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Walking with Life

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

LIFECYCLE, COVENANT CYCLE

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This year, I am turning 50. My father just celebrated his 80th birthday, and my twins are making plans for which college to attend after high school graduation and a year in Israel. Life cycle is very much on my mind.

In any human life, it is easy to move out of the moment, into a stream of constant, small adjustments and modifications that indicate our ageing, our development, and our passage through time. Rather than experiencing ourselves and others as objects – stable, constant, unitary and substantial – we are more like streams of flowing droplets, always on the move, never quite the same, shifting to match the world around us and the relationships we engage. We aren't solid and static – each individual is in process, always synthesizing and integrating new data into evolving patterns of personality, temperament, memory and aspiration.

We aren't human *beings*, so much as human *becomings*.

In that surging tide of life, Judaism offers us wisdom, companionship, and help along the way. At every key moment of our lives, Judaism offers mitzvot – connections with the divine, imperatives of relationship – to lighten our burden and illumine our vision. In moments of transition, in places neither inside nor out – in such times and places, Judaism blossoms into ritual, nudges us forward through word, song, and deed.

Scholars call these occasions “liminal,” from the Latin for “threshold.” To be liminal is to be aware of standing on the threshold of two different existential planes, on the transition point between two different stages or spheres. Take, for instance, the key celebrations/observances of the Jewish home. On the doorpost and between every room we are commanded to place a *mezuzah* – a ritual object of Torah, making emotionally safe the transition between inside and outside, between one room and the next. In the doorway, one is neither in nor out. That is liminality, and Judaism offers the added measure of comfort, belonging, and meaning at precisely such indeterminate and ambiguous spots.

Liminality pertains not only to space, but to time as well. As we move through the day, Judaism offers moments of mindfulness – *Shaharit* in the morning, *Minhah* as morning shifts to afternoon, and *Ma'ariv* as day becomes night. Each morning as we move from the relative unconsciousness of sleep to the awareness of waking, we mark the liminality of our minds with *tefillin* (phylacteries), *tallit* (prayer shawl), hand washing and other mitzvot. Judaism stands with us to walk us through these periods of greater flux and blurred boundaries – opportunities for new perspectives and fresh insight.

SACRED, ALLURING, AND DANGEROUS

Growing from one stage of life to another moves us to a liminal phase in which our identities are not self evident, expectations of behavior open up to new levels, and previous elements of self now give way before unheralded possibility. These moments of transition are enticing – holding out as they do the opportunity for novelty, achievement and delight. They are also terrifying – with an undercurrent of danger, uncontainability, and unpredictability. Small wonder, then, that they attract religious attention and ritual – both to maximize their promise and to contain their threat.

BIRTH – the first and biggest life transition is from non-life to life. The gradual growth of a being from non-being, as the mother experiences the reality of new life within, grows in relationship with this promise of a future, and births this baby into a waiting world. *Aggadah* – Jewish tellings – attaches the hope that each new child might actually be the long-awaited Messiah. And *halakhah* – Jewish ways of living – offers the structure of *brit milah* (circumcision) for boys and *simhat bat* (rejoicing in the daughter) for girls as a way of expressing/containing/celebrating this momentous eruption into life.

ADOLESCENCE – the next major transition after birth is the period when one is no longer fully a child but not yet completely an adult. This period of adolescence is one of exploration, boundary pushing, anger, frustration, joy and discovery – both for the adolescent and for the teen's family. Not yet capable of bearing the full burden of adult responsibility, yet chafing under the restrictions of adult supervision, this is a time of constantly renegotiated privilege and limit. No small wonder that Judaism launches this phase with a great celebration – Bar Mitzvah for boys, Bat Mitzvah for girls – helping all involved, and the community as a whole, to muster the love and caring necessary to sustain each other during this time of change.



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ADULTHOOD – at this stage the primary life tasks are meaningful work (compensated or volunteer, but a way of contributing value and meaning in the broader community), meaningful family (marriage and children), and meaningful community. Traditional Judaism doesn't really have a ritual for the launching of a career, but it does provide a lyrical and raucous celebration of marital love. Standing under a wedding canopy, the loving couple re-enacts the idyllic past of the Garden of Eden, anticipate the messianic redemption, recall the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem, and an age of world harmony and peace.

From marriage until death, there are no traditional Jewish rituals to mark stages of life, although one's adult life is filled with the celebrations of the life stages of the next generation and of other members of one's community. In this way, the broad range of life experiences is rooted in belonging, in a life entwined in relation to others.

DEATH – the final transition, mortality, is the mirror image of natality, as the individual merges back into the larger cycles of cosmic belonging, entering eternity (what the rabbis call *Olam Ha-Ba*, “the coming world”). All human living is a journey toward this inevitable juncture, toward separating loved ones and transitioning from active participant to loving memory. Jewish ritual clusters around three primary values: asserting the reality of this loss (and its finality), honoring the dignity of the deceased, offering comfort, community, and connection to the surviving mourners.

RE/CENTERING

This understanding of the lifecycle as marking the beginnings and endings of different stages of life for each individual Jew corresponds to the general cultural perception that life belongs to each solitary individual, that we make autonomous choices as discrete individuals, and that our living links only externally with other objects – human or otherwise – in the world. As such, it really is all about me (or you!) and the transitions you are going through at each of life's stages. Such a view of life is constricted, brutal, and isolating.

But Judaism offers a deeper, far more profound spiritual approach to life – one in which our principal life task is to not dominate the center of our own concern. Recognizing that what is closer appears to be larger (but isn't really!), Judaism reminds us that this looming large is a distortion of a more inclusive, integrated perspective. We loom large in our own imagination and narrative, but only because it is ours. Life invites us to live fully – to risk a perspective that sees the cosmos as a dynamic, integrated whole. We are significant to the degree that we relate to it all, not because of our perceived centrality but because of our real and dynamic relating. In the words of the philosopher Hans Jonas:

Life thus faces forward as well as outward; just as its Here extends into There, its Now extends into Not Yet, and life exists “beyond” its own immediacy in both horizons at once.¹

Each life – and every life event – extends beyond itself, connecting to what came before and what will come afterwards, to our own locality and to the cosmos as a whole. Putting God at the center is how Judaism seeks to correct the distortion of our own self-absorption. “Do God's will as though it were yours, so that God will do your will as though it were God's. Nullify your will for God's, that God may nullify the will of others for yours,” teaches *Pirkei Avot*.² This shift of centrality is not about denigrating our uniqueness or worth (we, after all, each of us reflect *tzelem Elohim*, God's image!). Rather, it is about deriving our value and contentment from our rootedness in relationship, in our connection with each other, with all of creation. God is the supremely relating one, and we derive our purpose and meaning in the context of that connection. The Copernican Revolution opened great possibilities by making the earth peripheral and moving the sun to the center. The Torah Revolution offers exactly the same liberatory growth by prioritizing oneness, relation, and integration while marginalizing self-centeredness and self-concern. The Israeli poet, Yehudah Amichai expresses the power of this inversion when he writes:

In a Jerusalem courtyard I saw seeds
spread out on a cloth to dry in the sun, and I said:
Let me be their historian and tell them about the watermelons

¹ Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed., Lawrence Vogel, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996, p. 70.

² *Mishnah Avot* 2:4



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and pumpkins they came from. I insist that the sand
remember the stone, the stone remember the great rock
and the rock — the lava and the fire.
And I myself forget what went on last summer,
even what went on yesterday, which happened to be
a Wednesday. But I remember
the psalm the Levites would sing each week
in the Temple on Wednesday.³

What happened to the poet yesterday or last week or last summer is of little concern. But subsuming his personal story to that of the people Israel, to the narratives of Torah and the concerns of God – that focus shines the light of purpose, service, and compassion on every aspect of his personal existence.

Armed with this insight, we can now envision the lifecycle, not as stages in the life of each Jewish individual, but rather as the unfolding expression of the covenant at every moment of each person's life. It is not *our* lifecycle we celebrate – it is the life of the covenant linking God with *Am Yisrael* that is worthy of our attention and justifies our celebration.

Viewed only materially, the value of life dissolves in its own finitude. We are merely a collection of elements organized to perceive ourselves and our own fragility. Our life is one of struggle and inevitable end. In such a schema, celebration is a momentary distraction from a grim and indifferent doom. Placing ourselves at the center is a prescription for depression or insanity.

But the celebration of real connection, real embeddedness, of real relationship – to all that is becoming and to the One who invites greater complexity, goodness, and experience – that endless living process is indeed an engine of hope and purpose. Judaism labels that connecting, that relating, “*brit*, covenant.” It is made real through the study and implementation of Torah. In the words of Professor Charlotte Fonrobert (formerly on faculty at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, now at Stanford University):

Embodied life, suspended between birth and death, between becoming and decaying, is not transcended and thus left behind, but on the contrary, it is, as it is, imbued and infused with a new script, the Torah, which regulates it, guides it, and hence enhances it.⁴

REVISITING

Let's revisit the stages of the lifecycle, not through the prism of each Jew's individual life, but through the lens of *brit*:

BIRTH: The covenant has the capacity to be self-renewing, to begin again. Each individual Jew is an opportunity to get it right, to launch afresh, to enter the world with wonder, with new eyes and a clean slate. Each Jewish baby is an embodiment of covenantal hope, of the audacity of a dream in the flesh. *Brit milah* and *simchat bat* are opportunities to dance the newest expression of covenant into the world, to hurtle the story of the ancient Hebrews that much further into the future.

ADOLESCENCE: Surely the weakest link in the chain of continuity is that moment when the child realizes that the Judaism of the parents no longer dictates his or her way. Each child, emerging from the cocoon of their childhood, stands in the blazing light of adulthood, deciding to fly with its own brilliant wings. Whether or not the Torah provides the wind is the fateful commitment of each adolescent, and the future of the Jewish people hinges on the treble chant of thirteen year olds. Bar and Bat Mitzvah is the public enactment of this fragile yet durable renewal.

ADULTHOOD: Not merely internal, the Jewish people live in a flesh-and-blood people in a rough and tumble world. Finding a way to shine light into the world, finding a way to nurture and cherish the next generation remains the fundamental work of a covenanted community – rearing children *al pi darko*, on the path they should walk – a path

³ Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open: Poems*, Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, trans., New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2000, p. 104.

⁴ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “To Increase Torah is to Increase Life: Poetics of the Mind and Poetics of the Everyday in Jewish Culture,” in *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, eds., Oxford: OneWorld, 2000, p. 88.



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of justice and of love. The rituals of adulthood are all affirmations of these sacred commitments, confirmation that it does, indeed, take a *shtetl* to raise each other and each other's children.

DEATH: Just as birth is the covenant's opportunity for renewal, death is the occasion for value and memory. As the frail, tired, and habituated move on, the covenant community has the opportunity to affirm that each person's worth is more than merely instrumental, that each Jew, each person, each living thing, expresses perpetual worth as a manifestation of God in the world. By escorting their remains with dignity and community and tradition, we affirm our own place as honored, valued partners with God and the people Israel in the work of repairing the world.

Imbued and infused with Torah, with covenant, the life of a Jew is a manifestation of caring and service, of connection and nurturance, of becoming and belonging. Such an unfolding is surely worthy of celebration!



LIFECYCLE, COVENANT CYCLE – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

MIDRASH *TANHUMA, PEKUDEI 3*

At that time the soul will pass through seven worlds. In the first world it is compared to a king, for everyone asks about its health and everyone yearns to see it. They hug it and kiss it when it is a year old.

In the second world, it is like a pig which digs at the garbage heap. Similarly the child picks at filth when it is two years old.

In the third world it is like a kid goat which prances around its mother in the meadow. Similarly a child is full of joy in front of its father and mother and dances here and there, and plays around and everyone rejoices in the child. [When is that? When it is five years old.]

In the fourth world, he is like a horse that trots through the streets. When is that? When he reaches maturity, when he is eighteen years old. Just as a horse gallops around proudly, so too a youth is proud of his youth.

In the fifth world he is like a donkey on which they place a saddle. So too is a man burdened with a saddle, for he is given a wife and bears sons and daughters, and he has to go here and there bringing food to sustain his children and provide for them. A burden is placed on him and he is loaded with the weight of sons and daughters. When is this? When he is forty years old.

In the sixth world, he is like a dog; for everywhere he flaunts his cockiness and takes from one and gives to the other shamelessly.

In the seventh world he is like a monkey, for his appearance has changed so that he does not look like the other creatures; he asks about everything, eats and drinks like a youngster and plays like a child. He returns to his younger days in knowledge but in nothing else. Even his sons and members of his household mock him, curse him and loathe him. When he says anything, they say to him, “Let him be, for he is like a youngster, but is elderly.” He acts like a monkey in all matters and in his speech. Even the young children mock him and have sport with him. Even a sparrow can awaken him from his sleep.

In the end, his time comes and the angel comes to him and says to him, “Yes,” and then he says to the angel, “Why have you come to me today more than on any other day?” The angel says to him, “In order to take you out of the world, for the time has come for you to leave.” Immediately he begins crying and raises his voice from one end of the world to the other. But no creature recognizes or hears his voice, except for the cockerel. Then he says to the angel, “But you have already taken me out of two worlds and put me into this world?” And the angel says to him, “Have I not already told you that you were created against your will, you were born against your will, you have lived against your will, and you are to die against your will, and against your will you are destined to give justification and reckoning before the Holy Blessing One?!”





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