

The Sacred Stuff of Memory
 Yom Kippur Morning, 5772
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The rails are rusted now. If you close your eyes, you can still hear on the wind their hum of connection, joining place to place, people to people, all running on time, feeling now, perhaps, like it was borrowed time, but it really wasn't. An old locomotive and a single box car rest on the short sections of remaining track. You can still just about make out the number "250" on the old engine's cab. If you look up on the side of the boxcar, that's right, way up there toward the top, you can still see the large faded letters vertically arranged, an "N" and an "H," for the New Haven Railroad. Here, if we walk all the way around to the other side, stepping over the three rails, strange isn't it, that there are three rails..., we see the wide open space where the orange sliding door was, like on the other side. Who knows how long it's been missing, for a long time, though, that's for sure, a long time since it mattered, since there was any freight inside to be hauled on those tracks that aren't there any more. Look here, just before we leave, way down now, near the bottom, just above the four-wheeled carriage at the forward end, you see what it says? BLT 3-56 BY LIONEL.

Built by the Lionel electric train company in March, 1956, so proud of the product as to sign and date it. I was the engineer back then. In my blue and white fine-striped engineer's hat, I would climb up to the cab, or so it seemed when I would take my place at the transformer. The cellar lights out, just the glow of the engine's head light and the street lamps of imaginary towns and villages and of the search light that turned 360 degrees from atop the red tower, telling perhaps of the airport and of things to come when trains would no longer haul the way they once did. It was mesmerizing to watch the train make its way around the large figure eight of Lionel's signature three-rail track, arranged on the big plywood table my dad had made for it. Overjoyed from the moment I first saw the box that Chanukkah night, I was probably seven years old, and it was the best present I could ever have imagined receiving.

Sitting at my desk, I look over to my left at what remains of that train, resting there atop the antique wooden filing cabinet in my study, the locomotive with faded numbers and the banged up boxcar on three short sections of remaining track. We hauled a lot of freight way back then, small nimble fingers rising up as loading cranes or bent over like the backs of laborers, carrying capacity in cubic footage marked on the side of the

boxcar, according to the specs of the real New Haven Railroad. As from time to time reverie takes me riding down the rails again, the years of my life racing by in the opposite direction, passing through stations and crossings to the lonely whistle's call, I have come to realize that this old train carries more now than it ever did before. Just the locomotive and one lone boxcar with a missing door, which doesn't much matter for the hauling now, loaded with memories shuttled through time, of people and places long ago.

We can probably safely say that we all have too many things, too much stuff. There are those things, though, that are different, that are not about money or intrinsic value, that when we see them, even out of the corner of an eye, bring a smile to our lips or a welling to our eyes. These things are "the sacred stuff of memory." Let's pause for a moment, even to close your eyes if you wish, and call to mind some of those things that for you are the sacred stuff of memory (*pause, wait a few moments...*). Perhaps for some, it is a table cloth that comes to mind, one that graced a table around which family sat at special times of gathering, and even now when set upon the table of your heart, here they are again, if but for a moment, a smile of pride, a word of encouragement, as long ago, but now to say, "keep going, you'll be okay, set the old cloth upon a new table and place upon it the sacred stuff of future memories." Perhaps it is a pair of candlesticks passed through generations, telling of a family's migrations, children whose faces were once illumined by the dancing flames, now grown with children of their own; or of brand new little ones whose eyes are just starting to open wide to the wonder of light. Or a book with fading margin notes, as though just written for you today; a string of pearls that was your mother's, or a tool, or ritual item, a ball or a bat, an article of clothing perhaps, a sweater worn when a hug is needed from the one who wore it once, her or his warmth forever inhering in the warp and woof of life's threads.

I have stood at the chuppah with couples when all manner of precious things such as these have brought the presence of loved ones to be felt among the gathered; and with mourners at the graveside when a simple scarf, or something as small as a polished stone in the pocket, drew strength in a different way than before, but no less real, from the one dwelling now upon the other shore. Like the couplings that once joined the cars of that Lionel train, people are joined together, traveling on in time and in the heart's terrain through the sacred stuff of memory.

It is not only from family or of times long ago that the sacred stuff of memory comes. For some there may even be pain attached to things of the past, things that remind of brokenness, of gatherings that weren't, or the jagged tear in the photograph that reminds of the way things were before or might have been. We also create the precious stuff of memory when steering the course alone, setting the table with a beautiful cloth, gathering upon it the wine stains and the laughter and tears of friends who become as

family. Mementos of trips, of little things gathered in special places, winking out from a bookshelf or a night stand, reminding of sunshine on days in our lives that seem so gray; a letter from a friend whom we know is there even in the absence of seeing, whose words speak kindly to us, though penned all those many years ago.

In Hebrew, the word for word and for thing are one and the same. Words are real, having substance and heft, sculpted with the chisel of tone and intent, whether placed upon a page or left to float in space for ever and ever. The word for word and thing is *davar*/דבר, *d'varim*/דברים when more than one, as words strung together in conversation, or things carefully placed for special keeping. The speaking of a word person to person is *m'daber*/מדבר, but formed of the same root, surely things speak as well, giving voice from afar to the one with whom a certain thing draws us close. Usually understood as holy words, *divrei kodesh*/דברי קודש might also refer to holy things. The two came together for me in the building of a workshop, words written with indelible ink upon a thing of my own making. I learned much from my father in the way of wood and working with my hands. The workbench I made had simply been a bunch of 2x4's, some plywood and nuts and bolts, but in the coming together of all these parts, my father's pride lifted my spirit like that of the little boy who worked alongside him at another bench long ago. From that bench to mine, there comes an old gray metal toolbox that was my father's when I was a boy. As it sat all the way over on the right-hand side of his bench so it sits on mine, the clasp long broken, childhood treasures still inside. Just above it on the pegboard there hangs a small metal parallel clamp, the name REINSTEIN engraved in capital letters in its lower arm, machined by my father in a high school shop class. Turning it over and over in his hands some tears come, amazement and wonder, standing there in his son's workshop, telling of his life back then, of hardships and hopes so long ago. I had earlier asked my father to write some words upon this bench we stood before, a thing carefully crafted, and almost a year ago, then at ninety-three, this is what he wrote:

With expectations for much great work.

With much love and pride,

Dad 12/27/10

Much more now than things, my father's words upon the bench, protected by ten coats of polyurethane, his blessing carried in the wood, all as *divrei kodesh*/דברי קודש, bench and words, the sacred stuff of memory.

Of things that are sacred from the time of their making, what makes ritual objects uniquely our own? Perhaps simply through use, in fulfilling their intended *mitzvah*/מצוה, they come over time to speak of our days and tell of who we are. It may be some holy thing given by a loved one, purchased or made, that brings them into the circle of our prayers, held close in God's presence. It may be something crafted by your own

hand that in its use brings to mind the time and place and the tools of its making; or a talis bag made by your daughter in the very week of her Bas Mitzvah. Of gossamer strand, the talis upon your shoulders, shuttled through time, your turn now to be enveloped in the stories that have become part of its weave. It may be the talis that was your chuppah, or a kiddush cup that in its raising to welcome Shabbos reminds of a baby's entry into the covenant. *L'chaim*/לחיים, to life, laughter and tears, the sacred stuff of memory.

I purchased a talis once, now well-worn, that I still wear upon a time. I bought it at the Israel Book Shop while visiting from Canada, paying for it with one hundred dollars in \$20. bills carefully counted out and placed in a plastic sandwich bag by my Bobi the year before. I went directly from the store to Hebrew Rehab, where Bobi lived her last few years, to show her what I had gotten with the money she had given me. Sitting next to her on the edge of the bed, I opened the box and set the talis down between us. Without saying a word, she bent her head down and began to sob into the soft wool. Sanctified by Bobi's tears, the talis had become uniquely my own. To this day, when I fold up my talis after davenning, I nuzzle my face into the soft wool and think of Bobi.

Ritual objects are called *k'lei kodesh* / כלי קודש, holy vessels. As the sacred stuff of memory can become *divrei kodesh* / דברי קודש, holy words and holy things, diverse as the people who hold them dear, so ordinary objects can be transformed into ritual objects, *k'lei kodesh* / כלי קודש. That type of small folding magnifying glass sometimes called a "jeweler's loupe" has become a ritual object for me, a *k'li kodesh* / כלי קודש. Ever since my mother died, I have given such a magnifying glass to all of my Bar and Bas Mitzvah students as a way of honoring her memory. A science teacher and naturalist, my mother always carried a small folding magnifying glass around her neck, introducing family, friends, and students to tiny worlds of wonder, so easily missed as we hurry through life. The Hebrew words for magnifying glass are *z'chuchit magdelet* / זכוכית מגדלת, *Magdelet* / מגדלת, to make big, is of the same root as *yitgadal* / יתגדל, as in the first line of the mourner's kaddish, *yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah* / יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא, "May God's great Name be magnified and sanctified. A most ordinary object transformed, raising us up on the wings of God's Name, the sacred stuff of memory opening our eyes to beauty when sorrow brings our spirits low.

In every crystal tear drop a lens to magnify the beauty of things remembered, of people, places, and times. If pain is magnified too, in an instance of recall, then in the tears that follow, the possibility of healing and hope brought more clearly into view. Yizkor is a gathering of all the memories each one brings, filling together the holy vessel of this room. In remembering, our own lives are given sharper focus, the ways we are and happy with, and the ways we would like to change in making their memory a blessing. In the end it is not about the things, but about the memories they call forth, but that is

why they are so precious, the sacred stuff of memory, for all they carry and convey through sunlit day and dark of night, the lonely whistle of an old locomotive and a boxcar traveling on to the next station along rails that never rust.