



Tashlikh 2017

“THE PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS WE HAVE CAST ASIDE” by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

There’s a very old custom associated with *Rosh Hashanah*. It’s called *tashlikh*, a practice in which Jews cast off their sins into a body of running water, preferably containing fish, by symbolically emptying out their pockets. The ritual became popular in the 13th century despite objections from the rabbis who feared that people would find it more efficacious than the prayers uttered in synagogue. They were particularly opposed to and condemned the practice of throwing bread into the water to feed the fish. Needless to say, and I can testify to this personally, rabbis are often ignored by the strong-minded will of the people who are not easily separated from their superstitious beliefs.

Traditions change and over the years we have also chosen to alter the *tashlikh* practice using new ideas, new readings, and new practices. For example, instead of casting our individual sins into waters, we can talk about casting away indifference to injustice, and pledging to take on a commitment to change. Last year I focused my remarks on gun control. The prior year I talked about racism.

This year I decided to go into a very different, more personal direction, far away from current events and politics.

I presented several people with two specific questions. The answers they shared with me were remarkably personal and intimate.

The first question was: Is there any object that comes to mind that you threw away or misplaced or lost – or someone else threw away – that you wish you could have kept? Why?

For some, this question immediately triggered memories of their childhood home where they spent their formative years and which their parents sold in order to downsize or relocate, or which it fell on their children to sell after their parents died.

One person related to me the story that after her mother died she and her siblings moved their father out to live with one of the sons. Then it was their job to clean out the contents of the house that had accumulated for over sixty years. “There was a large table lamp. When we were small, Mom read to all her children sitting in the chair next to the lamp. Dad suggested I keep the lamp, knowing how I’d loved it as a child but I was more interested in getting the sale over quickly and frankly, I thought the lamp too old-fashioned. I deeply regret selling it, and today I wish I had that lamp.”

Other iconic items that several people still miss are a particular chair or armoire and especially the dining room table and chairs where they had such wonderful memories of family and friends coming together. But none of us needed a second dining room table and it made no sense to store it away for years for the next generation who don't share our associations.

Many of us also miss a special home away from home – perhaps a summer place by the sea or in the mountains, or even in another country – or a cherished restaurant that has since closed its doors, where a romance may have gotten off the ground or been nurtured over the years, or one which we visited for family brunches, and where the staff greeted us warmly whenever we showed up.

And then there is the story I heard from a woman who, for almost ten years, starting when she was 11 or 12 years old, kept a diary that she wrote in faithfully, several times a week. “I led an extremely uneventful life,” she said, “so I think I mostly summarized what I was reading, and analyzed frequent arguments with my sister. Every year, sometime during the week between Christmas and New Years, I observed an important ritual – I bought a new notebook for the following year – and so, in time, I amassed a large pile of different colored notebooks. But then, when I was 20, I was betrayed by my best friend and a boy friend. The discovery of their affair was very traumatic – so many of my memories and experiences had involved one or both of them. I struggled with a way to cope. I decided that since I had lost much of my past, I needed to let go of my *whole* past and trust the future. I found an extra-large garbage bag and threw out all the diaries. I believed that I had to start living in a different way. I survived that difficult time but I sometimes miss those diaries...they might have been totally dull reading -- and I might have been embarrassed in retrospect by all my inane thoughts and observations. But since they were thrown out long ago, they only exist as an increasingly vague memory – which may be as good a way as any to process our past.”

The second question I posed was: Have you ever had the experience of having cast off another person or been cast off by another person? What were the circumstances, feelings that were engendered?

Some people undoubtedly think about job situations where they've been told that their job has been cut or terminated, or just the opposite, have had to deliver that news to someone else. Some have experienced both sides of this coin. Either way is fraught with loss of purpose and identity and meaningful relationships that transcend the specific job.

But by and large, my respondents took the question into the personal sphere. Several people used the same word – toxic – to describe very harmful relationships that they had to end for the sake of sanity and personal survival. One person talked about a friendship of twenty years with a charismatic, more cosmopolitan friend who opened the world to her, but this person was also manipulative and domineering and could be very unpleasant. “I'd often apologize to taxi drivers and waitresses! Over the years, she'd thrown many tantrums and stopped talking to me for weeks. Then the day I learned I was pregnant, she made her jealousy clear and I knew she would become a toxic presence, so I ended our friendship. It was a hard and unfortunate but necessary choice. That was thirty years ago. I do not regret it.”

Another person also made a very difficult decision to cut out from her life a close relative who is addicted to heroin. After too many arrests, overdoses, and his coming around just for the purpose of asking for money, enough was enough. “Illness or not, he was toxic for me. I didn’t want to see him any longer, and I didn’t want him around my child. I wrote him a letter (to cut things off). My hand trembled as I wrote, so painful was it for me to tell him this. He didn’t respond, and I haven’t heard from him since. Yes, I understand that he was ill, and that in so many ways he had no choice. But neither did I.”

Sadly, several people shared with me what I have come to characterize as the secondary consequences, or maybe, more accurately, the collateral damage that occurs when people get divorced or end a relationship. “When I decided to end the relationship, I had to discard so much more than my best friend: I had to discard his entire family, a family I had become very much part of, a complicated family I loved. It’s a bizarre, uncanny feeling, to lose an entire lineage like that. It’s like an entire room of your house has been walled off with everything still in it.”

And finally, there’s the account of someone who had been in therapy for many years, who got a phone call to tell her that Joan, her long-standing therapist, had had a stroke and that she wouldn’t be able to practice therapy again.

“Disbelieving, I asked Barbara, the woman who called me, and who is also a therapist, if I could see her for a session to discuss my sudden loss of Joan.

“During the week, waiting for my session with Barbara, I kept clutching my stomach as if I’d been kicked there. A part of me felt that I couldn’t go on without Joan in my life.

“Barbara and I spoke of little else but Joan that session. I asked her if we could meet the following week. We met weekly after that for about a month, and every week we spoke mostly of Joan. I kept meeting with Barbara... It became clear that I was now her patient.

“After a while, maybe six months, Barbara told me that Joan was doing much better against all odds. She could maintain a sort of conversation even if she wasn’t sure to whom she was speaking or exactly what they were speaking about. ‘You can call her,’ Barbara told me. ‘It would be OK to speak with her now.’

“But I didn’t call her. I didn’t need to hear Joan in such a compromised and diminished state. It would be more painful than living with her loss. I was reminded of how I felt when my heart had been broken by the men I’d loved in my past. Each time, I felt that I could never love anyone else. And yet I did, eventually meeting the man I married. Life goes on, as the saying goes. As does love. As does therapy, for which I thank Joan, who paved the way for me to be helped by someone new.”

On that note, I want to extend my deepest thanks to the people I reached out to who generously and candidly shared their stories with me so that I could share them with you. Even as we tally up our losses, of the things and people and places that have been cast off and have meant so much to us, I believe we can find solace and comfort through our storytelling, and, ultimately, make supportive connections with others who identify with our stories because they have lived them too.