

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

5770

I do like stories and I also like divrei Torah. Although I don't think they should always go together, a good story can help you carry your point across in a more graphic way. Stories, like fables, by means of exaggerating defects and vices, bypass the defense mechanisms we all have inside and assist us in the difficult task we all have to improve the way in which we relate to our families, to our community, and to God.

The story I am about to share with you is a well known one, but since it won the second prize to the best Jewish joke ever (I am not sure about that but I thought you would be impressed), I wanted to share it with you. With a bit of luck, it will help me make my point.

A Jewish grandma and her grandson are at the beach. He's playing in the water, and she is standing on the shore not wanting to get her feet wet, when all of a sudden, a huge wave appears from nowhere and crashes directly onto the spot where the boy is wading. The water recedes and the boy is no longer there; he was swept away.

The grandma holds her hands up to the sky, screams, and cries: Lord, my GOD, please give me back my grandchild!

A voice booms from the sky, "All right already!"

A moment later another huge wave appears out of nowhere and crashes on the beach. As the water recedes, the boy is standing there. He is smiling and splashing around as if nothing had ever happened.

The voice booms again. "I have returned your grandson. Are you satisfied?" She responds, "The boy had a hat."

The virtue -or the vice- behind our story is the well-known one of "chutzpah."

Chutzpah is usually defined as the quality of audacity, for good or for bad. The word comes from the Hebrew, meaning "insolence," "audacity," and "impertinence." In Hebrew, chutzpah is used negatively to describe someone who has over-stepped the

*boundaries of accepted behavior with no shame. But in Yiddish and English, chutzpah has developed ambivalent and even positive connotations.*¹

What makes us laugh about our joke is the sudden change of emotions of the Jewish grandmother of our story, the contrast between *"Lord, my God, please give me back my grandchild!"* and *"The boy had a hat!"*

The truth is that although our story borders the grotesque, which actually is what makes it funny, we all carry within ourselves the Jewish grandmother of our story, and we all go through life with our list²:

"Lord, my God, give me back my grandchild, and the hat, and nice weather and a parking spot close to the beach so I won't have to walk too much!"

While I don't like to admit it, I too go through life with my list. Although I usually say "thank you," and I try not to take my blessings for granted, many times, echoing the hero of our story, I *hold my hands up to the sky and say, "Thank you, God, for your blessings! Let them keep coming! I am ready for more!"*

Even collectively, as a community, we go through life with a huge list. What is the weekday Amidah if not a long list of requests? And even during the High Holy Days, where the middle thirteen blessings are absent, the long list of the Avinu Malkeinu takes their place:

Avinu Malkeynu, grant us a good new year.

Avinu Malkeynu, send complete healing for our afflicted.

Avinu Malkeynu, frustrate the designs of our adversaries.

Avinu Malkeynu, remember us favorably.

Avinu Malkeynu, inscribe us in the book of goodness.

Avinu Malkeynu, inscribe us in the book of redemption.

Avinu Malkeynu, inscribe us in the book of sustenance.

Avinu Malkeynu, inscribe us in the book of merit.

Avinu Malkeynu, inscribe us in the book of forgiveness.

Avinu Malkeynu, hasten our deliverance.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chutzpah>

² Rabbi Moshe Birmbaum, from Kew Garden Hills Jewish Center, shared with me the "wish list" idea

Avinu Malkeynu, accept our prayer with mercy and favor.

Avinu Malkeynu, have pity on us and on our children.

And the list goes on...

Many times we are so busy with our own list that we don't have too much time to think about other people's lists. What is my wife's list? What is my parents' list? Do my children have a list as well? I am sure they do. Am I aware of my loved ones' lists?

And what about God? Does He have a list too? What is it written in God's list?

You will be surprised to know that, actually, God has a list as well. Not the original list of 613 troublesome commandments, but a narrower list, a more affordable one.

Our Sages of blessed memory explain (Makkot 24b) that God, through His Prophets, kept reducing His minimum expectations as the history of humanity progressed.

King David reduced the number to 11 (Psalm 15), Isaiah condensed the number to six (Is. 33:15-17) and Micah compressed the number to three: *"It has been told you O mortal, what is good, and what Adonai requires of you-- only this: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."* (Micah 6:8).

In Prophet Micah's words, God, in probably one of the most famous and quoted verses from the entire Bible, gives us His final short list:

"...only this Adonai requires of you: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

Now, because I don't want to run the risk of making the Prophet's words too spiritual or touchy-feely, let me translate this famous verse into practical terms:

"Do justice" – Do what is right! Even when it is not convenient to you! And don't get too philosophical because we all know what injustice is when we see it! Do what is right at home, at work, in the street, in your community!

“Love mercy” – Doing justice, doing merely what is right, as important as it is, is not enough! Our world, by definition is unjust and in order to balance it, abiding by the letter of the law, although praiseworthy, is not sufficient. Feeding the poor, visiting the sick, comforting the lonely and down-trodden, are just a few examples of ways for you to do a little more than your fair share.

Now justice you *do*. Mercy you need to *love*. Justice you *do* because you have to, because it is the letter of the law. Mercy you must *love* because, I am afraid, you don’t have to *do*, because it is *more* than what the letter of the law requires. Therefore you must teach yourself to love mercy, to go out of your way, to do more than what is expected of you!

Finally, “*walk humbly with your God*” – There is room for only one God in this world and God wants you to walk with Him, not on top of Him. Humility is not just a nice character trait. It is a religious imperative! Humility is so important that God put it among His “big three.”

When you review God’s list, it doesn’t sound too bad. Do what is right, what it is expected of you, and have mercy, do a little more than what it is expected of you, and live a humble life, a life in which chutzpah is not a virtue anymore.

Rabban Gamaliel, the son of Rabbi Judah the Prince, used to say: Do His will as if it was your will that He may do your will as if it was His will.³

We are bringing our wish list to God, individually and as a community. We ask for the child and for the hat. Are we ready to work on God’s wish list? Are we willing to give in one inch, so God will give in two, or three, or ten inches? We ask for God’s gifts. What will our gifts be this coming year? We ask for God’s blessings. Are we ready to share our blessings?

Yom Kippur is a 24 hour journey; a journey that has the potential to change us radically, to make us better human beings, to bring the best out of us. It is not an easy journey but if we keep coming year after year it is because we didn’t give up on ourselves.

³ Mishna Avot 2:4

May this year be one in which we work a little less on our list and a little more on God's list, may this year be one of justice, kindness and humility, and may it bring blessings to all of us and our loved ones.

L'shanah tovah tichatemu! May all of us be sealed for a good, healthy, and meaningful sweet year!