

## What We Carry – Rosh Hashana morning 5782

What do you carry?

There is a scene in a Superman movie where Lois Lane defends herself against a purse snatcher, and Superman, with his ability to see through anything except lead, says to Lois that risking her life isn't worth five dollars and 23 cents, a hairbrush, a handkerchief, a pack of gum, and a lipstick. Superman, of course, knew the contents of her purse and what she carried around.

But what DO we carry?

First, let's address the "stuff" we carry. Some of it is quite important and says something about who we are.

A musician may carry their guitar, or flute. A golfer may keep their clubs in the car, an artist may always be carrying around brushes or pen and ink. A writer, voice recorder or pen and paper. A student, their books and homework. We all seem to carry our phone. Whether we do or not may speak volumes about our day and age, but also of our comfort with technology, and being accessible, or tethered. And on these phones there are apps that say a great deal about our interests and what is important to us.

Take a moment, think about a few of the things you carry – the physical items... Is there a relationship between what you carry and your work, your interests, your hobbies, what is important to you?

Next, let's address what we carry that isn't "stuff". We carry many things. We carry love, connection, relationships, hopes, dreams, plans, and memories. Some of us carry a child, a toddler, this too isn't carrying "stuff" – this is carrying that is sacred carrying – the caring for a child, the caring for a soul. Take a moment to reflect on what you carry.

We are each sacred vessels, we carry that which is truly meaningful in life. Some of what we carry is filled with promise, is joyous, some of what we carry is bittersweet with love and loss.

When Moses left Egypt, he became a shepherd. A shepherd carries a staff, and it was this same staff that his brother Aaron used to turn the Nile into blood, and

Moses carried this same staff, to shepherd the Israelites for 40 years in the desert on their way to the Promised Land.

Moses carried down the tablets of the covenant from Mt. Sinai. The Levites carried the tent of meeting and the Kohanim carried the ark which contained the tablets, both sets of tablets, from Mt. Sinai into the Promised Land. What they carried had holy purpose.

In the V'ahavta it says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with everything that you are. Place these words upon your heart." Later, in Deut 30 it says, "These words are not in the heavens...but are in your heart and in your mind to do them." This is a reminder for us to carry that which is sacred in life, and which reminds us that we are sacred vessels. As Jews, we carry these words, and are to strive to live our lives shaped by them. In turn, these words say something about who we are, and give our lives meaning.

Take a moment and consider what you carry – the words, thoughts, memories that you carry, some things that nurture you and honor your soul. Take another moment and consider what you carry – the words, thoughts, memories that you carry that does not nurture you and does not shape your life in a meaningful way. What is that intangible question that lingers behind everything. I believe that we each have a nagging question...am I doing this right? What have I done wrong? Did I mess up? These High Holy Days carry some semblance of these questions – where have I erred, what sins have I committed, where have I missed the mark? To whom do I need to apologize? To myself? To God? Perhaps what is there is closed, inaccessible. Perhaps a thought that I have done nothing wrong, perhaps my heart has become hardened, and I am impatient with all this.

What we carry, perhaps even hidden from our awareness, are thoughts, assumptions, and decisions that instead of making us each a better person, instead, stifles our soul, and inhibits our creativity and joy. Am I doing this right? What have I done wrong? Did I mess up? Or perhaps there is the certainty that I most certainly did not mess up, I have nothing to change.

We might wonder, why does it say place these words "upon" your heart? Menachem Mendel Morgenstern (1787-1859), the Kotzker Rebbe has a brilliant interpretation of this. A hard heart, a stony heart is usually sealed shut, and it is

hard to place anything, including Torah, within it. But when we place these words “upon” our heart, there will be moments when the heart breaks open, even for an instant, and in that holy moment, the words of Torah will enter into the heart and begin to shape and nurture the soul.

Sometimes our hearts are so hurt and closed we become miserable and ashamed. Here is a story that is told in many traditions:

An elderly woman completed a daily trek to the stream past her home and back to supply her family with fresh water. In order to do this, she fashioned a heavy pot on each end of a long pole, which she carried across her shoulders.

One of the pots was in perfect condition and always delivered a full portion of water. The other had a deep crack in it, causing water to leak out. At the end of the long walk, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

This situation occurred daily for two years, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it had perceived to be bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the woman by the stream. “I am ashamed,” it said. “This crack in my side causes water to leak out. You work so hard and yet have little water once you return home.”

The old woman smiled and replied, “Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path? I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path. Every day, while we walked back home, you watered those seeds and helped them to grow. For two years, I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table and give to neighbors. Without you being just the way you are, there would not have been this special beauty to grace our homes and lives.”

We can pick these questions up, address them, and then put them down, especially if they do not nurture our soul. There are questions, thoughts, memories, certainties that should be questioned, and we do not have to carry them like a shadow over our very soul. These questions are meant to check in with, not to carry.

On this day of Rosh Hashanah, and in the next couple of days, I encourage you to take some time to consider the things you carry that do not nurture you. Things that someone said, or did that hurt you, thoughts about yourself that do not

nurture you, and do Tashlich – meaning, cast them away. Traditionally we take breadcrumbs and throw them into a lake or other body of water, or alternatively, throw bird seed to the birds, or even dish soap into a basin of water, and in this way symbolically cast away those things that we no longer wish to carry, especially those things that do not nurture us.

The following is a story by Adam Fisher<sup>1</sup>:

It was a bright day in Jerusalem and Eleazar the priest was thankful for the warm sun after the chilly winter. He washed, prayed, and then studied. Before he went to the Temple, he put money into a box for the poor. On his way to the Temple he visited a sick neighbor. All of these acts were part of his careful preparation for the offering of sacrifices in the Temple. He knew that he had to try to be a good person, or the sacrifices would be meaningless.

On this morning Reuben came to offer a goat as a sin offering, that is an offering to God to show how bad he felt for having done wrong. Reuben was a tall, thin man with a purple coat and a round hat. Eleazar asked him what he had done wrong. Reuben told him that he had cheated someone. A man had come into his shop and paid for the best quality barley. Eleazar asked Reuben if he had refunded the money or given the man the proper barley. Reuben told him he had not. “That’s why I am bringing an offering. I don’t want God to be angry with me.” Eleazar told him to go and give the man back his money. After he did that, he could offer a sacrifice to ask God’s forgiveness.

But Reuben protested, “I want to bring the sacrifice instead of giving the money back. It would be embarrassing to go to the customer. Word might get around that I cannot be trusted. The customer lives far away, and it would be inconvenient to get to him. Besides I don’t have much money and I cannot afford to repay him. You know, business is business.”

Eleazar told him, “The man and everyone else would probably consider you more honest if you repaid the money.”

Reuben suggested, “Suppose I give the money to the poor instead of to the customer. Then the people who need it most would be helped.”

Eleazar was firm: “First you have to repay the person you cheated even if you pay him back a little at a time. Only then can you offer a sacrifice to show God how sorry you are.”

Reuben left grumbling.

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<sup>1</sup> God’s Garden: Children’s Stories Grown from the Bible by Adam Fisher, pp 81-83.

Sarah, a tall, thin woman came to Eleazar. "I am a teacher, and I insulted a student in front of the class. I called him stupid, and I feel very bad about doing that. I didn't mean to say anything nasty to him, but I was angry with him for not doing his homework. The words came out before I could stop them, and I want to offer a sacrifice to God."

"Did you apologize to the student?" "No," said Sarah.

"Did you tell the other students in the class that you are sorry?" "No."

"Then you cannot offer a sacrifice. You have to apologize first and then go to the people who heard the insult and tell them that you were wrong. Then you can come back to offer a sacrifice."

"But I can't do that. It would be humiliating to apologize to him in front of the class. Besides, it was partly his fault. He didn't do his homework."

"But you did insult him."

"I'm sorry I just can't do it. Let me offer the sacrifice."

"No. You cannot offer a sacrifice until you speak to the student and the class. Sin offerings are only for when you have already done your best for the person you wronged. Then you can ask God for forgiveness."

"Okay, I'll try but it won't be easy."

Sarah came back a few days later and told Eleazar that she had apologized in front of the class and not only did this student thank her and say he would be careful about the homework, but she added, "All the students seemed to respect me more!"

Joyfully Eleazar offered the sacrifice to God.

Later that day an old man named Joseph came to Eleazar. He was leaning on a cane. He said, "Many years ago I picked up a piece of wood and hit a man. I hit him hard. In those days I really had a temper, and I was very strong. The man fell down and hurt his back. He couldn't work for many months. I ran away to the next town where no one knew me. I started a new life. I had forgotten about the incident until recently when someone did the same thing to my son. He can't work and he has a hard time trying to learn a living. That is why I want to bring a sacrifice. I want God to understand how sorry I feel for what I did."

Eleazar listened carefully and asked, "Have you tried to help the man you hit? Did you pay him for the time he could not work?"

"I looked all over for him, and I finally found him. I went to see him, and he told me that it took him three months to recover. I saved and paid him for the time he lost at work. The man was very surprised and didn't even want to take the money.

He said it happened such a long time ago and he didn't need the money now. But I insisted, and he took the money. Now I want to show God how sorry I am and ask God to forgive me.”

For this man Eleazar offered the sacrifice to God. As he did, the man seemed to look younger. He stood up straighter. He smiled and sang a song of praise to God.

Yes, this is a simple children’s story, and what does this teach us?

Sometimes we carry the burden of having wronged other people, but before we can ask God to forgive us, we must try to make amends to the person we have hurt.

Choose what you carry wisely. What we carry – both physical, and incorporeal, matter.

When we carry something physical, its tactile nature reminds us of our commitments, our interests, and helps us direct our attention and actions. Choose what you carry wisely.

It is also very human to carry complaints, criticisms, and condemnations. The three “C’s” I call them. Joseph Telushkin in his book of “Telushkinisms” suggests going on a one week fast from complaining. When we cease complaining we discover gratitude, which is the secret ingredient to happiness. For extra credit, take on a fast of the three “C’s”: Complaints, criticisms, and condemnations. Try it. These are just examples of the intangibles that really are optional – we don’t need to carry them.

We have the capacity to be sacred vessels and conduits of the Divine.

When the artist has no sketch pad and pencil, and the moment of inspiration comes, she cannot be the vessel through which Divine inspiration can become realized into this physical world. When the musician’s instrument is at a distance, the music of the universe that comes to him may be as a passing breeze, and gone with the wind, back into the universe waiting still to be realized. When what we carry gives us purpose, we become sacred vessels and conduits of the Divine.

I want to share one more story – I am not quoting precisely – I want to share my takeaway of just one or two pages in a very special book which was the source of inspiration for this sermon. Earlier this summer I was read a Mitch Albom book – I love his books – they’re filled with stories of meaning and what it really is to be

human. I picked up his book, "Chika." Chika is a story about a young Haitian girl living in an orphanage that Mitch and his wife support and visit monthly. Chika becomes ill with a rare cancer, and after exhausting treatments in Haiti, Mitch and his wife bring Chika to New York to live with them and get her treatment. Mitch is not only an author, but a sportswriter. Chika's treatments caused her to gain weight even as she was becoming weaker and weaker. She could no longer walk or stand on her own, but her spirit and her vivacious nature were strong. Super Bowl Sunday was approaching, a sports event that Mitch had attended and written about professionally without missing a single one, for many years. The day he was to leave, Chika said no, he couldn't leave. Mitch was dumbfounded. Of course he had to go to report on the game, that's his job. Stronger, and more insistent, Chika replied, "No, that's not your job. Your job is to carry me." She was right. His wife was not strong enough to lift Chika, it was his job. I saw, reading his words, that his identity, his soul's purpose for that time, was to carry Chika. He was the closest thing to being a father that she had ever known, and for the rest of her short life, that was his purpose.

Choose what you carry wisely.

Sometimes what we carry chooses us, if we say yes.

We have the capacity to be sacred vessels and conduits of the Divine.

When we are sacred vessels and conduits of the Divine, we bring healing to the world, fulfill our purpose, and bring life meaning.

Over these Yamim Noraim, Days of Awe, these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have these days to make amends, ask for forgiveness, reflect on what we carry, and do tashlich, symbolically cast into the water that which we do not want to carry, including resentments, regrets, anxiety, anger, sadness, our sins, and truly cast them away. In this way, we lighten our hearts and souls, enabling us to choose what we carry wisely, and return to our truest selves in this new year of 5782.

Shana Tovah tikatevu v'teichateimu,

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