

Big Read: Hare with Amber Eyes
Rosh Hashanah, Day 2, 5784
September 17, 2023

Edmund de Waal's extraordinary and unique memoir, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, is a story about what remains when all is lost. I am going to tell you the story in some detail because part of the point of this story is that the details matter. De Waal, a prominent ceramicist in England, inherits a collection of 264 netsuke from his beloved great-uncle Iggy. The netsuke are tiny objects, smaller than the size of a walnut, carved in ivory or wood, at one time worn on the obis (sashes) of wealthy Japanese men. There is a tiger, tail twitching, ready to pounce, two wrestlers locked in combat, a couple making love, a hare with amber eyes, staring doe-eyed. The netsuke obligate de Waal in some indefinite yet compelling way to seek out their story. He writes, "I want to know what the relationship has been between the wooden object that I am rolling between my fingers — hard and tricky and Japanese — and where it has been. I want to be able to reach to the handle of

the door and turn it and feel it open. I want to walk into each room where this object has lived, to feel the volume of the space, to know what pictures were on the walls, how the light fell from the windows. And I want to know whose hands it has been in, and what they felt about it and thought about it... I want to know what it has witnessed.”

Improbably, de Waal puts his ceramics career on hold for three years while he travels to Paris, Vienna, Odessa, and Tokyo, to unearth his family and the netsuke’s story. At the outset of his journey, his father hands him a thin folder of letters and photos. It isn’t much to go on. Over the course of his journey, he will visit his family’s homes and businesses, comb archives, and museums, and unearth a veritable treasure trove.

DeWaal’s first stop is Paris, where his cousin Charles Ephrussi lived; it was he who originally acquired the netsuke from Japan in the 1870’s. Charles’ grandfather, Charles Joachim Ephrussi, was

a wealthy grain merchant in Odessa — Rothschild-style, he disbursed his sons to Paris and Vienna where each was to establish branches of the family home and business.

Charles, a young, wealthy, debonair bachelor, occupied the family home with his brothers, the elegant Hotel Ephrussi on the Rue Monceau. His neighbors included Rothschilds, Camondos and other nouveau riche Jews, each carving out a niche in Parisian society.

Charles was a leading figure in the Parisian art scene. He wrote about art and edited the influential Gazette de Beaux-Arts, but he was also a prominent collector. He was among the early collectors and champions of Impressionist art — he collected Pissarros, Manets, Degas, Sisleys, Renoirs, Morisots, Cassats — all of whom were among his personal friends. If you know Renoir's large painting, Luncheon of the Boating Party, which hangs in the Phillips Collection in Washington, he's in it — the tall

overdressed man in the dark suit and top hat in the back. He was also a friend of Proust's, and Charles Swann, the main character in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, is based at least partially, if not largely, on him.

Japonisme — love of all things Japanese— was all the rage in France at that time, particularly among the Impressionists with their attention to daily life as lived in the moment. At some point in the 1870s, Charles purchased the netsuke, all 264 of them. He placed them on green velvet in a dark vitrine with a mirrored back and they lived among his carefully curated collection of art and beautiful things. Two or three decades later, in 1899, as antisemitism in the form of the Dreyfus Affair, wracks Paris, his cousin Viktor gets married to the Baroness Emmy Schey in Vienna. Charles, apparently not as enamored with the netsuke as our author, sends his cousin the netsuke and the vitrine as a wedding gift.

We follow the netsuke to their new home on the Ringstrasse in Vienna, the home of Emmy and Viktor Ephrussi, de Waal's great-grandparents. The Palais Ephrussi in Vienna was far grander than its Parisian counterpart, occupying a full city block on the Ringstrasse with its Corinthian pilasters, Doric columns and endless statuettes of young Greek maidens supporting the roof. Everything is gold and marble, the initials JE for Joachim Ephrussi set in marble in the entrance hall, golden dinner service with the ears of corn and the trademark double E. The Palais Ephrussi joined the homes of other wealthy Jewish families in their equally ornate homes along the Ringstrasse, arrived and confident. Emmy and Viktor seem unsure about the gift of the netsuke, small and odd, in this house of opulent grandeur, and after some debate, the netsuke find a home in Emmy's dressing room. In Vienna, Emmy's children — Elizabeth, the eldest, is our author's grandmother — take out the netsuke and play with them, a favorite past-time, while their mother dresses, which she does often, and at length. Emmy, it turns out, is also a gifted

storyteller, amusing the children with stories she invents about the netsuke.

The pace of the writing is languorous — Januarys on the Riviera, Aprils in Paris, Augusts with the Parisian cousins at the Chalet Ephrussi in Switzerland, autumn in the family's mountain home in Czechoslovakia, endless rounds of balls and tea. Viennese antisemitism is more blatant and violent than Parisian, but it seems hardly to disturb the family's placid life until 1938. You know what is coming but it is still shocking when you read it, like a bolt of lightning. The book's pace quickens. There is to be a popular vote on whether Austria should unite with Germany or remain independent. Jews support independence. On the afternoon of March 11, Emmy and Viktor sit in their library listening to the huge English radio. The maid serves tea — for Viktor, in a glass with a porcelain dish with lemon and sugar, for Emmy, British tea along with her little blue box of pills. At 8pm the Chancellor speaks; Hitler has given him an ultimatum —

appoint a Nazi-sympathizer as Chancellor or face invasion. Hitler doesn't wait for an answer — Nazi troops invade; the Chancellor resigns.

By 10pm crowds surge in the streets. There are cries of Death to the Jews! That very night a mob swarms through the Palais Ephrussi, opening drawers, ransacking closets, taking what they can. They handle the ornate and beautiful things roughly, decrying the Jews for what they have stolen from them, how they have despoiled Austria. Viktor's desk, a wedding present from his cousins in Paris, is hurled out the window. By morning Jewish neighbors are on their knees scrubbing the sidewalk while young SS oversee their work. Jews and other resisters are picked up off the streets and and thousands are sent to Dachau. Some escape across the border.

The Gestapo arrive a few days later to take whatever the mob left behind — priceless works of art, family heirlooms, a huge library

of precious books, clothing, china — they decide what will be shown to the Fuhrer for his person collection, what will go to museums, what will be auctioned off. The Gestapo mock the vulgarity of the Jews' aesthetic, even as they greedily take it all. The Palais Ephrussi becomes Nazi headquarters— Emmy and Viktor are confined to two small rooms in the back. The Nazis outlaw Jews from owning businesses. Viktor is forced to sell the storied Ephrussi Bank to his non-Jewish business partner of 28 years for a song. After the war, his partner defends his actions — it was a fair price, the family, after all, needed the money to escape.

Viktor and Emmy finally secure passage from Vienna and travel to their country home in Czechoslovakia. In the record of their marriage deWaal finds in the Jewish archive in Vienna, their names are crossed out, replaced with the names Israel and Sarah. He looks and sees that each Jewish name on the registry

was similarly altered. DeWaal realizes — his great-grandparents were not simply erased — they were written over. He weeps.

By October Emmy dies of suicide. Many other Jews also take their lives and, of course, many Ephrussi relatives meet the fate of the rest of European Jews.

And what of the netsuke? Elizabeth, Emmy and Viktor's eldest daughter, de Waal's grandmother, married to a Dutch Reformed banker and living in London, returns to Vienna after the war to see what she can salvage of the family fortune. She reconnects with Anna, the family's maid, who, during the Nazi occupation of the home, managed to salvage the netsuke by hiding them in her apron pocket, a few at a time, concealing them under her mattress until, eventually, she had squirreled them all away. In December 1945 Anna hands Elizabeth a suitcase with 264 netsuke. Elizabeth brings it to London and gives it to her brother, Iggy, who is on his way to Japan. The netsuke will return home.

DeWaal, as we know, inherits the netsuke from his beloved great uncle.

DeWaal's Dutch Reformed grandfather converts to Mennonite. Together with his Jewish wife they raise their family, living under much more humble circumstances, as Anglicans. Their son, DeWaal's father, becomes an Anglican minister. In the end, deWaal has a single nominally Jewish maternal grandmother and, 264 netsuke, which he lovingly places in a glass vitrine for his children, a new generation, to play with.

This is a story of exile, of loss, of family, and of what remains. Although it is also a story of Jewish assimilation, extermination, erasure, and intermarriage, deWaal is not writing to reclaim his Jewish past — the book doesn't end with him in shul, weeping at the sound of Kol Nidre.

We might conclude that the story is that of an illustrious family — mansions, diamonds, artwork — of whom all that is left in the end is a suitcase of netsuke, each no larger than a walnut. And while that is true, deWaal is not writing tragedy, although Emmy and Viktor's story, in particular, is tragic. Nor is it a book of about denial and regret — the family could have left Vienna sooner — others did — there were plenty of portents — their wealth and status fed their denial. All true, but again not the central point. DeWaal seems to accept denial as part and parcel of the human condition. For him, the netsuke are keys that open a portal to his rich heritage, which he explores with tenderness and honesty. He wants to understand how the choices people make and the ways they respond to the vicissitudes of history beyond their control, generate the present.

Three themes stand out for me. First, the netsuke, like the art of the Impressionists who collected them, are all about the present moment. Each one — a tiger ready to pounce, a sleeping

servant, a child at play, a couple making love, a watchful hare — freezes a moment in time. When de Waal sets out to discover his family, he says he doesn't want to get into the "sepia saga business," to write a story of dynasties and mansions and wealth plundered or squandered. He wants to write about the feel of the door handle as it was opened, the angle of the light in the room. He wants to capture the living moments of his family members across almost a century — to know what Charles felt when he moved to Paris, when he acquired his first Renoir or Degas; what Emmy felt as she dressed for dinner, how the netsuke felt in their hands as they did in his his, how a particular crack was formed or when a particular piece of dust lodged in a crevice. He is not saying that those moments are worthless because they didn't last, because the collections, the wealth, the people are gone. He is saying that those moments are all we have. Those moments comprise a life — any life.

In unetaneh tokef we say that our lives are like withered grass, a passing shadow, a flower that blooms in the day and is gone by night. Our lives fly quickly by — great joy, great sorrow, great pain — here and quickly gone. But neither the psalmist nor deWaal concludes that such evanescence makes life worthless. The psalmist writes, “Teach us to number our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom.” I think that means something like, teach us to cherish each day, teach us to sink fully into the moment, teach us to put our attention on that which matters.

In the end, there are only moments. That isn’t tragic, it’s just life. Can we, as deWaal succeeds in doing, string them together to form a beautiful strand of pearls, so that we can look back, rub each one between our fingers, and remember the depth of that moment, the joy, the sorrow, all strung together in a life that is uniquely ours. To acquire that heart of wisdom, we will need to be more attentive to the moment and less attentive to our endless to-do lists and persistent electronic interruptions. We are

called to inhabit the moment fully, in pain or in joy, because, it is the only place we truly live.

When DeWaal begins his tale, he is a successful ceramicist, married with three young children, living in a suburb of London, presumably content. He has some inkling of his large and illustrious family, he knows the bare outline of their story, but he is, at the outset of the book, like so many people today, essentially rootless. Following the netsuke like a detective, he uncovers his rich heritage. He sees aspects of himself in that story — the ways Charles writes about art, his great-grandmother's love of beauty, his grandmother's drive. Most of all he comes to understand himself differently — no longer an atomized individual — a ceramicist with three young children — he is deeply connected to a past that spans generations and continents. He is the most recent chapter in their story.

This is true for all of us, whether we know our stories or not. We are all products of generations of ancestors who made choices within the vagaries and unknowns of their particular moment in history. We are here because of all those accidents and choices. Our story is never just the story we are writing — in so many ways, they lived so that we could be here today, their choices, their sacrifices, their hopes and dreams — all created this moment, made our lives possible. We sit in a synagogue today built by ancestors who had their own dreams. The netsuke, tiny as they are, are keys — when deWaal puts them in the keyhole he opens the door to Narnia — a vast world of stories and people.

We are not alone. We are products of a vast history just as, God willing, we are also authoring a story that will be told generations from now. The question is does the first idea — that we live in the moment — contradict the second idea, that we are part of a story that began centuries ago. Seemingly it does, but in DeWaal's

writing, and, I think, in our own experience, not only are both things true but they are part of the same truth. The fullness of the moment is so much more than the moment. I sit in my backyard shaded by trees that have grown here for a more than a century. I am deeply connected to them and yet they were here long before me and hopefully will be here long after. This summer my beech trees are dying. We have already had to take down two. They are infected by a worm that hitched a ride from Japan and has spread rapidly through the Northeast. When I sit here, I sometimes think about my own grandmother, raised in Connecticut, just over an hour from here. Although she spent most of her life in New York City, she loved the country, its smells, its flowers, its quiet and she would have loved to sit here with me. Consciously or not, her experience is part of mine. I get my love of the outdoors from my father, her son. And she came to Connecticut because Baron Hirsch settled her grandparents here. They came from Grodno in Belarus. What did they think of this brave new world? I also sit here sometimes and remember

my backyard in Brooklyn, my own children playing there, bathing in the kiddie pool under the shade of its large maple tree. All of those memories infuse this moment. The moment is like the netsuke — the more you hold it in your hand, the more you feel its subtlety, its cracks, its folds — how it is, past and present all at once. Our connection to the past and to all that is, makes the moment rich — the older we get, I think, the more we sense those depths..

In the end, deWaal becomes angry at a woman who suggests that he should not have taken the netsuke from Japan, that he should have left them where they belong. “No,” he answers, “Objects have always been carried, sold, bartered, stolen, retrieved, and lost. People have always given gifts. It is how you tell their stories that matter...Stories and objects share something, a patina.” A patina, he says, both reveals the object’s essence but it also additive, the way a piece of oak furniture gains luster over the years.

What deWaal has left in the end is not just the netsuke but the story they have told him. He has carried the netsuke in his pocket, fingered them, imagined the hands that touched them before his, given those hands voice and body. He has also left his mark on the netsuke, rubbed them a little shinier, just as he has added his voice to their story. In the end, the netsuke are not nothing. They, like the story, are everything. The story lives.