

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5785  
Lost and Found  
Rabbi David Englander

I had a rather odd experience connected to the time I'm privileged to spend at Beth El in our beautiful building, the product of the imagination, envisioning, and investment of so many, and a jewel that we are all responsible for maintaining. And that odd experience is that somewhere in this exquisite building of ours, I lost my tefillin. The tefillin that my grandfather bought in Israel, gave me right before my bar mitzvah, and showed me how to put on, as he did my for my brother and my two male cousins - what can I tell you, it was the 1980's. He didn't skimp on them either; I got them tuned up once - yes that's a thing - and when the scribe handed them back he said the next time you get them checked can be when you are ready to give them to your own grandchild. Sometimes, in life and in tefillin, you do get what you pay for. That is assuming you don't drop them in a swimming pool or puddle, and that you don't, you know, lose them in an airport, leave them on top of Massada, or misplace them at your own synagogue.

I figured someone mistakenly walked off with them; I checked every shelf, closet, lost and found and even storage container where they might have ended up. I borrowed a pair of our loaners - yes, we have those as well - and figured I would get around to replacing mine eventually, perhaps on a future Israel trip. And although I could easily keep you in suspense as to the end of the story, a few weeks went by and Marlon was rearranging some chairs in the Brown Chapel and there they were. They had fallen between two seats so you couldn't see them from the top and you couldn't

see them from by looking under the chairs either. It is sometimes possible to find what we have lost, and that is an idea that digs deeper than tefillin or any other material object, no matter how precious.

The Torah and even more extensively the Talmudic tradition deals with the laws for finding lost objects. These laws cover many scenarios and revolve around some core principles, and one of them is how strong our expectation is of ever getting something back. On the one hand, there is the person who has misplaced an object that they hold out hope of finding again, perhaps through a lucky break, extensive searching, or by way of an honest person who returns it to them because it is the right thing to do. As I've told you before God gave us two hands so we can say "on the other hand", there are those lost objects over which the owner has established what the rabbis called Yeiush, despair and giving up hope of ever seeing it again. For a few moments this morning as we approach Yizkor on this holiest day of the year, on this third Yom Kippur that I have had the privilege of spending with you, I want to share some thoughts on what we have lost, and how we might strive together to find again.

The first is what Israel lost on October 7th and as lovers of Israel what we lost along with her. Some of you knew a world without Israel and can remember where you were in May 1948 when the dream of a Jewish state was realized. As the story is told, while Jews danced in the streets of Tel Aviv upon hearing the results of the UN vote that took place in Queens, a short throw from where the Mets still play, just thought I would throw that in there, Ben Gurion declined invitations to join in the festivities because he knew that some if not all the celebrants would soon be fighting a war for

survival and some would not come home. He was right, and the courageous and depending on your perspective miraculous defense of the new state began shortly thereafter. And continued through every necessary war since then - 1956, 1967, and 1973, all considered existential threats to the state. And it continued through acts of daring and foresight, like the capture and trial of Adolph Eichman, and the rescue of the hostages at Entebbe, the hunting down of those who killed Jewish Olympians in Munich, and Iron Dome and David's Sling and generally achieving extraordinary things at the intersection of ingenuity and courage. The myth of Israel's military infallibility is something that has been part of the narrative of Zionist life for decades.

Of course they were not perfect or always successful but the expectation, here but mainly in Israel, was that the IDF offered the solid iron-clad unbreakable and non-cancellable guarantee that Jews would be watched over and if necessary defended before the decimations common to the rest of Jewish history would have a chance of being repeated. Enemies would be stopped in their tracks, they would pay a high price for threatening let alone hurting us, we would know what they were planning as soon as or even before they did. Enemies bent on destruction had some limited success in waves of attacks against Israelis. Yet the capacity for a strong response combined with ever increasing security capabilities allowed the state to believe the age of the possibility of wholesale slaughter of Jews and those who lived under their protection was over.

And then it wasn't. That myth - flawed as it was - broke on October 7th. A full and deadly failure of communication and mobilization, warnings that

went unheeded, mostly from disrespected female soldiers who had been reporting on the very buildup to the attack, 16 of whom were savagely killed and 5 more of whom were mercilessly dragged to captivity. A diversion of focus to internal divisions and the demands of government ministers with their own agendas and assumptions about those in charge of Gaza. Making a presumption about their lack of capacity or desire for large scale invasion and establishing an over-reliance on cameras and automation instead of people on a dangerous border. It all led to unmitigated disaster and death the likes of which were supposed to be in the category of Never Again.

Instead of Never Again Israel got Screams before Silence and all of the horror that represents. Instead it got Bring Them Home and ongoing national trauma that is not knowing the fate of the remaining hostages. Instead it got a war that has been fought with bravery and sacrifice and has cost families everything as their beautiful, smart, dedicated, selfless, aspiring, and joyful children, as well as reservists who reported to their units whether they were called to do so or not, laying down their lives in our defense. Instead there are too many rows of fresh graves in military cemeteries, grieving families who cannot be adequately comforted, and a nation not even close to healing that will come with time, love, and accountability.

The IDF is reaching beyond Israel's borders to secure those who rely on its protection within them, in a post October 7th, post mythological, post Israeli superman and superwoman era. Exploding pagers and decimation of terrorist leadership in Gaza and Lebanon but mainly unbelievable sacrifice

and determination have begun to re-establish and re-build a sacred trust. We should plan to spend a lifetime repaying our debt to them in the form of active concern and support for Israel and Jewish life. The bubble of one of Israel's founding myths may be pierced or punctured but in its place is steely resolve and a step by step journey back to confidence bent but not broken, for them and for us as well.

The second is what it feels like America has lost and our role in regaining it if we feel it is worthwhile to do so. It is not true that the election to take place in a few weeks' time is the first contentious contest in American history, or the first that was called the most important in your lifetime; others have had grave implications for the course of this country, an adopted homeland for so many of us and still the safest and largest Diaspora Jewish community on a very long list of them. But something feels like it has changed, the intensity and stakes have ratcheted up in so many ways and any communication across ideological barriers seems to be impossible.

Some good news I can share with you is that our own Jewish tradition is no stranger to those who find themselves disagreeing vehemently over core matters of faith, practice, theology and ideology, even foundational approaches to what it means to be Jewish. We have also fallen victim through history, ancient and modern, to the perils of failing to recognize that they - whoever they are - believe what they believe for reasons that are as good and valid to them as we believe what we believe for reasons that are good and valid to us. That does not mean they - whoever they are - have good or valid reasons or opinions, it only means that there is as much

chance of them shifting their view to your more reasonable one as you have of shifting to theirs.

Which is why it is ever more imperative to find, explore, and talk about any common ground or shared baseline commitments to this country and what it stands for, and what it is capable of achieving. I have no reason to be any more hopeful than you that peace and understanding will suddenly descend after the votes are counted in November, but the only chance that it might will depend on how many are willing to disengage from hate while continuing to advocate, peacefully, for what they believe is the best path forward for this still grand experiment that is called America. As the High Holiday liturgy makes clear, we each have our own agency for the choices we make, but we are also all in this process of seeking forgiveness and charting a path forward together

When I got back from some time off this summer I gave a sermon about something else that many fear is being lost and that a synagogue such as ours can be a partner in recovering. And that is nothing less than childhood - a childhood that gives our kids the best chance of becoming who they are supposed to be, and to feel fulfillment and satisfaction in doing so despite the inevitable skinned knees and disappointments that can morph into the resilience we spoke about last week. There is a library shelf of books on the effect of overuse of technology and especially smartphones and social media apps, most of which light up parts of our kids' brains that are not ready for that particularly addictive and highly judgmental kind of stimulation. A synagogue is the perfect place to offer support to stressed out parents as well as peer to peer connection so this

generation out of which our next leaders will come feels heard and valued. It is also the perfect place for pre-teens and teens to re-establish a lost aspect of healthy childhood, which is face-to-face interaction and the establishing of potentially lifelong friendships, the strongest of which are built by experiencing life's ups and downs together.

In your favorite word of any sermon: lastly...Having had the honor of serving our Beth El community for about two and a quarter years I have enough perspective to weigh in on a couple of trends that seem to be more than blips or anomalies. I don't want to declare yeiush on them, not yet and hopefully not ever. When you looked at your appeal card earlier you saw a new tab that was the product of a lot of discussion before the holiday and that tab reads: I will attend minyan at least twice this year. Maybe we should have made a complicated scheduling app so you don't all show up at once; I'll take my chances. Every Beth El member showing up twice a year, in person if you can or online if you can't, will fully insure that the practice of our ancestors remains in place for us. It will lead to the best chance that those who will come after us will continue it. As the saying goes I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet but I can tell you this: if daily communal prayer goes away in a community like ours, it will not come back. We do not plan to let that happen on our watch, and with your support, it won't.

And you can fulfill this mitzvah - it is a mitzvah - in connection to another practice that seems to be falling by the wayside and that is saying kaddish on the yahrtzeit of a loved one. Our carefully kept records probably have an average of seven or eight yahrtzeits a day; it is rare we see more than

one and at the most two at minyan who are there observing a yahrtzeit, who are there to say kaddish. We will unapologetically emphasize the importance of this tradition, as well as Yizkor services connected to holidays other than Yom Kippur whose attendance is also diminished, not just here but in other synagogues like ours as well. These Yizkor services are critical to Jewish continuity and the affirmation of the centrality of memory to our lives. Starting with Shmini Atzeret, which will also be the first Yahrtzeit of October 7th on the Hebrew calendar, we will be trying in all ways we can think of to do just that.

The idea that something or maybe a lot of things may be lost but may also yet be found has been part of our Jewish tradition for a long time. One of my favorite teachings to share at a shiva gathering is that when the Temple stood, those who made a pilgrimage there for a holiday would fulfill that mitzvah by circling the Temple in a counter-clockwise direction. But some would circle the other way. These clockwise traveling pilgrims included those who had experienced a loss of a loved one in the prior year. The original text is beautiful: All who entered the Temple Mount entered by the right and went round [to the right] and went out by the left, save for one to whom something had happened, who entered and went round to the left. [They were asked]: “Why do you go round to the left?” [If they answered] “Because I am a mourner,” [they said to him], “May He who dwells in this house comfort you.”

This year I feel like all Israel would be circling the Temple to the left, counted among those who experienced irreparable loss over the last twelve months. Like the torn ribbon or clothing many of you have donned during



shiva, recently or long ago, the soul-level injury of some losses can never be fully healed. Yet it is a last resort to declare that we despair ever feeling more whole and complete again. May this place, our Beth El, continue to be a source of connection, compassion, and increased strength. May what we do and learn here help to guide and inspire us to be the best individuals, parents, spouses, children, friends, Zionists, and citizens we want to be. And may we continue to search together for what has always comforted our people following loss, which is love of our people and its homeland, our Torah, and the ever present never extinguished hope that something of what we have lost may yet once again be found.

May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year. In a moment we will continue with the Yizkor service.