

# Torah, Ritual, Body, Jew

BENJAMIN D. SOMMER

To be a singer, you use your throat; to be a surgeon, you use your hands and, ideally, your mind; to be a running back, you use arms to catch and legs to run. What do you use to be religious?

How one answers this question depends in part on where one lives. In Western countries, the default concept of “religion” is a Protestant one. Even Catholics, Jews, and (increasingly) Muslims in the West think about religion using models Protestantism provides. In much of Europe and North America, you “do religion” with your soul or spirit, and also perhaps with your mind. If something physical is involved, it is your mouth or ears: you preach, teach, and proclaim the Word, or you listen to it.

## A great deal of Jewish hesitation with ritual stems from Western embarrassment about the body...

Now, the idea that religion is fundamentally a spiritual pursuit may seem obvious, but in fact it’s a remarkably rare point of view. Around the world, religion is almost always something one does with one’s body. For Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Muslims, most Buddhists, and Jews, the main vehicle for carrying out the teachings of religion is our physical self. Regulations regarding what one may eat are the norm in most religions, whether they involve vegetarianism, abstaining — except on certain festival days — from the especially sacred foods that are “taboo” in many tribal religions, eating only *chalal* meat among Muslims, or (prior to the Protestantizing reforms of Vatican II) avoiding meat other than fish on Friday for Catholics. Elaborate regulations concerning how and when one bows during worship may seem arcane to modern Americans, but they are common in Catholicism and Islam. For many a devout Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Baha’i, one’s fingers pray at least as much as one’s mouth; believers connect with God by fingering through strings of prayer beads.

Similar practices are central in the daily life of a Jew. From waking until going to sleep, a Jew expresses a relationship with God through concrete actions, not just words or concepts. Jews envelop their bodies in a *tallit*; Jews put

*tefillin* on their arms and heads; Jews attend with great care to what they do and don’t put into their stomachs; every seventh day Jews recognize God as creator by preventing their bodies from creating or destroying most sorts of matter; by making their torsos lean a certain way while eating a special meal and dipping foods in particular fluids or mixtures, Jews recall how God took them out of slavery; by sitting in a ritual hut and waving around a fertility symbol, Jews recall how God led them through the wilderness and gave them sustenance. Of course, Jews also use their minds to connect with God. Prayer involves not only woolen threads and leather boxes but also specific words. Further, for rabbinic Judaism, Torah study is the highest path to God and equal to all the other commandments combined. But even when Jews use words to mediate their relationship to God, they don’t do so silently, in their minds alone. A Jew is instructed to pray out loud: tongue, lips, and vocal cords must move so that one’s ears can hear the words. A Jew doesn’t merely think a prayer; she utters it. Similarly, Jews study sacred texts out loud, often while shuckling back and forth.

One can imagine a Platonic study circle populated by philosophers who have a mind but no body or a church full of certain kinds of Protestants who have only a soul. (If faith rather than ritual is the core of Christianity, as it is for many low-church Protestants, then one could be a disembodied spirit and still be a full-fledged Christian.) There could be no such *beit midrash* or *beit k’neset*. It makes sense that the traditional Jewish belief in an afterlife involves not just immortality of the soul but resurrection of the body: if we only have souls in the future, then we will no longer have Torah, for one learns Torah with one’s mouth and throat, and one lives Torah with one’s forehead, arms, shoulders, and stomach.

Judaism is a religion of the body. Now, this would not be worth noting — after all, almost *all* religions are religions of the body — if Judaism hadn’t become, for most of us, so very Western in the past 200 years. A great deal of Jewish hesitation with ritual stems from Western embarrassment about the body, or from a recent Western assumption: that the body may be good for some things, but religion isn’t one of

Benjamin D. Sommer is professor of Bible and ancient Semitic languages at the Jewish Theological Seminary. His book, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2009. He is currently working on the JPS Psalms commentary.

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them. Protestants in the 17th century began to cut back on all that genuflecting; they downplayed eating the bread and wine in worship (it didn't have to happen every week, and anyway it was only a symbol). As Jews westernized, they aped their neighbors by minimizing physical aspects of religion. Head covering? Not really necessary. Prayer shawl? Okay, but let's make it a tasteful little scarf, not one of those big cloak things. Leather boxes and straps? Surely you jest. The rabbi at our children's preschool explained that in the synagogue he attended as a child, there was only one *lulav* on Sukkot. It was displayed on a table in the front of the sanctuary; you could view it, but no one ever touched it. (Years later, shortly after his ordination, he consulted *The Jewish Catalogue* to learn how to shake a *lulav*.)

One of the most important developments for Judaism in the last three decades has been the reversal of this trend. Large *tallitot*, often custom-woven, have become common. *Teffilin*, *sukkot*, and even *tohorat hamishpacha* (a whole-body ritual) are now observed. Many Jews are no longer embarrassed by ritual. The rabbi who told the story about his childhood synagogue did so to suggest that his audience might want to embrace the *lulav* ritual (and also, I suspect, to convey the idea that there's nothing wrong with an adult looking at a basic reference book to learn how). We've begun to understand that the body can be a vehicle for holiness and that words are only part of communicating with God. Jews in North America have begun to reclaim ritual — which is to say, to reclaim the body, which is to say, to reclaim Judaism itself. 🕯

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### “Vi'avitah Tehillah” “You Desire Praise”

*“Your awe is upon the angels, who are mighty and exalted, who dwell in beautiful heights. And You desire praise from those stained with sin, passing shadows who dwell below — and that is Your praise.”*

The human is a combination of godly spirit and dirt (Genesis 2:7); the highest and the lowest. In infinite irony, what God-the-Highest truly desires is the praise of the lowest — humans; and not from our Divine image identity but from our sinful, fleeting, creaturely selves. Precisely on Yom Kippur, the day on which we are most prone to feeling like sullied failures, do we have the most potential, precisely from our lowness, to meaningfully praise the Highest. —Hyim Shafner

## Yom ha-Kippurim and Tisha b'Av: The Commonality of Opposites

SHAUL MAGID

Many Jews equate Yom Kippur with Tisha b'Av. The reasons are obvious enough. These are the only two days of the year when we fast from sunset to the following night (25 hours) and abide by the five Torah-derived types of affliction specific to Yom ha-Kippurim. Yet the days seem to represent two opposite states of mind. Atonement, the centerpiece of Yom ha-Kippurim is an act of grace (*chesed*) that should be experienced as a state of enjoyment or *oneg*; Tisha b'Av is a day focused on exile, suffering, and mourning.

The similarities ostensibly have textual as well as ritualistic support. In his *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Mourning” 5:7, Maimonides writes, “Tisha b'Av night is like the day [regarding fast-

ing and the five afflictions]. One can eat when it is still day. Dusk [between sunset and darkness] one must refrain from eating *like Yom ha-Kippurim*. We do not eat meat or drink wine in the meal preceding the fast [of Tisha b'Av].” Curiously, while the similarity to Yom ha-Kippurim is clear, Maimonides undermines the similarity when he describes the meal that precedes the two fasts. In the meal before Yom ha-Kippurim we specifically eat meat and drink wine as this is a festive meal and not a meal of mourning like Tisha b'Av. The similarity between Yom ha-Kippurim and Tisha b'Av exemplified in the fast, suggests that there is a connection between these days through their opposition.

Shaul Magid, a *Sh'ma* Advisory Board member, is the Jay and Jeannie Schottenstein Professor of Jewish Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, and most recently the author of *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* with Indiana University Press, 2008. He is presently working on a book titled *Judaism on the Cusp of Post-Ethnic America: Becoming an American Religion*, also with Indiana University Press.

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