

Once upon a time, there were two brothers. They came from a wealthy East coast family and were well-educated, having both attended Columbia University. But in March of 1947, police were called to investigate the Manhattan brownstone in which they lived together. Neighbors had reported the death of one of the brothers.

When officers arrived at their home, they found the brownstone un-enter-able. Both the front and the back door were blocked. Three hours after their arrival, police gained entrance, via a small window on the second floor of the building. But once they were inside, the officer could barely move – the entire house was full, literally to the brim, with **stuff**.

It took workers three days to find the body of the elder brother, and another two and a half weeks for them to find the body of the second brother. In their attempt to clear out the space for eventual reuse, they removed more than 170 tons of “stuff”, including fourteen grand pianos and a Model T Ford.

Dr. Randy Frost, a professor of psychology at Smith College, opens his book “Stuff” with this scary but true tale of Langley and Homer Collyer as an introduction to his research findings on the psychology of compulsive hoarding.

Now, obviously this is an extreme example, but Frost does point out the human tendency to collect, to gather things around us. It makes us feel safe, protected. Even more importantly, the things we gather take on meaning and become individually significant to us - they become pieces of our narrative, artifacts that help us tell our story. Early 20th century psychologist William James wrote: “It is clear that between what a man calls ‘me’ and what he simply calls ‘mine’ the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves.” In short, we are what we own.

I happened upon an estate sale last week and, being a sucker for garage-sale-ing, I stopped in. The couple hosting the sale looked to be in their early 50s, and their impeccably manicured lawn was covered in beautiful silk kimonos and hand-painted pottery from Japan, linens and cookery and art books you only buy in museum gift shops. A fellow shopper asked where everything had come from and the husband replied that he had lived in Kyoto for about 25 years. Overhearing this, I smiled. He had confirmed the tale I had put together in my head – a person needed only to look around the yard for the story his possessions told.

Judaism also recognizes the importance we give to our belongings. Deuteronomy 22 verses 1-3 commands us both to pay attention to items we find along our way and to return them to their rightful owner. 13th century Rabbi Menachem ben Benjamin Recanati comments on these verses, saying: “people often value possessions as much as life itself. Therefore, when they lose something that has a special distinction, they are likely to feel great pain, as if a life has been

lost.”

Rabbi Recanati has, in essence, placed the importance of an inanimate object on the same level as human life. This is decidedly hyperbolic - I doubt Recanati truly believed that a lost sock would cause a person as much anxiety as if a friend of hers suddenly went missing. That being said, I think it is safe to say that we all own at least one “something” we would be devastated to lose - a gift from a grandparent, or perhaps a grandchild; an item that has been with you through thick and thin.

For compulsive hoarders, every possession retains that heightened value; hoarders are unable to differentiate between “which features [of an object] were important and which were unimportant”. It is for this reason that a hoarder home is often filled with seemingly insignificant items; piles of old newspaper, odds and ends, handles that are no longer attached to the doors and cabinets they used to open.

Compulsive hoarders hide, sometimes literally, behind and within those things, creating very real walls of belongings to block them from a world in which they feel unsafe and insecure. The items they fill their homes with simultaneously ground them and stifle them. Owning things allows them to feel worthwhile, but the sheer amount of things they own renders most of it unusable - there simply isn't enough time in the day to read all of the newspapers they have collected, or wear all of the clothing they own. And they are unable to rid themselves of these things, because they assign special significance and meaning to each individual item.

Now, while many people are collectors, most of us are not compulsive hoarders. And because we are not subject to the symptoms of hoarding, we are able to differentiate between those items that remain important to us and those that have lost their significance or are no longer of use. We are able to purge, to evaluate our belongings and downsize. We go through our closets and our bookshelves, drive garbage bags full of “stuff” to be donated, and return home feeling lighter. The phenomenon of “spring cleaning” exists for a reason, after all!

But how often do we do the same for those intangible “things” we are holding on to? How often do we hide, mentally, behind inner walls of metaphorical “newspapers”, walls piled high with regrets and resentment, old hurts and pains. Anger. Denial.

Very few people in the world are afflicted with the compulsive hoarding of actual “things”, but I would venture to guess that far more of us are afflicted with a hoarding of emotional “things”. We bear grudges, and we keep checklists - “what have you done for me lately?”

We think of how well we have treated our friends and relatives and we become frustrated that

they have not reciprocated in kind. We hold on to our version of the story until we no longer remember when the story began, what came before or after; we are only able to recall the piece that made us angry, the perceived transgression of the other person. And the more anger and resentment we hold inside of ourselves, the higher our inner piles of “stuff” grow.

Dr. Frost writes about a concept called “churning”. This is the hoarder’s process of attempting to pare down their piles of belongings. They will pick something up, say a newspaper clipping. It will remind them of the friend they originally intended to give it to, three years ago. They then place that article on top of the pile, where they can see it. Putting it at the top, they think, will remind them to deliver the article to the friend. But then they pick up the next item in the pile, and the process repeats itself. The pile never shrinks, it just gets re-sorted, churned.

We do similar things with our inner “stuff” piles; we look at our bad habits, our old grudges, those those seemingly intangible goals we know we want to reach. Once in awhile (perhaps once a year, somewhere around this time * winkwink *) we have a soul-searching moment and pledge that we will rid ourselves of the habit, let go of our old grudges, and take steps to actually achieve our lofty long-held goals.

But so often, we let ourselves off of the hook too soon; we fall back into the habit, the grudge flairs back up, and we fail to continue up the steps toward our goal. And so on and so on. The inner churning continues, until there are so many frustrations and regrets and angers rolling around in our head that we can no longer think straight!

On Rosh Hashana, we are supposed to examine each and every one of these frustrations and regrets and angers. We are to pick up each newspaper clipping, no matter how long it has been sitting on our table, and complete the action it was intended for.

Sometimes that means throwing it away, letting it and all of its possibilities go.

Maybe that cooking class you wanted to take? It sounded like a lot of fun, but it took up a lot of time and if you’re being honest with yourself, you don’t like the idea of all of the time cooking takes in general, especially now that microwaves exist! Rosh Hashana is the time to truly let go of the desire to take that class. It isn’t just about cancelling your enrollment in the class. Truly letting go means that you also have to stop beating yourself up for not making the time to take the class. It means recognizing that for you, this class actually was not worth it. THIS is what allows you to remove it entirely from your inner pile.

On the other hand, perhaps when you re-visit the cooking class you wanted to take, you are reminded that your aunt used to make the BEST casseroles and that ever since you have also

wanted to make great casseroles but have no clue how to begin. Rosh Hashana is the time to re-register for that class, to commit to attending every single session, to make it a priority. This ALSO allows you to remove it from your inner pile.

Obviously, my example is a fairly safe one; it is not up to me to call us all out on our individual failings or misgivings, our unrealized hopes and dreams. But we know what they are. We know what our inner piles consist of.

And what I'm saying is, regardless of what you choose to do with each item that contributes to your inner piles, these next ten days are the time to DO IT. The YamimNoraim, the Days of Awe, are all about clearing the clutter so that we can see our inner desktop again, removing the weights from off of our chests so that we can breathe deeply again.

According to 19th century hasidic text *SefatEmet*, "the human heart is the tablet on which God writes. Each of us has the word *life* engraved in our hearts by God's own hand. Over the course of the year, that engraving comes to be covered with grit....on Rosh HaShana we come before God, having cleansed ourselves as best we can [throughout Elul], and ask God to write that word once again...so that the sensation of being truly alive...may not depart from us through the entire year." (citation: Arthur Green, 1995 forward to Agnon's Days of Awe)

What does the sensation of being truly alive feel like? What does it feel like to have the word "life" re-inscribed on our hearts?

As we celebrate Rosh Hashana and move into the YamimNoraim, let's look at our inner newspaper piles, our years worth of collected grit, and let's make sure we don't have too many grand pianos hanging around like our friends the Collyer Brothers!

More importantly, let's take a step past the categorizing of our piles. Let's actively cut through them; on the one hand, let's be honest with ourselves about what is worth holding onto and moving forward with. On the other hand, let's identify those things that hold us when we continue to hold on to them.

Let's get accustomed to breathing deeply. Let's rediscover that sensation of being truly alive.

Kenyhiratzon