

FEELING IT ALL

West End Synagogue, Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776

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By now, I'm sure you remember Chayim Yankel and Sora Rivkah and their children, Shira, Shimon, and Shmendrick -- the ones who are always having problems when the Jewish New 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 Reb Shmuel Lev, 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.

The next year, all the kids were fine -- but Rosh Hashanah had come early and the apples on the trees were not ready to be picked and eaten. So the people had carefully saved apples for Rosh Hashanah. But when they took them out, all the stored apples had turned mushy and yucky.

Reb Shmuel Lev told them to think about the mistakes they had made, and to apologize to anyone they had hurt. He told them to promise to try to do better in the New Year. And as soon as the people did so, the apples suddenly turned crunchy and ready to eat.

Last year, the problem was that everyone's new clothes were too stained to wear for the holidays. Rabbi Shmuel Lev told them to reach deep into their pockets and find the schmutz there -- the little pieces of tissue and lint that remind us of our secrets and the things we've done for which we're sorry. He told everyone to pray and ask God to help them be the best person they can be. And lo and behold, the stains vanished and everyone's clothes were beautiful.

This year, everything seemed perfect. Rosh Hashanah was coming in the middle of September, and the new apples would be just right. Everyone made sure to empty the schmutz from their pockets, and the clothes were clean. Hopefully, all would finally be well for the holiday. Every single day of this past year, Chayim Yankel and Sora Rivkah woke early 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 us and our children well!"

But this morning, before Rosh Hashanah, once again, there was a big problem:

Chayim Yankel stubbed his toe on a box someone had left in the hallway. All he felt was anger.

Sora Rivka was thinking about her mother, who had died last Sukkot. She felt sad.

Shira remembered something mean she had said about her best friend. She felt guilty.

Shimon the Mets fan was thinking about his team's three straight comeback wins. He felt happy.

And little Schmendrick, the smallest child, thought he saw a ghost. He felt scared.

Suddenly, as they each had a single feeling, every member of the family simply could not move a muscle. They stood absolutely still in place. It was as if they were frozen. No one could move -- but they could still talk.

Chayim Yankel yelled, "I can't move! I'm so **angry!**"

Sora Rivka screamed, "I can't move either -- I feel so **sad!**"

Shira had frozen in place as she bent over to put on her yontif shoes. She called out, "I can't move either! I feel so **guilty!**"

Shimon was standing like a statue in front of the mirror, which he was looking into as he adjusted his tie. "I can't move at all! I feel so **happy!**" And Schmendrick was standing still where he'd gone to straighten up his toys. "Aba, Ima -- I can't move at all! I feel so **scared!**"

Of course, they immediately knew they needed to go see Reb Shmuel Lev. But how could they get to him? They couldn't even move a finger! Luckily, their screaming was so loud that their neighbors heard them, lifted them into a wagon, set the GPS for Pinsk, and off they went.

When they arrived, as usual Reb Shmuel was sitting in his study, calmly drinking a glass of steaming hot tea. He smiled with a twinkle in his eye as he saw them come in. "Ah," he said, "You again! I've been expecting you. Nu -- so what's the problem this year?"

The neighbors had unloaded the family from the wagon and set them up like statues in front of Reb Shmuel Lev. "Rebbe," they cried, can't you see? None of us can move at all! We are frozen in place! And each of us can only have one feeling!"

"I only feel **angry!**" said Chayim Yankel, steam coming out of his ears.

"I only feel **sad,**" said Sora Rivka, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I only feel **guilty,**" said Shira, his eyes looking down at the ground.

"I only feel **happy,**" said Shimon, his smile reaching ear to ear.

"And I only feel **scared,**" piped up Schmendrik, who had closed his eyes tight so he wouldn't see anything.

"Ah, I see," said the rebbe. "Hm. This is a very new and difficult problem. I will need to pray about it." So Reb Shmuel Lev sat quietly and closed his eyes for a long time. For the family, it felt like forever. And after a while, he began to hum a niggun. He hummed and hummed and hummed some more.

"Ah hah!" said Reb Shmuel Lev suddenly. "I know what to do! Come with me, and bring the whole town with you!"

"But we can't come with you -- we can't even move!" they all screamed.

“Ah, good point,” admitted the rebbe. “So -- we will bring the whole town here!” So all the residents of Pinsk or Minsk came and crowded into the rebbe’s cozy house. It was so packed, almost no one could move.

The rebbe hushed the crowd: “Now everyone,” he announced, “I want you to take a minute and pay attention to what you are feeling right now.”

The crowd fell silent. Everyone closed their eyes and tried to notice their feelings. After a minute, the rebbe asked:

“How many of you are feeling **angry**?” A number of hands went up, and some people even roared like lions. Some steam began to rise over their heads.

“And how many of you are feeling **sad**, like Sora Rivka?” the rabbi asked the crowd. About the same number of hands went up. Tears flowed.

“And how many of you feel **guilty**, like Shira?” Many hands went up, and there was a loud, collective, “Oy!”

“And what about Shimon -- how many of you feel **happy**?” Hands went up, and those people even smiled, laughed and cheered.

“And how many of you feel **afraid**, like Schmendrick?” And a few more hands went up, and those people covered their eyes and cowered in fear.

“Now,” said Reb Shmuel Lev, try to get a little bit closer.” And even though it was crowded, the people nudged a bit closer to the frozen family. And as all the different feelings in the town began to come together, every member of the family started feeling more than one feeling. Suddenly Sora Rivka, Chayim Yankel, Shira, Shimon and Schmendrick found that they were able to move their bodies again. They were cured!

“Thank, you, thank you,” they all cried together. “You did it again, Shmuel Lev -- but tell us, how did it work?”

“Ah,” said the wise rebbe. “It’s actually very simple. When we only feel one feeling, we really can’t move or do anything well. **We need to have all our feelings, sometimes all at the same time, even if we think the feelings don’t go together.**

“Each of our feelings is a gift from God,” the rebbe said. “Sometimes,” the rebbe said, “life is just unfair. Sometimes, people can be really selfish or mean to us or to others or to animals -- or even to the Earth. And that can make us **angry**. God give us anger so we will do something or speak up when we see injustice or unfairness in the world. Anger is a very important feeling, too.”

“Some things in life are just hard. We move, or we lose people we love, or things change. Sometimes, we trip and hurt ourselves or other people. When that happens, we need to be able to feel **sad**. Tears can wash away our pain and hurts, and help us start to feel better.”

“Sometimes we know we didn’t try our best, or were not as generous or nice or as honest as we could have been. Sometimes we lie. Sometimes we miss the mark. That’s why God gives us **guilt** -- so that we will try to do better the next time.”

“Some things in life are wonderful. We are in beautiful places, or with good friends and people we love. Sometimes, we are eating our favorite foods or watching a beautiful sunset or sunrise or a rainbow, or jumping over the waves -- and for those times, God helps us feel **happy**, so we can feel joy and pleasure in the good things of life.”

“Sometimes life is just scary. We are worried about new schools or teachers or that people won’t like us. We’re nervous that things won’t work out, or that we’ll lose our jobs or that we or other people will get lost or hurt. That’s why God gives us **fear** -- to help us protect ourselves and the people we love.”

“But to really live in this New Year,” the rebbe said, “we need to bring every one of our feelings, and know that they are **all** inside us. We need to be able to feel **joy** about the beautiful and wonderful parts of life. We need to be able to pay attention when we feel **guilty**, to see if there’s something we can do better, or if there’s something we need to apologize for. We need to notice when we feel **sad**, and even let ourselves cry, when we are hurt or in pain.

We need to be able to notice when we feel **afraid**, and be able to admit that to someone who feels safe. And when we see something that is wrong or mean or selfish, we need to let our **anger** remind us to stand up and speak up for ourselves and for others.

“It’s important to have a community that lets everyone have their feelings, just like we did today. It’s important to have a community that knows that there can be a lot of different feelings inside us, even ones that make us feel confused. We can feel **happy and sad** at the same time. We can feel **excited and scared** at the same time. We can feel **proud of ourselves and guilty** at the same time. And we can even feel three or four or five feelings, all at the same time.”

“God gave us feelings to help us be the best people we can be. We need every one of them. So as we go into this New Year, may we feel happy enough for the many blessings and good things in our lives and in our world. May we feel just sad enough about the things and people we have lost as we go through changes. May we feel just guilty enough about our mistakes to help us be more loving, kind, and generous every day.”

“When we feel afraid this year, may we share our fear with other people, so that fear doesn’t stop us from doing the right thing. And when we see something wrong in this world, may we be angry enough to speak out and to take a stand -- but not so angry that we hurt ourselves or other people.”

“*L’shanah tovah tikateivu* -- may we take all the holy feelings God gives us, and use them to write ourselves into the Book of Life for a year of health, a year of justice, a year of freedom, a year of happiness, and for us and the whole world, a year of shalom.”