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Tashlich: Baggage Check
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If on a Winter's Night a Traveler is a 1979 postmodernist novel by the Italian writer Italo Calvino. In its opening chapter, a traveler arrives at an old-fashioned train station at a non-descript time, which is neither day or night, burdened by a suitcase that is not his, yet that he cannot get rid of.

I often find myself drawn to re-read this chapter in the lead-up to the High Holidays, a time traditionally set aside for reviewing one's life journey. Calvino's writing brilliantly conveys the traveler's own sense of disorientation and irrevocable loss, together with his awareness of being adrift and his urgency in seeking to get back on track to continue his journey:

“Something must have gone wrong for me: some misinformation, a delay, a missed connection; perhaps on arriving I should have found a contact, probably linked with this suitcase that seems to worry me so much, though whether because I am afraid of losing it or because I can't wait to be rid of it is not clear. What seems certain is that it isn't just ordinary baggage, something I can check or pretend to forget in the waiting room.” (Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, p 13)

Like Calvino's traveler, we can find our journeys burdened by baggage. How we perceive ourselves and what motives we attribute to others, the connections we make and those we miss -- all color our interactions and shape that suitcase we find ourselves carrying. It can be difficult to pinpoint where and when exactly we picked it up, what precise event led us to take up the suitcase. Aware of its burden, its shape, and its weight, we seek some resolution.

The traveler admits that he is unsure whether his apprehension about the suitcase is "because I am afraid of losing it or because I can't wait to be rid of it". This is a significant insight into the process of change and Teshuvah.

Becoming aware of the burden we carry and how it encumbers our journey does not lead us automatically to get rid of it. Sometimes, as our hand rests on the handle of a wheeled suitcase, rather than us wheeling it, the suitcase becomes our rudder and we glide through the world following alongside it. We often hang on to the baggage because it contributes to our identity. It shapes who we are. Even though burdensome, it informs our self-view.

While change is a process fraught with pitfalls, the language of Teshuvah suggests return to an initial condition, prior to the events, actions, and consequences that led us to the present situation. The ritual of Tashlich, the symbolic casting off of one's sins into a body of water, can play a role in facilitating this process if we approach it as a framework for change and not as a prayer to 'maglc away' our sins.

There are two aspects to Tashlich that have transformative potential -- the setting and the stance.



The Setting

Tashlich takes place as we stand on the edge of a flowing body of water. There is something compelling and evocative about flowing water, well captured by John F. Kennedy's remarks:

“I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea, except I think it's because ... we all came from the sea [...] And when we go back to the sea - whether it is to sail or to watch it - we are going back from whence we came.” (John F. Kennedy, Remarks at the Dinner for the America's Cup Crews, September 14, 1962)

The setting for Tashlich is an invitation to consider where we come from -- to seek our starting point, before we acquired that unwanted suitcase. This is the first step in enabling a return to who we are at our core, to retrieve our true identity in its purest form.

The Stance

There are two gestures associated with Tashlich in the mystical tradition: symbolically emptying out our pockets, and shaking out the corners of our garments, inspired by the verse: *'And I shook out the bosom of my garment and said, So may God shake out...'* (Nehemia 5:13).

Both gestures invite a stance of 'letting go', enabling inner change. The items in our pocket were placed there deliberately, for safe-keeping or to have them with us at all times. The crumbs and dirt that cling to our garment were inadvertently picked up along the way, in a casual or negligent brushing past.

Tashlich invites us to deliberately empty what is in our pockets, giving up the baggage we are intentionally holding on to, as well as to gain awareness of what has inadvertently clung to us and needs to be brushed off.

The setting and the stance of Tashlich complement and reinforce each other, enabling the process of Teshuvah.

“Getting rid of the suitcase was to be the first condition for re-establishing the previous situation: previous to everything that happened afterward.” (Italo Caivino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, p 15)

This year, let us experience Tashlich as a sophisticated ritual, finding release in its gestures, and in its setting an intuition of our true selves.



Rabba Dina Brawer was born in Milan, Italy and studied in Jerusalem and New York. She holds a BA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies from the University of London and an MA in Education and Psychology from the Institute of Education, London. Together with her husband, they have recently co-launched Mishkan: The Jewish Community Beyond Borders. In 2013 she launched JOFA UK as a platform to engage in communal discussions around religion and gender. She ranked 55 in The Jewish Chronicle's Power 100 List of individuals who are most influential in shaping the UK Jewish community.

