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From Chore to Ceremony: Toward Reconnecting Work with Worship

Everett Gendler

Work and worship: what is their connection? Since the Hebrew word *avodah* can refer to either or to both, presumably they are linked in some way. But how? The same might be asked about "karma," the well-known Hindu term that refers both to simply doing something, engaging in action, and to devotion through doing, worship by performing certain actions with distinct intentions.

The question is intriguing, and I used to struggle for a convincing answer. Looking back, I'm embarrassed to think about all the comments I inflicted on congregants as I was trying to clarify these ancient equivalencies. I would lament how weakened their connection had become in our contemporary, advanced, but perhaps not advantaged, ways of living. When I would talk about the attenuation between the daily and the devotional, the world of work and the world of worship, I'd often detect an undertone of longing in my voice, wishing that our lives were not so spiritually zoned, the sacred so safely separated from the secular.

On several occasions over the years I tried to explore possible connections, but rather than finding present-day examples, I ended up mostly with words, not deeds. I continued to find the idea appealing, but the secret of how to give it lived, not simply verbal expression, remained hidden from me.

Now, in that state of idleness/puttering/reverie/contemplation to which a passport stamped "retirement" gains one entrance, a few parts of the secret have at last come my way. The discoveries are quite a delight, and I'd like to share them briefly.

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But first, to reassure skeptics, a word of clarification. To assert that some routine tasks can be ritualized, thereby conveying a sense of the broader context within which we live, is not to claim that all drudgery can be redeemed from its enervating effects. There is, after all, along with the classical work-worship equivalence, also the category of *m'lechet avodah*, servile work that resists such ritual rescue—and that was before modern assembly line production! Post-Eden, at least some drudgery has been a constant in human experience.

Let me now share, step by step, the stages through which my discovery moved.

Physical Background

A few months ago, near the time of summer solstice, I was changing the filter on the water system for our house in the Berkshires. Because municipal water lines do not reach our part of town, our water comes from a drilled well near the house, and the system requires some personal maintenance. For reasons that not even the well-driller can figure out, the water from this artesian well, although of generally fine quality, still contains some very fine sediment eight years after the drilling was completed. So a fine-sediment filter is essential, and it needs to be changed every three months or so.

Certain flow and shut-off valves need to be turned; the canister containing the filter needs to be loosened, the old filter removed, the canister cleaned, the new filter inserted, petroleum jelly applied as sealant at the top, the canister tightened, and the valves again turned. Nothing elaborate, a simple task.

Ritual Source Material

Near this particular solstice I was thinking that the water filter would soon need changing, and I was also rereading the section on Seasons (*t'kufah*) from J. D. Eisenstein's *A Digest of Jewish Laws and Customs* (1917, in Hebrew). As I read it this time, the familiar section, before only theoretical, now seemed to relate directly and practically to the task at hand. "It is customary to take care to avoid drinking water at the precise time of the turning of the seasons." Hmmm: an association of water and the seasons. What is this about? Eisenstein then cites a fascinating explanation by David Abudarham, the 14th century Spanish commentator from

Seville who often includes folk customs and mythic material in his commentary:

I have found written that one should take care, at each of the four seasons, not to drink water at the hour of equinox or solstice, for at such times there is danger of swelling and illness from drinking the water.

For it was at Vernal Equinox that the waters of Egypt were turned to blood (cf. Exodus 7:19-25). It was at Summer Solstice that Moses and Aaron struck rather than spoke to the rock, and blood gushed forth (cf. Numbers 20:8). It was at Autumnal Equinox that Abraham, binding his son Isaac upon the alter (cf. Genesis 22), shed some drops of Isaac's blood, which spread through all the waters. It was at Winter Solstice that Jephtha's daughter was sacrificed (cf. Judges 11:29-40), and all the world's waters were turned to blood. And so annually, at each turning of the seasons, the ancient contaminations may recur.¹

Abudarham is aware of skepticism and a division of opinion within the community. Not having Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* at hand, he responds:

Some call these divinations or old wives' tales. But others say that for each season a guardian is appointed over the waters. Along with each change of seasons comes a changing of the guards, and at the precise moment of the exchange, the waters are without protection.²

One need not be persuaded by the explanation of the changing of the guardians to wonder: Might this myth represent an unconscious memory of seasonal sacrifices offered in the dim past of human history? Were there such ceremonies? Scholarly opinions vary. I find that Sir James Frazer, Theodor Gaster, and Mircea Eliade are always stimulating reading; the fascinating details of various seasonal practices that they amass are quite compelling, and some do involve the shedding of blood.

However, for this practice-oriented discovery, let me remain focused on how to convert chore to ceremony. I simply note that some association of blood with the succession of the seasons clearly persisted in the 14th century Judeo-Spanish community, and it provided a rationale for two specific religious practices that Abudarham now describes:

At these times [of seasonal changes] some place a piece of iron (*barzel*) upon well covers, storage tanks, and water containers, confident that the Merits of the Mothers *Bilhah*, *Rachel*, *Zilpah*, and *Leah* (BRZL) will protect us all from harm.

Still others, avoiding drinking water at those times of turning, eat sweets instead, that the coming season be a sweet one.

Lest there be misunderstanding or suspicion of reliance on other deities, Abudarham adds these words to his description of this latter custom: "But I say that for the person who worships the One God, trusting in Him alone, each season will be sweet in its turn."

Applications: What Can We Do?

How might this myth and these folk practices serve us today? I have begun to experiment with a number of different ways to incorporate this mythic-ceremonial material into the chore of changing the water filter. So far I've not come up with an appealing way to adopt the iron bar, but let me share some of the other customs.

First of all, I try to change the water filter on or very near the seasonal solstice or equinox. If that coincides with Shabbat, then either the day before or the day after is the time I select for changing the filter.

Next, I reread the material from Abudarham, and recite this *b'rachah* (devised for another seasonal ritual by my colleague Rabbi Neil Kominsky):

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam,
hamachalif et haz'manim.*

You overflow with blessings, Eternal our God, Sovereign of All Creation, impelling the succession of the seasons.

I then turn off the flow valves, change the filter, clean the canister, and replace the filter. After turning back on the flow valves, I read Genesis 8:22 in Hebrew and English:

"While the earth remaineth,
seedtime and harvest,
and cold and heat,

and summer and winter,
and day and night
shall not cease."³

Following that, I read the appropriate poem for the season from William Blake's *Poetical Sketches*. For this approaching autumnal equinox:

To Autumn

O Autumn, laden with fruit, and stain'd
With the blood of the grape, pass not, but sit
Beneath my shady roof; there thou may'st rest,
And tune thy jolly voice to my fresh pipe,
And all the daughters of the year shall dance!
Sing now the lusty song of fruits and flowers.

"The narrow bud opens her beauties to
The sun, and love runs in her thrilling veins;
Blossoms hang round the brows of Morning, and
Flourish down the bright cheek of modest Eve,
Till clust'ring Summer breaks forth into singing,
And feather'd clouds strew flowers round her head.

"The spirits of the air live in the smells
Of fruit; and Joy, with pinions light, roves round
The gardens, or sits singing in the trees."
Thus sang the jolly Autumn as he sat,
Then rose, girded himself, and o'er the bleak
Hills fled from our sight; but left his golden load.⁴

The foregoing is the kernel of the ceremony, the *matbea*, as it were, of the ritual. What comes next depends entirely upon circumstances. If it is a leisurely day, I might listen to the appropriate instrumental selection from Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons," or if in a vocal-choral mood, the parallel section from Haydn's "The Seasons."

Of course there is much other classical music that for me also feels naturally associated with given seasons. A few examples: For spring, Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" and Parts 3 and 4 of Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde." For summer, Berlioz's "Les Nuits d'Ete" and Bernstein's "Jeremiah" Symphony. For autumn, Brahms's Horn

Trio Opus 40 and Parts 1 and 2 of Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde." For winter, two of Handel's Oratorios, "Jephtha" and "The Messiah."

One's Own Embellishments

Those with different musical predilections could certainly compile comparable lists. "Turn! Turn! Turn!" and Carole King's "You've Got a Friend" come immediately to mind, and there are surely many more from which to choose. Poetry? Of course. Add your own favored poems of the season.

Meditation/reflection almost always adds a dimension to any worship experience, inviting both inward exploration and outward expansion. Since our focus here has been water, consider the familiar verse from Isaiah that we often sing: *ush'avtem mayim b'sason* (Isaiah 12:3): "And you will draw water joyfully from the wells of salvation."

Inwardly speaking, we might consider: What are for us "wells of salvation"? What are the spirit-sustaining, life-enhancing sources of inspiration for each of us? Which are traditionally Jewish? Have we additional wells that inspire us? Perhaps special teachings or practices from other religious traditions that deepen our own Jewish practices? Perhaps cherished teachings from philosophical traditions that we find especially uplifting? How do we "draw" from these wells? Are there problems with the waters mingling and mixing? How do we integrate these elements so that our lives, fed from many streams, become truly *mei m'nuchot*, "still waters," not whirlpools? Exploring these questions can be a personally refreshing experience.

And if, however unlikely, you also have a well, then outwardly speaking, you might find it interesting to ask, What kind of well is it: a shallow-dug, a deep-drilled, or an artesian well? What is the water quality? Is there sediment in the water? What does this reveal about the course of the water and the effects of digging or drilling? Further, how is it that water in direct surface contact with dirt is contaminated, whereas water that seeps through twenty feet of dirt is purified? Ashes of the red heifer quickly come to mind, don't they, with their purifying and polluting capacities? At this material level there is, indeed, material for meditation.

Sweets? Why not follow the Judeo-Spanish custom to which Abudarham refers and eat sweets that the season to come be a sweet one? Begin with the blessing, *shehakol nihyeh bid'varo*, "by Whose word all came into being," followed by a *Shehecheyanu*, and then munch on some turrón/Spanish nougat, sesame candies, heart-healthy dark chocolate, rugelach, teiglach, marzipan, who knows? Perhaps a small selection of sweets, to be washed down by a cup of the now freshly filtered water? The possibilities are endless and not to be resisted.

Conclusion: Give it a Try

This detailed description of a simple chore that invited ceremonialization will, I hope, stimulate others' discovering other examples that could sustain similar ritualization. We must be wary of contrivance, of trying too hard to construct connections that aren't anchored in the reality of the task itself. If we are alert to this possible way of reconnecting work with worship, however, it is my sense that with time we shall discover many more such connections than we can now imagine. Those discoveries might be the links that can once again, on occasion, bind work and worship for our own lives today, and so reclaim the full meaning of *avodah*.

Notes

1. J. D. Eisenstein, ed., *Otzar Dinim Uminhagim* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1917), p. 446, quoting David Abudarham.
2. Rabbi Isaac Sperling of Lvov, *Taamei Haminhagim Um'korei Hadinim* (Eshkol Israel edition, Jerusalem, 5721), p. 384, quoting David Abudarham's *Shaar Hatekufot*.
3. King James and JPS, 1917.
4. Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1948), pp. 4-5.