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Our Jewish Toolbox

This summer, I had the joy of standing under the chuppah with six different weddings couples. I love officiating weddings. And, there is a moment that happens after every wedding I officiate. After the vows are said, the blessings are sung, the couple is wrapped in a tallit, and folks yell “mazel tov!” -- people find me and say:

“Rabbi, I’m not Jewish... but after that wedding, I kind of wish I were.”

At first, I thought it was the beauty of the chuppah. Or maybe it was the music of our ancient blessings. Or the glass shattering at the height of joy that acknowledges the brokenness of the world even in our most joyous celebrations.

But over time, I realized it isn’t just one ritual. It’s the whole thing. The Jewish thing. The way we hold life. The way we show up for each other. The way we tell the truth: that life is beautiful and hard, that joy and sorrow arrive in the same breath.

After enough people said it, I realized they weren’t asking for a new religion. They were saying: “Wow, you Jews have figured out how to handle life -- do you rent out that toolbox?” What they are yearning for isn’t a label, but the tools.

And tonight, as we enter the new year, I want to open the Jewish toolbox with you. To show you what our ancestors passed down. To remind you that we have not only the tools to survive but the tools to thrive, even in a world that feels profoundly broken.

Speaking of a toolbox... I first became a homeowner a few years ago. And suddenly, I had to think about tools in a way I never had before. Like, how many tools could one person possibly need? Before, a hammer, a screwdriver, or maybe a drill if I was feeling fancy. But then one of our trees fell into our neighbor’s yard and I learned very quickly that it was cheaper to buy a chainsaw than to hire someone else to come cut it down. And so there I was, watching my wife and one of our kids, take a chainsaw to the fallen tree and thinking: I never thought this would be part of my life. That was the beginning of a slow realization that sometimes you don’t know which tools you’ll need until life hands you the situation.

It’s the same with Judaism: we don’t always notice the tools we have because we’re used to them. But if you’ve ever grieved and had a community show up with food, you’ve used the tools. If you’ve ever lit Shabbat candles after a hard week, just to make time feel different, you’ve used the tools. If you’ve ever done something hard as a 13 year old, like a b’nei mitzvah, you’ve used the tools. If you’ve ever said kaddish for your parents or someone you loved, cried in front of the open ark, argued with a Jewish text out of stubborn hope, you’ve used the tools.

But before we reach into the toolbox about the joys of being Jewish, let's name the heartbreak. It's always been hard to be Jewish ... but this year it can feel especially heavy. Old hatreds dressed in new clothes, arguments about Israel and Gaza that land at our kitchen tables and on our Instagram feeds. We love this beautiful, complicated tradition, and sometimes it hurts.

We see our children growing, and then we watch the news of violence in schools and we weep. We walk through our lives, and then we look at the divisions in our nation, or wars, or the rise of antisemitism and hate and we weep. We see the beauty of our Pacific Northwest, and then we read about wildfires, or drought, or floods and we weep.

Where heartbreak, weeping, and despair whispers: stay in bed, nothing changes; Judaism answers: light the candles. Say the blessing. Visit the sick. Show up for shiva. Sing the prayer. Don't give up. Pick up the tools.

And tonight, I want to open that Jewish toolbox with you.

Yes, other people have tools, but our 5,000 year old tradition has honed some very special and unique ones for us, hundreds of them. But, don't worry, tonight, I only want to talk about five: Shabbat, mitzvot, community, torah and prayer, and rituals of transition.

1. Shabbat:

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously called Shabbat a "cathedral in time." Once every seven days, we step out of chaos and live as if wholeness were possible.

When the news is unbearable, when our children's schedules run us ragged, when work emails follow us into the night, thankfully, Shabbat interrupts. Shabbat says: the world may be broken, but for this moment, you are whole. You are not your inbox. You are not your productivity. You are a soul, worthy of rest and joy.

As I say almost every Shabbat: Shabbat is an act of resistance. We're not ignoring the outside world, we're renewing and fortifying ourselves to re-enter it.

But, Shabbat was different for our ancestors. What does this look like for us, as modern Reform Jews, because often it's not going to mean unplugging from the world for 25 hours.

So what could that look like for you? It could look like lighting two candles, whatever time you arrive home on Friday night and taking a deep breath; it could be joining us for services in person or online; maybe you zoom into Torah study, even with your camera turned off just to feel a little inspiration. One thing my kids appreciate about Shabbat is it means no chores ;-). For us parents, it means no nagging ;-).

I'm pretty busy on Shabbat BUT even when I get home on a Friday evening after 8pm, we do blessings together. It centers us. Reconnects us. Probably they've already eaten dinner but we'll sit together, phones away, and talk. And then they'll leave to hang out with friends or play

video games. Shabbat doesn't demand perfection; it asks for presence. Even fifteen minutes can turn a tired house into a small sanctuary and it's a tool I reach for every single week.

2. Mitzvot:

Judaism gives us daily practices, mitzvot, commandments, that transform ordinary acts into sacred ones. As Reform Jews, we don't feel bound by the mitzvot, the commandments, but they offer opportunities to orient our lives.

Our tradition teaches that we are supposed to say 100 blessings each and every day. 100. That's a lot of blessings. Why so many? Because Judaism invites us to see the world through the lens of blessing; to turn toward gratitude by noticing that almost everything in our day can be an opportunity to bless. When we wake up in the morning, we are told to say: Modeh Ani, thank you God for this new day, thank you for this tool against despair.

Every time we eat, we are commanded to bless our food as a way of connecting what sustains us to the sacred as a tool for cultivating awareness.

Our tradition commands us to do justice by giving time, money, and talent, through tzedakah, which serves as a tool against self-centeredness. This is why we collect money for the RPHHDEFF during the time of year.

We probably won't get to 100 blessings or mitzvot each day -- I never reach 100 -- but in a society that preaches scarcity, mitzvot teach abundance. Every mitzvah is a tool that insists: the world is still worth blessing.

3. Community:

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh, all Israel is responsible for one another.

When someone is ill, a meal train appears. When someone grieves, community gathers. When a child is born, the community welcomes their name into the world.

Not long ago, a few congregants came up to me at oneg and said, "Rabbi, we love the challah, but some of us can't eat it because of the gluten and eggs." They weren't complaining; they were asking us to live our values.

So we listened. And then something beautiful happened. Over thirty members of our community showed up on a Shabbat morning, rolling up their sleeves, tying on aprons, and baking together. Twice in the past year, our kitchen was filled with laughter, sticky dough everywhere, and the smell of dozens of loaves of challah, made vegan, alongside the traditional ones.

Now, every Shabbat when people gather for oneg, I hear congregants say, "Thank you. I can finally eat challah here." That's what community means -- not just sharing food, but making sure everyone has a place at the table, everyone can taste the sweetness of Shabbat.

Community is not an extra. It is one of the most powerful tools we have. In an age of loneliness and isolation, Jewish community insists: you are not alone. You belong.

4. Torah and Prayer:

When the world tells us we are powerless, Torah insists: you are part of a story larger than yourself. A story of resilience, of struggle, of people who carried their questions and their faith side by side.

When the headlines make us anxious, prayer gives us language to pour out our hearts. Sometimes we rage, sometimes we cry, sometimes we sing with joy. You don't have to know Hebrew, you don't have to believe in God the way your neighbor does, or at all, you can wrestle and question and still find meaning in prayer. Maybe that's on a hike in the Gorge or sitting in Pollin Chapel. Or even sitting right here in the Temple tonight.

Torah and prayer are Jewish tools for living. They don't erase the complexity of being human; they hold it.

So come to Torah study with your questions, your doubts, and of course, your coffee. You don't need to know Hebrew, you don't need certainty; you only need curiosity. Let the week's Torah portion expand your perspective with thousands of years of argumentation, so that you remember: you stand in a lineage, not just a news cycle.

5. Rituals of Transition:

Judaism gives shape to the passages of life. Baby namings, b'nai mitzvah, weddings, funerals; each one a way of saying: your life matters, your story matters, you will not cross this threshold alone.

Without them, life transitions can feel like chaos. With them, we are guided across with dignity and holiness. These rituals are the handrails we cling to when life tilts sideways.

And as Reform Jews, we know that tradition is a foundation, not a limit. We inherit ancient practices and we create new ones: rituals for adoption, divorce, retirement, gender transition, recovery, healing, even for moments of joy and gratitude that our ancestors never could have imagined.

Did you know that your clergy would love to hang a mezuzah at your home, or to take you to the mikveh, the ritual bath, to mark a moment of transition in your life? Our rituals are flexible, creative, and deeply personal because in Reform Judaism, we believe every passage of your life is worthy of blessing.

And nowhere is the ritual clearer than in a Jewish wedding: Do you know when the Sheva Brachot -- the seven blessings that are central to the Jewish wedding ceremony -- were written? After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Judaism itself teetered on the edge of extinction. Most Jews of that era were forced away. But a small group of rabbis, against all odds, imagined a future no one else could see. They wrote blessings for a wedding they weren't sure would ever happen again.

Under the chuppah, those seven blessings move from simple joy to a vision of a world repaired, reminding us that love can build again out of rubble. I carry that audacity into every wedding and into every life passage, including the complicated ones, because resilience belongs to all of us.

Every wedding I officiate reinforces this for me. Every time someone from outside our tradition watches what we do with awe, I'm reminded that we are custodians of something profoundly needed. Not just beliefs. Not just identity. But a spiritual technology that helps people live.

This is why I officiate interfaith Jewish weddings. Because Judaism's toolbox is not meant to be locked away for insiders only. When two people fall in love and choose to build a Jewish home together, even if only one partner is Jewish, that love itself is a vessel for blessing. Reform Judaism affirms that holiness is not diminished when shared with someone beyond our tradition; on the contrary, it is expanded. Standing under the chuppah with an interfaith couple is, to me, an act of faith in the same rabbinic audacity that created the Sheva Brachot: that against all odds, love will build again, and Judaism will continue to flourish through openness, inclusion, and hope.

And, this year, our toolbox is needed more than ever.

The world today is heartbreak upon heartbreak. And yet, the Jewish people have survived every heartbreak history could throw at us, because we picked up the tools.

This past year, I watched a non-Jewish parent of a bar mitzvah kid cry through the entire service. Afterwards, they said to me: "I didn't know you could build something so joyful in our synagogue in a world so broken."

And I thought: That's exactly it. That's exactly what Judaism does.

Each one of these moments is an act of spiritual defiance. Each one says: we will not surrender to chaos. We will use the tools.

That is why I love being a rabbi. Because again and again, I meet people who are not Jewish and people who are Jewish who come back to find meaning, who long for what Judaism offers. They say: I want to live in a tradition that knows how to mark life with blessing. I want to live in a community that believes joy and heartbreak can be held together. I want to live with tools that make me stronger when the world feels overwhelming.

And every time I hear that, it reminds me: we already have this. Judaism already gave us a toolbox.

When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed 2,000 years ago, it could have been the end. Judaism could have disappeared. No priests, no sacrifices, no holy center.

But instead, the rabbis built a toolbox. So this year, let's use them.

I couldn't have imagined what my two-car garage would look like today when we bought our house four years ago. But, spoiler, our cars live on the street, in the rain, and the garage is filled with tools. Tools I never imagined I'd need, tools I didn't even know how to use until the moment arrived. But each one tells the same story: life is unpredictable, and if you want to face it with some measure of courage, you need a good toolbox. That's true for homeowners with chainsaws, and it's true for us entering a new year.

So, as we enter this new year: if someone were to watch a video of your life, to follow you through an ordinary week, would they know you are Jewish? What would they see? Would they notice a rhythm of rest? A moment of prayer? A blessing before a meal? Who you donate your time and money too? Judaism lives not only in our hearts, but in our actions, in the habits and rituals that shape our days. The question is not whether we carry the toolbox -- we do. The question is: do we take it down off the shelf and actually use it?

When you are exhausted, pick up the tool of Shabbat: try lighting Shabbat candles, even if you have non-Jewish friends over. See how it transforms your home. Come to services or watch us online. Unplug, even if it's just for an hour.

When you feel powerless, pick up the tool of mitzvot: Feed someone, clothe someone, visit someone. Volunteer, donate to the Robert Peltz HHD FFF.

When you are overwhelmed, pick up the tool of prayer: Even if you don't believe in every word, let the words carry you. Say a blessing over your morning coffee. Let gratitude reorient you.

When you are lonely, pick up the tool of community: Call someone. Come here. Don't lift yourself alone. Join one of our many CBI Circles or start one of your own.

These are not quaint rituals. They are radical acts of resilience and resistance. They say: I am here. I matter. I will not give up. That is the Jewish way.

So tonight, as we open the Book of Life for 5786, I ask:

Where is your heartbreak? And which tool will you use to carry it?

We are not a people of perfection. We are a people of resilience.

Pick up a tool:
Light the candles.
Say the blessing.
Make the call.
Give the gift.
Join the circle.

And let that act be the first note of your tekiah gedolah into this New Year.

The world outside may be chaotic. Our hearts may be broken. But our toolbox is full.
And when we use them, we will not merely survive, we will thrive.

Kein yehi ratzon. May it be God's will. Shanah Tovah.