

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5774

Last month my daughter Abby and I traveled to Argentina for a family simcha where we stayed with my in-laws for eleven days, 14 hours and 32 minutes. While in Buenos Aires I visited a friend from childhood and I noticed that all over his home he had on display hundreds of different bottles and memorabilia of Coca Cola. Granted that my friend is the head of human resources of Coca Cola in Latin America but still I was surprised. I asked him: "What's the story with the bottles?"

He told me, half smiling, half seriously, that since Americans are big in collecting things, he wanted to copy us and started collecting bottles and memorabilia of Coca Cola.

I dropped the matter, but his comment about Americans and their collections got me thinking. Growing up in Argentina, it was rare for people to collect anything at all. I remember as a child that my father's oldest brother had a stamp collection which he sold to buy a car, and I remember myself collecting soccer cards, but to my knowledge, that was more or less the extent of Argentinean collections.

However, my friend is right in that it is very common for Americans to start and keep their own unique collections. A close friend from Roanoke, VA collects hippo figurines, and her tall sister-in-law collects giraffes. I know of people who collect baseball memorabilia, shot glasses, ties, Hannukah menorahs, tzedakah boxes, and Broadway playbills, and, as some of you may know, we have a congregant at Hillcrest Jewish Center who has a most impressive collection of items related to the Sesame Street character, Big Bird.

So, I wasn't surprised when, about seven years ago, maybe due to the influence of friends, or to celebrate our new American citizenship, Silvia started collecting matryoshkas.

A matryoshka doll, also known as a Russian nesting doll, is a set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside the other. They are sometimes incorrectly referred to as "babushka dolls" (grandmother dolls) and I am sure you have seen

them around. As a matter of fact, I remember seeing my first Russian wooden doll in Buenos Aires, at the home of a Jewish acquaintance of my father who sympathized then with the Communist Party.

Coming back to Silvia and her collection, we have now about 40 different matryoshkas, among them a few I, myself, brought back from Russia two years ago.

I don't pride myself in being an expert in matryoshkas although I must confessed that I have gained some knowledge in a subject that was totally foreign to me until three years ago. Thus I learned that Silvia is not the only collector of Russian wooden dolls in the world and that you can pay \$75,000 or more for some of them (don't get any ideas, Silvia).

I also learned that there are different kinds of matryoshkas, Russian nesting dolls.

The most common one (and probably the one all of you encountered) consists of identical dolls of different sizes, nested within one another.



Then you have family sets: grandpa, grandma, father, mother, big brother, little sister and baby, for example, one inside the other.



You can also get sets that display different presidents of a country, or different members of a rock band, or different players of a particular soccer or baseball team. By the way, I walked half of Moscow to get Ilan a matryoshka of the *Mets*. I wasn't sure if the reason was that the *Mets* were so popular in Russia that everybody was buying them, or that nobody really knew who the *Mets* were.



Finally, you can find very interesting sets that tell a story, each doll being a different character in a particular narrative. By now, you shouldn't be surprised if I tell you that you can get Russian dolls of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs or Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. As a matter of fact, the most expensive matryoshkas are the ones depicting ancient Russian stories.



Now you may be wondering, what do Russian dolls have to do with Rosh Hashanah and where is Rabbi Kogan going with this?

I'd like to suggest that each of these kinds of matryoshkas I was describing can teach us an important lesson to treasure on these High Holy Days, and hopefully to carry with us throughout the year.

Like the more simple identical Russian dolls nested within one another, I look at you and I look at me and I know that there is more there than what I see. There is a Manes that was, and one that will be, and the same is true for each of you. Assembling and disassembling Russian nesting dolls reminds me that there is a

deep history inside us, that there is pain, and joy, and struggle, and the hope of growth within each of us. This awareness of the depth of the many layers within each of us is the first lesson I would like you and me to treasure today.

I now turn my attention to the family sets of matryoshkas, realizing that I am part of a larger family. I am not the first and I am not the last. Moreover, I look at my congregation as a big family. Others paved the road for me and I must pave the road for others. I look at my people, I look at the 4,000 year old history of the Jewish family and I am proud to find my place within it, to toil for its continuity. Others came before me, others will hopefully follow. *"As my ancestors planted for me, so do I plant for my children"* (Ta'anit 23a).

I open a doll and I find myself, distinctive, nested within others, occupying a unique space within my family, within my congregation, within my people; not more important than others, not less important.

Seeing all the pieces displayed in front of me is an exhilarating experience and I am ready to cherish a second lesson: I belong! I am part of a family, of a congregation, of a people, and I have a unique place there.

I now pick up the *Mets* matryoshka which I got for Ilan. I open it and I find different players, all of them belonging to the same team, all of them dressed in the same colors, and yet, each of them is different. Each player had days of glory, each player had days he wished to forget. I realize that I am myself a member of a team. As a matter of fact, I am a player in different teams. I belong to the Hillcrest Jewish Center team, I am a member of a team of rabbis in the community, and I belong to a small team of two called the "let's help mom and dad" team. Like any other member of a larger team, I also enjoyed moments of glory and moments of despair. I am unique within my team and yet just one more player. Unfolding nesting dolls is a humbling experience and teaches me a third lesson: I am not a loner, I am always part of a team, and as such, I need to help others and even more important, I need to learn how to ask for and accept help.

Finally, I hold in my hand the more complex set, the one that depicts a whole story. Each doll is a different character, without one of them, the story is incomplete. These characters are not identical, and for the most part they are not members of the same family. Very seldom do they play on the same team, and many times

they are antagonistic to each other, to say it kindly. Yet, we need all of them in our story.

And the same rings true with us: each of us plays a character in a story, or in more than one story. Each of us has a role in a bigger play: sometimes we play the bad guy and occasionally we save the day. Sometimes we inherit a role or someone else puts us in a particular place; other times we are the ones who create the role, who direct the play.

Looking at the different characters of a matryoshka story teaches us a fourth important lesson: each of us plays a role in the story of our lives and in the lives of those around us. Many times we are bound by the role someone else or we ourselves imposed on us; we are bound by the limitations of our body, by our genes, by our history, by our own fears. However, unlike with the wooden characters of the matryoshkas, we can change, we can transcend our roles and become a different character in the play of our lives and in the lives of those around us.

The High Holy Days is a time of introspection and self-examination. Not unlike the matryoshkas, we too are made of different layers, we belong to a family, we are members of a team, and we have a part in a larger story, in a larger play. Only when we open ourselves we can start assimilating the lessons that will transform our lives into more significant and meaningful ones.

As we embark together in these High Holy Days, let's open ourselves to the possibility of change. As we allow for time to reflect on the role we play in our lives and in the lives of those around us, let's believe that change is a real option, for all of us.

May Hashem give us the courage to face ourselves the way we are, and to become who we ought to be. May the sound of the shofar open our hearts and move us to change what needs to be changed in our lives and in the world. May we enter these holidays with enthusiasm, with faith, and with hope, and may Hashem bless all of us and our families with a good, healthy, and sweet year.

Amen