

Kol Nidrei Sermon 5784
Rabbi Dara Frimmer
Lost + Found

I'm one of those parents that does NOT allow my kids to take precious items out of the house for fear of losing them. Of course, as they've gotten older, I've tried to increase responsibility and awareness of consequences.

Months ago, we were planning a trip to the Science Museum and I reminded Maddie that if she took her beloved stuffed animal "Slush" onto the train and into the museum, she was responsible for it.

Well, Slush traveled with us through all the exhibits, but as we arrived in the cafeteria to eat our lunch, we noticed Slush was gone. Maddie was devastated.

And because I am a tad self-righteous, a hazard of the job, I may have offered a bit of a sermon on the consequences of bringing beloved toys outside of the house. And when I was done...I then returned to every room we'd visited over the past 3 hours.

Sadly, no Slush.

We gave our name to someone at the front desk. They even gave us an email address set up for just this kind of moment: LFound@californiasciencecenter.org, but sadly, no one turned in our lost stuffed pup.

This idea of calling out for what we have lost and hoping someone will answer back "here it is" is not a new idea. As Jews, we've been doing this for thousands of years.

The Stone of Claims, in Hebrew, *Even Toe'ayne* or *Evan HaToe'een*, was a raised platform in Jerusalem first mentioned in the Mishnah, and later on in the Talmud¹.

¹ The Sages taught in a baraita: There was a Claimant's Stone in Jerusalem, and anyone who lost an item would be directed there and anyone who found a lost item would be directed there. This finder would stand and proclaim his find and that owner would stand and provide its distinguishing marks and take the item. And that is the place about which we learned in a Mishna (Ta'anit 19a): Go and see if the Claimant's Stone has been obscured by the rising water. (Bava Metzia 28b, Translation Sefaria)

ת"ר אבן טוען היתה בירושלים כל מי שאבדה לו אבידה נפנה לשם וכל מי שמוצא אבידה נפנה לשם זה עומד ומכריז וזה עומד ונותן סימנים ובוטלה
וזו היא ששנינו צאו וראו אם נמחת אבן הטוען

It was built during the Second Temple period by Jews who had returned from their exile in Babylon. As they rebuilt from the ruins, **they decided to include something new**, something that would be needed in their community as they returned, repaired, and reimagined their lives - they built a space that would serve as the community's lost and found.

Anyone who lost an item -
Anyone who found an item -
would be directed to the stone.

The finder would stand and proclaim their find.
Behold, I have found a coat.

The owner, waiting in anticipation, would call back:
It's mine.
And then provide a distinguishing mark:
Look for a wrapped up piece of bread in the left pocket.

And the lost object with the petrified bread would be reunited with its owner.

Imagine for a moment, you are an ancient Israelite, journeying three times a year to the Temple to offer your required sacrifices. Sacrifices that would atone for sin and transgression, mark holidays and festivals, and give thanks for goodness and blessing.

The journey would never be easy. Most Israelites had to spend days and weeks en route to the center of Israel. In addition to all they packed, I imagine they also carried with them:

- Hopes and dreams.
- Sadness and grief.
- Fear for the future.
- Desperation to protect all that was good.

And then they arrived in Jerusalem and realized they had lost something precious.

- A medallion that belonged to their parents that they wore for safekeeping.

- A goat they had purchased to offer for repentance.
- A shirt that offered protection during the day and became their blanket on cold nights.

What would it mean to know that you might be reunited with a lost item in the holiest city in all of Israel? And not simply reunited, as if you *just remembered where you had left it* and went back to pick it up. NO, this item was GONE. Taken.

Until it wasn't. Until someone stood up on the platform, holding it in their hands, and looked you in the eyes, and said "Is this yours?"

Wouldn't this be the ultimate sign from the Universe that everything was going to be okay? That no matter how much pain and loss and suffering we carried, that some piece of us might be healed and made whole? From one set of hands to another.

I remember a time of profound loss, not so long ago, when the world seemed devoid of light. For this kind of loss, return was not possible. (Sometimes, loss is like that.)

Nevertheless, I felt compelled to name it. To declare my grief and heartbreak. And a friend listened and then gathered me close and replied: "I know you cannot see the light right now, so I will see it for you. And I will hold it for you until you're ready to see it again."

And in that moment, while she held onto the light, she gently returned hope. And faith. And patience...all of which I had lost, as well.

Thousands of miles from Jerusalem, on a side street in Rancho Park, a small stone platform was revealed. And eventually, I claimed that light again.

Lawrence Kushner wrote a poem many years ago about puzzle pieces - how each of us are like an incomplete puzzle...walking around with only some of what will make us whole...and it is other people, it turns out, who are lovingly, gently, holding our pieces, not always knowing why. But when we encounter one another

- face to face, heart to heart - and we are blessed to receive one of those pieces, we realize the empty space we've been carrying has been filled.

This stone outside the walls of the Old City could have been called "the stone of loss". No finding. No claiming. No return or repair. Just a sacred platform on which to name our grief and heartbreak. To name our losses that we *know* might never be returned.

That feels on brand for a people who have experienced more than their fair share of pain and suffering. *A people who watched their Temple destroyed by the Babylonians and likely wondered if rebuilding was even worth the effort.*

Perhaps, our ancestors realized something new about *loss* after the destruction of the First Temple: that naming it wasn't enough. And so they had the audacity to declare that along with loss, ***something might also be found***. And that "thing" would be returned not by sacred fire but by human hands. Not by bloody sacrifice...**but by neighbor turning to neighbor, and strangers turning to strangers.**

This year, I want us to build that platform together.
I want it for our Temple family.
I want it for our neighborhoods.
I want it for our nation and the greater world.

In the last few months, you've told me:

- I've lost someone through illness, dementia or death.
- I've lost my job, and with it, my professional identity and my confidence.
- I've lost my faith and trust in organized religion, community, democracy.

And, I've also heard about the congregant who read the condolence announcement and noticed the address listed for sympathy cards...was just down the street. That week, they walked over, introduced themselves as fellow Isaiaans, and delivered dinner to a home that was bereft.

I've seen a member text me a picture of her children, embraced and celebrated by an older member, *not related to them and with no grandchildren of their own*, and comment with joy and appreciation: My kids now think she is their grandparent with a smiley face and 3 heart emojis.

The promise of the stone platform is not just to return a lost animal or garment, **but to find one another**, and in that sacred encounter, to discover how we might fill the emptiness together.

Johann Hari in his book Lost Connections suggests that to end loneliness, we need other people, *plus something else*. "You also need...to feel you are sharing something with the other person **that is meaningful to both of you.**"

We didn't know we were *missing* our congregant Gabriel Mann's music until Cantor Coyot asked him to write something a few years ago. Out of that "ask" came a new score for Ahavat Olam which Gabe and his daughter, Piper, wrote together in honor of her bat mitzvah. (Piper is now a freshman in college and we are sending her all our love!) Through this exchange, Gabe was able to give AND receive in a way that became bigger than the music itself...it helped deepen his entire family's relationship to the community and the Jewish world.

This year, the Kleinrock Schuler Center for Innovation produced a series of videos called Intersections. We paired people together from different generations to get to know one another - to see what they had in common, and also lift up and appreciate the beauty of their differences. At one point, Stella Kleinrock, a child survivor of the Shoah, talked about her experience in a displaced person's camp...and it reminded Ryan Karni, a teenager, of his own family history. When Stella shared her story and *talked about her loss*, Ryan listened and responded, "That feels familiar. It feels like a part of my story, a part of my family." That day in the Levine Library, two people who never would have met, connected and shared something that was so meaningful to both of them: an exchange of sacred story. A new chapter of friendship that they could write together.

As many of you know, our beloved facilities manager Chris Falone died by suicide in August. He was loved and cherished by so many of you - by us, as well. This was his holiday season and we all looked to him to help build us a Temple, here, at Royce Hall.

Chris was a builder and an artisan. A quiet observer of community...which is, maybe, how he *knew* we would need more than just our beautiful Nickoll Sanctuary or Royce Hall to attend to our broken hearts and losses. We would need a space to declare our losses every day of the year.

And, so, across our campus, he would plant succulents and place stones - small platforms of modesty and beauty - each one a gathering space for sacred encounters and exchanges.

If we would have known the depth of his darkness, we would have held the light, and stayed close by his side. We would have opened our hands and given all that we had.

If the Stone of Claims was thought to exist ONLY during the Second Temple, that means, it didn't exist during the first...which means, *someone thought to add it in*.

Someone had a vision that would go beyond the ruins and create something beautiful and holy adjacent to the stones of the Temple Mount. A new and different set of stones carved and placed into a raised platform. A *new kind of* altar on which to bring offerings.

On Kol Nidrei, as we focus our attention on the raised platform of this makeshift bima, with your clergy dressed in white robes, performing ritual and asking for atonement, we are vulnerable to thinking the magic and mystery only happens here. Just like our ancestors who focused on the sacrifices, *we may forget the smaller platforms just outside these walls*.

But we have a chance to learn from them and from their vision: There is a lost and found waiting to be built with *your hands* adjacent to Royce Hall, or in the lobby of Temple Isaiah, or in our neighborhood encounters as we walk around Rancho Park.

For some things we have lost, there will never be a return. The pain stays with us. Always. And, still, on Yom Kippur, we pray that our empty hands might once again be filled with blessing - *malay yadeinu m'birchotecha*.

We arrive with nothing – *nothing* that says we are deserving or worthy - *ki ain banu ma'asim* - and yet our liturgy comforts us: in spite of our emptiness, or perhaps because of it, God will return to us *chesed* - loving kindness...

But what if we, too, could be the deliverers of lovingkindness?

What if we could work together to be the architects of a new society?

This year, I want us to practice declaring our losses: of faith, of love, of trust, of patience.

I want us to look into OUR hearts and hands and take an inventory of what we carry; and see what we could give that someone else might need.

And when we find a bit of light, hold onto it. Protect it. Someone else may have lost it and desperately needs it to be returned.

You could be the one to return it.

Maddie was devastated by the loss of Slush the Stuffie. I didn't get it. It was a hand me down that had never made it to the Top 10 list of her favorites. But that day, and every day after, she begged me to buy her a new one.

But not every loss needs to be immediately filled, so I held off.

Then...many months later...Maddie was reunited with Slush.

Hold on.

The museum had nothing to do with it.

It was our friend Micah, who happened to have the same toy.

One evening, she emerged from Micah's room triumphantly holding the dog in her arms. "Look, Mama! It's Slush!"

Let's be clear, it wasn't the *original* Slush.

I prefer to believe THAT Slush found its way into someone else's loving embrace and is still being cuddled tonight somewhere in the world.

Thanks to Micah, who realized it meant more to her than to him, Slush was returned to her.

And in that moment, Maddie felt the forces of the Universe shift. She believed in the possibility that lost items might be returned. And, it was delivered NOT by Amazon or Target, but through the hands of her wonderful friend.

THIS is how redemption begins: in returning what has been lost, in filling empty spaces, in believing that we hold one another's missing piece.

Gmar Chatima Tova.



Thank you:

To Rabbi Asher Knight, my wingman in writing High Holy Day sermons.

To Michele Lowe, the best sermon editor, coach, and cheerleader a rabbi could hope for...and, no, she didn't edit this line. 😊