

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780 Sparking Joy

I wonder how many people here have come across something called the KonMari method...? It's a decluttering practice. It was invented by Marie Kondo and has spread all over the world through her book, *The Life-Changing Magic Of Tidying Up*.

Marie Kondo suggests that we approach our living spaces category by category - clothes, books, papers or whatever we choose - and ask ourselves whether each object in that category is worth keeping. This is the method she suggests we use:

Keep only the things that appeal to the heart, and discard items that no longer spark joy. Thank them for their service - then let them go.

We should notice the language that Kondo uses. She's not saying, 'throw everything out and start with a clean slate.' She's not saying, 'tidying up is about creating a system and then organizing what you've got to fit into that system.' Instead, she wants us to begin from a different starting point entirely - one which in Japanese is expressed in the term *tokimeku*. We need to ask whether we are filling our space with what brings us joy. Her method is mindful, introspective and forward-looking, requiring us to search inside ourselves and deeply question our relationship with the objects with which we surround ourselves. Only then can we make the decision whether to keep them or let them go.

For example, if we were to sort a spice drawer using the KonMari method, we wouldn't only consider sell-by dates [though hands up if we have already failed that test!]. Rather, we can imagine ourselves picking up each flavor and asking, do I actually like this flavor? Do I want to use it in my cooking? Do I want to feed it to others? Does it make me excited to think about doing so?

If we were sorting a bookshelf we might ask: Have I actually read this book/do I truly intend to? Is it a gift I was given and am grateful for, but not interested to keep? If I have read it, did it speak to me in some way? Would I want to read it again?

And so on.

Kondo even suggests that we should begin our clearing by thinking of it as a 'tidying festival,' creating a vision for ourselves of what our ideal life should look like.

She is not the first person to notice an overlap between tidying up and self-improvement and is she? It can be very helpful to think of our High Holydays as our own 'tidying festival' - a once-a-year opportunity to KonMari not our surroundings but our actual selves. These next ten days - the *aseret yemei teshuvah* - are traditionally given over to an exercise called *heshbon hanefesh* - a deep soul-searching, a self-evaluation. As Ambassador Dennis Ross wrote recently: *Self-examination is rarely easy, sometimes painful and yet always necessary.*

That might give us a bit of a sinking feeling. The prospect of evaluating ourselves and our lives might feel overwhelmingly negative. And so we might be tempted to carry out our spiritual tidying by making a blanket promise to chuck everything out and start again, or by designing a mental system into which to shelve all our stuff without sorting through it, and then say, 'job done, on to Sukkot.' But neither of these approaches really achieves the deep and long-lasting change - the *teshuvah* - that we are striving for at this season of the Jewish year, that at some deep level we sense that we really need.

This year, we might want to try some KonMari *teshuvah* instead. Here is what she teaches:

I had been so focused on what to discard, on attacking the unwanted obstacles around me, that I had forgotten to cherish the things that I loved, the things I wanted to keep. "Take each item in your hand and ask: 'Does this spark joy?' If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it... Keep only those things that speak to your heart. Then take the plunge and discard all the rest.

The end of the Torah - those passages that we have been reading every Shabbat leading up to tonight - actually takes a similar approach. This is Moses speaking to the Israelites:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live.
[Devarim 30:19]

So this year, we might want to approach our *teshuvah* the KonMari way.

We can begin by focusing not on what we need to get rid of but what we actively want to keep. Call it 'life,' call it 'the truth,' call it 'what sparks joy' - in the end we are talking about the same thing. Taken this way, *teshuvah* becomes an uncovering and discovering of the innate goodness that lies inside each of us. It can free us from the pernicious voice of self-criticism while still enabling us to undertake the vital work of tidying and discarding. We can ask ourselves, 'what traits in myself am I proud of but don't practice enough?' We can ask, 'how can I create more time to be gentle?' We can ask, 'how can I make myself more free to focus on what I know I care about the most?'

It's getting late, but I want to offer just one more image for us to focus on. Every year after the month of Elul has begun, somebody from the Synagogue gets in touch with our member Jonathan Cohen. For more years than many of us can remember, Jonathan has been the person who deals with beautifying our Jewish objects. He brings us *schach*, the green leaves that cover the Sukkah. He has rebuilt our old *huppah* into a thing of beauty, with floral poles, a tallit that appears to hang in the air, and hidden bells that only the bride and groom can see. And it is Jonathan who puts together a team to clean our silver, so that our Torahs start the year bright and new, in a blaze of light as we open the Ark. I think that if we were to ask Jonathan why he performs this mitzvah, he wouldn't say that he focuses on the dirt and the tarnish. Rather, he has a sense of how the silver will look once he and his team have finished - and that's the vision that sustains them as they work. It's the KonMari approach again - hold on to what sparks joy, discard the rest.

It's always powerful to have a vision of where we are going. And so, please rise. We are going to open the Ark one more time. Let's look at the silver, think of the blessings, focus on the joy - and commit ourselves once more to the work of *teshuvah*.

Shanah Tovah - may it be a good, sweet and joyous year.