

## **RH2 5769 - The Mind/Body Connection**

About a month ago, I experienced a momentous transition in my life when Jeff and I got engaged. To be honest, as excited as I was to make this transition, I didn't expect the change to be such a momentous one. For months leading up to our engagement, Jeff and I talked candidly about marriage, discussing when and where our wedding would be. Before "making it official," our relationship was already a loving and committed one. What's more, engagement is less of a complete transition than a symbolic one. In our tradition, the betrothal ceremony formerly took place a year before the wedding. Due to the binding nature of *erusin*, betrothal, and the difficulty of undoing it in the event, God forbid, that the couple did not marry, this "waiting period" has been eclipsed, and *erusin* takes place under the *huppah*, alongside the marriage ceremony. In the eyes of Jewish and civil law, we have no binding relationship to each other, no matter how emotionally connected we feel.

So I was surprised by how different I felt almost immediately after Jeff proposed. Thinking carefully about this, I realized that it

was triggered by a physical change, by the fact that I now wear a ring. Jeff proposed to me in Florida. We were there visiting his mother as she celebrated her learning as an Adult Bat Mitzvah. When we returned to the *shul* on Sunday to retrieve some things we had left there, the sanctuary (through no planning of Jeff's, the lucky guy!) was set up for a wedding. While Jeff's mom went to find someone to open the office, he and I explored the sanctuary, and wound up standing under the *huppah*. We were admiring the beautiful silk embroidery, and Jeff distracted me for a moment. I turned back around to face him, and found him on one knee, under the *huppah*, offering me a ring, and asking me to be his *kallah*, his bride.

The ring has its own story. It was the ring Jeff's grandfather gave to his grandmother, after whom he is named, when they became engaged. It is also the ring his father, ז"ר, of blessed memory, gave to his mother when they became engaged. I am honored to be the most recent person to receive this gift that connects so deeply to his family's history.

The ring fit perfectly, but wearing it all the time was a real change. With it on, my hand has a new look. It also feels different. The way my fingers lay when my hand is at rest has been altered. I feel the gold of the band between my fingers. When I take it off, I feel its absence. This small change in my wardrobe is actually quite significant. I am never not aware of its presence in my life.

By wearing an engagement ring, I am outwardly representing a complex of personal, spiritual ideals. In my ring, I see the history of Jeff's family, a family that is about to become mine. I see the *huppah* under which Jeff proposed to me, and the important role Judaism has in our lives. In this ring, I see reflected the love and commitment that Jeff and I feel toward each other, our hopes for our future.

This reflection of the spiritual through the physical is something that is at the heart of Jewish observance. Our tradition is filled with ritual objects and traditions that engage our bodies. Wearing a *tallit* reminds us of the *mitzvot*, and of God's sheltering presence. We bow during our prayers to show deference to God, and stand erect when mentioning God's name to show our ability to approach God freely.

Given the season, the upcoming holiday of Sukkot is one that immediately jumps to mind as one whose practices similarly express spiritual ideas through physical actions. During Sukkot, we drastically change our physical relationship to the world around us by leaving the comfort of our homes and dwelling in a *sukkah* for seven days. The Torah teaches, בסכת תשבו שבעת ימים כל האזרח בישראל ישבו בסכת, “You shall live in booths seven days; all citizen in Israel shall live in booths.” (Leviticus 23:42) Living in the *sukkah* is clearly a physically oriented *mitzvah*. But what is the inherent meaning that the practice reflects? The Torah explains, למען ידעו דרתיכם, “In order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.” (Ibid. 23:43) From the Torah’s perspective, our physical practice is meant to jump start our collective memory. Our ancestors dwelled in booths during their journey through the wilderness; now we do too.

In the eyes of the Midrash, the Torah’s comment requires further explanation. Our Sages astutely point out that, in the telling of the Exodus from Egypt, no *sukkot*, or booths, are mentioned. What,

then, were these *sukkot* that God provided for the people? Some sages say that the word refers not to actual booths, but to the name of a place. In the description of the journey there in the Exodus narrative, *Sukkot* is in fact the first place the Israelites stopped after leaving Egypt. Rabbi Eliezer disagrees, emphatically stating that it refers to actual booths. Although the Torah never explicitly says that *B'nei Yisrael* lived in *sukkot* in the wilderness, they certainly would have erected booths to protect themselves while encamped. Rabbi Akiva presents a third view: that the word *sukkot* refers to the clouds of glory, the cloud of God's presence that traveled with the people and protected them.

Each of these comments provides us with a different lens through which to view the *sukkot* that we build every year. The opinion of the sages envisions *sukkot* as places of respite and refuge. Exhausted from their dramatic departure from Egypt, the people would soon find relief when they stopped to camp at *Sukkot*. Our *sukkot* thus become reminders of God's beneficence, of how God provided in our time of need. The opinion of Rabbi Eliezer, who held that our ancestors dwelled in actual *sukkot*, helps us relive the

experience of the Israelites and apply it to our present lives. When we dwell in the *sukkah*, we tap into the experience of wandering in the wilderness, reinforcing our own gratitude for having been rescued from Egyptian servitude. The physical act of living in the *sukkah* emphasizes our religious identity—we are *B'nei Yisrael*, who were taken out of Egypt by God's hand, and who lived in modest booths during our journey to the Promised Land. Rabbi Akiva's position is the most esoteric. He takes the word *sukkot* as a metaphor for the clouds of glory, imagining God's presence hovering over the people like a shield, like a blanket, like a *sukkah*. Reflected back into our observance, our *sukkot* instill in us an awareness of God's protecting presence. With the approaching winter, we begin to feel a need for security; dwelling in the *sukkah* focuses our attention on the fact that God will protect us during the difficult season ahead.

Sitting in a *sukkah* couldn't be more straightforward, more physical. But the physical act is enriched and transformed by the spiritual ideals that it represents. Our growing awareness of how our bodies and souls work together here also has the potential to deepen our experience of this *mitzvah*. When we come this Sunday to help

our dedicated Brotherhood members build our Temple Emunah *sukkah*, we can feel how a *sukkah* is a sheltering presence for a community. When we join together with neighbors and friends for Sukkot in Your Neighborhood in just a few weeks, we can experience gratitude for the enduring existence of the Jewish people. *Sukkah* is but one of the many tangible, physical *mitzvot* that, through its concreteness, conveys deeply meaningful ideas about our relationship to God and our people's history.

The nexus between body and soul is something our entire community is examining this year. Our religious school's educational theme is שלימות הגוף ושלימות הנפש, *sh'leimut ha-guf u'sh'leimut ha-nefesh*, wholeness of body and wholeness of soul. We are calling forth these concepts by bringing music into our classes, exploring movement in our prayer studies, and more. Our adult learners also have access to this integrated learning, as they continue in an enlightening course on Jewish meditation. Over the last few months, we have enjoyed a number of energizing Israeli dancing sessions. All of these programs and activities call our attention to how our bodies can and must be engaged in pursuing our spiritual goals. Yet another

way our *shul* will be considering this body/soul connection is through reassessing the role of *kippah* in our ritual lives.

The practice of wearing a head covering goes back to the Torah, where the ritual garb of the priests included a specialized hat. However, the notion of covering one's head as a normative practice did not exist until the time of the Talmud. Even in the Talmud, head coverings are a sign of piety, worn by especially devout people, or by those in need of a little piety. The Talmud relates that the mother of Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak was told by astrologers that her son would be an incorrigible thief. In response, she forced him to cover his head at all times, saying, "Cover your head, so that the fear of heaven will be upon you, and pray for mercy!" To the transmitters of this story, wearing a head covering is a symbol of reverence for the Divine, one that hopefully keeps one on the straight and narrow. One day, Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak was sitting under a tree—in someone else's grove—and his head covering fell off. Immediately, he was seized by his *yetzer ha-ra*, his evil inclination, and he climbed up the tree and bit off a cluster of dates with his teeth. While we may not understand our modern tradition of wearing *kippot* as a protective

measure, as Rabbi Nahman's mother did, the other message of this story has become an intrinsic part of why we do cover our heads—as a reminder of our awe of Heaven.

Another passage from the Talmud casts the symbolism of covering one's head in a slightly different light. It was told that Rav Huna son of Rav Yehoshua would not walk four cubits with his head uncovered, saying, "The *Shekhinah*, God's presence, is above my head." In Talmudic parlance, four cubits is the minimum distance of travel; less than four cubits doesn't count. Rav Huna, then, was saying that he wouldn't go anywhere without his head covered. His understanding of the significance of a head covering is clear—living as we do in God's presence, it is fitting to show our honor and humility by covering our heads. Covering our heads, then, is one of the most immediate ways we can physically connect to this idea of the Divine sheltering presence; it is how we evince awe and reverence for God.

As our religious practices developed, wearing a *kippah* became a custom incumbent specifically upon men, one carrying the weight of

*halakhic* law. In some communities, men cover their heads at all times. In others, it is customary for men to cover their heads in moments of prayer, Jewish study, and when reciting blessings. In still other views, men put on *kippot* when participating in Jewish events, such as being in a synagogue, or attending a wedding or funeral. We can surmise that men, who bore the primary responsibility for public observance of Judaism, expressed their reverence for God's presence in a similarly public fashion, by wearing a garment that all could see. The idea of covering our heads out of respect for God's presence has also been a traditional part of the more private observance of women for centuries. Just like my mother, grandmother, and countless generations of women who came before, I was taught to cover my head when lighting Shabbat candles. When immersing in the *mikveh*, women often cover their heads prior to reciting the blessings over the immersion.

In many communities, these practices have faded over time, and women feel no obligation to cover their heads during moments of prayer or closeness with God's presence. In our community, we currently have varying practices of head covering. We ask all men,

Jewish and not, to cover their heads while in the building. We also see many women wearing a variety of head coverings when in our *shul*. This reflects the way that women in our community for years have been taking on with more regularity other traditionally male pieces of ritual clothing, particularly *tallit* and *tefillin*. In our religious school, we require boys to keep their heads covered at all times, and make no similar demands of girls. In the Billy Dalwin Preschool, each student decorates his or her own *kippah*, and wears it during the Friday Shabbat celebrations and when reciting *berakhot* over food.

We are a *shul* that is committed to egalitarianism. Just as we have explored practices that were once cut off from women, and encouraged women to take on the *mitzvot* of *tallit* and *tefillin*, we are now about to embark on a period of experimentation with head coverings for women. For the past year, the Religious Committee has been discussing this issue along with Rabbi Lerner and me, and together with the School Committee, we have come up with a number of opportunities to introduce the concept of head coverings to the women and girls of our community.

Inspired by the model of the Preschool, our religious-school-aged students will soon be receiving their very own *kippot* decorated with the Temple Emunah logo. Recognizing the differing social and emotional needs of our students, our plans for bringing head coverings more fully to girls vary based on age. In our *Gan* (kindergarten) class, all students will be expected to cover their heads during school time. In the remainder of our grades, boys will continue to cover their heads, and we will be asking girls to cover their heads during moments of *tefillah*, or prayer, and when reciting *berakhot*. Students are encouraged to wear their Temple Emunah *kippot*, but other head coverings are also welcome.

During religious services, it is customary for men to don a *tallit*, particularly when approaching the Torah for an honor. We currently offer all women similarly honored a *tallit* that they may choose to wear when approaching the Torah. In a similar vein, we will now also offer women the option of wearing a *kippah* when taking an honor to the Torah. Just as we purchased *talliyot* with a more feminine feel a few years ago, we are also exploring venues for acquiring more feminine

head coverings. These, like the *talliyot*, will be kept near the sanctuary, so that those wishing to try them on will have easy access.

When this idea was first brought to my attention, I was, to be honest, uncomfortable. I do not currently wear a *kippah*, and knew that I was being asked to consider changing my practice. My relationship with covering my head goes back a long way, and is something I have considered deeply.

When I became a Bat Mitzvah, I wore a *tallit*, but did not wear a *kippah*; this was no innovation on my part: the same practice as my female classmates—I was merely following their lead. A few years later, prompted by my *shul's* new *hazzan*, a woman who did wear a *kippah*, I decided to put one on. I picked out one from the *shul's* gift shop that I loved, and wore it at services. As I became more involved in my synagogue, I had more and more occasions to wear the *kippah*—I now covered my head when teaching in the religious school and tutoring B'nei Mitzvah students. I also wanted to be wearing it more. I remember one day, I brought my *kippah* to school, anticipating my tutoring responsibilities later in the day. I felt like it

was burning a hole in my pocket, like I just had to put it on, but I also knew that to do so in a public high school was beyond the realm of social acceptability. When I began college at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I felt liberated—I could finally put on a *kippah* in a supportive setting. Over the couple of years that I wore my *kippah* more or less all the time, I began to struggle with it. As I spent more time with Jewish friends who affiliated across the spectrum, I began to feel that wearing my *kippah* marked me as coming from a particular perspective, and often caused others to judge me as “out” of their community before they even got to know me. I found it especially challenging to wear my *kippah* during my junior year in Israel. Eventually, I took it off completely.

My experience with *kippah* was a formative one, and I felt like I might be renouncing my past if I put one back on. Upon further consideration, it occurred to me that experimenting with head coverings wouldn't mean that I had to make a 180° turn and wear it all the time. It wouldn't mean that I had been wrong to take off my *kippah* before. On the contrary! Experimenting with wearing a *kippah* motivates me to try out something new, to step outside my

comfort zone. How can I grow if I never do what I haven't done before? Trying out a *kippah* again gives me an opportunity to find a tangible, physical way to express the yearnings of my soul. It is my hope that it does the same for each and every one of us.

I'd like to introduce you to some of my head coverings:

This is what I wore on my head growing up when I lit Shabbat candles with my mother. It's a piece of lace that was given to me by my grandma, ל"ר, of blessed memory, and it came from her workshop. She was a genius with a needle and thread. She made all the draperies in my parent's house, a number of bedding ensembles, and even gave my favorite doll a new body after my cousin Tamar decided to give her a bath. This head covering keeps the memories of my grandma alive, and reminds me of how my connection to Jewish tradition started in my parents' home.

This is the *kippah* I bought when I first came to New York to go to college. Inspired by a suitemate of mine, I wanted grow my *kippah* collection, and went to West Side Judaica looking for the right one.

Walking to the back of the shop, where they kept the *kippot*, I boldly (and nervously) asked the *haredi* salesman for a *kippah* that was “a little girly.” Regardless of what he thought of my practice, Shloimy pointed me in the right direction. This *kippah* reminds me of when I first felt the exhilaration of independence.

These two *kippot* I crocheted myself. While I wasn't wearing one anymore, I thought that I might again one day, and wanted something that I could truly call my own. At the present time, these and a few others that came off my crochet hook live in my dining room, there for visitors to borrow if they haven't brought their own. They speak to me of hospitality, and of my pride in creating ritual objects.

Together, these head coverings enrich what it means for me to cover my head. As Rav Huna taught us, covering our heads is a sign of our awareness that God's sheltering presence is above us, but it can also be a symbol of cherished family memories, a sense of community, and much more.

Experimentation is just that—trying something out. It is a learning process. We know from the world of education that kinesthetic learning, learning that involves our bodies, can take the longest to assimilate. I imagine that I, and we, will feel varying degrees of comfort and confusion as we experiment with this new part of our community's practice. I'm going to start right now. I invite you to join me in this, and look forward to the conversations and learning that it will inspire.

This time of year is ripe for such experimentation. Like the symbols I spoke about—my engagement ring, *sukkot*, and *kippot*—Rosh Hashanah calls upon us to represent the feelings and yearnings of the day physically. It is customary to wear new clothing, and to eat a new fruit, so that we can experience newness in our lives at the start of a new year. When we dip our apples in honey, we recite a special prayer: May it be Your will, Adonai our God, that you renew for us a good and sweet year. By tasting the sweetness of the apple and honey, we envision our year being similarly palatable.

As we greet the New Year, may we see it as an inspiration to enrich our own lives with new experiences, new practices, and new growth.

I wish you all a *shanah tovah u'metukah*—a good and a sweet new year.