

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT
Rabbi Marc Margolius
West End Synagogue, Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771

Once, there was a Jew named Chayim Yankel, who lived in the town of Pinsk -- or maybe it was Minsk. Chayim Yankel lived a normal sort of life, earning a living selling herring in the market -- I forget if it was matjes or schmaltz. With his wife, Sora Rivka, he raised three children: Shira, Shimon, and Schmendrick. Chayim Yankel was a simple man and a pious Jew. But every year, just before Rosh Hashanah, the strangest things would happen to him. He prayed that this year, he would reach the holiday with no major misfortunes. And lo and behold, until the day before Rosh Hashanah, all was fine with Chayim Yankel.

But then it happened. The morning before Rosh Hashanah, Sora Rivkah woke up and, just as always, recited the Sh'ma, rubbed her eyes, and got out of bed. While she was walking to the sink to brush her teeth, she thought to herself, "Such a beautiful morning! Let me go to the window to greet the sun." But to her great surprise, Sora Rivkah could not turn. No matter how hard she tried, she could only put one foot right in front of the other. She reached the sink and could go farther. "Chayim!" she cried to her husband. "I can't turn!"

Chayim ran over to see. It was true. No matter what, Sora Rivkah could walk only in a straight line. Each time she hit the wall, Chayim Yankel had to lift and turn her to walk in a different direction. "What'll we do?" cried Sora Rivkah. "If I can't turn, what'll become of me?" In a panic, Chayim took Sora to doctor after doctor all morning. They checked her up and they checked her down, but the doctors were stumped. None of them could find anything physically wrong with Sora Rivka. They shook their heads, wished her well, and sent her home.

Suddenly, Sora and Chayim remembered last year, when Chayim had kept tipping over. And together, they exclaimed: Reb Shmuel Lev! He was a very wise rabbi who lived in the next town, the town of Pinsk -- or maybe it was Minsk. Chayim and Sora thought: what does it hurt to try? Maybe Reb Shmuel can help us before the holiday arrives.

So they travelled to Pinsk or Minsk -- wherever -- and came to the bet midrash of Reb Shmuel Lev. He was, indeed, a wise rabbi, with a long beard, glasses, and a twinkle in his eye. Reb Shmuel listened carefully and stroked his beard and drank some tea, as Chayim Yankel and Sora described the problem. Sora walked for the rabbi, and bumped right into the wall in front of her. "Nu," said Reb Shmuel. "You cannot turn? You only go forward in a straight line? Most unusual, most unusual...." Then he closed his eyes and hummed a niggun as he thought and thought it over. He thought for a very long time. To Sora and Chayim, it felt like an eternity.

"Aha!" Reb Shmuel exclaimed. "I have an idea. You must stand up, Sora, and do exactly as I say. Chayim Yankel, you can do it too. In fact," said said the rebbe, "everyone here can do it as well. Everyone, stand up, and follow what I say and do."

"Now," said Reb Shmuel, "put your left hand in. Now take your left hand out. Put your left hand in. And shake it all about. Do the hokey-pokey and turn yourself around. That's what it's all about. Now, put your right hand in. Take your right hand out. Put

your right hand in. And shake it all about. Do the hokey-pokey and turn yourself around. That's what it's all about. Put your left leg in. Take your left leg out. Put your left leg in and shake it all about. Do the hokey-pokey and turn yourself around. That's what it's all about."

The rabbi went on like this, with the right leg, and head and fingers and feet. Each time, Sora Rivka put her hand or her feet in and shook them all about, but she could not turn herself about. Finally, Reb Shmuel said, "Now, Sora Rivka, listen very carefully – this time, put your whole self in. Take your whole self out. Put your whole self in and shake it all about. Do the hokey-pokey and turn yourself about. That's what it's all about. And then, please, sit down."

Lo and behold, Sora Rivka had turned completely around, a perfect circle. "I'm cured, I'm cured!" she cried, hugging Chayim Yankel for joy. "Oh, thank you, thank you, rebbe. But can you tell me -- how did it work?"

"Ah," said Reb Shmuel, with a twinkle in his eye. "The secret is quite simple. As long as you were only using part of yourself, you could not turn. But once you remembered to put your whole self into it, and to take your whole self out of it, then you could turn and be healed."

Some of us here tonight may feel a little like Sora Rivka. It may feel hard to turn ourselves around. Some of us may feel as though we've made more mistakes than we should have. Some of us may feel that we spent too much time at work and not enough with our families. Some of us may feel that we spent too much time watching TV and not enough time reading a book. Some of us may feel like we spent too much time indoors and not enough time out in nature. Some of us may feel as though we spent too much energy getting angry and not enough energy learning how to forgive. Some of us may feel as though we bought too much food for ourselves, and not enough for people who are hungry.

But tonight, on Rosh Hashanah, if we really try, we can actually feel inside us, God helping us ourselves around. When we're too hard on ourselves, God tells us to lighten up. When we're too easy on ourselves, God reminds us we can do better. When we feel lonely or afraid, we think of a friend to call or visit. When we act too selfishly, God brings us someone who needs our help. All we have to do is put our whole selves into everything we do and, at the same time, remember that nothing is just about us or just for us. We are each an important and holy part of God's creation -- but we are also just a part. And that's what it's all about.

So tonight and tomorrow and all year long, let's remember Sora Rivka and Reb Shmuel. Let's remember to use our whole selves, to be generous in what we give, in what we do, and in what we say. Let's remember to use the special gifts God has given each of us. And let's remember to take our whole selves out, too. Let's remember that even though the world depends upon us, it's not just about us. In this new year, may we learn, with God's help, to find our balance. May it be a happy, healthy, peaceful year for us, for our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world, and for all who dwell on earth.