

Doing *Teshuvah* with our Trash
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200 years of garbage. Apple cores and chicken bones, newspapers, clothing, glass bottles and chipped teacups, roofing tiles and plastic bags, all piled high on a hundred acre island in Boston Harbor. In just 200 years, Spectacle Island, once shaped like a pair of eye glasses, two rounded mounds connected by a thin spit of land, was transformed into a single mound of stinking, toxic seeping garbage.¹ Almost as soon as we finished dumping tea into Boston Harbor, we began to dump garbage on the island. By 1960, thousands of gallons of contaminants oozed into the water. Fish died, birds were threatened, and marine life was endangered. Trash floated on waves, sank to the bottom, washed back up on the shore. Methane gas fires smoldered underground. It was: an eyesore to every passenger landing at nearby Logan International Airport; an olfactory affront to every sailor coming into port; an environmental tragedy in a historic harbor.

In the 1980's another problem emerged in Boston. The Big Dig, a 12 billion dollar project to build highways and tunnels under the existing city, needed a place to put 3 million cubic yards of contaminated dirt. In a moment of inspiration the city leaders had an idea. Big Dig dirt could help solve the problem of Spectacle Island. 4,400 barge loads of dirt made their way to the island to be recycled, reused, create new life. Engineers and environmentalists were able to: cap the landfill, rebuild the beach, sculpt the hills, raise the island 60 feet, making its peaks the tallest points in the harbor.

Spectacle Island was recycled into a magnificent National Park, the only zero-emissions park in our country, with lush native vegetation, hiking trails, a beach, and a visitor center with solar panels and self composting toilets. As Carey Goldberg wrote, when Spectacle Island reopened as a National Park, "For some in this sorry life, though, there is redemption... For people, for islands, even for whole harbors, given a great deal of work and the right historical juncture."² Most of our National Parks were forged at historical junctures millions of years ago. The hard work was done by glaciers, volcanoes and erosion. The Boston Harbor Islands National Park story of redemption is different. Its historical juncture was only in 1992. The hard work was done by people: scientists, lawyers, engineers and naturalists. On Rosh Hashanah we stand at a historical juncture in our own lives. We stand on the edge of the New Year 5770, with our broken pieces, heaps of mistakes and discarded dreams. This is our redemptive moment, the day we begin the hard work. We can do *teshuvah* with our trash and create something sacred.

Rosh Hashanah is described as *Hayom Harat Olam*, today is the birthday of the world. It doesn't mean this is the anniversary of the day the world was created. It means, today the world *is being* created.³ Rosh Hashanah announces each day is a new beginning, an opportunity to start over, to renew what has grown old, to recycle what is broken. It is a day given over the work of creating—not the creating that God does—not taking dust and breathing life into it, but the creating and re-creating which humans are blessed to do, fixing and repairing our world and ourselves. This is what *teshuvah*, repentance, is all about. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught, "The basis of repentance is that human beings are capable of recreating themselves continually..."⁴ *Teshuvah* is about looking at our lives, thoughts, words, actions and relationships. Instead of tossing them into the garbage, we gather them up. We examine them. We figure out how to reuse them in more holy and meaningful ways. When we do this we are doing *teshuvah*, repenting, recreating, and recycling ourselves.

Recycling, the act of taking something that seems valueless and turning it into something useful and beautiful, inspiring and lasting, even sacred, has long been a part of our tradition. The rabbis of the first century became recyclers when the Temple was destroyed. No longer able to offer animal sacrifices they recycled actions into words. They protected the ideas of the daily and seasonal sacrificial cycles. They preserved the themes of thanks, praise and petition. They crafted prayers that still bring sanctity to our lives. They did the same thing with Shabbat. When the Sabbath rituals could no longer be observed in Jerusalem, the rabbis boldly recycled the concepts and relocated them at the family table. They created the rituals of candles, Kiddush, and Motzi. When travelers and the homeless needed a place for Kiddush the ritual was recycled again. It moved to the synagogue. Here all could partake of the sweet promise of redemption and renewal. Over and over Jews took what looked like a disaster, the end of Jewish life, and with creativity, cooperation, and commitment, recycled the trash into acts of beauty and enduring value. If recycling is possible for polluted islands and ancient rituals, surely it is possible for us.

As this New Year 5770 begins, some of us are: broken by illness or grief, vulnerable financially, hurt by words of a loved one. Some feel abandoned by a friend or co-worker or distant from our faith. Thank God, none of us are in ruins like the Temple in Jerusalem or contaminated like the island in Boston Harbor. But if these inanimate places, made of dirt and stone, can be renewed, repaired and redeemed, certainly we, people made in the image of God, can engage in *teshuvah*, use the trash, the broken and discarded pieces, to recreate, renew, and recycle our ourselves.

The prophet Ezekiel, whose words inspire the Rosh Hashanah ritual of *Tashlich* (symbolically casting our sins into the water), challenges us to recycle ourselves. Unlike some of the Psalmists, who beg *God to give them* new hearts when they sin⁵, Ezekiel teaches, this work, of taking what is old or broken and making it useful and valuable, is our job. For Ezekiel creating “a new heart and a new soul is a human achievement.”⁶ He tells us, “Cast away from yourselves all your wrong doings and create within yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, return and live.”⁷ *V’hasheevu v’eechyu...return and live, repent and live, recycle and live.* As one commentator notes, “This verse affirms once more the sinner’s ability to regenerate themselves.”⁸ *V’hasheevu v’eechyu...Recycle and Live.* Rosh Hashanah is our opportunity to begin the sacred work of recycling, our hearts and souls, as the New Year begins.

Ezekiel uses the Hebrew word, *asu*, the root letters, *ayin*, *sin* and *hay*, which means to make or create. In the Bible the word *asu* is used when men and women, people like us, create something sustaining and holy, out of ordinary or broken objects. *Asu* means, make something from what you have, *V’hasheevu v’eechyu... recycle and live.* Our biblical ancestors knew how to recycle and live. They can teach us how we can transform, not just paper and plastic, not only islands and rituals, but our hearts and minds, our souls and our lives. Three well known biblical stories use the same word, *asu* for doing this sacred work. Ordinary people, working together, with resources they already have, achieve transformation.

In the first story the Israelites create new hearts and new souls, they recycle and live, by learning skills to make something nourishing. For 40 years in the wilderness they survive by eating manna, an organic substance that looked like small white seeds. According to the Torah, the people would, “go about and gather it, grind it between millstones or pound it in a mortar, boil it in a pot and make it into cakes, *v’asu oto oogot...It tasted like rich cream...’*⁹ It is a lot of work but they do it. They use something that could be mistaken for a weed or for trash, *v’asu oto oogot...they made cakes that tasted like rich cream.*

I saw this transformation happen. It was the last day of Religious School. I was headed down the hall near the access bathrooms and the water fountain. Adult Hebrew students were gathered around one of the posters. They had just completed their first year of study—they learned aleph and bet, then how to combine letters and read words. They were sounding out the national anthem of Israel, *Hatikva, The Hope*, from the poster on the wall. I watched them as they huddled together helping each other, with the gentle guidance of their teacher, until they could read the whole thing. This was manna being turned into nourishment right in our hallway. These were adult learners making manna into food. They will tell you changing Hebrew letters into meaningful words, is not easy. They were able to do it only with lots of hard work, gathering and grinding, pounding and boiling. They will tell you, like the manna, the taste is sweet and the result nourishing.

- One is proud that he is learning while his daughter is at Religious School.
- Another is happy to read the Hebrew prayers at services.
- A third feels like she finally belongs to the Jewish people.

They will tell you in addition to new skills they have new hearts and new souls, committed to learning and to nourishing each other, their community and their God. *V'asu oto oogot*—they made cakes and they created hope. They became the embodiment of the anthem they were reading. *Hatikva*, our hope that the Jewish people lives, and thrives, learns and grows.

The second story is about how to create a new heart and a new soul, to recycle and live, by sharing with others to collectively make something holy. The Torah describes how God invites the Israelites to help create the Mishkan, our first sacred space. God asks people to share: a scrap of fabric, a piece of animal skin, a strand of yarn, a bit of gold, a small stone. God says, *asu li mikdash* make me a special place so I can dwell among you...¹⁰ Create something out of these old things, where we can all feel connected to each other and accomplish together what none of us can do alone.

Cantor Cohn and I teach a class for 6th grade students and their parents. Community MoVeRS helps bar and bat families focus on mitzvot, values, rituals, and spirituality. The kids study the gifts the Israelites bring to make that ancient tabernacle. We do an activity with fabric squares, bits of yarn, and glass gems. The kids compare these “gifts” with the gifts that they have—being a good friend, drawing, playing the piano or running fast, being organized or making people laugh. Later, these same scraps re-appear as a commodity for trading. Parents and kids negotiate with each other and then pool their varied resources to create collages. The collages become cards for Jewish soldiers serving overseas. The cards become holy when each person contributes something and signs his or her name. Each time we debriefed with activity the families were:

- Surprised that squares of fabric could be part of something beautiful.
- Excited that trash can touch the heart of another person.
- Inspired to create something together that none could have done alone.
- Connected to the others because they made something sacred from scraps.

The results are beautiful. A card--lift the heart of a soldier in Iraq, reminding him that despite the distance, he is not alone; he too is part of our community. A note--to touch the soul of a soldier in Afghanistan, a reminder that her gifts, large and small, have the potential for good and to create something holy. A realization-- *Asu li mikdash*...When we share our ordinary gifts, together we can make something holy. We can make sweet cards and we can make sacred places to support each other, on the journey toward Bar or Bat Mitzvah and along the path to peace.

The third story is about how to create a new heart and a new soul, to recycle and live, with the choices we make to be part of a community. Long before the dramatic moment at Mount Moriah we read about today, Abraham and Sarah begin their journey from Haran to Israel. “Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had amassed, and *the souls they had made in Haran v’et hanefesh asher asu b’Haran ...*”¹¹ The Torah doesn’t say, *the friends they made in Haran*. It doesn’t say *the slaves they bought in Haran*. It doesn’t say *the extended family members who wanted to join them in Haran*. It says, *hanefesh asher asu, the souls they made*, the community they created, the people they inspired, with their values, their beliefs, their way of living. Who were these people who found a home, a community with Abram and Sarai? Who were these souls who chose to have a place in the history of humanity? We know who they are. They are here among us. He might be sitting next to you. She might be behind you in line for the shuttle bus. Members of our congregation make these choices. Right here, individuals and families, choose to recycle and live, to make Temple Emanu-El the home for their heart and their soul.¹²

At a conversion ceremony the new Jew affirms her commitment join her soul to the Jewish people. She speaks of feeling called by God, like Noah, to repair and rebuild our broken world, to do the sacred work of recycling. Her fiancé reflects on how her conversion inspired a sort of conversion for him. His interest and commitment to Jewish life is renewed, his Jewish identity is recycled. Each of them has a new heart and a new soul. They are ready to build a life together, in their home and our congregation.

A widow comes to see me a year after her husband of 50 years passes away. A lifelong member of this congregation, she tells me she is ready to recreate her life, to begin anew the business of living. She wants to learn: Hebrew so she can say Kaddish for her husband, the meaning of prayers so she can participate with her community, stories from Torah so she can keep up with her grandchildren and develop her own understanding of our history and our traditions. Her determination illustrates why Torah is described as, “a tree of life to those who hold fast to it...”¹³ In our congregation Lifelong Jewish Learning creates new fruit in each human heart, in each human soul who embraces it.

As the only Jew in his high school, a teenager faces hard choices about his Jewish identity. This summer he went to Greene Family Camp for first time. For three weeks he lives and plays, prays and learns, swims and sweats, as a Jew with other Jews. He comes home and now his choices are easier. Now he wants be part of the Jewish community, he wants Temple to be his home. His soul, his identity as a Jew was remade. He will continue to be shaped and influenced by the world in which we all live, but thanks to camp his connection and commitment to Jewish life is secure.

At a baby naming a family stands before the ark with two children. The Jewish grandparents read a blessing. The Christian grandfather, with gratitude and graciousness, recites Psalm 91—asking God to spread divine wings over these children, to protect them from the dangers of the world, to lift them high above the storms of life. His grandchildren may not share his faith but they will have a faith, they will grow up with values and ethics, with history and traditions dating back to the Bible. They will have a family and a community where their souls will be blessed and be a source of blessing.

These adults, teenagers and young children did what the souls in Haran did. Right here, in Dallas Texas, in our congregation, they chose to recycle and live. *V’et hanefesh asher asu* they have made new souls for themselves. They chose to make their hearts and souls a home in this sacred community with all of us, descendents of the souls made by Abraham and Sarah.

The reminders to recycle are everywhere. Sometimes they are obvious, big blue recycling containers around our building or at the end of our driveways. Sometimes the reminders are more subtle, the small three arrow symbol printed on a container. Some are quite polite, like the nice reminder on the back of the shampoo bottle in my shower—“Please Recycle” it says to me each morning. What if this year we took those reminders seriously? They could remind us of the real recycling work we have to do. The sacred work of repentance and renewal, of turning what is broken or tattered or cast off into something sacred. “Create within yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, *V’hasheevu v’eechyu*. Recycle and Live.”¹⁴ The reminders are everywhere, encouraging us, every day:

- What skills will we use to create something nourishing for our world?
- What gifts will we share to create something holy in our community?
- What choices will we make to create new hearts and souls for ourselves?

Today stand together, ready to begin the hard work, to do *teshuvah* with our trash. This year we can transform our lives. Toxic islands become inspirational parks. Bland seeds become nourishing food. Random letters become prayers of hope. Fabric scraps become collages of connections. People like us can become part of a sacred community with new hearts and souls. *V’hasheevu v’eechyu* in 5770 we can, return and live, repent and live, recycle and live.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. So May It Be God’s Will. Amen.

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- ¹ For more about the history of Spectacle Island www.bostonislands.com and www.nps.gov/boha
- ² *New York Times*, June 27, 1999.
- ³ Rabbi Mark B. Greenspan in *Rosh Hashanah Readings* by Dov Peretz Elkins, page 305.
- ⁴ As quoted in *Rosh Hashanah Readings* by Dov Peretz Elkins page 303
- ⁵ For example Psalms 51:12
- ⁶ Ralph W. Klein, *Ezekiel: The Prophet and His Message* page 108.
- ⁷ Ezekiel 18:31-32
- ⁸ *Artscroll Torah Series* Ezekiel 18:31
- ⁹ Numbers 11:8
- ¹⁰ Exodus 25:8
- ¹¹ Genesis 12:5
- ¹² I am grateful to these congregants who gave me permission to share their sacred stories.
- ¹³ Proverbs 3:18
- ¹⁴ Ezekiel 18:31-32