

Rosh HaShanah Morning 1 5782 *Derasha*: Gail
Rabbi Eric Polokoff, B'nai Israel of Southbury

Over the years my sermons have become more personal – my learning to standup paddleboard, college visits, my wife Ellen's garden and the like. Not all of my family welcomes being so referenced. Some who know my family are chuckling: 'I bet they don't.' Yet for those in my family who do enjoy being referenced, absolutely no one is more enthusiastic than my sister Gail. Each season she'll casually inquire: "Are you mentioning me?"

Gail especially looms large in my consciousness this past year. After our mother died, Gail's husband Steve took the lead in organizing a myriad of tasks, including cleaning out and readying for sale the house in Norwalk where our mom had lived for half-a-century. Steve was kept very busy. For her part, Gail was masterful in ensuring that my brother Jay in Atlanta, she and I all received significant keepsakes. A portrait from the early 1960s of my mother looking a lot like Jackie O – complete with a bouffant hairdo – as well as two drawings made by an artist who was a friend of my parents reside with us in Southbury. Gail's study in Southport now includes my mother's high school graduation photo, and a favorite lamp and chair from Norwalk; she described a bookshelf as "sort of a shrine." Rejecting my callous advice and inspired by my mother's commitment, she went about rescuing an old, primitive painting done long ago by an Argentinian cousin as an adolescent, to the delight of his heirs. From a clock on my niece's wall to glassware in my daughter's apartment to Jewelry given to all the grandchildren, thanks to Gail *and* Steve remembrance is inclusive and readily facilitated.

Shrouds have no pockets. Assuredly, such sorting-out of items and inheritances are not unique – not to our family nor to any generation. Figuring out legacies is as old as time immemorial and ubiquitous everywhere. You likely have – or will have – your own experience. You likely have – or will have – to make decisions. You've probably already gotten good training figuring out what to keep before or after college, or in various moves. What guides you? I read this summer in a book by the Israeli scholar Micah Goodman, who shared how Jewish thinkers, too, understood that what to keep from generation to generation makes for an important metaphor and lesson in identity.

On the one hand, we might determine to hang onto everything – every sofa and mirror, table, chair, rug and toaster oven – and place them prominently in our homes. Cling to every bedframe or coaster. Within the religious realm, that's essentially what the ultra-Orthodox attempt to do. They treasure every aspect of the past, every *mitzvah* and tradition inherited from previous generations. Nothing is to be let go. Instead, all are to be scrupulously maintained, placed front-and-center.

On the other hand, we might sell it all or throw everything away, trashing all tangible reminders of the inheritance and leaving nothing for future generations. That's what so many completely secular or estranged Jews do, as they discard Judaism and the opportunity it brings for identity and community. Clearly, we'd feel stifled, over-stuffed trying to keep every last item we've inherited, trying to perform every last traditional observance. It's neither practical nor advisable

to cram it all in next to everything else we've acquired over the years. Hence we choose a pathway beyond the confines of ultra-Orthodoxy. Our homes are furnished with a flair extolling science and reason. And we make room around the table not just for seemingly straight Jewish men, but women, Queer persons, non-Jews and others. Traditional practices originally formulated to minimize contact with gentiles, such as the laws around kosher wine, have become discordant. Indeed, in our community the greater temptation is *not* to horde traditional religiosity but to toss it out whole.

That, too, is folly. We diminish ourselves in throwing it all away. Time and again studies have demonstrated that people connected to religious communities are happier and more generous. Research on human spirituality, such as work by psychologist Lisa Miller, highlights the mental health benefits to such awareness and how it alters pathways in our brains. We are better off with God and the moral structure of religion. Even amidst doubts and uncertainties, faith provides comfort, hope, meaning and identity.

When we place the Torah back in the Ark we sing from the book of proverbs: *Etz chayim hi... for I have given you good instruction, do not abandon my Torah. It's a Tree of Life for those who hold fast to it, and all its supporters are happy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.* Religion can improve us. Were even more proof necessary, there was last January's insurrection at the capitol. Its instigators and many supporters – unbelievers, nihilists, or conversely, a few religious fanatics – find everything relative – falsehood, violence, bigotry – and nothing mattering beyond one's own self. The replacement of rational religion has been disastrous. In contrast the Torah insists injustice must be challenged, lies cannot be quartered, bullying and intimidation must be countered. And then there's the current antipathy to mandated vaccination and mask-wearing, as I mentioned last night. From ancient times to now, Judaism stands in opposition to magical thinking and selfish, destructive individualism. "All of Israel is responsible for one another" and "Do not separate yourself from the community," our Sages cautioned. Yet such values lose their currency when thrown away or sold. What's needed are opportunities to examine, refine and promote them.

So let us do in the religious sphere precisely what Gail and Steve (with an assist from Ellen and me) did at my mother's house – thoughtfully and selectively culling out the most significant, enabling us to make space for the treasures bequeathed to us. Let us foster Reform Judaism. Your presence today, in person or on-line, and the ongoing support you provide the synagogue demonstrate this very thing.

Deuteronomy tells us:

תּוֹרַה צְוֵה-לָגוּ מִשָּׁה מוֹרֶשֶׁה קְהֵלֶת יִעֲקֹב:

Moses commanded us Torah, an inheritance of the Congregation of Jacob. Rosh HaShanah reintroduces us to an inheritance, an inclusive Torah whose wealth is readily co-distributed amongst all who seek it, irrespective of actual parentage – that is, Jews-by-birth and Jews-by-choice, non-Jewish family and all who link themselves to us. Rosh HaShanah initiates a period of *Teshuva*. That Hebrew term has two interconnected meanings – the word means both "repentance" and "answer." Focused on rituals and avowals of faith that summon us to trust in

something beyond ourselves, we are invited this day to contemplate spiritual beauty, to celebrate Jewish continuity, and to hear in Judaism's beating heart the sacred pulses of freedom and diversity, hope and renewal.

But enough about Judaism and current events, and back to my sister. Making sure nothing had been left behind at the house, Gail examined every nook and corner. Thrilled, she called me. "You'll never guess what I found! It's a treasure better than gold!" Gail was right, I couldn't guess. My immediate response, some missing paperwork, was completely off the mark. Gail then volunteered her answer. She'd discovered old movie reels, including one labeled "Gail's 4th Birthday."

The films were quickly digitized. I opened the thumb drive file. There were my siblings and parents, some of their friends and occasionally me. My mother looked great and for the first time ever I saw my father completely healthy. Grandparents and relatives never seemed so vital. It felt surreal – like I was seeing ghosts. I'll save you from scenes of pin-the-tail on the donkey, musical chairs, and the paper party hats, but here's a still photo from the thumb drive. (Please put on screen.) I'm the one looking at Gail. Again, Gail's ongoing determination as chief nurturer of our family's roots and ties had borne fruit. (Thank you.)

Admittedly, not every family is lucky enough to have a Gail and Steve. Nor will everyone have ancestral keepsakes or documentation or remembrances. But now on Rosh HaShanah each of us, in our own way, can follow their lead. We can bring the past into our future by embracing *Teshuva*, a return to Torah and communal solidarity as our answer. Considering life's complexity Judaism offers one overarching response: there's a remarkable consistency across the millennia. Judaism champions a monotheistic singularity – *Adonai echad* – linking everything in creation, and framing a mindset grounded in justice, humility *and* memory.

I'll soon learn whether or not Gail, Steve and my family found this sermon too much of a good thing, or whether it just whet the appetite with new ideas to be pitched over lunch. The sermon's ultimate success, however, relates to how it was heard by you in support of your own choices and values – the Tree of Life *and inheritance of the Congregation of Jacob* whose practices you determine to keep and celebrate. I wish you *L'Shanah Tovah*, a year of blessing, strength, preservation and renewal.

Cain yehi Ratzon. Be this God's will.