

There is a product that people can purchase to put on their key chains, or maybe on anything, that helps them find lost objects. It can be expensive, but then again, losing your keys is also costly. Do you have one of these gadgets?

I should have one. I know that not everyone loses things, but I do, and I bet some of you also lose things on a regular basis. Long ago I accepted that I have both strengths and challenges – we all do. I am someone who often loses or misplaces objects. Keys, pocketbook, license, phone, sermon, you name it. I'm not proud of it; it is one of the challenges I work on. The first big step I've taken is that I no longer panic when I "lose" something, because I have usually just misplaced it. I mindfully take a deep breath and contemplate where it is. Usually I find whatever was misplaced. And so, when I read the famous statement in Ecclesiastes, it comforts me.

"There is a season for everything,
עַת לְבִקֵּשׁ וְעַת לְאָדָּד
A time for seeking and a time for losing,

A 16th century rabbi, the Radbaz, writes that often what we have lost is often right in our hands. (1) Have you ever looked for your glasses and found that they are on your head? Or looked for your phone, while it was in your hand... that's what this rabbi was teaching us; sometimes, whatever we think is lost, is actually still in our reach. Have you ever lost your sense of calm, but found it through a deep breath, or the embrace of a friend?

Maybe the distractions of the 21st century make us less able to keep track of things. Or, maybe losing and finding things is just endemic to the human condition.

Our Tradition knows human nature, and thus, we actually have a commandment in the Torah to return lost objects. In Parashat Ki Tetze we learn about - Hashavat Aveda- the mitzva to return something that is lost to its rightful owner. I first encountered this commandment as a kid at Camp Ramah, when on most days some adult in the dining room would get up and say: "heneni muchana u'mezumenet, "Here I am ready to fulfill the mitzva of Hashavat Aveda, the return of lost objects", and then hold up items found around the camp. After the Holidays, we will gather lost tallit bags, *machzorim*, purses, wallets, earrings and the like – and we will set up a Lost & Found in our office to help get these lost objects to their owners. It's one of the first mitzvot we perform here in the New Year.

Tonight, I want to share with you teachings from Rav Nahman of Bratslav. Rebbe Nachman lived at the end of the 1700s, was a grandson of the The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and wrote extensively combining Torah and Jewish mystical tradition. Rebbe Nahman revolutionized Judaism by giving us a Jewish way to meditate and to speak openly with God. He also taught memorable and profound Torah.

One of the lessons Rebbe Nahman taught was about returning lost items.

He writes: (Lekutei Moharan 1:188) “We should know that there is an angel in the world, and under this angel there are other appointed angels, and each holds a shofar and a shovel in their hands. The angels are always standing and digging and searching for lost objects and then blowing their shofar. When the angels find something, they blow the shofar to make a joyful, happy noise since they are able to return what was lost. There are so many lost objects in the world and so Rebbe Nahman says it is because sometimes people lose things due to their own desires.” Rebbe Nahman continues and says that, “forgetting is an example of losing.”

What an incredible image-that there are angels in this world whose job it is to help us find what we have lost. I often feel that the folks who help us find lost objects are angels. Reb Nahman is acknowledging that often we need help to find things that are lost. Reb Nahman believed that much of our lives are spent searching for what we feel we have lost. **Not only physical items, but, more importantly, what we have lost of ourselves, of who we are.**

My teacher at The Hartman Institute, Dr. Biti Roi remarked that it is glory, or ego, that Reb Nahman is speaking about when he says our desires are what causes us loss. If someone wants to work over time, above all else, then something else will be lost. If someone wants to play or relax, to the exclusion of something else, then much else will be lost.

Rav Nahman teaches that the central mitzva of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur IS *Hashavat Aveda* – returning what is lost. Amazing. According to Reb Nahman, we are not here to beat ourselves up, or to think about how we will live or die as a result of our behavior. No, the New Year, from Rosh Hashana until we hear the sound of the Shofar tomorrow night, is our time to identify what we have lost in ourselves.

Sometimes each of us can lose our keys or wallet or important papers. And sometimes, in life, we lose our way. Who among us has not **lost** an opportunity for joy, or compassion, or you name the value, at one point in our lives. What value have you lost this year that you would like to find? (pause)

We might be inclined to think about actual people in our lives who are no longer with us either because a relationship has ended, or because a person has died. This too can be about us considering not just the loss of that person per se, but the loss of the values and richness that they brought to our lives, and how that person changed us. That is why when we think of who is gone from our lives, we ask ourselves to remember the values that they left us with. If they made us laugh, it is laughter we may have lost - and we need to notice this and look to bring more laughter into our lives. If they showed compassion to others, it is compassionate acts that we miss inspiring us and we can try to be more compassionate. While we cannot have those people back – we can amplify, extend and embody their values.

Sometimes we lose some of our core values, or the balance of priorities in our days and in our lives. Sometimes we stray from living in the world as our most authentic self. In large and in small ways. Remember when you were a child, or when you were embarking on your adult life – who did you want to be? How did you want to be known in the world? What were your core values and traits? The next 24 hours are OUR time to seek, and to find what we have lost in ourselves, to discern our priorities,

and to dedicate ourselves to more fully living our values. That is the purpose of our time tonight and tomorrow. To realign ourselves with our most sacred values, and to start the new year having been RETURNED to who we aspire to be in the world.

The word for returning a lost object is *Hashava*, to do repentance is *T'shuva* – both words come from the same Hebrew root. To return. *T'shuva* is finding what we have lost in our inner core. Today, is the day to embark on this searching and finding.

I am reminded of the famous Jewish story: Before his death, a certain rabbi named Reb Zusya would say, “When I ascend to heaven and am asked about my acts on earth, I won’t be asked: ‘Why weren’t you more like Moses?’ Nor will they ask, “Why weren’t you more like Devora, the judge.” What I will be asked, is ‘Why weren’t you more like Zusya, the best Zusya you could be?’”

The moral of this Jewish story is that we should aspire to do enough introspection in our lives so that we are continually discovering who we are supposed to be at each point in our lives, to be our authentic selves. This is deep, often emotional spiritual work. Work that may require us to change – and as we know – change is not easy. We are not defined by the many labels we carry: daughter, brother, parent, teacher, lawyer, rabbi. Rather, we ARE defined by our values and our actions, which ultimately make up our character. In every one of the titles above, one can be generous, thoughtful, giving, or miserly, dismissive or mean. Who Zusya is, or any of us are, IS defined by how we relate to others, to God, and the world.

Judaism doesn’t just ask questions, but rather our rich tradition provides ways that we can find those lost bits of ourselves that we need to strengthen or add or tweak in the coming year.

There are 3 important texts that can guide us in the introspective work we need to do: They are, in the order you will see them: God’s 13 Attributes, *Ashamnu*, and the *Al Het* prayers.

We repeatedly chant God’s 13 attributes. God does not need to be reminded of those values. We need to be reminded of ours, and that is why we repeat them. Because we were born *B’tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God, our core value is to be *Imitatio Dei*, to imitate God. Just as Adonai is merciful, compassionate, full of love and faith – so too it is our goal to be merciful, compassionate and full of love.

The *Ashamnu* appears 10 times during the next day and outlines core Jewish values, by stating their opposite. We betray, we are cruel, we have spoken ill of others. Ask yourself, ‘how can I not betray who I am? And others? How can I be more kind, to myself and to others? How can I swallow the hurtful words I want to say that I know will hurt others? How can we flip the sin to the positive – from betrayal to trusted, from cruel to kind.

There are 44 sins in the *Al Het*. We have sinned against you by... it is a long list – find one that you want to work on. Maybe it is “For the sin we have sinned against you by clever cynicism.” Nobody feels better when they are around a cynic. You get a temporary laugh, but are then left flat and dark.

Cynicism is merely a lack of curiosity and hope. We can each aspire to bring sweetness, not vinegar, curiosity and hope into the world.

Will reciting these texts change your life immediately? I don't think so. But looking deeply at one of these texts may help you to discover what of your values you may have lost a bit of.

Since change is hard and often overwhelming, focus on one or two traits to work on. Françoise Mathieu, a therapist and clergy writes: "Instead of picking your trickiest area, pick the issue that you can most easily visualize improving on. These 3 texts and others in this *Machzor* can act as prompts for our own thinking about how we wish to live in the coming year.

Another way to help find what is lost is to give yourself permission to think quietly and reflect. Every Shabbat morning, we begin our service here with quiet reflection for just a few minutes. For some of the time during this Yom Kippur, choose NOT to say the words of the prayers, and not speak at all. Instead, try to block out what is going on around you and look into your heart and soul. It can be during the service, later tonight, or during a walk tomorrow.

One more way to help find the lost pieces of our selves is to cultivate a contemplative practice. Rebbe Nahman, had a practice of going out alone into the forest to speak with God and to discern the lost parts of his self. He also arrived early to traditional prayer and sat in silence so that he could hear what his heart needed to tell him, before services.

Cultivate a contemplative practice, a few quiet moments each day to let your soul speak to you. Those who practice mindfulness know the power of this practice and the positivity it can bring. When you check in with yourself each day, you can make course corrections along the way. Reflection, change and restoration of our souls are all things that take time and practice. (Our Center for Spiritual Well-being offers opportunities to learn contemplative practices. Join us on November 1st when we launch a year of learning about Judaism, positive psychology and happiness.)

The actual commandment to return lost objects comes from the Torah – (Dvarim 22:1-3) - If you see one's ox gone astray, you must take it back to them. We are told to do this with livestock and possessions – and to return anything that one loses: you must not remain indifferent.

Most of the spiritual work that we do here is solitary; it must be our own soul searching. But remember those angels in the Rebbe's story who find lost things? You can be one of those angels for a loved one, a friend or co-worker.

How can we help someone find and reclaim his or her dignity? Or find their self-confidence? My friend S. Mary tells me that whenever she is present with someone who is vulnerable, it is the other who is able to return her to herself, to her value of compassion and service. Take a moment to consider how our actions might help someone else find what traits they may have lost – be their angel. And you might also end up being your own angel also.

As we go through this day together, remember Reb Nahman's story about angels, each with a shovel and shofar in hand – digging to help us search for the lost parts of ourselves. When we hear the final Shofar blast tomorrow night, let us hear it as a celebration for what we have each found in ourselves. Tomorrow we say, "A great shofar is sounded, and still small voice is heard." That still small voice is the one that comes from you, reminding you of who you aspire to be.

1. (Metzudat David on Ecclesiastes 3:6:2)

(לאבד. הדבר ההוא יאבד אף בידיים)