

My Changes of Heart and Mind**II: Rituals****November 2, 1984****Temple Israel****Omaha, Nebraska****Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks**

My remarks tonight are a continuation of a response through this season to the quite proper question directed to me to tell about the changes of opinion which I have noticed in the years of my active rabbinate. It would, of course, be the rare man who did not undergo some changes of heart and mind in the course of a lifetime. One of the problems for a liberal rabbi is, however, that religion is not the kind of enterprise which easily accommodates change. Above all, rituals, about which I want to talk tonight, tend to solidify themselves. Bar Mitzvah, for example, once so simply observed is now exaggerated beyond reason. Indeed some rituals which had perfectly cogent reasons for their observance, in the course of time are perpetuated, while no one really knows what they signify. Few people can tell you, for example, why at the Shabbat table when the blessing is said over the Challah, salt is sprinkled on the bread before it is eaten. Nor are there many who can tell accurately why, when a woman says the blessing over the Shabbat candles, she spreads her hands before the lights with a waving motion.

Still the ritual maintains itself without reason! A rather remarkable example of unjustified trust. Most often when people cannot tell the reason for a ritual, the answer given is that magic word from "Fiddler on the Roof" (a questionable rabbinic authority, indeed) "It is tradition." That means we do it and we don't know why.

I was never satisfied with that even in my younger days. I wanted to know the reason for the rituals even though I found them far more attractive in my youth than I do now. This is not to say that I have changed my mind on *all* ritual. Not so. I am very selective. I have been selective both then and now.

An example: When I was a student I served a small congregation every other weekend. They were wonderful people. They forced me to a practice that I had not known previously. It was their practice to require the rabbi to wear both tallit and yalmeke (now called kipah) in the pulpit. No one else in the congregation wore either one! As a student, I was bound to observe the practice of the congregation. I did not like it at first. It was alien to my worship mode. Finally I came to see that it was a kind of shiliach uniform. It set the leader in prayer apart and emphasized his sacred role. When I left that congregation, I abandoned both in my personal practice.

I should say that nowhere in Jewish law is there a mandate for covered head. Albeit there is biblical and legal justification for the tallit. In early Reform Judaism both were considered outdated and inappropriate expressions of reverence. When I officiate in traditional settings I use both headcovering and tallit if required during the day. I have had a change of heart and mind about both. I think abandonment of the kippah--which legally is optional anyway, and is a custom with the force of law, was a foolish thing to do. For some, the kippah smacked of Eastern European custom and Western European Jews simply

could not observe it. I now think that the kippah would, with all of its vagueness of meaning have done much to keep the liberals somewhat in touch with older Jewish ritual. As for the tallit, I feel now that it is far more authentic than the robe which I now wear, which is not only uncomfortable, but is borrowed from academic and Protestant clergy.

When I first came to Temple Israel I battled each time there was a wedding against the crushing of a glass at the end of the ceremony. To this day I consider it meaningless superstition and even with some explanations that are offered, I think it says nothing to either heart or mind. Then I surrendered: The game was not worth the candle. The ritual act is so freighted with emotion--some even thinking, wrongly, that the wedding is not Jewishly valid without it--that I allow the crushing of the glass without protest. My worst pun is said to myself, I find it a shattering experience.

I feel similarly about the ceremony of the keriah, cutting a ribbon on one's garment as a sign of mourning. At best the ceremony is a legal evasion to avoid actually cutting one's dress or suit. Now I find it is a powerful act to allow mourners to give visible signs of their grief. Few request this ceremony in our congregation, but I have no objection to it on a voluntary basis.

There is one ceremony which I have never helped to conduct in my life: The Pidyan Ha-Ben, the redemption of the first born male child of the mother. I find it crude, misleading and again, superstitious. As far as I am concerned there is no "priesthood."

Since there are rabbis here who *can* accept this ceremony, I ask those who require it of me to go to other rabbis to conduct it. In all of this I still adhere strictly to a principle of Reform Judaism. We seldom say *you must*. We are almost always likely to say, *you may* when questioned about rituals.

Major rituals of life cycle events are the most difficult to manage of all. B'rit Milah, Circumcision, naming of a female child, Bar/Bat Mitzvah and even weddings have no meaning for me at all if the intent of the ceremony is not understood and appreciated, and if the observance does not inspire the participants to seek a life of righteousness and proper reverence of God. What I am saying is that I know of no ritual which is an end in itself. All rituals have meaning and if they have no meaning or function, they should be abandoned.

Some sacred symbols, however, are inviolate to me. Whether understood or not, proper reverence for the Sepher Torah, for the Bible and the prayerbook are not to be questioned. A congregation should rise in respect for the sacredness of the Torah when it is raised. I have failed to teach our congregation that. I see in the Torah an inherent loyalty to Judaism for I know how many have given their lives in its defense and sacrificed themselves rather than see the Torah violated.

I suppose that rituals should serve present needs and moods. Some I have abandoned, some I have repossessed. That will no doubt continue in my life as I hope it will in yours.

Rituals, to repeat, are not ends in themselves, but observance with devotion of heart and mind certainly confers a sanctity upon what we say and what we do to affirm our faith. My plea is: Think about the meaning of what you do before you insist it be done. Then observe with love and devotion.