

## INTRODUCTION - STORY

I was in the middle of a meeting here last week when someone on staff knocked on the door. “There’s someone here to see you.” “Do they have a meeting with me?” No, they said. But you’re going to want to take this one. He has your wallet.

I quickly checked my pocket and much to my disbelief - no wallet. I hadn’t even noticed it was gone. I’ve NEVER lost a wallet. I’ve never lost my keys. I once left my phone in a cab in Jordan, but after a phone call and a ransom payment of a couple hundred Jordanian dinars, I got it back. I’m definitely *not* on top of everything in my life, but I’m usually on top of keeping pocket items in my pocket.

I stepped out of my meeting and came to the front door, and sure enough, there was a complete stranger holding my wallet. And this guy didn’t just find my wallet right outside of Sixth & I. He saw it fall out of my pocket near 11th and N, while I was biking. He saw my name on my license, googled me, saw that I worked here, and came right over (in the middle of a work day, mind you) to hand-deliver it to me.

I was completely blown away, so touched by his kindness and selflessness that I felt speechless. Which is rare for a rabbi. What could I possibly say to thank him besides the horribly insufficient “Thank you so much”? I awkwardly offered him the cash in my wallet, which contained a whopping \$8. He graciously turned down my not-so-generous offer. I asked for his email address so I

could send him a proper thank you later - he gave it to me and left. And that was that.

Now, during the weeks leading up to the high holidays, I, like every other procrastinating rabbi, begin to see sermon potential everywhere. “The pandas are leaving the zoo - is that a sermon?” “You are so not invited to my bat mitzvah’ newly released on Netflix - is that a sermon?” “My air conditioning unit is kind of broken - sermon?” But a stranger going out of his way to deliver my lost wallet a week before the Jewish New Year? Now that is *definitely* a sermon!

## RETURNING A LOST OBJECT

This stranger was not aware that the Jewish New Year was just around the corner (I know because I asked him) - so I seriously doubt he was aware that returning a lost object is an important commandment known as *hashavat aveidah*. It’s mentioned not once but twice in the Torah. In Deuteronomy 22 we read (v. 1-3):

If you see your fellow’s ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must surely return it to your peer. If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who [the owner] is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your peer claims it; then you shall give it back. You shall do the same with that person’s donkey; you shall do the same with that person’s garment; and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow loses and you find: you must not ignore it.

The text is explicit. If you see a lost object, *any* lost object, you have to return it. You can't ignore it. And even if you're unsure of how to return it, you have to hold on to it until the owner comes to claim it.

The scope of this commandment is far-reaching and quite onerous. This is the opposite of "Finders, Keepers" - it's "Finders, Returners". Which makes sense why the text says not once but twice - "do not ignore it", which the 11th century commentator Rashi understands as: "Don't close your eyes as if you didn't see it." The act of seeing a lost item renders you responsible.

Now the skeptics in the room are surely thinking "*Any* object? That feels excessive and unreasonable." Don't worry - the rabbis of the Talmud, who clarified and interpreted the Torah about 2000 years ago, agree with you. In fact, there's an entire chapter of the Talmud devoted to outlining the parameters of this *mitzvah*, this commandment.

Related to the case of my lost wallet, the Talmud says that loose, scattered money does not need to be returned to the original owner. Why? Because loose, scattered money does not have any identifying features. Therefore, we presume that the owner gives up hope of ever regaining ownership, a legal category called "*yei'ush*" - which literally means despair.

But then the Talmud asks (Baba Metzia 21b): "What if the owner didn't know the money was missing? Then we can't claim that the owner felt this *yei'ush*, this despair, since the owner was never

even conscious of the money being gone in the first place!” The Talmud responds, and I’m really not making this up:

אדם עשוי למשמש בכיסו בכל שעה ושעה

“A person constantly checks their pockets” - meaning we can assume a person immediately realizes that their money is gone.

Well, I guess the Talmud never met a scatterbrained rabbi a week before the high holidays, because I had no idea mine was gone.

So does that mean this kind stranger could have actually kept my wallet? Could he have assumed that I felt *yeiush*, despair?

No. The Talmud (Baba Metzia 24b) goes on to explain that this assumption of *yeiush* only applies in reference to scattered, loose money. But money in a wallet, or even an empty wallet itself, must be returned. Why? Because a wallet presumably has identifying features, and therefore we assume that the owner of a wallet holds on to the hope of it being returned.

## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

At this point, you might be wondering - why does the Torah, and the rabbis of the Talmud, and this rabbi who’s speaking to me right now, spend so much time on some lost objects, a relatively small and insignificant part of life? We lose things. It happens. Move on.

I’d like to suggest that this *mitzvah* is about something much deeper than the lost object itself.

## HOPE

It's about hope.

As the writer Kathryn Schulz [observes](#): "With objects, loss implies the possibility of recovery; in theory, at least, nearly every missing possession can be restored to its owner. That's why the defining emotion of losing things isn't frustration or panic or sadness but, paradoxically, hope."

I think this is why Judaism says you have to return an object that you find. Because the person who lost that object is holding out hope they will be reunited with it. If no ever returned a lost object, we would lose that hope. Returning lost objects keeps hope alive.

How long do we have to hold on to the object, and to the hope of returning it? Until the point of *yeish*, of despair, we're still responsible. And since we don't know whether the owner has despaired, we can, we should, stubbornly hold on to the object for months, for years, even for decades - hoping that the original owner is still out there looking for it. Hoping that there's still hope.

This is about more than the hope of being reunited with a lost object. It's about hope in humanity. Hope that strangers go the extra mile, or 10 city blocks, to show us kindness and in doing so prevent us, collectively, from devolving into a disconnected, selfish society. Prevent us from despairing.

Returning a lost object is itself an expression of this hope in humanity. As the kind stranger who returned my wallet said to me: “I would hope someone would do the same for me.”

## POLARIZATION

But that simple and moving line of his isn't the end of the story. Using the email address he shared with me, I sent him a gift card. His email was his name, so I googled him. Which I rarely do - but I was curious. Within a few seconds, I found his linkedin profile. And then I found his twitter account (or whatever that's called now). And then I started reading some of his tweets.

Now, I didn't find anything horribly offensive, but let's just say, it became clear pretty quickly that we do not see the world in the same way. We don't share the same politics. And frankly, if I were on social media, I could see myself getting into it with this guy. (Which is a big reason I'm not.)

So, does that change the feel-good nature of this story?

I don't think so. In fact, I think it makes this story even more important.

Remember how I said that the commandment to return a lost object is mentioned not once but twice in the Torah? There's a slight difference in the language in those two places. In the verses I quoted earlier from Deuteronomy, it says “If your *fellow's* ox... goes astray...” But in the other place it's mentioned in Exodus, it says: “When you encounter your *enemy's* ox... wandering, you

must surely return it.” (23:4) This other version of the commandment isn't to return the lost animal of your fellow - it's to return the lost animal of your *enemy*.

Now, maybe you don't have any enemies. If you do, they probably don't have any ox. But picture someone who gets on your nerves. Maybe even makes you angry. Someone who you'd rather not see again. Now imagine you find something that belongs to them. Are you really going out of your way for *them*?

Yes. Everyone, even our enemies, deserves kindness. That doesn't mean we ignore our disagreements. Returning a lost object doesn't magically repair harm. But it does remind us that we are all, regardless of what we've done or what we believe, worthy of kindness. We can and must treat others, even our enemies - especially our enemies - the way we like to be treated.

The *Sefer Hachinuch*, an anonymous work written in 13th-century Spain that explains the reason for each commandment, writes that this particular commandment of *hashavat aveidah* is about *יְשׁוּבַת הַמְּדִינָה* - social order, or peace of one's country. (mitzv. 538)

Will returning lost objects solve the polarization of our country and our world? Certainly not. But might it imbue our bitter fights with a little more humanity? I think so. At least, that's the hope.

## HOPE IN OURSELVES

I also don't think this *mitzvah* of returning lost objects is limited to hope in others. I think it's also about hope in ourselves.

**Because if we can hold on to the hope that lost objects can be returned, then we can maybe also allow ourselves to hope that we too might return, might gain back the parts of ourselves that we feel are lost.**

And that is ultimately what the High Holiday season is about. *Teshuva*, often translated as repentance, but which means return. A return to self.

In different ways, we all lose ourselves or pieces of ourselves. Life is hard and overwhelming. There are a lot of demands on us, on our time and on our attention. We're being pulled in so many different directions. It's easy to get lost. To *become* lost.

The Aish Kodesh, a chassidic Rebbe who delivered sermons from within the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust, writes that becoming truly lost means becoming unrecognizable to yourself (Toldot, p. 20). Not knowing who you are is a scary and disorienting place to be. But even in those moments of *being* lost, hope is not lost.

The Aish Kodesh uses a term for God that I've never seen anywhere else: *ba'al ha'aveidah*, "The Owner of Lost Things." God, the Aish Kodesh explains, is searching for us, trying to help return our lost pieces to ourselves.

The act of *teshuva*, of returning, begins with the belief that those parts of ourselves that have been lost, that we've become disconnected with, are not lost for good. To believe in *teshuva* is



to believe that there's no such thing as the point of no return. There's always a way back, even if we can't see it right now.

## DESPAIR

And just like how knowing that someone is trying to return a lost object to us prevents us from despairing, knowing that there's a greater force guiding us back to ourselves can prevent us from despairing about ourselves.

It's easy to despair. To give in to cynicism. To believe that it's a lonely, cruel, selfish world out there. One in which there's no possibility of return.

Which, of course, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more that people believe there is no possibility of return, the more it doesn't happen, which just reinforces that belief. It's a vicious cycle. Which is why Rabbi Nachman of Breslov writes (Likutei Mohoran II, 78:7): "It is forbidden to despair."

No matter how hopeless things may seem - out there, or in here - we have to hold on to hope. *Teshuva* ends with despair but starts with hope. Hope that, like the new year, we too can be renewed.

Yes, to live is to lose. And these days, it feels like there's so much we're losing. Our lives the way they were pre-COVID. Our sense of safety. Our trust in institutions. In one another.

But life isn't just defined by loss. It's also about finding. **And moments of profound loss carry with them the potential for**

**profound recovery.** Not all loss is permanent. We are capable of renewing, of repairing, of healing.

Belief in *teshuva* is the belief that we, as individuals, and as a society, can recover. It's the belief that small gestures of kindness can have a big impact. It's the belief that, if we keep our eyes and our hearts open, we can help us find each other and maybe lead us back to ourselves.

## CONCLUSION

My kind stranger received the gift card I sent him. He emailed me thanking me for it, assuring me it wasn't necessary. And he asked me if, after the holidays are over, I might be interested in getting dinner with him and his wife.

I would. I'd like that very much. (Pause)

I'm not sure how this story will end. Will we become best friends? Unlikely. Will we get into a heated political debate and become sworn enemies? I sure hope not. (Though even if we do, I will still return his ox to him!)

But no matter what happens, we'll be connected because of his kindness. Because of what he gave me. Which was more than \$8 and a couple of my credit cards.

He also gave me hope.

Shana tova.