SCHLEPING!
Kol Tikvah 7/9/99
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In this weeks Torah portion which Michael and Nathaniel will be reading from tomorrow morning we read that the Israelites stopped 42 times during their 40 year journey through the dessert. In each of these places, the community, some 600,000 men, women and children, unpacked their bags, set up tents, tended to personal and community needs and then some months later packed everything back up again, hoisted it on their backs or on their animals and traveled further in to the dessert toward the land of Israel.

When I think of this Torah portion, with its laundry list of stopping points and geographical locals I think not only of the journey from one spot to the other, but also of the process of constantly setting up and then breaking camp, packing and unpacking their belongings. One can only imagine what the Israelites carried with them as the marched through the dessert, which items they held so valuable that they carried them for 40 years on their backs and which items were discarded along the way, as too heavy, to cumbersome to schlep from one place to the next.

I've been doing a lot of packing and unpacking of my own lately. As many of you know I moved last year from LA to Cincinnati, Ohio to complete my Rabbinic Studies. Kim stayed here in LA, in our apartment along with most of our belongings, and I took only the stuff I would need for my stay in a foreign country... I mean the Midwest.

Moving by definition means taking your stuff from one place and putting it in another place. About a month ago I began to go through all of the stuff I brought with me to Cincinnati, items that I felt were so important a year prior that I could not do the

year without them. This was not your run of the mill junk, but in fact carefully selected junk, so vital to my continued well being that I paid $0.65 a pound to bring it with me. With great care and effort I re-examined all the items I had brought with me and the new things I had acquired while away. The sheer volume was overwhelming, it appeared in observance of the biblical command to be fruitful and multiply, my stuff now had its own stuff. I had more than I brought, and certainly more than I could bring home to our already stuffed apartment in LA. Thus in the midst of packing all my stuff, it was necessary to do what archeologists say the Israelites did in the desert and what my wife calls sorting and tossing. I went through all my possessions and determined that which I could not live without and that which I would be better of with out. I made three piles. Stuff to pack, stuff to be thrown out, and stuff I have no idea what to do with. Needless to say this last pile of stuff was far and away the largest of the three. This pile of "I don't know what to do with this stuff" stuff contained your usual collection of cords and gadgets, tools and trinkets. Things that held too much sentimental or practical value to be thrown away, but things whose immediate relevancy to me was uncertain as well. Do I need the other hammer? It weights a lot to ship across country and just end up in another drawer; yet it was a good hammer, its nice to have a spare, I remember when I built this or that with it. How many extension cords does a person need, I wondered as they began to accumulate on the floor? Answering myself you always need one more than you have. How long should I keep copies of my cable bill, will I need this if I am ever audited? Oh and the clothes, Will I ever wear this again? Will I ever fit into that again? I love these jeans, even if they have more holes than they do denim. In the end the decisions became to overwhelming, they stressed me out just too much. I didn't want to throw something away or give something up I may one day need again, but at the same time I really didn't want to

schlep all this across country and then put it right back in the closet to which it had been relegated. OY!

In the midst of all this mess and stuff, sitting on the floor between my piles of possession, surrounded by just about every material thing I cared enough about to move across country a year earlier. I began to think about those immaterial things that I had brought with me or acquired over the past year. The lessons, insights, beliefs, theologies, opinions and values that became a part of me, and who I am as a person. Its not that I sat on my floor and started having a conversation with myself, though having lived a year by myself in Cincinnati, it wouldn't have been the first time, but I just started thinking. What else am I bringing with me to California? Do I need to bring everything I have in this regard or are their things I should leave behind? I started to make piles in my head, stuff to leave behind, stuff to bring with. I identified stuff that I had learned that would be very helpful next year and therefore should occupy a special space in my memory. They were very practical things, like I can't drink a gallon of milk by myself before it goes bad. I really generate a lot of trash for one person. Without an ocean to use as a reference I have a no sense of direction. But these though important were minor revelations compared to the deeper spiritual and emotional insights I gained and am determined to retain to add to my view of the world.

Likewise as I went through my mental sort and toss, I discovered a number of beliefs and opinions that I no longer held. A year a part from family and friends can give new perspective to relationships and old arguments or grudges. These I am just as happy to get rid of and consider myself better off for having unloaded them.

Then I came to that big pile of uncertainty, beliefs, opinions and ideas that I was not sure if I was ready to abandon, nor was I sure I wanted to keep. These ideas didn't seem to fit anywhere in my personal philosophy, but at the same time they were not

totally inconsistent with it either. The prudent and intellectually honest thing to do would be to resolve these contradictions and make a decision once and for all did I believe this or did I believe that. You either keep the extra hammer because you are going to use it or you get rid of it, because you know you won't and lighten your load in life. But that's not what I had been doing, instead of exploring these contradictions and uncertainties for the purpose of reaching some resolution on the issue I have been doing with them what I eventually did with the hammer, extension cord and much of the clothing, shoving them all in a box and schleping them with me where ever I went. And once there, they would remain in the box until I either needed to confront them or had to move them again. If I had been an Israelite marching in the dessert I would have been the one straining under physical and emotional baggage.

Each year our tradition commands us to clean out the closest of our conscience, to sort and toss our philosophical, spiritual and emotional beliefs. In preparation of the High Holidays Judaism instructs to each Jew to under take what in Hebrew is called *Heshbone HaNefesh*, the through examination and checking of ones soul. We are commanded to spend the months leading up to the High Holy Days in reflection and contemplation. Not only on the past year or the year ahead as we are often reminded in High Holy Day sermons but also on the state of our soul, or *neshamah* right now. While their is still time to make adjustments and resolutions before the year is out and the *sefer haHayim*, the book of life is sealed. We often think that such an examination and evaluation of ourselves is reserved for those hot days in September as we sit in Yom Kippur services, our stomachs growling as the day slowly wears on till night time and relief from the prayers acknowledging our failings and seeking forgiveness.

But the time is now, to unpack those boxes of unresolved issues and ideas, to take down the burden from our backs go through it and sort and toss in preparation for

whatever lies ahead. If you only cleaned your home in Spring Time, your house would never be clean. The dirt would be too much for you to handle all at once and you would poop out before you ever got to the stuff you failed to get to last year. I know I have a closet and a storage space that have been on my cleaning list since I moved into my apartment 5 years ago. We clean our homes and our cars on a regular basis, to allow things to pile up to the rafters is unthinkable, and very unappealing. So to can be our approach to our soul, to our nefesh. The high holy days stand three months off in the distance, it the time of year that rabbis start thinking of sermons, temple start making arrangements and my mother starts cooking for break the fast. Let is also be the time that we begin the process of unpacking and repacking our stuff from the past year. Let us make piles of what we want to keep, what we want to leave behind and let us identify that which needs more attention and thought. The Israelites had little warning when it was time to pack up and move on, our time is three months off, we can start the process now and find out burdens lighter and our lives more full of what we cherish and find meaningful for having made the effort.

Shabbat Shalom.