

## BALANCING ACT

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Erev Rosh Hashanah, West End Synagogue 5772/2011

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. One day, though, a few days before Rosh Hashanah, the strangest thing happened to him. He woke up, just as always, recited the Sh'ma, rubbed his eyes, and got out of bed to brush his teeth. But when he started walking to the sink, he tipped over to the right and fell to the floor. He picked himself up and started walking again, but this time he tipped over to the left and fell again. "Sora!" he cried. "I can't walk! I keep losing my balance!"

Sora was distraught. No matter what, Chayim Yankel kept losing his balance and falling. He simply could not walk straight. In a panic, Sora took Chayim to doctor after doctor. They checked him up and they checked him down, but the doctors were stumped. None of them could find anything physically wrong with Chayim Yankel. They shook their heads, wished him well, and sent him home.

Finally, Sora remembered a very wise rebbe, Reb Shmuel Lev who lived in the next town, the town of Pinsk -- or maybe it was Minsk. Last year, he had helped them remember how to turn around by putting their whole selves in and taking their whole selves out. Chayim and Sora thought: what does it hurt to try? Maybe Reb Shmuel can help us again this year.

So they travelled to Pinsk or Minsk -- wherever -- and came at last 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.

Then Reb Shmuel turned to Chayim: "Let me ask you," he said. "When you start to tip over, what are you thinking about?"

"Oh, rebbe," said Chayim. "I am embarrassed to say. Sometimes I think I am just nothing at all -- like what difference do I make in this world? I feel so small and insignificant. And when I think like that, I tip over to my right. Then, other times, I think I'm so important -- the most important person there is, like only what I think and what I want is what matters. When that happens, I tip over to the left. Either I think I'm nothing at all and nothing I do matters, or I think I'm the the only one who matters. Woe is me, rebbe!" And Chayim Yankel burst into tears.

"Out of balance, hmm?" said Reb Shmuel. He closed his eyes and hummed a niggun as he thought and thought it over. Finally, Reb Shmuel exclaimed: "Ah! I have an idea!"

Reb Shmuel took two tiny pieces of paper, and wrote something on each of them. "Here," he said to Chayim Yankel. "Put one of these pieces of paper in each of your pockets." And Chayim took the two small scraps of paper. He put one in his left pocket and one in the right, as the rebbe had instructed.

"OK," said Reb Shmuel Lev. "Now try walking." And lo and behold, as Chayim Yankel took a few steps, he neither tipped to the left nor to the right. True, he swayed a little bit, but he was able to find his balance without much trouble. "It's a miracle!" cried Chayim. "You cured me, Reb Shmuel!" But Reb Shmuel shook his head and smiled. "No, Chayim Yankel. God helped you find your balance. Now take a look at the pieces of paper I gave you."

Chayim took the papers from his pockets. On one, the rebbe had written. "*Bishvili nivra ha-olam* – for my sake the world was created." On the other, the rebbe had written, "*Va'anochi afar v'eifer* – I am dust and ashes."

"Your problem," said Reb Shmuel Lev, "is that you've just been thinking of one of these teachings at a time. Sometimes you think the whole world has been created just for you, and so you act too selfishly, you are too full of yourself. Other times you think that you are nothing at all, that nothing you do really matters, and you are too filled with shame and powerlessness. The trick is to balance these lessons – you really are both, at the same time. You need to keep both of them in your pockets, every day."

Especially over the next ten days, from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, our job is to remember to keep both pieces of paper in our pockets, one in the left and one in the right.

"I am only dust and ashes," says the piece of paper in one pocket. When we hold that piece of paper, we remember that each one of us is only a small part of something much bigger than ourselves. Each of us is only one tiny fraction of our families, of our classes, of our people, of our country, of our world. Our lives are really just a tiny, infinitesimal aspect of human history. We are very small.

This paper stands for the *middah* of *anavah*, or humility. It helps me remember I am not the only person in the world. What I believe or want is not the only thing that matters.

Sometimes we remember this when we are looking at the hugeness of the ocean, or stand on top of a mountain, or when we look out the window when we are up above the clouds in an airplane. Sometimes we can remember this when we stop ourselves from bragging or showing off. Sometimes we remember it when we let someone get on line or get on the bus or go through the subway turnstile ahead of us, or when we decide to listen to what someone else is saying instead of just thinking about what we want to say. Sometimes we remember to give others credit for our accomplishments, instead of thinking or claiming we did it all by our self. Sometimes we remember this when we do what others -- our parents or family or friends or community or country -- asks us to do, even if it's not what we feel like doing at the moment.

At the same time, we have to hold on to the piece of paper in our other pocket, the one that says, "For my sake the world was created." This paper reminds us to give ourselves *kavod*, to honor ourselves and remember that we do matter – in fact, each one of us matters a lot. Every one of us is priceless. Each one of us can change the world even by being kind to another person, or by one small action that makes the world more fair or just. Each one of us has the power to help someone who feels left out, or to write a note that can bring comfort and healing, or to join a protest that will fix an injustice. We can give ourselves credit and pat ourselves on the back when we do something brave, or accomplish something difficult.

"The world was created for my sake" reminds us that what we have to say or share in our class or in our family or in our community is just as smart and important as what anyone else has to share. It doesn't have to be perfect, and neither do we. Each of us has our own special job for which we were put here on earth. It's up to us to speak the words we are meant to say, and to do the things only we were put here to do.

None of us has perfect balance. We are a lot like Chayim Yankel, tipping too much one way or the other. Sometimes, we fall. Sometimes we are selfish and self-centered. Other times we think we don't matter, and that everyone else is better or more important than us.

But there's something inside us which helps us catch ourselves before we fall, something that helps us balance ourselves. I believe that "something" is God working inside each of us. God is what helps us realize that we're tipping too much one way or the other; God is what helps us find our balance when we lower ourselves too much or when we raise ourselves too high.

Tonight, on Rosh Hashanah, if we really try, we may actually feel God inside each of us, bringing us back into balance. I may hear God reminding us that I'm not the only one who matters; that what I need and want is not always most important; that I am no better or more important than anyone else. And I may hear God reminding me that I matter a lot – that my words and actions can make all the difference, that the world needs me.

So over the next ten days, and all year long, let's remember Chayim Yankel and Reb Shmuel Lev. Let's remember to that each one of us is a unique and essential part of something larger than ourselves – part of our families, part of our community, part of this city and country, part of the Jewish people and its destiny, part of the world in which we live. 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.