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WHY WE PRACTICE RITUAL

Rituals elevate mundane moments to holy ones. Rituals come in many forms—they can be set of words (such as prayer), gestures, or actions sometimes involving special objects (like lighting the Shabbat candles) performed in a special order. Rituals help us connect to something bigger than ourselves, and tap into the awe of humanity, and of the Universe. All known human societies have some form of ritual. Many rituals are symbolic actions to help people feel that they belong to a certain tradition or group, for example, a religious worship service.

Judaism has many rituals created over the many different eras of Jewish life. There are big rituals that happen only once and are witnessed by many, like the naming of a baby. And there are small, private rituals like reciting the Modeh Ani, a prayer said every morning immediately after waking.

THE RITUAL-LESS RITUAL OF ROSH CHODESH

And as we mentioned in Packet 0: Foundations, Rosh Chodesh is a ritual-less Jewish holiday. Marking the new moon has always been a Jewish ritual; it’s actually the Divine’s first commandment to the Israelites in Exodus. Once Israelites were no longer slaves, they gained ownership over their own time. There’s even a special prayer Jews say each new moon called Birkat HaChodesh.

Over time, marking the new month and moon became a time for women to come together to learn and study, and so observing Rosh Chodesh became a ritual of its own. However, because the practices of Jewish women were passed down via Oral Torah (word of mouth), we don’t have written records of the Rosh Chodesh rituals these women performed. That’s how observing Rosh Chodesh became a ritual-free ritual. Unlike many of the major Jewish holidays, the sacred texts contain no laws and offer no instructions about how to observe Rosh Chodesh. That means there’s a cool opportunity for you and your Well Circle to create your own rituals within Rosh Chodesh.
While ritual often serves to connect us to community, we can also use it to connect to ourselves.

Ritual also enacts separation, drawing a veil across a space and time, and transitioning us from the regular everyday to an elevated, sacred state. Rituals have a variety of capabilities — they can amplify significance, mark rites of passage, and draw a distinct line between an old phase into a new one, like Shabbat, which marks the end of the week, and Havdalah, which marks the start of the new one.

You can perform a ritual to highlight the importance of many different kinds of big moments — a career shift, the beginning of a new partnership, the end of an old bad habit, or a reunion. You can perform a ritual to ask for help with a big decision, to manifest a desired outcome, or to celebrate something grand.

Ritual can be deeply embedded and traditional, something people have practiced for thousands of years. Ritual can also be a one-off, here-and-now, spontaneous creation suited for exactly one particular moment, like jumping in the ocean at the end of a cross-country road trip, or on the count of three yelling into the wind with a friend to release a heartbreak. We can practice ritual alone or together, with the help of objects or just with our bodies, in great seriousness or with super-silly giggles.

That’s the beauty of ritual; it’s flexible.

The ritual prayers, holidays, and tools that already exist help us feel connected to our ancestors, and a great chain of being stretching back in time. But no matter how official-seeming any given ritual is, someone made it up, even if that someone was a once-famous rabbi or sage. That means you too have the power and opportunity to reinvent old rituals, and create new ones.
POSSIBLE OPENING & CLOSING RITUALS
FOR YOUR WELL CIRCLE

We believe the tradition of an opening and closing ritual add a lot of value and richness to each Well Circle. Opening and closing rituals help make a Well Circle meeting feel separate and special, and transforms the evening from a regular hangout to a sacred space and time.

In the following pages you’ll find examples of these rituals from our network and from Rabbi Jill Hammer. They’re here to inspire you, and we invite you to bring them in to help your Well Circle feel sacred.
Rabbi Jill Hammer, PhD, is an author, teacher, midrashist, mystic, poet, essayist, and priestess. She is committed to an earth-based and wildly mythic view of the world in which nature, ritual, and story connect us to the body of the cosmos and to ourselves. She has been called “a Jewish bard.”

In ancient times, two witnesses had to confirm the appearance of the new moon. The exact day of this appearance was crucial — the new moon would determine when the month began and when that year’s festivals would fall. The earliest Jewish legal code, the Mishnah, says two witnesses would report when they’d sighted the new moon to a court of judges in Jerusalem. These judges would examine the two witnesses carefully to make sure their testimonies were identical, and then confirm that the new moon had indeed appeared (Mishnah Rosh haShanah 2:6). To quickly transmit this knowledge to far-flung Jewish communities, bonfires were lit on hilltops around Jerusalem. Each community that saw the fires burning would then light its own bonfire. Thus, the news would pass from mountain to mountain and town to town, until all the Jews knew it was Rosh Chodesh, the new moon.

In remembrance of this custom, some modern Rosh Chodesh groups begin their rituals this way: After everyone in the group has been given an unlit candle, a single participant lights her candle from a central flame. Then she passes her flame to the next woman in the group, until all the candles are lit. Through this ritual, we recall both the ancient bonfires of the Jewish people and personify the light we kindle in each other.

A similar version of “The Fires of Rosh Chodesh” ritual was originally posted on the website Ritualwell.org.
CALLING IN THE FOUR DIRECTIONS: THE JEWISH MEDICINE WHEEL

An Opening Ritual by Ariella Bea Powers

Ariella Bea Powers is an earth-based queer healer, passionate about reclaiming our innate human wildness, and empowering folx in the re-membering of our bodies, minds, emotions, and spirits.

From these four elements, which are hinted to by the four letters of the Tetragrammaton (יהוה / YHWH), all of physical creation was brought into existence.

- Rabbi Peretz Auerbach

A COMMON THREAD

Earth, air, water and fire: The four elements of creation. These elements and their corresponding cardinal directions come together to make the Medicine Wheel. In our Well Circles, we can quite literally call on this medicine to create sacred space in which to conduct our meetings, through a ritual of calling on the parts of the wheel.

Consider how many cultures across time have created systems around these foundational elements, Judaism included. In many Native American cultures (including the Lakota, the Cherokee, and others) the four cardinal directions — North, South, East, and West — are linked to four magical elements — earth, fire, air and water — creating a Medicine Wheel.

An ancient Midrashic source, according to Rabbi Jill Hammer,

...speaks of the four elements giving birth at the beginning of time: “the fire gave birth to light, the water gave birth to darkness, the wind gave birth to spirit, and the earth gave birth to humanity.” Giving us reason to believe in the foundation power of the elements in the creation of the world, our bodies and everything we know.

Starhawk names the four elements the “Declaration of the Four Sacred Things”, explaining that they are “symbols of the interconnected systems that sustain life, we know that nothing can live without them.” The earliest surviving book on Jewish esotericism, the Sefer Yetzirah (also known as The Book of Creation),
proclaims: “Three mothers....in the Universe are air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire. Earth was created from water. And air from breath decides between them.” (Jill Hammer)

The elements of earth, air, water and fire are also cited in the holy Zohar. In Vaera 23b, Rabbi Shimon announces:

Come and see! These four foundations manifest the mystery of faith. They are at the root of all the heavenly realms and represent the mysteries of the Divine chariot. The four are: fire, air, water and earth and they form the basis of everything... From them also stem the four winds, as well as the four directions of space: North, South, West and East... The four foundations are connected with the four winds and they all form one entity.

In The Magic of the Ordinary: Recovering the Shamanic in Judaism, Gershon Winkler explores the impact the four elements functioning together as a Medicine Wheel. In particular, he explains how the Wheel’s fractal nature, “...spirals us deeper and deeper into ever unfolding awareness of and closeness to the Creator and the mystery of Being” (55).

There are several reasons why we would want to “call in” the directions to open and close a ritual Circle. Utilizing the medicine of the wheel in our Well Circles helps us create a container that opens our bodies and minds to a slower temporality, provides a more complex spatial awareness, and deepens the holy place within ourselves. By asking the directions (and their corresponding elementals, animals, angels, energies, and qualities) to be our allies in our relational ritual building, we are participating in an act of creation.

CALLING IN YOUR JEWISH MEDICINE WHEEL

The practice of calling on the directions can be used to open and close each Well Circle meeting is both a ritual in itself and a container for whatever practices and rituals you chose to fill your gathering.
Keep in mind:

- Speak the words aloud
- Stand up and face the direction you are calling
- As you speak, move sun-wise (That means moving clockwise, when we open and counter-clockwise when we close.)
- When you use the Medicine Wheel to open your circle, spend a moment breathing in each element. Breathe deeply. Try to imagine how that direction would feel on your skin, how it would taste on your tongue, how it would hold you if it were your lover...

**CIRCLE OPENING**

*East (Mizrach), the place of the sunrise, the element of air (ruach), the wind of balance (gavree’el), the home of the eagle (or hawk), the shining/illumination, we invite you to join our circle today.*

*South (Darom), the place of innocence, the element of water (mayim), the wind of seeing, the home of the humans, cleansing and reflection, please join us.*

Moving your body to the right, close your eyes, feel into the element...

*West (Ma’arav), we welcome you to our circle today, the place of transformation and healing, the element of earth (afar), the wind of understanding and wisdom (bina and chochma), the home of healing and merging and blending. Please help us hold the sacred process we are becoming.*

*North (Tzafon), the place of the ancestors, the element fire (eish), the wind of yhvh, the home of mystery/the void.*

As Above (katri’el: — wellspring, the heavens, cosmos, stars, planets, giving),

So Below (malchuti’el — nurturance, the earth, the soil, the mycelium, the roots, the interconnectivity, groundedness, receiving),

and Center (yourself, your body — spirit in physical form) are additional directions to complete the merkabah, Magen David (Star of David) that surrounds you and completes the full seven directions.*

*The medicine wheel is a fractal, extending inside/outside itself infinitely.
Once you open the medicine wheel, you are in sacred-space. You have invited in the holy, honored her presence and your unique place within her.

**CIRCLE CLOSING**

At the end of your circle you can use this same wisdom to close your circle.

Thank each of the directions for participating in your ceremony.

You’ll be going backwards from where you began. If you did just the four directions, begin with the North. If you called in seven directions, you’ll begin with yourself: Center. Move counter sun-wise, releasing all the directions back to their four corners, thanking and blessing them for joining your circle and helping you hold space.

Remember, you are participating in creation. You are bringing something into life each time you hold a circle, every time you pray. Do not take this medicine lightly.

The elemental wisdom reflected in the Jewish Medicine Wheel proves a framework of understanding in which we are always walking. This process of being located on the Medicine Wheel reflects our life cycles, moon cycles, birth cycles, seasonal cycles, and so on.

Bless your Circle.

**REFERENCES**

- Tel Shemesh. [http://telshemesh.org/earth/the_four_elements_and_the_four_seasons_jill_hammer.html](http://telshemesh.org/earth/the_four_elements_and_the_four_seasons_jill_hammer.html)
This closing ritual was contributed by Rabbi Sarah Tasman, a lifecycle officiant, mikvah guide, Jewish yoga teacher, and a member of the Shechinah Council for At The Well. You can find her at rabbisarahtasman.com.

Having an opening and closing ritual for your Well Circle meeting defines your time and space as sacred and intentional.

If you’ve done an activity or discussion during your meeting, bring the group back together for a closing ritual to close the space. Participants may linger to chat or help clean up but some may need to leave when the gathering is over, so it’s helpful to do a closing ritual to demarcate the end of the Well Circle meeting.

**TAKING IN THE LIGHT**

For the opening ritual, arrange a circle of candles in the center of your group and light them. Place candles on aluminum foil or a meal platter for safety and intentionality in arrangement. When you’re ready to close the meeting, invite participants to come in close together around the candles. Get down low and bring your hands together, palms open in order to see the light of the candles reflected in your hands. In turn the light will be reflected on the faces of the group as well. Invite everyone to notice the light reflected on everyone’s hands and faces, allowing each person to be illuminated by the light of this month.

**OFFERING A GIFT**

Ask each person to offer a word, wish, hope, or blessing for the month. This is something you wish for yourself and everyone in the group. You can go around in a circle or popcorn-style (letting each person speak when and if they’re ready). The leader will say: “May this be a month of __.” Each person shares their intention as a word or phrase. Once each person has shared, everyone gently blows into their upturned hands, which will gently extinguish the candles (and stop your tealights’ melted wax from flying everywhere). The leader can then say, Chodesh Tov (the greeting for a “good month”) and everyone can respond, Chodesh Tov.
LIFTING UP INTENTIONS

The group stands in their circle. After each person shares her word or intention, everyone rubs their palms together to create warmth, to add support and energy to send the intentions out into the world. The group may also raise their hands as though each person is symbolically lifting these intentions to elevate and offer them up. The gesture’s movement adds a physicality to the act of speaking aloud the intentions.

GUIDED BY THE HOLIDAYS

If your Well Circle meeting is before a major holiday or a special time of year, the leader may invite participants to offer a word, hope, blessing, or intention for that holiday, or in connection with a specific theme connected with that month. For example, during Rosh Hashanah, the leader may invite each person to go around and offer an intention for the new year, or a word or phrase for this past year and a word or phrase for the coming year. For Passover, the question may be particular to freedom.

+ AND Δ

For the first few months, the group may wish to devote time during closing for reflection about the group itself, which will give an opportunity for ongoing feedback as the group is forming. One way to do this is by using the “Plus/Delta” evaluation tool. Each person can share something positive (represented by a plus symbol, +) and something they might want to change, experiment with, or do differently (represented by the change symbol delta, Δ). The leader can invite each person to share a plus and a delta: What was great about tonight? What do you wish we did differently? or What do you want to see us try in the future?
KIDDUSH LEVANAH, BLESSING THE MOON
A Closing Ritual relayed by Hadar Cohen

Hadar Cohen is a God-lover, justice seeker, community organizer residing in the Bay Area. She loves finding new creative ways to resist capitalism, tap into the eternal love of this world to heal our people, and dance in joy through all the messiness.

The moon is associated with eternal life and redemption. During the waxing period of the moon (from three to 14 days after the new moon), it is customary in Jewish tradition to gather outside and recite a blessing towards the visible moon. In this ritual, we are highlighting renewal. We are blessing the moon for her cycles, blessing her Maker, and remembering the renewal that is possible for us too each month. The Talmud teaches us that “those who recite the blessing over the new moon in its time is as if they greeted the presence of the Shekhinah (Divine Feminine).” The text continues to say that if we were only to unite with our Beloved the Divine once a month, it would be enough.

The Kiddush Levanah prayer is here to remind us that the Divine is with you. She is here for you. She understands if sometimes you need to ignore her or even pretend that she doesn’t exist. She loves you as you are. She will be there when you want her and will give you space when you desire. You decide how much you want to let her in. She will come wherever you desire her.

As a closing ritual – walk outside with your sisters. Find the moon. Take a moment to meet your Beloved the Divine through bearing witness to the moon. You can follow all of the traditional practice below, or only parts of it. Join together in dance and celebrate the hidden mysterious force that is divine and signaling to the eternal liberation that is possible in the renewal of time.
The traditional practice has us stand outside, place feet together as we look at the moon and recite the following:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעולָם אֲשֶׁר בְּמַאֲמָרוֹ בָּרָא שְחָקִים. וּבְרוּחַ פִּיו כָּל קֹבֶעַ. פּועֵל אֱמֶת שֶׁפְּעֻלָּתוּ אֱמֶת. וּלְבוֹנָה אָמַר שֶׁתִּתְחַדֵּש. עֲטֶרֶת תִּפְאֶרֶת לַעֲמוּסֵי בָטֶן שֶׁהֵם עֲתִידִים לְהִתְחַדֵּשׁ כְּמותָה. וּלְפָאֵר לְיָצָרָם עַל שֵׁם כבוד מלכותו: בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ מְחַדֵּשׁ חֳדָשִׁים.

Blessed are you our God, queen of the world who in her word created galaxies and with the breath of her mouth all of their hosts. Law and time the divine gave them so they would not change their course. Joyful and happy to fulfill the will of their creator. Worker of truth whose work is true and to the moon she said, “Renew yourself!” A crown of splendor to those carried in the womb who are destined to renew themselves like her and to glorify the One who formed them by the name of the glory of God’s queendom. Blessed be You Hashem who renews the renewing moons.

Then rise on the tips of the toes in the direction of the moon while reciting the following three times:

בָּרוּךְ עוֹשֵֹךְ, בָּרוּךְ יוֹצְרֵךְ, בָּרוּךְ בּוֹרְאֵךְ, בָּרוּךְ קוֹנֵ.

Blessed be your Maker, blessed be your Former, blessed be your Creator, blessed be your Possessor.

כָּשָׁמַש שָׂפֵא רוֹקֵד כְּנֶגְדֵּךְ וְאֵינִי יָכוֹל לִנְגּוֹעַ בָּךְ, כַּךְ לֹא יוּכְלוּ כָּל אוֹיְבֵים לִנְגּוֹעַ בָּהֶם. תִּפֹּל עֲלֵיהֶם אֵימָתָה וָפַחַד בִּגְדֹל זְרוֹעֲךָ יִדְּמוּ כָּאָבֶן. כָּאָבֶן יִדְּמוּ זְרוֹעֲךָ בִּגְדֹל וָפַחַד אֵימָתָה עֲלֵיהֶם תִּפֹּל.

Just as I dance opposite you and cannot touch you, so may my enemies be unable to touch me for harm. There will fall upon them terror and fear, through your arm’s greatness let them fall silent like a rock.

דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְרָאֵל חַי וְקַיָּם.

David King of Israel lives on.
Greet three people with the phrase: Shalom Aleikhem!, Peace unto you! And they return: Aleikhem shalom! Unto you peace!

A good omen and a good sign for us and for all Israel! Amen.

The voice of my beloved, here this one is coming, skipping over mountains, jumping over valleys. My beloved, be like an antelope or a doe of the deers! Here this one stands, beyond our wall, peering from the windows, peeking through the cracks.

It is the custom in the month of Av to wait to sanctify the moon until after Tisha b’Av, and in Tishrei to wait until after Yom Kippur. This blessing is not recited on Sabbath and holiday eves.
At The Well is all about reviving lost rituals, like Rosh Chodesh. We also encourage you to create your own rituals to bring to your Well Circle and to practice in your own life.

The problem is that people often think of rituals as Official and Serious, which can make designing one’s own feel daunting. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Ritual creation can feel holy, fun, and light.

In fact, you probably already have a ton of little rituals you do everyday. Maybe first thing in the morning you go outside to do five sun salutations. Or maybe you make a cup of chamomile tea and light incense every night before going to bed. Perhaps you put on a certain piece of clothing or jewelry whenever you feel down. Maybe you always say goodbye to your best friend with the same special phrase. All of these things are rituals.

And there will be times in your life where you don’t have ritual, but want one. Like when you finish big project, move houses, are about to take a big risk, or are calling in some courage to do something scary and difficult. In anticipation of a moment like that, let’s show you how to make a ritual of your own.

Creating a more elaborate ritual is just a matter of making decisions about a few specific factors, including setting, timing, and intention. There’s help to do that right here, in the exercise on the next page.
MY RITUAL

Fill in the answers to these questions to start developing your own ritual, to use at your next Well Circle meeting, or to practice yourself.

Why are you doing this ritual?
Check as many as you like.

☐ To celebrate new life
☐ To quit
☐ To let go for an emotion, person, or belief
☐ To ask for guidance
☐ To arrive
☐ To mark a cycle
☐ To strengthen
☐ To apologize
☐ To grieve
☐ To welcome
☐ To ask for help
☐ To heal
☐ To leave
☐ To celebrate an achievement
☐ To get rid of something
☐ To make a commitment

Where would you like do this ritual?

☐ In your bedroom
☐ In your kitchen
☐ In the forest
☐ At a park
☐ At a sculpture or large piece of art
☐ At a festival
☐ At home of an ancestor, beloved family member or close friend
☐ In your living room
☐ In or at a body of water
☐ In a garden
☐ At a scenic viewpoint
☐ In a place of worship
☐ At a public event
☐ In a foreign country

When would you like to do this ritual?
Check as many as you like.

☐ Sunrise
☐ Dusk
☐ In the morning
☐ After dark
☐ When it’s raining
☐ When it’s cool
☐ Sunset
☐ Dawn
☐ In the afternoon
☐ In the middle of the night
☐ What it’s clear
☐ When it’s hot
Which of the natural elements feel right to incorporate?

Check as many as you like.
- [ ] Earth
- [ ] Wind
- [ ] Water
- [ ] Fire

What actions and tools will you include in the ritual?

Check as many as you like.
- [ ] Ritual Objects
- [ ] Meditations
- [ ] Dance or movement
- [ ] Adorn something
- [ ] Release something
- [ ] Write something
- [ ] Prayers
- [ ] Song
- [ ] Build something
- [ ] Destroy something
- [ ] Readings

Who will be involved in this ritual?

Check as many as you like.
- [ ] Just me
- [ ] Many other participants
- [ ] A few witnesses
- [ ] My Well Circle
- [ ] A few other participants
- [ ] One witness
- [ ] Many witnesses

Will you invite any higher power(s) into this ritual as part of the ritual?

Check as many as you like.
- [ ] The Divine
- [ ] God
- [ ] Universal Energy
- [ ] Your ancestors
- [ ] Angels
- [ ] A great teacher of yours
- [ ] Other spiritual beings
- [ ] The Divine Feminine

Check out what you checked in response to the question about why you’re doing this ritual. Now, we’re going to take this intention and use it to help us think about the form of the ritual itself. Let’s start with setting the scene.
Look at the location and time that you checked. List three possible locations based on the time you want to do this ritual. (ex. In the backyard at dawn, or at a local lake on a Tuesday afternoon when no one else is there.)

1.
2.
3.

What are three ideas about how you might make this space feel special and set apart from everyday life? (ex. Arranging special objects in front of me, putting out flowers, lighting candles, burning incense.)

1.
2.
3.

Did you select any kind of higher power to be part of this ritual? Look at the actions/tools and elements you checked. List three ways could you combine these to bring that higher power into the space. (ex. I want to ask the spirit of my grandmother for advice, so I’ll light a candle in front of her photo.)

1.
2.
3.

Next, list three ideas for how to open your ritual that would help you feel connected to the reason you gave for doing it. (ex. I want to let go of a feeling, so maybe I’ll start by filling a bowl with water to pour it over my hands, wash the feeling away.)

1.
2.
3.
Now, let’s think about the people who will be there. If you’ll have someone with you, what role will they play? List three ways they might be involved in your ritual. (ex. A few close friends will help me put on special clothes, or the group will all sing a song together.)

1.
2.
3.

Next comes the main event of the ritual. Based on your reason for doing the ritual, the activities and tools you checked, and elements you want to incorporate, list three ideas for how you could combine all three to make your ritual. (ex. I’ll bury the key to the car that I got into an accident with, or I’ll read the prayer I wrote, fold it into a paper plane, and send it into the breeze.)

1.
2.
3.

Consider again the elements and activities you checked. Now, list three ideas about how you might close and leave this space. (ex. I’ll sing a song that reminds me about being strong, or I’ll end with a five-minute silent meditation.)

1.
2.
3.