

**SWEET!**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777/2016**  
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By now, I'm sure you remember Chayim Yankel and Sora Rivkah and their children, Shira, Shimon, and Shmendrick -- the family which is always having problems when the Jewish New Year rolls around.

One year their daughter Shira woke up to find 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. Then they could turn themselves about.

The next year, Shimon woke up 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 in the moment by looking only at the lights of the *ner tamid*, they could keep their balance.

The next year, all the kids were fine -- but Rosh Hashanah came early and the apples on the trees weren't ready to eat. So the people carefully saved apples all year long for Rosh Hashanah. But when they took them out on the eve of the New Year, all the saved 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. And as soon as they did that, the apples on the trees suddenly turned red and shiny, and ready to eat. They each took a fresh new apple, dipped it in honey, and -- CRUNCH! The New Year was off and running!

The next 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 -- the little pieces of tissue and lint that remind us of our secrets, the mistakes we made we feel badly about. He told everyone to pray to do better in the new year. And lo and behold, the stains vanished and everyone's clothes were beautiful.

And last year, remember what happened? Every member of the family woke up on erev Rosh Hashanah and could only feel one feeling at a time. But when Reb Shmuel Lev had the whole town shmush together, bringing all the feelings together, each of them began to feel all of their emotions. Reb Shmuel Lev taught them we need to have all our feelings at the same time, even if we think the feelings don't go together.

This year, everything seemed perfect. Rosh Hashanah was coming in October, and the new apples would be perfect. Everyone emptied the schmutz from their pockets, and their clothes were beautiful. Everyone stared on the light of the *ner tamid* and had excellent balance. They each remembered they could be sad and happy and angry and sad even at the same time.

Every single day of this past year, Chayim Yankel and Sora Rivkah woke early to pray: "Dear God, this year, may we celebrate the New Year with no problems! Keep us and our children well!"

And this morning, coming into Rosh Hashanah, everything seemed fine -- until the family looked in the cupboard to get their honey for dipping apples, and saw that their honey pot was empty. Quickly, they ran to the beekeepers of the village, who normally had pots and pots of honey from their bees.

But when Chayim Yankel, Sora Rivka and their kids got to the beehives, they couldn't believe their eyes: the whole village was there, because there was no honey in their cupboards either. And the beekeepers were sitting by their empty beehives, crying: "Oy vavoy! Our bees are gone! There will be no honey for the New Year!"

What?! No bees! No honey in the entire village! What would they dip their apples in? How could they have a sweet year? When everyone returned to their homes, they realized that everything they were eating, even the normally sweet foods, tasted bitter or sour. Even the lollipops the children were allowed to eat only on the holiday tasted yucky.

There was no sweetness at all in the entire village! Wailing and whining arose from each house: "The bees are gone! There's no honey! Everything's too bitter! Everything tastes too sour! Nothing tastes sweet! This is going to be the worst year ever!"

Of course, it did not take long to remember the only person who could save the day. So the whole town went off to Pinsk, or maybe Minsk -- they were never sure which -- to see the wise Reb Shmuel Lev. And they brought with them their empty honey pots and beehives.

As usual, Shmuel Lev 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! And this time it's the whole village coming to visit! Nu -- so what's the problem this year?"

Everyone spoke at once, crying and screaming. "Sh, sh," shushed Reb Shmuel Lev. "One person at a time, please."

Shira stepped forward. "You see, Reb Shmuel Lev, we have a BIG problem. All the honey in the town has disappeared, and the bees have vanished from the beehives. There is no honey to be found anywhere, and everything we eat tastes bitter or sour. Nothing is sweet! How can we have a sweet year if there is no honey?"

"Ah, I see," said the rebbe. "Hm. No bees, hm? No honey, hm? No sweetness, 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. "Go quickly and gather the whole town in the square!" So everyone assembled, just as you are here tonight, and the crowd fell silent in anticipation. What would the rebbe say? How could he solve this terrible problem?

“The answer to this problem comes from my teacher, the great Ba’al Shem Tov, the Besht, may there be peace upon him, he announced. “He taught us that it is easy to lose the sweetness of life when we think only about the badness in the world, instead of what is good in everything and every person. The problem today is that everyone is looking for what is bad, instead of looking for what is good.

“So everyone, do exactly as I say: first, close your eyes. Now: think of something good about someone else, something you like about them. Or think about something good about the kind of person you are, something you like about yourself. Or think about something sweet you have done this year, or something sweet you can do for someone else in the new year. Think sweet thoughts!”

And as everyone quietly thought of something good about themselves or someone else, or something sweet they could do for another person, suddenly everyone heard a loud buzzing sound.

They opened their eyes, and looked towards the empty beehives they had brought with them. But now, the hives were full of bees buzzing, and happily at work making honey! And the empty honey pots suddenly were overflowing with delicious, thick, sweet honey! Suddenly, the bitter taste in their mouths became sweet.

“Hurray!” cheered the people. “Maybe the New Year will be sweet after all! Reb Shmuel Lev has saved the year!”

“Ah,” smiled the rebbe, “not at all. I didn’t sweeten the year—you did! All you had to do was practice ‘sweetening,’ as the Ba’al Shem Tov taught. All you had to do was remember that when things taste sour and bitter, when we only think sour and bitter thoughts, it reminds us to look for what is good and sweet in ourselves, and each other, and in the world. And when we add sweetness in this world, that’s just what God put us here to do.

“It wasn’t only the Ba’al Shem Tov who taught this. One hundred years ago, a man named Julius Rosenwald made a lot of money from being the president of a big company, Sears Roebuck. Julius was famous for saying: “If you have a lemon, make lemonade!” He saw that the schools that African-American kids went to were very bad. So he gave millions and millions of his dollars to improve those schools and try to make those kids’ lives more fair. Julius Rosenwald knew how to make sour things more sweet.

“And think about that little girl named Alexandra Ross who lived near Philadelphia. When she was one year old, the doctors told her that she had a very bad cancer. But instead of just being sad and angry, when Alex was four years old she decided to start a lemonade stand to raise money for kids like her with cancer. Alex died when she was only eight years old. But Alex’s Lemonade Stand has raised over \$127 million to end cancer. Alex added a ton of sweetness to this world!

“I hear that even your Beyonce must be studying the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov! On her new album “Lemonade,” she sings “I had my ups and downs, but I always find the inner strength to pull myself up. I was served lemons, but I made lemonade.”

“You know, none of us knows what will happen in this New Year. No doubt, there will be both terrible things and good things. But when the bad things come and we feel sad, angry, bitter and sour, remember to look for the good, to sweeten what is sour. The Holy One created each and every one of us to taste the sweetness of creation -- and to make it even sweeter. It’s not just the bees who must work hard to bring honey into the world. *Aleinu* -- it’s up to us, too.

“*L’shanah tovah tikateivu* -- may we take all the sourness of the world today, and turn it into sweet blessings for the New Year. May we turn all forms of racism and bigotry into acts of love and justice. May we turn all acts of violence into moments of healing and peace. May our own sadness help us do a better job of caring for people who are suffering, and sweeten their lives. By turning what’s bitter into something sweet, may we 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.”