Parshat Shelach Lekha
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Things

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Things. What is the place of things in our lives? This question is prompted by an event happening just now on the opposite end of the country—an auction of things.

The things belong to the actress Debbie Reynolds, and they consist of Hollywood memorabilia that she has accumulated over the years. Things like:

- the ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland in "Wizard of Oz"
- Julie Andrews' dress and guitar from "The Sound of Music"
- Marilyn Monroe's white halter "subway" dress from "The Seven Year Itch."

All told, Reynolds has 5,000 pieces of such memorabilia—vintage costumes, props, icons from the Golden Age of Hollywood. Today, she starts to auction if off, piece by piece.

Why? For years she had tried to create a museum for all this memorabilia, but for whatever reason the museum idea never took off. In the meantime, she owned these possessions, but these possessions really owned her. They were rare and fragile, and she had to spend time and money taking care of them. When asked by a Los Angeles Times reporter why she was parting with priceless treasures, she answered that she was exhausted by spending millions of dollars and endless anxiety protecting things. She wanted to be freed from her things.

Freed from her things. Most of us don't have Judy Garland's ruby slippers or Marilyn Monroe's white dress. But how many of us have something like our grandmother's crystal set, stemware for 12, water glasses and wine glasses, that are a precious relic, but we don't quite know what to do with it. Yes, it's Nana's stemware. We're not going to throw it out. But it's not our style. We're not going to use it. We're trying to do fen shue. Less stuff. Less clutter.

More light. More space. More Mandarin Oriental. We don't really have space for it in our kitchen cabinets. So Nana's stemware hides out in a box, in the attic or the basement, until our children will have to deal with it a generation from now.

Pirkei Avot puts the dilemma nicely: *marbeh devarim, marbeh deagot*, the more we own, the more we worry. The old car gets a dent. Who cares? The new car we just drove off the lot gets a dent. We care. The more we own, the more we groan.

All of which raises the question: what should our attitude be about materialism? About money? About wealth? All religions, including our own, struggle with this question, and it easy to get it wrong, and hard to get it right.

Is wealth an end in and of itself, or a means to an end? Is money good because we are enabled by it to do tikkun olam, to give it away, to be a philanthropist? Is money good because it supports a large standard of living that we enjoy? Yes to both. But one is about us, our own happiness, and the other is about the good we do for the world. A bit spiritually confusing.

And the relationship between wealth and happiness is complicated. On the one hand, as my Bubbe used to say: "Rich or poor, it's nice to have money." But on the other hand, there is a lot of current research on point, which David Brooks discusses in <u>The Social Animal</u>. The bottom line is that being richer does not make you happier. Brooks writes: "Winning the lottery produces a short-term jolt of happiness, but the long-term effects are invisible…People who place tremendous emphasis on material well-being tend to be less happy than people who don't." (p. 196)

Given these complexities, religious traditions have radically different approaches to the question of wealth.

On one end of the spectrum, for example, is Mother Theresa, who did her work among the poorest of the poor, the widows and the orphans, the dying and the unwanted, of Calcutta. All day long, she lived amongst dire poverty. She was interviewed by Time Magazine in 1989. She said:

> We have very little, so we have nothing to be preoccupied with. The more you have, the more you are occupied, the less you give. But the less you have, the more free you are. Poverty for us is a freedom. It is not a mortification, a penance. It is joyful freedom. There is no television here, no this, no that. This is the only fan in the whole house. It doesn't matter how hot it is, and it is for the guests. But we are perfectly happy.
>
> I find the rich much poorer. Sometimes they are more lonely inside. They are never satisfied. They always need something more.

As Mother Theresa sees it, wealth creates hungers that are never satisfied. Simplicity, even poverty, equals happiness.

On the other end of the spectrum is Oprah Winfrey. A professor of religion at Yale named Kathryn Lofton has written a book called Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon, which sees Oprah's work, in her shows and publications, in religious terms. She offers her audience spiritual fulfillment achieved by the purchase of things, specifically things that Oprah herself endorses. Oprah will recommend that you buy things, as Lofton shows, "countless objects, from lipsticks to tank tops, honey to books, pens to sedans, computers to butter trays." Buying these Oprah-endorsed things packs a spiritual punch. In Professor Lofton's words:

> The right goods, according to Winfrey's advocacy, encourage self-indulgence and relaxed reflection among individuals who spend too much time on others, not enough on themselves. This is how products become practices in the land of O. Every product of Winfrey's empire combines spiritual counsel with practical encouragement, inner awakening with capitalist pragmatism. (p. 24)

As Oprah sees it, the products she recommends bring not only physical pleasure, but also an inner light.

So where does that leave us? Do things *get in the way* of spiritual fulfillment? Mother Theresa. Or are things *the pathway* to spiritual fulfillment? Oprah Winfrey.

Fortunately, our tradition inhabits the wide middle ground between them, conveying a nuance that is expressed in one felicitous word. Namely, in Hebrew, the same word, *davar*, means both thing and word. Both physical and spiritual. Both material and not-material. You can touch it, and you cannot touch it. What do we learn from this? It speaks both to the incredible importance of, and also the real limitations of, things.

On the one hand, things are crucially important in the Torah. After major spiritual events, like the Exodus and Sinai, *sefer Shmot* spends 5 portions on the things that go into the building of the *mishkan*, the wilderness tabernacle. Unlike Mother Theresa, Judaism hardly glorifies poverty. To the contrary, God tells Moses collect gifts of gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen; ram skins and dolphin skins and fine wood; oil for lighting; and precious stones like lapis lazuli. All these things created something holy, the Tabernacle so that God could dwell amongst the people. No things, no Tabernacle. No things, no second half of the book of Exodus. No things, no first or second Temple in Jerusalem, which were also made out of vast amounts of gold, silver, copper, wood and other precious materials. And where did all these things come from? The Torah is clear where they came from. From ordinary Israelites. *Devarim*. Things. Things are good. Things can be holy. Work hard and acquire things. Fine.

And yet, while things are indispensable to the creation of a holy life, at the same time, we are acutely aware of the limits of things. Things don't last. Things break. That is true of the things that Oprah tells us to buy. It is true about all the gold, silver and copper that went into the

Tabernacle, none of which remains. It is true about all the gold, silver and copper that went into the First and Second Temples, none of which remains. Things go poof. They are gone.

But if things, *devarim*, are gone, what remains are stories and words, *devarim*, about those things. We have a whole book called Devarim, words, that we read every year. Nana's crystal, her stemware for 12, is a thing that we may not have a ready place for. But stories and words about Nana, the mother and grandmother she was, the kindness she showed, the resilience she embodied, those stories and words are not in the attic and not in the basement, but in our heart. Words we live for. Words we transmit from generation to generation.

A story, which may well be an urban legend, is told about one of the Reichman brothers, a Canadian real estate mogul who died with an estate of more than a billion dollars. He left two letters to his children, one to be opened immediately, the other to be opened at the completion of the *sheloshim*, or thirty days following his burial. The first letter contained a bizarre request. Dear children, I know that this is somewhat unusual, but please bury me in a certain pair of socks. The children did not know why their father wanted this, but they were going to do their best to fulfill his wish. So they go to the *chevrah kadishah*, the burial society, they show the letter, bury me in these socks, and say: we want to honor our father's request. The *chevrah kadisha* said no. It's against *halakahah*, Jewish law. The children pleaded. The *chevrah kadisha* refused. He was buried without his socks. At the conclusion of the *sheloshim*, the thirty day period, the children opened up the second letter, which read as follows: "My dear children. By now, you have buried me without my socks. I wanted you to understand, at a deep level, that a man can have 1 billion dollars, but in the end, he cannot take along with him even one pair of socks."

Devarim, things, are good. They can even be holy. But all things, from the lapis lazuli stones that went into the *mishkan*, to Judy Garland's ruby slippers worn in "Wizard of Oz," don't last. *Devarim*, words, last. The rich life embodies both *devarim* and *devarim*, things for the moment, and words for eternity. Shabbat shalom.