THE STUFF WE CARRY

In 1968 Andy Warhol famously suggested that each person is allotted 15 minutes of fame. I thought of this as I waited outside the CBC Radio studio last week for the latest installment of my 15 minutes.

I was there for an on-air interview with, Temple Sholom member Stephen Quinn on The Early Show. As I waited 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 a number of things in that brief summary they offered me. I admired their optimism and idealism. I envied their youth – when I asked if they were married or engaged – they emphatically insisted they were not a couple. Watching them interact affectionately and call each other by sweetie and muffin – I suggested, only half jokingly 'not yet'. But above all I was most taken with their backpacks. Piled high like they were setting out on an expedition – which they were I asked them so what are you taking with you?

Calan explained that they had each sold all their stuff 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 coach surfing their way across the continent. By technology she meant their iPhones, iPads and iStuff. Calan added that the only thing tying them down was their cell phone contracts which 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 was wondering what was in the backpack? Could there only be clothes and iStuff. 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 Europe with only what they could carry in a suitcase.

Were there silver candlesticks stuffed in one of these pockets? A family bible with names of each newborn child written on the inside cover? What could they not leave behind?

What did they sell or give away? Where was their High School yearbook, their certificate of achievement they won in grade 8 from the science fair? What about the glass bowl they bought on their college trip to Spain? Their collection of baseball cards – here I guess it would be hockey cards? Their favorite childhood toys? Did they just throw those memories and mementoes out with the trash? How

much do you sell your childhood memories for on Craigslist? Easy to part with now, but won't they regret that later, when they have their own children. Which I still maintain they will have with each other they just don't know it yet.

As I looked at their overstuffed backpacks – I thought to myself, they are going to need another bag. With the adventure they have planned they're gonna pick up new stuff – where is that stuff going to go?

This of course made me think of my own sorting and packing experience as me, Sharon and our three children packed up our household and our life in California and moved here to Vancouver this summer. Now I really envied Calan and Jessica – what they could fit in their backpacks we needed the better part of a 55 foot long haul semi-truck.

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 the question is a worthy one to ponder.

As you step forward into this New Year what are you carrying with you? What is so important that it goes in your backpack? Did you put it there or are you schlepping it because it's important to someone else? Is it a burden you feel you must shoulder or cherished possession you must safe guard?

In this New Year what can you leave behind, or more purposefully what can you put down? Standing at the threshold can you leave your emotional baggage at the door? What enslaves you, entraps you, encumbers you? In this New Year can you declare – I'm not taking this with me anyone and walk away from it?

As you set out on this grand adventure, this New Year, what do you need to you pick up? What are you looking for, shopping for, searching for? Do you have room for new things, ideas, interests, passions – where will they fit in your crazy busy life? And what does it say about that life if there is no room for what newly inspires you?

Back to the backpack – as Calan and Jessica set out on their adventure, we shared a few final words, we had bonded in our 15 minutes of fame, I wished them well and gave them some what of a blessing for their journey. They thanked me and before they left and I went into the studio, I said to Calan, "I just have to know what are you bringing with you that is not clothing or technology, any family heirloom or souvenir? 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." A compass to your 24 year old boy who is about to backpack the continent – his father was a philosopher I concluded.

We all know about souvenirs. We all have them. Derived from the French, a souvenir is an object a person acquires for the memories the owner associates with

it. Memorabilia and souvenirs have value and meaning for those who have collected them but for no one else.

Contrast this with family heirlooms safely stored and used. They 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*. The word, 'loom' means a tool. An heirloom was then quite literally a family tool handed down from generation to generation. Furniture, silverware, jewelry, a compass are held in trust for subsequent generations. An heirloom is made by family custom – its meaning and value is redoubled with each generation that finds it useful again.

I want to challenge each of us to make heirlooms out of souvenirs. Those silver candle sticks that grandma carried across the ocean – she didn't carry them so they would sit on a shelf – they are meant to be used, as is the Kiddush cup, the Seder Plate and the Mezuzah that hangs by your door. They are tools; with them you will build your Jewish present and future. Similarly the Hebrew you learned for your Bar Mitzvah – dust it off, put it to use, show your children and grandchildren it wasn't just for a moment, but for a lifetime.

(I need a bridge here)

A woman suffers a terrible tragedy and she goes to the rabbi and he hands her a cup and tells her that she'll be okay if she fills the cup with water.
And she asks, "But where can I find this magic cup of water? And he says, "Take this cup and go to a house that has never known sorrow and fill the cup with water from that house."

So that's easy, she thinks, and she goes immediately to a mansion at the top of a hill, the richest house in the village, surely they have known only blessings and good fortune. She rings the doorbell and a butler comes to the door. She asks if she can fill her cup with some water from the house and he says "Certainly, but why?" And she explains that she needs to fill her cup with water from a house that has never known any sorrow. And he says to her, "This is not that house, but you're welcome to come inside." And she talks to the family; they are going through a terrible crisis.

A few months later, the woman runs into the rabbi on the street and he asks her how she's doing. She says she's ok. And he asks what ever happened to his cup. And she looks at him and doesn't know what he's talking about. The rabbi says, "I sent you to find a magic cup of water from a house that has never known any sorrow." She apologizes and says that she forgot all about it. And she says that she's sorry but she has to run because there's a woman in trouble and she needs help. And as she runs off, the rabbi just smiles.

The woman still had her burden. Her grief was her grief and the rabbi didn't change it. But she had a new purpose; she put her burden down for a while so she

could help someone lift theirs. Its simple physics – a person can only carry so much. Trade your burdens for those of another and you will learn just how strong you really are.

(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 different interpretations. 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 the 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 the weight" of their Beatle legacy. But the greatest comment came from John Lennon who said that McCartney was "singing about all of us."

We're all *schelpers* – we are all carry the weight of our past. Sometimes that past is a burden – but at other times, though heavy it can be an anchor – keeping us moored to our values and ideals.

One of the greatest examples of this is the story of the first set of the 10 commandments. According to rabbinic tradition it was on this day the 10th day of Tishrei that Moses returned from carving the second set of tablets. If you recall the story the first set were given to Moses, written by God's fiery hand 80 days before on Mt Sinai. But when Moses brought them down he encountered the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf, a pagan god and smashed the tablets into pieces. He returned up the mountain a second time, this time he had to carve them himself and it was on this day according to tradition that he returned 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 put in the ark along with the second set. The broken tables went in first and then 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 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. We cannot forget our 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 becoming the foundation for our return and our redemption.

Back to the backpack one final time. As Jessica walks down the hall, the backpack is so overloaded with stuff its amazing she can even walk straight. I imagine that necessity will compel her, as it compels 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. Remember Thoreau – just the clothes on our backs.

And when she does create space in her backpack and when we create space in our lives its 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, even if that something is colorless, odorless air.

What will you pick up in this New Year? Can we be discerning, can we make wise choices? You've got a little bit of room, you've let go of your burdens, you've put souvenirs in storage and dusted off the heirlooms putting them to good use. You've found the strength to carry your sorrows by helping others carry theirs. You've made a little bit of space? What are you going to put there?

Let me suggest that whatever it is make it truly meaningful, if all you have is a little space for you, a little time for you – put what you most want to put in that space.

This needs an ending – maybe another text??? Or something personal? Help