



Yom Kippur 5778: Holding On

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An airplane was about to crash. There were four famous passengers on board but only three parachutes left.

The first passenger, a sports star, said, "My team needs me. My fans need me." So he took a parachute pack and jumped out of the plane.

The second passenger, a politician, said, "Out of my way! I am the world's greatest and smartest leader, and I need to survive." So he quickly grabbed the pack next to him and he too jumped out of the plane.

The third passenger was the Pope and he turned to the fourth passenger, a Rabbi and said, "As a good Catholic, I will sacrifice my life and let you have the last parachute."

The Rabbi turned to him and said: "I appreciate the interfaith gesture, but it's really OK.... there are enough parachutes for both of us. The world's greatest and smartest leader just jumped off the plane with my tallis bag."

Last night, I spoke about decluttering – letting go of what holds us back in our lives. Today, I want to suggest to you that some things are worth holding on to.

There's a line that's been haunting me, this year. It comes in the midst of a novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Here I Am*. In the novel, Jacob, the main character, is facing the dissolution of his marriage, at the same time as he is trying to prepare his son for his bar mitzvah and figure out his relationship with Judaism and Israel. Light reading. The passage I want to share with you goes like this:

Jacob never knew how to answer the question, are you religious? He'd never not belonged to a synagogue, never not made some gesture toward Kashrut, never not assumed not even in his moments of greatest frustration with Israel or his father or American Jewry or God's absence that he would raise his children with some degree of Jewish literacy in practice. But double negatives never sustained a religion, or, as [his son] would put it in his bar mitzvah speech... you only get to keep what you refuse to let go of.¹

You only get to keep what you refuse to let go of.

Today, I want to share two stories with you. Stories of holding on to what matters.

¹ Recounted in Jonathan Safran Foer's interview with NPR. Transcript: <http://www.npr.org/2017/07/07/535969620/jonathan-safran-foer-on-marriage-religion-and-universal-balances>



First: the story of a seder plate.

Rabbi Benjamin Blech was browsing in an antique store in New York City. He spotted a seder plate that he recognized. Years before, Rabbi Blech had officiated at the funeral for a man named Sam, a Holocaust survivor. When the Nazis were rounding up the Jews in Sam's small town, he hid his silver seder plate, burying it fifty paces from his favourite tree in his back yard. After the war, he eventually retrieved the seder plate and used it every Passover until his death. For him, it was a symbol of survival; as Rabbi Blech had said in the eulogy, "Hitler's "Final Solution" would be overcome by the treasure guarded by [Sam's] very own tree of life."²

Surprised at seeing the seder plate in the shop, the rabbi asked the owner about its origins. He was told it was part of the contents sale of the estate by the children. "You see, the deceased was religious but his descendants aren't – so they really don't have any need for items like these."³

It is a heart-breaking story – not to mention, a guilt-inducing one. You know I'm not a fan of taking the one day of the year that the most Jews show up and using it to make you feel bad. The point, however, is not to look backward, but forward. As Rabbi Blech puts it, our task is to "[retell] the past in a way that binds us to the future... so that none of us will ever suffer the fate of Sam, who survived the fierce hatred of his enemies but not the forgetfulness of his loved ones."⁴

Jonathan Safran Foer, in reflecting on Jewish identity, raises the possibility that the identity we claim is often shallow: "...shallow in the sense of being a fair-weather friend. Like, when you need it, you can take from it what you want. When you don't need it, you dismiss all of it."⁵ We use our Judaism to get a rabbi for a lifecycle event or have a place to go on the holy days, to enjoy good food and be warmed by nostalgia, and all that is well and good – but it can be deeper. There can be more. Not to realize this sells short both our Judaism and ourselves.

What do we hold onto? We hold onto what matters. We hold onto what adds meaning to our lives, connecting us to both our ancestors and our descendants. I think of the non-Jewish groom who wanted his chuppah to be the quilt under which he had slept at his grandparents' house, and the bride wearing a ring that generations of her family had used; I think of the bar mitzvah boy wearing a tallit passed down by his great-grandfather, or our congregant Maurice Shriqui, carrying a tallit bag from Romania that his grandmother had given him on the day of his bar mitzvah in Morocco, almost sixty years ago. I think of the woman in palliative care who used

² Benjamin Blech, *The Book of Passover* (New York, 2005), p.2.

³ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵ <http://www.npr.org/2017/07/07/535969620/jonathan-safran-foer-on-marriage-religion-and-universal-balances>



the Jewish tradition of ethical wills to help her leave a message for her daughter, herself on the path to parenthood.

I think of a woman in our adult bat mitzvah class, who shared the experience of growing up in an intergenerational family home, with her grandmother living upstairs: “Even if my bubby fumbled her way through her Shabbat prayers, between lighting the candles every Friday night, to her well-thumbed prayer books, it was clear that being Jewish was a large part of our family identity.” So too, she said, was bravery on display, in the presence of her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor.

She recounted moving back into the family home after her marriage and divorce, saying:

I am now living in and raising my son in my bubby’s space. As much as I resisted what felt like regressive steps home, since I have moved what the predominant feelings are, are actually gratitude, comfort and empowerment. I have been able to channel the intergenerational strength that runs through me and get back on my feet.⁶

Being in her bubby’s space has made a real difference in her life – as has returning to her synagogue home:

I feel more anchored as a person, and as a mother by now including ritual and weekly services to my life... I want [my son]... to know that his lma stood before our community and committed to being the best me I can be for myself, but also for those around me, and most importantly, for him. To model, as was modeled to me; bravery and resiliency.⁷

We take what we use; we take what matters. The seder plate is never just a seder plate. But if we don’t tell its story, how can we know to treasure it? How can really use it, enough to pass it on? I think of the story of the rabbi and the soap-maker. The soap-maker is arguing with the rabbi about the ineffectiveness of religion. “What’s the use of religion,” he asks, “if it doesn’t make people better?” A little boy runs past, covered in dirt. “What’s the use of soap,” the rabbi asks, “if kids still run around so dirty?” “Well,” said the soapmaker, “you have to use the soap!” “Precisely,” the rabbi replied.

Let me encourage you, this Yom Kippur, to share some of those stories from your families, to use your Jewish legacy. If a baby is being named for a family member who has died, write a note for that child to read in the future, telling them about their namesake. If you have a child becoming bar or bat mitzvah, take this opportunity to tell them why you’ve chosen to raise them as a Jew. If there are family stories you never get around to recording, resolve to do so this year. Write names and places on the back of family photos. Tell the stories of the objects in

⁶ Jordana Vamos, Adult Bat Mitzvah Speech, June 2016. Shared with permission.

⁷ Ibid.



your home. And go beyond the home to take out a Temple membership in your own name, if you've been coming on your parent's tickets; teach your own children, in your own way, how to make this sacred place their home. This is how we make memories. This is how we make meaning. This is how we hold on to what matters.

You only get to keep what you refuse to let go of.

Second: the story of a mountain.

We sometimes think that it is only we North American Jews who struggle with our identity. So let me share a second story now with you.

One of the most fruitful days of my summer study in Jerusalem was when our group of North American rabbis was brought together with a pluralistic cohort of Israeli rabbis. One of them, Rabbi Shai Zarchi, works to help thousands of secular Israelis integrate Jewish traditions in their lives, to find their Jewish spark.⁸

He told us this story:

My grandparents founded a kibbutz in Emek Yizrael, the Jezreel Valley, in 1922. They had a big mountain to climb [not geographically, for the valley, after all, is a valley – but in terms of what needed to be done]. Because they had a hard climb ahead of them, they packed a smaller pack. They took with them only a few things – love, and socialism, and faith– which enabled them to travel light. But they left a lot of luggage at the base of the mountain, things they could not carry at the time. Within two generations, my family had lost religion. But guided by melodies and memories from my grandmother, I, along with others, started going back down the mountain, to find the baggage that our ancestors had abandoned, and to bring what was valuable back up.

What a story; what an admission. To recognize that Israel, which so many of us see as Judaism's religious and spiritual home, also needs to recapture its Judaism.

Israeli Jews and diasporas Jews sometimes hold on to different things. Dr. Norma Joseph wrote an article in the Canadian Jewish News earlier this month about how and why the kotel, the Western Wall, holds much more meaning for diaspora Jews than Israelis.⁹ When you go there, you see it to be true. Jews in Israel, by and large, have left the kotel to the ultra-Orthodox and to tourists. They care much more about issues like fairness in conversion and burial, marriage and divorce.

⁸ <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/213997/israeli-rabbis-you-should-know>

⁹ Norma Baumel Joseph, "The Wall that Brought Us Together and then Divided Us," *The Canadian Jewish News*, Sept. 2017.



I worry, when we don't talk to one another, that we get lost in different conversations. As Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer of the Hartman Institute says, "The gap is real between American and Israeli Jews... and it has been expanding even after decades of bar mitzvah tours, Birthright trips, intense investment in Israel education, and the growth of the pro-Israel advocacy agenda."¹⁰ Even in the Canadian Jewish community, which traditionally has been very Zionist, this assessment holds true. We need to recognize, Kurtzer argues, that our communities have evolved in different ways, and hold onto different priorities. And yet we have much to learn from each other. Rabbi Benjie Gruber, when he came to Canada from Israel this year – thanks to the support of ARZA, the Canadian Reform Zionist group, who I urge you to support in return – said something important. "In Canada," he said, "if you want to do something Jewish, you have to go into a building. In Israel, I know it's Purim because I see children on the streets in costume; I know it's Yom Kippur when the city falls silent. In Israel, we live Judaism outdoors." What an important insight. And our Shinshinim, the young adults who come from Beer Sheva to teach in Torah school each year, always speak about how much they learn here about different ways of taking Judaism seriously, and doing Jewish life.

One of the many reasons I continue to study in Israel, and plan to take a family trip from Temple next December, is that I want to keep this connection. I want us to keep bringing our insights to Israel, including our loving critiques, and I want us to keep learning from that centre of Jewish life.

In Jonathan Safran Foer's book, there is a dystopian, disheartening description of a war breaking out in Israel. When Israel sends empty airplanes to North America, asking for Jews to come and fight, the airplanes go back mostly empty. When push comes to shove, we opt out. "Israel survived without them," he writes, "But neither Israelis not American Jews could deny what was exposed." The distance between the countries grew: "Israeli waves took longer to reach the American shore."¹¹

Israel's creation and survival is one of the most miraculous stories of Jewish history and of modern times. The fact that I can wear a necklace with a coin from a sovereign Israel of over 2000 years ago, and also keep modern Israeli coins in my wallet, is absolutely amazing. But for those of us who didn't witness the creation of the state in 1948, or the victory of 1967, whose experience is shaped much more by the Lebanon war and intifadas, by opprobrium in the press – however unfair – and alienation from ultra-Orthodox authority – we too have a mountain to climb.

So if we have to pack light, let us bring what matters most. First-hand experiences of a country which is both infuriating and inspiring. Connection and conversation with real live Israelis, like

¹⁰ Yehuda Kurtzer, "Minding the Gap: A Primer for Jewish Professionals and Philanthropy." https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=2290&Cat_Id=439&Cat_Type=Blogs

¹¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Here I Am* (2016), pp.541-42.



the Shinshinim who come to our community from Beer Sheva each year, like the Israeli speakers that ARZA brings, like the Israeli Consul General, Ziv Nevo Kulman, who has been a good friend to our community and who addressed us today. Learning more, as in the series I'll offer on Israel in the spring. Conversion students sometimes ask me whether we have a party line on Israel. "No," I tell them, "but when you read the papers or listen to the news, and Israel comes up, I want you to care about it on a different level. I want you to be invested, to take the time to engage." I ask the same of myself, and also all of you: to hold on tight to this relationship – and when times are tough, to hold on tighter.

You only get to keep what you refuse to let go of.

In Kenya, our group of Jewish leaders was often accompanied by a young man named Moses, who worked for the Israeli embassy in Nairobi. Moses belonged to one of the largest Kenyan tribes, and he told us of their traditions – one of which involved killing a lion. He described to us how a group of young men would identify a lone lion who was threatening their village, and go out to hunt it with spears. "Weren't you scared?" I asked him. "Did you consider just not doing it?" "Of course not!" he exclaimed. "If you don't kill the lion, you don't get to be circumcised."

Can you imagine feeling that strongly about being a Jew?

If we do so, it will not be through guilt, and it will not be through fear. It will not be through distance, and it will not be through indifference. It can only be through pride and through love, through not only telling our stories, but living them, in Israel and here. *You only get to keep what you refuse to let go of.*

In this New Year, may we love well, may we choose wisely, and may we hold on tight to that which matters most.