

## Staking our Claims in the Power of Collaboration

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A few weeks ago, on our family vacation to the Adirondacks I lost my *very old* school Nikon coolpix digital camera. It was a simple point and shoot device that I'd owned this camera for well over a decade. And on it were saved photos from weddings, beautiful hikes and goofy candid. Even though I hadn't used the camera in years thanks to the built-in one on my phone, I thought it would be fun to bring on vacation. Yet one morning, at the playground it fell out of my pocket.

Rest assured I tried to find the camera, returning daily to the monkey bars and searching inside the large pirate ship. I visited the town hall where a local told me there was a lost and found. I gave my number to the town manager in case the camera showed up. But as we packed up to return to Maine, we still had not recovered it. The camera was gone.

Had someone found it? Did they try to find me? Did we just miss each other? Or did the finder keep my camera? Dispose of it, sell it or give it away?

Jewish law contains a series of commandments centered on the return of lost objects. These laws originate in the Torah in a surprising context. The text explains the following case- a person is walking along and sees their enemies ox or donkey wandering off. In this situation they must return the animal to their owner<sup>1</sup>. While we might be inclined to ignore a problem that our *enemy* experiences, here the text implores us to help even our enemy and all the more so a friend, experiencing a loss.

According to these laws, Jews are *commanded* to not ignore something that we find, instead we are compelled to return an object to its rightful owner.<sup>2</sup> Centuries after the Torah law, the ancient rabbis developed a system to enable finders to return lost objects. This system included a physical place, called the *even ha-toen* or the claimant's stone. At the claimants stone finders and losers were to meet. The claimants stone was a place to restore wholeness in a time of brokenness.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 23:4 and later Deuteronomy 22:1-3

<sup>2</sup> Baba Metzia 21b

Had there been a claimants stone in our time, I would have had a better chance of my camera being returned to me. According to the laws of lost objects, returning a lost object is not a choice, or a nice thing to do, it's a mitzvah, an obligation, even in the toughest of situations.

Archeologists believe the claimants stone existed during the 2nd temple period in Jerusalem yet it hasn't existed since. But nonetheless the principles behind the claimants' stone -those of collaboration and shared responsibility are just as important if not more so today. We must build our sense of trust in and obligation to each other, if we have any chance of addressing the existential threats to life on this planet.

The type of restoration envisioned at the ancient claimants stone, is the type of repair we need to cope with the climate crisis. We need to work together and support one another in the service of bringing more *shleimut*/wholeness to our vulnerable planet and all who dwell upon it.

Some of us have been directly affected by climate change, being forced to move for fear of our lives. Others of us learn in class or the news about rising sea levels, disease, wildfires, flooding and violent storms that cause death and destruction in their wake. If it hasn't already, climate change will affect each and everyone of us, our children and grandchildren.

Some of us are already engaged in political action to help stem the tide of the crisis, others of us are slowly but surely making changes to our own lifestyles. Others of us work for companies or corporations that are trying to make similar changes. Some of us are ES or government majors and hope to take on these issues in our life's work. Others of us already work on environmental policy, are climate change experts or marine biologists all working to make a difference. And some of us haven't gotten started yet, overwhelmed by our feelings of powerlessness. We are a diverse group, but I would venture to say and I hope I'm correct in saying, that we are all concerned about our planet and life here on it.

Indeed our diversity of experience and knowledge is a strength, *but* if we don't talk to each other and collaborate we won't move the needle to protect the lives of millions as well as that of our earth. We must meet in our own version of the ancient claimants stone<sup>3</sup>, a gathering of people who can bring their worries, concerns and ideas for how to work together to a central place. In the new year, I pray that this gathering place will be with all of you-our Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Angela Buchdahl All is Not Lost: We Return to the Stone, 5782  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPDbWYvz2VY>

community. And even better than that would be to build a network with other communities of faith to increase our impact.

This summer Beth Israel teen, Ren Kauffunger, built his own version of a claimants stone at the Arrowsic town hall. Having spent time along the banks of the Kennebec, Ren noticed a build up of trash stuck in local marshes. So he got together his friends, fellow students and members of the Arrowsic shellfish conservation committee to clean up the north marsh near Squirrel point Light House. Later he used the collected trash to construct a piece of public art now on display by the Arrowsic town hall, drawing attention to the problem of trash in the Kennebec river. Ren brought together a diverse group motivated by common concern and a sense of responsibility, to take a concrete action for change... . And I'm pretty sure that by working as a group they all had more fun along the way.

We are blessed to have tremendous local resources to help us act effectively around the climate crisis. Freeport based sociologist and author Kate Olson cautions against thinking that impactful climate work happens either through individual acts OR on the systemic level. Instead she suggests we should address climate change as *our problem*. Olson asks, what can you and a handful of friends do to make a difference? Who can you organize to join your effort to reduce consumption<sup>4</sup>?

When I think about my own consumption, I realize it's not reasonable to have no environmental impact at all. I travel on planes to see loved ones; I buy prepackaged items at the grocery store. It's normal to feel sadness when confronting the gulf between the modern systems we rely on and the cost to the environment. But the truth is that, by working together, we can move the needle enough to make a difference; to make the earth a safer place to live for future generations. The claimants' stone reminds us that nothing is truly lost if we show up for one another, placing our shared values at the center of our communal obligations.

Think- your roommates and the next pod over, the people on your hallway, your neighborhood, our synagogue community, our Hillel, - to use Jewish terminology- who is your minyan of ten people that you can bring to the claimants stone to bring restitution and wholeness, here and now?

As a Jewish community we are lucky because we gather weekly on Shabbat, we see each other, we check in. Could we use this weekly time to build our spirits, strengthen our

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<sup>4</sup> Thank you to Kate Olson for phone conversation on 9/8/23

relationships and better support each other to make a difference for our planet and generations to come? I think that would be a worthy use of our time, indeed.

This year I have a wonderful rabbinical student intern, Joe Blumberg, who will be working with me. He is interested in engaging with all of you to find concrete action steps that we can take *together* locally to care for our planet. I hope you'll join me in getting to know Joe when he arrives in October and to helping him with this important project. This is the time, this is the year to take action together.

And here at the college, we have amazing resources to teach and inspire us. This July Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, climate justice expert and advocate became a Roux Scholar. Professor Johnson teaches that in order to have a meaningful impact on climate justice we must (quote) “summon the expansive sense of possibility, .. harness our imaginations and our creativity.”<sup>5</sup> (end quote)

The creativity and expansive sense of possibility that Professor Johnson urges us to build, can only be summoned when we work together. When we gather at our version of the claimants stone we support each other, we get to know our neighbors, we extend care to our precious planet and to each other. Like any experience of loss and grief, we can better cope when we join together for mutual support, encouragement and strength. We feel less alone.

Indeed each of us is essential in making a difference. The following midrash bolsters this message:

Once upon a time there lived a person who wandered from place to place. Traveling mostly on foot, she ventured over high mountain peaks stopping in small villages to cool her tired feet in mountain streams and listen to the birds. Her journeys brought her across barren deserts where she rejoiced at the site of even the smallest oasis. Through all of her journeys one day in particular stands out, for as she was walking, she looked off into the distance and noticed a terrifying site, in front of her was a grand palace, like none she had ever seen. It had beautiful windows, fancy columns, and gorgeous gardens surrounding all sides, and yet, the palace itself was completely on fire, it was burning up and it seemed that no one was around to put out the fire.

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<https://www.bowdoin.edu/news/2023/06/incoming-roux-scholar-receives-honorary-degree-from-middlebury.html>

According to the legend, the wanderer stopped and knowing that something must be done instinctually cried out, “Who is in charge?” And just as she spoke, a head poked out from a window of the burning building and said “It is me, I am the master of the palace.”<sup>6</sup> (pause)

In case the metaphor is not clear, the burning palace is our world, the person poking their head out the window- well that’s God, and we, my friends, we are the wanderer. Indeed our world is literally burning, Hawai, Quebec and California to name a few places, and it is time for us to stop, notice and act. We can only do so together.

May this new year be one of gathering at our version of the claimants stone

May it be year of turning our grief into action, turning our fears into hope

May it be a year of collaboration as we take steps together to care for, protect and regenerate our precious planet and all life on it.

Kein yehi ratzon, may it be so.

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Genesis Rabba on Lech Lecha

**Sources:**

Juli Berwald, Life on the Rocks: Building a Future for Coral Reefs

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