

Adventures In Decluttering

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Rabbi Barry Marks

For two and a half months this past summer, I had an adventure in de-cluttering. After Nancy and I decided that we would, following our upcoming wedding, embark on our life together in a residence that was new to both of us and that my house would be the first to go on the market, I spent some frantic weeks trying to make the house suitable for showing to prospective buyers. I felt like a general contractor dealing with numerous subcontractors. For ten days a large dumpster sat in my driveway, which I managed to fill to the very top. Then there were the five to ten plastic bags of trash I was leaving for the garbage collectors each week in addition to the regular bin. My son and stepchildren were gently asked to claim their belongings that were stored in the basement and closets, and they rented mini-warehouse units to accommodate the items they took. I consigned some furniture to an auction, gave some away through Freecycle, sold items to Prairie Archives and Recycled Records, had Affordable Shred destroy ten boxes of papers on site, and donated to rummage sales, thrift shops, Lincoln Library and WUIS. The basement was the worst challenge, with numerous boxes that hadn't been opened during the entire fifteen years I lived in the house. Going up and down the steps, however was good exercise!

Thankfully, I had some help. The magnitude of what needed to be done still astonishes me. In the end, however, I was able to walk around in my basement without bumping into stacks of boxes piled up on pallets. I should have taken "Before" and "After" pictures. More significantly, however, this was a very emotional process. I had been through a similar experience when my mother passed away in 1981 and her home in Baltimore was being sold and again in 1996, when I moved to my present home. Among the cousins on my mother's side of the family, I am the unofficial historian. Every time an aunt or uncle passed away, more and more family pictures and documents were sent to me, because I would appreciate them and would know how they fit into our family history. Unfortunately there were many photos, particularly those from the Old Country, whose subjects I could not identify. Ultimately I decided to part with many of the pictures

and donated them to YIVO, the institute in New York devoted to the study of Yiddish language and East European Jewish history.

Some of what I sorted through, discarded, gave away, or decided to keep was mine, accumulated over the course of a lifetime, but much of it consisted of items that had belonged to beloved family members, now departed. I pray that I will be forgiven for it, but there were definitely moments when I was irked at them. Why did they accumulate all of this? What were they saving it for? How much stuff do you really need to live comfortably? I realized, of course, that they were doing what I too had been doing, holding on to loved ones whom they missed by holding on to their belongings. And yes, I did feel guilty (a) for being annoyed and (b) for throwing things away that linked me to the deceased and that had had meaning to them. I recall mentioning some of these feelings to a member of the congregation and being told, quite correctly, that I shouldn't feel guilty because the departed live on, not in their belongings, but in our hearts. This made sense to me, but often reason is overridden by emotion. Guilt and annoyance aside, many of the items evoked memories for me— happy ones and sad ones alike – and were a poignant reminder of how fleeting life is.

I know that I am not unique. Many of you have had to de-clutter a house or apartment or go through the belongings of a deceased parent. And there is a whole industry that has grown up around organizing and de-cluttering – books and websites devoted to the subject and professionals, who will come to your house and assist you in the process. In the extreme, we have the phenomenon of “hoarding”, a pathological condition that is the subject of a popular TV show, which, thankfully, doesn't apply to me or to any one I know or have ever known.

One reason why de-cluttering was so emotional for me is that it involved a recognition of my mortality. It's not being morbid to accept that I am much closer to the end of my journey than to its beginning. I feel a responsibility not to leave a huge and disorganized accumulation of “stuff” for my son to sort through. I have on my shelves many books that I've purchased that I eventually intend to read, perhaps more than I will be able to peruse in my lifetime. And since my son will be the ultimate recipient of items pertaining to our family history and of memorabilia from his and my past, why not have him look through things now, tell me what is meaningful to him, and take those items for

himself? Why not use the occasion to share with him and my grandchildren reminiscences, memories and histories evoked by the photos and heirlooms rather than letting them sit neglected in a box in a basement or attic?

There are several most sensible maxims used by professional de-clutterers when they advise their clients. I was familiar with them but was never motivated to act on any of them until I had to. “If you haven’t used an item in six months, you should either sell it, toss it, or give it away” is one. More relevant to me is the recognition that one is not honoring the departed by keeping their belongings around in storage. Use them or display them where they can be seen or appreciated or give them to someone who will.

So what does all this have to do with Yom Kippur? There are, I believe, several aspects of my de-cluttering experience that are relevant to the meaning and message of this solemn day. I spoke of the recognition of mortality that came from looking through the belongings of the deceased and from knowing that some day much of this would belong to my heirs, to cherish or to discard as they saw fit. The visiting of graves at this time of year, the inclusion of Yizkor within the day’s worship, and the tenor of many of the prayers (“who shall live and who shall die”) are intended to lead us to that same awareness. If we truly enter into the spirit of the day, we are moved to set our priorities accordingly and attach ourselves to values and pursuits that have enduring significance. Secondly, my concern this past summer was with sorting through material objects and deciding which ones I really wanted or needed. Too many material things seemed almost a distraction and a hindrance. Yom Kippur might serve as a useful corrective: it teaches us that we have a spiritual nature as well as a material one that needs to be nurtured and cultivated. Observing Yom Kippur involves devoting oneself totally to the spiritual dimension of our existence for an entire day through fasting and turning away from the needs of the body. On Yom Kippur we become, according to the rabbis, like the angels.

Most important, however, is the notion of letting go. I was letting go of things, I no longer wanted or needed, but Yom Kippur asks more of us, something that is perhaps infinitely more difficult, that we let go of those feelings and emotions, those habits of heart and mind that are just as much a hindrance and obstacle to an orderly and fulfilled life as a cluttered basement or a disorganized and overflowing closet. I have to confess that part of the inspiration for the thoughts I’m sharing with you came not from Scripture

or Midrash but from a magazine article (I can't recall if it was Parade or Good Housekeeping or some similar publication), something along the lines of "50 things you can do to de-clutter your home and your life." Along with such advice as discarding magazines that are more than six months old (you'll never get around to reading them, and they become a fire hazard) and throwing away single unmatched socks ((their mates are lost, never to return), the article also counseled the reader to get rid of leftover grudges, of negative feelings deriving from quarrels whose original cause was long ago forgotten, and of unhelpful notions that interfere with living life to the full- for example, the idea that I need to be perfect in every endeavor I undertake.

So it is appropriate to ask ourselves what mental and emotional baggage is cluttering up our lives, crowding us out of the emotional and spiritual space we require in order to make the most of this wonderful opportunity we call life. We have only so much time allotted to us to experience the world God created, to be awed by its beauty and its wonders, to bask in the warmth of love and family, friendship and community, to expand our minds with knowledge, and to touch the lives of others with kindness. How easy it is to fill up a basement or closet with "stuff" and how easy to clutter up mind and spirit with feelings and attitudes that preclude us from appreciating and taking advantage of these opportunities!

Let me mention a few. I've alluded in my Rosh Hashanah sermons to guilt and to perfectionism. The former, particularly when its focus is something which we can no longer rectify or make amends for other than by not repeating the act or behavior in question, leaves us feeling that we don't deserve happiness or fulfillment, which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The latter attitude discourages us from attempting any new endeavor or trying to master new skills or knowledge. We know we'll make mistakes at first and that, even after prolonged effort, we will be less than perfect, so we refrain from even trying anything new or different.

Competitiveness and the making of comparisons are habits we adopt early on in life. We find ourselves taking note of who is prettier, who is smarter, who is more gifted at sports, and who is more popular. Competition has its place when we are being interviewed for a job, when we are trying to market a product, when we're playing sports, or when we're sitting around a game table. But there are numerous situations where

competition and comparisons are totally inappropriate. Religion and family relationships are two areas that come readily to mind. Which faith tradition is truer? Which one is a more certain path to God's favor? And which individual in the congregation is more pious, more worthy of God's blessing? All of these questions, to my mind, are unproductive and conducive to disharmony, conflict and resentment. Better to ask: am I serving God as faithfully as I am able? Am I being true to the highest ethical ideals that my faith teaches? Similarly, within the family. We know that parents do show favoritism among their children and that children compete for parents' affection and approval. What Jew who hears the stories of Genesis read in the synagogue year after year could fail to know that? Realistically, competition and favoritism within the family have been around since time immemorial and will not disappear any time soon. But how much more beneficial it would be if such attitudes were less overt and were tempered by the recognition that each person is an individual with unique gifts and talents as well as specific limitations! Rather than seeking to determine who is most loved or which child is the most devoted, how much better it would be, were we to strive to make each relationship within the family as loving and as nurturing as possible!

Comparing ourselves to others is a surefire recipe for unhappiness and frustration, a habit that needs to be discarded like the material clutter that no longer serves any discernible purpose or need. There will always be someone richer, smarter, more talented, or more fortunate. Do the best of which you're capable and, if you must make comparisons, do so by setting realistic expectations for yourself and recording your own progress toward those goals. Have I done better today than I did yesterday? Discard as well what is likely a universal temptation, to weave fantasies of what might have been had I only done x instead of y. It's a harmless enough pastime, if indulged infrequently, but it can potentially become a distraction that interferes with our ability to make the most of our situation in the here and now.

Yom Kippur beckons us to let go. Let go of perfectionism, let go of "might have beens", let go of unhelpful comparisons and of the zero-sum way of thinking that tells me I can only win if you lose. Above all, let go of guilt by atoning for transgressions in the manner prescribed by our tradition for these Days of Awe. Strive for reconciliation with

others by letting go of long festering grudges and resentments that wind up hurting us more than they harm their intended target.

Sin has been defined as a missing of the mark, a failure to live up to our potential and, alternatively, as that which alienates us from God and from our fellow persons. This sacred day affords us the opportunity to overcome our distance from God, from fellow person, and from the better selves we are all capable of becoming. May we take hold of that opportunity, and may we be blessed with a happy and fulfilling New Year.