

Rosh HaShanah 5777- Tidying Our Souls & Finding the Sparks
Rabbi Hal Rudin-Luria
B'nai Jeshurun Congregation

Looking back on the past year-
a year of the Cavaliers championship and Tribe playoffs;
a year of political conventions and political contentions;
when we laid to rest Israel's President and elder statesman Shimon Peres zichrono
livracha (of blessed memory), the last-living patriarch of our homeland;
we certainly have seen change in our midst.

Rabbi Israel Salanter wisely said, "When I was young, I wanted to change the world. I tried but the world did not change. Then I tried to change my town, but the town did not change. Then I tried to change my family but my family did not change. Then I knew: first, I must change myself."

Change is hard, there is no sugarcoating it. Just look at the Browns, ever since I came to Cleveland for 15 seasons and 15 High holidays, they still seem to be in the same place- even though the players, coaches and even owners have changed. During these high holidays, when we look inward to our souls and outward to our synagogue filled with wonderful friends- old and new, we ask ourselves what is going to change this year? What am I going to change to be a better Jew and most importantly a better person? The rabbis are optimistic and see life as a long-term project of shaping who we are. They believe we can change, and that once we change ourselves, we have the power to change those around us and our world.

This spring, our family decided to make a big change. We did not begin by changing the world, nor did we begin by changing our town. We started with the hardest project- changing ourselves- and beginning with tidying and decluttering our home. This was very tough for me. I went into it literally kicking and screaming because I have to confess, since this is the season of repentance, I don't like throwing things away. They make TV shows about us. My parents were raised in depression-era homes that believed in saving, and I was raised in a home where very little was ever thrown away- the closets and basement kept getting filled more and more. You never know when you will need it was the phrase behind it all- that shirt that is two sizes too large or the encyclopedias that were printed years before I was born, there may be just the right time when they will come in handy. Maybe you can relate.

We each have different reasons for keeping the things that we do. Whether it looked good in the store but not so much at home, the dream we have to use it that one special

day that still hasn't come, the sentimental value that reminds us of someone or something special or the practical uses we have for it. Over the years, I have acquired so much stuff and am used to the tight closets and drawers.

For me, the most difficult and important room to tackle was my home office. Rabbis like books. I didn't count but I probably had thousands of books, of which I have read a few hundred. Some I turn to every week or at least every year and others I have never read and am waiting for just the right time. In my office, my books were piled this way and that- each bookcase was bending under the weight of shelves filled twice their capacity- with books piled high to the ceiling. My clothing needed help as well. My drawers were stuffed so tightly that I could barely close them. You get the picture. It was time for a change and I finally knew it.

The Kotzker Rebbe was once asked by a student, "Who is a good Jew?" The Rebbe answered, "Any Jew who wants to be good." The student was not satisfied with his teacher's answer and questioned again, "Doesn't everyone want to be a good Jew?" The rebbe answered, "No, anyone who thinks they are a good Jew already- that person doesn't want to be a good Jew." For the Kotzker, the essence of being a Jew is someone who constantly works on bettering oneself, never seeing oneself as a finished product.

I certainly am not a finished product and so we read Marie Kondo's, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying up- The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, and began to prepare to tidy not just our shelves, closets and home but also change ourselves. Marie writes, "Putting your house in order, positively affects all aspects of one's life. Tidying is transformational because when you put your house in order, you must put your past and your affairs in order, too. As a result, you can see quite clearly what you need in life and what you don't, what you should and shouldn't do." It was as if she was quoting from the greatest of rabbis. On Rosh HaShanah, the only way we can put ourselves in order and shape who we are truly meant to be- is by putting our past in order- by actively engaging in Teshuvah- repenting- seeking forgiveness for all our mistakes and righting any wrongs we have committed.

Following KonMarie's tidying system, we learned that tidying must start with discarding. As she writes, "To truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose. Letting go is more important than adding. To get rid of what you no longer need is neither wasteful nor shameful. Let them go with gratitude. You will feel clear and refreshed."

As instructed, we took every single article of clothing, grouped them in big piles. Again, this was not fun but painful and difficult searching each closet and drawer in the house to

see how much we had accumulated. Our bedroom became a construction zone. There were jacket piles, pants piles, tie piles and shirt piles, book piles arranged by theme and use, and so on. KonMarie's tidying method requires you to take each item in your hand and ask, "Does this spark joy?" If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it. In order to become tidy, or better yet in order to change, we have to ask every part of our closet, every book and every part of our own self- does this spark joy? And if not, dispose of it- donate it to a special organization or give it to someone to whom you think it will bring joy.

The Kabbalists or Jewish mystics taught that before there was anything in our world, there was simply G-d. G-d was everything and everywhere. In order for G-d to create our world and human beings, the first action that G-d performed was contracting, making space to create our world. The mystics call this *tzimtzum*- to limit or reduce in order to increase and change for the better. We filled bag after bag and box after box of clothing and books, kitchen utensils and chatchkes- more than 20 bags and 10 boxes that were donated and given to spark joy in others- leaving us with more breathing room. Now, each of my books has a spot on my shelf, there are no books on the floor or piled to the ceiling- my clothing drawers glide easily on their tracks. I gave myself the space to change for the better.

I needed space to see what I actually had in my life. With gratitude for the fullness, the overflowing bounty, I quickly realized that I had enough and could share with others. With space for my clothes to breathe in my closet, I also had created space to examine my deeds and change for the better- to find that most special outfit that was pushed in the back and a treasured photo that I thought was lost in a move. Deep down, I found some of the most important qualities that were always there.

Maimonides writes that our character traits and habits are ingrained in our genes, learned in our childhood, from the friends we keep and the people that we admire and idolize. And yet, we each still can change. Every year, we have to take a deep look at our ways, our values and our actions. Just like spring-cleaning our home, this is the time for a fall cleaning of our values and virtues. Step one is discarding those traits and thoughts that weigh us down, clutter our mind, pull us off course to make room for all the positive qualities and good in our lives. For us, forgiveness and gratitude are traits and actions that allow us to move forward- to help clean the slate for a new year.

One day, a big chalkboard was hung at a busy New York City intersection with this question written at the top, "Write Your Biggest Regret." Throughout the day, New Yorkers stopped by and after looking at the board wrote with chalk their answer. For most, it was chances not taken, words not spoken; regrets about staying in one's comfort

zone and not getting involved- about dreams not pursued and family time missed. After writing their regret, they were each given an eraser and told to wipe the slate clean. As they cleaned the chalkboard erasing their regret, they felt a weight lift from their burden and new opportunities open before them.

Now is the time to tidy up our souls, discard those bad habits and harmful ways before they tear us down, that is the first lesson from the life-changing magic of tidying. Making space helps us focus on what is most important in our lives and what needs to be changed. There are certainly relationships and responsibilities that we cannot simply discard- but for those where there is little joy, only regrets and difficulties- we must strive to begin again- to discard past hurts and disappointments- to make amends and start with a new foundation.

The Maggid, the traveling rebbe, would tell this story on his visit to the shtetl- “A village blacksmith had an assistant whose job it was to blow on the coals to make the fire burn stronger. That way, they could work faster and keep the fire going all day. It happened one day that his assistant traveled to the city and passed by a blacksmith’s shop. He peered inside and saw the fire was being fanned by bellows, which increased the heat. He was very impressed because using the bellows was far more effective than his blowing on the coals- so he gathered up all his money and bought one. He immediately told the blacksmith of the new invention that he acquired. The next day, he took out the bellows and pumped and pumped and pumped but nothing happened.

He took them back to the salesman and told him they were defective- it did not make a big fire, in fact it did not make a fire at all. The salesman asked him, “Are you sure you followed the instructions? Did you first have a spark and start a small fire before you started using the bellows?” The assistant shook his head. “That is the problem,” the salesman answered, “the bellows cannot make a fire on their own- first you have to light a fire and only then can the bellows make it increase.” The Maggid adds, “So it is with each of us, we have to provide the spark.”

The second lesson is the importance of finding that spark of joy. Finding that book, teacher, volunteer project, synagogue committee, prayer from our siddur that lights our fire. The mystics teach that when G-d created our world, it was in essence imperfect and could not hold all of G-d’s light which became hidden sparks of holiness and joy embedded in our world. When we perform acts of kindness and mitzvot, we literally repair the world by raising up a spark. G-d also spoke of creation as “Tov” good- it is our purpose to make this world even better by finding those sparks in each of us.

Tidying is just the beginning to help set our priorities straight, clean the slate and find those sparks. When things are too cluttered, we cannot see the spark within much less the sparks in others. What will be your spark this year? What will spark joy in you, your family, our synagogue and community? We have recently become a member the Greater Cleveland Congregations- perhaps your spark is caring for our larger community working to improve criminal justice reform, increasing health care access or reducing gun violence. Joining our Chesed Committee to care for those sick and in need in our congregation and larger community. Engaging our sacred texts at our Saturday morning Starbucks Torah study or beginning or ending each day with minyan prayer services? Find those sparks and light your fire for the best life-changing year.

May this year be tidy and clutter-free- may we be focused for a year of change creating the space for growth and learning and finding the sparks of joy in our life and our Judaism. Shana Tova