

## **Lost and Found**

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Here's how I lost it: I remember putting it down and thinking "don't forgot to get it" but it wasn't until later that I remembered that I had forgotten to pick it back up. It wasn't the first time that my memory had let me down and would be far from the last...just ask Hana how often I bring home 9 things from a 10 item shopping list. Actually don't.

But losing that particular prayer book, definitely stung. It was a pocket sized mainstream Israeli siddur but for me it was special. It had a grey cover and I spent a year of rabbinical school in Jerusalem praying with it and penciling in notes and underlining parts as I grew in my knowledge and connection to Jewish prayer. The morning service had smudges in the lower quarter of those pages where my thumb rested. I had written in Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah's names next to their husband's in the Amidah and written my own name in Hebrew on the inside cover. That December, it was Hanukkah and I was leading a youth trip to Israel and we stopped in a talmudic era village in the Golan Heights, called Katzrin. There is an ancient synagogue that dates back to the time right after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Our group held a mincha, afternoon service in the synagogue and somewhere between finishing the service and talking with the staff I had left my siddur on a table and forgotten to pick it back up. We were on the bus miles away before I realized.

It is just a reality of the human condition that we are unable to hold on to all the things that are important to us. Our minds are not reliable enough, our hands are not big enough, life is not kind enough and our lives are not long enough. Things just slip through our grasp and sometimes, its only then that we realize we were even holding something.

Loss is a powerful and ever present reality and the Torah confronts this honestly. As soon as Adam and Eve's eyes are opened paradise is lost. Abel is lost in the flair up of Cain's jealousy. Noah loses his dignity. Esau loses his birthright. Isaac loses faith in his

father. Jacob loses his son Joseph. The Israelites lose their freedom to pharaoh. Israel loses a Temple. The Jewish people return home and lose it to the Romans.

Judaism reminds us of loss even at those moments when we feel most found. Just before we break the glass at a Jewish wedding we say *na'aleh et yerushalyim al rosh simchateinu*—“we elevate Jerusalem above the height of our joy.” Not only during the years when Jerusalem was lost to us but because of how that place echoes with loss.

The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote:

Jerusalem is a place where everyone remembers he's forgotten something...its holiness turns into love, and the questions that are asked in these hills are the same as they have always been: “Have you seen my sheep?” “Have you seen my shepherd?”

Around the time that Jews were praying in the Katzrin synagogue, the Talmudic rabbis were thinking a lot about loss. There is a section of the Talmud called *elu metziot* or “found items” in which they get quite specific about our responsibilities when we find lost items. Behind every lost item is a bereft seeker. Its no coincidence that the people we are to watch out for, the orphan, the widow, the stranger are all searching after a loss. The Torah sees a finders keepers world rampant with loss and beseeches us to find people in need and keep them from being lost.

The Mishna teaches that during the time that the Temple stood in Jerusalem, if we find a lost object, we are to announce that we have found it and do so at each of the three holidays of Sukkot, Shavuot and Pesach, when people would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. As this was just a bit before social media, announcing it at these times would ensure that it would reach the maximum amount of people, increasing the chances of the item finding its way back to its owner. And after the last pilgrimage festival the owner is given seven more days in case she needs to go home as far as a distance of three days in order to figure out if she indeed lost the item. So if Rivka is in Jerusalem and hears someone announce that an oil lamp has been found she

can satisfy her curiosity by hitching up the horse and wagon and traveling three days distance to check the night stand with plenty of time to get back.

One of the standards by which the rabbis try to set limits on this process is called *ye'ush* or despair. At what point will an owner despair of ever finding the item and officially give up their search? That's not a scientific question and so the rabbis create long timelines for holding and announcing items. Loss is a difficult enough reality of being human, but despair, giving up hope, is worse and the rabbis try to do everything to avoid that.

The rabbis even discuss the question of how far you have to go to care for the item. Lets say its an animal, do you have to feed and house it? There are limits but there is an expectation that when an item is found that it will have been cared for by the finder.

This Talmudic discussion is only becoming more relevant. Our distracted and frenetic world seems to produce ever more opportunities for us to misplace, forget and leave things behind. One of the biggest lost and founds in the world is the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority's. We are most susceptible to losing things when we are commuting. We vault ourselves out of the subway on the way to the train. We startle awake to make our stop. There are many near misses where we turn back and grab the umbrella or hear someone shout "hey your coat!" The MTA publishes information on its lost and found and at one point reported having over 168,000 items. The most common objects will not surprise you- cell phones, MetroCards and wallets. But there is the "weirdest objects" list. For example, did you know that at one point in the MTA's lost and found there were over 1700 fashion costumes, 23 saxophones, 19 death certificates, 10 pair of tefillin (if someone needs to leave now to check I totally understand), and, wait for it, 2 air conditioners? Picture the guy who woke up just as the subway lurched to a halt at his stop and before lunging for the door, thoughtlessly heaves the air conditioner off his lap. He's running up the steps both relieved he made it and relieved to have all that pressure off his...no!

The level of care the rabbis assumed is all the more amazing given the "not responsible for lost or stolen items" world in which we live. Uber's website states clearly that if you

leave an item in their driver's car, once the item is returned your account is charged \$15. And when a taxi driver or someone comes across a wallet and returns it with everything still in it, we are overwhelmed with gratitude and surprise. "They did not have to do that!" we say. "It gives me hope in human beings" we gush.

The rabbis sought to create a world in which we are neither bystanders nor good samaritans, but simply finders. Loss is a part of life, but it is intolerable and we are here to stop the hemorrhage. In the rabbinic mind loss doesn't just produce a person who lost something it affords the finder the opportunity to re-imagine themselves as a caretaker and a redeemer.

Once the Temple was destroyed, the Talmud instructs finders of lost items to proclaim their find in the synagogue and study halls, gathering places that would increase the chances of the item being claimed. And during times when there is persecution, the Talmud teaches that the finder can announce the item to his neighbors and acquaintances and that is sufficient.

If we read carefully, there is a larger theme of loss going on in the background of this section of the Talmud. While discussing ways for a lost item to make its way back to its owner, there is an acknowledgment that we lose more than things we can hold in our hands. We lose important places. We lose Temples, synagogues, study halls. We lose homes. We lose places where we belonged.

Its the feeling you have the summer before college when your friends have already left. Your parents selling the home you grew up in. Walking into your house after having dropped your last child off at college. Moving into the apartment after the divorce. Selling the house to downsize and stopping to stand next to the driveway basketball hoop. Moving into assisted living for the sake of a spouse.

Sometimes it happens slowly, and sometimes it happens overnight like it did for Betty Levison who was interviewed after Hurricane Harvey hit Houston. She said:

Throughout the night, I could hear the thunder and lightening. Whenever I got up it didn't look too bad. I've had water in my backyard before. This morning, at six-thirty or seven, a friend of mine called and said, 'The water is lapping at my door.' ...Half an hour later, I walked into my garage and it was filling up. I walked into my study, a little lower than the rest of the house- I've never had water in there before- and it was starting to come in. You realize what's important: photo albums are the only thing I really care about. So I lifted things into closets as high as I could.

The rabbis in the Talmud know that there are cataclysmic losses in life when we realize how hard it is to maintain our grip on things, but that most of us are living the story of Noah's ark in slow motion. Water comes in here and there. We lose something here and there, but ultimately fail to grasp the undercurrent of loss in our lives. Why spend so much time training us to be finders of items belonging to other people? Because loss is an existential truth of life and the most powerful mitigator is human goodness.

The Talmud then asks what exactly do we mean by 'times of persecution?' What does that have to do with announcing lost items? The rabbis answer that it means a time when lost items automatically belonged to the king. Its like the teacher who doesn't allow eating in the classroom and declares "any snack I see is mine!" Announcing just to friends is a way of avoiding official confiscation.

Based on this they tell the story of Rabbi Ami who found a vessel filled with coins. A roman saw that Rabbi Ami was hesitant to take it and the Roman said to Rabbi Ami "Go, take it for yourself; we are not the Persians, who believed all lost items belong to the king!"

'How wonderful,' the Roman is saying, 'that we don't live in a repressive society in which the ruler gets it all, we live free in a finders keepers world!'

As if that's so much better.

What does this story have to teach us? Its one thing to lose an item, another to lose a sense of belonging and home and now the rabbis wonder: what do you do in a situation where you are at risk of losing your values? What happens if this culture of being a helper, a finder is undermined by individualism and self interest?

Here's how tempting it is- the Roman, who is not necessarily your best friend, is being friendly. 'Go on, take it for yourself' he winks. Its a devil's bargain in the guise of fraternity. Forget about your culture of care, be like me and take the money.

Its a boss who makes an unnecessarily harsh decision at work that will harm a co-worker or a client but its just easier for you to be quiet. Its the competitive environment that convinces you to push your child even harder to keep up. Its the angry language of the email or text that lures you into responding without restraint.

The background in this section is that its not only possible to lose an item, its also possible to lose yourself, to lose your identity.

In the final teaching of this section of Talmud the rabbis teach that in Jerusalem there was an *evan ha'toen*, a stone for claiming, where those who lost something would go and stand and declare their loss and those who found something would go and declare their find.

I imagine this must have been a powerful place. Even if you never found the thing you were looking for, even if you never found the owner of the item, you would know there was a place to go to talk about it. That there was a community that cared to listen. And hearing other people's losses you would know the most important thing: you are not the only person who lost something.

You see, there is something that happens to us emotionally when we lose something. We feel like the world doesn't care. How could I have lost that!? What did I do to deserve this?! How could this be happening to me?! When we lose something we feel lost. The stone of claiming is a place where you would announce your loss and find comfort.

The system the rabbis are building is meant to create the ironic blessing that when you lose something you find community.

Our section of Talmud ends with an obscure question: Go and see if the stone of claiming has been covered over by flood waters.

Bear with me for a moment here as I unpack that question.

This is actually a reference to another story in the Talmud about people who are eager for it to rain past the rainy season. In our liturgy we pray for rain from the end of the Sukkot holiday on Shemini Atzeret until Passover. Why only that time period? Because that is the winter rainy season in Israel. Its very Jewish: of course we pray for rain in Israel! Pray for rain in Israel in July, are you crazy? We are nothing if not a practical people. But the people in the story are not so reasonable, they ask for rain past when it is likely. A local townsman, Choni Hameagel, who is known for getting results when it comes to prayer is asked by the people to offer a special appeal for rain. Choni does and it starts to rain. Then it starts to pour. Then it starts to flood.

Be careful what you wish for.

Not having enough rain is bad but so is too much. It turns out that life is a balance of gain and loss. Sometimes while grasping for the things we think we want, we lose grip of the things we took for granted.

The people take refuge in the Temple in Jerusalem and as they cry for it to stop Choni replies "Go and see if the stone of claiming has been submerged."

Its one thing to lose items, another to lose homes, another to lose our values, our identity, our appreciation and sense of gratitude, but to lose the very place you go to find all lost things is to truly be lost.

In the end, this entire section of Talmud is constructed to teach us how to redeem each other from oblivion.

I often tell the story that when I first arrived in the Bet Torah community I spoke with a member of the congregation who talked about the loss of her brother. Next to her was an older member who put her arm around her and said “no one will forget your brother.” A community is there to make sure that when you lose something you don’t get lost.

There is an echo of this from the days of the Temple. Mourners who would go to the Temple on holidays would enter through a separate door that forced them to cross paths with all those who came simply to celebrate. When you passed a mourner the custom was to offer condolences on their loss.

We are trained to look for the loose threads, to pay attention to the seekers. That’s how loss turns into love.

As Yehuda Amichai puts it, holiness turns into love when we hear each other asking: ‘have you seen my sheep?’ ‘Have you seen my shepherd?’”

Have you seen the garden of eden, I seem to have lost my way?

Have you seen my son Joseph, I had just sent him to get his brothers?

Have you seen my wallet? I had it a second ago.

Have you seen my air conditioner? Its kind of hard to miss....

Have you seen my home? There was just too much water.

Have you seen my beliefs? It was just easier to stay quiet.

Have you seen my children? I turned around to finish the dishes and they got so big...they’re grown.

Have you seen my husband? We had just retired and were planning to travel.

Have you seen my brother? I have, I will never forget him, no one will.

Have you seen my prayerbook? *Ha'im matzata et a siddur sheli?* I ask the guy at the information kiosk at the entrance to Katzrin. It was a year later and I had brought another group to Israel. Since we were in the Golan and stopping at Kaztrin, I figured I might as well give it a shot.

*“Siddur katan, b’tzeva afur, Its a small grey one,”* I say. The guy turned around and reached up to a shelf of books, ran his hand along their spines, stopped at a short one pulled it off the shelf and looked inside. *“Aharon Brusso?”* he asked, reading my name. I nodded and with no emotion on his face, as if it was nothing at all, he handed me back the siddur he had held on to from last Hanukkah. I must have been pretty excited because for a jaded and salty Israeli kiosk guy he looked at my reaction and cracked a pretty sweet smile.

Loss is a part of life. And so we search. And in searching for what we lost, we find each other.