

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5780

Rosh Hashanah and the Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up

I am so blessed to be here to welcome the year 5780 with you. This past year brought a lot of transition for my family, and maybe you have had similar experiences as well. In fact, in some senses, my transition is your transition, since I am here because I am your new rabbi! This exciting change brought Matthew, Maya, and I from our apartment in Sharon to a house on Joseph Road, and we are delighted to be settling in and making friends in our community. There have been some other big moves in my family, too. My parents sold the house I grew up in, and my sister moved to a new apartment in Brighton. My family went through a lot of boxes and packing tape in the last 12 months. A large part of moving is sorting through what items are worth shlepping to your new house, and how to organize them again once you arrive. So naturally, with all the moves going on in my life, I got super into Marie Kondo.

For those of you who don't know, Marie Kondo is the Japanese tidying Guru, creator of the KonMari method of tidying, and author of "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up." Now, anything that advertises itself as "life-changing" and "magic" is something I'm going to want to check out. In the months leading up to my move I read her book, followed her on instagram, and watched her Netflix series. I was not disappointed. Marie Kondo is full of gentle but direct instructions about how clearing out your house can dramatically change your perspective and quality of life.

For example, most of her instructions are centered around the idea that we should enjoy our environment, and that in order to do so we need to see and appreciate all the things that we have. It is often difficult to do

this, because we hang on to things we do not want or need and the clutter prevents us from experiencing what we would otherwise enjoy. She writes, “to truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose.” So, for example, I ought to get rid of the clothes in my closet that do not fit in order to make room for me to see and access the clothes I do enjoy wearing.

As I applied her teaching to my closets and cabinets, I also found that many of the guiding principles behind her KonMari method were extremely useful for changes I might want to make in other aspects of my life. To fully engage with the things that are important to us, we must first discard the things that have outlived their purpose. This could be true for someone who is not enjoying important relationships because they are dragged down by others. Or for someone who is not pursuing their passions because they are caught up doing things they dislike.

I found for myself that this principle was really helpful for about 75% of the stuff in my house. A lot of the things that weren't bringing me joy were things I could get rid of, like clothes I didn't feel good wearing or hand-me-down furnishings that weren't my style. Those items were taking up space and getting in the way of my enjoyment of items I did like. However, some of her advice did not sit quite right with me. For example, I struggled with the idea that *everything* has to spark joy. I mean, my toothbrush doesn't spark joy. My snow shovel sparks the very opposite of joy. But I think we can all agree that I need to keep both of those things. So, what to do with the things that I still needed, even when they did not bring me joy?

I found these successes and challenges held true for other aspects of life as well, especially the way I manage my time. Time is an unfortunately

limited resource, and I spend a lot of time thinking about whether I am using time wisely, which is itself a waste of time. You see how quickly this can get out of hand. Because time is so precious, it is important to me to be present and living each moment to the fullest. With the KonMari method in mind, I decided to discard as many of the tasks and events that I don't like as possible. I stopped finishing a book or a movie that I was not enjoying, since there are so many others out there that I want to experience. I also decided to invest more in maintaining friendships that really mattered to me, and let go of a few "frenemy" relationships that were not bringing good energy into my life. Here again, I faced the challenge of what to do with the things I had to keep, even when I didn't want to. While I was free to give up on a certain book or stop investing in an unfulfilling friendship, there were other time commitments that I could not get rid of so easily.

This is where I turned to our tradition for more wisdom. Psalm 100 tells us "Ivdu et HaShem b'Simcha, serve God in Joy." The psalm pairs joy in service, reminding us that there are, in fact, joyful elements within seemingly monotonous obligatory tasks. This idea that we can *rejoice* in knowing, loving, and serving God permeates our tradition. The Hasidic master Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov taught that the purpose of every human soul is to serve God with joy and that the greatest enemies of this joy are self-doubt and worry, which distract us from devoting our whole hearts to this joyful service. Again, the Ba'al Shem Tov taught that service itself was joyful, that we serve God through singing, dancing, telling stories, and loving one another. He did not push aside onerous mitzvot, rather, he encouraged people to bring an atmosphere of celebration to all the commandments, even the tough ones.

The Ba'al Shem Tov's disciple, Rebbe Nachman of Breslav, was famous for his insistence that it is a "Mitzvah G'dolah L'hiyot b'Simcha Tamid, it is a great mitzvah to always be joyful." I doubt that anyone can be full of joy all of the time. In fact, we know that Rebbe Nachman himself struggled with periods of great sorrow and despair. But his teachings offer the suggestion that we should "make every effort to maintain a happy, positive outlook at all times. It is a natural human tendency to become discouraged and depressed because of the hardships of life: everyone has their full share of suffering. That is why you must...use every possible way to bring yourself to joy, even by joking or acting a little crazy!"¹ In the moments when we are sad, frustrated, or bored, we should stop and find ways to wade through the fog. Even when fulfilling serious mitzvot, it is ok, in fact it is encouraged, to sing and dance and joke and celebrate.

With the teachings of these rebbes in mind, I realized that the best moments in life come from not just finding joy, but also bringing joy, to each and every moment.

I spend a good portion of each day worrying about whether I am spending my time in the most productive way and maximizing my enjoyment of each moment. Of course, like the Ba'al Shem Tov suggested, this worry gets in the way of actually enjoying the day, especially when I am "wasting" time doing something I don't like. I hate doing dishes. It's wet, it's messy, it's not my thing. Lucky for me my wonderful husband takes on most of this particular chore, but there are days when I end up standing at the sink for whatever reason. And when I get stuck doing dishes I spend the whole time thinking "Uch, I could be outside! I could be playing with the baby! I could be reading a book! But I'm doing DISHES!" I tried the

¹ Ikkutei Maharash 2:24

KonMari method of getting rid of something that didn't bring me joy, but all I ended up with was a smelly kitchen and no bowls for my breakfast. So I turned to what I am now calling the Rebbe Nachman method to help me refocus my energy on what aspect of washing the dishes is joyful, or at least leads to a joyful outcome.

For starters, one huge aspect of the KonMari method is holding items in your actual hands and fully experiencing the emotions that arise. What task is better suited for this than washing dishes? As I scrub and rinse, I can think about how the dishes themselves were gifts received at my wedding, how the food I just ate nourished my body, how I enjoyed the dinner time spent with my family and friends, and how I am blessed to have a cozy home where I can prepare these meals for my family. Plus, the end result of having a tidy house and clean dishes next time I'm ready for dinner also brings me a lot of joy. I still don't like the wet mess of washing dishes, but this reframing made a distasteful task a lot more bearable, and made me feel a lot less resentment about "wasting" time at something I hate.

With the encouragement of our tradition, I have tried very hard to not only find the joy in each moment, but also to bring joy to even the most difficult or monotonous tasks. It's not a perfect system, but I have found myself enjoying and appreciating my days more and more as I employ this method. I invite you to explore Marie Kondo and Rabbi Nachman, and to try this practice for yourself in the coming year. More than anything else I hope that in this coming year you enjoy the blessings of not only finding joy, but also *bringing* joy, into as many moments as possible in this sweet, happy, and healthy new year. Shanah Tovah.