

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779
September 10, 2018
B'nai Israel Congregation
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz

Living With Less

At the beginning of August, Rebecca and I were packing up the contents of our kitchen in preparation for a well-overdue renovation. As I packed up our dishes, flatware, and endless variety of kitchen gadgets and small appliances, I complained to Rebecca about the amount of stuff we had. Laughing at me, she recommended that I watch George Carlin's routine about "stuff." (If you have not seen it, it is available on YouTube and I highly recommend that you watch it after Rosh HaShannah.) In it, Carlin says "That's the whole meaning of life: trying to find a place for your stuff." The routine unfolds, and Carlin says that our home is just a box for our stuff, with a lid on top, and that we only move to a *bigger* home because we have accumulated too much stuff, and that we lock the doors on our home to protect our stuff from others who are always looking to take the good stuff. The routine, despite its foul language, is at its core meaningful; perhaps even profound. In joking about our obsession with stuff, Carlin reminds us that we do not really need it all, that we can in fact live with less, and that doing so can be liberating and transformative.

First, I must acknowledge that I say all of this to you from a position of privilege. I live a comfortable middle-class life, and I think it is safe to say the vast majority of people in this room can say the same. We do not want for basic essentials in life. We have a roof over our head and food on our tables. So, when I talk about getting rid of stuff, I am referring to the things in life that we know we could do without. I talk about clutter, and things that get in our way, that pile up, that distract us.

We accumulate stuff because some part of us imagines that we need more things, that newer and better things can bring us happiness. In the end, however, we all know that this is just not true. The accumulation of physical things will not bring us lasting joy. Therefore, in our pursuit for happiness and fulfillment in the year ahead, I ask that you all acknowledge at this very moment that you have too much stuff. I know that I have too much stuff. We have a room in our basement that we call “the mall” because it is stocked with things that we do not need right now, but perhaps we will need in the future! So, if you believe it to be true, repeat after me: I have too much stuff.

Having a lot of things is convenient, and for some it is comforting to know that it is there, just in case we need it, even if we do not need it yet! But having too much stuff can be burdensome. When our physical spaces are cluttered, we cannot focus on what truly matters. We are distracted by the plethora of items that surround us. Our clutter inhibits us from reaching our greatest potential because it distracts us, and it can be a nuisance.

In our Torah, Moses addresses the Israelites on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, just as they are about to enter into the Promised Land, and he reminds them, שמלתך לא בלטה מעליך, *The clothes upon you did not wear out...these forty years in the wilderness.*¹ How truly miraculous! The clothing that the people wore as they departed from Egypt not only remained intact for 40 years, but grew with them as they grew. God provided them with their needs and made it such that they need not carry extra stuff. There was no additional baggage that the Israelites had to schlep through the wilderness as they marched from Egypt, to Sinai, to the Promised Land. All that they needed was on their person. They lived their lives without clutter,

¹ Deuteronomy 8:4.

without unnecessary material belongings. They survived on the essentials and made their way from slavery to freedom, from redemption to revelation, relying upon the gifts that God provided. And during that time, they thrived: they established themselves as a nation, they received the Torah, they constructed the *Mishkan*, and they moved ever-closer to the Land of Israel and to the God of Israel. The Torah thus provides us with a paradigm: Living with less, tidying up, and decluttering our lives is one way to thrive, to succeed, and to reach our goals.

One way of building a connection with the Divine is to clear away the distractions and focus on what matters to us most, what brings us joy and fulfillment. If we want to declutter our spiritual lives, we must begin with our *physical* lives—our homes, our offices, our cars, and anywhere else we keep our stuff. Our spiritual mindset is a reflection of our physical environment. If our physical spaces are cluttered, our hearts and minds will be cluttered as well. This clutter inhibits us from building a connection with the Divine, to something greater than ourselves. If I can learn to declutter my home, then I might be able to declutter my mind.

One of my favorite books, which I have written about before, is called *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, by brothers Chip Heath and Dan Heath. The Heaths set forth a paradigm for how to think creatively about making changes in our lives, whether it is at home, at work, or elsewhere. All of our behaviors can be explained with the following metaphor: There is a Rider sitting atop a large and unwieldy Elephant, and the Rider is trying their very best to steer the Elephant down a particular Path. Those are the three essential parts: the Rider, the Elephant, and the Path. The Rider is the rational, intellectual part of our brains, what helps us to make decisions based on logic, data, and facts. The Elephant represents our emotional reaction to the world: strong, sometimes erratic, and nearly impossible to contain.

And the Path is the environment, the external factors that influence how we behave and how we interact with the world and the people in it. When we seek to make changes in our lives, we must carefully consider all three factors: our rational side, our emotional side, and the environment in which we operate. What interests me the most is the Path, the external environment, because it relates to this idea of decluttering our physical spaces so as to generate more meaningful relationships and spiritual connections.

Consider the following example: There is a reason that amusement parks do not have only one gift shop. All of the major rides and attractions in an amusement park end with a gift shop. You cannot exit any other way—the exit is through the gift shop! You have no choice but to walk through one store after another, feeling the thrill of the ride you just finished, and now much more likely to purchase a silly souvenir. The environment is designed to change your behavior. You cannot walk by the store as you leave the park—you must go through a series of stores, one after another. The builders of the park have done what the Heath brothers call, “shaping the path,” intentionally designing an environment to influence your behavior. Sometimes, the easiest way to change our behaviors is to change our physical environment.

During our renovation, Rebecca and I spent almost four weeks living predominantly in our basement. One Shabbat afternoon, perusing the book shelves in our basement, I found a short book that I had not yet read: Marie Kondo’s *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. I was immediately captivated. Kondo is an organizing consultant who developed her own method for tidying up, called the KonMari Method. Her book is an attempt to translate her methodology, typically taught through classes and one-on-one consultations, into a “Do-It-Yourself” guide, accessible to anyone who opens its cover. Kondo asserts that the theme of her “method of

tidying is *transforming the home into a sacred space.*"² In reading these words I recognized that living with less, and removing the clutter from our lives, was the first step towards the establishment of sacred space, an environment designed with intentionality and mindfulness. Once again, I considered the stuff that we have in our house, what I have in my office, and I thought about whether it facilitated the creation of sacred space. Are these things that I need and truly benefit from having around, or are they clutter that distracts me and distances me from reaching my goals and aspirations?

In Jewish life, sacred spaces take many forms. Perhaps the most obvious one is the *beit k'nesset*, the synagogue sanctuary. Not all sanctuaries look alike, but there are shared features amongst them: an ark to safeguard the Torah, an eternal flame to remind us of the ancient Jerusalem Temple, seating for the congregation, and a place for the leader to stand. The Talmud suggests that these synagogues and houses of worship are like a *mikdash me'at*, a miniature Temple, built around the world and working to enhance Jewish lives even in the furthest reaches of the Diaspora.³ Despite the similarities of synagogues, we all know that some sanctuaries feel more sacred than others. Perhaps it is because of our personal attachment such as family history, or a *yahrzeit* or dedication plaque. Or, the space itself is conducive to enhancing spiritual moments. The seating might be in the round, rather than forward-facing, which allows worshippers to see each other's faces, rather than the backs of their heads. In the words of a poet greater than I, some sanctuaries really do feel like "the room where it happens." It feels like a place where meaningful spiritual connection is built.

² Marie Kondo, *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, p. 161.

³ Megillah 29a on Ezekiel 11:16.

But sacred space is not confined to the four walls of a synagogue. Jewish summer camps create sacred space outdoors, without much embellishment or adornment. Many of us find peace, tranquility, and spirituality in nature, surrounded by the beauty of the world gifted to us by our Creator. And our homes, what George Carlin flippantly refers to as boxes with lids for our stuff, in truth have the potential to transform into sacred spaces. We affix *mezuzot* to the doors of our homes to demarcate sacred space with God's blessing. In the Talmud, our Sages compare our kitchen tables to the altar of the ancient Jerusalem Temple upon which the priests would offer sacrifice.⁴ When it stood two millennia ago, the Temple altar functioned as a place for us to seek atonement from God for wrongdoing, and to thereby repair our connection with the Divine. In its place today stands our kitchen table. We build a relationship with God by placing only certain foods upon it, and by opening our hands to those who are less fortunate by sharing a meal with them.

In their infinite wisdom, the Sages of the Talmud responded to the destruction of the ancient Jerusalem Temples *not* by declaring that sanctity and holiness have departed from this world, but by transferring holiness, *kedushah*, into the homes of each and every Jewish family. *Collectively*, we stand in prayer and worship God within the beautiful edifices of our own construction. *Individually*, we sit at our kitchen tables and bring God's Presence into our lives through what we serve and to whom we offer the labor of our hands.

We learn from all of this that we each have the capacity to create sacred space, by surrounding ourselves with that which bring us joy and happiness, with that which enables us to foster relationships with each other and with God.

⁴ Hagigah 27a and Menachot 97a.

During *Musaf* we will hear Cantor Ilana Wolpert chant the hallowed words of *Unetaneh Tokef*, “Who by fire and who by water,” we will ask. The refrain is familiar to us: “Repentance, prayer, and righteousness avert the severity of the decree,” וַתְּשׁוּבָה וַתְּפִלָּה וַצְדָקָה מְעַבְרִין אֶת רֵעַ הַגְּזֵרָה. Three things are at our disposal to convince the Holy Blessed One that we should be inscribed in the Book of Life, despite our misdeeds from the year passed: *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*; repentance, prayer, and acts of righteousness. These words originate in a talmudic passage⁵ in which Rabbi Yitzhak teaches that the decree is torn up, not just averted, but torn up by God like a worthless piece of paper, annulled, unrecognizable, forgotten, destroyed. That is the awesome power of repentance, prayer, and righteousness—that it can overturn the decree that God has passed against us.

And in that very same discussion, another opinion is added to the mix, but somehow it fails to make its way into our prayers. From the back of the study hall another voice chimes in and adds, אף שינוי מקום. “You can also say that changing your place, *shinui makom*, is a way of tearing up the Divine decree.” This is based on the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha: “And God said to Abram: Go you out of your county,” and thereafter it is written, “And I will make of you a great nation.” In other words, Abraham’s departure from his birthplace, from a place corrupted by idol worship and immorality, earns him the reward of becoming a great nation. Had he stayed in his place, had he remained unchanged, he would not have merited such an outcome.

⁵ Bavli Rosh Hashanah 16b.

Therefore, we can add a fourth item to the list of things that have the power to transform the Divine decree: *shinui makom*, changing our place. You could read this literally, as Abraham was instructed to leave his physical space behind and travel hundreds of miles to a new land. Or, you could read it as changing the physical space around you, by decluttering your physical space, by creating sacred space, and thereby nurturing a relationship with the Divine. This change of place, this shift in our physical space, influences our inner spiritual lives, and is the first step towards sorting through the clutter of our minds.

Throughout the High Holiday season, from the beginning of the month Elul through the conclusion of Sukkot, we recite the words of Psalm 27 each morning and every night. Dreaming about entering the holy space of the Jerusalem Temple, the author of our psalm prays and says,

(אַחַת שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת ה' (One thing have I asked of God and I ask for it now: that I be permitted to dwell in the House of God all the days of my life (שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית ה' כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי) so that I may gaze on the beauty of God, and tarry forever in the divine sanctuary. (Psalm 27:4).

As my mentor and colleague, Rabbi Martin S. Cohen, writes in his commentary on the Book of Psalms, “the poet wants to cultivate experiential, rather than merely intellectual, knowledge of God.”⁶ Our spiritual lives do not exist only in our thoughts. Spirituality is lived, it is felt, it is experienced. We, like the author of this psalm, strive for that intimate experience of God’s Presence in our lives. And to do so, we must create our own House of God, we must construct our own sacred space. The first step is to live with less, to remove the clutter from our lives, to purge our homes of the things that distract and get in our way. And so today, I lay before you a

⁶ Martin Samuel Cohen, *Our Haven and Our Strength*, p. 78.

challenge: Go home and choose a room. Select a space that you wish to transform into your own sacred space, into your own *mikdash me'at*, your miniature Temple. And then tidy it up, remove from it the stuff that is not meaningful to you, throw out the things that distract, discard all of that clutter. Then you, too, can ask just one thing of God, to dwell in God's Presence all the days of your life, and tarry in your sacred space.

May your efforts bring you to be inscribed in the Book of Life. Shanah tovah!