

## SHMUTZ

West End Synagogue, Erev Rosh Hashanah 5775  
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By now, I imagine 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 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.

And last year, all the children were fine – but there had been a different kind of problem. Because Rosh Hashanah had come so early and the apples on the trees would not be ready to be picked and eaten, the people had carefully saved and stored apples to use for Rosh Hashanah. They were sure these apples would be crunchy and juicy. But when they took them out on the eve of the New Year, they were horrified to learn that all the stored apples had turned mushy and yucky.

They went to see the wise Reb Shmuel Lev, who told them to think about the mistakes they had made over the past year, and to go and apologize to anyone in the town they had hurt or offended. He told them to promise to try to do better in the New Year. And as soon as the people did as the rabbi said – as soon as they did *teshuvah* – the apples of 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!

But what about this year? Rosh Hashanah was coming in late September, and the apples would be perfect. Hopefully, all would finally be well for the holiday. Every 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 our children well!”

And the morning before Rosh Hashanah, everything seemed to be fine. The children were healthy and happy. Everyone could stand up and sit down and turn around and not tip over. With great joy everyone put on their beautiful new *yontif* clothes they had carefully cleaned for the holiday. They all wore their nicest holiday outfits. But when they each looked in the mirror to admire themselves, they each let out a scream:

“Ahhhh! My clothes are filthy!”

And so they were. Their beautiful dresses, shirts and pants were covered with stains – spots of spilled chocolate milk, ketchup, coffee, grape juice, wine, ice cream, birthday cake, balsamic vinegar glaze, chicken fat, raspberry coulis were all over their clothing.

“How can we go to shul? How can we celebrate Rosh Hashanah! We’re a mess! We look so dirty! Yuck!” they all cried together, slumping onto the floor. Shira was sobbing because her lovely white dress was ruined. Shimon wailed over his stained new white shirt. Shmendrick screamed about his soiled new tie. Even Chayim Yankel and Sora Rivkah were crying over their ruined outfits: “Oy! Oy! Oy! Vey iz mir! Vey iz mir!”

It took a few minutes before they remembered: Reb Shmuel Lev! Of course! Perhaps the wise Rabbi of Minsk – or Pinsk – could help them yet again. So they packed up the family wagon and, still wearing their dirty clothes, they set their GPS to Pinsk – or maybe Minsk – and headed as quickly as they could to see the wise rabbi.

When they arrived, as usual Reb Shmuel was sitting in his study, calmly drinking a glass of steaming hot tea. He looked up and smiled with a twinkle in his eye as he saw them come in. “Ah,” he said, “It’s you again. I’ve been expecting you. What’s the problem this year?”

“Rebbe,” they cried, can’t you see? We carefully picked out beautiful new clothes for the New Year, and washed them carefully so they would be clean and fresh for Rosh Hashanah. But as you can see, our clothes are covered with stains! We’re so embarrassed; we can’t even go to services tonight!”

“Ah, now I see -- stained clothing, dirty outfits.” said the rebbe. “This is a new problem. I will need to think 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!”

As it happened, the whole town had woken up with the same problem as our favorite family. Everyone’s new clothes were covered with stains. The cries of the town could be heard as far away – well, as far away as Minsk – or Pinsk!

So the rebbe brought the family and the whole town down to the Pinsk River, just past the new Trumpsky high rises. When everyone – young and old, was standing at the shore of the river, Reb Shmuel Lev said:

“Now everyone, I want you to reach into your pockets.” Immediately, everyone, from the oldest member of the community to the smallest, reached into their pockets – and if they had no pockets, they reached into their purses and pocketbooks.

“And *nu* -- what did you find?” asked Reb Shmuel Lev kindly. Some people raised their hands and reported they had found a set of keys. Some discovered to their embarrassment some rubles they’d forgotten to leave at home. Some found old tissues and cough drops and sticks of gum and old Metro cards and friendship bracelets they hadn’t finished making and old pieces of uneaten Goldfish crackers.

The rabbi asked: “*Nu?* Did any of you find nothing in your pockets? Is there anyone here whose pockets are clean and empty?” Many hands went up, among people who were proud that they had remembered empty their pockets and to leave everything at home.

“Oh, so you think your pockets are clean? You think they’re empty?” said the rabbi. “Dig a little deeper into those pockets. Surely you’ll find something. There’s always something in everyone’s pocket – fuzzy lint stuff, tiny pieces of old tissues. There is no pocket that does not have some shmutz in it.” Lo and behold, the people who had proudly reported having clean pockets reached a little deeper, and indeed they found, in the very bottom of their pockets, some shmutz. Just as the rabbi had said.

“Pockets are places for hiding things,” the rabbi continued. “Some of these are things we intend to hide -- wallets, keys, makeup, chapstick, breath mints. Some of the things in our pockets are hidden from us, yet still we carry them around with us all the time. That’s the shmutz. Wash your pants, pull them out of the dryer -- shmutz. Buy a new pair of pants and try them on for the first time -- shmutz. There’s always shmutz.”

“Like everything else in the world, the shmutz in our pockets means something. Our shmutz are the secrets we carry around, secrets from each other, even secrets from ourselves. Our pockets are full of secrets: full of things we meant to hide, things we thought we’d forgotten or lost, things we didn’t even know we had. The shmutz in our pockets are the things we feel sorry about but would rather than think about or let anyone see.

“Everyone knows that tomorrow afternoon, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we’ll be doing *tashlich*. We’ll empty our pockets and toss bread crumbs into the river. We’ll remember all the things we are sorry for, and we’ll try to toss them away and try to do better next time. But we need to remember to do that all the time. We always need to look for the shmutz and keep tossing it out; we need to always clean out our pockets.

“These holidays teach us not to be afraid of our mistakes and secrets,” said Reb Shmuel Lev. “They teach us that if we let them into the light, they need not embarrass us or make us feel bad. It’s just the opposite -- if we share them with God, we’ll feel a lot better. So take a minute now, close your eyes, and empty out your

pockets. Whisper out loud to God your secrets and your regrets. Ask God to help you be the best person you can be, the person God wants you to be.”

And everyone did just that. They closed their eyes and turned their pockets inside out. And everyone, from the kindest person to the meanest, whispered their secrets, their regrets about all the mistakes they had made. “God,” they prayed, “please help me do a little better this year. Help me be the best me I can be.”

“Now,” said Reb Shmuel Lev, “open your eyes.” And as they did, everyone was amazed as they looked at each other – the stains were gone! Everyone’s white shirt or dress was sparkling clean, like new! “It’s amazing! It’s a miracle!” the people cried. “Tell us, tell us, rabbi – how did you do that?”

“Ah,” said Reb Shmuel Lev, whose eyes were shining too. “It is very simple. We all must practice the middah of *nekiyut*, or cleanliness. But we can’t be clean on the outside unless we try to keep ourselves clean on the inside – in our pockets. God has given every one of us a *neshamah*, a soul which is pure and clean and shining like the sun. But every time we make a mistake, every time we’re selfish or don’t tell the truth, there’s a little stain on our soul. Over the year, those stains build up so much that they block the beautiful light of our soul from shining in the world and making it brighter.”

“Rosh Hashanah is a special time for cleaning up our insides. It’s a time when we can talk with God and show all our secrets. We can just be ourselves; we can just show our shmutz, and that’s fine with God. We don’t have to pretend to be anyone else. We don’t have to pretend to be better than we really are. We just have to be ourselves.

“And one more thing,” said Reb Shmuel Lev. “If thinking about your secrets and your mistakes makes you feel depressed or bad about yourself, then you’re not really doing teshuvah. You will know that you are doing teshuvah the right way if over the next ten days, you think about the kind of person you’ve been this year, you think about all the things you wished you’d done better, and you begin to feel a little bit lighter, a little bit better about yourself.

We are human beings. No matter how much we empty our pockets tomorrow, a day later there will be a little bit of shmutz there. Our job on Rosh Hashanah is to empty out our pockets, to be as honest as we can with ourselves and with God. And our job after that, in the year ahead is to try to keep our pockets as clean as possible until next year.

*L’shanah tovah tikateivu* -- may we and all the world be written in the Book of Life for a healthy year, a peaceful year, a happy year.