

## Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780

Sept. 29, 2019

Shana tova. One of the many things I love about Judaism is our rich history of folklore. Over millennia, our people have created and shaped stories to help us overcome obstacles, establish morality, and teach compassion.

That's why it shouldn't be a surprise to learn that there's a Jewish folklore about a rabbi and a chicken that has long shaped who I want to be, both as a rabbi and as a person. This seems like the right year to share it with you.

The chicken was dead. <Dramatic pause> The question at hand was whether or not the chicken was kosher. A wealthy woman brought the chicken to the rabbi who examined it closely, checking all the various parts and pieces, and after some deliberation declared the chicken un-kosher - and thus unfit for the well-to-do family to eat. So the woman took it home, set it aside as garbage, and went about procuring another chicken to eat for Shabbat dinner.

Meanwhile, a maid in the woman's house was thrilled to find the chicken, relieved that her family would have something to eat for Shabbat. She took the chicken to the same rabbi for inspection. Once again, the rabbi

examined the chicken closely, deliberated, and declared the chicken....  
Kosher.

What happened here?

Yes, the rabbi was examining the same chicken both times. And each time, he found the same questionable blemishes. At neither time did the blemishes appear more or less prominent or problematic. What changed was the person standing in front of the rabbi.

You see, the rabbi was not only examining the chicken, but also examining the person who brought the chicken. For the wealthy family, the rabbi knew that they could afford a better chicken. This one wasn't technically un-kosher, but it was questionable. But for the maid, whose family clearly struggled to make ends meet, that very same chicken was kosher enough.

Yes, this was inconsistent. Of course the easy answer is to tell both women "no." But anyone can find reasons to say no to everyone; it takes a great rabbi to be able to - and to know when to - say yes.

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On a lighter note, I was once out for ice cream with a friend and highly respected colleague who had just attended a BBQ dinner. As the rest of the group happily ordered their dairy treats,, someone asked this rabbi whether they were having ice cream and how long they generally waited between eating meat and milk. Without hesitation, this person replied, "three hours." After a pause, they continued, "Actually, it's a complicated formula that takes into account how delicious the meat was, how much of it I ate, how long I've waited, and how much I really want that ice cream." His implication was that the "3 hours" that he waits might sometimes be 2 hours and 37 minutes on the clock.

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I tell you these two stories not to diminish the reputation of either rabbi, but to emphasize that people are complicated - and that Jewish tradition places a positive value on that complication.

We all have truths that we tell ourselves (and each other) about who we are and how we behave. Inevitably, that behavior will strike others as inconsistent - someone keeps Shabbat but watches the Red Sox game after shul; someone else fasts the full day on Yom Kippur but doesn't come to synagogue the rest of the year. You have yours and I have mine, and we're each generally ok with our own idiosyncrasies of practice.

My husband likes to call this brand of Jewish ritual observance “consistently inconsistent.” I think he first labeled it as a joke, but as the years have gone by, we’ve noticed that this is actually how most people live their lives. We give ourselves labels, make definitive pronouncements, and then find ways to fit our deviations from the label into the label itself.

Labels are, in general, important in helping us function and make quick judgments. A warning on a bottle of drain cleaner tells us not to drink it; a name tag on a baby at the hospital tells us that we’re taking the right baby home. Even the denomination “Conservative” attached to Temple Israel tells you some of what you might expect from this service. Labels give us a common language with which to describe our world - including (and perhaps especially) ourselves. In other words: in some ways, you *can* judge a book by its cover.

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The danger is when we use labels to group other human beings into *our own* preconceived notions of the world. In our current climate, we have a tendency to cling to labels as a way to *define* ourselves and others, rather than as a way to help others know more about us.

If you had the chance to participate in the Resetting the Table program that we ran here this past year, you might have experienced the feeling of scaling, what is known as, the empathy wall. Perhaps you had an eye-opening moment when someone you had previously labeled as having a particular perspective gave you rationale that you agreed with (!) or offered an answer that was vastly different than what you had expected.

We have not yet lost the ability to listen to one another. We have not yet lost the ability to be brave and say yes, rather than default to the no. We are knee-deep in building walls, but are not so far gone that we can not replace them with bridges.

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Friends, looking back over my years of erev Rosh Hashanah sermons, I notice a pattern. I love starting Rosh Hashanah with a story. Most years it is a story of optimism and hope, of resetting the scene, or of a beautiful moment of forgiveness.

This is not most years. The year of 5779 is one that we are grateful to say good-bye to. Our community has been brutally attacked, divided, and diminished. Our strength in the world is in question, and our future uncertain. 5780 calls on us to be brave, to listen with an open heart. We

are called to stretch past the black and white of who we think we are, and to reach toward who we might yet become.

Let us see the real people in front of us, let us stop categorizing ideas in order to determine what we think of them. Let us be a little bit less consistent with our instincts, so that we can see arguments and real people - and not identities and labels. And let this be the year that we build those empathy bridges with people we never thought we'd be able to talk to again. Throughout these Yamim Noraim, we will explore the ways in which we can grow into the best versions of ourselves.

May 5780 be an infinitely better, safer, calmer, and more stable a year than the one we are closing out.

Shanah tovah.