New apartment, New Year, new beginnings

A couple of weeks ago, I moved from Boston back to Chicago, which is where I'm originally from. The movers arrived on a Sunday, and I stood around awkwardly, watching as two surprisingly un-hulking young men carefully brought box after box of my belongings into my third-floor apartment.

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They looked to me for direction, but I wasn't much help, only slightly more sure of where I wanted things than they were. Still, I directed the gentlemen as best I could, knowing all the while that I would be rearranging everything as soon as they left.

Which is what I did. The desk originally placed up against the wall ended up facing the windows instead, and it didn't take much to move it. After all, in that early stage of decorating, it's basically a game of interchangeable parts. Blank walls, clean floors, no magnets on the fridge. That pristine look you know you'll never see again – until, of course, on the next moving day.

I think about moving – of starting a new life in a new apartment in a new(ish) city – quite a bit right now. The Jewish New Year is approaching in all of her breathless glory, and I wonder if there are other Jews who, like me, feel just a tad bit off their game, but who are trying, in spite of that, to find meaning in the holidays.

I realize that for the holidays to be meaningful, I have to do the same thing to them that I'm doing to my apartment: make them my home.

For many of us – both religious and secular – celebrating the high holidays is a little like getting our car's oil changed. We know we have to do it – even watch the odometer's numbers rolling up – and so, perfunctorily, we book an appointment with the mechanic and leave work early. Maybe we catch up on our *Motor Trend* magazine reading while we're waiting. Thirty minutes later we leave the mechanic's, feeling like a responsible adult and thrilled that we don't have to check in for another 2,000 miles. Ultimately, our car engine's lubrication levels have almost nothing to do with our life – which is the way we like it.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can feel a lot like that. We find a seat in shul, mouth the words of the service, sit through a sermon that often involves asking for money. But the event has very little connection to the rest of our lives. The language of the prayers can feel foreign, stilted, hard to understand. Our attention span has already hung up a sign: "Gone Fishin'."

Unfortunately, the aspects of the holidays that have the most potential to be spiritually uplifting are the ones that have become the most meaningless, rote and detached from application to the rest of our lives. It's almost as though we have a collective sigh of relief when they're over, thrilled to get back to "real" life.

Something is wrong with this picture.

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A week after the move, I'm making my way through the stacks of boxes in my thankfully not-as-pristine apartment, fingering each knick-knack and letting its associations wash over me before deciding where to place it. And slowly, very slowly, my apartment starts to feel more real to me.

The bookshelves, always the first to receive attention, now pulsate with color, the spines of paperbacks winking at me like old friends. The once naked walls, only a beige shell before, stare back at me with a medley of art. A watercolor I painted at a beach on Cape Cod. A collage my 6-year-old niece created for me in a fit of love. A World War I poster my brother bought for me when he was a docent at the Harry Truman museum in Independence, Mo. A clipping of the front cover of a newspaper, celebrating an important day in the life of the New England town I once lived in.

All of these things tell part of a story – *my* story – and looking at them helps me to feel more like myself. In a sense, I'm looking at a mirror. These are the objects that make this my home.

It's not until I'm unpacking my dairy silverware, carefully placing it inside the white laminate drawer, that my internal light bulb flashes on. I realize that if I want the holidays to be meaningful, I have to do the same thing to them that I'm doing to my apartment: make them my home. Find the prayer that speaks to me and study it beforehand, allowing myself time to write down and think through my questions. Try my hand at making my Bubby's famous apple cake – even if I have to make three cakes to get it right. Read a holiday book to my 4- and 7-year-old nieces, then listen to the 7-year-old read another one back to me. Focus on a goal I'd really like to reach this year, and what steps I might take to get there. All of these things make the holidays mine, because I start to take part in the telling of the story – instead of passively listening to it.

Maybe it sounds far-fetched. Maybe none of these things will work for someone else – who, for instance, doesn't have a 7-year-old niece or a Bubby who made killer apple cake? The thing is, it doesn't matter. What works for someone else won't work for me, and vice versa.

Maybe the craw in your holidays is the synagogue itself, or the rabbi, or the congregants. If that's the case, find a new synagogue. Put out a Facebook APB for inspirational and dynamic rabbis. Switch it up a bit. Do something different, but do something for yourself. After all, if the holiday doesn't mean anything to you, it can't possibly mean anything to G-d.

Whatever you do, though, don't do nothing.

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It's been two weeks since the move and I'm not going to lie: The apartment still feels new. I'm not yet at the point where I long to go home after a hard day at work. But we're getting there. The test will be Shabbat, the time at which I should feel the most rested, most comfortable, most at home. If my apartment is where I choose to celebrate Shabbat, then I'll know I've finished moving in.

And that finally, I'm ready for a New Year.

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