of us has self-worth and inner beauty. We are taught to respect a person for their intellect and emotion, rather than just their physical appearance. We are instructed to treat our partners with dignity and respect, to listen to their wishes, and to establish relationships based on trust. Every Friday night, the Shabbat rituals performed at home remind a husband of his obligation to praise his wife as an *eishet chayil*, a woman of valour. Proverbs 31 praises a woman’s goodness, her industriousness, the kindness that she extends to other people including those who are poor and in need, and the wise words that she speaks, reminding us that beauty, and the values of lasting relationships come from within, and emanate from the deepest recesses of one’s soul and being.<sup>4</sup>

More than the latest fad or passing trend, religion concerns itself with timeless values, encouraging us to incorporate these ideas into our lives, in a timely fashion. For more than three thousand years, our peoples have turned toward God for guidance, to wise teachings for insight, and to one another for support and community. Religion links us with the stories of our ancestry, reminding us about our collective quest for justice, our need to retain hope, the imperative of demonstrating care and concern for others, and the importance of living with determination to make our world a better place. Participating in ancient rituals, walking with our ancestors, linking ourselves with centuries of tradition, learning from the words internalised by those who came before us brings blessing to our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 31.

One such ritual is prayer, a forum for expressing the longing of our hearts. Our liturgies can be viewed as inspirational texts, offering a structure for acknowledging the days of the year, and the days of our lives, containing words which have been handed down faithfully, from generation to generation. Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin has written about the *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book:

It is a reminder of laughter and gaiety, of celebration and rejoicing, as well as of sorrow and grief, of mourning and bemoaning that takes place in the life of an individual as in the life of an entire people....It contains biblical passages that date as far back as 3300 years; prayers composed by the Sages as long as 2500 years ago...It is moral instruction and ethical guidance as well as pleas for personal needs. It emphasises man's duties as well as his rights. It is the record par excellence of [our] relationship with God.<sup>5</sup>

There is so much beauty to be uncovered in the ritual of prayer. For years, I have had the pleasure of speaking with one of my best friends from university, a Roman Catholic named Paul. Still today, our conversations delve into the complexity of life, and the richness that we uncover from our respective, ancient traditions. Knowing that there are many denominations within Christianity, as there are in Judaism, I asked Paul why religion and ritual is still meaningful for him. He articulated that Roman Catholicism for him is about having a sense of friendship with God, using a time-honoured liturgy to engage in the memorials and feasts surrounding Jesus' life, celebrating not only those who saw Jesus preach, but "those in every century since who shown by their lives that they also were Jesus' friends and were changed to the core by that truth."<sup>6</sup> He expressed further:

I am certain that for you as a Jew, there is a rhythm to the year, a certain rightness when Passover and Rosh Hashanah and all their associated feasts and fasts come around. There is likewise a drumbeat and a bass line to the Catholic year, times of anticipation and contrition followed by times of rejoicing. The central moment, which ironically is an optional celebration, recently revived, is the opening of the Easter Vigil, when the long fast of Lent is past, all the sorrows of Jesus' suffering and death vividly recalled the day before, and the tall, bright candle of Easter is brought forward and the Exultet is sung to remind us of our faith's central teaching -- that all the sorrows of this life will come untrue. Life will triumph over death, indeed has triumphed and is triumphing now; death, pain, and evil will be swallowed up in victory when time's span is measured out and spent at last.<sup>7</sup>

There is a beautiful similarity between Paul's words and the Jewish observance of Sukkot, recently ended. Sukkot reminds us – thought we need no reminder – that life is fragile, that we can continue to live, to rejoice and to celebrate, even when the world around us is harsh, even with the knowledge that our existence on this earth is temporary and fleeting, comforted by God's presence and God's friendship.

Rituals have such incredible resonance. When we keep Shabbat, the Sabbath, when we learn Torah and Bible, when we mark the festivals of our respective calendars, we connect with the ancient stories, the myths, the journeys, the values of our ancestors, people like us, who encountered difficulty, who fled oppression, and who persevered, learning from God's teachings. With determination, they

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Pray As a Jew*, Preface, p. xviii.

<sup>6</sup> E-mail correspondence with Paul Giesting, 16 October 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

built a society where they recognized God's command to pursue justice and ethical living, all in the context of the most beautiful, spiritual calendar. Still today, our ancestors' journeys inform how we live and how we practice and comport ourselves in daily life. Their journey challenges us, to continue changing the world for the better.

As Christians and Jews, something special has been transmitted directly to us, part of what we call in Hebrew the *shalshet ha-kabbalah*, the chain of tradition. Once these words, these practices have been entrusted to us, it becomes our duty, to pass these teachings on to our children, to the future generations. Such is the meaning of the word tradition – that which is constantly in transmission, that which is entrusted for safekeeping.<sup>8</sup>

Even in an age where religion is in perennial distrust, when we walk with our ancestors, we find richness and inherent beauty that can enhance our lives, even in a generation filled with new age phenomena. Ultimately, religion challenges us to respond to Divine imperatives. Such a task is a tall order, especially in a twenty-first century world filled with innumerable choices, a world where we are all too painfully aware of our free will. But more than an individual quest for spirituality, religion challenges us to work together in community improving upon the gift of the world that has been entrusted to us. Though we may have individual opinions, discover meaning in a variety of ways and hold differences in belief and ideology, when our personal journeys involve the needs of others and the sacred teachings of our tradition, we can spread goodness to all parts of the world and grow closer in our relationship with all that is Divine and holy.

Walking with our ancestors offers us the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals, and to learn from one another in conversation, to experience the camaraderie and the fellowship of community. My friend Paul wrote:

Sharing experiences is not something that a man or woman needs to survive, but it is so enriching that by contrast, to live a life with no shared experiences, lived only with people from whom you feel alien, is barely to be spoken of as a life. It is rather a tragedy.

With such words, we remember and reflect on why we continue to practise and find meaning in our ancient rituals. Because our rituals help us to reflect, to connect with community past and present. Because rituals are symbolic and remind us that we need to make a difference. Because rituals create context for life's experiences – giving us the space to rejoice or mourn, providing a context and a structure for joy or sadness. Because rituals afford us the opportunity to be with others, to mark life's moments, to uncover the blessings of the limited time that we have here on Earth. And because rituals allow us the opportunity, the blessed opportunity to connect in conversation with God, the ultimate Source of meaning. May each of us continue to search for the resonance within our rituals, and may we rise from these rituals better people, strengthened in our efforts to make the world a better place.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradition>