

“If Not Higher”

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A story by the late 18th, early 19th century Yiddish author I.L. Peretz¹:

Every Friday morning, before the High Holy Days, special prayers were added to the services. But during those Friday mornings, the Rabbi of Nemirov was nowhere to be seen. He wasn't at his home or at minyan.

So the people explained that he was in heaven. “A rabbi has plenty of business to take care of [in heaven] just before the Days of Awe.”

But, there was a cynic among them. “No one can ascend to the heavens during their lifetime,” he thought. He was determined to find out where the rabbi went on Friday mornings.

One night, after evening prayers, the cynic hid under the rabbi's bed, he lay there the entire night, waiting to see what the morning would bring.

In the morning, the cynic heard all the others in the house begin to rise, and get ready, until only the rabbi remained. Once everyone was out of the house, the rabbi got dressed. He went to his closet and dressed himself in peasant clothes. He put on a big coat, with a heavy rope that dangled from the pocket.

The rabbi stuck an axe in his belt, and left the house. The cynic followed stealthily behind. The rabbi made his way to the outskirts of town, and then into the woods. He stood before a small tree, and he chopped it down. Then he cut the tree into logs and the logs into sticks. He bound them up with the rope in his pocket and made his way back to town.

He stopped on a back street, beside a broken down shack and tapped on the window.

“Who is there?” asked a frightened voice.

“It is I,” said the rabbi in the accent of a peasant.

“What do you want?”

“I have wood to sell, very cheap.”

Not waiting for the reply, he went inside. The cynic snuck in behind him. Inside, lay a sick woman, wrapped in rags.

¹ This is an interpretation of a translation of Peretz's story by Ruth Wisse, the texts in quotations (that aren't part of dialogue) are taken directly from Wisse's translation.

"How can I buy?" she said, "I have no money to buy wood."

"I'll lend it to you," said the rabbi, "its only 6 cents."

"Who will kindle the fire?" she asked.

"I'll kindle the fire," replied the rabbi.

As the rabbi put the wood into the oven, he began to quietly recite those special prayers added before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As he kindled the fire and the wood burned brightly, he continued to pray, a bit more joyously. When the fire was set, he completed the prayers, and shut the stove.

After that, the cynic became a disciple of the rabbi. And from that day forward, when they said that the rabbi of Nemirov went up to heaven during the Penitential Prayers, the cynic didn't laugh. He only added quietly, "If not higher."

Tonight is the beginning of the most important ritual time of the year. In the largest numbers of the year, you join us at the synagogue, or at Bethesda Chevy Chase High School. And we hope that our time together during this sacred season will move you, will make you think, will make you feel, will draw you closer to your notion of the Divine.

And, that alone is not the point of this season.

Yes, we should reconnect with the notion of humility, but let us not confuse humility with powerlessness. Our tradition demands that we do not think of ourselves alone. As we imagine how we might sway God's judgement in our favor we say...*uteshuva, utfilah, utzedakah*...yes, repentance and yes, prayer...but tzedakah, righteousness, justice sits right there beside the other two.

So as we begin this season of introspection, and taking stock, we invite you to consider how you are spending your time. We want to invite you, if you are able, to commit to doing a little more to help others.

The needs in our community are tremendous. We are watching the dismantling of social support systems, the dehumanization of our immigrant neighbors, the stripping away of reproductive freedom, the erosion of climate protection, all this alongside growing economic disparity. It is easy to feel overwhelmed and discouraged. It's easy to feel...like a cynic.

But now is not the time to take a step back. Now is the time to show up, to feed the hungry, to clothe those in need of clothing...there is a lot we can do, and we can do even more when we do it together.

There are many ways to serve our community. We are working hard at Temple Sinai to help direct the time and talents of our community so that we can better support our neighbors. Tonight, we invite you to Serve with Sinai. [The Davis Center for Social Justice at Temple Sinai](#), the umbrella under which we do justice at Sinai, has worked to create more opportunities for you, no matter your age or schedule, to help serve our neighbors.

Quarterly Sunday volunteer options for religious school families, a mitzvah day of service on the Sunday of Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, regular weekday opportunities at A Wider Circle, and DC Diaper Bank, Park Clean Ups and volunteer opportunities for young families. Visit our [website](#), sign up for something. And then text a Sinai friend and invite them to join you there.

There are 900 people in this room, we will see 1000s of you over the course of the next 10 days. Let's commit to doing more, together, in the year 5786. I pray that during this season, our hearts and our words are lifted to the heavens, and our actions, even higher.

Shanah Tovah.