

## **The Art of Losing Things**

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*Kol Nidre 5765*

This past Tuesday I lost my wallet. Somewhere between Fenway Park and my house, it disappeared. In it were all the various things that define my existence as a full-fledged citizen of the world: my driver's license, credit card and debit cards, my health insurance card, Triple A membership card, and God only knows what else.

This seems to happen to me periodically—every five or six years, I either lose my wallet or it gets stolen. After the initial panic, I know what to do – cancel the credit cards, shlep to the Motor Vehicles administration, and try to replace whatever else can be replaced.

For those first few days after I lose my wallet, I always feel like I'm in a kind of limbo. Some part of my identity has disappeared. It's disorienting, but also a freeing sort of experience. The day after my wallet disappeared, I went to the drugstore. The cashier asked me if I had my Extra Care Card, and I gleefully said no! I hate those cards. But I usually dutifully carry mine around, and produce it upon request. How nice to be able to truthfully answer that I didn't have one.

Yom Kippur offers us a kind of wallet-losing experience. Each year, as we arrive at the High Holydays, we're a bit like the old wallet. We're stuffed to the gills with coins and supermarket value cards and old receipts and ancient pictures of our kids. All that baggage gives us some sense of comfort, a sense of identity. When we lose it, we freak out—we're afraid we won't know who we are. But how much lighter we can be without all those encumbrances!

To contemplate letting go in this way, to imagine some version of ourselves disappearing, tends to make us nervous. On a very basic level, it means confronting our own impermanence, our own mortality. Yom Kippur is an invitation to do exactly that. Traditionally, we wear a kittel—like this—which reminds us of the shrouds we're wrapped in when we're buried. Like a person beyond this life, we neither eat nor drink nor engage in any bodily pleasures. Our Yom Kippur liturgy tells us, over and over again, that as human beings we are ephemeral, like grass that withers, like flowers that fade, like clouds that disperse overhead.

We do all this not to depress ourselves, but to free ourselves. We come here on Yom Kippur and we pretend to be what we really are: dust, grass, the stuff of clouds. Here one moment and gone the next. And the goal of these 25 hours is to find freedom and release in this realization. That is why we gather together for this Yom Kippur journey—because it might be a bit scary to have to face that reality alone. So here we are in community: individual blades of grass, unique flowers, standing in a beautiful meadow filled with our ephemeral compatriots.

Some of us have had life experiences that have already caused some significant shift in our sense of identity: the loss of a job, the death of a family member, the ending of a relationship. When we're in situations like those, our assumptions are broken, our reality is shattered. And in the process, we get to see aspects of ourselves that are sometimes hidden. This is a painful and disorienting experience, but it can be illuminating and strengthening as well. Others of us are

more in need of these High Holydays rituals to help us shed some layers, to help expose that which needs to be exposed.

When we shake up, when we loosen, our rigid sense of self, we allow ourselves to be far more open to the universe and all it has to offer us. When we stop clutching so tenaciously to anything and everything we think might help tell us who we are, when we accept that everything on this planet is fleeting, is in process, begins and ends, we can relax and just enjoy what every precious moment brings. Confronting the reality of our transience helps us appreciate what we have, and challenges us to get our priorities straight in this time that we are given.

To let go of our usual identities, to shed our comfortable encumbrances, is to allow ourselves to imagine an entirely new direction for our lives. The white we are wearing is like a blank check, a clean slate, a new opportunity to discover who we are and where we want to be.

We don't necessarily need to entirely rewrite our lives this Yom Kippur – you may be fairly happy with your life as it is, and that's great. But it's still a good exercise, once a year to disengage from our daily routine, our usual assumptions, and take another look. There are so many rituals of release associated with these holidays—annulling of vows, *tashlikh*, the Kol Nidre formula, which unbinds us from any oaths we may have taken and been unable to fulfill—all of these rituals contribute to this sense of newness, of beginning again, of freeing ourselves from the “shoulds” and the “ought to's” and the preconceived notions which rule us every day.

We combine this release with a deep soul-searching, a real calling to accounts. Once we have let go of those external things that define us, we can take a clearer look at who we really are. What are the missteps I've taken this past year? What are the ways in which I can more fully live up to my commitments? What is the truth about myself that I need to see more clearly? What are the gifts that I can bring to the world?

The tradition teaches that we come into Yom Kippur knowing that we're already forgiven. So why do we spend 25 hours pleading for forgiveness? Because we want to feel it ourselves—we want to really let go of the shame, the guilt, the harsh judgments that keep us from fully inhabiting our lives. We are calling on a Power of compassion that resides right here, in our own hearts. And once we have had compassion on ourselves, once we have forgiven and let go, then we can get on with the business of living our lives with honesty, with clarity, with wisdom.

I suppose I am giving this talk not just because I lost my wallet, but also because I am about to experience an interesting loss of structure and identity of my own, as I go on sabbatical. For 10 months, I won't have a job that normally occupies a significant place in my daily life. This makes me anxious, even as I am excited at the prospect. Yom Kippur is sort of like my sabbatical, on a miniature scale—it's even called Shabbat Shabbaton, the Shabbat of Shabbats. Twenty-five hours of freedom, if you're able to take it—freedom from working, from shopping and cooking and eating, freedom from having to do anything other than be with yourself, and find out again who you are. Somewhat anxiety-provoking, but a blessing nonetheless.

Even as I have my own anxiety about what exactly I'm going to do with myself and how I'm going to structure my days during my sabbatical, I am incredibly appreciative to have this

opportunity. Just as I hope we can all use this day of Yom Kippur well, I hope that I can use this gift you have given me to its fullest. I can't tell you as of yet exactly what I'll be doing, but I am hoping to make some rediscoveries of my own, to revisit why it is I've been put on this earth and what my own service is meant to be. And don't worry—whatever discoveries I make, I promise that I will be back in 10 months time.

I am glad we have this day together before I head off into my own Shabbat Shabbaton. I wish you all an easy fast, and a truly joyful, compassion-filled, marvelous Yom Kippur journey. May each and every one of us be sealed for a year of blessing and bounty.