

Lost Threads
Yom Kippur 5771
September 18, 2010 - 10 Tishrei 5771
Temple Israel - Minneapolis, MN
Rabbi Jared H. Saks

Having had lunch, Kirk and I went to the pharmacy to buy birthday cards for my Grandmother. We were already in the car on our way to her birthday party when I realized I didn't have my backpack. We've all been in a situation like this, where we turn around and realize that all of our belongings aren't with us. They haven't been stolen; we've left them somewhere. Our hearts start racing, we go to pieces, and we are blinded by the sheer panic of the moment.

Haphazardly, I parked the car, and ran as fast as I could back to where we'd eaten. I bolted up the back stairs of the restaurant and dashed to the table where we had sat. A couple was sitting there, but no backpack. As quickly as my feet would carry me, I ran back down the stairs to talk to the staff. Had someone turned in my gray backpack? Had they seen anyone walk out with it? Nothing. They suggested that I look again where I had been sitting. I knew I had just looked, but I also knew I was flustered. Maybe I'd missed it, somehow. As I bounded up the stairs a second time, completely out of breath, the couple that had taken the table where we'd been sitting was now making their way down the stairs. They overheard my mission and said, "The guy with the twin boys, the ones dressed alike in camouflage, he was looking for you. He saw your backpack and said he was bringing it downstairs to find you."

I ran back downstairs to talk to the staff, but no one said they'd seen him. The backpack was gone. And so was the guy who'd spotted it. Had he stolen it? Was he looking for me? How would I ever find him? I ran back to the car to get Kirk. The two of us starting wandering the

streets looking for a dad with twin sons dressed in matching camouflage, carrying my gray backpack.

After what felt like forever, but was probably only a half an hour, I decided I couldn't put it off any longer. I had to call my Mom to let her know. I knew that my iPod and my camera could be replaced. But my tallit, the one that had belonged to my grandfather - her father - after whom I am named, my Grandpa Jerry, the tallit his best friend gave me at my Bar Mitzvah, it was gone. I was distraught. And I was ashamed, ashamed that I'd lost my mother's father's tallit.

When I called, my Mom assured me that these things happen. But more importantly, that she honestly believes in people and that she believed that he was trying to find me. Was there anything in my backpack that would help him find me? I wasn't sure. My boarding pass? That had my name on it. But I'd flown from Milwaukee! How would he ever find me? (In the moment, I think I might have forgotten that I was a rabbi, that Googling my name pulls up Temple's website with all sorts of ways to find me.)

Shortly after finishing my call with my Mom, my phone rang. A number I didn't know. Could it be?! I answered. "Jared?" the caller said. "Yes," I replied. "I found your backpack." This backpack. And in it: my iPod... my camera... and my grandfather's tallit. I got his address, only five blocks away. We ran. As we came within sight of his home, one of his boys was hanging out the front door. "There he is!" his son shouted. They had been waiting for me.

He handed me my backpack and told me what had happened. As he and his sons were finishing their lunch, one of the boys spotted my backpack and said, "Dad, those guys left their backpack." When they tried turning it into the staff, they feared the staff was not going to handle the situation well. So, they took my bag back to their home to handle of things themselves. And they kept it in safekeeping until I'd arrived to claim it.

This was a by the book lost-and-found encounter. And when I say “by the book,” I mean *the Book* with a capital B, or a capital T, as in the Torah. In *Parashat Ki Teitzei*, from the book of Deuteronomy, the portion we read four weeks ago today, it says, “You are not to see the ox of your brother or his sheep wandering away and hide yourself from them; you are to return, yes, return them to your brother. Now, if your brother not be near to you or you do not know him, you are to bring it to the midst of your house, it is to be there with you until your brother makes inquiry about it, then you are to return it to him. Thus you are to do with his donkey, thus you are to do with his garment, thus you are to do with anything lost of your brother, that is lost by him, and you find it: you are not allowed to hide yourself” (Deut. 22:1-3; Fox, pp. 945, 947).

This guy and his sons followed the formula of our text perfectly. Though the text tells us to care for our *brother's* property, Reuven Kimelman teaches us, “By opening your hand to the stranger, he becomes your brother.” The text says that when we notice our brother's property where it shouldn't be, we cannot hide ourselves from the situation. We cannot ignore it. His son noticed my backpack and drew his father's attention to it. When Torah says that if you can't find or don't know the owner, you are to bring it home with you and keep it safe until he comes to claim it, this dad and his boys tried to find me. When they decided that they couldn't trust the staff at the restaurant, they brought my backpack home and figured out how to contact me. When the text closes by reiterating the notion that we cannot ignore the situation, that we cannot remain indifferent, the boys and their father went out of their way to make sure that my belongings were returned to me.

This passage about returning lost property to its owner is not the first time that the Torah teaches us this virtue. This time, though, the Torah expands the notion. The first utterance tells us if we happen to come upon an ox or a donkey, we are to return it to its owner. In Deuteronomy, though, the text emphasizes wandering off of the animal. This teaches us that

even if the animal has wandered really far astray and it will take a greater effort to return it to its owner, we are still obligated to help. Even if the animal wanders off four or five times, we are still obligated to help. Rashi, the 11th century rabbinic commentator, understands this to mean that it's not just about passively taking care of someone else's property. It's about active concern for safeguarding our fellow human being's possession so that it will remain intact and constitute something worth restoring (Leibowitz, pp. 209-214).

Our tradition tells two stories of people's possessions being left in the care of others when the owners have lost their belongings or have forgotten to reclaim them. The first comes from the Talmud. It is the story of Rabbi Hanina who was visited by a passerby who accidentally left some hens outside his house. His wife found the hens and began to take care of them. When they began laying eggs, the couple did not consume the eggs, because the eggs did not belong to them. They cared for the hens and the eggs until there were too many eggs and too many hens to tend. At this point, they sold the eggs and bought goats and cared for them, as well. When the passerby returned, looking for his hens, Rabbi Hanina and his wife directed him to the hens and the goats that now belonged to him. They took care of his possessions as though they were his own and made sure that they were something worth returning to him when he came back for them (BT Ta'anit 25a).

The second story comes from the Midrash. There were some men who left two measures of barley with Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. After some time, they had forgotten about their barley and left without it. Year after year, Rabbi Pinchas sowed the seeds, reaped the barley, and stored the produce. When seven years had gone by, the men suddenly returned looking for their measures of barley. Rabbi Pinchas directed them to the granaries in which were stored seven years' worth of barley harvest, which rightfully belonged to the man. Rabbi Pinchas had

just cared for it as though it were his own, making sure that there was something worth restoring to them when they returned (Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:5).

Each of these stories might be hyperbolic, but what they teach us is that when we encounter someone else's lost possessions, we are to treat it as though it were our own, perhaps better. It may cost us something to care for it; but ultimately, the lost possession and any riches it generates, belong to the original owner. "Is there a difference between doing what is right at the moment because it feels good and making a conscious, deliberate choice to follow God's laws? The text suggests that our choices must be deliberate" (Koritsky). By making conscious choices to care for others, we elevate ourselves to a higher state of holiness. By performing ethical acts, we become partners with God. This is "reaching toward our spiritual potential" (Eugene Borowitz).

Rabbi Shoshana Perry tells the story of playing hide-and-seek with her daughter when her daughter was a toddler. Her daughter would hide by covering her own eyes. If she can't see you, you must not be able to see her. When the text tells us not to hide ourselves, it is telling us not to turn a blind eye on others. To do so would be an ill-fated attempt to hide ourselves from something we want to avoid by shutting it out. "It is very easy for us to build a life that blinds us to the problems of others" (Perry). We get self-absorbed and forget about others' needs.

When the boys and their dad returned my backpack to me, it was more than just an act of lost-and-found, of returning my lost property to me. "Sometimes someone's emotional well-being is tied to [their] physical property" (Ariel). The iPod and the camera could have been replaced. All of the music on my iPod is on my computer at home. All of the pictures on my camera are backed up or printed. Those were the things with high monetary value. The tallit, on the other hand, probably has little monetary value. But it has incredibly high emotional value. It links me to my Grandpa Jerry. It connects me with my mother. These boys and their dad didn't

know it, but in restoring my lost property to me, they cared for my emotional and spiritual well-being, as well.

What, then, does the Torah or my experience losing my backpack teach us about what we do when the thing we find or hold has *only* emotional value? We know what to do with the tangible property of others. What about the intangible property? There is no 'Finders Keepers, Losers Weepers' in Judaism. We have a moral obligation to ensure the safe return of other people's property, even if we incur some cost. We've learned this. But these days, few of us find someone else's physical property and hold onto it for a lengthy period of time while we wait for the person to return, like the stories from the Talmud and the Midrash. More often, we make an immediate effort or the person shows up right away.

What we do find and hold are the feelings, the shared dreams, the confidences of others. "These, too, we must guard carefully and return with the accrued interest of our friendship, our honest praise, and our commitment always to nurture these vital human connections" (Shanks). The emotional and spiritual well-being of others is at stake. We have a duty to remember what others have entrusted to us, whether they have left them on our doorsteps and forgotten to come back and claim them, or whether they left them with us with intention and took a long time to return. We have to deem these confidences important because the one who entrusted them to us is important.

"It's not always easy to extend oneself to another. There is so much in our own lives that requires attention and so little time to do all that needs to be done" (Olitzky and Sabath, p. 78). So instead, we fill our time with obligations we have to ourselves. We also fear strangers. A stranger needs our help and we fear what he might do to us or how she will take advantage of us. Still, we must remind ourselves that "acts of kindness, motivated only by a desire to help

others, are part of the essence of what it means to be human, to be Jewish” (Olitzky and Sabath, p. 78).

“Compassion is a uniquely human characteristic” (Olitzky and Sabath, p. 79). A single act has the power to change reality. In Hebrew, we call these loving acts of kindness *gemilut chasadim*, which comes from the word *chesed*. *Chesed* is part of the thirteen attributes of God, which we enumerate on the High Holy Days: *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v’chanun, erech apayim v’rav chesed ve’emet, notzeir chesed la’alafim, nosei avon va’fesha v’chata’ah v’nakeih; Adonai, Adonai, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin (Exodus 34:6-7). *Rav chesed*, abounding in kindness. *Notzeir chesed la’alafim*, showing kindness to the thousandth generation. These are qualities we seek in God, especially on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. “Whenever we go beyond the normally expected, predictable behavior, the more we are like God” (Olitzky and Sabath, p. 80).*

Tonight, at our Ne’ilah service, which concludes Yom Kippur, we will “stand before an open Ark with none of our tangible property and all of our intangible property. At that moment we are our stories, we are what we love and care about... at that moment, we also hold the intangible [belongings] of the people around us” (Ariel). When we stand before the open Ark, it is about each of us alone with God. We will be as alone as we will ever be. At the same time, we will be connected to one another by the threads that we hold for each other. We have a sacred obligation to pick up the lost threads that bind us together.

It is fitting that it was my Grandpa Jerry’s tallit in the backpack; fringes, threads and all: fringes and threads that are meant to remind us of the 613 commandments. There is no way for any one of us to carry all of the commandments alone. We put the weight of them on our shoulders and wrap ourselves in them. We wrap ourselves, as well, in the threads of the fabric

of our lives that we hold for one another. In do so, we interweave our lives together. *G'mar chatimah tovah*, may we be sealed for blessing in the Book of Life.

Sources:

Ariel, Amy, based on a conversation, face-to-face and electronically

Fox, Everett, The Five Books of Moses. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.

Koritsky, Toby, "Creating a Promised Land," Torat Hayim - Living Torah, UAHC Department of Adult Jewish Growth, www.urj.org, 2000.

Leibowitz, Nechama, Studies in Devarim (Deuteronomy). Jerusalem: Haomanim Press.

Olitzky, Kerry M. and Rachel T. Sabath, Striving Toward Virtue: A Contemporary Guide for Jewish Ethical Behavior, Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing, 1996.

Perry, Shoshana, "The Art of Seeing," Torat Hayim - Living Torah, UAHC Department of Adult Jewish Growth, www.urj.org, 2000.

Shanks, Judy, "'Finders Keepers, Losers Weepers?'" Torat Hayim - Living Torah, UAHC Department of Adult Jewish Growth, www.urj.org, 1997.