Bava M’tzia is the tractate of Talmud that deals principally with moveable property. A discussion arises at one point regarding the return of a lost object, and the question is asked: what obligations does the possessor of a lost article have in the act of returning it to its owner? Specifically, the Sages ask whether one can just drop the object off, or must the owner be informed that it has been returned. The consensus, summed up by Rabbi Eliezer is that no communication is necessary. Rather, an owner must be told everything except the need to restore what is lost (BT Bava M’tzia 31a; also Bava Kama 57a).

In this fashion the Sages touch on an elemental human trait: one’s acute awareness of loss. When you know that something is missing, the awareness remains ineradicable. Either the missing item is restored—even replacement by an exact duplicate is often not enough—or the feeling of loss will continue to persist. Hence, the Talmudic adage that one need not speak about what is already known.

Loss is a matter of absence. More deeply, it is the memory of presence. When somebody is cajoling you to engage in a particular activity or attend some event, and responds to your reluctance with “You don’t what you are missing,” that is precisely the case. Without an experience of a presence, there is no sense of absence, and therefore no loss. Yet, loss, while always—by definition—negative, is not necessarily sad. Two summers ago, I hit upon a diet and eating regimen that has actually worked! Although I remain acutely aware of the twenty-five or so pounds I have shed, I am far from unhappy about the loss.

I am thankful to Ruth Gais for generating an interest in the theme of loss and for overseeing as guest editor the lead section of this Reform Jewish Quarterly. Handling loss, whether for good or for ill, is an integral part of a rabbi’s vocation. The essays in this section cover a wide range of instances of absence, and while some might appear to be especially personal, we learn that for a rabbi, very little is exclusively personal.
Most of the articles on loss draw principally from experience rather than the examination of text. To a great extent, experience becomes the text. The balance of papers in this issue, however, do draw upon sources. Stephen Passamanek investigates in “A Figure Dimly Seen” the unusual role of emissary of the court (sh’liach beit din)—a person who is allowed to defy some fundamental court norms in the pursuit of his duties. Reeve Brenner (“Kosher, Kashrut, and Little Piggy”) engages in a wide-ranging discussion of a modern sensibility to the Jewish dietary laws, such that the answer to the query “Is that kosher?” is hardly simple or straightforward.

After a child asks at the Pesach seder the prescribed four questions, we are reminded that “even if we were all Sages, all scholars, all experts in Torah,” we would still have to engage in a discussion of the Exodus; that is, it is not only the little children who should be prompted to ask questions. David Arnow in “The Sword Outstretched over Jerusalem” finds a question to ask, and then answer, from the Haggadah’s own elaboration of yetziat Mitzrayim.

Everett Gendler (“In the Process of Becoming”) turns to a different sort of text as an inspiration for his essay. After a career of well over fifty years as a rabbi, he pays tribute to the influence of the liberal religious thinker Charles Hartshorne, and he muses on the impact that process philosophy (which might be simplistically described as the idea of God as “becoming” rather than “being”) has on the vocation of the modern rabbinate, as we all attempt to communicate a sense of the divine to congregants, constituents, and, maybe most of all, to ourselves.

In the Maayanot offering, Suzanne Singer translates and analyzes a segment of Joseph Caro’s commentary on Jacob ben Asher’s Arba’a Turim. The section under consideration is employer-employee relations. Reading Jewish codes of law is generally a very marginal activity for Reform rabbis. Yet the material is both provocative and enduringly timely. (You can read Emmanuel Levi- nas’s examination of the underlying Talmudic passage in his Nine Talmudic Readings, the chapter entitled “Judaism and Revolution.”)

This edition of the Journal marks some important changes in the editorial staff. Mona Alfi, Elaine Glickman, Mark Dov Shapiro, and Donald Splansky have completed their terms of service on the editorial board. One cannot overestimate their importance in maintaining the quality of the content of the Journal. For those of you
who have submitted papers for publication, you know that the work of the editorial board is mostly anonymous. Let me therefore publicly express my gratitude for Mona, Elaine, Mark, and Don’s scholarly insights and literary sensitivity.

Also with this issue, Marc Dworkin joins the staff as poetry editor. Marc brings profound experience to this uncommonly challenging task as he recently stepped down as founding editor of Shirim: A Jewish Poetry Journal. One cannot say enough about Adam Fisher, who occupied this position for the past seven years. Writing a good poem is deceptively difficult. Adam not only made thoughtful yet tough-minded decisions regarding submissions, but also often helped improve poems that were published. I am most grateful for having Adam assist me in my own transition onto the Journal.

Paul Golomb, Editor