

## POSSESSED

## The Keeper of a Golden Legend

By DAVID COLMAN

It seems so well-meaning, the little dirt path of minimalism. Get rid of all the stuff you don't need or want — all the clutter that keeps you from seeing the beauty of life, the beauty that is somewhere underneath that pile of clothes. But now the concept of clutter, of sentimentally holding on to things, is so vilified that there is even a 12-step program devoted to its more extreme practitioners.

Yael Alkalay, the owner of Red Flower, the bohemian-modern bath and body line, will not be raising her hand at Clutterers Anonymous. Her loft apartment in the meatpacking district is, well, a bit chaotic. And though she apologizes for it, it's unlikely she will be packing up the hodgepodge anytime soon.

A child of the American 1970's who grew up in New Bedford, Mass., Ms. Alkalay is the grandchild of a doctor who left Bulgaria for Israel in 1954 with nothing more than the tools of his trade. The family left behind centuries of history. She can still chart its course through generations of grand rabbis in Turkey, all the way back to the late 15th century, when her Sephardic Jewish ancestors fled Spain for Turkey.

With precious little handed down to her from the past, Ms. Alkalay freely envies her husband's family, who have lived in Exeter, N.H., for generations and have a whole barn full of family relics. "And all he's interested in doing is throwing stuff away!" she said of him.

It's fitting, then, that the inheritance she does have is precious and little. It is a handful of

Turkish gold coins, a token from her grandmother's dowry, given to Ms. Alkalay by her father when she graduated from high school. Only seven in number, the coins have a melodramatic history. Her grandfather drilled out the legs of his examining table so he could get hundreds of coins out of the newly Communist Bulgaria. (Possessing a sense of irony perhaps, he also lined the binding of his son's "Communist Manifesto" with paper money.)

The coins are almost always with her, a talisman or good luck charm. Though she is not deeply superstitious about them, she recounted that in 1995, when she was working in Japan as a creative director at Shiseido, she left for the subway one day without the coins. She went back to get them, then decided to linger at home. Later she learned that she had escaped the infamous nerve gas attack.

Today the coins feel more like a reality check than a lucky charm. "I reach in my pocket to feel them sometimes," she said, "and it's like, 'Am I still all there?'"

They also represent an identity Ms. Alkalay has come to embrace. As a girl, she hated the name Yael (pronounced yah-EL) and all the foreignness it symbolized. Now, the heady exoticism and Oriental colors of Turkey are elements in her Red Flower line. "They're from a lost world," she said.

Part of the family legend is that the coins have been handed down through generations since the mid-18th century. Actually, as a New York coin dealer confirmed, they are 100-kurus Turkish coins dating from the late 19th century, when Ms. Alkalay's grandmother was a girl.

Ms. Alkalay is not too concerned. She is fully aware, she said, that it is her ideas of the coins that carry currency, not their face value.



**A FISTFUL** Yael Alkalay treasures the Turkish gold coins her grandfather hid in the hollowed legs of a table.