

Renewal

Renewal is woven into virtually all aspects of Jewish life and practice – in fact Jewish life is continually building on the past in new ways – bringing a sense of constant change with reassuring continuity.

The Jewish New Year (which usually falls in the same month as the European Days of Jewish Culture) opens with the festivals of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. These holidays – through their traditions and prayers – present an opportunity to reflect on and acknowledge our past actions, while looking ahead with new resolutions, optimism, and determination. During this period, we reconcile personal and communal differences within ourselves and with others, as we strive to actively renew our aspirations and actions for the coming year and beyond.

This concept of 'starting again' or pressing 'reset' is integral to the Jewish annual cycle, and to Jewish culture and life more broadly.

Each week throughout the year a Torah portion is read in synagogue, reinterpreting it anew to find new meanings that fit with our times. Each week, as the Torah scroll is put back into the synagogue's Holy Ark, the congregation recites 'renew our days as of old'. These words resonate with nostalgia for the past, whilst accepting and even embracing the new. Not by chance, the annual Torah reading cycle is both completed and restarted at the very end of the High Holiday period, with the festival of Simchat Torah.

There are other new years in the Jewish calendar. Tu Bishvat, 'The New Year for the Trees', celebrates the renewal of nature after winter. Passover is traditionally known as the 'Festival of Spring'. The re-enactment and telling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt at the traditional Passover Seder is also a way of renewing the experience and passing the story on to the next generation of 'story tellers', who will in turn renew the story themselves and pass it along to those who come after.

The Jewish discourse of learning is made up of layers of texts and arguments across generations (see the Dialogue exhibition panel on 'Dialogue Between Texts') – this also presents a constantly changing process of renewed thinking and interpreting.

Over the centuries, prayers and practices have also been adjusted to address new circumstances, places, and contexts – prayers for the well-being of the monarch or Kaiser are examples of adapting with the times. Many prayers and poems (piyyutim) were written for specific times and have been integrated into the liturgy across Sephardi and Ashkenazi traditions far removed from their original contexts. There is now a revival of traditional piyyutim across the world of Jewish music – as well as the integration of new styles of prayer (for example the tunes of Shlomo Carlebach).

There is a whole world of re-interpretation of Jewish practices from Ultra-Orthodox through Conservative, Liberal, Reform, Reconstructionist and non-denominational – there are those who resist renewed approaches in order to protect their traditional practices and ways of life, and those who embrace diverse forms of renewal – each according to specific interests, desires, needs and comfort levels. One of the biggest changes of recent decades has been the integration of women into Jewish practice and learning, which is still the subject of controversy, yet is becoming increasingly mainstreamed in different ways across the religious spectrum.

Though today largely associated with orthodoxy and conservatism, Hasidic Judaism originally emerged in the territory of contemporary Western Ukraine during the 18th century as a tremendous spiritual revival or renewal movement. It remains a remarkable historical example of the capacity to undertake renewal in Judaism, much in the same way as rabbinic (pharisaic) Judaism was a renewal movement that ensured the continuity of Jewish culture and practice after the destruction of the Temple.

It is important to include a sense of continuity when discussing renewal. The inheritance handed down from generation to generation, without losing the sense of continuity and belonging, is a fundamental treasure central to the transmission of identity. As this inheritance is adapted and modified – and some may even say perfected – it is generally guided by a desire to remain true to the original path or vision. The answers it gives to the modern world provide tangible signs of renewal in tradition.

However, as Isaiah da Trani stated, future generations are nothing more than dwarves on the shoulders of giants. The giants are the past generations who have built a solid system and it would make no sense to start over without taking into account previous insights, teachings, and experiences: in short, the culture and history that brought us here.

In many ways, Jews were unable to make major direct contributions to modern European society until they were allowed to come out of the ghettos at the end of the 18th century and start contributing to society as equals in some respects, though this of course did not bring an end to antisemitism, which unfortunately continues until today.

Long before the creation of the State of Israel, Hebrew experienced a real renaissance. A traditionally religious language, it first became a literary language with the *Haskalah* (18th century), then reached the status of a spoken language at the end of the 19th century before finally becoming the official language of the State of Israel with its creation in 1948. This change in the status of Hebrew meant a complete revival of the ancient tongue.

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 is an ultimate expression of renewal – a home for the Jewish People following 2000 years of exile – reshaping Jewish identity renewed with each wave of immigration. As Israel has thrived, so too have Jewish communities and cultures across the globe. The Israel - Diaspora relationship itself is constantly being reconfigured with new symbioses and interdependence between and among the Jewish People worldwide.

Another way to understand the concept of renewal is in the sense of "recovery" of the past, where there was a Jewish presence which, despite its disappearance, left a legacy, an inheritance, and a heritage without which we would not be able to understand the present. And we are fortunate to have material, physical testimonies, but which have had to be restored, rehabilitated, renovated and protected.

The traditional "She'hechyanu" blessing is said when we experience new things. It gives thanks for our ability to continue to live and to be renewed. The National Library of Israel will have the opportunity to say this blessing of renewal when we move to our new home towards the end of 2022.

This is the culmination of a long process of renewal, aimed at enabling the Library to fulfil its role as the leading institution of national memory for both the State of Israel and the Jewish People globally. The stunning new National Library campus in Jerusalem will contain and showcase diverse reflections of Jewish life and cultures, showing how they have changed and renewed across the generations.

The new home of the National Library will quite literally integrate the treasures of the past with cutting-edge facilities, resources, and technologies, allowing people near and far to take an active role in this exciting, constant process of renewal.