

YK 5770 The Stuff of Memories  
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*Gmar hatimah tovah* – may you be sealed for a good year.

In a few minutes, we will recite Yizkor. Well, maybe more than just a few.

This custom which dates from the time of the Crusades when so many suddenly had to be remembered awakens a flood of memories. It has become customary to recite a number of verses from the book of Psalms to set the mood.

After our Makhaylah sings *Enosh* from Psalm 103 describing how humans are like the grass in the field, our *shaliah tzibbur* – our prayer leader, David Srebnick, will chant from the 144<sup>th</sup> Psalm:

*“Adonai, ma adam v'teida'eihu; ben-enosh va'tehashveihu. Adam l'hevel damah, yamav k'tzel oveir. O' Adonai, what is a person that You should care about him, a mortal, that You should think of her. A human being is like a breath; his days like a passing shadow.”*

These words give us pause – they remind us of our mortality. We are not permanent; we are not like a rock, like the ocean or like God. We are temporary. We are transient when compared to God – who is so powerful and beyond description that Adonai eludes time and space.

*Ma Adam* – what is man? What is a human being? Or perhaps another translation: What is the sum of a human life? What do our lives amount to? What are we?

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This summer, Sharon and I were in New York and we wanted to go to MOMA – the Museum of Modern Art; well, all right, it is Yom Kippur, so let's be honest, Sharon wanted to go. I was a good sport about it - sort of.

You know what it's like to visit MOMA – Cezanne's famous *Still Life with Fruit Dish*, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, Picasso's *Woman's Head*, Chagall's *Over Vitebsk* and Monet's *Water Lilies*.

The strange thing was we skipped the first thing we saw in the museum. When we walked in, there was the large display of ... stuff. Rows of pairs of shoes, clothes, broken down small appliances, empty toothpaste tubes, bowls, and empty plastic bottles – just all kinds of junk lined up in neat rows and stacks. While many people were lined up to look at it, it did not seem to make any sense to us. It seemed too modern, too abstract for us so we skipped it for the wonderful newly redone sculpture garden.

But this display still called out to us, haunted us – we could see it from above as we moved through the museum to the higher floors; we kept seeing it again and again – it looked like a small organized village pulled out of the trash. As fortune had it, we found ourselves with a few minutes before the museum closed so we quickly walked through it. There it was – all the things in someone’s life. The pairs of shoes took me back to the concentration camps I have seen several times in Poland; those reminding us of death of millions; these of one life. The quantity and diversity of objects was dizzying and exciting; here’s an old radio, there a suitcase and here’s a cardboard box.

The exhibit was called *Waste Not* (here is a link to it: [http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/07/14/arts/20090714\\_SONG\\_SLIDESHOW\\_in\\_dex.html](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/07/14/arts/20090714_SONG_SLIDESHOW_in_dex.html)) by the Beijing-based artist Song Dong who has been at the forefront of conceptual art in China since the 1990s. Song grew up in a tight-knit, traditional community, and his work often examines the everyday realities and issues of his neighborhood.

As the Museum explains: “*Waste Not* features all the worldly goods belonging to the artist's mother, Zhao Xiangyuan (1938–2009) who died this year. It even has the wood frame of her house! Song's mother was typical of the generation of Chinese who lived through the hardships of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s abiding by the dictum *wu jin qi yong* (*waste not*). This guiding tenet deemed that resources be squeezed for all their value and nothing is wasted. For the subsequent generation—Song Dong and his sister, Song Hui, among them—the result was a childhood surrounded by partially used bars of soap, loose buttons, assorted buckets, and scraps of fabric, stockpiled and preserved as protection against future hardship, even in the face of improving economic conditions.”

It was fascinating to see this, to realize that much of the world’s population lives this way or worse. This may have been how my great-grandparents lived in Boston’s West End. When faced with the fear of losing everything at times like the Great Depression, folks want to hang onto everything – even a button.

Now these things cut both ways, in times when there is little, saving things can be helpful. My grandmother had a button jar and this was actually fairly useful. Probably some of us still have one or something similar. But this can cut both ways – in times when we have more, saving every scrap can be a burden.

There are times that I felt the same way growing up – I would work hard to save most things – both since I come from a family of “keepers” and because there were times when I felt I was lacking given what my classmates had. I was always proud of storing little knickknacks or of cutting off and mailing in cereal box-tops for a new Matchbox car.

In the modern world that is so filled with things, we are both attracted to stuff and can also become disgusted by all of it. It was fascinating to see all the pairs of shoes owned by even a poor Chinese woman, but also absurd that we all have so much.

There was a time not too long ago when people survived with much less. In Little House on the Prairie, we find the girls had one dress for the week and one for their Sabbath. In Jewish literature we find the same thing: Yitzhak Damiel's *Simlat hashabbat shel hanale* – one dress for the week and one for Shabbat. This phenomenon dates back to ancient times as our Torah teaches: “If you take your neighbor’s garment in pledge, you must return it to him before the sun sets; it is his only clothing, the sole covering for his skin. In what else shall he sleep?” (Exodus 22:25-26)

We are blessed to have clothing, but how much do we need? How many shirts, pants, dresses or suits should we have?

The exhibit reminded me of a number of critical Jewish values. The first was the title: *Waste Not* – which is the same as the rabbinic notion rooted in the Torah called: *Bal Tashhit*. This principle teaches us not to waste – the rabbis use the example of a flame; if you can make it burn in a way that uses more oil, it is forbidden to do so because of *Bal Tashhit* – you are wasting. We are not allowed to waste energy, food or simply destroy things. In all ancient cultures, garbage was the source of new things – recycling happened naturally when people and animals sorted through trash to salvage, use and eat what they could.

Today, in our world here in America, we have so much stuff, perhaps too much - we all have to do a better job of recycling it and keeping it from leaving a permanent footprint behind. I am proud of our communal efforts installing CFL light bulbs in our homes and recycling in the shul. But it is clear that all of us personally and communally will have to do more from purchasing more fuel efficient cars to avoiding bottled water – of course today, on Yom Kippur, we don't need any water!

Last night, we announced several new social action projects including *Hekhsher Tzedek* which will help us become more environmentally aware in our shul and help us buy products that are produced in accordance with Jewish values about the environment, workers rights and the like. Specifically, I would like us to move away from plastic plates at our Kiddush luncheons and at private celebrations; hopefully, we will be able to achieve this over this year.

We should also try to accumulate less. The truth is we don't need it all. I see it in my own home – we have too many toys, which lead to more boxes to store them and an endless striving to put them all away regularly. While we give away many toys and clothes, it seems like it would be better to have less to begin with.

Now, that is not to say that things are bad – I am not preaching a monastic lifestyle, but moderation. There is a spirituality of things – all things, like all life, contain God since the Holy One is everywhere. And we can infuse them with *kedushah*, with sanctity by how we treat them. The Torah is a good example, the parchment and the ink are not holy, but when a *sofer*, a scribe writes the timeless words of our Torah and God's sacred name on them, we treat them differently. Of course, on Shabbat we are encouraged to leave behind the world of objects, enjoying a more spiritual existence.

But, there can be an approach even to things that appreciates the effort it takes to produce them and how they help us – that was a feeling the *Waste Not* exhibit left me with – even simple objects help us in our lives.

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*Adonai, Mah Adam* – what is man? What is the sum of a person? Is it all their things? Is that all we are? Stuff?

Let me take you back to the exhibit – Song Dong’s mother – Zhao Xiang Yuan was not defined by all that stuff – she collected it to protect her and her family. Her father had been wealthy, but was accused of being a spy; his friends in the Communist party did not defend him. He went to jail and the family suffered. Shortages in China led people to this extreme frugality of saving everything – even junk and rubbish. Now that China has more, some people continue this practice of saving everything.

This reminds me of the need we have for more and more things and stuff. This yearning that never seems satisfied has been in the focus over the last year as we witnessed the most destructive side of this behavior. The need for more things and more money led Bernard Madoff to run the largest Ponzi scheme in history stealing billions of dollars from people around the world. Many of his victims were Jews in our own community and all over including Elie Weisel who lost his life savings, as well as, many Jewish non-for-profits including schools like my high school and organizations like Hadassah. Ultimately, it is a perversion of our values and we should speak out against the aspects of our culture that call for over-spending. As Madoff’s stuff is being sold – his homes, his possessions – we can think of his stealing money from so many– is that what life is all about?

We should all think about our own role in encouraging an ethos of materialism and selfishness that led to these acts.

Three of the Ten Commandments are relevant here. Number eight – don’t steal.

Commandment number two: *Lo yehiyeh lekha Elohim aheirim al panai* – You shall no other gods before me. (Ex. 20:3). I like to ask our B’nei Mitzvah students what they think this means. They tell me: no idolatry. And then I ask them what are the idols in our modern world? Often, they think of celebrities that people worship – great answer. Sometimes, we continue the conversation and consider what they see a lot of commercials for. They reply cars, things. Any time we are making the pursuit of money or things are primary focus over the Torah’s values of God, eternity, morality, we are committed an idolatrous act.

The other commandment is the tenth. *Lo tahmod* – do not covet your neighbor’s house ... or anything that is your neighbor’s. Be happy with who you are what you have – lest you spend your life trying in vain to fill it with things, empty things.

Given these examples of extreme greed in our world and the economic downturn and the high unemployment we have had, we have the opportunity for soul-searching, for re-prioritizing. I cannot tell how many people came into my office, especially during the winter to tell me that had been laid off or lost their jobs. These conversations often became opportunities to think about new directions or focus on other areas of life.

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*Adonai, ma adam* – what is the sum of a person?

Returning to the exhibit, to the rows of stuff. Song Dong wrote that this exhibit was created in response to his father's sudden death of heart attack in 2002. By taking all these items – sorting them, packing them and then setting them up, “the past was unpacked and given new life.”

Not only were these items – many of them useless and mundane – now useful, but the process of putting of them together for the exhibit was most healing. His mother did much of the work with him helping her as an assistant. This process became a healing one for her and it gave her a ritual to remember her beloved husband, lifting her out of a depressed state. Art became a vehicle to help her through her pain. The collaboration and partnership between mother and son served to lift her from her grief and, at the same time, strengthened their relationship.

High on the wall, in Chinese characters, was a message to Song Dong's father: “Dad, don't worry, mum and we are fine.” His mother died this year so now the exhibit lives on as a memorial to her as well.

Making the exhibit and setting it up in different museums became a ritual, a form of Yizkor – like lighting the Yizkor candle on *yartzeits* and before holidays. A simple act that helps us remember and reflect.

These objects are not important in themselves, but they, like a *yartzeit* candle, serve as reminder of the past, brining memories of our loved ones back to us.

Merle Feld, a contemporary Jewish author and poet has written movingly about the process of cleaning out her parents' papers after their deaths in her poem: In the Attic

I am spending this summer in my attic,  
on a dig of sorts, a dig in my attic.  
The layers go back to the beginning  
of this century when my parents were born.  
For the last few days I have lingered  
in one of the boxes I brought back up  
North after my father died.

I read every paper--the Valentine he sent

to her in 1931, the one she sent to him in 1932; waiting to get married, waiting, waiting, patience turning to anguish. I with 20/20 hindsight know they will not marry till 1935 when there is finally enough money for their own apartment.

All jumbled together I find the polite requests (1932, 1934, 1936) he wrote to law professors for references and then I find his check register from 1989, a shaky hand betraying what we have come to know as “silent strokes.” I am surprised, in this box, to find a card announcing the birth of Merle Lizbeth, 6 pounds 7 ounces. I find the menu from my wedding dinner, detailing “roast capon” and even “salted almonds.”

Where I am going there is no attic.  
I work to condense my father to a still  
smaller box all the while trying  
not to dishonor him.

Song Dong and Merle Feld teach us the lesson of memories. These objects they present and describe take us on a journey to the past. Whether it's old letter in the attic or a pile of soapboxes, what's important in life is not the stuff, but the people and how they touched our lives.

The *Waste Not* exhibit becomes a journey into memory and healing and how the generations come together. Rabbi Judah the Prince taught: *Al tistakal bakankan, elah vamah sheyesh bo* – don't look at the container, but rather at what is inside. While he meant this teaching to refer to people – don't look at their outside, but at their souls – it can be understood more literally, applying to things as well. What makes a thing special is how it connects us with others.

Sitting at my grandparents' dining room table and chairs which now occupy my dining room on Friday nights for Shabbat dinner takes me back to their home in Brookline. I remember Shabbat dinners with them – how they would ask me what I was learning in school, how they would love to hear of an adventure of mine on the sports field. I can almost smell their house on Winchester Street and see myself walking with my Saba to KI for shul on Shabbat morning. Just seeing the dining room table takes me back there.

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*Adonai, ma adam* – what is the sum of a person? Why would You should think of us?

*Waste Not* paradoxically reminds us that real meaning is not found in things, but in people and memories of people.

It is through our actions, our behaviors that we can transcend the physical world and bring sparks of holiness into the world, becoming closer to the divine. None of that depends on stuff, on things. It depends on the stuff of memories and how we act on them.

Perhaps in moments of pain and loss we feel God's absence, but we are reminded that through our memories, we can feel God's presence. It is through memory, through deep awareness of our lives and what is truly meaningful that we transcend the mundaneness of our lives, approaching the divine realms.

For in the end, Song Dong's lesson is not about the piles of things, but about the memories they evoke. A piece of furniture or a used toothpaste tube does not constitute the sum of our lives. Our lives are suffused with memories of the past. Even as we live the moment that will become future memories, when we close our eyes and feel the presence and touch of those whom we have loved who walk the earth no more, that is a moment filled with God.

*Adonai, ma adam* – what is the sum of a person? The memories that they leave us with – may they all bring us blessing. And let us say: Amen.