

Rabbi Lisa Edwards  
Kol Nidre 5768 / 2007  
Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles  
“Lost & Found”

The first time I laid eyes on Tracy...some of you know this story...was at Iowa City's first gay pride rally. I wasn't out yet – not even to myself – but since most of my friends were lesbians (go figure!) I went to be supportive. That is to say, I went thinking I would be supportive, but instead I found myself hiding under a rock. Not under exactly – but literally behind a huge boulder that graces the lawn of the main quadrangle at the University of Iowa. On the boulder is a plaque of some sort – I don't remember what it memorializes – I know it doesn't YET say “behind this rock Lisa first laid eyes on Tracy, ” but maybe some day...

Tracy was one of the speakers at the rally. She got up to encourage people to send documents of their lives to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. [If you know already that Tracy these days sits on the board of the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, her talk that day some 23 years ago won't surprise you] “Our lives, our histories – our herstories –“ Tracy said on the quad that day, “will continue to go unnoticed, unspoken about, unwritten. Unless we start to document our own lives, take to preserving evidence of our existence and of what our lives are like. . .we may as well be hiding behind a rock.” Well, okay, that's not an exact quote, but suffice it to say that from my perch behind that boulder -- I noticed her. And of course the fact that some time later I still remembered what she said that day gained me many points in my wooing of her.

There is a legend in the Talmud of a boulder or perhaps a pillar of stone situated [on the main quadrangle] in Jerusalem when the Temple still stood. Called Even ha- to'an “the claiming stone,” “Anyone who lost something would go there, and anyone who found something would go there. The person who found something would stand by the stone and announce what was found, and the person who lost something would go there and describe the lost object and reclaim it.” [Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 28B]

Different Jewish texts apply slightly differing names: *evan hato-in* (with a tet) “the error stone,” since the loss was a mistake, or *evan hato-in* (with a taf), literally “the wanderers' stone”<sup>1</sup> – since stray animals were often recovered there. It's also commonly translated as “the stone of losses,” or “the finders' stone.”<sup>2</sup> Had my Iowa City boulder – my refuge - been a “claiming stone,” one might say that I lost my fears there and claimed my true self; or if “the wanderers' stone” or “finders' stone” -- that I had wandered lost long enough, and found myself there. If spelled with tet instead of a taf, *evan ha-to'in* - I could call my boulder my “error stone,” as in I made a mistake, but the stone led me to see the error of my ways.

This “lost and found” of Jewish tradition often comes into my thoughts. Poets and novelists have been struck by it too. The Israeli writer Yehudit Hendel wrote a novel called *HAR Hato'im* – not just the stone of losses, but “The Mountain of Losses.” Written sixteen years after the Yom Kippur War, the novel takes place one morning in a Tel Aviv cemetery

where people have come to tend the little gardens around the graves of their sons killed in the war.

In Jerusalem last April when the BCC pilgrims stood -- on the day before Israel's Memorial Day -- at the graves of soldiers who died in battle --our guide reminded us that there is almost NO ONE in Israel who has not lost a loved one in a war. A very different statistic than we would get here if I asked who among us loved - or even knew - a fallen soldier. The title "The MOUNTAIN of Losses," carries all the loss and grief that modern Israelis live with ongoingly, and the weight of Jewish history.

Once the Temple was destroyed the evan ha-to-an -- the stone of losses disappeared, but Talmud tells us that synagogues and houses of study became the location for the stone of losses, the finders' stone. It ceased to be a boulder out in the midst of the plaza and became instead -- I don't know -- perhaps this bima/this sanctuary.

Which leads me to imagine -- and I'm sure I'm not alone in this--the Days of Awe as a kind of stone of losses, a finders' stone. We all enter this sanctuary, we come together here, with our varied losses and our varied finds. If we've been doing what Jewish tradition asks of us, then the past 39 days have been spent in self-examination --we've been engaged in chesbon hanefesh -- taking an accounting -- each of us - of our own soul. We've been taking time over this past month and 9 days to examine our losses, to try to make amends for wrongs we might have done, attempting to repair relationships that have been damaged over the year(s).

Not all of us know to engage in these tasks, and some of us who know the custom can't bring ourselves to do it, and always too there are those aspects that elude us -- despite introspection, maybe even despite therapy!, I would venture to guess that many of us have come into this sanctuary with as yet undefined emotions -- deep feelings -- roiling around in us. Based on what I've observed in myself and others in years past, I expect many of us will shed a tear or two, maybe even sob a bit before we leave here tomorrow night. In the next 24 hours, I imagine many of us will experience heights and depths of feelings -- harsh ones and pleasant ones -- guilt and anger as well as forgiveness and love, sadness and also happiness, deep grief and great joy, hope lost and hope found.

Jewish tradition invites all this -- these depths and heights -- and some of us embrace the invitation -- willing to be vulnerable for the sake of coming to a deeper understanding of ourselves, and in the hopes of healing or improving some of our relationships with others. Others of us don't enter this vulnerable place willingly, yet enter we do -- it's in the air -- human as we all are, subject to human foibles, we've made mistakes, we have regrets, we've become distant from our true selves -- the self we've lost in the rush and anxiety and temptation of life and the world as we know it. We would have to simply sleep the day away, or close our hearts, not to be moved at all during Yom Kippur -- this gift of a day to examine and feel, reflect and pray, search our hearts and minds, take in the words and exquisite melodies -- these ties that bind us to our ancestors and to each other.

We come here – tonight, tomorrow – to our stone of losses, our finders’ stone. We come -- some of us in anticipation of big feelings, some of us without giving it any thought at all – it’s just what we do when the calendar rolls around to Yom Kippur. Wanderers – some more aimless than others -- we enter searching or we enter anxious, some of us enter hopeful and others near to giving up hope. We come as individuals to our stone of losses, looking – deliberately or unconsciously - for what we’ve lost.

While we might tend to think finding is better than losing, some of us in the course of our lives actually choose loss in order to discover what is missing – we leave a job or a relationship or a house or a city, a way of life we know for a way of life we’ve yet to know.

Take our Fran, for example, Fran is choosing loss - at the end of December she steps down after 15 years as our cantorial soloist – choosing to leave behind this part of her identity in order to grow some other identities. She chooses to change this relationship in order to change and grow some other relationships.

Some of us choose loss, and some of us have loss thrust upon us – Fran is leaving, and we will learn what that loss feels like, we’ll grieve, and we’ll miss her – just as she’ll grieve and miss us -- and also, like Fran, we’ll find whatever it is that we would not have found had she stayed . Those who lose always also become finders in some way or other, often in unexpected ways, often in good ways.

Loss also brings opportunity along with the grief. One door closes and another opens – and we try not to slam the closing door on the way out or to force the lock on the one we want to enter next. Or maybe it’s better to see it as the same door – we are on one side and we go through it to the other side -- we are outside and we go in, or we are inside and we go out. In Jerusalem, after all, there was only one stone -- the stone of loss and the stone of found – it was the same stone.

Each year Yom Kippur begins as it did tonight with Kol Nidre - with our plea to be released from the promises we could not keep. And each year upon reciting Kol Nidre we hear God’s immediate response: – salachti k’dvarecha – “I have forgiven you,” says God, “as you have asked.”

Already forgiven us! We know the outcome already -- before we go through the day – no wonder some traditional Jewish communities celebrate Yom Kippur as a joyous holy day – a happy fast day -- as Joe explained to us at the beginning of tonight’s service. God has already forgiven us, though we’ve barely begun our long day’s journey.

Lists are all the rage these days – glossy magazine ads are full of them, self-help books and websites recommend them – make your own or share someone else’s. You’ve seen them no doubt:

100 things to do before I die

10 things I must do by the time I’m 20...uh...60...uh...90. . .

15 books I must read before I die

5 things to accomplish in the next 5 years,

10 in the next 10 years...

Me? I keep lists of what people talk to me about:

Please have no fear – I'm not going to violate any confidentiality promises here. In fact, this is a greatest hits list – it contains only things that more than one of you have talked to me about.

The last couple of years gleaned from growing numbers of people, here is a list (not complete) of common concerns from within our community:

- \* There are among us people living longer than they expected to – whether it's old age or HIV that they thought would allow them fewer years – people are excited about living longer, but also worried: about outliving their resources, outliving their friends, outliving anyone who will help take care of them... outliving their minds.
- \* Many of us are caring for and then burying our parents –
- \* Illness - chronic and otherwise – are complicating lives and relationships
- \* Entering widowhood – or living in it
- \* Coming out – with all its complications, including parents whose children come out (and adult children whose parents come out)
- \* Some have found Judaism & faith; OTHERS have lost their faith, and their Judaism
- \* There are those who spent years striving for what they wanted, and then finding themselves disappointed by what they got; or at a loss as to what to do next
- \* A burning question: Whether or not to be a parent – and for many couples in our community one partner wants to parent and one does not – a painful dilemma
- \* And for those who do decide yes to parenting – then how to bring a child/ren into one's home – the complicated choices and the complications after a choice is made.
- \* Fertility or adoption difficulties that frustrate the heartfelt desire for a child, and even put an end to the quest
- \* For those who do become parents – some surprises - bonding or lack of it, frustrations, fears – this is what I signed up for?
- \* Longings: for a relationship
- \* Longings: to leave a relationship
- \* Couples in various states of relationship – happily planning weddings, or deep in despair heading toward or in the midst of separation, affairs, divorce -- or tempted by these –
- \* Depression and other emotional/mental challenges – diagnosed and undiagnosed – complicate the lives of many of us
- \* Job anxiety & career unhappiness
- \* Addictions of all kinds: food, alcohol, crystal meth, other narcotics, sex, work – thank goodness 12-step programs are a readily available resource in our community
- \* Unemployment – some of us suddenly without a job, and a long, scary time looking for a new one
- \* Getting on disability and SSI, acknowledging the need for it, despair over needing it
- \* money issues of every ilk –
  - more than I thought I'd have
  - less than I thought I'd have
  - less than I need
  - more than I need
  - more than I want
  - less than I want
- \* Anxiety and Worry -- general and specific

\* Shame in all its varieties -- I could probably put that one as the umbrella under which all the rest find shelter.

What? You thought it was only you?

If it were, Yom Kippur never would have been invented.

It is all of us – not every item on the list at every moment, but you need to know you are not the only one. And we need to know that Judaism – that our tradition – says good, go there, talk about it, explore it, do something about it.

It's true that Judaism acknowledges that "life is hard." And Judaism also acknowledges that "everyone dies." But Judaism never says only what that old bumper sticker said: "life is hard and then you die." That's not a Jewish line at all.

Judaism says that in-between "life is hard" and "then you die" are worlds of possibility and opportunity, a lifetime of losing and finding, of wandering and sojourning, of making mistakes and making amends, of learning to live with ourselves and to live with – and without – others, coming to love ourselves and to love other people, a lifetime of growing and learning and living in relationship. A lifetime of living with and wrestling with and loving and hating God and Judaism in all their marvelous complications --- the ways God and Judaism always encounter us right where it counts, right where it hurts, right in our angst and frustration and points of resistance, they're just right there and they just urge us on – go ahead. . . take a step, take another. Just when you're ready to give up on them, the prayerbook comes along and quotes God saying to those bad boy children of Israel, "I have forgiven, as you have asked." [Numbers 14:19, Mahzor immediately after Kol Nidre]

Here's another luxury about Yom Kippur – you have nothing else to do, nowhere else to be. We took off our shoes at the beginning of the service tonight to remind us that we are standing on sacred ground AND that since we don't need to go anywhere, we don't need shoes to take us there. Admittedly most of us will sleep in a bed tonight, but in general, how often do we give ourselves this kind of luxury? – don't have to cook or pick a restaurant, don't have to eat, don't have to wash, don't have to drop the kids off in the morning, or go to work ourselves, just have to be here -among friends and friendly strangers, listen to beautiful music, hear the words of Torah read from a scroll that survived the Holocaust, and examine your life.

What a gift.

For just a moment – DON'T LOOK AT THE PERSON NEXT TO YOU, DON'T SAY ANYTHING TO ANYONE ELSE, JUST SIT QUIETLY FOR A MOMENT AND KNOW THAT WHATEVER IS TORTURING YOU TONIGHT, WHATEVER IS TUGGING AT YOUR HEART OR TWISTING UP YOUR GUT – SOMETHING SIMILAR – SOMETHING EQUALLY PAINFUL OR DISTURBING OR ANNOYING OR WONDERFUL IS HAPPENING TO THE PERSON NEXT TO YOU, OR AT LEAST DOWN THE ROW. YOU SEE? WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.

And our teachers long ago, in their wisdom, called us together for this day of luxury, inviting us to lead a self-examined life, an intentional life - inviting us to make an effort – once a year at least – to live a better life, to be a better person, and to help one another become more the persons God wants us to be.

For the rest of the night, just enjoy the opportunity to approach - here in this sanctuary [motion around the room] . . . and here in this sanctuary [point to your heart]-- the stone of many names –

the wanderers' stone,

the stone of losses,

the finders' stone,

the error stone,

the claiming stone –

use the time and place and energy

to retrieve your wandering heart (and your wandering mind),

to find what you've lost,

to examine the error of your ways,

to re-claim your soul and your life.

Remember it's all one stone – just as all the mix of feelings within you right now are all parts of just one person, part of just one life -- yours.

G'mar hatimah tovah & Shabbat shalom

May we each be sealed in the book of life, for a good life and for peace.

1 Hato'im with the letter tet means people who made a mistake. But in this context, it refers to people who suffered a loss. In Hebrew, the letters Tet and Taf sometimes are interchangeable. Hato'im with Taf are people who lost their way and wonder around without a way. Constructing a Trans-National Jewish Culture The Writer's Voice: Issues in Translation A Few Sentences about the Precision of Words Yehudit Hendel National Foundation for JEWISH CULTURE

[http://www2.jewishculture.org/publications/wtjf/publications\\_wtjf\\_hendel.html](http://www2.jewishculture.org/publications/wtjf/publications_wtjf_hendel.html)

2 The different names and spellings are summarized in The Talmud The Steinsaltz Edition, Bava Metzia, Vol.II, Part II, 28B (p. 122-124)