

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
Kol Nidrei 5777
October 11, 2016

Final Losses

Several years ago I lost my external hard drive. I had carried it to my car so I could take it to a computer repair shop, but when I arrived, it wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere. I searched in the car, on the sidewalk, in my house. I was tremendously distraught, and finally I gave up. A week later a man knocked on my door holding the drive. He told me that he lived down the block, and he had found it in the street in front of his house. Then I remembered – I have a terrible habit of putting things on the top of my car, forgetting about them, and driving off. So many coffee mugs have flown off my car, even a pot of soup. My neighbor was afraid it was going to rain so he brought the hard drive inside, finally decided to plug it in, found my name, looked me up, and tracked me down.

Losing objects seems to be part of the human condition. Perhaps it's inevitable – we become attached to material objects, misplace them, look for them, and yearn for them. It might be why the Torah commands us, twice, to return our neighbor's lost ox or donkey, and even our enemy's lost ox or donkey. When you find a lost object, the Torah is clear: do not neglect your responsibility to return it to its owner, do not remain indifferent.

The Rabbis, in their vast commentaries on the Torah, take these two short passages and write excessively about them. They are obsessed with lost objects. What if the lost object is going to spoil? (Sell it and give the proceeds to the owner, if possible.) What if the owner of the lost object is a fraud, do you have to return it to him? (Only if witnesses can testify on his behalf.) What if you try to find the owner but no one comes forward, how long do you have to keep it? (Until Elijah the Prophet comes.) In their zeal, they create a whole ritual to be performed when looking for a lost object – first, refer to God opening Hagar's eyes at the well; second, invoke the soul of Rabbi Me'ir three times; third, donate money to tzedakah. After all that, then look for your lost object.

Maybe they were just obsessive, but my former Talmud professor, Marjorie Lehman, argues that the Rabbis are laying the foundation for a discussion of loss in general. Two thousand years ago their losses were much more profound than an external hard drive. They were mourning the loss of their holy Temple, of their community, of their authority – the very foundation of everything they knew. Professor Lehman writes that the rabbis simply could not

create a foolproof system for ensuring that all lost objects would be returned to their owners. Some things cannot be returned. Some losses are final.

On Yom Kippur we come together to do the work of *teshuvah*, to return to our best selves, to make amends, to take responsibility for our actions, to set things right. At the heart of *teshuvah* is the recognition that we are not the people we thought we were, or hoped we were. We are not the people we might have been or could become. Doing *teshuvah* is seeing ourselves for who we are now, in the present.

The Rabbis identify the *mitzvah* of returning lost objects as *hashavat aveidah*. The Hebrew root of *hashavat* is *shuv*, the same as *teshuvah* – both words connote a sense of return. Doing *teshuvah*, in some ways, begins with recognizing our own loss.

When we have not lived up to our best selves it is because we have lost our center. We have lost a sense of who we are, of our deepest values, of our priorities. We have lost our ability to discern right from wrong. We have allowed disappointment, anger, and regret to consume us.

The Talmud describes a curious place in Jerusalem, *even ha-to'en*, the “stone of claims.” If you lost an object, you went to the stone. If you found an object, you went to the stone. And at that *even ha-to'en*, finders and losers would connect with each other and lost objects would be reunited with their owners.

I imagine that on Yom Kippur our synagogue is like that stone of claims. We come here to name what it is we have lost – deep within ourselves and in our lives. We come here to acknowledge our losses and to see them for what they really are.

We name the losses that come with growing older, with failing health, with watching loved ones die.

We name the losses that come with raising a family or with deciding not to have children.

We name the losses that come with partnering or remaining single or divorcing.

We name the losses that come with how we spend our days, working or caring for others or for ourselves.

Each story brings its own disappointment, anger, and regret. We were going to become something else, we were going to walk a different path, we were going to change.

In naming these losses we begin the long, complex process of doing *teshuvah*, of changing ourselves. We can work harder. We can fight for what we deserve. We can bravely follow our dreams.

And it might work. We might be able to push hard enough so that we can become the people we really hoped we would be. If we hold on, hold tight, and plunge forward we can alter the trajectory of our lives. People, after all, do change.

Sometimes, though, our dreams aren't going to materialize. We rely on hope to save us, to steer us towards a better life, a better future. But hope can be toxic. Hope can consume us and lead us to reject possibilities all around us, because we think there might be something better to come. Hope leaves us stuck in the past or stuck in the future, forcing us to abandon the present. Instead of accepting and even embracing our fragility and vulnerability and imperfections, it lets us believe that there is some perfect future we can aspire to.

In Jewish law, if someone finds an object, they have an obligation to try to return it to its owner as long as the owner still hopes to find it. But at some point, lost objects are really lost, and the time comes for us to give up looking for them. It's at that point that we come to a place of *ye'ush* – we acknowledge that it is gone forever.

Ye'ush means despair. Only when we get to the point of despair, when we truly let go of ever retrieving the object, can we free ourselves from it. It enters into the public domain and it is no longer ours. It's at that moment that we relinquish hope for a dream that is lost, when we acknowledge to ourselves that we have to let go and walk a different path.

We cannot change the past, but we can free ourselves from it so that we can pursue a different future. We do not forget the loss, but we allow it to stop tormenting us. We stop hoping for what will never be. Going into *ye'ush* enables us to see in a new way, to recognize that a different story can be written, a different future can emerge, a different journey can unfold. We give ourselves permission to disengage from the suffering that we cause to ourselves.

Yom Kippur starkly reminds us that we are imperfect human beings. We let ourselves down, we fail ourselves. We hold onto dreams instead of being fully here, now, in the present. We cling to hope instead of relying on our own tremendous strength.

On Yom Kippur we fast and we wear white as an enactment of our death, as a way to remind ourselves that our lives are finite, our days will come to an end. We mimic death to draw us closer to *ye'ush*, to despair, to help us stop our endless search for false gods, of chasing after hopes and dreams – instead of rooting ourselves here in the present.

Yom Kippur is a time of deep introspection. It is an opportunity to embrace our losses.

We are growing older. Our health is failing, or it will fail. Our loved ones will die. We will die.

We struggle with deep loneliness, whether we live by ourselves, with a partner, with children.

We waste precious time with meaningless work, chores, conversation.

We suffer from ambivalence and indifference.

We yearn to be different.

On Yom Kippur we come together at the stone of claims. We create a space *not only* to name our losses, but to discover who we really are. Not who we wished we were. Not who we hoped we would become. But to see ourselves candidly, honestly, genuinely.

At this stone, on this Yom Kippur, let's gather together so we can find what we have lost. Let this be a time of real discernment. Let's bravely embrace *ye'ush*, despair, death. And then let's live. Really live. Live with intention, with meaning, with awareness of who we really are, with all of our imperfections.

Gmar chatimah tovah.