THE STUFF WE CARRY
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Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC

- What do you carry with you?
- What items are better left behind?
- What do you hope to pick up along the way?

Two monks were walking along a river when they came upon their usual crossing point. At the crossing was a woman in tears. The older monk asked her what the problem was, and she told him that she was deathly afraid of the water and could not swim.

The younger monk looked at the woman with disdain and told the woman that they could not help her as their holiness did not allow contact with women, but the older monk suggested that she climb upon his back and he would carry her across. The younger monk followed them across, shaking his head the whole time. When they reached the other bank, the older monk put the woman down, acknowledged her thanks with a slight bow, and then the two monks resumed their path while the woman went her own way.

The younger monk was obviously agitated and continued shaking his head, muttering under his breath. After about 2 miles of this, the older monk finally asked him what was wrong.

The young monk said, "We are prohibited from any contact with women, yet you carried that woman across the river on your back. You let her crawl onto you and you held her! Terrible, just terrible. Wait until the abbot hears of this!"

The older monk gave a slight smile and said to his younger companion:

"Brother, I left her 2 miles back at the crossing. Why are you still carrying her?"

How many of us carry things - corrosive, damaging things - far longer than is necessary?

- What do you carry with you?
- What items are better left behind?
- What do you hope to pick up along the way?

I thought of these questions last week as I waited in the lobby at CBC Radio for an on-air interview with, Temple Sholom member Stephen Quinn on The Early Edition. In the lobby seated across from me was a young couple, Calan and Jessica who that very morning were preparing to set out on a backpacking trip across North America. The trip they explained was self-titled 'The Random Acts of Kindness Tour' – an idea they had, literally, 'one night in a bar' to sell all their worldly possessions except what they could carry on their backs and travel across North America ***helping people***.

I marveled at their optimism and idealism. I envied their youth, their verve, and their energy. But above all I was most taken with …their backpacks. Piled high and heavily stuffed in every visible pocket! I asked them, "So what's in your backpack, what are you taking with you?"

Calan explained that they had sold all their possessions and the bags contained only clothes and technology. "Camping gear?" I asked. Jessica, demurred that she was an indoor dog and that they would be couch surfing their way across the continent. By technology she meant their iPhones, iPads and iOtherStuff. Calan added that the only thing tying them down were their cell phone contracts that would expire shortly.

As they left to go in for their interview, they left the backpacks in my charge. The parent in me wanted to slip some emergency cash in a pocket for when the couch surfing waters ran dry; the rabbi in me saw a biblical reference.

"All their worldly possessions on their backs" - not unlike our biblical ancestors who left Egypt baking matzah on their backs or our parents' and grandparents' generation who fled distant lands with only what they could carry in a suitcase. Calan and Jessica were on a modern day Exodus – a journey to their own promised land and they were packing light.

Thoreau wrote, "that a man should be able to leave his home with nothing more than the clothing on his back and feel like he left nothing behind". That might seem a bit extreme – even for Thoreau – but what he meant was that it's not about our stuff, it's about our very being. The heaviest and most important thing we carry in life is our own soul. Our own sense of who we are and what we aspire to be, or not to be – as another man said.

So tonight, Kol Nidrei, ten days into this New Year we stand at the departure gate for the journey that begins the rest of our life.

- What's in your backpack? In other words, what are you bringing with you?
- What do you want to leave behind
- What do you hope to pick up along the way?

#1 What are you bringing with you?

We are all *Schlepers*! I say that with love and admiration, but it's true. We are all schlepping something with us in life we schlep our possessions, commitments, relationships, responsibilities, our goals. Are they burdens that weigh you down or emotional anchors that ground you and keep you steady in troubled waters?

The ancient Israelites wrestled with this same question on their forty-year journey across the desert. They had so much to carry, not just the physical, but the emotional baggage of spending four hundred years in slavery. The symbol of their angst and of Moses' own struggles comes at the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments.

The Torah relates that there were two sets of tablets. The first set was written by God's fiery hand, in white fire and black flame on Mt Sinai. But when Moses brought them down from the mountain he encountered the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf, literally the emotional baggage of their own assimilation and slavery in Egypt. When Moses saw this he smashed the tablets into pieces.

Moses confronted the Israelites and, pointed out how stubbornly they held on to their past; he argued with God to forgive them and then returned up the mountain a second time.

Again forty days and forty nights pass and it was on this very day, the 10th of Tishrei that Moses came down from the mountain with the second set, these written in his own hand, through his own sweat and labor.

Commentators ask what happened to the first set of tablets, the broken ones? The answer is that they were kept in the ark with the second set. The broken fragments went in first and the second, whole set was placed **on top** of them. When the Israelites marched through the desert they carried this extra weight, not as a burden but as an emotional anchor, a reminder of what they had done and how far they had now come.

That is in part the lesson of Yom Kippur - our brokenness serves as the foundation for our new wholeness. The great 16th century Jewish mystic, Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed, known as the Ari taught that before creation, everything that ever would be created, the very essence of God's creative powers were contained within sacred vessels through which God's divine energy would pass and differentiate. But the vessels were too weak to contain God's divine light and they burst and shattered. The Ari taught that it is our shlichut, our sacred purpose to gather these broken shards and put the pieces of God's divine light back together – this is the essence of the teaching of Tikkun Olam. In our brokenness we find the building blocks for renewal.

We cannot forget our past wrongdoings, our hurts, our failures they are part of our story, part of who we are, we carry them with us, **but** we can't let them weigh us down, rather they should lift us up, be the foundation upon which we build our future.

Not all of what we carry with us into this New Year is brokenness and burden – no matter its greater lessons. We also carry the essential tools that give our lives meaning and direction.

As Calan and Jessica came out from their interview and hoisted their backpacks heavily on their backs, we shared a few final words, I wished them well.

As they started to walk down the hall, I called after them, "Calan, I said, I just have to know what are you bringing with you that is not clothing or technology, any family heirloom, something to remember home? He smiled and reached into his pocket and held up an old weathered compass. "It's my father's, he's had it since he was a teenager and gave it to me last night as we said goodbye."

A compass to your 24-year-old boy who is about to backpack the continent – his father was a not only an outdoorsman but apparently also a philosopher…to have given him such an heirloom.

The word, 'loom' in 'heirloom' means a tool. An heirloom then quite literally means a 'family tool' handed down *l'dor vdor* from generation to generation. Furniture, silverware, jewelry, candlesticks, a compass each are held in trust for subsequent generations. Heirlooms are not passive objects, dusty and on display, but tools passed from one generation to another that help bring past to present, *l'dor vdor*. In this New Year along with our burdens we carry tools given to us by those that came before us to help guide our steps, direct our ways.

What is your compass, what teaching did your parents, your grandparents impart to you that you use as a tool to help you build your life? Think beyond the 'stuff' they left you and focus on the lessons they taught you.

#2 What are you leaving behind?
A professor walked around a room while teaching stress management to her students.

As she raised a glass of water, everyone expected they'd be asked the "half empty or half full?" question.

Instead, with a smile on her face, she inquired: "How heavy is this glass of water?"

Answers called out ranged from 8 oz. to 20 oz.

She replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long I hold it.

- If I hold it for a minute, it's not a problem.
- If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my arm.
- If I hold it for a day, my arm will feel numb and paralyzed.

In each case, the weight of the glass doesn't change, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes."

She continued, "The stresses and worries in life are like that glass of water; think about them for a while and nothing happens. Think about them a bit longer and they begin to hurt. And if you think about them all day long, you will feel paralyzed – incapable of doing anything."

Our burdens, judgments, grudges, resentments, guilt, anger, fear, sadness grow heavier the longer we carry them. They sap our strength and numb our senses. Like Jessica and Calan's backpack we can feel their weight digging into our shoulders, the weight of emotional baggage grows heavier with time.

The great Rabbi Paul McCartney said it best:

(sing)
Boy, you're gonna carry that weight
Carry that weight a long time
Boy, you're gonna carry that weight
Carry that weight a long time

If you're a Beatles fan, you know that these lyrics have inspired something like a Talmudic debate. Some think that the writer of the song, Paul McCartney, is saying that if John Lennon allows the Beatles to break up over his relationship with Yoko Ono, he will be "carrying that weight" for the rest of his life.

Others say that this lyric is an acknowledgement by the group that nothing they would do as individual artists in the future would ever equal what they had achieved together as The Beatles, that they would always "carry that weight" of their Beatle legacy.

But the greatest comment, the *halachah* if you will, came from John Lennon who said that **McCartney was "singing about all of us [all humankind]."**

We're all *schlepers* – we all carry the weight of our past a long time, some times too long and we need it put down already. We carry around things that make the journey harder than it needs to be; standing at the threshold of this New Year; can we leave our emotional baggage at the door? Can we drop what enslaves us, entraps us and encumbers us? In this New Year can we declare – I'm not taking this with me any more and just walk away from it? Leave it behind, if its not helping, teaching us, guiding us – what use is it? Put it down.

- Who here is angry with someone? Angry with a co-worker, a spouse, a sibling. Anger so real that my mere mention of the word reminds you of that heat you carry inside toward another. Put it down!

- Who here is judging other people unfairly? Being intolerant of others for things you struggle with yourself. Put it down!

- Who here is holding a grudge, harboring resentment? A friend didn't call, an invitation wasn't extended, your trust was betrayed. Put it down!

Put down the anger, Put down the resentment. Forgiveness begins when we forgive ourselves. Go through your spiritual backpack and lighten the load. Hold each item, feels its emotional weight and ask yourself do I really need to keep *schlepping* this? Is this a load I should continue to bear? Now is the time, this evening, this moment of Yom Kippur to empty our backpacks make some decisions about what we are going to put back in before we continue slowly crushing ourselves under the weight and the

burden of that which we are too proud, too stubborn, to timid to put down and walk away from.

And to the last question: #3 What are you going to pick up?

As Jessica walks down the hall, I notice her backpack is so overloaded with stuff it's amazing she can even walk straight. I imagine that necessity will compel her, as it compels all of us at some point to lighten our burdens; to let go of things and lighten the load. I'm sure she'll keep what's important, but even in a backpack full of 'essentials' there is always extra stuff. Even more, what about allowing room for the new things she will encounter. Sometimes we are so stuck in the past, our packs so full, we leave no room to acquire new experiences and lessons.

When she does create space in her backpack and when we create space in our lives it's human nature to fill it back up again. Aristotle observed, "Nature abhors a vacuum." He based his conclusion on the observation that nature requires every space to be filled with something.

So, what will we pick up in this New Year? Can we be selective; can we make wise choices? We've got a little bit of room, we've let go of some burdens, we've dusted off the heirlooms and started putting them to good use. We've found the strength to carry sorrows by seeing them as building blocks to renewal. We've made a little bit of space? What are we going to put there?

The New Year is not just a chance to repair old relationships; it is a time to explore new ones as well. This New Year, let's open up our hearts to allow for people to make an impression on us, and we on them, so as to fill our souls with meaning. This New Year, we can push ourselves to be better parents, spouses, children, friends and colleagues. We can look outside of ourselves, outside of our personal bundles of stress and burdens irritation; and look rather to assuage the difficulties of others.

Let me suggest that whatever it is you pick up, make it truly meaningful, if all you have is a little space for you, a little time for you – put there what you need most for you.

What are you bringing with you?

Bring all the meaningful experiences of your life.

What do you want to leave behind?

Leave behind all that does not help you, all that inhibits you from being the person you believe you were created to be.

What do you hope to pick up along the way?

Pick up blessings and love and meaning wherever you find it and hold it as a treasure. Pick up opportunities that ring with words like mitzvah, tzedakah and

tikkun olam…. and then pass that habit on as an heirloom to your family. Or, as those two monks might have put it more simply, "Help the woman. Drop the anger. And the professor would add, "Put down the glass!"

Feel the reassuring weight of your spiritual backpack on your shoulders – not as a burden but as an emotional anchor, let it ground you and guide you and inspire you for the journey that begins….. today. Your own, personal……Random Acts of Kindness Tour.

Boy, you're gonna carry that weight
Carry that weight a long time

So… Pack carefully.