

MAKING NEW THE TRADITION: THE TASK OF EACH AGE

The Aquarian Minyan Recipe Ingredients

The questions which human beings in every generation ask are known in philosophy classes as the perennials, the eternal 'heavies'. These questions have been said to be encoded in our very souls, our lives, our language. They are the deep wrenching issues which every one of us must face at some point in our lives. They include the familiar gems such as, "What is the purpose of the descent of my soul?", "What should be the direction of my life?", "What is my relationship to the Rebono shel Olom (The Master of the Universe)?", and "What does the word 'Aquarian' of the Aquarian Minyan signify?"

The latter question in particular has been crying itself to sleep lately. It raises the critical question about the degree of purity of the tradition that we are creating.

Where indeed have we borrowed from in fashioning our blend of Newish Jewish, the Jewish Renewal Movement?

In general, we can say the following: Its roots are in the Judaism of our ancestors who scribed the Torah, kept the Shabbos, studied in Aramaic and Hebrew while living in countries where the peoples wrote in Latin, Turkish, etc.

We borrow a lot of our emotional aesthetic from the Hassidic movement in which, in the seventeenth century, the styles of prayer were updated. Songs were sung with passion while moving, with a sense of personal engagement with God. The leaders (Rebbs) channelled teachings from heaven, pleaded for the Messiah to come bring a more perfect world. Followers wore unique clothing, like foot high fur hats and white socks to manifest allegiance to their Rebbe and portray the uniqueness of their community lifestyle.

We too feel free to update the forms of prayer, to reach for a passionate outpouring of feelings towards God. We too have a spirituality which allows for channelings, for occasional powerful dreams and visions to guide us. We move in our prayer. We too identify as a community and a sense of folksiness pervades our gatherings.

We are more eclectic in our innovation than the Hassidim. On our Holydays, we may do a psychodramatic Torah reading, we may sit Zen-style in a breathing meditation, we may Sufi dance a Shalom Aleykhem song. Yet our primary modality is Neo-Hassidic Judaism, with its melodies and *haimish* flavor. Our secondary modalities range widely, bringing in the fresh, the unique, the creative and the "off-the-wall", to restimulate our spirituality. Our motto: preserve and alter.

Our meetings are marvellous when not only the tradition is represented and innovated upon, "making new the holy and holy the new," not only when the new song is sung, but when the song is sung with a feeling of love.

Whereas our ancestors made a fuss about their sons and ignored their daughters, we borrow from the feminist consciousness which seeks to equalize the focus on each sex. We attempt to retranslate the ancient prayers so as to be readable by both genders equally. We have balanced the preponderous "He's" with plenty of "She's" and "The One's".

The feminist consciousness envisions a leadership which is more communally based, a politics which is more compassionate. In our minyan, we attempt to share the leadership.

It is not an easy process and sometimes works better than other times. The core group who do the work and attend meetings remains small. Sometimes we are baffled by this.

Oh, yes, let me say again that love is an essential flavor for us. And let us also not forget the other essential ingredient of Aquarian Minyanism. Joy. Our holidays are often supremely joyous. I'm not sure which tradition we borrow from in this.

So ancient Judaism, Hassidism, feminist sensibility, love, joy, what else can we say that the Jewish Renewal Movement brings forward? We really aren't that dedicated to astrological metaphors, notwithstanding our Aquarian name. For us, it is just a loving name for the Meshiakh time, hinting that our prayer is ultimately for all peoples to find the peace that we seek, not just the Jewish people. We thread into our name our belief in an awakening, unitary, humanistic, planetary consciousness of which we are a facet. We may not be full blown universalists, but at least we are non-exclusive.

Is it pure Judaism? Yes, according to some. If you believe that everything is in the Torah (see Avot, Chapter 5 teaching 21), then the seeds of all Aquarian Minyan happenings may be said to be there too. Sing to Adonai a new song (Psalms 96).

It is now your job to find where in the Torah may be found all customs of the Aquarian Minyan. Go and learn.

Sacred Symbols in a Secular Society

Our path has been to mingle the ancient and the modern, and to carefully watch what works. Consider the following quote (from The Use of Sacred Symbols in a Secular Society - Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion '86 [25] 3) about a group of people who began by rejecting the tradition and then went through a process of re-integrating the traditional back into the new.

"Many kibbutzim allowed each kibbutz member to choose his own day of rest during the week. Nevertheless, the rest day, whenever it took place, continued to be called Shabbat.

The following is the Kiddush from a Kibbutz Haggadah (authored by Ben Gurion). Blessed art Thou Lord our God, king of will, who has chosen us to sanctify us with work, and hast given us days for work...because Thou hast chosen the workers and made them holy. Blessed art Thou O Lord, who hallowest labor and its festivals.

Rituals in the Kibbutz began with a total rejection of religious ritual and symbols based on the desire to eliminate religious meaning and a sense of holiness from their revolutionary settlement of the land of Israel. ...all the rituals were meant to be non-religious. As the Kibbutz evolved, a sense of sacredness began to develop around this set of rituals, which was described as a non-religious sanctity.

In the earlier periods, ritual was of a more spontaneous and effervescent nature. Later as the kibbutz became established and conditions improved, ritual became more formalized and lost its spontaneity. Consequently a paradoxical process begins, which, for lack of a better term we call the 'secularization' (profanation) of secular religion. This is expressed by a willingness to accept some of the previously rejected (traditional) rituals and symbols- an attitude which had been considered sacrilegious several decades earlier.

All rituals may be said to undergo a four part life-cycle process: eradication of the previous ritual, creation of a new form, innovation and addition to that new form, and eventually, profanation of the new form, paving the way for the creation of new rituals."

The Jewish Renewal Movement's process of weaving both the traditional and the topical into our ritual forms is a complex and sensitive process. We have to be able to both de-sacralize and re-sacralize, as Maslow says. We try to de-sacralize the no longer meaningful and re-sacralize that which is meaningful.

Creating the mixture is often a hit and miss process. When we have chosen the right combination of new and traditional, the right words and the right melody, the room fills with excited fullness. No one is bored. There is a sense of a special moment that is deeply nourishing. The senses open wider. When we have missed, it is equally obvious.

What is nourishing from this process is that it attunes us in an ongoing way to the sensibilities of our community as we interweave, develop, and change.

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