

The Umbrella Nobody Could Describe

Chapter 1: The Pile

The pile behind the shul's coat room has been growing since Cheshvan, and by Adar it has a shape, like a hill, and a reputation, like a joke.

"There are nine black umbrellas in it," the gabbai tells Simcha after maariv on a Tuesday. "I counted. Also gloves with no partners, a hat I have personally watched three men try on, and a scarf that may predate the building." He rubs his forehead. "You're organized. Your mother says you're organized. Will you take it?"

Simcha is sixteen and flattered, which is how most jobs get given out. He says yes before he asks what taking it means.

"What it means," the gabbai says, "is that on the first of Nissan, whatever is left goes to the gemach, and nobody can say we didn't warn them. You have a month."

Simcha walks home past the coat room and looks in at the hill. Somewhere under it, he thinks to himself, are real things belonging to real people who walk past this room every single week and never look. The job is not to get rid of a pile. The job is to move each thing from the pile back to its person.

It sounds easy. He has a month.

Chapter 2: The Table

His first idea is the easy one, and it works beautifully for four days.

On Wednesday he carries the whole pile out to the long table in the lobby, lays everything out in rows - umbrellas like rifles, gloves in pairs where he can find pairs - and tapes up a sign in letters an inch high: TAKE WHAT'S YOURS. FIRST OF NISSAN, THE REST GOES TO THE GEMACH.

The table empties like a bowl of popcorn at a simcha. Men coming out of the evening shiur take umbrellas. Boys from the youth group take gloves. Somebody takes the famous hat, and Simcha watches three different men be disappointed it is gone, which should have told him something, and doesn't.

By Sunday the table holds nothing but the scarf and one mitten, and Simcha reports to the gabbai with his chest out a little.

"Efficient," the gabbai says. He does not say it like a compliment, exactly. He says it like a man filing something.

Chapter 3: The Taped Rib

On Monday, a man from the morning minyan stops Simcha in the lobby.

"You're the fellow with the table." He is not angry. He is puzzled, which is worse. "My umbrella went out from the coat room two weeks ago - I left it after shacharis, my own fault - and my son-in-law said, good news, the shul put the lost things out, and I came, and it wasn't there. Someone took it Wednesday."

"How do you know it was yours?" Simcha asks, and the man looks at him the way you look at a boy who has asked the wrong question.

"Because I can tell it apart from every umbrella in this town," he says. "The third rib is taped with black electrical tape, and the handle has a chip on the left side, from the year I dropped it on the steps of the bank. I didn't see it on your table. Someone else saw it, and liked it, and now it's his."

He says it without heat and walks away, and Simcha stands in the lobby understanding exactly what his beautiful system did: it moved the pile, all right. It moved some of it to the right people and some of it to the wrong people, and it has no way of telling the difference, and neither does he.

The sign said TAKE WHAT'S YOURS. The sign trusted everyone to know what was theirs. The sign, Simcha thinks to himself, was doing a job a sign can't do.

Chapter 4: The New Sign

That night he takes the sign down in his head and writes a new one, and crosses it out, and writes it again.

The problem, he decides, is not that people are dishonest. The man who took the taped umbrella probably has a taped umbrella of his own somewhere, or thinks he does. The problem is that "it's mine" is a feeling, and feelings are cheap, and a table can't check them.

What an owner has that a taker doesn't have is not the feeling. It is the details. The chipped handle. The taped rib. The thing you know because you carried it in the rain for six years, not because you saw it on a table for six seconds.

He writes the new sign in pencil first: DON'T TELL ME IT'S YOURS. TELL ME ABOUT IT.

Under it, smaller: The lost things are behind the coat room now. To claim something, describe it - something only its owner would know. If it matches, it's yours, with pleasure.

He brings it to the gabbai, who reads it twice.

"You'll get complaints," the gabbai says. "People want to point, not describe." He thinks a moment. "The rule is right. Do it anyway. And Simcha - the ones who describe badly and still truly own the thing, you'll learn to hear. The rule is for the things, not against the people."

Simcha puts the remaining pile - refilled by a month of fresh losses - behind the coat room, and tapes up the sign, and waits.

Chapter 5: The Sticky Button

The first week is comedy, and he writes it all in a notebook because it teaches him the rule's edges.

A boy from the youth group comes for "a black umbrella." Simcha opens the door: nine black umbrellas. The boy stares. "Mine has... a handle?" Simcha, who likes him, gives him three more tries, and on the third the boy says, "the button you press sticks, you have to push it twice," and Simcha hands over the umbrella with the sticky button, because nobody knows that about an umbrella they saw for six seconds.

A mother comes for her daughter's glove. "The left one," she says, "has a hole in the thumb shaped like a heart, and she won't throw it out because her Totty bought them." It matches. It goes home.

A man comes, looks at the sign, and says, "This is a shul, not a bank." But he comes back the next day and says, "Gray scarf, and the fringe on one end is shorter because my daughter cut it with her craft scissors when she was five." Simcha gives him the famous scarf, the one that predated the building, and it turns out to have a name after all: it was his wife's.

The pile shrinks the slow way, the true way. Some things sit, and Simcha learns that sitting is fine. A thing that waits behind the coat room still belongs to somebody. A thing that walks out with the wrong somebody is gone.

Chapter 6: The Green Umbrella

The real test comes in the third week, and it comes for the best umbrella.

It is a good one - wooden handle, dark green, the kind that opens with a sound like a small tent going up. A man from the evening kollel claims it Thursday.

"Dark, wooden handle, expensive," he says. "Mine. I left it last week."

"Something only the owner would know," Simcha says, as gently as he can.

"It's an umbrella," the man says. "What is there to know? It keeps off rain. Look - I'm not going to describe my own umbrella like it's a criminal. Give it to me." He is not a bad man; he is a certain man, and Simcha's hands sweat anyway, because saying no to a grown man is not in the sixteen-year-old job description.

He says it. "If it's yours, it'll still be yours when you remember something about it. Nobody else can take it - that's the whole point of the door."

The man leaves unhappy, and Simcha spends the evening wondering if he has invented a machine for insulting people.

On Sunday, an elderly man from the early minyan shuffles in, apologizes for the trouble, and says: "Green, wooden handle - and the handle is loose, it turns a quarter-inch, because the screw inside is stripped, and I keep meaning to glue it. And there's white paint on the tip, from

my daughter's porch, and I can tell you the year." The handle turns a quarter-inch. The paint is there. The umbrella goes home.

And on Tuesday, the certain man comes back, red-faced, carrying a green umbrella with a wooden handle - found in the coat closet of his son's office, where he himself left it two months ago. "Mine never left the city," he says. "I owe the boy behind the door an apology."

"Take it as a compliment," Simcha says. "Yours was safe the whole time. Nothing that was yours could walk out of here."

Chapter 7: The Clean Conscience

The last week before Nissan, the gabbai stands with him in front of what's left: one mitten, a child's umbrella with ducklings, and a rain hat nobody has ever claimed in recorded history.

"The gemach gets these," Simcha says, "with a clean conscience. Everything that had an owner who came had to prove it, and everything that proved it went home."

"The youth group wants your sign," the gabbai says. "Their closet is worse than ours was. I told them they have to take the door with it - the sign doesn't work without somebody willing to say, tell me about it."

Simcha copies the sign out for the youth group that evening, and under it he adds the line the gabbai gave him, because it is the line that makes the rest kind: the rule is for the things, not against the people.

He thinks about the first table, the beautiful empty table. It had felt like success. It was only fast, he thinks to himself, and fast and done are not the same thing.

Chapter 8: The Binoculars

On the first of Nissan, Simcha's little brother stands in the doorway of his room at home, eyeing the binoculars on Simcha's dresser - the good ones, a birthday gift from his uncle two years ago.

"Can I take these to the park? Mine broke."

Simcha opens his mouth to say the obvious, which is no, these are mine. Then he hears himself, and what he hears is TAKE WHAT'S YOURS - the feeling, not the details.

He closes his mouth and thinks.

"Here's the deal," he says. "You tell me how you'll carry them, where they'll be when you're climbing, and what you do if it rains. If the plan sounds like a plan that brings them home, take them."

His brother, insulted for exactly one second, thinks. "The strap goes across, not around my neck. They stay in the case on the climbing part. If it rains I put them inside my jacket and come home, because they're only binoculars and you're only my brother." He says the last part with a grin.

Simcha hands them over. They come home dry at five, with a report of two herons and one turtle, and Simcha takes down, in his head, the last sign: not a wall between people and things - a door that only the owner's knowledge opens.

The rain hat from the coat room goes to the gemach on the first of Nissan, as promised. Somebody is wearing it now who needed a hat. The rule held.

Eight activities

Activity 1: Remember the story

1. What does Simcha's first sign say, and what happens to the table?
2. How does the man from the morning minyan know the umbrella taken from the table was his?
3. What does the new sign say, and what must a claimer do?
4. What happens with the green wooden-handle umbrella?

Activity 2: Fact or guess

1. The first table system returns every item to its true owner. Fact / Guess
2. The man from the morning minyan is angry when he speaks to Simcha. Fact / Guess
3. The certain man's green umbrella turns up in his son's office coat closet. Fact / Guess
4. The youth group asks to copy Simcha's sign. Fact / Guess

Activity 3: Think and write

1. "Fast and done are not the same thing." Explain what Simcha means, using the two systems.
2. The gabbai says the rule is "for the things, not against the people." How does that line keep the rule kind?
3. Why does "it's mine" fail as a test, even when nobody is lying?

Activity 4: Apply it - Rutie's lost-and-found box

The rule: an owner can be asked for what only an owner knows - the details. A feeling of mine is not proof.

1. (a) Rutie runs the lost-and-found box for her seminary's dorm floor. A girl says, "That's my water bottle," pointing at one of three identical ones. Using Simcha's rule, what does Rutie ask, and what answer would send the bottle home? (b) Another girl says, "Why should I have to prove my own stuff?" Write Rutie's answer in one or two sentences, keeping the gabbai's line in mind.
2. "The sign was doing a job a sign can't do." What job? What kinds of jobs can only a person do?

3. Simcha's brother earns the binoculars with a plan, not a claim. What does the plan prove that the claim doesn't?

Activity 5: Scrambled words (from the story)

1. MICAL
2. WORNE
3. VOLEG
4. CRAFS

Activity 6: Word work

Match each word to its meaning from the story.

1. gemach a. a claim based on facts only the rightful person has
2. proof of ownership b. a free-loan collection that lends or gives items
3. claim c. to say something is yours
4. conscience d. the inner sense of whether you did right

Activity 7: Word search

Find the eight words hidden in the grid. All words run left to right.

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C L A I M V W B F Y
D E S C R I B E R S
U M B R E L L A X J
O W N E R Y G H U P
S I G N R S T C D E
M A T C H J K V W B
P I L E U P L M N O
G A B B A I A I Q Z
X J K V W B F Y G H
U P L M N O R S T C

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The eight words: CLAIM, DESCRIBE, UMBRELLA, OWNER, SIGN, MATCH, PILE, GABBAI.

Activity 8: Your turn - the door and the details

Think of a place where things get lost and found in your life - school, shul, camp, home. Write five lines: how items are claimed now, what could go wrong with the easy way, and one "tell me about it" question that would work there.