

Nothing. We Own Nothing.

Rosh Hashanah morning 5770

Stuff. Anyone who knows me knows I like *stuff*. Things. Objects. Collectibles. I like things of beauty. Paintings. Prints. Pottery. Photographs. Posters. I have (if I don't say so myself) one of the largest and most impressive collections of railroad menus from the New York Central System in the country. (I think.) I also collect fossils. Cephalopods. Brachiopods. Trilobites. Especially trilobites. They are the weirdest but coolest looking creatures God ever made. As a boy I collected coins. And stamps. And baseball cards, of course. To this day I still am looking for my baseball card collection, refusing to accept the possibility that my mother actually threw them out. My fantasy is that one day I'll open up a box and there they'll be, still organized, all the Al Kaline cards up front. (I actually think I had the Mickey Mantle "rookie" card when I was in third grade, but I traded it for a Don Mossi—the man with the biggest ears—and a Charlie "Paw-Paw" Maxwell card. It seemed like a pretty good trade at the time.)

I'm not sure why it is I'm so stuck on these *things*. Maybe it's reflective of a deeper insecurity, rooted in an instinctive need to possess, as if having things makes me feel somehow more secure. Maybe I got it from my mother. I love to blame my mother. In my case, though, it's true. My mom (and her family as well) just kept things. Photographs. Documents. China. In my front hall closet are boxes and boxes of *stuff* that belonged to my mother. Some of it goes back as far as the early 19th century. Receipts. Hand-written notes. Programs and brochures. The truth is my mother taught me a reverence for the holiness of objects, the need to preserve and care for them.

Whatever the case, I know that I have this instinctive need, maybe even compulsion, to gather things—and above all, to want to keep them.

I was reminded of this this past August, walking though my (now former) house on Glenridge Parkway. This structure has taken on a rather storied character, largely a result of sermons I have devoted to it and its *stuff* on this bimah, on these days, in years gone by. Standing in the empty living room, for the last time, bereft of all its objects (both inanimate and animate), I was overwhelmed with a profound sense of emptiness. Looking into the dining room, I recalled sitting at the Shabbat dinner table, our first in the new house, surrounded by loved ones, admiring how the William Morris "pomegranate" wallpaper, the deep blue foyer's walls, and the mustardy living room all blended in so perfectly together. Above all I remember thinking at the time how I wanted it all to be *forever*. I remember thinking to myself, I want this to *last* forever.

You know what I mean. How, when you get something you've craved for so long, or something that just seems to be so perfect in your eyes, something that you never thought you'd really *get*, but now that you have it you don't ever want to let it go. No one will ever take this away from me. Like a little child on a birthday wanting to put his arms around all of his toys, no one else can touch them, they're "mine". They'll always be *mine*.

But standing there that day last month, in the echoes of emptiness, the *truth* was starker than I cared to admit. Nothing. I *own* nothing.

This is one of the foundational truths of Judaism. Nothing belongs to us. Not our homes. Not our possessions. Not our spouses, nor our children. Not even ourselves. It's all on loan.

Psalm 24. *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.* How often I'd hear those words as the Torah service would commence. (Page 144. The Union Prayer Book.) For a long time I simply read this text as affirming the preeminence of God. It's about God. God's in charge. But I now think that Psalm 24 is stating an even more primal notion, an idea that precedes all others. Everything is God. That is, every *thing* is God.

Many of you who have studied with me know how often I like to invoke the panentheistic theology of Dov Baer of Mezerich. Panentheism (not to be confused with pantheism) teaches (not God is everywhere but) "everywhere is God." It's also known, particularly in the study of eastern disciplines, as "radical monism". There is only The One. All is God. The chairs we're sitting on (whether it's the nice comfortable green chairs or the white plastic things we call "chairs"), the clothes we're wearing, the air we breathe, our bodies—it's all God. We are all part of the same, the ultimate Unity. Everything is connected. Nothing is separate. Ownership therefore is out of the question, it's out of the equation. In fact ownership is impossible. Nothing can be owned, because to own something would imply separateness.

The theology is a little *Star Wars*-ian. "The Force, Luke. Trust the Force." The truth is George Lukas did his homework when he fashioned the *Star Wars* series, particularly the notion that there is a *force* found within all things from which we can draw strength. The *force* is not outside of us, it's not transcendent; but neither is it immanent or inside of us. Rather we are inside of it. We are a part of it. Collectively—and this is the *big* collective, not just all of *us* but all of everything—we comprise to make the *All*. And to carry the idea to its logical conclusion, the problem with the universe is our disparateness, our lack of cohesiveness, our apartness from that *which seems* apart from us. In fact, it's an illusion. As Richard Rubenstein imagines it, *God is the Ocean and we are the waves*. There might be a moment when we appear separate and distinct, but our momentary independence is no sooner established than it is obliterated. We are all of the same. And, therefore, to try to be separate, to try to own or possess, is to stand in contrast to and exist in violation of the Oneness that we seek.

To own is not merely impossible. To own—that is, to *attempt* to own, to *pretend* to own—is to distance ourselves from ourselves. It might be more correct to say then that our sacred affirmation—*Shema Yisraeil*, which ends *Adonai Echad*—is less a statement than a wish. After all, how else might we explain the seemingly conflicting text from Zechariah which concludes our worship service, *Bayom ha-hu yihiyeh Adonai Echad u'Shmo Echad*—On that day God will be One and God's Name will be One? God's "one-ness" is dependent upon our ability to cleave to the universe from which we so frequently try to distinguish ourselves. And the way in which we do that is by relinquishing our need to own, for it is the ultimate *selfish* act.

Of course you don't have to be a Lurianic kabbalist or a Zen Buddhist to appreciate the burden of the myth of ownership. You don't have to buy into the notion that we are all connected, you need not embrace the mysticism of Dov Baer's radical monism in order to accept the idea that to own is a failing proposition. Torah states it rationally in the very beginning. Genesis, chapter 3: "You are dust—and to dust you will return." Or as Frank Capra put it, *You can't take it with you*. Contrary to that bumper sticker that reads "He who dies with the most toys wins," life is not a competition as to who can amass the most wealth, who can die with the most things. It is the very message of Orson Welles' epic film, *Citizen Kane*. "Rosebud." At film's end, as the camera scans his vast collection of things, amidst the clutter of objects filling a warehouse is a simple, non-descript children's sled—and at the top, the word "Rosebud." The message is clear. We can spend so much of our lives in search of things, somehow believing that they will

bring us happiness. But at the end of his life, surrounded by more objects and things than any one person could conceivably possess, all Charles Foster Kane can say is one word: “Rosebud.” That sled represented all that is sacred in life. The moment. The singular moment when a human being knows happiness and joy in the company of other human beings. It can’t be held onto. It can’t be preserved. It can’t be owned. It can only be experienced. And celebrated. And shared.

But it’s not like you need me to tell you this. This is a universal truth. It permeates our sacred literature. It flows through the plays of Shakespeare. The great filmmakers of Hollywood got rich off of selling its message. (Hopefully, for their sakes, they *bought* it as well.) Deep down we all know that you can’t take it with you. We all know that we own nothing. And yet we spend so much of our time trying to get as much as we can, believing somehow that life will be better. Yet the stuff we collect doesn’t really make life better, does it? *Lehavdil*—on the contrary, our pursuit of things, our drive to own often makes our lives more complex.

None of this should be interpreted, however, as my pushing for a life of asceticism. Remember, I’m the one who likes things. To the best of my knowledge, there is nowhere in our tradition that would suggest that we should eschew the material life. (Although it’s intriguing that there is no word in Hebrew for “thing”; the word the Torah uses to describe a thing or object is *d’var* which means “word”; as if to suggest that ultimately all objects are of no value, only words are enduring.) Torah’s concern is not whether to have but what to do with what we have. It’s not about ownership; it’s about stewardship.

Packing for my move this time around was much different than at any time before. Partly because the longer you live the more stuff you accumulate, and partly because I was moving into much smaller quarters, I was faced for the first time with having to decide what to keep and what to discard—on a large scale. There were questions of furniture and artwork, books and more books. Above all I was confronted with all the stuff I had inherited from my mother—in other words, *her* stuff.

In my front hall closet are boxes and boxes filled with pieces of paper, ribbons from a state fair, the parking stub from Harper Hospital my dad kept the day I was born, the little note paper my grandfather wrote down with the date and cause of the death of his first-born son. In one of those boxes was a handmade book, mostly articles cut and pasted from magazines from the mid-nineteenth century, stuff from Harpers and the like, but nothing that would—in my estimation—be worth keeping. Until, that is, I flipped through the pages. Halfway through the book the clippings stop, and what you find is a ledger. A store ledger tracking every purchase made in my great-great-great grandparents’ store in Perryville, New York in 1848. The entries, in and of themselves, are mundane. But that they are a testament to daily life, the life of one of my ancestors, makes it sacred—especially for its ordinariness. How do you dispose of such *stuff*?

Maybe the biggest crisis of the move was what to do with furniture I had no room for? A beautiful enamel-top Depression era kitchen table. An old metal trunk that had been in the family for generations. I loved them; there just was no room in my new place. And the thought of thrusting them into the 30-yard dumpster made me ill. Thank God I found new owners for them. (You know who you are.) New caretakers. Take *good* care of them. It’s a sacred trust.

This applies to everything we know, to everything we *think* we own. The family heirlooms, the memorabilia, the *objet d’art* we possess, the homes we inhabit. But it applies to those pieces of

our lives that seems not quite within the categories of *stuff* but nevertheless often fall prey to our notions of ownership. It is equally true of our children. We don't own them. They don't belong to us. Rather they are gifts to be treasured and cared for. I often marvel at those of you who have chosen to parent a child not born to you, the sacred trust you take upon yourself in the service of another human being. Should it be any different for those of us who have brought a life into the world? Do we think that just because we participated in the creation of a life that somehow that child belongs to us? Can we be so arrogant as to think that God has nothing to do with the birth of this child? And how much the more so with our own bodies? Are they not also gifts from God? Do we have the right to treat them without regard for their wellbeing, or ought we not care for them the same way we would care for a masterpiece of art?

But there's another piece to this. Even as we affirm that we own nothing, that what we have is on loan, that possession implies stewardship, a sacred obligation to care for what we have, even more—indeed, certainly more to the point is our obligation to share what it is we do have. For if we own nothing, if nothing ultimately belongs to us, and if we are all connected as disparate parts of the One Who Is, then sharing with others is what ultimately sanctifies our lives. *Tzedakah. Chesed.* Acts of love and justice, giving and sharing, are what transform us into vessels of holiness. This is the reason we exist.

This past year has been enormously trying. Who among us has not been impacted by the economic crisis that enveloped our nation and our world? Some have lost their jobs, others have seen their savings dwindle—and the truth is no amount of “we own nothing” can assuage the pain and fear that these losses have evoked. I realize that it's not much consolation to believe that the things we lost didn't really belong to us in the first place. And even as it might help to provide some perspective, even as getting “philosophical” might allow one to see the bigger picture, the wondering when (or *if*) a job will come, the anxiety of not knowing if there will be enough money to pay the mortgage, or the college tuition, or to have enough to live on after retirement takes a profound toll. But it is precisely this environment that brings into relief the deeper reality that we are—or should be—responsible for each other. Moments of crisis become precious opportunities to affirm our humanity, to transcend the needs of the self in the service of the other. Because, after all, the *I* and the *other* are both part of the *One*.

But at the other end of the spectrum are those who not merely fail to understand this truth, they refuse to accept it. For them there is no connection to the *other*, there is no responsibility to the *other*, there is no compassion for the *other*, there is only the *I*. “Greed is good,” says Gordon Gekko. But, of course, it isn't. It's insidious. We all want to live well. There is no shame in desiring a life of pleasure, free from stress and fear. But at what cost? What truly is the measure of our lives? Do we want to be remembered for how much we made? Or how much we gave to others?

This past year has shown us both sides of the equation. We've seen the rich humbled, their names shamed for the rest of their lives. But we also know that these troubled times have brought out the truly generous and compassionate among us. They don't get the headlines. Their names are unknown. But they are there. Helping others to find jobs, offering interest-free loans, providing shelter to the homeless.

No area of the country has been hit harder than southeastern Michigan. The failing auto industry and political corruption have resulted in devastating consequences. Home foreclosures abound. Into this nightmare are a group of latter-day *Robin Hoods*, who smuggle

these newly homeless families—illegally—into the many abandoned homes that saturate the inner city of Detroit.

And herein is the essence of the matter. I know of nothing more symbolic of *ownership* than the desire to own a home. To be able to call a plot of land one's own. For so many it is the ultimate goal, both on the international level (as so readily seen in nation-state conflicts) as well as on the individual level, the dream of owning property seems inherent to our nature. But I wonder if it is also not at the core of our undoing? I wonder if—in our pursuit to own, to possess, to have—we have not made vulnerable our souls to foreclosure? I wonder if in our desire to acquire we, in fact, lose the only thing we can ever really own—our humanity?

I know of no Torah portions that are more provocative and controversial than the ones we read on these two days of *Rosh Hashanah*. And there's a reason why we read these portions on *these* days. Today we read of how Abraham abandoned his son Ishmael to the wilderness with the consent of God. Tomorrow we will read of how God commands Abraham to take his other son Isaac and offer him up as a sacrifice. Both tales profoundly challenge our sense of right and wrong. But in our discomfort I wonder if perhaps we miss the point? What if the texts are not at their core about the ethics of abandonment and human sacrifice? What if the tales are not about the ethics of right and wrong but rather the ethics of who and what belongs to whom? Perhaps the stories are here to remind Abraham—and us—that Ishmael and Isaac do not really belong to him, nor does the promise of his progeny or the land that he is on; they all belong to God. Everything belongs to God. All that we have is but lent to us. Our possessions. Our loved ones. Our very own lives. They're all on loan. Perhaps this is the lesson Torah is trying to teach us? Perhaps this is the lesson of Torah? Nothing. We own nothing. It's not what we have; it's what we give. It's not what we can amass; it's what we are willing to share. Just imagine how much easier life would be were we able to truly assimilate this truth. Just imagine how much better the world would be if everyone based their lives on this premise...

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.