

From Ritual to Meaning

Rituals are performed to bring higher — and perhaps illogical, magical, and delightful — meaning into our life experiences. Rituals help us make sense of our life-stages, construct personal and social meaning, and add color to our ordinary lives.

— *Stanford School of Design*

Ritual is a powerful means to mark time and inspire Jewish connection and commitment. Performed by individuals or groups, loudly and dramatically, or in intimate circles, the rituals you create and celebrate will bond your community to one another and to their Jewish identity.

Crafting the Moment: Ten Gateways Into Ritual

Gateways, or opportunities from which to craft ritual moments are everywhere. They may be planned in advance, or spring from something spontaneous. As you craft your ritual, you may embellish it as you like; you can include a variety of ritual components, no matter which Gateway to the ritual you choose.

When crafting your ritual, consider designing some of the following materials into your plan:

- ✦ Read formal liturgy out loud or to one's self
- ✦ Read a poem or song chosen in advance by group leader or participant
- ✦ Create time for personal reflection, either individual journaling or verbal sharing in pairs or small groups
- ✦ Sing a simple song or *niggun* or *share a recorded song*
- ✦ Read and reflect on a short Jewish text in small groups
- ✦ Create space for meditation/breathing/silence
- ✦ Pass a sacred object among group members
- ✦ Engage the five senses — seeing, tasting, hearing, feeling, smelling
- ✦ Encourage spontaneous intentions and blessings
- ✦ Organize group physical action (pass the [object of your choice], clap, dance, etc)



- **Start from the need** — Articulate why you are gathering.
- **Rituals begin from the moment an invitation is received up until the gathering** — An invitation is a priming tool to remind people what has happened in the past and to deeply acknowledge the present moment
- **Thoughtful structure is key to transformative gatherings** — It gives form to purpose.

Here are ten Gateways to crafting a ritual for any situation

Gateway 1: Traditional Jewish liturgy is naturally baked into the week.

Tip: Print out text or have full text on a poster. Include Hebrew, transliteration, and English. Lead a tune in call/response format, or identify a participant who can help facilitate.

Example: Candle lighting with full blessings followed by a poem about light.

Gateway 2: Weave tradition with creatively adapted liturgies.

You can choose a selection from the liturgy and weave it with another ritual component.

Tip: Bookend with liturgical components. Encourage spontaneity and group participation.

Example: Before departing, open by creating a travelers' prayer. Ask the group to share spontaneously in two rounds: 1) fears, things we hope to avoid; and 2) hopes, things we wish to happen. Then close with the liturgical line "barukh...shomea tefilah — Blessed is...who hears prayer."

Gateway 3: Work with materials of the natural world.

Encourage participants to call on the group or a few individuals to create an opportunity for blessings.

Tip: Have a contest of who can say the most blessings in a day. FYI, the rabbis teach that we should each say 100 blessings a day!

Example: While on a hike in the desert, a small group sees an ibex in the distance and stops to say "meshaneh ha'briyot" — who "differentiates creatures".

Gateway 4: Savor the moment with food blessings.

Tip: Pick one meal or snack per day to 'quiz' participants on the proper blessings. Bonus — encourage folks to come up with original blessings in Hebrew after trying delicious new Middle Eastern foods.

Example: Say "borei pro ha eytz" at the falafel stand over some olives, then have participants write spontaneous blessings about their favorite condiments.

Gateway 5: Knit the everyday into the sacred.

When you connect Jewish teachings to existing daily rituals, participants are more likely to pay attention since they know what to expect.

Tip: Assign 2-3 participants to introduce each of these daily rituals throughout the trip.

Example: Have participants offer a word of gratitude for the day prior to the announcement of the weather forecast; announce a Hebrew 'phrase of the day' before summarizing news headlines; end announcements with a recurring silly song or clapping pattern to bookend these daily rituals.

Gateway 6: Shape minds and moods on the way to your next site.

Tip: Put aside ten minutes on the bus or waiting in line for participants to set intentions for that day's visit to Yad Vashem or Har Herzl.

Example: Give out sticky notes in 3 colors and assign a prompt for each color. Yellow — how I am feeling now, green — what I hope to learn, blue — blessings for the group experience. Have participants share in groups or make a wall of words while singing and grouping similar words together.

Gateway 7: Stitch together experiences as you transition from one to the next.

Sometimes you only have a short amount of time for participants to integrate what they saw/heard/experienced.

Tip: Even if you only have a short amount of time, you can do a one-word go-around, a physical gesture reflecting one's mood, or a 60-second pair/share.

Example: Post a photo from the tour on Instagram with the same group hashtag and one sentence sharing a highlight.

Gateway 8: Get physical

Tip: Take notice of when the group could use a stretch break, even while taking part in physical activities.

Example: When transition from a long time sitting and listening to a speaker toward a long bus ride, take five minutes of fun dancing or stretching

Gateway 9: Get elemental

In addition to liturgy and music, many ceremonies include one or more of the four elements (earth, air, fire, water). Consider what is available (beeswax candle, water collected from the ocean or sacred site, rocks from a hike, etc) versus what you want to seek out to collect (olive wood, melted snow, rock salt or a vial of water from the Dead Sea).

Tip: Collect (or have participants choose) meaningful objects to include in the ritual.

Example: Pass around a sprig of rosemary harvested in downtown Tel Aviv as the talking stick for evening reflections. Save it to use for havdalah on Saturday night.

Gateway 10: Design in time for radical amazement.

Tip: Study the concept of Radical Amazement and call upon it anytime you might rush past a beautiful vista.

Example: Say shehekhyanu at the first glimpse of Jerusalem from the hilltop. Choose a key word such as "sababa!" (awesome!) to call out to each other each time you see something that amazes you.



Crafting Meaningful Moments

Worksheet

Ritual Ingredients	Questions to Consider	Designing Your Ritual
Space Environment Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How am I using the space around me? • Where will the ritual occur? • Is there an aesthetic setup around the ritual? • How do I transition people in and out of the experience? 	
Senses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How am I using... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sight? • Sound? • Smell? • Touch? • Taste? 	
Choreography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are people going to stand/move? • Is there a shape that this ritual makes in space? • How many people are participating? • How will they be oriented in the space? 	
Order Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What comes first? • Consider text, translation, <i>halacha</i>, time, props, transitions 	
Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the ritual about? • How does it make us interact with each other and/or the world around us? • What do you want to happen at the end of the ritual? 	
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is leading the ritual? • Do others also have active roles? • Will they be holding something, sharing a song, exchanging words with each other, lighting candles, etc? 	