

YK KN 5766 Tikkun Olam

Good Yontif.

The great Yiddish author, Yud Lamed Peretz, told the following story.

“Early every Friday morning, at the time of the [*Selihof*], the Penitential Prayers, the Rabbi of Nemirov would vanish.

He was nowhere to be seen – neither in the synagogue nor in the two Houses of Study nor at a minyan. And he was certainly not at home. His door stood open; whoever wished could go in and out; no one would steal from the rabbi. But not a living creature was within.

Where could the rabbi be? Where should he be? In heaven, no doubt. A rabbi has plenty of business to take care of just before the Days of Awe. Jews, God bless them, need livelihood, peace, health, and good matches. They want to be pious and good, but our sins are so great, and Satan of the thousand eyes watches the whole earth from one end to the other. What he sees he reports; he denounces, informs. Who can help us if not the rabbi!

That’s what the people thought.

But once a Litvak came, and he laughed. You know the Litvaks. They think little of the Holy Books but stuff themselves with Talmud and law. So this Litvak points to a passage in the Gemarah – it sticks in your eyes – where it is written that even Moses, our Teacher, did not ascend to heaven during his lifetime but remained suspended two and a half feet below. Go argue with a Litvak!

So where can the rabbi be?

“That’s not my business,” said the Litvak, shrugging. Yet all the while – what a Litvak can do! – he is scheming to find out.

That same night, right after the evening prayers, the Litvak steals into the rabbi’s room, slides under the rabbi’s bed, and waits. He’ll watch all night and discover where the rabbi vanishes and what he does during the Penitential Prayers.

(Someone else might have got drowsy and fallen asleep, but a Litvak is never at a loss; he recites a whole tractate of the Talmud by heart.)

At dawn he hears the call to prayers.

The rabbi has already been awake for a long time. The Litvak has heard him groaning for a whole hour.

Whoever has heard the Rabbi of Nemirov groan knows how much sorrow for all Israel, how much suffering, lies in each groan. A man’s heart might break, hearing it. But a Litvak is made of iron; he listens and remains where he is. The rabbi, long life to him, lies on the bed, and the Litvak under the bed.

Then the Litvak hears the beds in the house begin to creak; he hears people jumping out of their beds, mumbling a few Yiddish words, pouring water

on their fingernails, banging doors. Everyone has left. It is again quiet and dark; a bit of light from the moon shines through the shutters.

(Afterward the Litvak admitted that when he found himself alone with the rabbi a great fear took hold of him. Goose pimples spread across his skin, and the roots of his earlocks pricked him like needles. A trifle: to be alone with the rabbi at the time of the Penitential Prayers! But a Litvak is stubborn. So he quivered like a fish in water and remained where he was.)

Finally the rabbi, long life to him, arises. First he does what befits a Jew. Then he goes to the clothes closet and takes out a bundle of peasant clothes: linen trousers, high boots, a coat, a big felt hat, and a long wide leather belt studded with brass nails. The rabbi gets dressed. From his coat pocket dangles the end of a heavy peasant rope.

The rabbi goes out, and the Litvak follows him.

On the way the rabbi stops in the kitchen, bends down, takes an ax from under the bed, puts it in his belt, and leaves the house. The Litvak trembles but continues to follow.

The hushed dread of the Days of Awe hangs over the dark streets. Every once in a while a cry rises from some minyan reciting the Penitential Prayers, or from a sickbed. The rabbi hugs the sides of the streets, keeping to the shade of the houses. He glides from house to house, and the Litvak after him. The Litvak hears the sound of his heartbeats mingling with the sound of the rabbi's heavy steps. But he keeps on going and follows the rabbi to the outskirts of the town.

A small wood stands behind the town.

The rabbi, long life to him, enters the wood. He takes thirty or forty steps and stops by a small tree. The Litvak, overcome with amazement, watches the rabbi take the ax out of his belt and strike the tree. He hears the tree creak and fall. The rabbi chops the tree into logs and the logs into sticks. Then he makes a bundle of the wood and ties it with the rope in his pocket. He puts the bundle of wood on his back, shoves the ax back into his belt, and returns to the town.

He stops at a back street beside a small broken-down shack and knocks at the window.

"Who is there?" asks a frightened voice. The Litvak recognizes it as the voice of sick Jewish woman.

"I," answers the rabbi in the accent of a peasant.

"Who is I?"

Again the Rabbi answers in Russian. "Vassil."

"Who is Vassil and what do you want?"

"I have wood to sell, very cheap." And, not waiting for the woman's reply, he goes into the house.

The Litvak steals in after him. In the gray light of early morning, he sees a poor room with broken, miserable furnishings. A sick woman, wrapped in rags,

lies on the bed. She complains bitterly, “Buy? How can I buy? Where will a poor widow get money?”

“I’ll lend it to you,” answers the supposed Vassil. “It’s only six cents.”

“And how will I ever pay you back?” said the poor woman, groaning.

“Foolish one,” says the rabbi reproachfully. “See, you are a poor sick Jew, and I am ready to trust you with a little wood. I am sure you’ll pay. While you, you have such a great and mighty God and you don’t trust him for six cents.”

“And who will kindle the fire?” said the widow. “Have I the strength to get up? My son is at work.”

“I’ll kindle the fire,” answers the rabbi.

As the rabbi put the wood into the oven, he recited, in a groan, the first portion of the Penitential Prayers.

As he kindled the fire and the wood burned brightly, he recited, a bit more joyously, the second portion of the Penitential Prayers. When the fire was set, he recited the third portion, and then he shut the stove.

The Litvak who saw all this became a disciple of the rabbi.

And ever after when another disciple tells how the Rabbi of Nemirov ascends to heaven at the time of the Penitential Prayers, the Litvak does not laugh. He only adds quietly, “If not higher.”

If not higher. ...

This story beautifully articulates the two sides of being a committed Jew – being fully engaged in our tradition and having it propel us to action. The *Selihot*, the early morning Penitential Prayers are normally thought of as personal time, a time for restoring ourselves through *tefillah*, through prayer. But this story reminds us that it does not really work, unless it pushes us to repair the world around us.

As I mentioned on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, prayer reaches its ideal, its highest form, when it forces us to move beyond ourselves. Yom Kippur is the culmination, the high point, the apex, the climax of the entire year, stripping away everything, exposing ourselves before the Almighty. But, it does not stand alone. It requires more than words.

Perhaps the best example of this idea is found in the Haftarah that we will read tomorrow morning. It reminds us that it is not acceptable simply to fast and observe these rituals and prayers of Yom Hakippurim. We must change our own ethical behavior. Our prophet Isaiah admonishes us to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and clothe the naked. Only if we rid our communities of oppression and injustice, will God grant us the strength and forgiveness that we ask for on this most sacred day. This Haftarah is the culmination of a day laden with introspection and self-examination. This Haftarah reminds us that all of this process must culminate in action after the fast is over.

Isaiah reminds us that we are part of a web of life that needs our attention. Like the great Rabbi of Nemirov, we all must ascend a little bit higher through our actions in the world.

This year has seen terrible suffering. The devastating tsunami in Asia, Hurricane Katrina, the mudslide in Guatemala, and the earthquake in Pakistan remind us just how much pain there is in the world. So many have asked, “Where is God in all of this?” “How do we respond to such suffering?”

In response to these questions, Emanuel Levinas, the great French Jewish philosopher of the 20th century, taught us that God is found in the face of the other – when we encounter others with compassion. In that special moment of connection when two people look into each other’s eyes, we can sense God’s presence.

Levinas uses the example of the altar in the Holy of Holies – in the holy Temple in Jerusalem. Above the ark there were two cherubs, two angelic creatures with human faces looking at each other. According to our tradition, God dwelled in the space between them. Building on that metaphor, Levinas reminds us that God is found in that moment of connection, when two human beings truly see each other’s faces, lovingly reaching out to each other with that sense of divine compassion.

That’s how God acts in this world. We are God’s hands. We say in Psalm 145, known as the *Ashrei*, a prayer recited three times a day: “*Poteah et Yadekha U’Masbia l’khol hai ratzon* – God, you open up your hands and sustain every living thing.” When we recite that line, there is a custom to open our hands, because we know that while God is the paradigm of moral and ethical behavior, we are the implementers of that behavior. While God metaphorically opens up God’s hands, we can literally open our hands and reach out, lifting up our sisters and brothers, helping those in need. We must respond to the hurricane and to the tsunami by creating warning systems that would prevent such calamities, by having smarter evacuation plans, by avoiding the man-made components of these natural disasters, by not putting poor people in dangerous situations where we can avoid seeing their faces. We need to act in this world.

...

We are blessed to have at Temple Emunah an inspiring Social Action Committee that engages our community in social justice and social service initiatives. Projects respond to hunger, homelessness, educational needs, and national and international catastrophes, but our committee has many different projects and needs your ideas, your passion and, most of all, your hands.

I want to mention a few different projects on the local, national, and international levels.

But first, I want to talk a little bit about our own community, right here in Lexington and the surrounding towns. Moving to Lexington some fifteen months ago, I thought I was moving into a bastion of tolerance, but I must say that I have been terribly distressed at some of the issues that have come up in our own

community and in the public schools over the past year. I was surprised by some of the intolerance I have heard, especially to gays and lesbians.

Recently, I heard of a lesbian couple in Arlington, who spoke about how they are afraid to live in this area. This is a cause for alarm for all of us. We must create an open, tolerant community in our own neighborhoods, in our towns, and, of course, right here at Temple Emunah, where we can reach out to all families, regardless of their sexual orientation or their composition. ...

Nationally, we must aid the relief efforts in the Gulf of Mexico. Tonight, we were all asked to bring two packages, which I think really demonstrates how we here at Temple Emunah respond to the world. A package of toiletries for victims of Hurricane Katrina, as well as the normal food that we ask you to bring each and every Yom Kippur for those who are fed through the efforts of Family Table. We must keep our eyes both on this acute disaster as well as the ongoing needs.

On the international level, there are so many critical places that need our assistance. Temple Emunah has taken it upon itself to work hard to end the genocide that is occurring in Darfur. I spoke a little bit about it on Rosh Hashanah, but we need to take a more and more active role. That can range from the simple act of wearing a green bracelet to say "never again," and raising awareness to donating funds to the American Jewish World Service or other organizations. We must also encourage our government to be more proactive to end this atrocity.

Finally, I want to mention those who are hurt in natural disasters worldwide. While we have many who are now in need right here because of Hurricane Katrina, let's not forget those who are in pain around the globe. Although they are not of our faith or our country, they are all our sisters and brothers in the web of life. Our synagogue has committed to raising funds to help build a house for a family made homeless due to the Asian tsunami. ...

This year the Social Action Committee, led by its devoted leaders Bob Russman-Halperin and Sherry Hahn, is again reaching out to all of you through the Mitzvah Pledge Program. I can't tell you how beautiful I find this practice. We don't ask for funds on Yom Kippur. We ask you for something much bigger and much greater and much harder to give – to volunteer to be a part of our community, to help make Temple Emunah a nurturing and caring community, to benefit Lexington and our surrounding towns, the Boston area, and national and international efforts.

Please take your card and indicate which volunteer efforts you would like to give time to in the coming year. Please don't forget to put your label on the card (found with your high holiday tickets). I would like each and every one of you to check off at least one activity, if not more, that you will find the time – even just once during the coming year – to participate in. Be a part of these activities. Be a part of our community. Help us take these words that we recite on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and implement them. Help us continue to be the loving and compassionate community that we are. Help us take this step and ascend a little bit closer to heaven, if not higher.

May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life and may we all take a little step a little bit higher on this Yom Kippur.