

(After riding a bicycle down the center aisle of the sanctuary...)

No one is really sure how it started. Did otherwise secular, non-religiously-observant Jews have a sense of historical consciousness that precluded driving cars on Yom Kippur? Were they worried about offending a more pious neighbor? Was it just how they were raised? Whatever the original reason may have been, Israelis have long refrained from driving their cars on Yom Kippur.

“The opportunity presented by the carless streets was not lost on Israeli children,” write statisticians Shmuel Rosner and Camil Fuchs, “who took to their bicycles each year in even greater numbers. After a decade, the phenomenon was keenly felt; after two decades, it was not just inconsiderate but dangerous to drive a car on Yom Kippur. The streets were absolutely packed with children on bicycles.”¹

And they aren’t exaggerating. Some 43% of Israeli parents say their kids ride bikes on Yom Kippur, and 1 in 10 adults — hundreds of thousands of adults — say “Yom Kippur is an ideal day to ride a bicycle” *and do so themselves*.² Adults who don’t even own bicycles make plans to rent or borrow them for the express purpose of riding a bicycle on Yom Kippur...just as I have done today. It begs the question: is riding a bicycle on Yom Kippur a specifically Jewish act?

As you might imagine, the rabbinate thinks not. “As early as the mid-1980s, rabbis started putting out a ‘call for children...not to roam the streets on bicycles, which is forbidden on the holy day’.”³ Rabbi Shmuel Holstein, writing specifically about this phenomenon, says “This day is suitable for prayer and introspection...it is not suitable for cycling... (which adds) another sin on the holy day itself.”⁴ Fasting, praying in synagogue, repenting your transgressions: yes; cruising the highways on a two-wheeler: hard no.

And pretty close to 1/3 of all Israelis couldn’t care less. They dust off, they rent or borrow a bicycle specifically for this one date on the Hebrew calendar to be with their Jewish family and friends regardless of what their rabbis think. While Pew has not yet developed the right question to ask about Yom Kippur cycling as a measure for one’s Jewishness on their next population study, it seems like many Israeli Jews would say this **is** their observance of Yom Kippur. After the destruction of the ancient Temple, they might say, Yom Kippur was an important date in search of new content. Gone are the priests and the sacrifices and the blood; the rabbis suggest prayer and fasting and

¹ #Israeli Judaism: Portrait of a Cultural Revolution by Shmuel Rosner and Camil Fuchs. Pages 60-61.

² <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4132382,00.html>

³ #Israeli Judaism, Page 61.

⁴ Ibid.

synagogues; we suggest the contemplative silence that comes from this societal pause and the hope for the future rekindled by seeing children on bicycles.

So. Who is right, the rabbis or the Jews? Is riding a bicycle on Yom Kippur “Jewish”?

Let’s try to answer this question about what’s uniquely Jewish in the most Jewish way possible: by looking back at our history to find clues for our future.

We should begin some 1,800 years ago. In a text ostensibly written to preserve memories of the rituals practiced when the Temple was standing, we read about the “first fruit” offerings brought to Jerusalem.⁵ Those bringing their fruits would load up a basket and parade into town, preceded by flute music and a bedazzled, olive-crowned ox. When they arrived at the ancient Temple, they would proclaim 8 verses from the Book of Deuteronomy, recalling God’s kindness in redeeming their ancestors from Egypt and bringing them to the land of Israel. Those who knew the verses would say them, those who didn’t would repeat after the priests, they unload their fruit, pay their tax, and be on their way: which apparently worked quite well...until it didn’t. The Mishnah records that people were tired of being embarrassed before their peers — “haha, did you notice that Shlomo didn’t know the verses and had to repeat after the priest?” — and they stopped bringing their first fruits all together.

The ancient priests, precursors to the rabbis, had a problem. Jewish ritual as they preferred to observe it — bring us your fruits and praise God through this de facto Jewish knowledge quiz — was actually pushing Jews away. The priests could keep doing it their way, catering to a diminishing subset of the Jewish people, or they could read the writing on the wall. Spoiler alert: we are still here, so we know that they found a different way.

“התקינו שיהו במקרין את מי שהוא יודע ואת מי שאינו יודע”⁶ - The priests decreed everyone had to repeat after them whether they knew the words or not; come one, come all, no one will be made to feel less than. The people pushed back against a status quo that was no longer serving them — it was embarrassing them — and the leaders recognized it was high time to change in the interest of preserving Jewish continuity.

“Rabbi, the Mishnah is ancient history,” our high school students tell me every Sunday afternoon. “Doesn’t Judaism have anything more recent to say about this?” It sure does, thank you for asking!

Let’s fast-forward some 1,600 years to antebellum Charleston, South Carolina. Why Charleston? In 1824, it was home to the largest Jewish population in the United

⁵ Mishnah Bikkurim 3 https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Bikkurim.3?lang=bi

⁶ Mishnah Bikkurim 3:7 https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Bikkurim.3.7?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

States,⁷ and Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim was its biggest synagogue.⁸ Comprised of mainly Spanish and Portuguese Jews of the Sephardic rite, their board meetings must have been a sight to behold. In 1824, 47 congregants led by Aaron Phillips and Isaac Harby and Abraham Moise submitted a petition to the board. Your services are long, they're pretty boring, and we don't understand what you're saying the petitioners wrote. Please change things while there are any Jews left to care. Okay, okay, they were a bit more diplomatic about it. We all know the language of the time from the musical Hamilton. "The memorial of the undersigned, showeth unto your honourable body, (and that's honourable with a "u") that they have witnessed with deep regret the apathy and neglect which have been manifested towards our holy religion....we would call the particular attention of your honourable body (again with the "u") to the absolute necessity of abridging the service generally...and to repeat in English (that being the language of the country) such part of the Hebrew prayers as may be deemed necessary."⁹

The rabbi and president of the board had a problem. Jewish ritual as they preferred to observe it — Hebrew and Ladino and auctioning off honors and spitting on the floor — was actually pushing Jews away. They could keep doing it their way, catering to a diminishing subset of the Jewish people, or they could read the writing on the wall. This time, the rabbi and president actually chose not to change, rejecting the petition on procedural grounds, and the petitioners went off and formed their own synagogue. 14 years later, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim burned to the ground in the great Charleston fire of 1838. Which group do you suspect had the funds to rebuild: the rabbi and board president, preservers of the status quo who spoke only Ladino and refused to change, or the group that spoke English fluently and became successfully integrated into society? The Jews waited out their intransigent leadership and **then** brought about their changes in the interest of preserving Jewish continuity.

"Rabbi, the 1800's are ancient history," our high school students tell me every Sunday afternoon. "TikTok wasn't even invented then. Doesn't Judaism have anything more recent to say about this?" It sure does, thank you for asking!

Before Temple Emanuel made the transition to Mishkan Hanefesh, the silver and gold standards for Reform Machzorim that you hold in your hands today, we used Gates of Repentance. Do you remember this one? Before we made the transition to Mishkan Tefilah, the blue prayer book we used every Shabbat, we used Gates of Prayer. Do you remember these books? And if you go back far enough in your memory banks, you will remember flipping from the Amidah to the inside back cover every time we stood together in prayer.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Charleston,_South_Carolina

⁸ History of KKBE: <https://www.kkbe.org/ourhistory>

⁹ "Memorial" - A Petition to the Parent Congregation, 1824. Appendix V-A in Biography of Isaac Harby by L.C. Moise.

“Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu, V’elohei Avoteinu,” the pages of prayerbook proclaim. “Blessed are you, God, God of my fathers. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.” It’s a beautiful prayer, but it — inadvertently, hopefully — omits our relatively contemporary understanding that women are people, too. “Elohei Sarah, Elohei Rivkah, Elohei Leah, V’Elohei Rachel” we pasted to the back cover, “God of Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel,” allowing our words of prayer to match our contemporary values.

The editors of the prayerbook, the rabbis, had a problem. Jewish ritual as they preferred to observe it — let’s keep the Hebrew text intact and only change the English translations — was actually pushing away Jews who wanted the core text of their prayers to reflect their highest values. The editor rabbis could keep doing it their way, catering to a diminishing subset of the Jewish people, or they could read the writing on...the back inside cover. They heard these words of prayer coming from throughout the movement and integrated them into prayerbook itself. The people had pushed back against a liturgy, a status quo, that was no longer serving them — it no longer matched their values — and the leaders recognized it was high time to change in the interest of preserving Jewish continuity.

You’ve caught on to the pattern. Abolishing traditions, changing traditions, renewing traditions, inventing traditions has always been necessary to ensure that what we think of as Jewish tradition continues to serve the Jews who practice it. It was as true 1,800 years ago as it was 200 years ago as it is today. Jewish continuity has never been served by inflexible, rigid adherence to the way things have always been done. The Jewish people change, our ritual practices have changed, and that change has always come as a reflection of the needs and wants and practices of the Jewish people rather than their rabbis. **You** see and respond to the ways Judaism is not working for you, **you** adapt...and **you** eventually — through a positive articulation of your values and sustained effort — bring along the rabbis and synagogues that are slow to catch up.

What if, write Rosner and Fuchs, “a decline in synagogue attendance rates, along with a simultaneous increase in cycling on Yom Kippur did not signal a weakening commitment to Jewish culture but simply a **change** in Jewish culture?”¹⁰ What if the gradual and unrelenting decline in membership that Congregational President Michelle Markowitz mentioned during her address on Rosh Hashanah — not only at Temple Emanuel but at synagogues Reform, Conservative, and traditional Orthodox across the country — are not signs of apathy toward Judaism but toward Jewish institutions that are no longer serving the Jewish people? What if the Jewish people are only pushing back against a status quo that is no longer serving them — as they have always done? The writing certainly seems to be on the wall; we have to find a different way.

In the coming months — and, if we play our cards right, years — you will hear much more about these efforts. With the help of our strategic partners at Outside Angle, we are looking at your patterns and preferences and the demographic projections of the South Hills. We are exploring the changing reality faced by American Jews and the best

¹⁰ # Israeli Judaism, Page 63.

way to fund ongoing operations at Temple. We are going to be asking about your highest Jewish values — in a study session immediately following services, actually — because it is these *values* that have remained constant throughout Jewish history. How you put them into practice; what you need from your synagogues and rabbi, that's what we need to explore. We see that the status quo is unsustainable in the American synagogue writ large, that rabbis and Jewish leaders are relevant to a diminishing subset of the Jewish people, and we believe that Temple Emanuel is well-positioned to be part of the next evolution in Jewish life because of you. With your involvement, we are the center for progressive Jewish life in the South Hills. With your generosity, we remain financially sound. With your creativity and passion and investment of heart and time and talents, we are ready to do what Jews have always done, from the days of the Mishnah to the age of TikTok: adapt, change, and grow to meet the needs of the Jews who practice Jewish tradition.

So. Is riding a bicycle on Yom Kippur “Jewish”? Don't look at me: it's the Jews, not the rabbis — you, not me — who are responsible for answering this question; just as it has always been. I'm ready to listen.