

CRUNCH TIME

West End Synagogue, Erev Rosh Hashanah 5774/2013

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You may remember Chayim Yankel and Sora Rivkah and their children, Shira, Shimon, and Shmendrick -- the ones who are always having problems when the new Jewish Year rolls around.

One year their daughter Shira woke up and discovered she could only walk in a straight line – she couldn't turn. The family took her to the wise rabbi of Pinsk – or maybe it was Minsk – and he solved the problem by having Shira and the whole town stand in the town square and put their whole self in and take their whole self out.

The next year, it was Shimon, who woke up on erev Rosh Hashanah and kept tipping one way and then another – he couldn't find his balance. That time Reb Shmuel Lev taught Shimon and the whole town that when they focused their attention by looking at the lights of the *ner tamid*, they could keep their balance.

This year, Chayim Yankel and Sora Rivkah woke early every day of the year to pray: “Dear God, this year, may we be free from calamity and from trouble! Let us celebrate the New Year with no problems! Keep our children well!” And it seemed to work. The day before Rosh Hashanah, everyone woke up and felt great. Everyone could turn, no one lost their balance. Everyone and everything seemed as set to begin the New Year.

Now this year, Rosh Hashanah came very early – right after the long Socialist Bund weekend. Everyone knew that the apples in the orchards would never be ready to eat for the holiday. It was too early to pick apples. So ever since last fall, the wise people of Pinsk or Minsk had cleverly stored many apples in their root cellars, so they'd be ready for the New Year.

That morning, Sora Rivka and Chayim Yankel family sent Shimon, Shmendrick and Shira out to the root cellar to get the apples they had saved. But when the children looked, to his horror, they found that the apples were so mushy, no one would want to eat them. Honey? Yes, there was honey – the bees and the beekeepers had made sure of that. But there was not an apple fit to be eaten, neither Macintosh nor Delicious nor Bubbie Smith apples. Over the past year, all the apples had turned to mush. They were, indeed, yucky -- each and every one.

The family ran door to door to their neighbors, to the whole town, until everyone realized *everyone's* apples were mushy. They could find only beets and potatoes and, as everyone knows, it would never do to dip a beet or a potato in honey. It says in the Good Book itself: to begin a new year, you must dip an apple in honey and

eat it. As the Rabbi Schlemiel ben Shlemazel teaches in the Talmud, “Do not dip a mushy apple in honey. It is an abomination, and way too yucky.”

The town was in a panic. “Yucky, mushy apples!” the children cried. “This will be a terrible, horrible, no good year!”

Nu? What to do? Chayim Yankel and Sora Rivkah and their children and the whole town walked as fast as they could to the town of Pinsk – or maybe it was Minsk – to the house of study of the wise rebbe, Reb Shmuel Lev. Perhaps he could, once again, save the day.

They came to Reb Shmuel, who was sitting drinking tea calmly in his study. He looked up and smiled with a twinkle in his eye as he saw them come in. “Ah! I’ve been expecting you!” he said.

“Rebbe,” cried the whole town, “we have no apples for the New Year! Rosh Hashanah is so early, we knew the new apples on the trees would not be ready for picking! And the apples we saved in our root cellars for Rosh Hashanah are so mushy, no one will want them. And if we don’t have apples and honey, this will surely be a terrible year!” And all the children were crying, tears rolling down their cheeks. “Yucky apples! Yucky apples!”

“Mein kinder, my children, my friends, don’t worry!” said Reb Shmuel Lev. “Do you really think God let us begin a new year without apples? *Has v’shalom* – God forbid! Tonight, let us will begin the New Year with services outside, in the apple orchard itself!”

With that, the rebbe led everyone out to the apple orchard. The trees were full of fruit. There was a beautiful sunset. The first new sliver of moon, signaling the start of the new month of Tishri, was rising. The stars were emerging. The air was clean and fresh after the rain and storms of the past few days.

“Now everyone, I want you to think about how you did this past year. How many good things did you do for others, or for yourself? How many times did you wish you had tried harder to be nice, to be more generous, to be better at sharing, to say the right thing?” Everyone took a few minutes and thought hard about how they had acted over the past year. Everyone thought of some things they were proud of, and some things they were very sorry for.

“Now,” said Reb Shmuel Lev. “Take another minute and say to yourself: ‘I wish I had done better this year. I am sorry for anything I did that hurt another person. This year, may I be the best me as I can possibly be. I will try harder to do the right thing. I will do *teshuvah*. I will turn myself around.’” And everyone did as the rebbe said.

Everyone went over to someone they had hurt and said they were sorry and they would try to do better this year.

“Now,” said Reb Shmuel Lev, “look around.” And to everyone’s shock, all the apples on the trees of the orchard, the very same apples which until that moment had looked too green and too small to eat -- suddenly every single apple had turned a beautiful, bright red, shiny, full, perfect for picking and eating. Everyone was amazed. It was, indeed, a Rosh Hashanah miracle.

“My friends,” said Reb Shmuel Lev, “everyone knows it’s impossible to keep apples crisp all year. They just keep getting mushier and mushier until we can’t even call them apples anymore. But even apples can turn. And when Rosh Hashanah comes, it’s crunch time! Tonight, we remember that we all have a chance to start over again, to have a fresh start. And suddenly the apples are hard and crisp, and when you take a bite, there’s a crunch.”

“These apples are a lot like we are tonight: crispy and crunchy. When we start a new year, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we try hard to be the best person we can be. But when the fall holidays are over, it's tough to keep that going. We slip back into bad habits. Our best intentions, our clear ideas about who and how we want to be, begin to get a little bit softer. We start making mistakes. Just like the apples, we begin to turn a little mushy.

“God knows we’re human beings,” said the rebbe. “None of us is perfect. We all make mistakes. We already know that we'll probably do some things this year that we'll be apologizing for when Rosh Hashanah comes around a year from now. We’re all going to get a little mushy this year. But tonight, let’s try to keep our promises to God as long as possible – let’s be as crisp and crunchy as we can, for as long as we can.

“Now -- everyone, pick an apple, and take some honey. Let’s lift up our fresh apples, and our fresh promises, and let's pray together that we can take the crispness, the firmness of our resolve and carry it into the New Year as best as we possibly can. When I say count to three, we will say the *b'rachah*, the blessing for eating apples: *borei pri ha'etz*, and I will say the prayer for a sweet year: *y'ehi ratzon, Adonai eloheinu v'eilohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, she-t'chadeish aleinu shanah u'metukah* -- may it be your will, God, to renew us for a good and sweet year. Shanah tovah!”