

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.

Readings about Life Transitions in Judaism

Group 1: Birth and Adoption

When a child is born, or becomes part of a family through adoption, there is clearly a change for family members; people become parents and grandparents for the first time, or widen their family circle, children become siblings, etc. The child also undergoes a change, from potential relative to family member. A child is welcomed into a family, and into the wider Jewish community, through ritual.

For boys, the ritual of circumcision (*brit milah*) – a tradition which has its roots in the Torah – often occurs in an in-home ceremony. Girls are often named in synagogues during a service where the Torah is read or in-home ceremonies celebrating their arrival. In addition to receiving names, parents and others present also speak of their obligations to and hopes for the child as they grow up.

Readings about Life Transitions in Judaism

Group 2: Adolescence

When a child reaches the age of 13 (12 for girls in some traditions) they automatically become *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. As a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, a young person is considered an adult member of the Jewish community and, as such, obligated to take on the responsibility of the *mitzvot* (commandments). Among these are fasting on the required days, such as Yom Kippur, and, in some circles, participating in a *minyan* (a gathering of at least ten, for prayer) and the wearing of a tallit. The words “becoming a bar or bat mitzvah” have generally come to mean not the coming of age but the public observance, usually marked by a child leading a portion of the service, reading Torah, being called up to the Torah to say the blessings for the first time, and/or speaking/teaching about the Torah portion.

Readings about Life Transitions in Judaism

Group 3: Marriage

The Jewish wedding ceremony is called *kidushin*. *Kidushin* comes from the Hebrew root kuf -daletresh, which means to sanctify or make holy.

There are two parts to a modern Jewish wedding: *erusin* and *nisuin*. *Erusin* is a term for betrothal or engagement. *Nisuin* is the term used for the formal marriage ceremony. At one point these two ceremonies were held a year apart from one another. Though *erusin* and *nisuin* each have their own set of blessings, and *kiddush* is recited at both, most contemporary Jewish weddings include both of these ceremonies.

At a Jewish wedding, there are a few moments – after *erusin* but before *nisuin* – during the now brief betrothal period, when members of a couple are neither single nor yet married.

Readings about Life Transitions in Judaism

Group 4: Death and Mourning

In Jewish tradition, one is obligated to observe the rituals of mourning for the following seven relatives: mother, father, son, daughter, sister, brother, and spouse (though modern custom allows for a wider circle).

The time from when a potential mourner learns about a death until the time of burial is called *aninut*; the mourner is called an *onen*. An *onen* is considered to be in a state of shock and is, therefore, exempt from regular ritual observance. For instance, an *onen* is not expected to attend prayer services or recite blessings before eating, even if these are things they do regularly. They are not expected to do anything beyond making appropriate arrangements for the funeral, burial, and *shiva*.

After burial, one becomes an *aveil*, a mourner; the period of mourning is known as *aveilut*. Mourners are obligated to sit *shiva* – the seven-day intense mourning period following burial – and say the Mourner's *Kaddish*, among other things.

When Does an Occasion Need a Ritual?

How do we know when an occasion demands a ritual? Is every moment equally filled with possibility?

If, as Myerhoff claims, rituals help us deal with chaos or change or ambiguities, any moment of liminality, of transition from one world to another, calls out to be marked.... We might create a new ritual or use an old one in a new way. We might create a synagogue ceremony or a private meditation. We might write a new *berakhah* [blessing] or use traditional ones in ways they were not originally intended.

Modern rituals give us some sense of where people feel the blank spaces were in their lives: aging, marriage, separation, divorce, pregnancy, choices about childbirth, nursing, weaning, infertility, giving a baby up for adoption, pregnancy loss, menstruation, death, Rosh Chodesh [day the new Jewish month begins], and holidays. Myerhoff suggests that rituals are necessary in those places where we usually suffer alone: surgery, menopause, retirement, empty nest, and loss. Esther Broner...says that her best customers are people with broken hearts.

Rabbi Debra Orenstein adds to the list: completing a creative project, becoming a grandparent, forgiving yourself for a sin you have committed, celebrating a time of family closeness, first love, first sex, first apartment, planning a wedding, publishing a book, deciding to leave a lover, coming out as a lesbian or a gay man, acknowledging that someone you love is terminally ill, leaving a batterer, reconciling with someone from whom you have been estranged, making *aliyah*, recovering from an addiction, healing from sexual abuse, and cooking a special family dish with your bubbe's [grandmother's] recipe (Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones, Vol. 1).

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