



Jewish Ritual and the Transition Beyond High School

Topic

Creating a Jewish ritual to mark the transition from high school to beyond

Grade Level(s)

11th and/or 12th graders

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will:

- Consider historical and lifecycle-based moments of transition in Judaism
- Consider how Judaism uses ritual to mark transitions
- Learn about the concept of liminality and how it applies to ritual
- Explore various contemporary rituals through Ritualwell.org
- Create their own ritual to mark the transition from high school to whatever comes next

Background for Teachers

As early as sophomore year in high school, students are bombarded with questions about “what’s next?”—be it college, a gap year, or work. This time can be fraught with anxiety* as students find themselves in the middle. They’re not children, but don’t yet have the freedom to make all of their own choices; they’re not yet adults, but often have adult responsibilities.

*It’s important to note that well-meaning adults often unknowingly fuel this anxiety in a simple attempt to connect or make conversation. Additionally, students who choose non-traditional paths—perhaps community college or military service—often endure judgement or further questioning which can lead to doubt.

This lesson offers these students some comfort and inspiration by exploring how Judaism not only recognizes, but also celebrates, moments of transition. By reviewing various ways in which Judaism views moments of transition, learning about the anthropological concept of liminality, and exploring various contemporary ways in which modern Jews use ritual, the students will consider ways in which they, too, can use ritual to mark their own moments of transition.

Ideally, the rituals that the students design to mark their transition from high school to beyond high school will be implemented at some point. Ideas include:

- A religious school service at the end of the school year
- A special Shabbat honoring graduating seniors
- A youth group retreat or service
- A program or lunch to which parents are invited at home, or in the environment that feels most comfortable to each individual student.



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Transitions in the Historical Journey of the Jewish People

In this lesson, students are asked to name times of transition in the Torah. Examples include:

- Adam and Eve being punished and leaving the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-24)
- Abraham and Sarah leaving their homeland (Genesis 12:1-5)
- Joseph being sold and going to Egypt (Genesis 37:12-28)
- Moses running away from the palace in Egypt and encountering a burning bush (Exodus 2:11-3:12)
- The Israelites leaving Egypt (Exodus 12:30-39)

They are also asked to name transitions in Jewish history. Examples include:

- Exile from Jerusalem post-destruction of the Temples
- Leaving home after the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal
- Forced wanderings post-pogroms in Eastern Europe
- Journeys made during and after the Holocaust
- The birth of the State of Israel

Materials

- Computer with speakers and internet connection
- Pens or pencils, one per student
- Copies of Worksheet 1: Wake Me Up, one per student
- Butcher paper
- Markers
- Resource 2: Readings about Life Transitions in Judaism (4 separate pages total)
- Resource 3: When Does an Occasion Need a Ritual? 1 per pair
- Whiteboard and whiteboard marker (or flipchart paper and markers)
- Access to internet
- Access to computers, at least one per pair of students
- Access to *siddurim*, copies of the *TaNakh*, and other Jewish reference books

Prepare in Advance

- Load “Wake Me Up” by Avicii onto the computer with speakers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Uk2O5Gxd6g>
- Make copies: (located in separate download called Support Materials):
 - Worksheet: Wake Me Up (one per student)
 - Resource: Readings about Life Transitions in Judaism (4 separate pages)
 - Resource: When Does an Occasion need a Ritual (1 per pair)
- Prepare butcher paper following the example found on Image for Butcher Paper, located at the end of this lesson
- Confirm access to computers, internet, etc.
- Gather *siddurim*, copies of the *TaNakh* and other Jewish reference books



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Lesson Plan

Step 1: “Wake Me Up”

Play “Wake Me Up,” a song by Avicii. Crank up the volume! (The full running time is 4:17 but it can be paused at 3:25.) You can choose to play the music only (using speakers only), or to play the music and lyrics (using video and speakers).

Consider playing it twice if time allows.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Uk2O5Gxd6g>

Step 2: Reflect on “Wake Me Up”

Ask:

- What is this song about?
- What was it like listening to it?
- What did it make you think or feel?

Step 3: Finding Yourself in the Song

Distribute a writing instrument and one copy of Worksheet 1: Wake Me Up to each student. Students will complete the worksheet quietly.

Step 4: Sharing

Hang the butcher paper, prepared according to Resource 1: Image for Butcher Paper. As students feel comfortable, they will use markers to respond to the prompts on the butcher paper. The teacher can also add an appropriate personal experience about being in a moment of transition.

Review the group’s responses together.

Ask:

- What patterns do you see between the types of experiences that were described?
- What patterns do you see about the resources that helped us get from where we were starting to where we were going, even if we weren’t sure from the start?

Step 5: Historical Jewish Journeys

Explain:

- We are always coming from somewhere and heading to somewhere—even if we are not sure exactly where we are going.
- We are always on a journey, sometimes figurative and sometimes literal.
- The Jewish people are very familiar with journeys.

Ask:

- What are some examples of journeys or transitions in the Torah? (There are a number of examples shared in the “Background for the Teacher” section of this lesson.)
- Ask: Can you think of other examples outside of the Torah when the Jewish people were on a journey of some sort, literal or figurative? (There are a number of examples shared in the “Background for the Teacher” section of this lesson.)



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Explain:

- In each of these cases, the Jewish people were neither here nor there. They certainly experienced moments of confusion, fear, and anxiety—all the emotions we wrote on the butcher paper. They also likely experienced moments of connection, calm, meaning, and just day-to-day life, by using similar resources that we also put up on the butcher paper—relying on family and friends, personal mantras and beliefs, and perhaps Jewish texts as well.

Step 6: Journeys of Jewish Individuals

Explain:

- So far, we have discussed the transitions and journeys of the Jewish people on a macro-level.
- On a micro-level, however, Judaism also recognizes moments when individuals experience transitions.
- In a moment, I will divide you into four groups. Each group will read about a different experience marked by Judaism when a person is neither here nor there. Each group will create a short skit or commercial to present to the class about what you read.

Do:

- Divide students into four groups. Give each a copy of its respective reading from: Readings about Life Transitions in Judaism (separate download).
 - Group 1: Birth and Adoption
 - Group 2: Adolescence
 - Group 3: Marriage
 - Group 4: Death and Mourning

Step 7: Liminal Moments

Explain:

- Anthropologists refer to the moments when you are neither here nor there as “**liminal moments.**”
- Liminal comes from the Latin word “limen,” which means a threshold, such as the threshold of a doorway.
- Liminal moments, or liminality, refer to “the quality of ambiguity or disorientation” that occurs when someone is no longer who they were but isn’t yet who they will become. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality>)
- According to anthropologists, the act that changes you from what you were before to what you are now—the “threshold” that you cross to get from one state to another—is a **ritual**.
- During a ritual, “participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status” but have not yet “begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete.” During a ritual, participants therefore “stand at the threshold” between the previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way of considering their identity. The ritual represents the moment of transition.



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- Understandably, any time we shift our identity in any way, we can experience some worry or fear, but those moments are also full of potential for meaning and comfort.

Ask each group to look again at the Jewish time of transition that it presented on previously.

Ask each group to identify for the ritual that they presented:

- What was the **pre-ritual status** of the individual?
- What was the **post-ritual status**?
- What was the threshold, or *limen*, that the ritual marked?
- How did the ritual change the individual's identity, relationship to community, or relationship to time?

Encourage students to think of a transitional moment in their own lives: *b'nai mitzvah*, 8th grade graduation, confirmation, going to a different unit at camp, moving to a more competitive team in sports, etc.

Ask:

- What marked this transition? Was that marker of the transition a formal ritual, or an informal one?
- Did the ritual change your identity, relationship to community, or relationship to time?

Step 8: New Jewish Rituals

Explain:

- The rituals that we have looked at were created centuries ago.
- Modern sensibilities and movements—such as feminism, the LGBTQ community, the disability community, and changing family structures—have identified new liminal moments and have influenced and expanded the need for Jewish rituals.
- There has been much conversation about when an occasion needs a ritual.

Read together Resource 3: When Does an Occasion Need a Ritual?

Explain:

- A website called Ritualwell.org has created a crowd-sourced resource for ritual moments and prayers that people have written.

Students will take 10-15 minutes to review www.ritualwell.org using their devices or computers.

Students will identify a ritual or two that speaks to them personally and will prepare to share it with the group with which they previously worked.

In sharing with the group, students will explain:

1. What liminal moment the ritual recognizes
2. How the ritual “works”
3. Why the ritual was personally meaningful



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Step 9: Creating a Ritual for You, on the Threshold

Explain:

- Right now, you are all on the threshold.
- As juniors (or seniors), you are on the verge of transitioning from high school students to beyond high school, whatever that may look like for you.
- For some of you, that might mean going to college. For others that might mean taking a gap year or not going to college at all, and instead working or traveling. Some of you may want to start your own business out of high school, or nanny or work abroad or domestically. Some of you may go straight to college on scholarship or attend part-time while you work.
- Regardless of what you intend to do or where you intend to be, there are a lot of expectations placed on you, which might result in stress and confusion.
- Your friends, favorite books or songs, activities, or personal mantras may be of comfort to you.
- Another resource that can help you is Jewish ritual.
- As we have learned, ritual can help us during times of transition, as we shift our identity and our relationship to other people and to community and to time.
- We will therefore dedicate some time for you to create a Jewish ritual that marks your passage from high school to beyond. “Beyond” might be college if you think that is where you are heading, but it can also be more generally to adulthood. [Note: If this lesson is done with high school juniors, it might be a ritual for thinking about what’s next—perhaps a ritual to get them ready for searching.]

Explain the following requirements for this ritual:

- The ritual must be, first and foremost, meaningful to you.
- It must somehow mark your transition from high school student to beyond high school, and therefore reflect a liminal moment.
- It can include blessings, readings, designed to be done alone, or in community with family and/or friends.
- Since we are creating this ritual in a Jewish setting, your ritual must incorporate something “Jewish” —either reference to Jewish stories, texts, prayers or concepts, or Jewish ritual objects like candles, Havdalah candles, etc.

Offer access to *siddurim*, copies of the *TaNakh*, and other Jewish reference books for inspiration.

Distribute paper and pens and let students work. If preferred, students can type their ritual instead.

Explain: When you have completed a first draft, be prepared to share it with another person for revisions and feedback.

Step 10: Getting Feedback

Students will pair up with a partner to share the ritual and give/receive feedback.

In offering constructive feedback, partners should look for areas where instructions might be clearer or connections made stronger. Encourage students to use the constructive feedback



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protocol: *I like, I wish, I wonder.*

Students will incorporate the feedback and revise the ritual.

Step 11: Performing the Ritual

Students will explain and/or practice the ritual in front of their peers.

Students may also submit their ritual to Ritualwell.org if desired.

If desired, the class may select one (or more) of the rituals to put into effect at the completion of their senior year, with parents and clergy in attendance if invited. A subcommittee of students may be invited to coordinate this event.



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Worksheet: Wake Me Up

Think of a time when you knew where to start but didn't know where the journey would end. Where were you starting from and where did you end up?

What worries or anxieties did you experience while you were on your way?

What helped you get through to the other side? These resources could include people, personal mantras, books, movies, songs, activities, etc. List as many as you can.



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Resource 1: Image for Butcher Paper

**Where I Was
Coming From**

**What Got Me
Through**

**Where I Was
Going To**

