

Yom Kippur Day

Ha Shalom 2016

What They Left and What They Kept

Let me begin by asking you a question: What is the most significant invention of this past century when it comes to travel?

Is it perhaps the jet? Allowing people to cross the oceans close to the speed of sound?

Is it the maybe the internet? Allowing people to book flights, hotels, and even restaurants in other countries?

In my opinion, the most important invention of travel in the past century is...the rolling suitcase...that's right, the most important innovation is that we were given the ability to not have to CARRY our stuff, instead being able to roll is down the concourse of airports and hotels...

Think about it, when we had to **carry** our suitcases, we were very conscious of its weight. We had to carefully pack or not pack certain things based on weight,

because, after all, we would have to carry those heavy objects...the hair dryer?

Nope leave that behind...too heavy...those nice boots that made your tush push out and made you look soooo good, those were out too, way to heavy...and the list goes on.

Those of us who enjoy backpacking are all too familiar with the concept. It only takes a few hours on the trail with a heavy pack to know that even ounces matter. My son and I are both mountaineering fans and a few years ago climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. At 19,000 ft. ounces mattered and we found ourselves the night before summit day even cutting on the handles of our toothbrushes to lessen the weight of our packs.

But all of that changed with the rolling suitcase. All of a sudden, weight is not so much an issues. Hair dryer? Sure, throw it in there, we'll just roll it? That hard cover book? No problem...indeed the rolling suitcase enabled us to travel foot loose and fancy free....We no longer had to choose what to bring and what leave behind....

This point was driven home to me even further in a fascinating book I recently read on the explorer Ernest Shackleton.

I am not sure how many of you are familiar with the Shackleton story but it is, perhaps, one of the greatest adventures of our time.

Ernest Shackleton was the leader of the 1914 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, a scientific endeavor to the Antartic. The expedition hoped to travel around the

coast of Antarctica aboard their ship, the Endurance, and then travel across land to the south pole.

However, after a few months in the Antarctic ocean, disaster struck. The Endeavor got stuck in the ice and was eventually crushed by the moving ice flows.

The men of the endeavor trudged out onto an ice flow, leaving behind what had been, all things considered, a warm and comfortable home. It was a farewell to their last tie to civilization. The men set up their tents on the ice foundation that was likely no more than 6 feet deep and could crack open at any time – plunging them into the icy deep.

Shackleton strode from the Endurance carrying a copy of the Bible given him by Queen Alexandria at the outset of their journey and made his way to the center of the hastily constructed campsite. Gathering his men around him, he told them of the new plan: they would begin a march across the ice towards Paulet Island, some 346 miles to the west. As they hoped to hit open water along the way, the men would have to drag two, one-ton lifeboats along with them, hauling them across a vast wasteland of ice and over ridges that could rise two stories high.

Given the arduous nature of the task ahead, Shackleton solemnly informed his men that “nothing but the bare necessities are to be taken on the march, for we can not afford to cumber ourselves with unnecessary weight.” .

Shackleton had come to believe that traveling light was absolutely paramount, as “those that burdened themselves with equipment for every contingency had fared much worse than those that had sacrificed total preparedness for speed.”

Each member of the team was allowed the clothes on his back, plus two pairs of mittens, six pairs of socks, two pairs of boots, and a sleeping bag. Beyond these basic provisions, Shackleton ordered that each man only bring a **maximum of two pounds of personal possessions.**

Shackleton moved to set the example for his men. He took his Bible and ripped out the flyleaf upon which the Queen had inscribed: “May the Lord help you to do your duty & guide you through all the dangers of the land and sea. May you see the Works of the Lord & all His Wonders in the deep.” Then he tore out the 23rd Psalm, as well as a page from Job he considered “wonderful”:

Out of whose womb came the ice?

And the hoary frost of Heaven, who hath gendered it?

The waters are hid as with a stone,

And the face of the deep is frozen. (Job 38:29-30)

Shackleton placed the torn pages inside his jacket and laid the Bible in the snow. He then reached into his pocket and withdrew a gold watch, gold cigarette case, and a handful of gold sovereigns. He gave the items one last look before tossing them into the snow as well.

It was a dramatic gesture, but Shackleton was determined to impress upon his men the absolute necessity of each man stripping himself of every ounce of superfluous weight. “No article has any value when measured against our survival,” Shackleton intoned. “Everything is replaceable except your lives.”

Shackleton’s men were indeed faced with a series of heart-wrenching choices.

Given the scant two-pound allowance, which of their cherished personal possessions should they keep, and which should they cast aside?

I often wonder what I would have done in that situation. Looking at my possessions, my little treasures, my photographs and mementos, what would I toss away into the icy waters and what would I take with me.

I'm sure you'll agree with me that seeing what we decide to keep and what we would leave behind can teach us much about what is truly valuable to us — not only literally, in terms of material possessions — but also as broader symbols of what matters most in life for all of us.

We may never face a situation of life and death survival as the members of the Endurance expedition did. Yet in a world of gray morality, shallow culture, and relentless consumerism, our values, happiness, goals, are ever at risk.

Every “mile” matters in our personal journeys too, and the lighter we travel, the further we can get in the goal of becoming the individuals we truly want to become.

So today, on Yom Kippur, on this day of atonement when we are all asked to do a heshbon hanesh, an inventory not of our gear but of our souls, it's valid to ask:

What kinds of things should we “carry” with us this next year, and what will weight us down and keeps us from living in the image of God?

Going back to the men of the Endurance and their decisions, there are valuable lessons to be learned for us as we inventory our lives:

The first thing that Shackleton and his men got rid of was items of gold and silver.

Shackleton himself commented on the irony: “The thing that had the most value in our lives back home,” he commented, “Will have the least value on our Antarctic march.”

Having just finished 35 years in the Navy, after 13 moves, across the country and across the world, I can tell you that we Americans sure accumulate a lot of junk. A simple walk around your neighborhood looking at those open garage doors will verify that we love to accumulate stuff.

Before you think that I am going to say that we should not strive to have nice things, or nice cars, big houses, please know that Judaism is not against accumulating wealth and things. It’s not the things we have and accumulate, but the time they force you to invest in taking care of your stuff when we could be taking care of peoples, and dreams and our very soul.

Everyone should have a nice house, but is it a house that is open to guests on Shabbat? Or a house where a Succah is built on Succoth? Or a house that does not turn away those in need? Everyone is entitled to stuff, but does this stuff take us away or bring us closer to our family, our community and the Jewish people?

Perhaps on Yom Kippur we should ask, what is of true value to us and how is it of use to us?

Back to Shkelton:

In addition to the goal of being the first men to cross Antarctica, the expedition had also originally aimed to gather geologic and other scientific data about the continent. But with the sinking of the Endurance, that original purpose had to be abandoned; the men had to focus all of their energies on their new mission: simply making it home alive. Thus, microscopes, telescopes, and other scientific equipment were discarded in the snow.

Wow, there's a Yom Kippur lesson for us; Sometimes the plan we set out for ourselves – either professionally or personally — changes dramatically.

How does that saying go?: Man plans and God laughs.

In life there are always curve balls. These curveballs can come because of an intentional shift in our goals, or circumstances over which we have no control.

Either way, there's no use in holding onto the past.

Shkelton's expedition reminds us that you have to leave behind the trappings and the baggage of your old dream, and ditch the regrets for what could have been and the guilt for the path you "should" have taken.

On this day of Yom Kippur, we not only commit to ditching our regrets for dreams not fulfilled, but Yom Kippur also call on us to find a new purpose, a new goal and, most important, press onwards.

So, we've learned a lot from what they left behind, but what about what they kept?

There are certainly lessons to be learned there, as well...

If you're a dentist out there, you're going to love this one:

When it came to cleanliness on the expedition, the book I read describes the men were divided into two camps: "some men scrubbed their faces in snow whenever the weather permitted. Others purposely let the dirt accumulate on the theory that it would toughen their skin against frostbite." But there was a general consensus when it came to the importance of caring for one's teeth, and thus most of the men chose a toothbrush as one of the few precious items to bring with them. Thousands of miles from the nearest dentist, a painful problem with one's teeth could have spelled real trouble on the march.

I can guarantee you that the ADA did not give me a kickback for this sermon, but I'm sure you can see that the idea of daily tooth brushing is one of the habits every person should develop is endorsed by Arctic explorers!

But, there is more because one can find a deeper meaning here beyond the necessity of keeping your teeth in good condition.

There are many things in our life that require mundane daily maintenance to keep on top of, and while consistency in these small, regular efforts may not be fun, they ultimately prevent the creation of huge problems and pain down the line.

Judaism knows this when it teaches us: Ase Toratckha Keva: Make the learning Torah, kevah, something you do permanently, ritually, constantly.

On this Yom Kippur, as we make resolution for next year, we must ask ourselves, what rituals should we pursue that raise us up personally and spiritually. What are those practices that bring out the best in us and keep us from falling into sin? How about prayer? How about daily study? How about charity? The list in our tradition is endless.

And finally, the most universal item the men chose to take with them were a few photographs of loved ones back home. Completely isolated at the bottom of the world and faced with traversing an alien terrain, they felt a million miles from their old lives. Yet photographs kept their connection to home alive and reminded them that there was something worth fighting to return to.

My friends, our relationships are truly the most valuable things in our lives.

Connections with friends and family have been proven by science time and again to be the single biggest contributor to happiness. At the end of our lives, it is our relationships that we look back on most fondly and regret not investing more time into.

Our loved ones not only bring us joy and add a beautiful depth and richness to our lives, but also give us something to live for.

In a few minutes we will begin the chanting of the Yizkor service.

Yizkor is a time when we remember not only our loved ones who have gone to their eternal home, but more important, **Yizkor is a time when we reflect on what our loved one chose to leave behind with us.**

What experiences did we have with them that made us who we are today? What dreams and ideals from did they not fulfill that we want to carry ourselves? What mistakes did they make in the past that we don't want to repeat?

We use this time, to reflect on what chose to leave behind with us.

On last lesson from the men of the Endurance:

If you were faced with the same kind of decision as the members of the crew, which of your personal possessions would you take and which would leave behind? What does the nature of your selections reveal about what you truly value in your life?

On a deeper level, what attitudes and behaviors are you carrying with you that are actually weighing down your progress on your own march thru this next year?

What negative habits have become a burden, keeping you from becoming the person you want to be?

And once you answer such questions, the most important question then becomes:
**are you putting your time and money where your mouth is? Are you investing
the resources of your life into what you truly value, or are you wasting them
on things, that, if push came to shove, you would ultimately leave behind in an
icy grave?**

Yom Kippur and in particular Yizkor is a time of praying, a time of remembering a
time of resolved.

My hope and prayer is that the resolutions we make on this most holy of days,
shaped our lives in the coming year enabling us to chose wisely what we take with
us and what we leave behind

Amen