

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei¹

5774

When rabbis get together during the days leading up to the High Holy Days their subject of conversation can be summed up by the following question: How are you coming along with your sermons?

When asked, I tell my colleagues that the only way I am going to finish writing my sermons is if I start writing them, and so far it doesn't look so good...

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Hi Rabbi, you have someone on line 46 who is looking for a place to have a Rosh Hashanah dinner.

Hi. No, we don't have a congregational Rosh Hashanah dinner. Yes, we have a Passover Seder. No, no Rosh Hashanah dinner. Yes, it is an excellent idea. No, I cannot put it together for his year. Yes, maybe next year. Yes, I know of someone who will be happy to host you.

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Hi, Mrs. Goldstein. Happy new year to you, too. I see you in shul. Services will be over around 1:15 PM. You have 12 people for lunch. I should try your gefilte fish. Made from scratch? Please, save me a slice. Your son isn't coming? He doesn't talk to you. Yes, it is very sad. Maybe I can give him a call after the holidays... Yes, I will give your best to Silvia and the kids. Give my best to Mr. Goldstein....

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¹ Inspired by, and based on, Rabbi Margie Klein's Kol Nidre sermon of 2011: "Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World"

Hi. Mommy. Yes, Mommy. No, Mommy. Yes, I am trying to work on my sermons. No, Mommy, they are not ready. Yes, it will take me a while to translate them into Spanish, Mommy. No, I won't be able to translate them if I don't write them first. No, Mommy, you are not bothering me. Yes, I have time for you, Mommy. Don't worry. I love you, too, Mommy.

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Loosely paraphrasing a very well-known Murphy's Law, everybody seems to need the rabbi precisely during the days preceding the High Holy Days.

Actually, the frenzy surrounding a rabbi's life around the High Holy Days, made me think, however, about the rabbi's place, not only during the days preceding the High Holy Days, but also throughout the year.

Where should the rabbi be found?

Let me try to address the question with the following story....

And the Rebbe of Nemirov, every Friday morning early at Sliches-time, disappeared, melted into thin air! He was not to be found anywhere, either in the synagogue or in the two houses-of-study, or worshipping in some Minyan, and most certainly not at home. His door stood open, people went in and out as they pleased--no one ever stole anything from the Rebbe--but there was not a soul in the house.

*Where can the Rebbe be?*²

This is how the story *If Not Higher*, written by Yitskhok Leybush Peretz begins.

Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (May 18, 1852 – 3 April 1915) was a [Yiddish language](#) author and playwright, considered to be, together with [Mendele Mokher Seforim](#) and [Sholem Aleichem](#), one of the three great classical Yiddish writers.

I am not going to read to you the entire story (I did it once in my first congregation and lost 148 families), but to summarize it for you, everyone in the village seems to wonder where the *Rebbe* is during *Sliches-time*, but while the Jews of the village

² If Not Higher; from "Stories and Pictures"--Translated from the Yiddish by Helena Frank

are content to assume their *Rebbe* is in heaven, a Litvak, a skeptical Lithuanian Jew, doesn't believe it and decides to spy on the *Rebbe*.

The Litvak secretly entered the *Rebbe's* home and hiding under the bed, he remained awake throughout the whole night. At dawn, next morning, the *Rebbe* woke up, disguised himself as a simple peasant, took the axe and a bundle of rope and got out of the house, followed quietly by the Litvak.

The *Rebbe*, passing by the village, checked every house and headed towards the forest, cut firewood, and returned back to the village. He stopped in front of an old hut where a lonely old woman was living.

"Who is there?" cries a frightened voice within. The Lithuanian knows it to be the voice of a Jewess, a sick Jewess.

"I," answers the Rebbe in the peasant tongue.

"Who is I?" inquires the voice further. And the Rebbe answers again in the Little-Russian speech:

"Vassil."

"Which Vassil? And what do you want, Vassil?"

"I have wood to sell," says the sham peasant, "very cheap, for next to nothing."

And without further ado he goes in. The Lithuanian steals in behind him, and sees, in the gray light of dawn, a poor room with poor, broken furniture.

In the bed lies a sick Jewess huddled up in rags, who says bitterly:

"Wood to sell--and where am I, a poor widow, to get the money from to buy it?"

"I will give you a six-groschen worth on credit."

"And how am I ever to repay you?" groans the poor woman.

"Foolish creature!" the Rebbe upbraids her. "See here: you are a poor sick Jewess, and I am willing to trust you with the little bundle of wood; I believe that in time you will repay me. And you, you have such a great and mighty God, and you do not trust Him! Not even to the amount of a miserable six-groschen for a little bundle of wood!"

"And who is to light the stove?" groans the widow. "Do I look like I could get up to do it? And my son is away at work!"

"I will also light the stove for you," said the Rebbe.

Then, the Rebbe sat down by the fireplace, and as he lit the first log, he groaned the first portion of the penitential prayers. As he kindled the rest of the fire, he groaned the second portion of the penitential prayers. And as he finished stoking the fire, he cried out the third portion.

Then he shut the stove and left.

The Lithuanian who saw all this remained with the Rebbe, as one of his followers.

And later, when anyone told how the Rebbe early every morning at Sliches-time raised himself and flew up into heaven, the Lithuanian, instead of laughing, added quietly:

"If not higher."³

End of a good story.

But good stories, like Torah stories, can always use a good interpretation, and I would like to suggest the one from Rabbi Margie Klein, from Congregation Sha'arei Shalom in Ashland, Massachusetts.

Rabbi Klein suggests that our story helps us *"understand that the rabbi's holiest act is not prayer, but prayer combined with action in the world. Yes, in the penitential prayers, the Rebbe prays for the lives of the Jews to get better, but instead of just waiting for something to happen, the Rebbe goes and does something himself to better the life of just ONE poor Jew.*

³ If Not Higher; from *"Stories and Pictures"*--Translated from the Yiddish by Helena Frank.

In the story, the Litvak comes to understand that the rabbi's acts of loving-kindness to one poor Jew are spiritually even higher than if he had literally jumped up to heaven through his prayers.

So, as we reflect together on Yom Kippur on this story and on our lives, I ask myself: "What is the relationship between prayer and action?"⁴ How can I become a prayer?

"And what lessons can we draw from our tradition so that we can be inspired by this day of fasting to reengage in the world in a way that is both grounded in this-worldly action and holy?"⁵

Again, Rabbi Margie Klein suggests that "we can find our tradition's answer to this question in the Yom Kippur Haftarah that we will read tomorrow. Just listen, and take in God's words, as recorded by the prophet Isaiah:"⁶

"Is this the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies?

No! This is the fast I desire...to let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and do not ignore your own kin." (Isaiah 58:5-8)

"I believe the rabbis had some chutzpah to assign this reading on a fast day, a passage that says that fasting is not enough! The passage teaches that our work today is not done until we have learned to see the world, as it were, through the eyes of God, until we see injustice and suffering as an affront.

Our work won't be done until everyone in this community feels welcome and at home; until we put human suffering at the center of our concerns."⁷

So maybe, after all, God doesn't need me to write another sermon, or to teach an extra class, but instead to find quality time for my mother and my father (and my wife and children). God may actually delight in my distraction, when I listen to Mrs. Goldstein, and even more when I try to do something to bring her closer to her son. Maybe God wants me to stop writing for hours and try to organize a Rosh Hashanah dinner so the lonely among us don't spend the holiday alone.

⁴ From: Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World. By Rabbi Margie Klein.

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

By now you should know that when I speak, I always speak to myself, I always speak about myself. However, this dvar Torah is not about me, but about each of us. Where should all of us be found before and after these High Holy Days? We don't have to be the Rebbe of Nemirov. We don't need an axe, or rope, or a forest nearby to do God's work. Just look around and you will find plenty of opportunities, and if you don't, come and talk to me and I will help you make a difference.

Now, this may feel overwhelming to you. The suffering out there is too great, the problems are too big.

However, all we need, all I am asking of myself and of you, is a beginning, one step, one call, one visit, even just giving it a try.

Paraphrasing the Mishna (Avot 2:21), *"It isn't up to us to finish the work of fixing the world, but we are not free to quit trying."*

"And so, this year, when you leave this service and these holidays behind, go, get sidetracked, and do something in the world!"

And when you do it, think of the Litvak watching you from behind a corner, whispering:

*Your prayer was good, but this, this is even higher.*⁸

Avinu Malkeinu, beloved father, compassionate King:

Bless all of us and our loved ones with a year of action, with a year of doing, and may our action and our doing bring us a little higher, a little closer to You. May our prayers and our Torah study inspire us to do Your work in this world, to become the change we want to see.

In this sacred hour we ask You, our Father, our King, to inscribe and seal us for a year of life, health, sustenance, meaning and peace. For a good and sweet year. Amen.

⁸ ibid