



Kol Nidre 5778: Letting Go

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Grandma Tonia was a formidable woman. As Israeli author Meir Shalev describes his grandmother in his memoir, she arrived in Palestine from Russia on a boat in 1923 and proceeded to go to war. Against what? Against all the dirt in the land of Israel. In her small house, she kept two locked rooms filled with furniture protected by sheets, and with chairs that only saw freedom at the Passover seder. Her American brother-in-law sent her a vacuum cleaner, which she refused to use once she figured out that as a consequence of cleaning, it would get dirty inside. “It’s dirty,” she said... “Inside my house. An appliance filled with dirt.”¹ There was no worse treachery. And so the vacuum cleaner was locked up with the chairs.

We often think of Passover as the holiday for spring cleaning, and it’s true; even the notes in the kotel, the Western Wall, are removed to make more space before Pesach. But the notes in the kotel are removed before the High Holy Days as well.² This too is a season for cleaning, for discarding some things to make room for others.

At Tashlich on Rosh Hashanah, we gathered at Westmount Park, casting bits of bread into the water, symbolically throwing away the residue of the year that is past. One of our younger members also threw his shoes in the water, giving a whole new meaning to *tshoe-va*, repentance and return.³

Tonight we say Kol Nidre. May all the vows we make, from this Yom Kippur to the next, be null and void if we can’t fulfill them. May they too be cast away.

Tomorrow, the traditional Yom Kippur Torah morning reading describes the original scapegoat, sent out into the wilderness weighed down with our ancestors’ sins.

This is the time when, like Grandma Tonia and her vacuum cleaner, we look to clean the schmutz that is inside; we aim to declutter our lives.

Grandma Tonia’s spiritual descendent could be Marie Kondo, the best-selling author of “The Life-Changing Magic of Cleaning Up.” It was given to me as a gift a few years ago, when it first reached North America from Japan. The book has been described as “a tidy blend of confessional autobiography, life philosophy, decluttering strategies, and clothes-folding tips,”⁴ and Kondo herself has been called, “Japan’s preeminent guru of tidiness, a warrior princess in

¹ Meir Shalev, *My Russian Grandmother and her American Vacuum Cleaner: A Memoir* (New York, 2011), p.150.

² Ari Rabinovich, “Where Do All the Prayer Notes Go?” *Reuters*, Sept. 2, 2007. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-prayers/where-do-all-the-prayer-notes-go-idUSL142274520070903>

³ With thanks to Brian Rubineau for this joke, and to Oscar for inspiring it.

⁴ Barry Yourgrau, “The Origin Story of Marie Kondo’s Decluttering Empire,” *The New Yorker*, Dec. 8, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-origin-story-of-marie-kondos-decluttering-empire>



the war on clutter.”⁵ The basic idea is that each and every item you own should be assessed according to this question: “Does it spark joy?” If so, you keep it. If not, you discard – or, rather, you hold it, you thank it, and you let it go.

I confess that for the most part, this book has neither sparked joy in me, nor inspired me to declutter. Rather, it has just added to my own domestic untidiness; a book on a pile of books. Marie Kondo’s notion that books should be read immediately or discarded crosses a serious rabbinic line.

Her approach, it should be noted, has been widely spoofed. My favourite was the meme that said, “I tried the Japanese method of decluttering where you hold every object that you own and if it does not bring you joy, you throw it away. So far I have thrown out all of my vegetables, my bra, the electric bill, the scale, a mirror, and my treadmill.” I also have a soft spot for the woman who wrote, “I can’t throw away this Minnie Mouse doll because my daughter would cry, and I can’t put it away because first I need to sew the bow back on, and I can’t do that because I have a baby in my arms.”⁶ That one is from an article entitled, “The Real Reasons Marie Kondo’s Life-Changing Magic Doesn’t Work for Parents.”

On a more serious note, many have pointed out that the freedom to discard stuff requires confidence in one’s ability to replace it. In an article entitled “Marie Kondo and the Privilege of Clutter,” Arielle Bernstein writes about how being the daughter and granddaughter of Jewish refugees, first from Europe and then from Cuba, has shaped her perspective:

...in order to feel comfortable throwing out all your old socks and handbags, you have to feel pretty confident that you can easily get new ones. Embracing a minimalist lifestyle is an act of trust... The idea that going through items cheerfully evaluating whether or not objects inspire happiness is fraught for a family like mine, for whom cherished items have historically been taken away. For my grandparents, the question wasn’t whether an item sparked joy, but whether it was necessary for their survival.⁷

For most of us, though, there is something appealing about decluttering; about the vision of a perfect home. Something to aspire to, with the ambition of a New Year. A friend who I respect recently rolled her sleeves up and attempted Kondo’s technique. “I’m fifty pages into the book and I hate it,” she wrote me, “so it must be a good idea...” Countless trash bags later, she has become one of many adherents.

⁵ *The London Times*.

⁶ Tanya C. Snider, “The Real Reasons Marie Kondo’s Life-Changing Magic Doesn’t Work for Parents,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 14, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2016/01/14/the-real-reason-marie-kondos-life-changing-magic-doesnt-work-for-parents/?utm_term=.65cbc0c09d52

⁷ Arielle Bernstein, “Marie Kondo and the Privilege of Clutter,” *The Atlantic*, March 25, 2016.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/marie-kondo-and-the-privilege-of-clutter/475266/>



“The best way to find out what we really need,” Kondo writes, “is to get rid of what we don’t.”⁸

So I ask you, on this night: what do we actually need?

This year, I was struck by two contrasting stories. One was of Silicon Valley billionaires, buying real estate in silos in the Midwest which they furnish as post-apocalyptic bunkers, to escape to if the poor rise up against the rich, or other disaster comes. “Survival of the Richest,” the New Yorker article was called, and it documents the belief that those with the most stuff will in fact win the human race, flying to their private silos in their private planes.⁹

The other story, at the opposite extreme, is of the Salwens, a family who sold their house and bought one half its size, giving the difference to charity. The impetus? As their family car was waiting at a red light, they saw a homeless man sitting in front of a rusting wire fence holding a cardboard sign. On the side of Hannah, the fourteen-year-old daughter, a man was sitting in a black Mercedes convertible:

Kevin [the father] noticed his daughter’s head turning from left to right. Finally, she spoke: “If that man had a less nice car, that man there could have a meal.” Sensing he could use the occasion to teach his daughter something, Kevin replied, “Yes. But you know if we had a less nice car, he could have a meal.”

Speaking at home later that night, Joan, Hannah’s mother, asked her:

“What do you want to do? Sell our house? Move into a smaller one and give what’s left over to charity?” Without batting an eyelid, Hannah said yes. “I’ll give up my bedroom. Dude, we should definitely do this. We should sell the house and give away the money. Definitely.”¹⁰

As her brother Joe, a more reluctant participant, later said, “One day my sister got outraged about hunger. Now we’re selling our house.”

The prophet Isaiah, by the way, will tell us almost exactly the same thing in our Yom Kippur morning haftarah. Not necessarily to sell our own houses, but to realize that until everyone has a roof over their head, we are missing something fundamental about religion and life, and especially about Yom Kippur. The whole point of the fast, he says, is to “share your bread with

⁸ Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, p.183.

⁹ Evan Osnos, “Doomsday Prep for the Super Rich,” *The New Yorker*, Jan. 30, 2017.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich>

¹⁰ Emily Hohler, “The Power of Half: How Hannah Salwen and Her Family Gave Half their Home Away,” *The Telegraph*, March 26, 2010. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/7527861/The-Power-of-Half-how-Hannah-Salwen-and-her-family-gave-half-their-home-away.html>



the hungry, [and] take the homeless into your home; clothe the naked when you see him, [and] do not turn away from people in need.”¹¹

Kevin Salwen, reflecting on his family’s experience, says:

People can be more generous and philanthropic than they ever thought they could be. It’s so easy for all of us to lose sight (of) why we are on this planet with the way we live our lives. You would think having stuff is the most important thing on earth.¹²

“The question of what you want to own,” Marie Kondo says, “is actually the question of how you want to live your life.” How long does the wedding album stay on a shelf in the closet after the marriage has ended? And as long as it sits there, is there room for new love? How many cars do we need in the driveway, without knowing where we want to go? How much money do we need in the bank before we feel secure enough, to realize we have enough to give? And how do we let go of those other things, those less material things, so that we can do an internal cleaning, a decluttering of the soul?

“[W]hen it comes to stuff,” one commentator on Kondo writes:

...we are all the same. Once we’ve divided all the drawers and eliminated that which does not bring us joy and categorized ourselves within an inch of our lives, we’ll find that the person lying beneath all the stuff was still just plain old us. We are all a mess, even when we’re done tidying.¹³

We are all a mess, even when we’re done tidying. Remember, Grandma Tonia’s problem was the dirt that was on the *inside* of the vacuum cleaner. That’s the part that’s most challenging for us as human beings.

On Yom Kippur morning, with the scapegoat, we will let go the mistakes of the year that is past. We do teshuva, following Maimonides’ wisdom; we abandon our sins, remove them from our thoughts, resolve not to make the same mistakes twice.

Tonight, Kol Nidre, we let go of the dreams that no longer fit, and the possibilities that no longer exist. As Sheryl Sandberg writes in *Option B*, her book about life after the death of her husband: “Although it can be extremely difficult to grasp, the disappearance of one possible

¹¹ Isaiah 58:7.

¹² Masada Siegel, “Everyone Has the Power to Give,” *The Dayton Jewish Observer*, April, 2011.
<http://daytonjewishobserver.org/2011/05/everyone-has-the-power-to-give/>

¹³ Taffy Brodesser-Akner, “Marie Kondo and the Ruthless War on Stuff,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 2016.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/magazine/marie-kondo-and-the-ruthless-war-on-stuff.html?mcubz=0>



self can free us to imagine a new possible self.”¹⁴ Beginning the New Year, we try to hold on to what will bring us forward, and let go of what drags us back, things both trivial and profound.

As for me? I still want to be an astronaut, but I think I’ve missed my rocket ship – thank God I love being a rabbi. At this stage, I am unlikely to have a marriage which will last for sixty years – but thank God for however many years we will have. I probably didn’t start my kids on piano early enough for them to be prodigies. Truth be told, I haven’t started them on piano at all – but thank God for the people my children are becoming, for mornings singing in the shower and made-up stories at night. If I let go of those aspirations which aren’t within reach, I can grab hold of what’s possible. Call my parents more often. Be home for bedtime. Do a date night each week. I won’t write as many books as my predecessor Rabbi Stern, but I can aim for a few good sermons. Do my utmost, together with our lay leaders and team, and with each of you, to grow Temple as a place of meaning.

Here too, there is wisdom from decluttering. A piece on religious institutions suggests: “Leaders must take the possessions, procedures and attitudes that no longer work, box them up and throw them out. Throw away the clutter that is holding us back: the unnecessary, the unjoyful, the underfunctioning, the no-longer-functioning at all...”¹⁵ We are distracted, sometimes, by the peripheral, or by the things we have always done, that which claims our energy and time but does not speak to our souls.

What is on that list, for you? What do you need to let go? Where do you need to say “no,” so that when it matters most, you can say “yes”?

Rabbi Alan Lew asks:

What’s important? What is at the core of our life? ...And what are we clinging to that isn’t important, that won’t endure, that isn’t worthy?

What do we want to live on? Our money, our pride? Our anger, our selfishness? If not, we better let go of them now, before they become what we are...

...Yom Kippur... remind[s] us of what we must hold on to, and what we must let go of...¹⁶

And for this day –this long day of Yom Kippur – our task is to be here and now. To let go of what is extraneous, and find a way to our heart’s core. “The best way to find out what we really need is to get rid of what we don’t,” Marie Kondo says. But that means facing the choices we have

¹⁴ Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* (New York, 2017), p.91.

¹⁵ Andrea Syverson, “Can Facebook Replace Church?” *Religion News Service*, July 5, 2017. <http://religionnews.com/2017/07/05/can-facebook-replace-church/>

¹⁶ Alan Lew, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation* (Boston, 2003), p.222.



made, and all that we have acquired, physical possessions and qualities of character alike. She writes:

The things we own are real. They exist here and now as a result of choices made in the past by no one other than ourselves... There are three approaches we can take toward our possessions: face them now, face them sometime, or avoid them until the day we die. The choice is ours.¹⁷

Tomorrow, we will tell the story of a person who had trouble facing his choices, and had trouble letting go. Jonah the prophet travelled light. He was willing to jump on a ship at a moment's notice to run away from God, and I'd be surprised if he got to take a carry-on into the belly of the whale. But the moment God makes a plant grow over him, Jonah loves it with all his heart. And when God kills the plant, Jonah is so upset that he wants to die. More profoundly: Jonah doesn't want to let go of his beliefs. His belief that the people of Nineveh should never be forgiven. His anger that the world is unjust. The only way God gets to him is by saying that God, too, is attached:

Then God said to Jonah, "Are you so deeply angry about the plant?" "Yes," he replied, "so deeply that I want to die." Then the Eternal said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city..."¹⁸

"Get your priorities right!" God chastises Jonah. Keep the things that matter. Let go of the things that don't. People matter more than possessions. Forgiveness matters more than keeping a grudge. Fasting prods the hunger of the body to awaken the hunger of the soul.

"We all have hunger," Kevin Salwen says. "There are two types of hunger: the hunger to eat and survive, and the hunger... to be connected and to give."¹⁹

So here's where I disagree with Marie Kondo. The key question is not: Does this spark joy? The key question is: Does this spark meaning? This possession, this relationship, this action, this choice – will it add meaning to my life? And if it doesn't – then it's taking up space and time that could be better used. Then it's time to let it go.

I don't think there is a one-time fix. But I can't think of a better lifelong project than clearing away the schmutz and clutter, so we can find the meaning underneath.

¹⁷ Kondo, pp.183-84.

¹⁸ Jonah 4:9-11.

¹⁹ <http://daytonjewishobserver.org/2011/05/everyone-has-the-power-to-give/>