

Renewing and Reinventing Jewish Ritual

NewCAJE July 25th, 2026

Definitions:

It's roots trace back to the Indo-European *ṛta* which is Sanskrit for "the melding of art and order, beauty and truth."

1. Cambridge Dictionary - a) "a way of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time"
b) a fixed set of actions and words, especially as part of a religious ceremony
2. Britannica - "Ritual is a specific, observable mode of behavior exhibited by all known societies. It is thus possible to view ritual as a way of defining or describing humans."
3. Ezra Bookman ritual designer - "Rituals are intentional symbolic elevated actions, routines are intentional repeated actions, and habits are automatic repeated actions."
4. Barry Stephenson - "Ritual is first and foremost a doing"
5. Bruce Feiler - "A shared unnecessary act that makes us feel at home...Rituals are central to human life"

Four Categories of Ritual

Civic Rituals - marks changes in society

Calendric Rituals - marks the cycles of our year

Daily Rituals - marks the variations in our day

Life Rituals - marks the transitions and changes of our lives

Key Elements of Ritual

1. Creates a boundary - sacred space and sacred time
2. Engages the senses, uses physical elements
3. Challenges or requires something significant of the people involved (the more people have to invest, the more meaningful the ritual will likely be)
4. Provides connection to others and/or transcendence
5. Life Rituals provide support and care through a transition
6. Offers renewal and hope

Things to consider when creating or adapting a ritual

1. What is the need you are trying to address?
2. What can you do to make people feel at home, less lonely, most safe in this gathering?
2. Who is it for, and how will the rest of the community experience it with them and for them? Are you leaving anyone out - intentionally or unintentionally?
3. What type of environment will best support this?
4. What objects, texts, themes, or elements of existing Jewish ritual fit naturally with your goals, and can be included or adapted to your ritual?
5. What physical act will participants do/create? (often best in the middle section)
6. Think about the arc of the ritual. Like stories, they need a beginning, middle, and end. In life rituals, the beginning is the state the person is preparing to separate from; the middle is the liminal stage before becoming something different; the end is the completion by integrating one's old and new self together.



You do not need permission, a guide, or a script. All you need is a threshold and a purpose.

Resources

Ritual Well: Tradition & Innovation

Offers hundreds of creative rituals and materials for life, daily, and calendric rituals.
Ritualwell.org

A Time to Gather: How Ritual Created the World - and How it Can Save Us

by Bruce Feiler (I recommend interviews with him on this book, which give a lot of the content)

Beside Still Waters: A Journey of Comfort and Renewal

A trans-denominations Jewish resource. It provides traditional and contemporary liturgy, poetry, and rituals designed to guide individuals through grief, illness, mourning, and the end of life. yourbayit.org/beside-still-waters

Worksheet for Creating Your Ritual

Ritual is creative and very individual, just use what is helpful from this list

1. Name of Ritual _____

2. What experience is this ritual responding to?
Describe the life event, transition, loss, joy, need, etc.

Why does this moment need ritual?

3. Who is this ritual for?

Primary participants _____

Others who may be included _____

4. What values and themes do you want this ritual to embody?

5. What is the core spiritual need?

☐ Meaning and direction

☐ Closure

☐ Belonging

☐ Blessing

☐ Comfort

☐ Celebration

☐ Gratitude

☐ Healing

☐ Justice / Responsibility

☐ Connection to Divine

☐ Forgiveness

☐ Other: _____

6. Texts you want to use from Liturgy, Tanach, Psalms, Blessings, etc.

(less is more, so be careful using too many words, but this can be a beautiful way to set intentions at the beginning of your ritual, or close your ritual with a blessing, etc.)

How do these sources connect to the themes of your ritual?

7. Environment: Where will the ritual be held, and how will you separate your space to create a container?

8. WELCOME

How will people arrive, how will they enter, how will you begin?

9. What physical action and what objects will your ritual utilize? This usually comes in the main, middle section of your gathering.

Some examples: light candles, pour water, tie threads, write something, share blessings to others, place stones, share memories, sing, walk, plant, break, build, weave. Describe the action(s) step by step:

10. How will the community be asked to give of themselves to the group and/or to the person the ritual is for? What will the person the ritual is for need to do for themselves or for the community?

11. Fill in anything else that will happen or be said during the ritual.

12. CLOSING

Ending with intention can be the most delicate part.

You want to end with hope, blessings for going forward, etc.

Ideas can be: offering a blessing - even better have attendees bless each other.

Also powerful is to have the blessings manifested in a physical way that attendees can take home with them. Other possibilities include: silence, song, sharing food (if you end with food, your ritual still needs to have a formal completion that leaves people feeling complete, hopeful, restored).

13. Is any follow-up after the ritual warranted?

This could be a yearly gathering, a journal prompt for attendees to do at home after some processing, community support, check-in, etc.?

14. When you finish writing your ritual, remember to reflect on and critique how well it achieves your goals and tweak as needed.