

America's Greatest Lost & Found

**The Unclaimed Baggage Center
in Scottsboro, Alabama: Last
Stop for Lost Suitcases**

In recent weeks it was reported in Jewish circles that a rabbi returned seven lost pairs of tefillin he had found in a store that deals in baggage left behind in airports. However, that was only half the story. The rest of the story is the Unclaimed Baggage Center itself, a one-of-a-kind sprawling facility where left-behind clothes, electronics and anything else of value—including items potentially worth hundreds of thousands of dollars!—are sent.

A news story that was reported a few weeks ago in Jewish newspapers attracted widespread interest. The story involved Rabbi Uri Pilichowski of Boca Raton, Florida, who was vacationing in Alabama. While there, he visited a store called the Unclaimed Baggage Center, where items left behind by travelers are sent to be sold at a discount. Rabbi Pilichowski was looking to buy a cheap cell phone, but was shocked to discover seven pairs of *tefillin* for sale.

The price was \$45 for each pair (if only the sales managers knew what a bargain they were offering...). Without thinking twice, Rabbi Pilichowski purchased them all. Within a remarkably short amount of time he was able to identify the owners by relying on clues such as the names embroidered on the bags. For one pair, a sticker from



In the general chaos of an airport it is impossible to keep track of every single piece of luggage.



Unclaimed baggage at London's Heathrow Airport.



Rabbi Uri Pilichowski with some of the tefillin he found.



Another pair of tefillin at the Unclaimed Baggage Center, among various knickknacks.



Yossi Malka's son's tefillin at the Unclaimed Baggage Center.

the manufacturer in *Eretz Yisrael* led to the identification of its owner. By the end of the week all seven pairs were reunited with their owners. Four of them were in New York.

One set turned out to be a valued family heirloom whose disappearance had been a source of acute heartache. Rabbi Pilichowski saw the surname "Malka" on the *tefillin* bag. He recalled that he had volunteered 20 years earlier to work in a Jewish summer camp in Ukraine. There he met another staff member, a fellow named Yossi Malka. They hadn't had any contact in many years, but the rabbi figured it was worth calling his old friend to see if he could offer a lead. He found the number for Yossi Malka, who was now living in Los Angeles. The moment Malka heard the purpose of the phone call he let out a whoop of joy and shouted, "*Hodu lashem ki tov ki Y'olam chasdo*—Praise Hashem, for He is good!"

It turned out that the *tefillin* belonged to Yossi Malka's father, Reb Dovid. Reb Dovid Malka had served for years as personal cook to the late Lubavitcher Rebbe. After years of suffering from a terminal illness, Reb Dovid Malka passed away last fall at the age of 58. Beforehand, he bequeathed his coveted *tefillin* to his oldest grandchild. This was Yossi's son, who is a bar mitzvah this year. Six months after Reb Dovid's *petira*, the Malka family flew to Mexico for *Pesach* with a stopover in Charlotte, North Carolina. Somewhere along the way the *tefillin* disappeared.

Yossi Malka was distraught when he realized that his father's *tefillin* were missing. He kept the matter to himself, not wanting

to upset his family. Instead, he returned to Charlotte alone in an attempt to locate the *tefillin*. He searched the entire airport and spoke with every official he could find, but to no avail.

As he related to Rabbi Pilichowski, Yossi Malka prayed every day that the *tefillin* be located and returned. His prayers were answered. In an unlikely set of circumstances, *Hashem* arranged for his former friend to vacation in Alabama, turn to an unclaimed baggage center in search of something else entirely, only to find Yossi Malka's *tefillin*.

That makes for a happy ending to the story. But there is another aspect that was not depicted: the Unclaimed Baggage business in Scottsboro, Alabama. Think of it as a massive *Hashavas Avedah* (Lost and Found) center, except that the items are not returned to the owners for free. Instead it attracts tourists from far and wide who are looking for a great bargain on typical travel fare.

The Air Traveler's Nightmare

The plane lands and you are longing to relax at home after your protracted and exhausting journey. You look forward to a homemade meal and catching up on your children's latest antics while you were away. But first you have to stop at the luggage carousel and wait for your suitcases to magically appear.

You find the conveyor belt that corresponds to your flight number and join the waiting passengers. You watch impatiently as unfamiliar suitcases appear, only to be

grabbed by their owners who then rush off. Why does it seem like you are always the last? Eventually, the more or less steady flow of suitcases slows to a trickle and then stops completely. And your suitcase is still not there.

After waiting for half an hour you are at wits end. You track down the airline representative who seems harried long before you show up. (Airlines are notorious for cutting costs by reducing services and forcing personnel to multitask.) You receive the absolute minimum amount of help the airline can get away with providing. The worker is nice to you. He promises to do everything he can to help. Just be patient. In plain English: "Sorry, we can't help you." You are on your own.

You argue with the man, you plead with him. Maybe it was left behind somewhere on the plane? Could he please go and check it for you? But the man just hands you a long form and kindly suggests: "Please fill this out and we will inform you as soon as we know where your luggage is."

Now it's not just your suitcase that is lost. You feel lost as well. You are upset, disappointed, angry. You demand immediate restitution from the airline for its carelessness. You want the official to reach into his pocket and hand you several hundred dollar bills in compensation. You will not accept third-party checks, *chessed* coupons or any other form of payment except cold cash. Alas, the system does not respond so swiftly. "Patience, mister. First provide us with receipts for all your missing items and we will process your request after 30 days. But