

CHAI CEREMONY by Rabbi Julie Hilton Danaan

Background:

The Chai Ceremony is an innovative ritual, centered around the Havdalah ceremony, celebrating the life passage at age 18. Chai means “life” and the young adults, having finished high school, are embarking on a new chapter in their lives. Chai equals eighteen in gematria (Hebrew numerology), and most young adults in our culture make this transition at about age 18. The Chai Ceremony is centered around Havdalah, the traditional ritual separating Shabbat from the days of the week. It is also a time of separation as our young adults go to college (even if they continue to live at home, the nature of the relationship will change.)

Families gather on a Saturday night shortly before the Chai participants leave for college or other destinations (The congregation or havurah might consider Shabbat Nahamu, the Sabbath of consolation after Tisha B’av, as a regular annual time for the Chai Ceremony. It could also be done around high school graduation but seems to have more impact just prior to leaving for college.)

If the gathering is small, it may be held in a home and the entire program may be done while participants are seated in a circle or other informal arrangement. For larger groups, after the opening, the sharing portion could be done in small circles or at tables that seat 2-3 families.

The Chai ceremony was conceived of and written by Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan (author of *The Jewish Parents Almanac*). It was first practiced in Congregation Beth Am, a Reconstructionist congregation in San Antonio.

Note from Reb Julie: I look forward to different communities finding new ways to enrich and enhance the Chai ceremony. For example, most North American Jewish youth head for college, perhaps preceded by a year in Israel, at age 18. At that age, most Israeli youth embark on their military service. This ceremony might have an even more powerful meaning in Israel, where the young people would be blessed for life and protection as they prepared to serve their country in the military (or volunteer service).

There are three parts to the ceremony:

- 1) Sharing & Blessing
- 2) Havdalah Service
- 3) Social-Simchah

A wordless refrain (for example, from Debbie Friedman’s havdalah song), may be sung between parts of the ceremony to create coherence and flow.

Part One: Sharing

Suggested outline

- A) The program may open with a song or niggun.
- B) The leader introduces the ceremony and explains its meaning.
- C) The leader invites each young adult to speak, whether with the whole group or in smaller sub-groups. It is recommended to provide a list of a few questions in advance, for the participant to talk about for a minute or two (e.g. Do you have a favorite Jewish memory growing up? What Jewish activities do you plan to pursue in college? What Jewish values will guide your course in studies and life? How will you affirm the value of Life?).
- D) Parent(s) of the chai participants (followed by other relatives and friends, if desired) are invited by the leader to share their thoughts, feelings, blessings or wishes for their child. Parents may wish to present their child with a family memento, Jewish gift or other keepsake. Some may wish to share a poem, prayer or song.
- E) The community may wish to present each Chai participant with a gift with a chai motif, such as a key chain with a chai (I found glass pocket stones with a chai symbol) that the participants can keep as a concrete reminder of their home community, their dedication to life-affirming values and their participation in the Chai ceremony.

Other options: The community may also wish to give practical gifts for use at college, such as a siddur, Jewish calendar, portable candlesticks, etc. Or the community might wish to give the Chai participants subscriptions to a Jewish periodical or send them Jewish care kits or cards while at college, as well as planning a homecoming event during a vacation period.

- F) The leader invites everyone to rise, join hands or link arms, and say or sing a blessing together. The family members may be invited to contribute spontaneous words of blessing to the entire group at this point. The priestly blessing in Hebrew and English may be used to conclude the blessing.

Options: This ceremony requires little prior preparation. If a more formal program is desired, the chai participants and/or the families could have a period of preparation, such as Torah study, a tzedakah project, gift to the community, or preparing a presentation of Jewish arts.

Part Two: Havdalah

A traditional Havdalah ceremony is held, led by the Chai participants. Special readings are included to highlight the themes of this life cycle event. They can be read by individual readers or by the group.

The Wine:

Wine symbolizes joy. At this time of celebration, our cup of joy runs over. It is a Sephardic custom to smile or even to laugh joyfully as we look into the kiddush cup, anticipating a delightful week ahead. As we say the prayer over the wine tonight, let our smiles and laughter be not only for the week ahead, but for the upcoming years of growth and learning. To Life – L'Chayyim!

Option: Based on the old tradition, put a drop of wine on the eyebrows-for wisdom and on the pockets for prosperity. You'll need both for college!

The Spices:

Tradition tells us that the spices at havdalah console us as our "Sabbath soul" departs. It is also said that the sense of smell is one that is most closely linked to memories. As we smell the havdalah spices, may their fragrant scent recall our many memories of growing up. May we take these special memories with us as we go on to the next phase of our lives. May the sweet scents of memory console us as we face the tender partings that are part of growing up.

Option: Participants bring a scent that reminds them of home, or of Jewish experiences.

The Candles:

The havdalah flame is made of two intertwined wicks. They blend together to form a bright flame, yet each one stands independently of the other. So, too, our lives are interdependent. We weave together and share the warmth of love and friendship, but we must also grow and become independent. As Shabbat departs, the glow of the havdalah flame reminds us of the productive work ahead. May this candle light our way as we go on to a new phase of life, and may God establish the work of our hands.

Option: In a larger setting, provide havdalah candles for each table or small group.

Responsive Prayer, prior to Hamavdil:

Chai Participants: Havdalah means separation. It is the ceremony separating the Sabbath day from the week ahead.

Parents and relatives: Tonight's havdalah has a special meaning. It is time to acknowledge a separation in our lives as our young adults grow up.

We celebrate Chai, eighteen years that mark the fulfillment of one phase of life and the beginning of another.

It is a time of releasing and letting go.

It is a time of growing up and experiencing the new.

It is a time to remember that life is a dance of comings and goings, like the light and shadows formed by the havdalah candle.

Just as Shabbat will return next week, we will return many times to our families. But each time, we will be different. All of us will grow and change.

All: Let us bless the letting go and the letting grow. Let us bless the new phase in our lives upon which we now embark. Amen.

Prior to Eliyahu HaNavi:

Even as we bid the Sabbath farewell, may its essence infuse our week and inspire us to work for a messianic time when all may enjoy the blessings of life. According to tradition, Elijah the Prophet will herald this world-that-is-coming. We express our hope for the future as we sing together:

Eliyahu HaNavi – Shavua Tov

Part Three: Social/Simchah

After the “Shavua Tov” song, all break for “Melaveh Malkah,” post-Sabbath refreshments and socializing. Be sure to take pictures!

To Life—L’Chayyim!