

CULTURAL AWARENESS

Rites & Rituals

Rationale

Rites and rituals have existed since the beginning of time in all cultures. They are defined as rituals or ceremonies that surround milestone events in a person's life such as birth, coming of age, reproduction and death. Other rites of passage may celebrate transitions that are wholly cultural, marking changes in social position, occupation or social affiliation. Whether they take place in a secular or religious context, such rites serve a similar function. They symbolically mark the passage of an individual from one phase of life, or social status, to another.

Rites of passage can be considered universal, as all societies have their own way of marking a transition from one phase of life to another. The Jewish customs and rites studied in this activity may be different from a person's own experiences. Nevertheless, participants may be able to identify commonalities between their own social, cultural or religious identity and the rites explored in this activity.

This activity was designed to help participants identify and explore the range of rituals and practices that may be part of the life cycle events of a Jew or a Jewish family. It is also interesting to note that some of the rituals described may be considered an obligation within Judaism.

Learning Outcomes

- To deepen the knowledge of the rites and rituals that are part of a Jewish person's life cycle.
- To understand that a ritual is a way to mark the transition from one stage of a person's life to another.
- To appreciate the universality of the rites and rituals of cultures throughout time.
- To become aware of what each participant can bring to the group, e.g. strengthening the knowledge of the group overall.
- Learn from the knowledge and experience of other participants.

Requirements

Materials: Sets of two envelopes. One envelope should contain 15 images of rites of passage from Jewish life and the other 15 sheets of descriptive texts about the images (the number of envelopes will depend on the number of participants and groups).

Copies of worksheets and handouts.

Duration: 90 minutes.

Rites & Rituals

Directions

1. After introducing the concept of rites of passage and explaining the rationale for the activity, divide participants into small groups of 3 to 5 people.
2. Give each group an envelope with the photos and explain that they will have 15 minutes to look at the pictures and discuss their own knowledge, experiences and perceptions of the rituals displayed.
3. Once the participants have looked at the pictures, hand out the second envelope with the descriptions of the rites and rituals. Give them another 15 minutes to match the photos with the descriptions. Invite the small groups to share their own knowledge of the ceremonies described in more detail.
4. Once everyone has returned to their seats, ask the following questions before proceeding with individual reflection:
5. Are there some traditions which you are more familiar with than others? Why? This question may raise a couple of points:
 - a. Traditions that are close to their own experiences
 - b. Traditions that exist in their local environment or with which they have had personal contact
6. Are there any traditions that seem strange or odd to you?
7. Again, remind participants of the universality of rites and rituals around the world and the fact that they may or may not have religious significance. Invite participants to reflect on their own experiences of rites and rituals using the personal reflection questions provided on the worksheet. Allow 10 minutes for individual reflection.
8. Ask participants to find a partner and share their impressions based on the individual reflection. This exercise can take 15-20 minutes.
9. When the pairs have finished sharing their experiences, gather the larger group and ask the discussion questions below.

Discussion questions

- How did you feel when you reflected and then shared your rites of passage?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Are some rites and rituals comparable across different traditions?
- In general, what are the defining elements of rites of passage? (Write these down on the flip chart for the whole group to read. Distribute the handouts to participants to close the activity).
- In what way is this discovery of rites and rituals relevant to life in a multicultural society?

HANDOUT

Rites of Passage

Questions for Personal Reflection

Rites of passage mark religious, cultural or social milestones. They can be celebrated in religious or secular ceremonies. You may decide to focus your reflection on a ritual that is particularly meaningful to you, rather than on a specific rite of passage.

1. Think of a significant milestone in your life that was celebrated by a ceremony or ritual.
 2. Who participated in this rite of passage with you?
 3. How did you feel during that rite of passage?
 4. How did this rite of passage help shape the person you are today?
 5. What were the elements of this celebration that made it ceremonial?
 6. What meanings are given to this rite of passage?
 - a. in your family?
 - b. in your community?
 - c. outside your community?
 7. Was your rite of passage defined according to tradition or was it somehow unorthodox, unusual or unique?
 8. Are there different ways of celebrating this specific rite of passage in your community?
 9. How does this rite of passage position you within the group with which you identify?
 10. Is it a rite celebrated within a dominant society or a rite that is part of a minority tradition? How does it position you within a multicultural society?
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Rites of Passage

Reading on Rites of Passage

Rites of passage have existed at all times and in all cultures throughout human history. They are defined as rituals or ceremonies that surround milestones in a person's life such as birth, coming of age, reproduction or death. Other rites of passage may celebrate transitions that are wholly cultural, such as a change in social status, a change in activity or social affiliation.

A rite of passage is inherently evolutionary, in the sense that the individual's perception of themselves (and the way they are perceived by the community), is continuously modified by this experience. Thus, the ceremonial activities and teachings connected with a rite of passage are not only intended to mark a change in status, but also to make it real.

In his ground-breaking work *Rites of Passage*, the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) identified three stages in rites of passage, namely separation, transition and reintegration. During the separation stage, the subjects begin the process of detaching themselves from their former status and prepare for the changes to come. This is followed by the transition stage, in which ceremonies, usually presided over by an authority figure, give the individual a new sense of 'self', a new identity along with the powers and responsibilities that come with this stage. In the reintegration stage, the subject is reintroduced into society on a new basis by the community members who initiated and witnessed the transition.

A rite of passage is thus both a personal and a communal event and brings special meaning to otherwise purely incidental biological events. Rites of passage, like all other rites, exist because they are necessary. From the mating dance of hummingbirds to the warrior dances of the Yanomami to the procession of worker ants to the parade of Olympic athletes, all living creatures engage in certain repetitive and symbolic behaviours that connect individuals of a species with the collective enterprise of well-being and survival.

Ultimately, no community would exist without its rituals. These repetitive rituals, expressed through dances, songs, stories, symbols or symbolic actions, express the core beliefs of a community and what it aspires to become and why it gathers. In the same way that living in community is intrinsic to human nature, rituals are intrinsic to life in a community.

Throughout history these rituals have developed in many forms, sometimes religious and sometimes not. While it is true that we tend to associate rituals with exclusively religious practices, not all rituals are religious. Rituals exist in our private and public lives as well as in our religious experiences. They express and affirm our personal and communal identity. They maintain and strengthen the bonds between members of a community. They support individuals or the community as a whole through times of celebration, crisis or transition. They celebrate the passing of the seasons and give special meaning to the years. Rites, whether secular or religious, bring human beings together, connect the past with the present and the future, and ultimately affirm the rightness of the human condition and the relationship of all human essence to nature.

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Jewish Rites & Rituals



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

1. Circumcision

The Brit milah ritual is performed eight days after the birth of a boy. Circumcision brings the child into the covenant with Abraham, who is traditionally considered the first Jew. The mother hands over the newborn to the sandek (godfather) through a relative or friend of the family. The sandek is usually a family member present at the ceremony and who holds the child, while the mohel, who is qualified to perform the circumcision, performs the operation. The sandek then passes the child to the father and together they recite a prayer. The name of the newborn is announced to those present: the Hebrew name sometimes differs from the usual name.

2. Zeved habat or naming of a girl

After the birth of a Jewish girl, her name is announced, often at the synagogue, during a ceremony.

This ceremony is sometimes called Brit Bat (bringing the girl onto the covenant) or Britah (feminine version of Brit that means covenant). It is also called Simchat Bat (the joy of the girl) or Zeved Bat (the gift of the daughter).

The ritual during this ceremony is less strict than that of circumcision. In addition to the naming, it includes a festive meal, a reading from the Torah and other books, and songs. The timing of the ceremony also varies, ranging from a few days to a few months after the birth.

The ritual during this ceremony is less fixed than that of a circumcision, and besides the naming, it can also include a festive meal, a reading from the Torah and other readings and songs. The timing of the ceremony also varies, ranging from a couple of days to a few months after the birth.



Jewish Rites & Rituals



3. Pidyon Haben (Redeeming of the Elder Son)

The mitzvah (commandment) of Pidyon Haben, the redeeming of the eldest son, is held when the newborn is at least 31 days old. It consists of “redeeming him from a Cohen”. (Numbers 18:15) Although this mitzvah is a bit complex, let us try to explain it: Originally, G-d had attributed the function of Cohen (priest) to the eldest son of each Jewish family to represent it in the Temple. (Exodus 13:1-2, Exodus 24:5, commentary by Rashi) Then came the affair of the Golden Calf. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai and saw this spectacle, he broke the Tablets of the Law and gave the following ultimatum: “Choose! Either G-d or the idol” (“He who loves the Lord follows me” Exodus 32:26). Only the tribe of the Levites sided with G-d (“All the Levites gathered around him”, Exodus idem). Then G-d decreed that the eldest sons of each family would henceforth be deprived of their status of Cohen and that the Kehunah (priesthood) would be exclusive to the tribe of Levi. (Numbers 3:11-12) This brings us to the mitzvah of Pidyon Haben. Every eldest son is technically a potential “Cohen”, who cannot assume his role. He must therefore “be replaced” by a Cohen from the tribe of Levi. The father of the baby is to be relieved from this obligation by offering the Cohen five silver coins as exchange value. This commandment has a deeper motivation: that of remembering the Exodus from Egypt, when G-d killed the eldest sons of the Egyptians and spared those of the Hebrews. Since the love for the firstborn is so strong, it is an appropriate time to acknowledge once again that everything we possess belongs to G-d. (Numbers 3:13)



4. The Bar Mitzvah / Bat Mitzvah

The Bar-Mitzvah for boys and the Bat-Mitzvah for girls represent the public celebration of the coming of age. These terms mean: “son/daughter of the commandment” and refer to both the ceremony and the person performing it. It is usually celebrated at the age of 13 for boys and 12 for girls. The Bnai Mitzvah (plural form) ceremony consists of the reading of a passage from the Torah. In Orthodox Jewish circles, this reading is done only by boys, the ceremony for girls being much less elaborate. Afterwards, the father or parents of the new adult recite a blessing. After the ceremony, the family usually holds a reception or party at which the Bar/Bat Mitzvah receives gifts.

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5. Mikvah

A mikvah is a pool of water supplied by a natural source such as a river or lake. It is used for Jewish purification ceremonies. The mikvah is used for various rituals: conversion, marriage, or after menstruation (among Orthodox and Masorti Jews). Some men in the Hasidic community immerse themselves in the mikvah on a weekly or even daily basis. The mikvah is also used to purify newly acquired items. The persons entering the mikvah must immerse themselves completely, their hair must be untied, and they are not allowed to wear any jewellery, clothing, or even bandages. Every part of the body should be in contact with the water.



6. Marriage

Jewish weddings can be celebrated in any place. However, in some communities the synagogue is preferred. The ceremony is presided over by a Rabbi or other officiate with the couple standing under a wedding canopy known as a chuppah. This canopy symbolises the home that will be created by the new couple. The officiating rabbi says a blessing and the couple shares a glass of wine followed by the reading of the ketubah (the marriage contract). The groom then gives a ring to the bride and in many communities the bride also gives a ring to her new husband, followed by the participants in the ceremony reciting seven blessings for the couple. Finally, the groom will smash a glass with his foot to remind those assembled of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, because according to tradition, despite the joy of the wedding, there is still sorrow in the world. The religious wedding is usually followed by a reception or meal. In some communities, during the week following the wedding, the couple will be invited for meals at the home of family or friends and during these meals, these people share their blessings.

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7. Funeral / Burial

When a Jew dies, Jews recite prayers ending with the Shema, the main text of the Jewish liturgy. As far as possible, it is customary not to leave a person who is dying alone. Once dead, the person is washed and buried according to a ritual. The relatives of the deceased (parents, wife, brothers, sisters and children) tear off part of their clothes before the ceremony to symbolise their grief. Jews are buried in very simple coffins or shrouds which symbolise equality as well as the worthlessness of material wealth. The relatives of the deceased participate in the burial by throwing earth into the grave until the coffin is covered. This ceremony is brief and simple. After the funeral, the immediate family observes a shivah, period of mourning, which lasts seven days (shivah means seven in Hebrew). During this mourning period, they must sit in low chairs and are not allowed to look in mirrors, shave or have their hair cut.

Friends and extended family will bring food to the relatives of the deceased. Prayers are said every evening and a candle is kept lit for the whole duration of the mourning. Family members do not participate in any celebrations or parties within 30 days of the burial.



8. Mezuzah

A Mezuzah is a parchment inscribed by hand with verses from the Torah in Hebrew. It is affixed to the door frames of Jewish homes. In Deuteronomy 6:9, God tells the Jewish people to attach the commandments to the doorposts of their houses. The Mezuzah is the fulfilment of this.

The parchment, written in black ink with a special quill pen, is rolled up and placed in a protective and decorated holder that can be made of any material, and then affixed to the doorways of the house.

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9. Tefillin

Tefillin (from the Hebrew “tefillah”: prayer), or phylacteries, are two small square black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment made of animal skin, attached with leather ribbons, that contain verses from the Torah. Every weekday morning (Sunday through Friday), Jews must wear these boxes during prayer: one tefillin on the forehead and the other tied to the left arm so that it rests against the heart. This practice comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-9: “And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders.”



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

10. Pesach Seder

The Seder is a ritual celebrated on the first and second night of the festival of Pesach (which falls in March or April). Families and friends gather around the table to read the Haggadah, the story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt.

While many Jewish holidays take place in the synagogue, the Seder is conducted at home and it is customary to invite guests, including strangers and people in need. During the Seder, participants drink four symbolic cups of wine, eat unleavened bread and share symbolic foods placed on the Seder plate: salt water to recall the tears of the Hebrew slaves, bitter herbs to recall the bitterness of life in Egypt, and a bone to recall the sacrifice of the Passover lamb at the time of the Temple in Jerusalem. The ceremony goes on until late into the night. The guests, among whom children play a very important role, discuss certain passages of the Haggadah and sing several Pesach songs.

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Photo: Wikimedia Commons

11. Shabbat

The Sabbath is the weekly day of rest for Jews.

This day begins at sundown on Friday and lasts until sundown on Saturday. Sabbath symbolises the seventh day after the creation of the universe, when G-d decided to rest at the end of six days of creation. Traditionally, observant Jews are not allowed to work on Shabbat, and this includes no business transactions, no use of machinery and no writing.

For many Jews, it is the day on which they attend religious synagogue services.

On Shabbat, Jews often spend time with family and friends. Traditionally, three festive meals are served: Friday dinner, Saturday lunch and dinner.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

12. Chanukah

Also known as the Festival of Lights, this celebration lasts eight days and occurs in late November or December. The most important Hanukkah ritual is the candle lighting in a special candle holder, called a hanukkah. One candle is lit each day until the eighth candle is lit on the last day of Hanukkah. It is customary to eat foods fried in oil, such as doughnuts and potato cakes. This holiday is less important than other Jewish holidays, as it does not originate in the Bible, but from a later period in Jewish history (2nd century BC). Nowadays, children usually receive gifts during this celebration, which is the closest Jewish holiday to New Year's and Christmas (see J-Quiz).

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Photo: Wikimedia Commons

13. Purim

The festival of Purim is often considered the Jewish equivalent of the carnival. This early spring festival recalls how Queen Esther saved the Jews of Persia from annihilation, as described in the biblical Book of Esther, also known as the Megillah. This festive celebration, as with all Jewish holidays, begins at sunset, when the Book of Esther is read in the synagogue. On this festival, Jews are instructed to get so drunk that they can no longer tell the difference between good and evil, and there is a joyful racket in the synagogue as rattles are used. As the story tells that Esther hid her Jewish identity, Jews, especially children, celebrate this festival by dressing up. In addition, on Purim, gifts or food are exchanged with friends (mishloah manot), donations are made to the needy and a festive meal is offered.



14. Aliyah

Aliyah has a double meaning for Jews. It can mean the act of being called forward to read the Torah in the synagogue, and aliyah can also refer to a Jewish person's move to Israel.

Aliyah (plural, aliyot) is a Hebrew word that means "going up" or "elevation." The term aliyah, going up to Israel, is based upon Genesis 50:13; after Jacob died, his sons carried his body out of Egypt to the land of Canaan to be buried as he had requested.

Aliyah is the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel in Hebrew). The State of Israel's Law of Return gives Jews and their descendants automatic rights to residency and Israeli citizenship. Lately, the rise of antisemitism in Europe has motivated more and more Jews to make aliyah.

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15. Hebrew Lessons

Hebrew is the language of the Bible, Jewish prayer and - since the early 20th century - a modern language spoken in Israel. Hebrew is a Semitic language spoken by the Jewish people and one of the world's oldest living languages. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and the language is read from right to left. Jews used Hebrew (and Aramaic) during prayer services, but Hebrew was not used in everyday conversation. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda is considered the father of Modern Hebrew. He developed a vocabulary for Modern Hebrew, incorporating words from ancient and medieval Hebrew, in addition to creating new words. In 1922, Hebrew became one of the official languages of British Mandate Palestine. Today Hebrew is the official spoken language of the State of Israel, together with Arabic. It is common for Jews living outside Israel (in the Diaspora) to study Hebrew as part of their religious upbringing.