



## Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779: Lost and Found

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, D.Phil., Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, September 19, 2018

On July 7, 2018, one of our young members became bar mitzvah at the *kotel*, the Western Wall. We were in Ezrat Yisrael, the controversial space which has been designated for non-Orthodox prayer. It's quite lovely; removed from the chaos of the main section, there is no one tying a red thread around your wrist or covering your legs with a *shmata*, and the women can be part of the celebration, instead of teetering on chairs overlooking the *mechitzah*, the barrier dividing women from men. We had been told that other groups have encountered opposition, but the Shabbat morning that we were there, the area was quiet. We stood by the shade of the massive stones and were inspired by this young man, surrounded by his extended family, his Jewish mom and his secular dad, everyone connected by the simplicity of the service, the sound of the chanting, and the power of the place.

Seventeen days later, a one-hundred kilo stone crashed down from the *kotel*, onto precisely the place that we had been standing.

This being Jerusalem, a stone is never just a stone. Here are some of the headlines which appeared over the ensuing days:

Archaeologist says entire Western Wall is 'danger zone,' public should stay away.<sup>1</sup>

Western Wall rabbi urges 'soul searching' after massive stone crashes down.<sup>2</sup>

Deputy Jerusalem mayor: Fallen Western Wall stone a message to Reform Jews.<sup>3</sup>

Kabbalist: Western Wall's Fallen Stone: Seed to Grow Third Temple?<sup>4</sup>

Abbas's Fatah: Israel Planning to Destroy Al-Aqsa Mosque.<sup>5</sup>

I promise you, I couldn't make this up.

In Judaism, we have the idea that there are two Jerusalems: not East Jerusalem and West Jerusalem, as in the political reality, but *Yerushalayim shel Malah* and

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/archaeologist-says-entire-western-wall-a-danger-zone/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/western-wall-rabbi-urges-soul-searching-after-massive-stone-crashes-down/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/deputy-jerusalem-mayor-fallen-western-wall-stone-a-message-to-reform-jews/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.breakingisraelnews.com/111405/kabbalist-stone-falling-western-wall/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Abbass-Fatah-Israel-planning-to-destroy-Al-Aqsa-Mosque-563525>



*Yerushalayim shel Matah* – the Jerusalem Above, the ideal, to which we aspire, and the Jerusalem Below, the real, in which things are as they are.

Now, there is a lot I love about Jerusalem as it is. I love the coffee shops, with *kafeh kar* – ice coffee – or *kafeh hafuch* – upside down coffee, otherwise known as a latte – and I especially love the little café in Hansen House opposite the Hartman Institute where I study, located in a former leper colony which is now a Center for Design, Media, and Technology. Again, I couldn't make this up. I love the pomegranate juice in the Old City shuk, the falafel in Machaneh Yehuda, the ice cream at the old train station. I love Shabbat services in that same train station, with people watching soccer games beside people praying – lest you should think I only love the food. I love the bookshops in which one room flows into another, and a small storefront leads into a labyrinth of shelves, like the small tent in Harry Potter which is enormous inside. I love the school where Jewish and Arab kids learn together, and the grassroots efforts for peace. I love the cat rescuer we met this summer, who invited me and my daughter into her apartment in the Old City to meet the latest litter, and I love the tacky tourist shop where we went to do a photo shoot dressed up as David and Goliath.

So I love *Yerushalayim shel Matah*. But sometimes, it's exhausting. Sometimes, I get tired of fighting over ancient stones. So tonight, I invite you to join me in a little bit of *Yerushalayim shel Matah*, a piece of the city as it was once before, and as it may yet become.

Our Rabbis taught: There was a Stone of Claims in Jerusalem: whoever lost something went there, and whoever found something did likewise. The latter stood and proclaimed, and the former gave identification marks, and received it back.<sup>6</sup>

The Stone of Claims: *Even haTo'en*. An ancient Lost and Found.

Losing, finding and returning are very serious business in Jewish law, and the subject of much Talmudic discussion. But these are also some of the most common issues in life. Where did I put my car keys? My cell phone? My glasses? Kathryn Schulz, in a brilliant article entitled, "When Things Go Missing," writes:

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<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 28b.



Passwords, passports, umbrellas, scarves, earrings, earbuds, musical instruments... that letter you meant to answer, the permission slip for your daughter’s field trip, the can of paint you scrupulously set aside three years ago for the touch-up job you knew you’d someday need: the range of things we lose and the readiness with which we do so are staggering. Data from one insurance-company survey suggest that the average person misplaces up to nine objects a day, which means that, by the time we turn sixty, we will have lost up to two hundred thousand things.<sup>7</sup>

What spurs her reflection, as it happens, was a series of days in which she lost the keys to her truck in a coffee shop; the keys to her house in the front door; a shirt and wallet at a café; a bike lock; and, implausibly, her giant truck. I can relate to this, having ordered a Bluetooth keychain to keep track of my keys, and then promptly losing the keychain before I could even attach it. Schulz, however, takes these losses as an opportunity to explore why we lose things to begin with, and comes up with two explanations: “one scientific, the other psychoanalytic, both unsatisfying.” Scientifically, losing things happens because of “a failure of recollection or a failure of attention.” Psychoanalytically, losing things is actually a success: “a deliberate sabotage of our rational mind,” according to which we never lose what we actually value.

Schulz plays this one out:

Maybe the doting mother who lost her toddler at the mall was secretly fed up with the demands of motherhood. Maybe my sister loses her wallet so often owing to a deep-seated discomfort with capitalism.

This, she suggests, is unlikely. Rather: “The better explanation, most of the time, is simply that life is complicated and minds are limited. We lose things because we are flawed; because we are human; because we have things to lose.”

*We lose things because we are flawed; because we are human; because we have things to lose.* In Jewish law, one of the key categories related to loss is *ye’ush*, despair. If you despair of finding something – either because it’s not identifiable, like a twenty-dollar bill; or because of where you lost it, like a screwdriver in a snowbank (long story, don’t

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<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Schulz, “When Things Go Missing: Reflections on two seasons of loss,” *New Yorker*, Feb. 13 & 20, 2017. All of the quotations from Schulz in this sermon are drawn from this essay. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/13/when-things-go-missing>



ask); or because it's just been too long – then you have reached the state of *ye'ush*, and give up your claim. Even the word sounds like a sigh. I felt *ye'ush* when I finally went to see if my keys were at Westmount Public Security, and the helpful officer brought out two big plastic jugs of keys, lost and lonely, and mine were not there. It had been my last hope for the keys that disappeared half a year ago, and it was time to let it go.

We despair of deeper things, as well. We like to believe that people always change, that we can always change, but sometimes, we give up. This isn't always bad. If I make peace with the fact that a friendship is lost, I can mourn it and let it go. If I can let go of the idea that I might still run a marathon, I'll beat myself up less when I don't do it.

But loss goes deeper still. Because the word “loss” – which we use for glasses and cell phones and keys – we also use for death. “Death is loss,” Schulz writes, “without the possibility of being found.” Reflecting on the loss of her father, she finds herself “at a loss—a strange turn of phrase, as if loss were a place in the physical world, a kind of reverse oasis or Bermuda Triangle where the spirit fails and the compass needle spins.”

Schulz is right. There are losses from which one never fully recovers. But the Stone of Claims still calls me. I love the idea of a public place, where we can share what we have lost, and return what we have found. There is something communal about it, and something comforting. And in our own way, we do that, here at Temple. When it comes time for the Modim, the prayer of gratitude, and we share things for which we are grateful – we are sharing things we have found. A child's success. The coming of spring. A new challenge. A rekindled love. And, when we come to Mourner's Kaddish, we invite people to share their loved ones' stories – to share their loss, to make their memories a blessing. Kerry Egan, a hospice chaplain, explains her role as being a story holder: “We listen to the stories that people believe have shaped their lives. We listen to the stories people choose to tell, and the meaning they make of them.”<sup>8</sup> How important it is to be heard; to hear each other; to hold each other – especially on these days.

Ultimately, though, these days are also about finding ourselves. What are we willing to let go of? What are we searching for? What are we holding onto, that needs to be returned? What have we lost, and what do we still hope to find?

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<sup>8</sup> Kerry Egan, *On Living* (New York, 2016), p.17.



Rabbi Lawrence Kushner shares the story of giving pre-schoolers a tour of his temple, culminating in showing them the ark. He told them that next time he saw them he would show them what was inside. The kids went back to class, and had a debate. As Kushner tells it:

One kid thought it was empty. Another thought it was filled with precious things. Another rather unimaginative child thought it held the Torah. But one kid said, “You’re all wrong. I’ll tell you what’s in there. When the rabbi-man opens that curtain next week, there will just be a big mirror!”<sup>9</sup>

On Yom Kippur, between the afternoon service and Yizkor, we have a tradition of opening the ark, and whoever wants to, can approach it with their individual prayers. It is not as if we find something tangible, when we stand there, our hearts in our hands. But perhaps, if we truly reflect on these days, we will find a reflection of ourselves. “The whole congregation of Israel,” Kushner writes:

Rich people and poor people. Wise and foolish. Beautiful and plain.... People who just got married and one who just got divorced. People who just got out of hospital and people who are going in real soon. People who just got born and people who, God forbid, won’t be here next year. People whose lives are finally coming together and people whose lives are falling apart.<sup>10</sup>

There is a time to seek and a time to lose, Ecclesiastes writes; a time to keep and a time to discard. *Eit levakesh v’eit l’abed, eit lishmor v’eit lehashliach.*<sup>11</sup> This, now, is the time. So we can see ourselves clearly. So we can remember what truly matters. So we can move freely into the New Year, connecting *Yerushalayim shel Malah* with *Yerushalayim shel Matah*, the ideal to the real. It is not easy work – but it is holy. Schulz concludes:

...we will lose everything we love in the end. But why should that matter so much? By definition, we do not live in the end: we live all along the way. The smitten lovers who marvel every day at the miracle of having met each other are right; it is finding that is astonishing. You meet a stranger passing through your town and know within days you will marry her. You lose your job at fifty-five and

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<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *I’m God, You’re Not* (Woodstock, VT: 2010), p.221.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:6.



shock yourself by finding a new calling ten years later. You have a thought and find the words. You face a crisis and find your courage.

All of this is made more precious, not less, by its impermanence. No matter what goes missing, the wallet or the father, the lessons are the same. Disappearance reminds us to notice, transience to cherish, fragility to defend. Loss is a kind of external conscience, urging us to make better use of our finite days... We are here to keep watch, not to keep.