



CONGREGATION
B'nai Torah

Unclaimed Baggage

Rabbi Joshua Heller

Rosh Hashanah Day 1, 5780

Where does all our unclaimed baggage go? Oddly enough, Alabama.

Every June I actually take my day off on Wednesday and take my children on a one-day road trip to Alabama. There are two rules. One is that we always stop at their favorite chain restaurant, “Nothing but Noodles,” which closed its Georgia location, much to our chagrin, but has 4 locations in the fine state to our West. The other is that we find the most random places imaginable to visit. Yes, the Civil Rights landmarks. The Space Center in Huntsville. But also, the Alabama Museum of Natural History in Tuscaloosa. Desoto Cave and Cathedral Caverns. The Sloss Furnaces in Birmingham. The world’s largest office chair in Anniston.

And, we saw the unclaimed baggage. We even brought some home.

Let me explain. We have all had the experience of getting off a plane, coming in 12:30 flight¹, schlepping on the train. You get to the baggage carousel, and you wait, and you wait, and you wait. And, finally there are the same two bags going around and around, and neither of them are yours. You file a claim, and you hope. That only happens to about ¼ of 1% of all passengers, but this time, even though the gate agent who took your rollerboard SWORE it would be checked through to your final destination, it happened to you. Even if your bag doesn’t appear right away, you can take heart, about 95% of those lost bags end up being reunited with their owners within a few days. But then there are the ones that just never make it. **Those** bags go to Alabama.

More specifically they go to the Unclaimed Baggage Center in Scottsboro, AL. Scottsboro is not technically the middle of nowhere – you actually drive to nowhere and then make a turn off the main road. There it is, a 40,000 square foot warehouse, plus an annex. The trucks deliver over 7,000 items a day. All those suitcases that are just going around and around at the end of the day? The iPads and books left in the seat pockets? That’s where they end up. They’ve found some weird stuff. A full suit of armor. 50 vacuum packed frogs. A live rattlesnake. Shrunken heads. The guidance system for an air force missile (which apparently did not work particularly well, given that it got lost).

We walked in there, overwhelmed by the shelves of things people had lost and left behind. Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore. I thought briefly about the Mitzvah of *hashivat aveidut* – that we have a sacred obligation to return lost object to their owners. I was assured that every

¹ Sermon Bingo for all four High Holiday Sermons is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTQbiNvZqaY>



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effort had been made. And besides, this stuff was for sale. Cheap! The Hellers each got something, though we passed on the vacuum-packed frogs. One of my children got a computer monitor. Another got a kindle and earbuds. My youngest got a mouse and a digital camera that does not fit any of the 400 charging cords we own. I bought a new belt. Wendy wasn't with us, so we got her jewelry, a necklace for 99 cents. I never see her wear it. Maybe she is saving it for a special occasion.

As we enter the season of repentance, it's worth reflecting on the spiritual baggage that we schlep on the journey of life. What things are we carrying around with us that are holding us back that we should really let go? When do we pick up other people's baggage that we really shouldn't? What are the things that we've lost that we really do want to get back?

We all have our emotional and spiritual baggage. We might have issues from our upbringing. A person may have had a father who was overly critical or a mother who didn't offer enough structure and discipline. When I work with couples contemplating a second marriage, I'll often ask them to consider what they are still carrying with them from their first. Have they contextualized their feelings about their first spouse, whether it is love for one who passed or resentment of one who is still alive? How will they put those feelings aside to be wholehearted in the new relationship ahead? But it's more than that. There are the things that our teachers said to us that we still carry around. I know plenty of adults who are still not getting along with their siblings because of things that happened when they were young, not even teens. We have the things we can't stand about ourselves, issues around eating, our bodies, sexuality. We might even have issues with religion, with spirituality, with God.

The problem is that sometimes we don't even realize the baggage we are carrying around. When you travel to Israel, the security agent will ask you: Did anyone put anything in your luggage without your knowledge? Well, if it was without my knowledge, how would I know?

By the way, giving that answer is a great way to be selected for additional screening... for the rest of your life!

So, how do we go about claiming our baggage? Our tradition offers some guidance. The *Torah* describes some extremes of packing. When Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, there were no suitcases involved. They each had one outfit, and they were wearing it. Noah had it easy as well. He brought everything on the boat with him. Not only all the animals, but also their food. Straw for the cows in the morning, lizards in the afternoon. A snack for when the wild dogs cry



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out in the night. The vultures brought their own. One brings this stinking carcass. Noah asks “can I put that down below?” The vulture replies “nope, its carrion.”

In today's *Torah* reading, we see a journey where the packing did not go as well. After Isaac is born, Sarah is resentful of Ishmael and Hagar, and demands that they be sent away. Abraham is distressed to lose his eldest son, but he gives in to Sarah's demands, and he packs for them. He gives them bread and water for their journey and sends them on their way. Within a short time, Hagar gets lost, and runs out of water. Ishmael almost dies, while Hagar sits off at a distance. In the end an angel saves mother and son.

In a narrow sense, it is a story about packing the wrong things. If Abraham had given Hagar enough water, or a map, the story would have ended differently. But it is just as much a story about **spiritual** baggage. Abraham allows Sarah to load him down with her baggage about Ishmael being competition for Isaac. Hagar has the helplessness of a slave and abandons her son. Because of her slave mentality and lack of initiative, she is unable to see the water right in front her. Ishmael suffers in this story because the spiritual baggage carried by his parents prevents them from packing the right luggage.

Abraham does better on the physical packing the next time around. Tomorrow, we will read how God asks him to take his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loves, as a sacrifice. Abraham awakens early, loads up the donkeys and heads out. While they are climbing the mountain, Isaac astutely observes that they may have left something behind. “Father, here are the firestone and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” The modern equivalent would be: “Dad, how come we had 5 suitcases in the driveway but only 4 in the car?” He would find out soon enough, that there was no packing mistake.

Isaac, by the way, may have carried some baggage from that day himself. When the *Torah* describes the aftermath of the story, it says that **he**, Abraham returned to his servants. You would think it would say “they,” plural, but it doesn't. It appears that Abraham and Isaac go their separate ways. And, by the way, the *Torah* never shows us Abraham and Isaac interact again after that. When Sarah dies and is buried, Isaac is not a part of the mourning. When Isaac is to be married, Abraham sends a servant to arrange it, but we never see him meet Rebecca. In fact, Abraham was still alive when Jacob and Esau were born, but we never see him meet the grandchildren. I'm imaging how that would have gone, Isaac warning the kids, “Now, if Zayde offers to take you camping in the mountains, you say thanks, but no thanks.” The only time these paths cross again is when Abraham dies. Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury him.



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Isaac may never really have claimed his baggage. When he is a father, he is blind, not only literally, but figuratively. He is blind to the issues with his son, Esau, who is impulsive and violent, and favors his strong, manly son, over the weaker Jacob. It leads to all matter of jealousy and manipulation. Isaac, who was bound on the altar by his own father, he couldn't be a strong father to his own sons, Jacob and Esau, and it took decades for that third generation to finally reunite and put their disagreements behind them.

They are victims of their unclaimed baggage. But so are we today. Someone said something to a young woman about her weight 20 years ago that still drives her to unhealthy eating habits. A man struggles to please a parent long deceased. We carry each carry anger about something – an illness, a failed relationship, or a career setback.

So how do we get rid of the baggage that we are looking to unload? It's all too easy to leave an iPad in the seat pocket. Words spoken in anger 20 years ago are much harder to let go. I talk to so many people who are carrying around hurts inflicted so many years ago. They nurse hatreds and resentments. And you know what, those people who harmed them may know full well what they did. They may be unrepentant. They may not even deserve to be forgiven. Or you know what, they may have no idea that anything even happened.

We don't want to let go. It used to be that we were happy to check our bags and see them on the other side. Now, even if you have fancy credit card and don't have to pay, you would not think of handing over your baggage. Now, we hold it close. We want to schlep our baggage through the airport. We rush onto the plane so we can be sure that there is room in the overhead compartment. We want to travel the whole journey with our baggage literally hanging over our heads! But, hanging on to baggage won't make you feel any better. Walking around hating someone for something they did to you is like taking poison and hoping that the guy will get sick.

This season of repentance, it is worth noting that forgiveness benefits the forgiver just as much as the forgiven. Each of us remember words that someone else spoke to us in anger, or cruelty, or, frankly, just without thinking, that still ring in our ears even though they left those lips 5 or 10 years ago. We're still carrying someone else's bags 20 years later. We can let those people live, rent-free in our heads, or we can move on, unencumbered.

Conversely, sometimes we take on unwanted baggage of a different kind. True story: Rob Leven was on his way back from Colorado. After a long journey, he grabbed the bag off the belt. When his wife opened it, she was shocked by the contents, and they quickly realized that it



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was not his. When he told me the story, he didn't say what was in the bag, but he was coming from Colorado, so I have my own ideas. It turned out that the bag's owner was staying overnight at an airport hotel, so a surprisingly quick schlep down to the airport at Hartsfield reunited the luggage with its rightful owner, and Rob was able to find his own bag, still at the airport.

Maybe you don't carry the baggage of taking someone else's luggage, but we all are burdened, with the pain of the harm that we have caused to others. Guilt and shame. The only way we can release ourselves from that baggage is to go to the person we harmed and make them whole. We have to return that baggage. That is the process of *teshuvah*, of repentance.

Everyone sitting in this room, no matter how kind, how caring, how sensitive has harmed another person, has caused pain to another human being in the last year. It might have been by accident, or maybe we were carried away in the moment. Or maybe we felt, at the time, like they deserved it.

It doesn't feel good to think about it. We want to move on in our journey. We don't want to look back, and think about others we harmed. But we owe it to that person to help them claim that baggage. That may require a journey much further than Rob's trip to the airport hotel. It may require a call to someone in another state. Or it may be all too close.

It may mean turning across the office, the classroom, the living room, or the bedroom.

The process of this season, of *teshuvah*, tells us how to file a claim for our baggage – we can admit our error, make amends, resolve not to do it again, ask for forgiveness. We have to be able to say, "I'm sorry, I realize I hurt you in this way. Here's how I'm going to make it right. Here's what I'm going to do differently in the future. Please forgive me."

It's not easy. Not easy to put ourselves in the hands of someone we have harmed. I'm reminded of the passenger who was incredibly rude to the airport check-in agent. At every turn, the passenger was condescending. He complained about the seat he was assigned, about the weight of his bag, about his airline miles, and ended with a particularly aggressive tirade. The whole time, the agent remained calm. When the interaction was over, the next agent asked, "How did you keep your calm with all of that?" The first agent replied, "It's easy, he's going to Arizona, but his luggage is going to Alabama."



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Still, putting yourself in someone else's hands is easier than standing in line at that office next to the baggage carousel. And you know what, the other person may not accept your request. That baggage may never be found. It may end up in the spiritual equivalent of Alabama, but that's not the point. The airlines are able to reunite a lost bag with its owner 95% of the time. The *teshuvah* process may have even better odds.

We may also have a different kind of baggage, spiritual baggage. We may have issues with God, with our own tradition. For each of us they are different. Maybe we had a bad experience as a child: "the cantor yelled at me before my *Bar Mitzvah*." Or we have guilt about what we don't do that we think we should. I can't tell you how often I have people who tell me: "I feel guilty that I don't come to synagogue more often, so I don't go."

One of the things about baggage is that, once you reach a certain point in your trip, it will probably have some dirty laundry in it. We know what's in our baggage, and we say, "How can God love me, how can God forgive me when I've done the things I've done?"

Our baggage all gets inspected whether we like it or not. The TSA folks can tell exactly what you have in there. And if they can't see it on the x-ray, they open it up and leave you that little card. Our spiritual baggage has already been inspected. God already knows our dirty laundry. We can pretend it's not there, we can feign ignorance, or we can open up and talk about it with God. You can't clean it if you don't know what the stains are.

God is the ultimate finder of unclaimed baggage. If you every feel like that poor, scuffed, suitcase going round and round on carousel 6, a wheel missing and half a shirt hanging out, that no-one will ever come back for, God says otherwise. God will still take you.

Maybe we can ask God to help turn our baggage, the things that weigh us down, that hold us back, or whose loss we mourn, into luggage, things that we can carry along for good, that will sustain us on our journey.

I've shared a few biblical packing stories with you. Now, I want to take you on one last journey to show you how God can help us turn baggage into luggage.

When the Israelites were leaving Egypt, they chose different things to bring with them. That luggage reflected the baggage they needed to claim. You may remember that God told them as they were leaving, to go borrow gold, silver and valuables from the Egyptians. They emerged from Egypt with great wealth. The verse says that *vaynazlu et mitzrayim* – literally, they



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despoiled Egypt. Rabbi Joseph Hertz, in his famous *Hertz Humash*, offers a different translation, that they **saved** Egypt. They saved the Egyptians from being the objects of later resentment. The Israelites, despite having been slaves to the Egyptians for generations, never speak harshly of their former taskmasters, and never seek revenge. In fact, they occasionally yearn to go back to the “good old days!” God made sure that of all the burdens they would carry out of Egypt, hate and the desire for retaliation would not be among them. God literally turned their baggage into luggage.

Exodus says that they came up “*chamushim*,” armed. And, indeed, it would not be long before they had to fight against Amalek, the first battle in a war that would continue for generations. That baseless hate has carried on, through the story of Purim, to Pittsburgh and Poway. Since last High Holidays, our Jewish community has faced deadly attacks, as well as threats and vandalism in a dozen other places. We have faced hatred because of who we are. As a result, some Jews are, figuratively speaking, packing. Like the ancient Israelites, we have to be ready, but we can’t let those threats be our baggage. We can’t let hateful people distract us from the greater meaning of the journey we are on.

Moses makes sure that the Israelites take Joseph's bones, a reminder of the promise that the Israelites made to him. It wasn't easy. According to the *Midrash*, Pharaoh had those bones thrown into the Nile, in a lead coffin. Moses missed out on all the gold and silver because he was finding those bones, and schlepping through the desert couldn't have been fun. But that promise was important; that luggage undid generations of baggage. The Israelites ancestors, the fathers of the tribes, sinned by selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt. By carrying Joseph back with them their descendants made right that ancient wrong. Every step became the fulfillment of a promise. We can see our traditions as baggage, as something that weighs us down or we can see them as luggage, things that sustain us, that guide us forward, that give us purpose as we fulfill promises, that will serve us well as we move towards life's destinations.

And, of course, they carried with them the dough that would not rise, that became the flat, tasteless bread, *Matzah*. And thus, was invented the airline meal.

Then, they reach the Red Sea. As soon as they cross, Miriam and the women take out tambourines and instruments to accompany their song. *Midrashim*, including the *Mechilta*, note the wisdom of Miriam and our mothers, who as everyone else was taking weapons, dough, gold, and Joseph's bones, decided to be the marching band. They prophesied that there were miracles yet to come, and there would be cause to celebrate. What would it be like to reach your destination, and celebrate that you brought the right things with you?



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And so, as we enter 5780, and we enter the season of repentance, I ask, what is your unclaimed baggage? What are the things that others have done to you, whose effect you need to recognize, in order to move on your journey? And what are the things that you have done, the shame and regret, that you can't just leave on the carousel, that you have to deal with? What are the things you must put right?

I believe that God can help you turn your baggage into luggage. You can use these High Holidays to figure out what you need to leave behind, and what you need to take on your journey into the future? Bring the right things, and you are on your way to the Promised Land. Bring the wrong things, and you might end up lost in the desert, or worse, Alabama.