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Parashat B'har

What does it mean to leave one's home?

A few years ago, I did something I never thought I would ever do. I helped my parents clean out their house of 30 years. My childhood home. I never thought I would ever do it because that house was always there. It was a rock in my life. It was my home base even though I have a home of my own now. I just expected it would always be there for me.

Although it was an emotional experience, especially leaving my home for the last time and looking out the car window as we drove down the block (which felt like the final scene from a movie I'm sure we've all watched), it was also a fulfilling experience. Going through hoards of papers and pictures and things, so many things, I had the opportunity to reflect on my life and share my memories with my parents. Some even brought us to tears, mostly from laughter.

Looking at old birthday cards, term papers and report cards, art projects, class pictures, letters from camp and various mementos collected over the years, I became thankful that my parents had done two things; the first—that they kept everything. And the second—that they decided to move and clean house. This purging process allowed me to review my life from infancy to the present. The funny thing is, had this move not been in the works, I would not have had this opportunity, at least not under these relatively decent conditions.

Throughout this whole process, I asked myself “What does it mean to leave one's home?” Is it simply just the physical relocation from one place to another? Could it entail a spiritual journey as well, a la Abraham and the Lech Lecha story in Genesis? Or might it be about leaving behind the stuff, but not the people and memories? I tend to think that it entails all of these aspects. The most challenging part, however, is the third piece. Figuring out what to take with you and what to leave behind is no easy task, especially when you keep everything.

My great grandparents were faced with this dilemma of what to take with them and what to leave behind. Some of you have heard parts of this story by now. My family fled Lithuania in the first couple years of the 20th century from pogroms in search of a better life. With little time to pack their belongings in order to cross a border and board a ship (a story not so uncommon to our Jewish narrative), they chose to smuggle their family Torah and leave everything else in their home for the taking. Leaving their home was both a frightening and necessary event. In a split second, they had to choose what meant most to them, and they chose the Torah. This story has become integral to my family. It certainly includes all the aspects of leaving one's home; a physical relocation, a spiritual journey and a valuing of possessions.

We leave our homes for various reasons. We leave in a rite of passage when we go off to college. We leave when we get relocated for work. We leave when we can't afford our homes any longer. We leave when we can't take care of ourselves any more, and we leave when it seems that the world is conspiring against us for no reason at all.

Leaving one's home for good, whether intentionally or not, can be a harrowing experience. Unfortunately, I cannot understate that enough for all the people who have been affected by the recent mudslide in Oso. Mud and debris travelled across the North Fork of the Stillaquamish River, destroying nearly 50 homes and killing 40 plus people. A month later we saw the devastation brought upon the midwest and south when a tornado left scores of homes completed demolished. This kind of trauma cannot be contained in words.

Saying that our possessions are just things and that a house is really just wood and bricks makes light of the situation. This week's Torah portion, B'har teaches us that we are only guests in this world and God is, in essence, our landlord. Everything we own is really God's. Getting caught up in acquiring things such as property and money is not how we should lead our lives. But our belongings do mean something to us. Our homes especially have great significance for us. It is in our homes where lasting memories and relationships are made. Although I agree that we should not strive for a materialistic culture, it cannot be denied that there is value in our material goods. The sentimental value is priceless. Though a house can be replaced, a home is irreplaceable.

The problem is when we think everything has sentimental value. This makes the leaving process so much more complicated, under any circumstance. For example, I found about 10 half dollar coins in my old room and mentioned to my parents I was going to use them to buy something. It was free money, like finding a 10-dollar bill in an old pair of jeans. They informed me that those were actually from the "tooth fairy" who visited me when I was 5, perhaps, and for a moment they became teary-eyed. Could I spend those on a deli sandwich? I also discovered a San Francisco Chronicle newspaper from the day I was born. It was still folded with a dried up rubber band around the now pale yellow paper.

What is it about keeping everything? Of course, our possessions hold much sentimental value for us. They remind us of specific moments, places, and people in our lives. But what good are they if they are left in the garage only to collect dust and cobwebs? Now, sorting through all this "stuff" is a painstaking activity. It's a real job. But it also shows us where we've been and how we got here. Leviticus 26:10 says, "you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new." On face value, this seems like great advice. However, perhaps we are being taught that there is a place for the new in the midst of the old. One does not replace the other. One cannot replace the other. We need both to nourish our lives. A complete eradication of the old will only bring heartache.

While the Torah portion teaches us that what we have really belongs to God, it also teaches us about a very interesting concept; the Sabbatical Year. For one in every seven years, the soil of the land is to be untilled. As people are to rest on the seventh day, so too should the land rest in the seventh year. Now, while many of us do not own farms that we can allow to lay fallow for a year, we can do another kind of Sabbatical ritual. Every seventh year, we can purge our homes of what we have accumulated over the years. What we don't need we give to those that need it. How many of us have sweaters in the closet that we haven't worn in years (raise your hands), but we don't give them away because of one reason or another?

Cleaning the house every seven years by recycling paperwork and old bills, organizing pictures, going through the closets, etc., will also allow us to reflect on our lives. Have we done the things we set out to? Have we changed our ways? Have we become the people we wanted to become? It can be a very therapeutic activity, so long as it is done on a regular basis and not that one time under distress and grief. Getting rid of all this stuff we have is not necessarily equivalent to abstaining from work as what the Sabbatical year is all about. However, it can bring us peace of mind and a sense of shalom or wholeness.

My prayer tonight is that when the time comes for us to clean out our homes we see it as a spiritual process; we experience it not as a stressful time but a time filled with joyful tears. When the time comes, for whatever reason, we acknowledge how lucky we are that we began the purging process years earlier. I also pray that others will find joy and comfort in the things that we once found pleasure in. And finally, I pray that through these transitions in our lives we learn things about ourselves and our loved ones that will stay with us forever.