

String Theory (November 2007)

I like things. Objects that I can collect, display, and give away. Especially pass on. I think I get it from my mom. And I think she got it from her parents. The result is a basement full of—as George Carlin would call it—Stuff. But of course it's profoundly more than just stuff. It's history. And sentimentality. It's memory.

My favorite subject in grade school was Show and Tell. I could bring in a Detroit Lions' football jersey (my dad had been the trainer of the ballclub in the 1930s and collected all kinds of memorabilia, much of which is now in the Pro Football Hall of Fame), or a diary kept by my great-great-grandmother's husband from the 1860s (where he talks about how he paid his way out of the Union army's draft). I grew up with a reverence for such articles; my friends would often say that my home resembled an antique shop. Even my bedroom dresser was an heirloom, built by my furniture-maker great-grandfather. Much to the dismay of our daughter Hannah, it is now her dresser. What can you do? With such objects come responsibility and obligation.

Of late I've been thinking about how this plays out in the course of Jewish life. We all have our sacred things. Kiddush cups. Haggadahs. Photos. I even have—and treasure—the mixing bowl my Bubbe brought with her from Russia. They all are magical, keeping us connected to people we love (even if we've never met them). But nothing can compete with the tallis, the tattered prayer-shawl handed down from generation to generation, kept in a drawer, often in its original bag, forever in wait for the next bar or bat mitzvah. I confess, it's a powerful sight to see a young man called to Torah wearing the same tzitzit worn by his great-grandfather in some Lower East Side immigrant shul.

There is, however, a danger in this.

Sometimes I wonder if we place so much reverence in our predecessors that we allow them to overshadow us. We look at them as being more authentic than ourselves, especially when it comes to Judaism. Even more, we allow them to be Jewish for us as we vicariously live out our tradition in their names—but unfortunately, it often comes at our expense. This is embodied by that tattered tallis.

After all, if we give our daughters and sons the prayer-shawls of their ancestors (only to thereafter return the sacred object to its back-of-the-drawer resting place), what good is it other than to serve as a symbol? But the tallit was never intended to be a museum-piece, it was meant to be worn (and worn-out). As touching (and appropriately so) it is to see our children carrying on the tradition of their grandparents, what makes Bar and Bat Mitzvah so important is that it is supposed to be about the future. The child wearing a tallit for the first time is of enduring value only when it is donned for the first of many times.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not dissing the wearing of a family heirloom. On the contrary, I encourage it. What I am saying, however, is that we need to be careful not to allow our nostalgia and reverence for the past to trump our hope for the future. And that means that our celebrations of our children coming-of-age need be more than exercises in religious show-and-tell. Becoming Bat Mitzvah to connect me to my past is well and good, but somewhere along the way I think it means we're supposed to be even more focused on what it is we will have to give to our grandchildren.

So here's my practical solution. Don't keep that heirloom in the drawer. Bring it out. Give your son the honor of wearing it as he is called to the bimah for the first time. But then, after his aliyah—maybe at the parental charge—present him with his own tallit, one that he will wear at his friends' b'nai mitzvah celebrations, week after week, as well as on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and that Shabbat morning service when he asks to go to just so he can wear his new tallit.

Postscript: Each Shabbat, when I'm sitting in my seat, you'll notice that from time to time I will take the tzitzit (fringes) that hang from my tallit's four corners and, pulling on the strings, tighten the end knots. They have a tendency to loosen up over time, and if they're not tightened they are in danger of unraveling. The way I see it, it's the same way with our heritage. No matter who tied it (or wore it), to be a Jew—and especially to be a Bat or Bar Mitzvah—we all have to learn how to tighten our own tzitzit.