

## OFFERING TO THE FOUNDATION STONE

Jill Hammer

Ritual is an organically occurring human activity. No one culture invented ritual – it is something humans do naturally. Ritual is a kind of adult play, a way of making meaning, communicating experiences, beliefs, and values, and creating structure for individual lives and whole societies. “Jewish ritual” is a category that has changed over time, from the biblical rituals of offering to talmudic prayers at morning, afternoon, and evening, to ceremonies invented in later times, such as the celebrating of *bar* and *bat mitzvah*.<sup>1</sup> Throughout history, rituals “canonized” by Jewish law or text exist alongside folk ceremonies such as the celebration of the birth of baby girls, the writing of amulets, or the ritual visiting of graves. New ritual continues to be innovated today in response to the needs of contemporary Jewish communities. As a scholar of ritual and folklore, I am interested in how new rituals meet these needs and what values and beliefs they express.

It is an endless source of fascination for me that sometimes old rituals go out of use and then come back into use again when they are needed. The rituals of the Temple have long been left aside as the Jewish people coped with the Temple’s destruction and as Rabbinic Judaism gained ascendancy as the heir to Temple Judaism. Some of those long-lost rituals speak to the current age. In particular, the Temple rituals of Sukkot, which the Talmud describes as ceremonies to plead for the fecundity of the earth and the sustenance of all beings, now feel relevant as we face ecological crises and political arguments about how to treat our planet.

My poem “Offering to the Foundation Stone” was written for

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<sup>1</sup> The *bar mitzvah* ceremony is first recorded in 13<sup>th</sup> century France, and the ritual of *bat mitzvah* innovated in 20<sup>th</sup> century United States. See, e.g., Rabbi Michael Hilton, *Bar Mitzvah, a History* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society 2014), ch. 1.

such a revived ritual. In the ancient Temple, on Sukkot, as part of a water ritual known as *Simchat Beit haShoevah* (“rejoicing in the water drawing”), a water libation was made on the altar to ask for rain for the coming year. There was much joy as part of this ritual: torches, fire-juggling, dancing, and singing all night: “One who never saw the joy of the Water Libation never saw joy in his life.”<sup>2</sup> Another text proclaims: “There was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not shine from the light of the Water-Drawing ritual.”<sup>3</sup>

Every autumn for several years now, at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center (owned by Hazon), I have the privilege of being part of the contemporary *Simchat Beit haShoevah* ritual conceived by Kohenet Sarah Shamirah Chandler. We create a modern version of the water libation ritual described in the Talmud – not to be conducted in a Temple, but to be conducted on beloved local land in celebration of the water cycle and in prayer that the water cycle continue to flow without interruption. We begin the ritual by drawing water from the local pond and dividing it into many bowls and jars. After *havdalah*<sup>4</sup>, we read the passages from the Talmud that describe the joy of the water libation ritual. Sometimes, we have torch juggling just as they did. Then, each member of the community takes a jar or bowl of water to carry in procession. Accompanied by people carrying torches, we all walk to the firepit, where a lit fire has been prepared. Then we pour out the water around the fire as a water-libation, praying for the blessing of water in our world. After that, there is music and joyful danc-

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 53a.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 54a.

<sup>4</sup> *Havdalah* – the “separation” between times of different sanctity – is recited once *Shabbat* (the “Sabbath”) or *Yom Tov* (a “Festival” day) has come to a close. Therefore the ceremony at Freedman is conducted on the third or fourth night of Sukkot, following the end of the festival days (and the end of Shabbat if Shabbat follows the festival days). For those who refrain from the actions traditionally prohibited on *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov*, it would be recommended to observe *Simchat Beit haShoevah* beginning on an evening when *Shabbat* does not coincide with *Chol haMoed* (“the profane within the sacred time” – the intermediary days between the first and final days of *Yom Tov* that surround the bulk of Sukkot). See fn. 5.

ing. It is probably my favorite ritual of the year.<sup>5</sup>

My ritual task has been to make a prayer for the pouring of the first water offering and then to begin the pouring. This poem was created for that ritual. It references the rabbinic legend of the foundation stone. The *even shetiyyah*, “the foundation stone,” was said to lie beneath the Holy of Holies. The word *shetiyyah* (שתייה) means not only “foundation” but also “weaving,” from *shet* (שת), the “foundation,” or “warp,” of the loom. The foundation stone, legend held, was the point at which God had begun to create the world:

Just as the fetus in its mother’s womb starts at the navel and spreads out this way and that way to the four sides, so too the Holy One made the world, making the foundation stone first and from it spreading out the world. It is called the foundation stone for from it the Holy One began to create the world...<sup>6</sup>

In another version of the legend, found in the Talmud, King David is digging the foundations of the Temple and dislodges the foundation stone, causing the deep primordial waters to rise and nearly flood the earth. King David throws a shard with God’s name inscribed on it into the waters, in order to cause them to subside. Then the waters dry up entirely, so King David utters the psalms of ascent to bring the world’s waters to their proper level. The foundation stone, then, is the keeper of the earth’s waters.<sup>7</sup> The word *shetiyyah* can also mean “drinking” as in the “drinking stone.”

In the poem, I imagined the foundation stone as the altar to receive the water libation. And, I imagined the Stone not only as a stone set in one place, but as a mysterious entity we might find anywhere: a

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<sup>5</sup> The Talmud does recall *Simchat Beit haShoevah* taking place on the second night of Sukkot, which is not fully reproducible for Jews who, during two consecutive days of *Yom Tov* at the beginning of Sukkot, refrain from lighting torches or engaging with musical instruments. Nonetheless the sages disagreed over the extent to which the celebrations of *Simchat Beit haShoevah* could (or could not) override the traditional restrictions on music on *Shabbat* or *Yom Tov*; see Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 51a.

<sup>6</sup> Tanchuma Shemot, Pekudei 3.

<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 53a-b.

holy guardian of the gift of water to us and our whole planet.

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The Sioux people say *mni wiconi*: “water is life.” So too, water in the Bible is called *mayim chayyim*, “living waters.” All of us need water to live. Our society, which pollutes and neglects its waters, has forgotten this. We need the ancient water libation ritual to remind us of this, to make us care for the primordial waters that still sustain us.

## **Offering to the Foundation Stone**

Rabbi Jill Hammer

I am the Stone of the Weaving,  
I was here  
when an ethereal hand  
spun planets out of the void,  
when an invisible palm  
cast down the first drops of rain.  
I was set to guard the entrance  
to the deep, to hold back the void  
so life could find its way.  
I am the core of earth, around which  
water flows, bringing life  
again and again and again.

I am the Stone of the Imbibing,  
witness to generations  
quenching their thirst: plants, animals, tribes.  
On me your ancestors offered libations  
of water, praying for rain to fall,  
for wind to bring flocks of clouds.  
On me the high priest  
rested the incense. I am the keeper  
of your deepest prayers,  
though you have forgotten me.  
I remind you of what you need  
to live, of what needs to live, of all  
that needs you to help it live.  
I tell the story of the divine image  
moving through its different forms  
as water becomes ice and snow and rain.

I am the Stone of the Founding,  
ground of the sanctuary,  
floor of the Holy of Holies.  
You could call me a pebble

or a planet.  
Souls make their home inside me,  
as do bears and the roots of trees.  
I was the Temple  
before ever there was a Temple;  
the Temple was built  
upon the broad ocean of my back.  
Whenever you stand in a holy place,  
I am under your feet.

I am the Stone of the Flowing.  
I call you at this season  
to share the water, to make an offering,  
to show gratitude  
for the dance between solid and fluid,  
for bodies and spirits knitting themselves together.  
Return to me at this season  
to renew your faith in the Source of Life  
still flowing in you, still changing you  
as water changes stone.

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