

“Two Holes in the Back”

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5772/2011

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“What are the two holes in the back for?”

I asked my father – I was 11 years old.

“I don’t know,” he said, “let’s find out.”*

Before you freak out – this wasn’t part of a birds and bees conversation, nor an anatomy lesson.

Well, it was sort of an anatomy lesson, just not of the human anatomy. My father had just given me a birthday present of some miniature Japanese ivory carvings called “netsuke.” He didn’t know much about them, but he knew a lot about **me**, and he thought I’d like these amusing, detailed, miniature carvings. I did indeed, and soon netsuke became my passion for many years. [VIEW SLIDESHOW of several of my netsuke, photography by Sylvia Sukop]

I can tell you more about all of that some other time, should you be interested, but for now, here are some photos of a few of my netsuke (thank you, Sylvia Sukop), and 8 actual netsuke from my collection (some of the very ones my father gave me) are being passed around for you to examine and hand on to your neighbor (if you get more than one, just hold on to it until later – I want them all back!).

I bring up my childhood collection now because this year I was among the thousands of readers smitten by an awards-winning book entitled: *The Hare [as in rabbit] with Amber Eyes: A Family’s Century of Art and Loss*. [<http://www.edmunddewaal.com/>] Written by a prominent British ceramic artist – a potter – named Edmund de Waal, the book tells the story of a collection of 264 netsuke that he inherited from his great uncle Iggie, a gay man born in Vienna to a wealthy Jewish family. Iggie escaped before the Nazis arrived, fought in WWII in the American army, and after the war took the netsuke collection with him and moved to Japan. Iggie had inherited the collection from his parents who received them in Vienna as a wedding gift from their cousin in Paris, Charles Ephrussi, himself the son of a wealthy Jew from Odessa whose family had made a fortune on the grain market in the mid 19th century and moved their families to Vienna and Paris at a time – brief though it was - when Jews were semi accepted and assimilated/acclulturated in those cities of Europe (though anti-Semitism lurked very near the surface and erupted regularly).

The *Hare with Amber Eyes* is a tale of the rise and fall of the Ephrussi family – once on a par with the Rothschilds as Jews wealthy beyond measure in Vienna and Paris. The Nazis confiscated their astonishing art collections and libraries and homes, and all that remains in the immediate family is the collection of 264 Japanese netsuke. How were they rescued?

The Ephrussi's loyal maid, Anna, told the story eight years after the war, to Elizabeth Ephrussi – Edmund de Waal's mother - who had made her way back to their palatial home in Vienna and found Anna there. Anna said:

‘and they [the Nazis] didn't notice. They were so busy. They were busy [cataloguing and packing and stealing] [with] all the grand things – the Baron's paintings and the gold service from [the safe and] the cabinets in the drawing-room, and the statues and all your mother's jewelry. And all the Baron's old books that he loved so much. They didn't notice the little figures.

‘So I just took them. And I put them in my mattress and slept on them [for years]. Now you are back, I have something to return to you.’ [p.278f]

Anna handed over to Elisabeth all 264 Japanese netsuke that she had grown up with. Elisabeth gave them to her brother Iggie. That's how Iggie decided to move to Japan where he met and then lived contentedly for decades with his Japanese husband named Jiro. Iggie died in 1994, and then the netsuke lived on in Japan until Jiro died, and then they came to Edmund de Waal, whose life changed when he inherited the collection. As he says, “In a coded way I was being given a responsibility,” [from his lecture at LACMA, September 25, 2011].

[he writes] How objects are handed on is all about story-telling. I am giving you this because I love you. Or because it was given to me. Because I bought it somewhere special. Because you will care for it. Because it will complicate your life. Because it will make someone else envious. There is no easy story in legacy. What is remembered and what is forgotten? There can be a chain of forgetting, the rubbing away of previous ownership as much as the slow accretion of stories. [What is being passed on to me with all these small Japanese objects?] [The Hare with the Amber Eyes: A Family's Century of Art and Loss Edmund De Waal, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010, p. 17]

Besides my affinity for netsuke, and thirst for Jewish history, I am enraptured by this complicated story of Jewish diaspora and assimilation, success and failure, extravagant wealth and devastating loss – even loss of identity, as de Waal's father, a child of the holocaust, became a minister, and not just a minister but the Dean of Canterbury, Church of England, no less --

and de Waal himself did not really know of his Jewish heritage until he began to research the netsuke collection that came to him.

It is a story biblical in its proportions –threatening and comforting at the same time.

And I am also drawn to this book, to this story, to its author’s story, because the questions de Waal poses are my questions too – all of our questions.

Substitute the word “Judaism” for the word “objects,” and you will find our issues – the questions, the “why” we are each of us here tonight – and why we are here together in this particular community. In de Waal’s reflections about inheriting a collection, about the responsibility of legacy – I see something of my own understanding—my own questioning -- of Jewishness – however we come to it - of Judaism’s importance and value – to us as individuals and as a community and as part of the larger Jewish world and entire world – to us as members of the generations of Jews who are alive today, as members and allies of a congregation of historic import -- the first gay and lesbian synagogue -- now entering its 40th year – does it matter that we are here together tonight? How do we make it matter that we are here - together?

Like Edmund de Waal and his 264 netsuke– we too are inheritors – by birth and/or by choice – of a collection. Of Judaism – of Jewishness – of things Jewish.

What I love about netsuke *and* Judaism is the invitation that they offer both to focus close *and* to step back and get the big picture. 264 netsuke in a cabinet offer quite a different effect than looking at one. A netsuke of a Japanese folk legend can tell you a lot about Japanese culture, just as one story from Torah – as we’ll see tomorrow morning – can offer you a lot – a LOT – about Jewish values and social justice – about how to put one’s values into action (putting values into action is of course a Jewish value in and of itself).

Some of you are new to us tonight – this is your first foray into our congregation, maybe even into Judaism. The questions you asked that got you here may be different from those asked by those who come here year after year. I suppose some don’t really ask any questions at all anymore – you just show up when you see Rosh Hashanah appear, as if by magic, on the calendar. Others hassle themselves – What do I want to do for Rosh Hashanah this year? Where do I want to go? Anywhere?

Many of you (oh and me too) have been working on ourselves and preparing for this service for months – learning songs, rehearsing with the choir, studying the liturgy, the theology, the traditions of this time of year, reading/discussing, reading/writing, taking a careful accounting of our souls – a *cheshbon hanefesh* – asking forgiveness of the people we’ve wronged, giving forgiveness to those who have wronged us, thinking about what it means to cycle around again to the end of one year and to begin anew. And some come here tonight without preparing, giving it not a moment’s thought until this afternoon when you decided what to wear or where to eat before arriving here.

Here’s the good news – all of these approaches –however. . .whatever . . .got you here tonight -- totally legitimate, totally valid. The point is they got you here.

But you tell me, whether this is your first ever Rosh Hashanah or whether you’ve lost count, whether you’re new to BCC or you’re a founder, *do* you feel in some way what I mean about being an inheritor? A collector of stories? A rememberer and a re-writer? A passer along of information and an interpreter, reformer, updater, reclamer, liver of Judaism? It is up to us to receive the stories and traditions and music, and up to us to translate all of that – to speak of it and to act with it in ways that make sense to us, that work for us, and then to continue to pass it along – to the next generation – *l’dor vador* – or just to the person sitting next to you, no matter the age difference or background between you.

Take our Cantor Porat, for example, with a background nearly as winding and complicated as the 264 netsuke – Juval feels how music moves the heart, and recognizes that in this setting – in these hearts – our hearts - a song by Debbie Friedman, may her memory be for a blessing, or Tracy Chapman or one of his own composition may move us as much as one of his beloved 19th century German Jewish composers, or even older more traditional melodies. Indeed, the mix of melodies, and Juval’s fluency with so many kinds of song – certainly move us more than we would be moved if he only tried to sound like Al Jolson in the Jazz Singer! [Not that Al Jolson in the Jazz Singer isn’t moving.]

Or take the eminent Jewish theologian, Rachel Adler, BCC’s scholar-in-residence, “student rabbi,” who reminded us the other night at our Selichot observance that speaking in metaphor – describing God in metaphors - can be useful but can also threaten. If we get too rigid about it, we risk seeing a

metaphor as definition or restriction rather than something that gives us more freedom to explore.

Or D'ror Chankin-Gould, our student rabbi, with us last year, and just in TODAY from Israel - who reminds us time and again how one generation can pass things along to another – often the younger generation to the older.

What *are* our responsibilities to what we have inherited? Where shall we keep our collections and what shall we do with them besides letting them get dusty on the shelf?

The British novelist Joyce Cary wrote a novel published in 1958 in which a few netsuke make a brief appearance. 'Look at this,' says the main character, an artist (Gulley Jimson), and I showed her the Japanese netsukes on the mantelpiece, real old ones. Carved all over with the wrinkles on the soles of their feet. 'Magnify them fifty times and they'd be monuments.' He is disappointed in his friend's reply: 'I pity the poor girl who has to dust this room.'

My mother (her memory is such a blessing) would have understood the friend's comment – living with 3 collectors of small objects - netsuke for me, coins for my brother, stamps for my father - my mother was sure she was destined to become only a dust collector!

We all could be dust collectors – if we were to leave behind an active interest in Judaism – in being Jewish. But look around you – I don't see us leaving it behind.

People who spend any time around netsuke or Judaica know that while miniature ivory carvings or intricate bronze Hanukah menorahs or books of prayer can look beautiful on a shelf in a case behind glass or in velvet lined drawers, they are intended to be held and examined closely, they are meant to be moved and used, shared, opened, read, handed around, discussed, studied and *appreciated with other people*.



*oh by the way – the two holes in the back of most netsuke? –it’s where the cord goes through allowing them to serve the purpose for which they were created: the traditional Japanese garb – kimono - contain no pockets – so they would put objects – money, tobacco, not yet credit cards – in wood boxes and fabric pouches – held closed by a cord strung through them – and the netsuke tied to the end of the cord would serve as a toggle to fasten the carrying cases securely through the obi sash -- just the way you might hook your keys behind your belt.



You might be thinking that something far simpler - an actual nut or seed or small stone could serve this purpose. Yep.

And a few Hanukah candles stuck with hot wax to a piece of aluminum foil would allow you to fulfill the mitzvah of lighting Hanukah lights. But both Japanese and Jewish cultures say, if you can, do more than just the minimum.

In Judaism the concept is called *hiddur mitzvah* – beautifying – enhancing - a mitzvah.¹ Thus making a beautiful spice box for havdallah, prayer shawls woven of exquisite threads and colors to carry our carefully knotted tzitzit,

¹ 2. Where does this concept come from? The value of *hiddur mitzvah* actually comes from that very experience that I remarked about a short while ago- our unbelievable escape from Egypt and Pharaoh, and safe arrival across the sea. It wasn't only me who said it, by the way. You can read it in the Torah for yourselves- we all said it! Zeh Eli v'anvehu: this is my G. and I should glorify [enshrine] G. The rabbis heard us exclaim this and wanted to know more. "What does it mean for us to glorify G?" they wondered. "How do we do this?" Can we emulate Moses who wrote poetry that we still read today, and Miriam, who took her timbrel in her hand, leading us in song and dance? From these questions and examples, the rabbis developed the practice that still exists today of *hiddur mitzvah*.

The Talmud (Shabbat 133b) tells us about a R. Ishmael who pondered these questions as well. In typical Talmud-fashion, he had an answer at the ready. "How should we glorify G? Set before G a beautiful sukkah, etrog, tallit, Torah, etc." He goes into the details of what this would look like. <http://bnaikeshet.org/?q=node/907> **Daria Jacobs-Velde**

or the tradition of painstakingly hand lettered Torah scrolls and the incredible arks we build to house them.

The purpose of *hiddur mitzvah* – beautifying a mitzvah – say our Talmudic sages, is to glorify God (who gave us the ability to create and to appreciate). So another kind of *hiddur mitzvah* is studying the mitzvah itself: considering *why* we light those candles, for example, or why we say the particular blessing we say when we do so – or why we are here right now – dressed nicely (another *hiddur mitzvah*), glad to see one another, readying ourselves to come together again tomorrow morning, and then Friday first at our new home – so intimate, and then at the ocean – so vast – so we might continue asking the questions this day challenges us to ask – among them:
 what are we carrying along into the new year and what are we leaving behind? For better or for worse?

In these Days of Awe – and beyond – on what do we – do you - need to focus close? And from what should we – should you - take a step back and look at the bigger picture?

My colleague Rabbi Marc J. Rosenstein lives in Israel and writes a wonderful, thought-provoking blog called Galilee Diary. Just last week he wrote an entry entitled “Taxidermy” about the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv and the plans to update it in the hopes it might be more appealing to the hoards of teenagers who come through there on school trips every year. He wrote:

The phenomenon of cultural change – and the attempt to somehow preserve and teach respect for what has been lost – are common themes around the world.

We move on, but we are nostalgic for where we came from – and [also] we feel the need to show it to our children, and to instill in them respect for it.

Everybody wants progress – but no one wants to be rootless.

Ideally, the changes happen slowly, the culture evolves, integrating new tools and new ideas into a strong, healthy rootstock.

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Does this endeavor indeed strengthen identity?

Can we allow ourselves not to try?

Are we doing it, maybe, after all, for ourselves?

And what's wrong with that?

September 21, 2011 | 22nd Elul 5771

GALILEE DIARY Taxidermy by [Marc J. Rosenstein](#) [Discuss on Our Blog](#)

What indeed is wrong with that – with doing it for ourselves? Of finding new ways and reclaiming old ways of making it matter to us? Of course we want to pass something along to our children, but maybe a good way to do so is to know ourselves what we might want to pass along. By the way, do you know that at BCC's Shabbat school Ohr Chayim, the parents come with their children AND stay to learn with each other? Join us some Shabbat – you don't even have to have a kid enrolled to come study Judaism with us.

Or to live it on Shabbat and every day. Speaking of hiddur mitzvah – don't just come once to look at 6090 W. Pico – come **live** there *with us* in the beautiful ECO friendly home we built together incorporating teachings and values of Judaism everywhere you look – literally from the writing on its wall – the Storylines Project - our words of connection written by our own hands, in conversation with the incredible designs of our artists – the stained glass windows and ark doors and an eternal light that fill the sanctuary and entryways with light and color – light that comes to us from solar panels on the roof, as we take on - in the way we built the building and the way we live in it -- our Jewish responsibilities – legacy - to be good stewards of the earth and its resources.

And any time you come by BCC, you'll quickly find eager partners in your search – *our* search – our joint exploration of what it means to inherit a legacy, a collection – Judaism itself – finding together how to keep it alive and thriving – and discovering for ourselves how it keeps us alive and living lives that matter.

What a perfect time to begin or begin again – at Rosh Hashanah – celebrated in part as the anniversary of the beginning – of when God created earth and sky and sea and all they contain, including . . . us. Rosh Hashanah – the moment of creation - a time when anything was – *is* - possible.

Some of us have been sleeping on Judaism for a while, and who knew? Like a netsuke in a mattress, perhaps it's nudged us every night, reminding us that when the time is ripe, we'll be able to return to it, or to discover it anew.

Now that we're all here – back again or newly arrived – let's have at it, shall we? we all have something to return to each other – and to offer ourselves -- treasures intended to be shared.

Shana tova – may it be a year of discovering what we have and sharing it with others, a year of learning and taking action, a year of focusing close *and* seeing the big picture.