

Blessing our Children

Happy 2015!

I hope you are having a nice start to the secular year; my family and I just came back from our annual winter tour and it was a little like a concert tour, though we did not have the t-shirts made up. I kind of regret that – maybe next year.



We visited 10 cities in 8 days and though we did not play to arenas with thousands of fans, we did play with lots of cousins and friends. And it was great – both my wife’s family and my family are in the New York area and in Philadelphia

and so we had the opportunity to get together with lots of folks.

The downside of not living in the same place is that you cannot easily stop by for a short visit and just have dinner together. But the upside is that when we come for a visit, we often get to spend the night and sleep over.



That presents us with the complicated logistics of sleeping over (which we did in a half dozen places on this tour!), but also with the intimacy of spending bedtime together. We get to share that most critical time of the day: bedtime. The rituals of bedtime are critical. Sharon and I are so blessed that

even if one of us forgets these rituals, or any part of them, our kids remind us – even our teen and pre-teen.

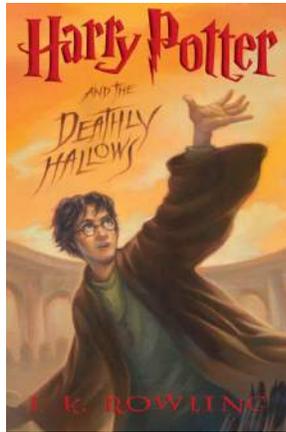


It turns out that far too many of us are removed from ritual in general or have removed it from our lives. But, rituals are vital – they provide structure and security while conveying the values that are embedded in them.

We all need rituals, but far too often we replace an ancient ritual with something less valuable. For example, passing up on the *Shema* at bedtime for watching



Sportscenter. One conveys a sense of eternity and the other, well, the other does not.



Let's look at bedtime. For us, it begins with a book or a story. These days, in my home, that's often a chapter of *Harry Potter*, but it can be something from the *parashah*, the weekly Torah portion, or another Jewish text. Sometimes, it is a story from my own life or one I have made up.

Once the chapter or the story has come to a close, then we turn out the light and recite the *Shema* and the *V'ahavta*, the first paragraph of the *Shema* – the feeling here is sensing the oneness of God and the universe.

put them aside and let them go. Then the healing power of sleep and dreams can work their magic to rejuvenate ourselves, preparing us for what lies ahead.

Sharon and I then close with a Hebrew bedtime lullaby. But it's not just the words and the song and the melody – which all have power – it is our presence. Lying in bed, a goodnight kiss, a hug, caressing a child's head gently, all play a part of conveying the love we feel.



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Our bedtime ritual is based on Jacob's blessing to his grandsons at the end of his life in this morning's *parashah*. Let me paint the scene for you – Jacob has been living in Egypt for seventeen years, he summons his son Joseph to tell him that he does not want to be buried in the land of

Egypt. When Jacob becomes more ill, Joseph brings his sons, Menasheh and Ephraim, to visit with Jacob one last time.



Jacob turns to his grandsons and asks: “*Mi Eleh* – who are these?” It is unclear if he does not recognize his grandsons – perhaps his eyesight was failing him at the end of his life, similar to what occurred with his father, Isaac -- or perhaps he does not recognize them in their Egyptian clothes.

The midrash has the boys reassure him by stating “*Shema Yisrael* – listen to us Israel [Jacob’s

other name] – *Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad* – Adonai is our God, Adonai alone,” meaning: we are your grandsons and we believe and practice as you do.

After he reverses his hands, which I am not going to go into, Jacob blesses Joseph placing his hands on his grandsons’ heads speaking the following words: “May the God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and

Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day – the Angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless these boys. In them, may my name be recalled, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth.”

It is a beautiful *brakhah* – a beautiful blessing. It begins unusually since the Torah states that Jacob is blessing Joseph, but he is clearly speaking to his grandsons. The Zohar, the classic mystical text explains that one blesses people best by blessing their children. What could be nicer than that!

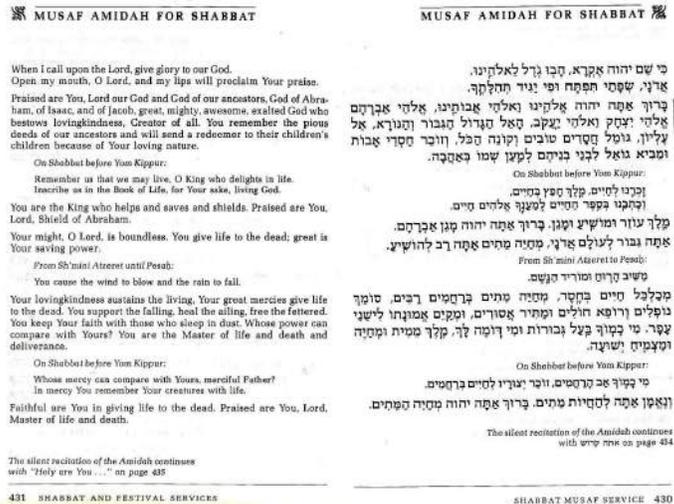
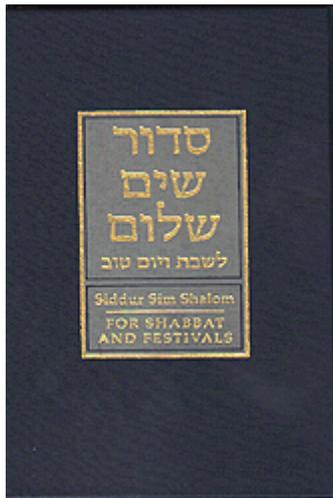


And Jacob hopes that his grandsons will continue to be bound by the same faith, the same tradition. That’s what we all hope – that the values and ideas and God that sustained us, will be with our children and our children’s children and future generations. We all know that we will not live forever, but we hope that the deeper values, the manner in which we lived our lives, will live on beyond us. That is our hope for the future.

And that blessing has been fulfilled – Jacob blesses his son and grandsons by hoping that future generations will connect to God with the

same names and way that he did. Sure enough, we are sitting here today almost four millennia later and we still utilize those names – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still used – we have a very fine Isaac sitting right here! And let me add Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, as well.

And beyond our names, we turn to God through our ancestors – exactly as Jacob hoped we would – we turn to God in the beginning of each *Amidah*, as we will do in a few moments during *Musaf*. “*Eloheinu, Velohei Avoteinu Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzhak Veelohei Ya’akov, Elohei Sarah, Elohei Rivkah, Elohei Rakhel V’Elohei Leah.*”



We call upon God as the God of our ancestors, exactly as Jacob hoped.

This is how God spoke to Moses at the burning bush – “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”

There is one other moment of blessing that relates to this; it is on Friday nights when the parents bless the children at the Friday night dinner table. This magical moment conveys the same feelings as we do each night at the bedtime *Shema*, although it is in a more public setting.



Any time we pause to appreciate the people in our lives, we increase our awareness of the goodness around us. And on Friday nights, we also demonstrate concretely our love for those close to us. There is the public recitation of *Eshet Hayil*, traditionally, the husband praising the wife, though I prefer to see it as both partners praising each other or even, everyone at the Friday night dinner appreciating each other. Having these words of

praise recited in a public manner, demonstrates to others the significance of our love and the importance of praising each other.

My parents still bless me – it can seem strange as I bend over so they can reach my head and now that I have children of my own it does seem funny, but it conveys something so powerful, that I would never want it any other way. It teaches others of the importance of blessing each other – no matter what age we are – we can all use it!

Whether it is literally our own children or grandchildren or simply bringing a sense of blessing, we would do well to add these rituals to our spiritual practices. The Friday night dinner rituals and the bedtime *Shema* both help us each week as we welcome Shabbat and each night as we go to sleep.

I commend these blessings and rituals to you as we deepen our experience of our tradition and of God.