

From the Rabbi's Desk
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What Do We Leave Behind?

D'var Torah for Yizkor

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An elderly man lay on his deathbed, surrounded by his wife, three children, and a nurse. Gathering his strength, the man spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. "Bill," he began, turning to his eldest son, "you get the houses in Beverly Hills." His son's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he said nothing.

"Mary," the man continued, looking at his daughter, "the offices in the Center are yours."

Mary's eyes widened, but she stayed silent, glancing at her siblings.

"Debra," he said to his youngest, "the apartments above the L.A. Plaza go to you."

Debra exchanged a confused look with her brother and sister.

Finally, turning to his wife, he said, "And to you, my love, take all the residential buildings near downtown."

The room fell into stunned silence. Even the nurse, standing at the foot of the bed, couldn't help but comment. "Wow," she said, visibly impressed. "Your husband must have been an extraordinary man to leave behind so much property."

The wife let out a deep sigh and shook her head. "Property?" she replied, her voice tinged with exasperation. "The man's been running the same paper route for forty years!"

I always like to joke that my parents didn't want my brother and me to fight over their money and we were most successful in fulfilling their wishes... there was not much money to fight over.

As a congregational rabbi I am privy to different stories, some happier than others, in which siblings strive to divide whatever assets their parents leave them after their passing in the fairest possible way.

Not surprising, there was not too much fighting over the 32 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the upright piano, or the painting of the old rabbi by the Western Wall.

Many of our members are faced with the challenge of discarding religious texts they don't want, since it is customary not to throw items with God's name on them in the garbage. As many of you know, I collect those religious books for proper disposal. Throughout the years, I have received 48 Tallitot, 389 prayer books, and approximately 150,000 Maxwell Passover Haggadahs.

Of course, sacred objects are not the only ones that need to find a new home after someone's passing, a home downsizing, or many other reasons.

There is barely a week that goes by in which we don't receive an offer of entire libraries, musical instruments, art, knitting supplies, plants, bicycles, Passover plates, Hannukah menorahs, or a request for a reliable charity where clothes can be donated. By the way, I am still waiting for someone to downsize his or her cigar collection.

Many of us are attached to stuff, either because we are amateur hoarders, or more likely, because the stuff we are attached to brings us memories of happier times. Throughout my wanderings from Argentina, to Israel, back to Argentina, to the Dominican Republic, to Virginia, and to New York, I "collected" many items, mostly books, pictures, and small tchotchkes. These many items include not only my stuff, but also my parents and my grandparents' stuff. Each of these items is suffused with stories and associations, which I intend to pass to my children as my legacy, when they inherit my stuff.

The problem is that they don't want the stuff. How do I know? Because Silvia and I already tried to give them all these items suffused with memories, and they say *thank*

you, but no, thank you. Not only do our lovely children refuse to take our stuff, but when they moved out, they leave us their stuff as well.

Is this story familiar? If you nod your head, it is because you and I are in the same boat.

I own a stamp collection, wonderful books, a pinball machine, three humidors, and 1258 golf balls. I can picture my three lovely children arguing among themselves one day, 120 years from now: "You take these books! No, you take them, please! What about the stamp collection? What should we do with abba's bowties? Let's bring the three sets of Talmud to the Upper West Side shul, let's hope Rabbi Goldstein takes them."

It looks like stuff won't be my legacy; it won't be our legacy.

Even if Silvia and I leave our children some money (and hopefully we will), the money loses its identity and gets assimilated into investments or expenses. Very few people, aside from those lucky enough to inherit generational wealth, think of the money left to them as a legacy.

So, now that we have established that money isn't a legacy, at least in the way I try to define legacy here, and stuff is sometimes... just stuff, I begin to think about what I can leave them that will stay with them, and their children, and their children's children.

Perhaps I can leave them my stories, the story of my life, which includes the story of my parents' lives, my grandparents' lives, and my great-grandparents' lives, although those memories are already fading.

I could put all my life experiences into quotes and sayings. I know at least one congregant who collected his father's witty sayings and put them into a booklet.

Perhaps I can do the same, although I am not as witty and funny as my congregant's father, so I am not sure about the result. My children like the Yiddish phrase "Ilan,

Ilan, Vos vet zain fun dir?" (Ilan, Ilan, what will be of you?) that I use, and my father used. When I hear Daniela, Ilan and Abby use the phrase it puts a smile on my face; but sadly, a few phrases here and there can barely count as a full legacy.

Many of you are familiar with *Legacies of Light*, a moving 52-day journey of meaning, memory, and commitment that began on Rosh Chodesh Elul and continues through Simchat Torah. Each day is devoted to one of the heroes who fell defending Israel on October 7th and in the Gaza War. These are not biographies, but soul-charged reflections, daily insights, values, and moments of inspiration drawn from the lives and words of the fallen. The content was written either by the heroes themselves, in messages left for their families, or by their loved ones after their passing. At the heart of the project is a beautifully designed desk calendar (there are still three or four at the front table). Each page features a photo of a fallen soldier, a stirring quote, and a brief reflection that captures their spirit, courage, and legacy.

The project is wonderful, but as wonderful as it is, it only features 52 IDF soldiers out of the over 900 who died since October 7.

So, what is the legacy we will leave behind? What is the true legacy our parents left us? When the money is gone, when you shed the stuff, the pictures, the collections, the hobbies, even the memories, which inexorably fade with time, what is left over?

We all wish to transcend, to be remembered, to leave something behind, so that others will know we existed.

The truth is that the only legacy we will leave the future generations, our children, our friends, the nameless people we call humanity, is the life each of us lives, day after day, year after year. When everything is said and done, the lives our parents lived is all they left us, and the life we live is all we will leave behind.

As we remember our loved ones who left this physical world, we become more sensitive to our true essence. We shed "the stuff" that drags us down, and we put aside the false pride that shouts "My own strength, and the power of my own hand, have achieved all these things for me" (Deuteronomy 8:17).

In this sacred hour we commit to live lives of meaning. We strive to become givers instead of takers, to spread kindness and compassion instead of hoarding more stuff, to form everlasting connections, instead of collecting more tchotchkes; in other words, to live the legacy we want to leave behind.

As we cherish the memories of those who helped us write our life stories, we ask You, our God and God of our mothers and fathers, to give us faith to believe that the most important pages in the books of our lives are yet to be written.

לְשָׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּכְתְּבוּ וְיִתְחַתְּמוּ.

May you and all your loved ones be written and sealed in the book of life, and may your life be one of joy, health, abundance, and peace.