

DISCOVERING THE TREASURE BENEATH OUR FEET

Yom Kippur Morning 5764

I confess I find absolutely nothing appealing in *reality* television. Maybe I'm getting too old. Maybe it's because I know that I wouldn't (or couldn't) do half of those things. Or maybe it's because my sense of excitement has matured (or mellowed) a bit over the years. Howbeit, for me it's a different kind of reality that draws me to the tube. *Antiques Road Show*. Now there's an adult fantasy.

For those of you who don't watch Public Television, *Antiques Road Show* is something of a blend of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *This Old House*. It has all the voyeurism of most of today's *reality* shows as well as the vicarious thrills of television's earliest quiz shows. But what makes it so exciting is the underlying principle that—indeed—you could be a winner. *Antiques Road Show* is a traveling circus where average people—like you and me—*schlepp* in *their* idea of something worth looking at to be told its *true* value. Invariably there will be an expert wearing a bow tie. He will examine it, point out little things we would never notice or pay attention to, ask how it was acquired and then, in the cruelest and most sadistic of ways, put the *schlepper* on the spot and ask: "How much do *you* think it's worth?" And, of course, right there in front of the television audience this poor, unknowing person is forced to bare himself only to learn whether he could have done better had he paid *retail* or if he has unwittingly become the owner of a small treasure. In either case, he invariably responds with Public Television's version of surprise: "Really? I didn't know that." Does it get any more exciting than this?

All kidding aside, *Antiques Road Show* is enormously popular. Just try to get a reserved ticket when it comes to *your* town. You have to send in an application for tickets months in advance. And while it may pale when evaluated by the ratings standard of the *Nielson Corporation*, it has great appeal (as the nodding heads I see attest). So I began to wonder, what it is that the devotees of *Antiques Road Show* find so attractive?

Well, to begin with—it is *genuinely* real. That is, as opposed to the spate of *reality* shows on contemporary television, this *is* real. It may be somewhat staged, and those we ultimately see may have been selected by the editors, but those holding up their treasures are ordinary people. They are you and me. Even more to the point, that which they are displaying is stuff we all have (unless, of course, we threw it out). *Antiques Road Show* lets us see all the treasures that may be lurking in our basements and attics and trunks and dresser drawers, just waiting to be discovered.

This I believe to be the real magic of *Antiques Road Show*. You see, we all harbor the fantasy that we will uncover—sometime in our lives—that which is hidden. Recover that which is lost. Like the proverbial dream of every man (and even a few women), we will one day—while rummaging through our parents' cluttered possessions—find that shoebox filled with the baseball cards of our youth (including of course the *Mickey Mantle* rookie card). In the spirit of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to be human is to forever be in search of. To return to *Gan Eden*, the mythical garden from which we emerged into the cold and harsh world of reality, we all dream of recovery, of return. And the thought that the doorway might be right around the next corner, even upstairs, tantalizes our deepest desires.

This truth inheres in many cultures. The Hasidic version, taught in the name of Rabbi Bunam, tells of Reb Itzik, a poor Jew who lives just outside Cracow. He knows he cannot long survive or provide for his family without some kind of divine intervention. One night he dreams of just such a treasure, buried at the foot of a bridge leading to the king's palace in Prague. After a long and harrowing journey he arrives at that bridge only to be thwarted by a soldier standing guard. When, in exasperation and hopelessness, he shares with the soldier why he is there, the soldier replies, "Do you think you are unique? Do you think you are the only one who dreams? Even I have such dreams. In fact, I too have had a dream of a buried treasure beneath the stove of some poor Jew named Reb Itzik who lives outside of Cracow, but do you think I'm crazy enough to go and do something about it?" Reb Eizik thanks him very much and promptly proceeds home to uncover the treasure.

It's not out there. It's here, hidden from our view by our very feet. It is the spiritual equivalent of the Horatio Alger myth, except in this case the moral is not rags to riches but riches *in* rags (and everything else). That is, the place you seek is the place wherein you stand. *Atem Nitzavim hayom / You are standing here this day before God.*

Perhaps the real reason behind the mass appeal of today's *reality* shows is that our realities are wanting. Our lives are so filled with ordinariness that we feed our souls—vicariously—through the lives of others. This is the point of the Hasidic story. Our lives are preoccupied with, to use the word of *Kohelet* or Ecclesiastes—*hevel* / wind. Vain pursuit. All the things we seek, all those objects of our desire are simply illusions. They are not real. Or better put, they are not really what we think they are. We live our lives in search of treasure—whether we identify it as wealth or happiness or meaning—only to learn, as this old tale suggests, that the treasure is where we are, not where we are not. So immersed in our pursuit, so focused on the map of promised wealth, that we lose the ability to see we are pursuing in vain; we fail to see where we are, blinded to the treasures of the garden from which we have *not* been banished. We are like Jacob, awakening the next morning only to realize, “Surely God was in this place and I did not know it.”

Judaism, as much as anything else, is a religion of challenge. Like Moses standing before the burning bush that was *not* being consumed, that was *not* burning up, something he could not have noticed without sustained powers of observation, we are asked only to pay attention. To take pause. To look. To listen. To appreciate this extraordinary gift we call life. And to make decisions which enhance our lives accordingly. This is the challenge of human existence. Not simply to be a traveler but to take each step as if it—and it alone—has meaning. Ours is *to take control*. And the way we do that is *by letting go*.

There's the mystical story from the Zen tradition of the man who slips off a cliff only to grab—with a last grasp—the edge of the precipice. Hanging on, literally, by the edge of his fingertips, he yells out, “Help! Is there anyone up there?” Whereupon a voice comes forth, “It's okay. Fear not. Let go.” As the story concludes, he does—and he flies upward. He soars. (Personally, I prefer the Jewish version of the story. Hanging from the cliff, he yells, “Help! Is there anyone up there?” And as with the Zen tradition, the voice comes forth and says, “It's okay. Fear not. Let go.” In this version, however, the man listens for a few more seconds and responds, “Is there anyone *else* up there?”)

The fact is, the teaching of “letting go” is universal. At its core is the suggestion that true freedom, true discovery comes at the expense of surrendering false reality. That the things we *think* are real, the things we *think* are of value are illusory. And by letting go we free ourselves of the shackles of what society has told us is worthy. Like the man who finds his treasure buried beneath his feet, these stories embody spiritual truths common to most religious traditions. They reflect upon a reality that transcends religious boundaries. As if to say, ultimate reality knows no religious identity. Yet at the same time what separates us, what distinguishes one religious discipline from another are the *paths* we choose to take. For Judaism, this liberation from false reality, this awareness of life's ultimate hidden treasure comes through the gift of Shabbat.

Shabbat is, in the words of its poet laureate Abraham Joshua Heschel, a *palace* in time. Heschel sees Shabbat as Judaism's affirmation of time (as opposed to space) and our ability to control our place within the continuum of time. In the preface of his extraordinary tone poem *The Sabbath*, Heschel writes, “The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong,” Heschel suggests, “when the control of space, the acquisition of things in space, becomes our sole concern.”

I remember how Professor Larry Hoffman, maybe 15 years ago as our scholar-in-residence, challenged us to take control of our lives. “Don't tell me why you can't do Shabbat,” he chided us. “Don't give me the excuses. It's just a matter of choices. If you want to come home early on Friday afternoon you will. If you want to be with your family on Shabbat afternoon you will. Shabbat is our opportunity to take control of our lives.” As Francine Klagsbrun reflects in her new book *The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath Day*, “Earlier generations would give anything to gain an hour or even a few minutes of liberation *from* work, but our generation, supposedly more liberated than any before it, longs only for additional work time...The Sabbath,”

she continues, “affirms the dignity of work...but it also asserts that people have the right to limit their work, for *endless* toil enslaves, draining the person of human dignity.”

This, for me, is why I find Judaism’s approach to *letting go* so compelling. Because it does not suggest that our *world* is an illusion, just our tendency to lose perspective. Judaism does not require that we let go completely but just once a week, for one day. Shabbat is transitory. It is not absolute surrender. It is predicated on the notion that if our lives are to have meaning they must involve engagement with a temporary detachment. A kind of spiritual oasis. Nor should our rest be understood as being in opposition to our labor but its complement. Like God’s creative enterprise of the world’s first week, we too labor in the name of God towards a summit of Sabbath renewal. Then we start all over again. Once a week we take everything on our desks and, at the appropriate time, push it all onto the floor. For one day we don’t look at it. We don’t think about it. It is out of mind. Then, come Sunday morning, we pick it up and start over again.

Our mistake is that we have allowed our tradition of Shabbat to be replaced by the modern invention of The Weekend. The only problem is that the weekend affirms nothing. On the contrary, it merely extends our sense of labor, albeit labor in a different form. Food shopping. Home repair. Athletic competition. For Judaism, our cessation from work in the name of God affirms that the world does not revolve around us. We, instead, are merely part of the world. But we are also partners with God in that process of creation. By our labor *and* our rest we affirm the sacredness of existence.

For some time I have struggled with wanting to present *Shabbat* to you in a way you would find compelling. I have wanted to make Shabbat’s case, to persuade you of its worth, to help you see why it is the foundation of our religious heritage. But as a religious leader I know that one cannot legislate spiritual obligation. You cannot make people embrace *chova* or duty until they see its value. Like the treasure that so often eludes us, we cannot discover its reality until we first remove the false realities which obscure. So when Moses stands before the burning bush God says, “Remove your shoes for the ground upon which you are standing is holy.” But the rabbis wonder, *Why remove the shoes?* And the answer comes, *Because when you have no shoes on you can feel the earth beneath your feet.* This is the challenge before us: How to see what is in our way, how to remove the obstacles that prevent us from seeing how much better our lives could be. Would it surprise you to learn that the most frequently taken pamphlet on spiritual well-being outside our office is the brochure dealing with how to cope with stress?

A couple of months ago I saw Charlie Rose do an interview with Tony Schwartz, author of *The Power of Full Engagement*. During their dialogue Mr. Schwartz made a remark that got me to reach over, open up my laptop, and promise myself to find a way to quote it in a High Holy Day sermon. He said, “To turn your value into virtue you need to have behavior to support it.” I was struck by his alliteration, to be sure. But I also found its simplicity profound. We so often speak of *values*, of those things we consider valuable. The treasures we seek. But have we ever stopped to consider that a value is nothing more than an aspiration? That it is only when it is transformed into something lasting—namely, a virtue—that its true worth is realized? And even more to the point, that such transformation requires normative patterns of behavior? To use Mr. Schwartz’s words, “The challenge is to transform [these] desired behaviors into acts akin to eating and sleeping.”

What will it take for us to see just how much of a treasure Shabbat really is? What will it take for us to take control of our lives and allow Shabbat to bring its healing powers? What will it take for us to let go of the things we think we’re supposed to be doing so that we can taste the sweetness of *oneg Shabbat* (Sabbath joy) and *Shabbat menuchah* (Sabbath rest)? What will it take to convince us that the opportunity to sit at a Shabbat table, to pray as a member of community, to listen to and discuss words of Torah are all treasures buried right beneath our feet? What will it take, I wonder, for us to see that Shabbat is a *mitzvah*—not a commandment as much as a sacred *challenge* by God to take our lives seriously enough that we might be willing to discover the potential for holiness that breathes within?

Our lives *could* be better.

Atem nitzavim hayom. You are standing here this day before God. So began our Torah reading this morning. But perhaps even more instructive were the portion’s closing words. *Lo bashamayim hi.* It is not up in heaven nor across the sea, but on our lips and in our hearts. It’s not out there. It’s right here. The treasures we seek can be found within the peace and rest and joy of Shabbat. Indeed, we might even discover that Shabbat—in

and of itself—is among our most valuable possessions. As Ahad Ha'am, an early twentieth century philosopher has taught, "More than Israel has kept the Sabbath has the Sabbath kept Israel." All it takes is the willingness to light two candles and say, "*Shalom Aleikhem Malakhei ha-Shareit*—Welcome you angels of peace."

Pretend you're at the Jewish version of *Antiques Road Show*. Here you are presenting your own personal treasures. You can just imagine the faceless announcer in the background:

"Ceramic Shabbat Candlesticks: \$75."

"Sterling Silver Kiddush Cup: \$500."

"Freshly-Baked *Challah*: \$2.50."

"Sitting around a Shabbat dinner table with those you love: *Priceless*."

The truth is, you don't even need an expert to tell you these things. These are truths, these are values you already know. The only real question is what are you going to do about it?