

“Your Life in 50 Objects”

Sermon - First Day Rosh Hashanah 5774/2013

by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

I became a Downton Abbey junkie while recuperating from back surgery this summer. Before watching the first episode of season one, I scoffed at the thought I might enjoy the series. Downton Abbey was just a high-brow version of *General Hospital*, a soap opera with British accents and scenery from a Henry James novel. Still, I quickly got hooked, though it wasn't the plot that first pulled me in, but the regalia, the painstaking historical accuracy of the furnishings, clothing and gadgets of the early 20th century. Alistair Bruce, who serves as the historical advisor for Downton Abbey, has done a phenomenal job in faithfully depicting English manor life around 1912.

I've always had a deep fascination with old objects of a bygone era, especially everyday items. To be honest, I'd be more interested in examining a set of George Washington's false teeth than seeing a famous portrait of our first President. By becoming acquainted with the prosaic items of the past, one gets a feel for how people actually lived in another time.

Sometimes one may even capture the essence of an entire historical era through learning about common items. Recently, friends gave me a book entitled *The Civil War in 50 Objects*. As the title implies, author Harold Holzer has written a history of the Civil War through selecting and describing 50 historical objects drawn from the rich collection of the New York Historical Society. Some of the objects are familiar for their significance: for instance, he includes General Grant's handwritten terms of surrender at Appomattox, and a copy of the Constitution's Thirteenth Amendment ending slavery. Yet others are relics whose power doesn't stem from their uniqueness; they touch us precisely because they were so ordinary. A photograph of child-sized slave shackles made me shudder, wordlessly highlighting the horror of slavery.

As for the terrible cost of America's bloodiest conflict, nothing brought it home to me more than a simple note written by a Union veteran named Joe Mersereau, two weeks after the war's end. Mersereau wrote: "To Whom it may Concern, This is a specimen of my penmanship with an artificial arm manufactured by the National Leg and Arm Co. of 44 Broadway, NY for an upper amputation. The stump being only three inches long from the shoulder joint. Respectfully, Joe Mersereau." The

penmanship is legible, but written in a very shaky hand.

Apparently Mersereau wrote it as a testimonial for a company selling prosthetic devices, but it also underscores the countless tens of thousands of who lost one or more limbs to the carnage of battle and the primitive state of surgery in the mid-19th century. Mersereau's simple words bring home the trials and tribulations of those who survived the Civil War as amputees. Did their sweethearts at home still want to marry them? Were they able to fend for themselves or did they become dependent on the good will of others? We don't know what happened to Joe Mersereau, but if nothing else, his poor, yet readable, handwriting with an artificial limb attests to the determination of one veteran to overcome the challenges of a combat wound.

Of course there is now a whole "50 objects" series: Vermont in 50 Objects, Medicine in 50 Objects, Jewish history in 50 objects . . . Well, what if there were a book entitled *The Jacksonville Jewish Center in 50 Objects*? What would it contain? How would its editors choose what to include or leave out? Creating this work as a congregation might be a fascinating communal exercise, a telling way to better understand what underlies our shared vision through the selection of those items that best represent us as a community.

But let's streamline the process, at least for today . . . What if we tried to define the Center's character in ten items, or five, or even just one? In pondering how I'd define our congregation through objects, I found I couldn't pare my list down to only one thing. But I did manage to reduce it to two.

The first is a chair, but not just any . . . rather it would have to be an authentic mid-1970s Samsonite folding chair with a metal back and a vinyl seat cushion -- just like this one. Apparently these once-common chairs have now achieved the venerable status of being advertised on Ebay as *vintage*! When I was growing up, however, this was the seat of choice in synagogues throughout North America. In fact as a child I remember stretching out across three of these Samsonite chairs and going to sleep during the late Friday night service. It's funny how the sight of an old familiar object can bring to mind a long-forgotten memory!

So what does this particular chair say about the Jacksonville Jewish Center's character that's so important? When we moved from Springfield to our current site nearly forty years ago, it was a

watershed moment in the Center's history. It was also an enormously expensive undertaking, one that left the synagogue with mountains of debt. On more than one occasion payroll was made by emergency donations. Now imagine if the future of your synagogue-affiliated day school was in doubt . . . What would you be willing to do to keep its doors open?

Many of us cannot imagine our sanctuary without its present seats. But when the present building opened we couldn't afford permanent seating. Instead worshippers sat on chairs just like this one. Not for one year, or two, but for nearly five years. It wasn't because the Center's leadership was aesthetically challenged and preferred an industrial look for the sanctuary; and it wasn't because the discomfort of sitting on them was deemed good for the soul. Rather it was because the synagogue gave priority to the solvency of its Solomon Schechter Day School that it postponed the installation of permanent seating in the sanctuary for almost five years. The Talmud teaches, **אין העולם מתקים אלא** -- **בשביל הבל תינוקות של בית רבן** -- The world exists because of the innocent breath of children learning Torah (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 119b). In its own twist on this ancient teaching, nearly four decades ago the Jacksonville Jewish Center affirmed that its world could not exist without Jewish education for its children.

That's why I see the character of our synagogue reflected in this folding chair, an unremarkable object which tells a remarkable story. When I first heard more than ten years ago how the synagogue's leadership put the Torah before the *tuchas*, I was not yet the Center's rabbi. But my first thought was *this* is the kind of congregation I want to serve: a synagogue with convictions, a community that stands for something.

You see, when I look at this chair I see a *shul* that isn't about the path of least resistance, but one that understands the value of authenticity can't be measured in terms of comfort, or the worth of ideals calculated by convenience. When I look at this chair it reminds me why our Jewish high school education goes through 12th grade rather than end in 10th . . . and see why we insist on *kashrut* not only for events in our building but when our affiliated arms meet outside its walls. I see why we pray largely in Hebrew, a language which, even if we don't speak it, joins us to Jews around the world. It is absolutely true that our approach to Judaism can, at times, entail inconvenience or discomfort (after all, it would be so much easier if we broke the Yom Kippur fast at 6 PM, or allowed *bar/bat mitzvah* parties in the building to start on Saturday evenings before nightfall); but then again, we once sat on

uncomfortable chairs to preserve our ideals. And so this chair demonstrates that the power of a religious institution comes from a willingness to stand for something beyond itself, something that asks us to be willing to push beyond the comfort zone in which we exist. More than serve as a foil for recounting a lovely story from the past, this object challenges us to consider how we will chart our future, whether in the realm of budget and fundraising or with regard to religious priorities and policies. This chair is a silent, yet powerful, reminder that beyond the question of whether or not we are making people more comfortable, *are we making them more Jewish* in their outlook and observance, their knowledge, and commitment?

Yet of course synagogues cannot live by ideals alone. They are living and breathing entities, filled with people of all ages and walks of life. It isn't simply about the kind of seats we use when the sanctuary is empty, but the people who sit in those seats.

Look around: how many of your neighbors do you know, and how long have you known them? What joyous milestones did they celebrate this year? What tragedies did they experience? When I scan your faces, I see the individual who had a hysterectomy, and the one diagnosed with prostate cancer. I see those who have lost parents and those who have witnessed the birth of grandchildren. There are those who are newly married and those whose marriages have ended. I look out at your faces and see a community comprised of individuals and families, each with their own story, whether sad, happy, or as frequently is the case, an admixture of both.

It's for that reason that for my second object I chose this -- a green box of 2-ply CVS brand tissues. It would appear this is nothing more than a nondescript box of tissues, identical to millions of others available in every supermarket and pharmacy in the world. But this particular box has a history, one that I've tracked for the last five months. It began its Center of care in my office, the day a new arrival to Jacksonville shared with me the story of how her life had emotionally unraveled over the past four years. It went on to serve the needs of several more families as they sat on my couch and reminisced about a loved one who had just passed away. Two weeks later, it migrated to the main sanctuary for the funeral of a beloved member of our community who died far too young -- there it helped family members get through their eulogies, and in fact, helped me get through mine. That very evening, it enabled a loving grandmother to dry her tears of joy as she made a presentation from the synagogue board to her granddaughter, the first grandchild in her immediate family to celebrate a *bat*

mitzvah. A month after that, it was on-hand when two Jews-by-choice celebrated their adult *b'nai mitzvah* on a Shabbat morning and began to cry as the spiritual significance of that moment washed over them with the power of a giant wave.

Yes, this is an unremarkable tissue box, but one that's been present at remarkable and pivotal moments in people's lives. As it has been increasingly emptied of tissues, it has been filled with rich stories of sorrow and celebration, stories that are uniquely and intensely personal and individual, but inextricably wrapped up in the life of this community, because if their stories weren't part of our congregation's larger narrative, the tissues from this box wouldn't have dried their tears, because this box hasn't left the synagogue since the day I opened it.

Judaism teaches that our material goods possess no ultimate significance. A rabbinic parable illustrates the point: a young fox is tempted by the fat and luscious grapes he spies in a vineyard along the road. He tries to squeeze himself under the surrounding fence but finds he can't fit. To remedy this and get to the grapes, the fox goes hungry for three days and is finally able to wiggle through. There he enjoys a feast, but upon attempting to leave, he discovers he has returned to his former size and is now trapped. After fasting for three more days and shedding the weight he had gained, he manages to slide under the fence. Turning toward the beautiful fruit, the fox laments, **כרמא, כרמא מה טב את ומה טבין אינון** -- O vineyard, o vineyard, how good and beautiful are you! But what enjoyment can one gain from you? **פירין! ברם מה הניא ממך?** -- כמה דְּבַר נש עליל לגוייך כך הוא נפיק -- As one enters you, so one goes out . . . (Kohélet Rabbah 5:14).

In antiquity the Egyptians buried their dead with all sorts of household objects that they would supposedly need in the afterlife. Jewish Law, however, prohibits this practice. We categorically reject the notion that objects, no matter how well loved in life, belong with the dead. The immortality of the soul transcends a three-dimensional universe. In the world-to-come you won't need your favorite number 3 iron, your Gator championship hat, or your lucky rabbit's foot. It is not the dead who should hold on to such things, but the living, for the objects once owned by a person are of value to her loved ones. They are keepsakes and mementos; even more they serve as a kind of resume, a catalog of an individual's character and concerns.

Written or not, there is a book that bears our name whose title is *My Life in 50 Objects* (or 25, 10

or 5). Its pages describe not only those items we most treasure, but of even greater importance, how and why such objects define us. Our ancestor Abraham's book would surely contain a description of the knife with which he almost slaughtered Isaac, and what he thought about each time he saw it. In the *Life of Moses in 50 Objects*, there'd be a picture of the staff with which he performed signs and wonders, while David's book would feature the slingshot he used to kill Goliath, and Samson's would certainly contain a lock of his long hair.

The literature and liturgy of the High Holy Days speak of ספר החיים -- the "Book of Life," wherein God decides our fate according to our actions. But this book isn't some imaginary ledger floating on high . . . it's just a copy of *My Life in 50 Objects* by a different name, a book which tells our story by what we've chosen to include, but equally what we've chosen to exclude. So what would you find between its covers? What items do you own that honestly and accurately describe your priorities and preoccupations, your values and concerns? How hard did you work to acquire them? And what things did you opt not to buy and why?

Would ownership of a Porsche 911 be more important to you than having the *Kiddush* cup of your great-grandfather? What would bother you more: the loss of the car or the family heirloom? If you'd be willing to buy a \$1,200 top-of-the-line pair of Kastle MX88 skis, would you be equally eager to purchase \$200 *tefillin* for your son's or daughter's *bar/bat mitzvah*?

Of course, most of the time the questions aren't so stark. We all value the plastic in our wallets for the miles we earn and for the convenience of charging, but do we also measure their worth by the regularity with which we use them online to support a charity of choice? The objects we place in our grocery cart at the supermarket also say something about our character -- are all the groceries in the cart intended for our pantry alone, or do we make it a habit of buying a few extra items for our local food pantry? A box of Publix mac-n-cheese in your shopping cart might say nothing about you (beyond the fact that you like mac-n-cheese). But when you put *two boxes* of mac-n-cheese in your cart, with the intention of giving one to those who are hungry, the inclusion of that second item does tell a story about what you believe in.

. . . And that's why we've distributed 800 pocket packs of tissue throughout the sanctuary this morning. It's a gift from me. If you need to open the package and blow your nose, be my guest. But

allergies and colds notwithstanding, I am hopeful you will take these tissues home as a reminder of the tissue box on the *bimah* which I described earlier -- how it's been used, and what it says about our community, a community in whose destiny you play a role. What if you were to save these tissues exclusively to comfort friends in need or at a shared moment of celebration? What if you resolved not to open them until performing the *mitzvah* of visiting a house of *shiva* or *bikkur holim*, visiting someone who is ill? How long would it take for you to open the package? How long before all the tissues were gone? What other mundane objects do you have at home with which you do God's work in simple, yet profound ways?

This is the challenge of the Days of Awe: To take remember the inventory of very ordinary things with which we stock our lives and how we use them. As we read our own individual copies of *My Life in 50 Objects*, do we like the story or does it make us squirm? One day, when the loan of our days on earth is called, the Bank of Time will inherit our estate, and with it all those things we bought, carried, used, trashed, loved, re-purposed, shared, or hid from others. Yet though Eternity will take back all that time has lent us, at life's check-out counter God will issue us a receipt in the form of the name we have chosen to make for ourselves. You can't take it with you; but isn't that the whole point of living? . . . What you leave behind says more about you than anything ever will. In the world-to-come the real value of our shopping will be measured by those 50 simple and extraordinary objects we bequeath to those who come after us.